

Deceit and Persecution

Key Text:	Acts 5
Key Verse(s):	“And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? And, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us. Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:27-29)

Background to the Study

Acts 5:1-11 covers the deception and punishment of Ananias and Sapphira, while verses 12-16 detail the signs and wonders the Apostles did through the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 33 of chapter 4 states that the unity in the church resulted in great power as the Apostles proclaimed the resurrection of Christ. Since the Jews thought that the death of Christ meant He could not have been the Messiah, one vital mission of the Apostles was to convince the Jews of the reality of Christ’s resurrection. In Acts 4 verse 36, Barnabas (who later travelled with Paul) is singled out as one who sold his land and gave the proceeds to the Apostles to distribute as needed. Since Barnabas is the only donor mentioned by name, the acknowledgement of his endowment may have been what caused Ananias and Sapphira to want similar recognition. His action was in contrast to their self-serving attitudes. In Acts 5:1-2, Ananias and Sapphira sold a possession and gave the impression that they were offering the full amount for God’s use while holding back part of the proceeds for themselves. This couple’s deceit and hypocrisy were a direct threat to the church’s unity and spiritual success and resulted in swift punishment from God. While the Early Church met in homes and other venues, the signs and wonders done by the Apostles had resulted in the number of converts growing to where they started to convene at “Solomon’s porch.” This was a covered walkway on the east side of the Temple compound within the area known as the “Court of the Gentiles.” Verse 13 indicates that while the people held the Apostles in high regard, those with impure motives did not dare join them for fear of what had happened to Ananias and Sapphira. However, multitudes of men and women did believe, and the church continued to grow. According to verses 15-16, the people were so impacted by Peter’s ministry that they brought those who were sick and laid them on cots or pallets in the streets, hoping they would be healed by the shadow of Peter when he walked by.

The next portion of chapter 5 describes the opposition of the religious leaders in Jerusalem to the preaching of Peter and the Apostles. It can be divided into three main sections. Verses 17-25 cover the Apostles’ arrest, confinement, and angelic deliverance. Immediately returning to preaching, they once again were apprehended and brought before the council, where Peter fearlessly stated their position that obedience to God must come

first (vs. 26-32). Finally, Gamaliel's restraining advice, the beating and release of the Apostles is related in verses 33-40. These religious leaders no doubt felt their authority as spiritual teachers was being threatened as more and more of the populace accepted what Christ's followers were teaching. The Apostles' supernatural deliverance from prison (verse 19), was evidence to the believers that the Lord was with His Church. However, that deliverance was not granted so the disciples could flee for their lives; this is made clear by the angelic charge in verse 20, where the Apostles were commissioned to go and take a stand by preaching at the Temple once more. Peter's assertion that "we ought to obey God rather than man" (vs. 29) was not a defiance of secular authority but a statement of spiritual obligation. Verse 33 states that the members of the Sanhedrin were "cut to the heart"—they were furious at what they considered to be defiance, and determined to sentence the Apostles to death. Intervention came through the advice of Gamaliel, who was perhaps the most distinguished man of the entire council during the time of Christ. Gamaliel reminded the Sanhedrin of insurgents in the past whose rebellions had died out and pointed out that if the teachings of Jesus' disciples were not of God, their movement would come to nothing as well. If the movement were of God, it would be imprudent for the Sanhedrin to resist it. Though the Apostles were beaten—the harshest punishment to that date in the emerging church—they were not cowed by the threats and demands of the council.

Testimony from Our Day

From hostility and harassment to torture, imprisonment, and even death, Christians in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith. Christians in at least sixty countries around the world face persecution simply because they believe in Jesus Christ. Yet even in those locations, Christians continue to witness to those around them and meet for worship. Cheng Jie is one of those individuals. Living in China where religion is tightly controlled, this pastor's wife, mother of two little boys, and former kindergarten director had prepared herself for the possibility of her husband's arrest. However, she never thought she would be the one to spend time behind bars for her faith. In the end, it was her role as school director that caused her to be imprisoned for two years. Chinese authorities claimed the school and its administration were guilty of using what the authorities called "religious curriculum." The school was closed, and Cheng Jie and three others were arrested. Sentenced to two years in a hard labour camp, Cheng Jie at first was afraid. She was housed in a cell with fifteen criminals, some of them due to be put to death for murder. Their fifteen-by-fifteen-foot cell had only one toilet. Though expected to work twelve-hour work days, the prisoners were fed very little, usually just rice with boiled cabbage or radishes. The prison guards refused to give Cheng Jie a Bible, but another prisoner had one and she gave it to Cheng Jie in trade for some personal items. Despite the long work hours, Cheng read the Bible faithfully every night and found strength in God's Word. She also taught her cellmates hymns and Bible stories. Her faith and trustworthiness made her stand out to prison authorities and after six months, she even was put in charge of the cells. In February 2016, Cheng Jie's sentence was complete and she was released. The future for their family was uncertain, but she and her husband continued to cling to their faith in God and trust Him to be with them no matter what might lay ahead. Today's text describes the second instance in Scripture of followers of Christ being imprisoned for their faith (the first is recorded in Acts 4:3). In this instance, Peter and the other Apostles were arrested and put in jail by the religious leaders, but an angel of the Lord "opened the prison doors, and brought them forth" (verse 19). Although they had been commanded after the first arrest not to teach in the name of Jesus, the Apostles had immediately resumed witnessing. How would we respond if we were threatened with imprisonment and even death for talking about the Lord? To what extent are we willing to suffer for the sake of sharing the Gospel with others?

A Closer Look

Question 1	What do you think caused the people in the Early Church to willingly share their assets with those in need? · (Acts 4:34-37; Acts 2:44-45)
Question 2	In Acts 5:1-2, Ananias and Sapphira sold a possession but conspired together to hold back part of the proceeds, while giving the impression that they were offering the full amount for God's use. The Greek word translated <i>kept back</i> in verse 2 means "to set apart or appropriate for one's own use," indicating that the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was deliberate deception to portray full submission and participation. Divine judgment was immediate, and caused a healthy fear of God among the people. Why do you think God punished this couple so quickly and with such finality? What can we learn from this?
Question 3	What did the angel of the Lord tell the Apostles that they were to do when they were released from prison (Acts 5:20)?
Question 4	What doctrinal precepts of the faith did Peter refer to in Acts 5:30-31?
Question 5	With reference to Acts 5:17-42, what lessons can we learn from the behaviour of Peter and the other disciples in this portion of the text?

Take Home

God's Word makes it clear that lying is abhorrent to Him. To please Him, we must always openly declare the truth in both our words and deeds. Even though we live in a society where lying and deception are commonplace, we need to remember that God cannot lie, and He wants His children to be truthful at all times. Telling the truth isn't always easy, but it is the right thing to do! Opposition to the Gospel of Jesus Christ will come, but God will embolden and strengthen those who courageously take a stand for Him.