

Acts 5

Lesson 3

Chapter 5 continues with the narrative stream from the previous chapter that deals with the sharing of goods and the issue of the authority of the Apostles. This section deals with an issue highlighted by Jesus when he says, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”¹ A surprisingly large percentage of the Book of Acts deals with economic issues as does much of the Gospel of Luke (Luke 7:41-43; 10:29-37; 12:16:21; 16:1-8; 16:19-31; 19:11-27). All except one of these parables is unique to Luke’s Gospel: For Luke wealth is not a sign of divine approval it is a danger. Many times people want to talk about spiritual things rather than money. Luke understands that how we deal with money is a spiritual matter (Luke 18:24).²

This issue will be used as an example of the genuine power that rests in the hands of Apostles. It will be a pivotal

¹ *The Holy Bible, Translated from the Latin Vulgate*. 2009 (Lk 12:34). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

² William H. Willimon, *Acts*, The Interpretation Commentary series (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 52-53.

matter in the life of the newly formed church. The story of the greed of Ananias and Sapphira offers a startling contrast to the generosity displayed by Barnabas in the previous chapter. The verb that is translated as “kept back” (νοσφίζομαι) implies that he embezzled the proceeds. This implication creates some tension with what is said in verse 4 about the proceeds remaining at the disposal of Ananias after the sale. How then can it be called embezzlement?³ The verb may have been chosen by Luke in order to make a connection with Joshua 7:1, where the account of the sin of Achan is described using this very word.⁴

Apparently Ananias and Sapphira sought to have the glory of a reputation like that of Barnabas who owned property and sold it in order to bring the proceeds to the Apostles. They seek the glory of the reputation without the sacrifice it entails and with the ulterior motive of keeping back some of the proceeds of the sale for themselves.

Though they do provide some money for the needs of the

³J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2007), pp. 87-88.

⁴ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), p. 209.

community they sought to deceive the community.⁵ The results of this lie are the instant death of Ananias and ultimately the death of his wife. This story, though not couched in terms of a miracle, demonstrated the powerful supernatural ability that had been granted to the Apostles. Peter was able to discern the deception and then was fully aware of what God would now do to the one who perpetrated such an act.

This act would serve to bring “great fear” upon, not only the whole church, but also upon those that heard this story. The story also powerfully connects lying, not to the Apostles alone, but to the source of their power, the Holy Spirit. Lying to the Apostles in reality involves lying to the Holy Spirit and though lying to a man is bad, lying to the Holy Spirit brings death immediately, at least in this instance. It is perhaps the case that Ananias makes the mistake of thinking that when he was dealing with the Apostles he was merely dealing with human beings and human institutions. The church is the renewed

⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Yale Bible series, Vol. 31 (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 316.

eschatological, and prophetic community of God that is filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit.⁶

In verse 8 Luke allows Sapphira to implicate herself in the conspiracy to defraud the church, the Apostles, and most importantly the Holy Spirit. Sapphira and Ananias had “agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord” (v. 9). In the Old Testament the verb used for “to tempt” (πειράζω) consistently denotes the actions of the Children of Israel during their time in the wilderness wanderings (e.g. Exodus 17:2; Deuteronomy 6:16; Psalm 78:18 [77:18 Septuagint], 41 [77:41 Septuagint] 56 [77:56 Septuagint]; 95:8-9 [94:8-9 Septuagint]). This verbal echo provides an additional invitation to Luke’s readers to compare the story of the early eschatological community with their ancestors in ancient Israel. Ancient Israel often did not embrace the liberating salvation that God offered to them, but responded by pressing the limits set by God, probing; for how much they could get away with before God acted. This new

⁶ Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 88.

community acts in very much the same manner with the same result, God's judgment.⁷

Luke uses the term "church" (ἐκκλησία) here for the first time, perhaps to provide one more echo with the stories of the wilderness and Israel's earlier salvation story. The term ἐκκλησία (church) is used consistently throughout Deuteronomy in the Septuagint (the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) to denote the community of God (cf. Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:2, 3, 9; 31:12, 30). In the same way that their ancestors were to "fear" God so likewise this new congregation is to "fear" God (cf. Deuteronomy 4:10; 31:12). This new congregation (church) of Israel has no less obligation to be holy than the Israel of old. The mark of holiness is manifested in truthfulness and integrity both toward God and His people. Salvation is marked not only by the announcement of that salvation and blessing, but also by a declaration of God's judgement when it is necessary.⁸ It should be noted that the execution of that judgment does not fall to the church, that judgment is

⁷ Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 89.

⁸ Bradley Chance, *Acts*, pp. 89-90.

performed by God Himself. It is only the announcement of that judgment that falls to Peter.

Verse 12 begins a new section that continues the explanation of the life of the community but ultimately focuses upon the continuing power struggle between the old order (the High Priest, and the Sadducees) and the Apostles. The idyllic life of the community produces “high esteem” among the people and more and more people continued to become believers. Note should be taken of what Luke wrote at verse 14 “More that ever believers were added to the Lord” The miracles also continue to be manifested and people were flocking to be cured. This state of affairs draws the attention of those in power because of their jealousy and the apostles are arrested and imprisoned. The point of Luke’s narrative here is to demonstrate that not only are the Apostles the leaders of this new group of followers but that they are indeed “rulers of the twelve tribes of Israel.” The power of God has been set loose in

Israel because Jesus is at the right hand of God and that power will not be controlled by human manipulation.⁹

All of this sets the stage for the second trial of the Apostles before the Sanhedrin. For the reader the outcome of this trial is no longer in doubt; these men are the chosen agents of God in the world and no political power or human force can stop them from fulfilling their mission. Verse 19 powerfully demonstrates that human efforts to silence the Apostles are useless. It is perhaps ironic that the human agents of the Apostles imprisonment do not believe in angels. The lack of belief in angels does nothing to blunt the effectiveness of the angels in releasing them and instructing the Apostles. At stake in the narrative is the real leadership of Israel and it is being fought at the center-point of power, the temple.

In Jewish culture a close association is assumed between legitimate authority and control of the temple. After Israel returned from exile in Babylon, Zerubbabel's legitimacy as the ruler over the Jewish people is associated

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in the Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 101.

with his rebuilding of the temple (Zechariah 4:6-10; 6:9-13).

The Hasmonean family secured their legitimacy as rulers over Israel during the revolt against the Syrians by rededicating the temple back to God and later this authority was marked by their holding the office of High Priest as the ruler of the temple (1 Maccabees 4:36-61; 14:41-49). Herod the Great would refurbish the temple in order to emulate the great kings before him who had built temples (Solomon and Zerubbabel). The first public act of Jesus upon entering Jerusalem was to seize control of the temple grounds, even if it appears only to be symbolic (Mark 11:15-17).

Awareness of this history and association with power allows the modern reader to grasp the significance of Luke's portraying of the apostles as having the ability to carry on their ministry right in the midst of the temple grounds.¹⁰

The council searches for their prisoners where they left them, in prison. However, they receive a report that they are not there despite the facility being locked and guarded. In verse 25 you can imagine their confusion and

¹⁰ Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 93.

perhaps even concern at finding that they were “...standing in the temple and teaching the people.” They go and arrest them once again, but “without violence” for fear of the people. They were actually afraid that they might be stoned. The Apostles are brought before the council and questioned once again. They have directly challenged the authority of the council and the members of the council clearly understand this fact.

The response of Peter once again revolves around the issue of where does the authority come from in this matter. He and the other apostles claim that their authority comes directly from God and that the only thing that they can do as obedient children of God is to follow his leading. In verse 32 Peter states the motivation behind what they are doing he says “... we are witness (martyr μάρτυς) to these things ...” and along with their witness (“martyr” μάρτυς) the “...**Holy Spirit** whom God has given ...” is a witness (“martyr” μάρτυς) along side of them being given “to those who obey him.” This concept of being a “witness” continues to retain a central position in the narrative.

When the council hears the response of Peter they are enraged to the point of wanting to kill the Apostles. The only thing that appears to stop them at this point from ordering this is that Gamaliel, one of their number, stands up and addresses the council. The name Gamaliel means “recompense of God.” He was the grandson of the great rabbinic teacher Hillel who was the founder of one of the two leading scribal schools of thought (the founder of the other great school was Shammai). The son of Gamaliel would become the leader of the revolt against Rome (Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 4.159). Toward the end of the first century, Gamaliel’s grandson, Gamaliel II, was the “prince” of the reorganized, post-revolt Sanhedrin. This information perhaps helps the modern reader to understand the stature of Gamaliel and provide an understanding of why he is so influential.¹¹

In the speech of Gamaliel it is obvious that he does not have an understanding for the message of the apostles as he compares what the apostles are doing to that of 2

¹¹ Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 95.

revolutionaries. It is however, significant that he leaves open the possibility that the power and authority behind this new movement is indeed God. The message that Luke is able to convey in this narrative is that God is behind the Apostles as the events that will follow will clearly demonstrate. On the opposite side, the message of Luke is also that the leaders of the council, which includes the priests, are in a position of being in opposition to God and the authority of his apostles.

During the first half of the second century A. D. Rabbi Johanan, the sandal maker said, "Every assembly which is for the sake of heaven will in the end be established, and every assembly which is not for the sake of heaven will in the end not be established" (*Aboth* 4:13). This saying expresses the sentiment of Gamaliel in the first century.¹²

He convinced the council, but they did not let the apostles go without a good beating. It is likely that this will have been the infamous thirty-nine lashes. Chance sees it as naïve to imagine the apostles charging out to the council

¹² Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 97.

chamber and proceeding directly to the temple, jumping for joy that they could suffer for Jesus. He says likely, the apostles will have to have been helped from the place of beating and returned to the temple after their wounds healed.¹³ Pervo disagrees with this assessment and follows more closely the actual language of the text, which seems to indicate that they are rejoicing as they leave the council chamber.¹⁴ Whatever the exact scenario the outcome anticipated by the council was not what happened. These men no longer hold to the values traditionally held, they see the beating not as a shameful thing that brought pain and discouragement. They see this beating as a sign of honor and they wear it as a badge of honor, not seeking revenge nor do they seek to avoid further beatings. They demonstrate through their actions a total disdain for the authority of the court and its ability to sanction them in any meaningful way. What the court intends as punishment the apostles now see as an honor. They did not cease to

¹³ Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 97.

¹⁴ Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, in the Hermenia Commentary on the Bible series (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 149.

continue just as they had before proclaiming Jesus as the
Messiah.

Synopsis

This section continues the story that began in the previous chapter with a powerful episode that demonstrates the great power and authority of the apostles but more importantly demonstrates the presence of God amongst his people. Luke consciously links what is taking place here with the Exodus (Joshua 7:1) story of Achan and calls for the people to be holy. Ananias and Sapphira serve as a catalyst not only to bring awe of God more deeply into the community of God, but also amongst the people who would hear of this incident. Luke also ties what is taking place here with the Exodus account by using the term “church” ἐκκλησία in his description of this community of believers. They are called upon to be the holy people of God (Leviticus 19:2).

Following this episode the apostles continue to be a part of many signs and wonders and the people begin to flock in from beyond Jerusalem. The sick are cured and the demon possessed are released from their torment. All of

this activity brings them into conflict with the high priest and those who were with him because they were “filled with jealousy.” The apostles are arrested again and this time released by an angel during the night and found preaching once again in the temple courts.

It is interesting that fear, jealousy, and anger take such a prominent role in the decision-making processes of the council. These emotions incite in the council a desire to kill the apostles, but fear overrules the jealousy and anger, along with the wise words of Gamaliel. Gamaliel delivers very wise, and prophetic words to the council about the role of God in such happenings. The apostles continue their mission undeterred by fear, anger jealousy or any of the negative emotional encumbrances that were so prominent among the council of the Jews.

Main Points

1. The apostles are shown to be God's representatives on earth.
2. Though fear seizes the church it drives the church closer to the truth and God rather than into conflict with him.
3. The Jewish officials are motivated by fear, jealousy and anger in their decision-making and actions.
4. God continues to bless the church as they follow him in obedience.

Questions

1. Why do you think Luke tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira?
2. What do you think the story of Ananias and Sapphira teaches us today?
3. What purpose did the signs and wonders serve in the ministry of the apostles?
4. Why do you think the religious leaders were jealous of the disciples?
5. Why do you think the angel releases the apostles and then sends them right back into the temple courts? What might this say about God and our relationship with him?
6. Where does authority come from and how do we evaluate the source of authority today?
7. Do you think the words of Gamaliel regarding the origin of things and movements still holds true today? What should the church today learn from this?

8. Is the mission of the church today the same as it was in the day of the apostles? Why or why not?