

As God's people, we want to be guided by His Word and empowered by His Spirit to look more like Jesus. This Scripture Guide is based on this morning's passage to further equip you with what God's Word says.

Week 8 Acts 4:34-5:11

Overview

The end of Acts 4 and the beginning of Acts 5 is literarily designed to see the contrast between two people within the early church: Joseph in Acts 4:36-37 and Ananias/Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11.

4:36-37 Before looking at the latter, infamous characters, one quick observation to make of Joseph. In v.36 we are told he is a Levite. Why is that significant? In the Old Testament, the tribe of Levi relied purely on the contributions of the nation of Israel for their needs to be met (Num 18:21, 24 and Deut 26:12-13). The Levites, along with working in the temple also taught the Hebrew Scriptures, reading aloud to the congregation the text and unpacking its meaning. Thus, Joseph's generosity is quite remarkable - his ancestors, the Levites, once were the recipients of generosity by God's people but now he sees that in this new era of God's salvation history, the apostles are the fulfillment of the Levites from the Old Testament - the apostles are the teachers of Scriptures, and God's people are to give generously to them now so that their needs would be met and the mission go forth.

Joseph's astounding act of sacrificial generosity is heard through this newfound Jesus movement. So much so, Joseph has gained a bit of reputation with the apostles giving him the nickname of Barnabas.¹

5:1-6 Contrast Joseph's selling a field and laying it at the apostles' feet with Ananias who does the same thing. There's one big difference though, Ananias lies about the amount he sold it for and has kept some of it for himself. Peter, knowing this, questions Ananias - why has he allowed Satan to fill his heart? Why has he lied to God? Unfortunately, Ananias does not give an answer as he falls dead on the spot. So what would motivate Ananias to lie? Why not be honest with the amount that he gave the apostles?. While the text is not explicit it could very well be, given the contrast with Joseph, that Ananias desires the same reputation as Joseph. Perhaps he wants the approval and notoriety of following Jesus while still holding onto his money.

It should also be noted that this is the first time in the book of Acts that Satan (Σατανᾶς) is mentioned. He doesn't appear in human form (Luke 4:1-13) nor does he send his legion to attack as we've seen in the Gospels (Mark 5:1-12), rather he works through deception by means of Anania's lie. Jesus informs us elsewhere in John 8 that this is Satan's primary mode of operation - not through possession or anything of the like, but through lies. Lies are satanic in that, as we see in Genesis 3, they have the potential to destroy. Similar satanic deception is referenced in Luke's previous work when Satan is said to have entered Judas to betray Jesus over the religious rulers in Luke 22. This satanic deception in Luke 22, like we see in Acts 5, is motivated by money. Perhaps Paul, upon hearing this account of the early church is why he warns his young disciple Timothy to beware of the love of money for "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils (1 Tim 6:10).

5:7-11 In the next scene, Sapphira also walks in hours later, presumably wishing to receive the same attention her husband received - and she certainly does but not in the way she expects. She agrees that their field was sold for the same amount as her husband, thus revealing that she is complicit in the

¹ It's likely this is the same Barnabas we see as an apostle in Acts 14:14, traveling with Paul in his missionary journeys.

deception. She too receives the same fate as Ananias as she is also struck dead. So what are we to make of this strange, unique account in Acts? Two theological concepts help us understand what's going on: the holiness of the Lord and the fear of the Lord.

The holiness of the Lord. Remember the early church is not so much the start of something brand new in the New Testament but a continuation/fulfillment of patterns and themes we see in the Old Testament. And in the Old Testament, at times we see particular people in particular situations being struck down so that God might highlight a particular attribute of Himself. One notable account comes from Joshua 7.² In this story, God commands his people to destroy everything in Jericho, but one of the Israelites named Achan decides to keep some of the loot for himself. As a result of Achan's deception, Israel is defeated in the next battle. Achan is eventually found out and killed before his sinful deception continues to destroy God's people. Why is his deception such a big deal? Because God's holy reputation, as acted out through His people, is on the line. Willful deliberate sin keeps God's name from going out, and in this particular case with Achan, his personal sin impacted other people and was punished immediately for it.

The fear of the Lord. In Proverbs 9:10 we are told, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Thus to understand how to navigate life, it first requires that we "fear the Lord" - this does not mean we are to be scared and timid around God, rather we are to worship and revere his power, acknowledging that He is Creator of all and because of that, He gets to call the shots. God judges sin (as we saw with Achan in Joshua 7) but He is also a God of mercy and grace for those who trust in Him. "The fear of the Lord" recognizes both His judgment and His mercy.

The holiness of the Lord and fear of the Lord are most clearly seen in the death of Jesus. In the death of Jesus we see God's judgment on sin, and through that judgment came the forgiveness of sin, God's mercy extended to human beings. Our response? An appropriate fear of the Lord that recognizes God's immense power and immense love and as a result, in love we obey. Jesus is now the resurrected Lord who has defeated sin and death and is slowly undoing the curse of sin over all things, and this fear of the Lord ought to lead to reverence, worship, and obedience. This is what Ananias and Sapphira failed to see. God's reputation was on the line through the early church and in this particular case, their willful deception received judgment before it could influence and destroy others. As a result of God's judgment on their sin, the early church learned first-hand the fear of the Lord (v.5 and v.11).

Connection and Application

As followers of Jesus, we are to see Him for who He really is as we orient our lives around His Lordship more and more. Acts 5 shows us, sin has severe consequences - so much so that Jesus had to die for it. And yet, for those who live and walk by faith we do not stand under fear of judgment. Our judgment was dealt with once and for all on the Cross. So then, should we keep on sinning so that grace may abound? Paul expects this pushback in Romans 6:1-2 when he replies, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" Our call then is to be a people who stand in humble confidence regularly confessing sin as the Spirit empowers us to make much of Jesus and His grace for us.

² Other accounts in the Old Testament include Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-2, Lot's wife in Genesis 19, Er and Onan in Genesis 38:6-10, and Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6.