

**Acts 4:32-5:11, No. 12****“Not Again?!”****November 8, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

In this case, the chapter division is not well placed. Remember, the Bible was not divided into chapters until a thousand years after Christ, so these divisions are hardly original to the biblical text. Some are better than others. We ought to begin a new chapter in v. 32 for, while this short paragraph summarizes the generous spirit of these early Christians, repeating in greater detail what was said before in 2:44-45, surely part of the reason for the placement of this summary is to prepare for the startling contrast in the behavior of Ananias and Sapphira. In other words, these two paragraphs are directly related to one another, vv. 32-37 of our chapter 4 having much more to do with the paragraph that follows it than with the one that precedes it.

## Text Comment

v.32 The statement is a generality as we shall see, typical of the Bible’s way of speaking in generalities. We will learn in a moment that there were those who were *not* of one heart and soul and who felt very strongly that the things that belonged to them were their own.

But take note of the definition of Christian stewardship provided here: “no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own...” In his discussion of stewardship in 2 Corinthians Paul will say a similar thing: “what do you have that you have not received?” It was voluntary, not an economic system, motivated by love and gratitude not coercion, but the result was that what Chrysostom called “those chilly words ‘mine’ and ‘yours’” were not part of the Christian vocabulary! As G.K. Chesterton put it: “Any number of philosophies will repeat the platitudes of Christianity. But it is the ancient church that can again startle the world with the paradoxes of Christianity.” Such a paradox, for example, as “what belongs to me does not belong to me!”

v.34 Sometimes the shoe is on the other foot. Later in Acts we will find this same Jerusalem church fallen on hard times and needing and receiving help from other churches, including Gentile churches.

v.35 Luke, in the fashion of great writers, introduces here a man who is to play a significant role later in the narrative. Why do we learn Barnabas’ name? Well, we’ll know soon enough. It is what in literature is called a *prolepsis*, an anticipation of things to come. We will not hear of this man again until 9:27, but when we do we will already have some idea of his character.

v.37 The ancient law that forbid Levites from owning land was by this time a dead letter, as was that entire system of laws of which it was a part: the division of the land by tribe and clan – which made no sense since so much of the land had been taken from the Jews by this time – the law of Jubilee, and so on.

- 5:1 The “But” with which our chapter 5 begins indicates that a contrast is being drawn between these two people and Barnabas and the other Christians whose spirit of love and generosity had just been described.
- v.2 In other words, they wanted credit for a larger gift than they were willing to give. They wanted people to think that their sacrifice was greater than it actually was.
- v.4 In other words, the sin did not lie in not giving the full amount. Ananias was free to give any amount he wished. The sin lay in the lie, the hypocrisy, and the subversion of giving for love’s sake. In those early days the apostles were privy to direct communications from the Lord. Presumably Peter knew the facts only because God made them known to him in some way. This comforts us. God himself judged these two for reasons sufficient to him, and the judge of all the earth always does right!
- v.6 One of the questions always raised about this narrative was this summary burial. Why didn’t they wait at least until they had contacted the man’s wife? We know too little to answer for sure. Burials typically followed soon after death in those hot and sunny climes. But it may well have been supposed by the community that someone who died, as it were, by the very hand of God, should be buried immediately, with none of the usual solemnities observed. In that case it would have been a further sign of God’s judgment.
- v.11 This is the first use of the word “church” to describe Christian believers. The Greek word employed here, *ekklesia*, was the standard term for “congregation,” “people, or “assembly,” such as the assembly of citizens in a city. It was one of two terms the translators of the OT into Greek two centuries before Christ – the translators of what is called the LXX – used to translate the Hebrew terms for the congregation or assembly of Israel. It is an ordinary term with an ordinary meaning which was invested with great significance when it was used for the people of God.

We do not expect this. Everything was going so well. The gospel was advancing, the church was growing rapidly, converts were being added day by day, miracles were occurring, and a new community of love was springing up. We would have expected every member of the church to be caught up in the excitement and wonder of the work the Holy Spirit was doing among them. And then this depressing episode. It is a jarring note in Luke’s otherwise positive depiction of the days after Pentecost. Accordingly, Commentators have expressed their suspicions that something is amiss here.

There are those who wonder if “this sordid offense deserve[d]...an immediate capital punishment which allowed no time for repentance.” [Wendt] Others are more direct: “We may hope that Ananias and Sapphira are legendary.” [W.L. Knox] Others attempt to soften the blow by imagining that this account is an interpretation – presumably developed much later – to account for the first two deaths that occurred in the Christian community after Pentecost. The theory is that Christians had thought that no one would die between the Ascension and the Second Coming and they had to explain how it was that two of them had died (though, no doubt,

they had died of natural causes). But all of this completely misses the point and detaches Luke's narrative from real life.

Indeed, the utterly unexpected nature of this narrative is some significant demonstration of its historicity. This is not a story likely to have been invented. It places the church in a poor light and might be seemed to have cast some sort of doubt or question on the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The later inventions of Christian legends are demonstration enough that inventions are almost invariably to the credit, not the discredit of the church and its heroes.

So why this? Why did Luke include this unhappy episode in his otherwise so heartening narrative of the early progress of the gospel in the world? Why this downer among so many heroic and inspiring episodes? There are perhaps a number of reasons.

*I. Let's begin with the obvious. Luke reports this because it happened.*

Happening as it happened, it was seared into the mind and the conscience of the Christian church. When God executes a husband and then immediately thereafter he executes his wife for a crime committed against the truth and against love and against Christian faithfulness, Christians are bound to remember that. There is a painful honesty in the Bible's reporting of events from beginning to end. It is as much a record of the stumbles and failures of God's people, as it is of their triumphs, if not more so. This is, alas, the way of things in the church of God. There have always been false sons in the pale and there were from the beginning. David was betrayed by his friends; there was a Judas among the Twelve; Paul would have a turncoat, Demas, among his inner circle of assistants; and among those generous, loving men and women who formed the early community of Christians, there were Ananias and Sapphira. No one who refuses to face this fact, no one unwilling to recognize the so often deeply disappointing behavior of people who ought to know better, will ever understand this world or the gospel of Jesus Christ. This narrative might be surprising to a modern reader, but it surprises no one nurtured on the stark realism of the Bible's depiction of the human heart as a cauldron of selfishness, pettiness, and corruption.

“During the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery Improvement Association led thousands of local blacks through months of hardship in an attempt to break municipal bus segregation. Blacks rode bicycles, trudged miles to and from work, and formed car pools that local police regularly harassed. Police would stop and interrogate drivers, make them demonstrate their wipers and lights, and then write them up for tiny and, often, bogus violations. Drivers adapted. According to one historian, they ‘crept along the road and gave exaggerated turn signals, like novices in driving school.’

“Under these difficult conditions, many black citizens of Montgomery supported the boycott single-mindedly and with a spirit of mutual help and accountability. Even those who had little to sacrifice nonetheless sacrificed what they had in order to bring down city walls of injustice. Remarkably, a number of blacks also figured out ways to defraud their own movement. By submitting phony reimbursement claims, they hustled the Montgomery Improvement Association for ‘oceans of gasoline and truckloads of

imaginary spare tires.’ The MIA says [one historian] was constantly trying to ‘plug the holes in the reimbursement system.’ The hustlers were living on tears.” [C. Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 78-79]

Can you believe it? At such a time of moral heroism and sacrifice and togetherness in a great cause, many took the opportunity to game the system? Can you believe it? Darn sure you can believe it if you know anything about the human heart and the human condition.

What we find here in Acts 5 is what we find everywhere in the world and far too often in the church if only we care to look and are honest about what we see. The account of Ananias and Sapphira is an example of Luke’s honesty, the Bible’s honesty in reporting human life as it actually is and Christian life as it so often is. [Bruce, *Acts (Greek Text)*, 131]

*II. But moral realism isn’t the only reason Luke includes this episode in his early church history. By this means Luke also establishes a continuity between the fledgling post-Pentecost church and the ancient people of God.*

In other words, while in some respects Pentecost represented a new beginning, in most respects the church was as it had always been. A new chapter of its history was being written, but the over-arching story is the same. It has long been pointed out that there is a resemblance between this history and that of Achan in Joshua 7, the man, remember, who, after the conquest of Jericho, stole for himself some of the “devoted” things. Nothing was to be taken from the conquered city, but Achan took some valuables nevertheless. The very word translated “kept back” in v 2 is used in the Greek translation (the LXX translation) of Joshua 7:1 to describe what Achan had done. The word means “put aside for oneself” or “misappropriate.” [BAG, 546] The parallel is scarcely accidental.

Another parallel to the behavior of Ananias and Sapphira is the account in Numbers 15:32-36 of the man who was put to death for gathering wood on the Sabbath Day. In each case, the sin comes in the midst of the manifestations of God’s glory, presence, and grace and power; in each case, and clearly, the point of the punishment and its being recorded is dramatically to reinforce the sanctity of God’s law and the reality of the divine holiness (as it does here, the result was that great fear overtook the people of God); in each case God himself orders the punishment; and in neither case was the punishment repeated. There was but one man stoned for gathering wood as there are but these two executed immediately for lying about their gift.

Just as Pentecost had its precursor in the prophesying of the seventy elders with Moses, so did the sin of Ananias and Sapphira in the execution of a man who, in full view of the assembly, flaunted God’s law almost as soon as it had been given. You will often, far too often hear some Christian teachers, even some of our own men, speak of the New Testament as if it were a more liberal, compassionate, wide-spirited epoch than that described in the first thirty-nine books of the Bible. No one who reads the Bible with any care should think it so! Most of the great and memorable, most beautiful descriptions of the mercy of God, of the scope and sweep of divine forgiveness, of the tenderness of the Lord toward the frailties of his people come from what we call the Old Testament. And the New Testament has a great deal of the Lord’s wrath and vengeance in it. Indeed, perhaps the most difficult of the statements of that type found in the

Bible are found in the New Testament, not the Old. There is no difference on this score. We live in the same spiritual world and before the same God of tender love and perfect justice as did the saints of the ancient church. Ananias and Sapphira remind us of that. Life is still serious business and it is still a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

We might have been tempted to forget God's justice, to forget the necessity of our obedience to him, if we were fed a steady diet of good news and happy recollections of ancient victories, and were not made to remember that God remains, as he must always remain, the enemy of the wicked whether those wicked are found outside or inside the Christian church.

*III. A third reason for the inclusion of this discouraging narrative in Luke's early church history is that it provides a corrective, a balancing weight to his account of the gospel's advance.*

It was a time of great spiritual power. Thousands had come to Christ in a very short period of time. The spiritual landscape of Jerusalem had been dramatically redrawn. The church seemed to be sweeping all before it in the power of the Spirit. But during his ministry the Lord had taught his disciples that the sowing of the gospel seed would produce some growth that did not last and that the gospel net would pick up both good fish and bad.

The church has always needed to be aware of this and prepared for the fact that not everyone would stick. We have already read of the church encountering formal opposition and persecution. But this is a problem of a different sort, the church being dragged down by the dead weight of unbelief within its own membership, among folk who think themselves or who are thought to be by others faithful members of the body of Christ.

All great revivals or renewals of gospel power – and there have been a great many through the ages – require this lesson to be learned again and it is always a painful lesson to learn. To lose those whose lives seemed to have changed, whose profession of faith in Christ once seemed to be so genuine, *that* always stings. This, of course, will not be the last such story of seeming faith in Christ coming to nothing, even in the New Testament. But it is the principal example of this dreary phenomenon in the book of Acts. If you want to know the story of the Christian church in the world, you have to know this too. *And by executing these two on the spot the Lord made sure we'd know this and remember this!*

And, of course, this history, as all biblical history, is also instruction in the Christian life. There is warning and exhortation for us here as well. We are shown people thought to be Christians, who thought *themselves* to be Christians, losing interest and returning to the world or, as here, being revealed in their hypocrisy, I say, we are shown such people in the Bible *in large part to put us on our mettle never to be such people ourselves*. One way God keeps his people walking with him and striving to obey and serve him is precisely by providing warnings such as this one, warnings that belonging outwardly to the community of faith is hardly the same thing as being a true follower of the Lord Jesus. Multitudes have gone from their place in the Christian church straight to hell, as multitudes of Israelites did in the ancient epoch. Indeed, one of the great messages of the prophets to Israel was that mere outward conformity was not salvation, that God knew what was in a man or woman's heart; that God knew whether the acts of worship and even of generosity were done in love for him or in love of oneself.

*IV. And finally this record of sin and punishment even in the earliest days following Pentecost is a further lesson in the nature of biblical holiness.*

Pay close attention here. We are inclined, I'm sure, as we read this narrative, to wonder at what seems to be a disparity – even a huge disparity – between crime and punishment. After all, consider the facts.

Ananias was free to give as much or as little as he wished. Peter told him that. He didn't have to sell that piece of property at all. Others were selling theirs but there was no law that they had to do so. They were simply caught up in the delicious sense that God was among them and doing wonderful things before them, that they were part of the unfolding salvation of God. What is more, Ananias *did* give something. In fact, he gave quite a bit, so far as we can tell. The impression is not that he gave only a small sum. Apparently he gave enough so as to give the impression that he had given the entire sum realized from the sale of his property. He thought people would think that the amount he had given for the help of the church and its poor was the amount he had been paid for the parcel of land.

All he did was to reduce the gift. And there was nothing intrinsically wrong with that either. He could have given all, or half, or a quarter of the sale price to the church. He was free to make up his own mind about what he would give. Barnabas had given the entire sale price and perhaps Ananias had felt that anything less than that would be considered cheap.

Ananias' sin was in wanting to look like an especially good Christian without actually having to be one. [Stahlin, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 83] And he was not forgiven; he was condemned without being offered a chance to repent. Now, to be sure, God judged him, not men, so we can be sure that it was just judgment, that Ananias would never have repented of his sin however long an opportunity he had been given to do so.

Still, we wonder. But here again we are taught something about what it means to be a Christian, about what holiness really is. We learn that in the Bible whether a sin is or can be forgiven is not a function of the nature of the crime itself but the attitude of heart in which it is committed. *The true index of holiness in the Bible from beginning to end is found in the heart, not the hand.*

David committed adultery and murder, and surely both those crimes are worse in and of themselves than Ananias' lie. So was Peter's betrayal of the Lord the night of his arrest. But David and Peter were forgiven and Ananias and Sapphira were not. Why? Because David's sin and Peter's were what in the OT are referred to as "unintentional." This can be confusing but the term "unintentional" or "inadvertent" (as it is also sometimes translated) doesn't actually mean that they didn't intend to commit their sins. David certainly intended to have relations with a woman not his wife and then to cover up that crime by seeing to her husband's death in battle. He thought about doing those things and committed his sinful acts in the full knowledge of what he was doing, as did Ananias and Sapphira.

The difference lies rather here: David and Peter did what they did not out of the settled commitments of their hearts but out of their spiritual frailty, not because they didn't want to live

a holy life, but because in the moment their lusts and fears got the better of them. Their sins were acts of weakness, not of purposeful betrayal of the Lord. Indeed, throughout that ugly episode in David's life, no matter the terrible things he did and attempted to cover up, the deepest intention of his heart was still that he should be the Lord's man in heart, speech, and behavior. Peter's bitter tears after his sin were proof that it was the same with him.

But that was not the case with Ananias and Sapphira. God's peremptory and immediate judgment of that couple was proof that what they did was not contrary to their deepest and most heartfelt commitments, but rather the consistent expression of them. Jesus taught, as you remember, that you cannot love both God and money. The ultimate measure of a person's life is what he or she *loves*. And David and Peter loved God, while Ananias and Sapphira loved money. *That fact* and that alone explains why the man who gathered wood was condemned and so were Ananias and Sapphira, both at the direct command of God who knows what is really in a person's heart and who that person really is; knows that, very often, better than the person knows himself or herself.

So, let us all take to heart the lessons of this sad event in the early history of the church after Pentecost, lessons so important that God made sure this history would be remembered by executing this man and woman immediately and by his own hand; by doing something that caused fear to come over the entire Christian community.

1. There are two ways to belong to the Christian church but only one that brings us to God and heaven.
2. The difference between the faithful Christian and the hypocrite is not that one sins and the other does not. Luke recorded and will record the sins of Christians without ever suggesting that they were hypocrites like Ananias and Sapphira. Sin is, alas, a fact of Christian life. But so is the fundamental commitment of a man or woman's heart.
3. The difference between the true and the false follower of Jesus, between a Judas and a Peter, both of whom sinned terribly against Jesus in person, is not always detectable by us precisely because it lies in the attitudes and the fundamental dispositions and commitments of the heart. That is why it is always a Christian's own responsibility to examine himself or herself to be sure that his or hers is a genuine faith, a real love for Christ, and a real intention to live for him.

There is no formula ever given us in the Word of God by which to examine the genuineness of our faith, to make sure that we are not hypocrites like Ananias and Sapphira, soon or eventually to have our hypocrisy exposed. There are tests we are given to apply to ourselves, but there is no formula by which we are to apply those tests to others or to measure the results. Deeply wise and spiritual men and women who recognize the supreme importance of the question have devised formulas for themselves.

Here is one of them. Look at yourself when you are at your worst, when your behavior is obviously not the behavior of a Christian. At that time, when you are thinking, speaking, or behaving so badly, can you say from your heart, that no matter how badly you have behaved you still would rather be changed to be like Christ, that you would rather have your sins rooted out of

your heart entirely so that you might faithfully serve the Lord Jesus? Or at such a time would you rather that God should change his standards so that you wouldn't have to live according to them after all? At your worst can you say you want to be Christ's man, Christ's woman, and would happily give up your sins if only you could be so in heart and speech and behavior all the time? That's the way a Christian thinks. *But* it is not the way Ananias and Sapphira thought!