

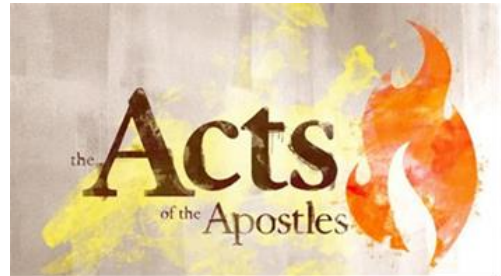
## ACTS: THE STORY OF THE CHURCH – Part 6

### ANANIAS & SAPPHIRA'S PLEDGE CARD

#### Acts 5:1-11

The *Paradise* of Pentecost was relatively short lived.

In the beginning the early followers of Jesus were meeting daily to share a meal, to hear the disciples teach and if a need arose they found a way to address it. The first break came when Peter and John were jousting with the Sadducees and full Sanhedrin.



Then came the first member drama – Ananias/Sapphira. If you have been in church for a long time these two names will be familiar, and the connotations will not be positive. I believe the more familiar we are with people or stories in scripture the less time we spend studying them. We may also have a predetermined view and as such we do not seek to continue to grow and develop theologically in these particular areas.

Ananias means “Yahweh is gracious” and Sapphira means “beautiful.”

Ananias sold some land – which the early community did if need arose – to share/meet needs of the whole.

As you already know, they sold property but held back a portion for themselves.

The Greek word used equals a form of embezzlement, *keeping for oneself something already entrusted to another*.

There is a similar story found in Joel that is almost a mirror of this story.

For us *embezzlement* is contextually difficult – it was their land – at their disposal so it was theirs to give some or give all.

But this could have been a pledge or a promise, one they did not have to make – but they did. And the new drill was to place gifts at “Apostles feet”, or present them with a gift for the whole community - was seen as a holy act – sacred ground contributing.

Add in the “Satan filling your heart” and you have promises made without holy commitment.

- Israel was spiritually adrift before Pentecost.
- Holy commitment giving was being restored. One might give out of fear of God – or to impress other or to curry favor – but had ceased being “sacred commitment” and true sacrifice.
- So, Ananias was not yet fully spiritually restored; he was not fully following Jesus.
- And a truly spirit-filled Peter could see his true soul-true motivation.

His sin is deception: If he had not surrendered his land’s proceeds to the Apostles after vowing to do so there would have been no issue. It was his land to do with as he wished. He could have given any portion of the proceeds to the community, kept the rest and been fine.

But he did promise – pledge – commit, and it is clear he was not pressured/coerced.

Voluntary – volitional action on his part – and he held back, breaking a holy vow.

Peter calling him out – essentially a verdict of sin – led to Ananias’s death; he literally dropped dead.

But it gets worse. Three hours later Sapphira is brought in unaware of his death.

She is given same indictment/verdict and she too drops dead: “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias received for the land?”

Again, deception.

And we know “Great fear seized the whole church” (first time church was used).

Big question: If she had confessed and told the truth, would she have been forgiven?

Seems yes, this was the time of grace.

They may have been wanting position in the community but were not emotionally, mentally and spiritually “in” the community.

One scholar cites them as imposters:

“By lying in order to achieve an honor they had not earned, they dishonored themselves as patrons but were in fact outsiders.”

They would not have been full converts to the restored Israel of Jesus as Messiah, effectively still Jews tied to the Roman patronage system – but wanting to be seen as converts – wanting it both ways.

So, they could have given a donation and chose to commit all proceeds but they were deceptive.

*But killing them?*

*Where is the grace?*

And we must ask if they were killed, who did it? That list is short.

Peter of all people should have known about grace. He was a walking example of grace. He was the poster child for Divine Grace.

So, did they die from the shocking reality that they really messed up?

Did God take them out? Did Peter have that much supernatural power?

The easy answer is death from massive guilt and shock, although it would have been “sudden onset guilt/shock.” As verse 5 states: “The moment Ananias heard those words, he fell over dead.”

Sapphira may have lasted thirty seconds more than her husband.

The answer to the question is “who knows?”

Brilliant theologians like F.F. Bruce and John Stott admit they are puzzled, so I am safe with admitting I do not know.

So, takeaways from this raw, ugly section:

1. Apparently they were both less than authentic followers of Christ, imposters is one word used. They were closer to the Jews who used giving as a way to be Roman-like and gain credit and notoriety. Their motivation for giving was at least spiritually immature and at worst totally deceitful. It should be noted that they likely did what they had done previously, but Pentecost and the Holy Spirit elevated giving in general and in specific authenticity.

2. We can ask “where was the grace,” but we simply cannot/will not find an answer. Maybe they were examples, and if so, if it had not been them it would have been someone else.
3. The whole sordid episode taught the community of faith a lesson. **Scared the tunics off them actually.**
4. Our lesson? Be careful what promises you/we make to God. There is a sacredness to our commitments to God, whether it is in giving or in service. “Sort-of” committed is not what God is seeking. Remember Jesus talking about lukewarm water?
5. If you completed a pledge card take the commitment seriously, but do not expect to get the Ananias/Sapphira treatment if you fall short. We can easily find grace in our lives. Same with community to serve. Let us see our commitments as being sacred.
6. Authenticity is our goal and deceitfulness is to be avoided... but we already knew that.

Amen & Amen,

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