

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 6

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCTION

We learn of the early growth of the church in the fourth chapter. The number of believers increased after Peter's preaching and teaching. The religious leaders were not very happy. These priests told Peter to stop preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus. But the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was indispensable for only in His name is there salvation and hope for all mankind. The Sanhedrin Council was helpless because Peter would rather obey God and continue to preach and teach in the name of Christ. The believers prayed to God for boldness and courage to do His will in the face of such strong opposition from the religious authorities. The believers were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were of "one heart and one soul" encouraging and caring for one another. The generosity of one, named Barnabas, was singled out. His name means "the son of consolation". He was a Levite from the country of Cyprus. He was a rich man. He sold some of his property and took the proceeds to the apostles, who then distributed them to the needy.

The church was strong, and obedient and faithful to God. It was a shining testimony of the transformation,

which God had made in them. They were united in the face of opposition. Many people were converted and the number of believers grew rapidly. Since the enemy could not stop the work of God from outside the church, this present study indicates the enemy used a more subtle and dangerous method in destroying the church from within.

Chapter 5 can be divided into the following sections: (1) Discipline and decisiveness in the church were necessary to maintain its purity and witness (vv.1-16); (2) Deliverance and defence of the church against its enemies from without (vv.17-40); (3) The effect on the church in the midst of the internal and external problems (vv.41-42).

COMMENTARY

Pretending & Lying

The fifth chapter begins with the conjunction "but". Luke was signifying that what he was about to write was in contrast to what he had just described in the fourth chapter, particularly, in its last section. He had described the wonderful relationship of the believers—the oneness of heart and soul; the helping of one another in practical ways. The Christian community was spiritual, splendid and attractive. So the "but" intimates something that would be damaging to the community.

There was Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. They had just sold their possession and brought the proceeds to the apostles. They gave the impression that they had brought all the proceeds but had actually kept part of it. In this matter, both of them acted together. When Ananias came before the apostles, Peter charged him for

succumbing to Satan's temptation and lying to the Holy Spirit. Peter made it very clear that he had every right to the money from the sale of the land. How did Peter come to know this secret? As a man, he could not know this for a fact. But Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit who gave him this revelation. What was wrong with Ananias' action? He gave the impression that he had given all the proceeds of the land, which he had sold, hoping to get the applause and approval of the other believers that gathered at the apostles' feet. But he "kept back" part of it. The literal import of the meaning of "kept back" is "pilfering or embezzling". So, Ananias was not only guilty of pretending, but was also guilty of lying and stealing from God.

The moment Peter pronounced that he had not lied to men but to God, Ananias fell to the ground and died. The young men, who were around the apostles, wrapped up the body of Ananias and they buried him. Three hours later, Sapphira, his wife, came to the apostles. She did not know what had happened. Peter then asked her specifically whether she had sold the land for the amount that her husband had laid at the apostles' feet. She answered affirmatively without any hesitation that it was so. On that note, Peter charged her in no uncertain terms that she and her husband had tempted (or tested) the "Spirit of the Lord". Peter told her that the young men were carrying out her husband to be buried. On hearing and seeing this, Sapphira collapsed and died. She too was buried together with her husband. Ananias and Sapphira had excellent names: the husband's name means "God is gracious" and the wife's name means "Beautiful". Clearly, they had not lived up to their names.

Peter's words in this incident that led to the deaths of both husband and wife let forth some important truths. Firstly, Satan could inspire and fill Ananias' heart to deceive and lie to God.¹ Secondly, the fact that Satan inspired Ananias and his wife to conspire against God does not free them from guilt. Peter linked Satan to Ananias' sin in verse 3, and in verse 4, Peter attributes the responsibility for the action squarely on Ananias. Thirdly, the most serious sin in this instance is lying to the Holy Spirit. Ananias and Sapphira in lying to the church had lied to the Holy Spirit. All of us need to take careful note of this truth.

The Effect on The Church

Great fear came upon all the believers in the church.² The apostles were empowered with "many signs and wonders" which were done among the people. They were all together in Solomon's Porch. The judgement of death on Ananias and Sapphira had a "negative" effect on the unbelievers. It prevented those who were without any true faith from joining the church. They could be attracted by the astounding miracles and the material benefits available from members of the church. But they also realised that professing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ was a serious matter.

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira did not reduce the work of evangelism. On the contrary, more believers were added to the church by the Lord — "multitudes both men and women" (v.14). People brought their sick folks on beds into the streets

¹ Compare Mark 8:31-33, "And he began to

² This is the first time the word "church" is used to describe the believers.

hoping that the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them! The news spread to the neighbouring cities and many more brought their sick including those who were troubled by demons. Every one of them was delivered. They had witnessed the awesome power of the Holy Spirit who judged and also demanded commitment and responsibility. The apostles were highly esteemed by the people because of what was done.

Apostles Imprisoned & Released

Peter's preaching and teaching in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ was accompanied by miracles and the number of people converted stirred up the high priest and those that were with him into a rage of anger (v.17). They were the Sadducees. These religious leaders were part of the Sanhedrin Council. The Sanhedrin Council consisted of seventy-one members.³

The High Priest used his political power to order the arrest and imprisonment of the apostles. But in the night, the angel of the Lord came to the apostles and set them free. The angel commanded them to continue to preach and teach the "words of life" to the people in the temple. These words encouraged the apostles and soon after daybreak, the apostles went to the temple. The first sacrifice took place at the break of day. The apostles presumably went to the same place in

³It was a religious court. It composed of the High Priest at the head of the court. The chief priests composed the next group in the Sanhedrin. These chief priests were heads of the twenty-four groups into which all the priests were divided. The remaining members in the Sanhedrin were the elders of the nation, eminent rabbis and scribes. The latter two groups were usually Pharisees whereas the High Priest and all the other priests were Sadducees.

the temple to preach and teach in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The High Priest convened the Sanhedrin Council. The Senate was a body of elders of the people, who functioned as assessors to the Sanhedrin. The officers were the temple guards who were under the orders of the High Priest. They were told to bring the apostles out from prison to appear before them. But the officers reported that although the prison doors were all securely shut, and the keepers were guarding the doors, the prisoners were gone. When the High Priest and the captain of the guards heard this report, "they doubted of them whereunto this would grow" — they were in doubt and perplexed as to what it would all turn out to be. However, at this juncture, someone came and told them the apostles whom they had imprisoned were "standing" (implying the calm and fearless attitude of the men) in the temple preaching and teaching the people. Then the captain and some of his officers came and arrested the apostles again. They were careful to treat them courteously for they feared the people and the possibility of being stoned. The Jews were a bold and aggressive people; the apostles were at the head of a great popular movement which had deeply impressed many people and they feared that an uprising might arise and endanger their lives.

When the apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin, the High Priest charged the apostles for disobeying the previous order given to them. No question was asked about their escape from prison. Perhaps they were afraid to ask. The High Priest did not even name Jesus in his charge against the apostles. It seems that they were afraid of the blood-guiltiness of their deed

against Jesus Christ. But Peter, who appeared to be the leader of the apostles, spoke up and gave the reason for what they did. “We ought to obey God rather than men,” says Peter. He reiterated what he had earlier posed to them in Acts 4:19. Peter’s response to the Sanhedrin Council was clear and direct. He plainly presented the facts of Jesus Christ. God of their forefathers had raised up Jesus whom they had slain and “hanged on the tree” (v.30)⁴ God had exalted Jesus Christ to be Prince and Saviour to bring about repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. Peter testified that they were witnesses to all these events, and insisted that so also was the Holy Spirit whom God gave to them who obeyed Him. Peter’s charge against them for killing and crucifying Jesus was undeniable. He was not addressing the whole nation, but the Sanhedrin. However, Peter also declared to them that forgiveness of sins was available provided they repented and obeyed God.

The High Priest and the chief priests were “cut to the heart” (v.33). They were convicted and guilty of the crime. Instead of repenting of their sins, they intended to kill the apostles. At this point, an eminent Pharisee, who was a member of the Sanhedrin Council, stood up and counselled the court. His name was Gamaliel, the greatest teacher of Judaism at that time and who was considered the embodiment of Pharisaism. The Apostle Paul boasted that he had studied “the perfect manner

⁴ “Hanging on the tree” is a reference to Deuteronomy 21:23 -- His body shall not remain all night upon the **tree**, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is **hanged is accursed** of God); . . .

of the law” under him.⁵ He counselled the Sanhedrin Council to be cautious and to exercise restraint. He cited two instances in which two political “rabbi-routers” tried to garner support for their cause. Theudas had four hundred followers, but when he was slain, his followers were scattered and the group came to nothing (v.36). The other one was Judas of Galilee. He too attracted many people to him, but when he died, as many as those that followed him dispersed. His work also came to nothing. On this point, Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin Council to leave the apostles alone. He reasoned that if the work of the apostles were of men, it would eventually come to nothing. But if the work were of God, the Sanhedrin Council would be fighting against God. The Sanhedrin Council heard him and they were persuaded not to kill the apostles for the time being. They used their powers of discipline to flog the apostles and repeated their ban on them not to speak in the name of Jesus.⁶ This was their way of not losing face. God was making His servants gradually accustomed to the cross, to the cup

⁵ Acts 22:3 I am verily a man *which am* a Jew, born in Tarsus, *a city* in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of **Gamaliel**, *and* taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

⁶ Deuteronomy 25:1 If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that *the judges* may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked. 2 And it shall be, if the wicked man *be* worthy to be beaten, that the judge shall cause him to lie down, and to be beaten before his face, according to his fault, by a certain number. 3 **Forty stripes he may give him, and not exceed: lest, if he should exceed, and beat him above these with many stripes, then thy brother should seem vile unto thee.**

which the followers of Jesus had to drink. They had been threatened and imprisoned and now were being flogged. After that, they were released.

Suffer for Christ

The apostles left the courts rejoicing that they were considered worthy by God to “suffer shame” for the name of Christ. They remembered the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, who warned them that they would be like “sheep in the midst of wolves”. He taught them to be “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves”. The Lord Jesus Christ also predicted that their enemies would deliver them to the religious authorities and they would scourge them (Matthew 10:16-17). A new spirit arose concerning suffering for Christ; it is an honour and not a shame.

The apostles continued daily to preach and teach Jesus Christ in the temple and at home. These were the two fields of work. The temple was where crowds of people gathered and where the mission work of the church was done. And the work of edification or training and educating disciples was done in private houses, in the home or the church. Thus the twofold mandate of the church: evangelism and edification or education. Preaching and teaching Jesus Christ concerns the things that pertain to His birth, life and vicarious death, His miraculous resurrection, and His words of life and hope.

PRACTICAL VALUE

The sad account of Ananias and Sapphira shows the imperfection of a church. However, there is both comfort and challenge to us as we face these troubles and problems in the church. It

is a comfort to learn that the early church faced such problems. There is no such thing as a perfect church. It is a challenge because the early church dealt with the problem immediately. We too must do likewise. We should not allow such problems in the church to fester until it is too late to arrest it. We must deal with our imperfections the moment we face them. Remember, “Know ye not that a **little leaven** leaveneth the whole lump?” (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Did the punishment of both the husband and wife commensurate with the crime? They only lied and they were penalised with death. Is that fair, and why are not Christians today who lie, killed straightaway? We must know that God gave the penalty of death. Peter had no power over life and death. Just as he did not have the power to heal the lame man, he also did not have the power to take the life of the errant couple. It was God who judged and punished them. So we learn that God takes a very serious view of sin. He hates the sin of hypocrisy and lying. The Lord Jesus Christ used the strongest term against the hypocrisy, insincerity and dishonesty of the Pharisees and scribes. The fact that Christians and others are not struck dead when they lied is because of the love and mercy of God. Make no mistake: God has appointed a day when He will judge and punish those who have sinned against Him. This episode also teaches us that believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and becoming a born-again Christian is a serious matter.

It is not true that when the church stresses on purity of life, “be holy as God is holy” people will not be attracted and interested in the gospel. The opposite is true. The account in this

chapter proves this to be true. Ananias and Sapphira, members of the early church, were severely punished for their sins. One would expect many people to have nothing to do with the apostles for fear that they too might be judged severely. But the effect was that more people join the church. The strict accountability of our actions in fact attracts those who were genuinely seeking God and believing in Christ Jesus. So we must be vigilant. God will bring His sheep that hear His voice to His church!

Once more, we witnessed the solidarity of the church. They were united and they stood with the apostles. We can safely say that while Peter and the others were being arrested and questioned by the Sanhedrin Council, the early disciples were praying for them. Peter was bold in the presence of the Sanhedrin Council as compared with his cowardice in the house of the High Priest where he denied the Lord thrice (Luke 22:55-62). When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, there is a transformation in us that makes us strong and brave and yearning to share the gospel with others, and willingly and joyfully suffer shame for the sake of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 5:1-11; Luke 18:24; 1 Timothy 6:10.

Tuesday: Acts 5:12-16; John 14:12.

Wednesday: Acts 5:17-28; Daniel 3:15-25.

Thursday: Acts 5:29-32; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Hebrews 3:7,8,15; Hebrews 4:7.

Friday: Acts 5:33-42; Matthew 10:16-18; 1 Peter 4:12-19.

Discussion Questions

1. Why was the judgement on Ananias and Sapphira swift and immediate whereas the same sins committed by churchgoers today do not elicit the same kind of judgement from God?

2. What was the impact of the Ananias-Sapphira incident on the Church (vv.11-16)?

3. How did God bring help and deliverance to His servants while at the same time he did not wholly exempt them from suffering? Should what happened be the norm for every Christian who is imprisoned?

4. What purpose did the miracle of vv.19-20 serve? Consider its effect on (a) the apostles; (b) the believers; (c) the people; and (d) the rulers.

5. Can the message of Gamaliel to the Sanhedrin Council and the Senate be applied to the Charismatics, Neo-evangelical Movement, and other modern isms i.e. to leave them alone for if they were not of God they would simply disappear?

6. What does it mean to be wise as serpent and harmless as dove?

7. What do you learn from Peter's testimony to the religious leaders? What does this chapter teach us about God?
