

Explore the Bible: July 7

Accountable • Acts 4:36 – 5:11

By Roland L. McMillan



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Our lesson passage begins with a positive example of someone in the church who lived that ideal. We are introduced to Barnabas in Acts 4:36. Verse 37 describes Barnabas selling a field and entrusting the money to the apostles. The description is simple, but it provides a strong contrast to what is about to come.

What follows, Acts 5:1-11, is the most difficult passage in Acts for many people. Reading the story of Ananias and Sapphira through our cultural lenses is not easy. They agreed to lie about the price of property they sold for those in need in the church. Peter confronted Ananias with rapid-fire

questions, accusing him of lying to people and to God. Ananias dropped dead, and some young men buried him quickly. When Ananias' wife Sapphira enters the scene, she is questioned, accused, judged, dead, and buried in short order. Through our cultural lenses, this story can seem harsh.

A careful look at the passage reveals there is more to the Ananias and Sapphira story than we may see at first glance. To the people of the early church in Jerusalem, their actions would have looked like the positive example of Barnabas. They sold property. They laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. They seemed to have been committed to the common good. They seemed to be a part of this extraordinary unity. What was happening in their hearts was another story. Behind their public actions was a conspiracy to lie to the church and to steal from the church.

One key is the word that Luke used twice for keeping back some of the money in 5:2,3. One standard reference book describes the meaning of this word as "to misappropriate funds for one's own benefit," and goes on to say "to embezzle" (Louw and Nida, 57.246). Apparently, Ananias dedicated the land to the church, so the land belonged to the church. Then, he kept part of the value for himself. He stole from the church. Another key is the description of their actions as lying to the Holy Spirit (5:3), lying to God (5:4), and testing God (5:9). This couple's conspiracy was about more than money. Lying and stealing was an insult to God and a threat to the church's unity.

What about the burials? They seem unusual because they happened so quickly and without ceremony. Normally bodies were not buried so quickly, but there were exceptions. People who committed suicide, criminals, and those who were thought to be under the judgment of God were buried like this. In these cases, a quick burial was appropriate in their culture. Obviously, Luke's description of the unusual burials is saying that they were under the judgment of God.

The few verses that follow this account describe a unique time of great spiritual power for the early church. The way that Luke framed the story between a description of extraordinary unity and a description of unusual power from the Spirit is no accident. The actions of Ananias and Sapphira were a threat to that unity, and their deception could have quenched the working of the Spirit in the church. Luke mentioned the fear that followed their deaths twice. The sudden deaths of the husband and the wife protected the purity of the early Jesus movement.

If the story makes us uncomfortable, then it has done its job. We can examine our motives about money and the church, our attitudes about the holiness of God, and more. We can question the values of our culture. When we are uncomfortable with God's actions, we can see where our thinking does not match God's standards. Life and death consequences in Acts 5:1-11 show us that Christianity is not a casual thing.

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