

Holiness in the Temple

The Warning of Ananias and Sapphira

- Acts 4:32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.
- 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.
- 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold
- 35 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.
- 36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,
- 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.
- 5 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.
- 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to [lie to the Holy Spirit](#) and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?
- 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have [not lied to man but to God.](#)"
- 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.
- 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.
- 7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.
- 8 And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much."

- ⁹ But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”
- ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.
- ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Acts 4:32-5:11

Holy People, Be Careful

The story of **Mt. Sinai** is perhaps best known for **the Ten Commandments** being given to Moses by God on the top of the mountain. But prior to that meeting, “**on the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt**” (**Ex 19:1**), was the day that Israel arrived at the base of the mountain. This all has profound relevance to the book of Acts. Let’s see how.

First, we saw in Acts 2 that the **day of Pentecost** was the day that Jewish tradition put Moses receiving the Law on the mountain (Shabbat 88a; Pesachim 68b; etc.). Exodus 19 is the preparation for that event whereupon God would summon

Moses up while he descended upon the mountain in the sight of all the people. He told all the people gathered there when they arrived, “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Ex 19:5-6). But beware. Once I come, don’t even touch the mountain, or you must be put to death (12).

Having just been led out of Egypt by uncounted miracles from this omnipotent God, the people were eager to respond. “All that Lord has spoken we will do” (8), they said. So God told them all to undergo a kind of baptism. “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them *wash their garments* and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (10-11). “Washing” their garments, and surely themselves (for who puts clean garments on dirty bodies) is one of the “various washings (*baptismos*)” of the old covenant that Hebrews speaks about (Heb 9:10). Meanwhile, as a consecration, this is their being *set apart*. The word (*weqididashtam*) comes from the root *qdsh*—to be *holy*.

A second major thing that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai was the **instructions for building the tabernacle**. Hebrews explains that these were to be “copies” of the heavenly reality, which is why God told him, “**See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain**” (**Heb 8:4**; cf. **Ex 25:40**). As this shows, the heavenly reality comes first. The copy comes second. The copy is a replica of the heavenly archetype. But as we will see, the copy itself pointed forward to something greater that must come in this world, for that is what all OT copies and types were given for. They were never to be an end to themselves.

One final point about the tabernacle is vital to make here. It concerns this idea of **holiness**. When we think of the term “holy,” most of us automatically go to **moral categories**. To be holy is to be faithfully obedient, a law-keeper. To be unholy is to be the opposite—a law-breaker, disobedient, sinful. Of course, we know as Christians that this kind of holiness can only come through faith in Christ—the only One who ever kept the law perfectly, for he alone is the Holy One of Israel.

It’s not that it’s wrong to think of holiness in moral categories. However, it is **too narrow** to think of it as *only* moral.

The thing is, throughout the Law, holiness is a category that belongs to things that can't possibly be moral. For example, God had Moses create **utensils** for the tabernacle, things like pots, shovels, basins, forks, and firepans (**Ex 38:3**). These things along with the altar, the washing basin, indeed the entire tabernacle itself would be consecrated to become “**most holy**” (cf. **Ex 40:9-10**). But forks and altars and buildings the like are *not moral creatures*. They are *objects*. So what could it possibly mean that they are “holy?”

Holiness simply means “**to be set apart**” as something “other” than it normally is. The opposite of holy is **profane**. Most people think of this word also in moral categories. The profane person is the blasphemer or the one who curses a lot (“profanity”). But profane simply means ordinary, common, or base. Holy means to be set apart from a common (not necessarily evil) purpose to serve God in a special capacity. It isn't evil to be a fork at a dinner table, but it is profane—common. It is holy to be a fork in the tabernacle. This is what the book of Leviticus is all about. It is about those people and places and creatures and things that God sets apart so that Israel might know what it means to be holy.

Regarding the tabernacle specifically, it was “most holy,” because this was the **place where the Holy-“Other”-God decided he would come and dwell** in the midst of the people. If God is Holy, then the place on earth he chooses to dwell must reflect his otherness, his holiness. Anything that was common or base or profane that came into proximity with the holy without being specially set apart **was or was to be** utterly destroyed. Why? Because they were coming into close proximity with the Holy God himself. And **our God is a Consuming Fire**. That’s his nature. He is like the sun, fly too close and you are incinerated, not necessarily because you are evil (although that is often part of it), but because your nature cannot stand to be that close to the star. It is the nature of the common material things of this world to be destroyed when they come too close to the sun.

Into this, enter **the first of the only two stories** in the book of Leviticus. Other than these (the other is the blasphemer in **Lev 24:10-15**), the entire book is law-code.¹ The story concerns Nadab and Abihu, the two oldest sons of Aaron. Aaron and his sons have **just been ordained as priests**

¹ As Mary Douglas understood Leviticus, these two stories serve as the “screens” between the courtyard and holy place and holy place and Most Holy Place in the literary design of the book. E.g. **Mary Douglas**, *Jacob’s Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 127.

(Lev 8-9). Why? Though God had told the entire nation that they would be a kingdom of priests, the nation broke their covenant vows at Mt. Sinai with the golden calf. When Moses asked, “Who is on the LORD’s side,” the only tribe that answered the call was the tribe of Levi (Ex 32:26). This meant that the entire nation would not be a kingdom of priests. The priesthood would instead go through Aaron the Levite and his sons.

In Leviticus, in literally the verse that appears just before our story, at the very end of that ordination of the priests, “Fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering” (Lev 9:23). This showed Aaron, his sons, and all the people that the LORD had accepted their offering. They were good to go. They had been set apart as holy, per the strict requirements of the God that they might now serve him in a special way that no one else in all Israel was permitted.

Thus we begin reading our story, “Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. *And fire came*

out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the Lord has said: “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.”’ And Aaron held his peace” (**Lev 10:1-3**).

Acts 4:32-37. It’s Structure and Context

The majority of our passage today is the famous story of **Ananias and Sapphira**, a husband and wife team who were part of the early church. They had most likely been among those converted either at Pentecost or at the preaching of Peter when he healed the lame man. Many people have made a direction connection to their story and the story of Nadab and Abihu, because as with those boys, both of these people died suddenly before the Lord. Today, we want to learn how and why and why this matters to us living 2,000 years after this terrifying event happened.

Before we get to that, I’ve chosen to preach the end of Acts 4 with this story.² When you read **these last six verses**

² See **Sijbolt J. Noorda**, “Scene and Summary, A Proposal for Reading Acts 4,32–5,16,” in *Les Actes des Apôtres. Traditions, rédaction, théologie*, BETL 48, ed. Jacob Kremer (Gembloux: Leuven, 1979): 475–83.

with the Ananias-Sapphira story, it immediately becomes apparent that they belong together. These six verses are their own independent literary unit, forming the following structure which centers on the great power with which the apostle's testified to the resurrection and the great grace that was upon the whole church.

- A. "No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own" (32)
- B. "They had everything in common" (32b)
- C. "With great power" the Apostles witnessed to the resurrection of Jesus (33)
- C'. "Great grace" was upon them all (33b)
- B'. No one lacked anything, all "was distributed to each as any had need" (34-35)
- A'. Barnabas sold one of his fields "and brought the money and laid it at the apostle's feet" (37)

There are **multiple reasons** Luke gives us the information in these verses. First, they **recapitulate** what we saw at the end of Acts 2, where those first Christians had all things in common and were distributing through the Apostles to anyone who had need. It even uses the same language: "**they had everything in common**" (Acts 4:32; cf. 2:44). As we saw in our detailed study of that text, this was not some state-forced socialism. It was of their own desire, because of the grace

God was giving them to take care of those thousands of converts that were staying in Jerusalem for a very extended period of time because of the miracles and conversions of those days. Our passage today reinforces that by telling us, “The full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own” (4:32). There is all the difference in the world between a despotic state forcing redistribution and a group of people deciding to do it voluntarily out of love. The latter can only come out from a change on the inside, which the state is never able to do.

Acts 2:44-45	Acts 4:32-37
<p>⁴⁴And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵And they were selling their possessions and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.</p>	<p>Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.</p>

A second reason is that it introduces to us a character we will see a lot more of later in the book: Joseph, who is more popularly known as Barnabas (36). As Luke tells us, Barnabas means “Son of Encouragement.” Luke uses Barnabas as an example of an individual who was fairly wealthy selling one of his fields and laying it at the apostles’ feet (37). In this way, Barnabas is a concrete example of what we see in vs. 34-35 where “as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

This language, however, will also serve as foreshadowing for two things in the coming chapters. First, we will see at the end of the Stephen story that the witnesses of Stephen’s stoning “laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (7:58). This Saul will later become Paul, the traveling companion of Barnabas on the first missionary journey! What an interesting juxtaposition, where one is receiving the gifts as he oversees the murder of one of the first Christians while the other is giving what he has to these very Christians to help them in their time of need. Second, as the Apostles’ are becoming so busy with redistribution, they will increasingly have no time for the proclamation of the Gospel,

and this will serve the occasion of Peter saying they need to **ordain some deacons** to oversee this duty (**6:1-4**). Ironically, one of those deacons will be the same Stephen who is stoned when they lay their garments at Saul's feet. (**5**). Apparently, he presided over it!

Third, Barnabas and the selling of property from him and all the Christians also **transitions** us directly into the story of Ananias and Sapphira. As we will see shortly, not everything was perfect in those early days. As we saw in ch. 2, Luke may be framing this early church's communal activities to some degree on Plato's *Republic*, but without keeping us in a utopia. Luke knows full-well that Christians still sin.

Before coming to that story, I think two more things are worth mentioning. First, we have an interesting **parallel and inverse parallel** here with Luke's Gospel. The parallel involves Jesus' baptism (**Luke 3:21-38**). Remember, I just mentioned the kind of baptism of the people at Mt. Sinai. And we've seen baptism in a major way in Acts 2, right before the sharing all things in common passage. In repeating this idea in Luke 4, we are still close to that theology. This is all the more true once we learn that **Barnabas is a Levite**, but one who is from the Gentile Island of Cyprus (**Acts 4:36**)!

Second, the inverse parallel comes at the end of Luke, when Jesus weeps for Jerusalem and cleanses the temple (Luke 19:41-44; 45-48). It's *very important* for you to remember that in these very early chapters of Acts, everything is taking place at or near the temple in Jerusalem. As we have seen with the idea of the Holy Spirit coming to reside in the Christians, starting at Pentecost, something world-shattering is happening as it regards the proximity of God and the sacred space he is creating in the new covenant. No longer does God reside in his special presence in the temple, but his Presence is now residing in human hearts, so that wherever they go, they become the holy place of God—his temple on earth. In keeping us close to the temple in these early chapters, Luke is reinforcing this idea to your mind. In now adding that Barnabas is a Levite, this strengthens the point and the warning we are about to dive into. If you don't understand this, then the whole Barnabas and Ananias-Sapphira juxtaposition of stories will be little to no sense. If you do, then suddenly, *it's warning becomes dramatic* as Luke intended it to be for Christians living at all times until Jesus returns.

Let us not forget that **Peter** himself, the hero of the first half of Acts, was all very familiar with this. In his longer letter he tells the Christians, using the very words of **Exodus 19:6**, “*But you [Christians] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession*” (**1Pet 2:9**) and “*like living stones*” the church is “*being built up as a spiritual house, to be. A holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (**5**). **John**, who likewise was with Peter at the first miracle and imprisonment (**Acts 3-4**) said that God “*made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father*” (**Rev 1:6**; cf. **5:10**) and called us “*the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*” (**21:2**). Christians are the antitype to which the copy of the tabernacle pointed. We have now become the temple in which God resides. Therefore, let us turn to Ananias and Sapphira.

Acts 5:1-11. Ananias and Sapphira

The first 11 verses of Acts 5 tell a **remarkable and frightening tale**. It is one that is structured, very deliberately, as an ABCD-A'B'C'D'. We will see in this how this means that what happens to Ananias will happen in parallel to his wife

Sapphira. And in having this structure, it will help us interpret parallel ideas, one of which is especially interesting for our understanding the nature of the working of Satan in a person's life.

- A. Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and kept back some of the proceeds (5:1-2)
 - B. Why has **Satan filled** your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit ... **why did you** contrive this in your heart (3-4)
 - C. Ananias hears these words and fell down dead (5a)
 - D. Great fear came upon all who heard of it; The young men took him and buried him (5b-6)
- A'. His wife, Sapphira is questioned about it. She lies (7-8)
 - B'. Why are **you testing** the Spirit of the LORD? You will die too (9)
 - C'. Sapphira fell down at his feet and died (10)
 - D'. The young men took her and buried her with her husband; Great fear came upon all who heart of it (10b-11).

The Couple Lies and Deceives the Church

The story begins, “**But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property.**” Ananias is a name that will appear again in Acts 9 (**vs. 10**), but that will be a different Ananias. Still a third **Ananias** will appear in Acts 22 (**vs. 12**). Obviously, it was a popular name. It means, “**Jehovah is Gracious**” (from the same root as Hannah). Given what

we are about to see: Wow. Sapphira means “Beautiful; Pleasant.” If we were only to go by the names, this introduction would make us think this is going to be a wonderful, happy story.

But. The verse begins with “**But...**” That tips you off that things might not be so golden in paradise. “**With his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet**” (2). This verse tells us a few things. **First**, they did the **same thing Barnabas had done**. They sold some property and laid it at the apostles’ feet. So far so good. **Second**, it was *their property*, just like Barnabas and the other Christians were selling. They had the right to do with it what they wanted. And, they decided to sell it.

But. **But they deliberately chose to deceive** everyone about how much money they made off of it. This was a pre-meditated plan they had hatched together. They would sell it, thereby looking like all the other Christians. But they would keep some of the proceeds for themselves. Now, again, they actually had every right to do that. That wasn’t the problem. The problem was that they deceived everyone and made them think that they were giving the whole of it.

They were liars—measured, cold, calculating liars. They agreed together to deceive the Apostles and the rest of the community.

Peter Confronts Ananias Who Dies

Peter eventually heard about it either directly from the Holy Spirit, or my guess is that it wasn't very hard to do the math. Everyone else was selling property for \$_____. Their sale didn't add up. So Peter confronts Ananias.

How does he do it? **He doesn't go to him and ask him anything.** Peter knows and he will not give the man opportunity to weasel out of it. He **directly confronts him** with the truth. “**Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?**” (3). No beating around the bush here. The Apostle is furious. At what?

The centerpiece of the entire story is **the lie. Vs. 2**, they kept back some deliberately in an attempt to deceive, to make themselves look good in front of others, while in fact stealing money as they did it. **Stealing**, because they said they gave it all away, when they didn't.

Vs. 3 says you have **lied to the Holy Spirit**. But this is no ordinary lie. It is a lie to the church, directly attacking God himself, as if the Holy Spirit doesn't know! And in his house too!

Even worse, **Satan has filled their heart** to do it! This is the first mention of that old rascal in this book, and it complements in a fascinating way, the last time Luke has mentioned him. This was back in **Luke 22:31**, “**Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat.**” Peter knows a thing or two about the power of Satan to tempt and cause to fall.

It is into this that you should consider what happens next. For Peter does not curse Ananias to die on the spot. Instead, he **explains the truth to him**. “**While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?**” (4). This is what I said earlier. They had the right to do with their property whatever they wanted. It was *their* property. This is not communism! Furthermore, they could do with it what they wanted *even after they sold it*. Had they wanted to keep some of the money for themselves, they had every right. But they decided to give the money to the church while lying about it. Why?

It seems to me that part of it was surely the **group pressure**. Everyone else was being so selfless, to keep any of it would have made them look bad to the rest of the Christians. But the question arises, **what if they were in need of the money themselves**? It would be a small thing to keep some of it and not let the rest know that they were in need. Why bother telling them so that everyone else would just give them some of their own. This was much easier. But what if they weren't in need? Then, they were just scoundrels, pure and simple. It was purely about appearances. They wanted to look good in the eyes of men. Their hearts may or may not have been changed. Christians still sin. If they weren't, we'll see this kind of thing rise up much more clearly later in ch. 8 when Peter confronts Simon the Sorcerer.

Either way, from good motive or bad, **they lied**. The motive is irrelevant, especially when they didn't have to do it. While we could say they lied to the apostles or to the church, Peter wants them to know that who they were really lying to was **the Holy Spirit**. Keep him in mind, as we now talk about him again in **vs. 4** in a different way, a powerful way, one that makes the cults furious.

Peter says one more thing. He asks him, “Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?” (4). This parallels with Satan filling his heart to lie. And we will see it again in vs. 9 with his wife, where I will return to this idea of Satan with a final thought. For now, the point is simple. This was an act of the deepest will. It came from his heart even if the source was satanic. He desired to lie to people about it. His heart was deceitful. And so Peter tells him, “You have not lied to man but to God” (4b).

But wait. I thought he lied to the Holy Spirit? Now Peter says he lied to God? Yes. Because the Holy Spirit is God. This is one of my favorite proofs for the Third Person of the Trinity being God. In the kingdom of the cults, the Holy Spirit is most often simply a force, a power to be manipulated by men, an “it.” He is most certainly not God.

I learned this passage many years ago when some JW's came to our door when I was in high school. My uncle, who happened to be a pastor, was at our house because it was a holiday. When we went to the door, we learned that the JW's are among those who believe that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force. He has no name. A single Person could never indwell multiple people. So “he” is actually an “it.” The first group to change pronouns. After that encounter, my uncle

took us to this passage and I have never forgotten it. Peter couldn't be more clear. To lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God. They are parallel constructions. The Holy Spirit is, as the Church has always said, the Third Person of the Godhead. All that it means to be God, he is, even while he is not the Father and he is not the Son.

Going back to what I said earlier, that **the Holy Spirit indwelt the tabernacle** in the OT and this is what made the space sacred and holy, this has a tremendous import for what it means that the Holy Spirit indwells his people today. It means that we have God himself living in us, indwelling us, making us holy. If the addition of Barnabas as a Levite is a further indication that Luke has the priesthood in mind, it means that when we as Christians act as representatives of him—in our capacity as Christians—we are priests, then this means we serve God with our bodies which have been made holy.

Furthermore, when we do this **in community**—which is the primary emphasis here—it means that the community has been set apart as holy by the Spirit's indwelling presence. The church is holy like the tabernacle precisely because the Spirit indwells her. Therefore, think about what lying does both to the individual and to the community as it regards holiness, our serving as priests, and our witness to the world.

It's bad enough to bear false witness in the world, to do so in church as a Christians is an ultimate blasphemy.

It is for this reason that *God decided to make an example out of Ananias*. Note, it is not Peter who at this point said or did anything more. Rather, “*When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last*” (*Acts 5:5*). Ananias expired. He died there on the spot. He fell down, dead. God had used the transmission of Peter's words to act in this remarkable capacity to show that at this moment, Peter was acting as his representative. And his words here were as powerful as the Gospel words that we've seen in previous chapters. As they went out, they did something in the world of men. They caused Ananias to die. This was the sovereign God's (recall, we saw how all the church had acknowledged this in their prayer just prior to our passage today) doing.

The result? “*Great fear came upon all who heard of it*” (*5b*). So Ananias dies; that's what happens to the individual. And *great fear stirs the church*; that's what happens to the community. What kind of fear? They were afraid! Because someone had just died because they lied to God. Wouldn't you be?

And the young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him (6). In the OT, a dead body was unclean and no one was allowed to touch it, lest they become unclean. But here, some of the Christians take the body and bury him. There is no mention here of anything like that. I'll return to that thought after we see the parallel half of this story.

Peter Confronts Sapphira Who Dies

Next, the way the story is told begins anew. “After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened” (7). What a pitiable spot we find Sapphira in. She has no idea what’s just happened. She’s been out, busying herself with whatever for “three hours.” That number reminds me of the “three days” that Israel was at the foot of Mt. Sinai awaiting the coming presence of God. And, of course, the last time we saw it from Luke, the cock would crow three times before Peter realized what Satan had done to him (Luke 22:61).³ This coming of Peter will prove to be

³ Jesus, of course, is also dead for three days (John 2:19; Luke 24:46 “third day”). The only other reference in Luke to “three days” is when Jesus is found three days later in the temple, sitting among the teachers (Luke 2:46).

as deadly serious as the comings of Satan and God in those previous two stories.

Peter confronts her just as he did her husband. But with her, he gives an opportunity to confess. “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much” (Acts 5:8). Here’s your chance, Sapphira. Wha’cha gonna do? But she fails. “And she said, ‘Yes, for so much’” (8b). Importantly, she has now sworn an oath, thus compounding her planned deception and lie to the church. She’s multiplying her guilt.

This becomes the reason we have Peter’s response, which comes in two phases. First, he tells her in words that are very similar to what he told her husband, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?” (9a). It’s just here that we can now fully comment on what we saw above. For we have three parallel statements:

- “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit” (3)
- “Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart” (4)
- “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord” (9)

What do we learn by looking at these together? **First, Satan** has an initial part in it. He fills the heart to lie. He puts that seed or kernel into it. **Second**, that seed is then “contrived” in the heart by the individual. That is, he has taken that initial word of the devil and then internalized it so that it gives birth. As Chrysostom said, “**He admitted the influence of Satan and was filled with it**” (**Chrysostom**, *Homilies on Acts* 12).⁴ Bede points out that this is not Satan “**going into him and into his senses**” but rather “**like a crafty, wicked, deceitful and fraudulent deceiver, he draws the human soul toward dispositions for malice by thoughts and enticements of vices, of which he is full**” (**Bede**, *Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* 5.3).⁵ **Third**, in this case, they conspire together to test God. That is, he took the thought that had now given birth and disseminated it to someone else. In this way, he spread the evil and she joins in.

This is all **fairly similar to what James tells us**. “**Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed**

⁴ In Francis Martin and Evan Smith, *Acts*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:13-15). And of course, **what happens** to our couple?

We’ve already seen what happens to Ananias. How about his wife? With her, it is a little different. This takes us to **the second stage** of Peter’s confrontation with her. He gives her **a prophecy**. “Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out” (9). “Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last” (10a). Sapphira expired. She died there on the spot. She fell down, dead. God had used the transmission of Peter’s prophecy to act in this remarkable capacity to show that at this moment, Peter was again acting as his representative. And his words here were as powerful as they were with her husband. They caused Sapphira to die. This was **the sovereign God’s doing**.

Again, “**When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband**” (10b). Same acts. Same men. Same day. There is no hint here that these men were unclean; there is every hint that they were expecting this to happen.

“And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things” (11). The same response now comes to the church. In fact, Luke now mentions the church, whereas before he had only mentioned “those who heard.” Yes, the point of this story is that it works its way to the church as a warning, and this now takes me back to our original thoughts.

Warning Passages At the Beginning of Covenants

As many have noted, this episode bears a remarkable resemblance to that of Nadab and Abihu. Both contain two parties. “Both parties instantly died in the presence of God for violating his holiness. Both incidents are recounted at the inception of a covenant between God and his people. These accounts serve as a warning that all who are members of the covenant community serve the Holy God. They cannot lie to him or worship him in a way that is improper. There can be no deception or manipulation in serving God.”⁶

⁶ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, vol. 4, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1992), 137–138.

Kistemaker says, “God wants the church to remain pure and unstained. He removes the blame of Ananias’ sin by removing him and his wife from the community of the early Christians ... Ananias’ deception could have destroyed the purity of the early church, which was displayed through unity, love, and harmony.”⁷ To me, this point is made all the more acute and vital because of the priestly associations made here by Luke connecting Barnabas as a Levite and the Spirit’s presence with Ananias and Sapphira. They are priests acting in the temple. Spence-Jones said of this, “If believers are rightly regarded as ‘priests unto God,’ then the case of Ananias and Sapphira is one of presumption in an assumed priesthood.”⁸ In this way, “Both of these events are potent reminders of God’s holiness.”⁹

It is simultaneously a privilege of the highest possible calling and a deadly serious business to be considered acting out a role as a priest of God. And it is something, I should point out, that in this general capacity as a Christian, belongs

⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 17, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 184, 82. Quoted in *Tabletalk Magazine*, March 2000: “Not the Labors of My Hands” (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2000), 23,

⁸ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Leviticus*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1910), 152.

⁹ Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, vol. 3A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 165–166.

both to men and women now—as Sapphira is the first example among others we will see later in the book. So this is a profound warning for us to take this business of being Christians with the upmost care and concern. Especially once you’ve been baptized, for this is the sign that you have been ordained as a new covenant priest. It is nothing to be mocked, trifled with, or entered into lightly. The church has done much harm both to itself and to the world in making Christianity this “**easy-believism.**” Can you have it told you in any plainer language than these two stories?

I say also *the world*, because as Joseph Seiss pointed out long ago of these stories, as well as the story of Achan lying to Joshua, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram opening their mouths against God’s authority, and other such warning stories,

I think of the coming in of that power [to kill, shown by God],—of the havoc it must needs make in the whole order of things,—of the confusion it will cause in the **depraved cabinets, and courts, and legislatures of the world,**—of the revolution it must work in **business customs, in corporation managements, in political manipulations, in mercantile and**

manufacturing frauds, in the lies and hollownesses which pervade social life,—of the changes it must bring into churches, into pulpits, into pews, into worship, into schools, into the newspapers, into book-making and book-reading, into thinking and philosophy, and into all the schemes, enterprises, judgments, pursuits, and doings of men,—of how it will affect literature, art, science, architecture, eating, drinking, sleeping, working, recreating,—of what it must do concerning playhouses, and rumshops, and gambling hells [halls?], and the unhallowed gains by which great masses of people have their living and keep themselves up in the world.¹⁰

Oh, church. What have we done in not taking seriously this warning of Ananias and Sapphira? Do we not see that **the leaven** works its way through the church and into the world itself because of what we do? It is true that things like this don't happen all the time. As we have noted, they happened **at the beginning of various covenant administrations** to serve as warnings. It is the grace of God alone that they do not oc-

¹⁰ J. A. Seiss, *A Series of Special Lectures on the Revelation of Jesus Christ with Revised Text*, Sixth Edition, vol. III, *The Apocalypse* (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1900), 328–329.

cur on a daily basis—everywhere. But God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do you think that he takes unholiness, lying, and stealing, covering-up lightly?

Importantly, I am not convinced that Nadab and Abihu, and even Ananias and Sapphira for that matter were **unbelievers**. They sinned and brought great unholiness to their persons and their proximity—the church. For this, God used them as examples to us, not because we are *not* Christians, but because we *are*. Though God forgives all our sin in Christ, it still has repercussions in this world. In the case of our couple, as Chrysostom concluded, “**The matter could not simply be passed over, but, like gangrene, had to be excised to prevent it from infecting the rest of the body.**”¹¹

That is why these stories are here. But there is one more word I want you to consider. And it has to do with **Satan**. Someone has suggested that this story can be read, in part, against the backdrop of **an ancient comedy**—not that it is funny or laughable, but that it is an inversion of a tragedy.

You might say, “**That doesn’t sound right. The characters die! Wouldn’t that be more like a tragedy?**” Not necessarily. You see, in that world, as was not all that long ago also

¹¹ Chrysostom in Martin, 60.

true in our own, when you swore an oath as Sapphira did, it was a legally binding self-imprecation, especially in the selling of goods. Often times people would swear that if they were lying, let the god kill them.

But, of course, *the god never did kill them*. And in fact, the gods didn't really care about taking oaths and lying and deceiving others in these kinds of ways. Because they did the same evil actions themselves. Go read the myths. For this reason, as is increasingly true in our own (in part because of the church's utter lack of fear of this very story), many impious people would swear oaths like this—to no harm, and they did it in the name of religion for monetary gain. Several ancient comedies actually explored this question “*to great dramatic effect*,”¹² showing that *the character of people matters*. In the comedy, the hero will often expose the hypocrisy of the oath-taker, and in Luke it is strengthened because the True God *does* care.

In this way, through this story, God is actually taking care of his people. “*The scene encourages [us] to have confidence that the church is blameless of impiety and that the*

¹² J. Albert Harrill, “[Divine Judgment Against Ananias and Sapphira \(Acts 5:1-11\): A Stock Scene of Perjury and Death](#),” *JBL* 130.2 (2011): 369. 351-69. On this entire line of thinking, see this fascinating article.

promises about its [God] are true.”¹³ Jesus had told his disciples things like, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Luke 14:33) and “Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:33–34). As Calvin said, “The punishment of this wretch ought to have encouraged the godly to be more liberal afterwards in setting apart their goods for God and the poor, because they could gather how precious alms were in the sight of God, when the profaning of them had been punished so severely” (Calvin, *Commentary on Acts* 5:5).¹⁴ This Jesus is still alive. And this is the positive reason the Christians acted in these ways in the first place. Our story actually reinforces this kind of positive, rather than negative reading. God did this to take care of his church. He loves her and would have no stain or blemish in his Bride.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ In Esther Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts: New Testament*, vol. VI, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 61.

But what about **Satan**? For he is clearly presented as being part of this sordid affair. Many have pointed out that in putting the liars to death, God was also **dealing a blow to Satan**. It was a victory of Satan *in* Ananias and Sapphira.¹⁵ Wiersbe reminds us of what a serious matter it is to be energized by Satan.

If Satan cannot defeat the church by attacks from the outside, he will get on the inside and go to work (Acts 20:28–31). **He knows how to lie** [he is the **Father of Lies**; **John 8:44**] to the minds and hearts of church members, even genuine Christians, and get them to follow his orders. We forget that the admonition about the spiritual armor (Eph. 6:10–18) was written to God’s people, not to unbelievers, because it is the Christians who are in danger of being used by Satan to accomplish his evil purposes.

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, “Sin has many tools, but a lie is the handle which fits them all.” Satan is a liar and a murderer (John 8:44). He lied *to* and *through* this couple, and the lie led to their deaths. When God judged Ananias and Sapphira, He was also judging Satan. He was letting everybody know that He would not tolerate deception in His church.¹⁶

¹⁵ **Robert F. O’Toole**, “Ananias (Person),” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 224.

¹⁶ **Warren W. Wiersbe**, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 422.

And he was also letting everyone know that Satan would not win. Therefore, take the warning of Otto Brunfels (Lutheran botanist, teacher, and physician; 1488-1534) seriously when he says:

Where a perverse disposition of the will begins to hold sway, there the door is open to the devil. He is constantly circling around, looking for a crack through which he can creep in. And this is what is meant when we say he enters, fills and possesses: during moments of joy or sadness he takes measure of our mind, and once it has been fully discerned and understood, he stirs it up and agitates it and drives it to evil, fueling the flames. (*Annotations on Acts 5:3.*)¹⁷

Indeed, **God will not be mocked**, by the devil or human deceivers. God has given us this story to show us how true it is. Church, you are well advised to consider the fear that first came upon all who heard of these events of those days. Fear God and take his Son seriously. Who knows what God might be pleased to do in our day if once more such fear fell upon God's people.

¹⁷ Chung-Kim 60.

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