

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 4:32-5:11 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 4:32-5:11 ESV

32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. 7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." 9 But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

STRUCTURE

- I. Spirit-filled Unity (4:32-35)
 - a. Unity, manifest in common possessions (4:32)
 - b. Unity, rooted in grace and truth (4:33)
 - c. Unity, manifest in care and submission (4:34-37)
 - i. Care for the poor and financial submission to the apostles (4:34-35)
 - ii. The example of Barnabas (4:36-37)
- II. Satan-inspired Conspiracy (5:1-11)
 - a. The conspiracy of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-2)
 - b. The conspiracy revealed, Ananias judged, the church fears (5:3-6)
 - c. The conspiracy revealed, Sapphira judged, the church fears (5:7-11)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

The New Covenant "assembly" fulfills what the Old Covenant "assembly" only foreshadowed under Moses. That word, "assembly" (Gk. *ekklesia*) appears for the first time in Acts 5:11 and is there translated, "church." In Acts 7:38, it refers to the "assembly" under Moses in the wilderness, but in most instances in Acts, it refers to the assembly of God's people under the New Covenant. The picture we have in Acts 4:32-5:11 is of God's people entering "the Promised Land" (I explain what this means in a New Covenant context under the verse-by-verse commentary), experiencing the same satanic tests as Israel of old, and yet prevailing in ways they did not—by the Spirit of God, our New Covenant inheritance (cf. 2 Cor. 3). The Greek word *ekklesia* thus communicates continuity between the Old Covenant and New Covenant people of God while allowing also for discontinuity.

In the prior scene, the church prayed for signs, wonders, and boldness over fear (Acts 4:28-29), and in this scene "fear"—the fear of God—falls upon the church (5:5, 11). Refusing to fear their persecutors, they instead fear God. Where Israel's first generation failed to enter the Promised Land, the church's first generation succeeds. The theme of "entering the land" is communicated in four ways: (1) by allusion in Acts 4:32 to Deut. 6:4, where Israel

remains in the land by loving God with all their “heart” and “soul”; (2) by allusion in Acts 4:34 to Deut. 15:4, where the land abundantly supplies Israel to care for her poor; (3) by allusion in Acts 5:1-11 to Achan’s theft, deception, and judgment, upon entry into the land; (4) by allusion in Acts 5:9 to Ex. 17:1-7, where Israel tests the Lord. Together these allusions show that God’s “assembly” has a renewed shot at faithfully obeying Yahweh, only this time she will succeed by the empowering grace of the Spirit of God, afforded under the New Covenant.

This is not to suggest that everyone was faithful. The scene of the church’s faithfulness in 4:32-37 contrasts with unfaithfulness in 5:1-11 (the scenes are linked). In this life, hypocrisy and unfaithfulness inevitably arise, even in a Spirit-empowered church. But good shepherds like Peter deal with it. Peter supernaturally detects the sin, calls them to account, and what should have threatened the community instead accelerated its growth (5:11-16). His wise, holy, Spirit-led shepherding is what makes him and the apostolic team worthy of being entrusted with ministry funds, laid at their feet (4:35, 37; 5:2).

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

—By sandwiching the apostles’ bold and powerful testimony (4:33) with the generosity of the church (32, 34-5), Luke marries orthodoxy and orthopraxy; Gospel preaching and Gospel justice; doctrine and habit; faith and works. We should never have to choose between biblical instruction and community impact.

—Stott: “Luke stressed Jesus’ teaching that the gospel of the kingdom was good news for the poor. But how could it be so unless it offered them justice as well as salvation, the ending of their poverty as well as the forgiveness of their sins?”

—“full number... one heart and soul”:

- We are reminded of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which Israel would have recited every single day, called the “Shema,” meaning, “Hear.” The words read: “*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*”
- God’s new community is thus fulfilling the central command of Torah to love God, who is one, with all “all your heart and with all your soul”.
- Given the echo of Israel’s Shema, the oneness of the community reflects the oneness of God, which fulfills Jesus’ prayer in John 17:11, 21-23.
- This also fulfills Ezek. 36:26, a new covenant promise: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”
- “full number” cannot mean “every single person,” for the subsequent narrative (5:1-11) illustrates rebellion. No church on this side of heaven is ever perfect, including the Jerusalem church. “full number” means the overwhelming majority.

—“no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common”:

- Their possessions technically “belonged” to them. The narrative that follows does not portray some form of love-based communism. There was no mandatory offering of goods in the community. Rather, it was Spirit-filled, grace-based, generosity.
- Stott: “In light of Peter’s later statement to Ananias that his property was his own (5:4), we cannot press these words into meaning that the believers had literally renounced private, in favor of common, ownership. Perhaps the important phrase is that ‘no one claimed’ their possessions as their own. Although in fact and in law they continued to own their goods, yet in heart and mind they cultivated an attitude so radical that they thought of their possessions as being available to help their needy sisters and brothers.”
- Luke intends to communicate something like the Spanish idiom, “Mi casa es su casa”—my house is your house. Whatever people owned, they shared. Homes, food, goods—radical hospitality characterized the Spirit-filled church.
- Sometimes this “sharing” looked like letting others use their stuff; sometimes it looked like selling it to give away the proceeds. Generosity looks like both.
- Some people settle for a form of generosity that is defined by the Old Testament tithe. I have never given less than a tithe and consider it a wise biblical principal that predated the Mosaic law (Gen. 28). Nevertheless, I believe that the primary model for New Testament giving is not the tithe; it is

Jesus, who gave it all. This is the point Paul makes when he motivates Corinthian giving: 2 Cor. 8:7-9: *"But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."*

- The reason I say "settle for a form of generosity that is defined by the Old Testament tithe"—even though I think tithing 10% of income is usually a good place to start—is that I have met Christians who tithe scrupulously, yet in every other area of life, are stingy. This reflects a heart that treats the tithe like a God-tax rather than an act of worship and self-giving joy. God's desire is to so transform our hearts by grace that we can't help but cheerfully give to others—not just in ways that earn a tax write-off, but in ways that bless others and will never be compensated for (in this life). I'm talking about gifts to the poor who will never repay us; opening our homes; cooking meals for others; and a thousand other forms of Christian hospitality. While I do think proportional giving is a New Testament principle (1 Cor. 16:3-4), generosity does not stop there. Generosity is a lifestyle.
- Generosity is not just a Christian ethic; it is a community virtue. Like Acts 2:42-47, which also depicts hospitality and financial generosity in community, this summary passage reflects ordinary life in Christian community. It's impossible to have community without sharing things in common—material things. This is why the words "common" and "community" share the same root in English. Similarly, the word for "fellowship" in Greek (koinonia) also means, "financial contribution" (compare usage in 1 Cor. 1:9 and Rom. 15:26). Communities share things in common: faith, joy, habits, money, and things. If we are not sharing with each other, we are not a community. We are a collection of individuals.

—"And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all":

- The prayer of 4:24-30 is answered here with "great power"—miracles. God backed their message about the kingdom with demonstrations of the kingdom.
- Later it will not just be apostles, but non-apostles who testify with miraculous power (Stephen, Acts 6; Philip, Acts 8; Ananias, Acts 9; etc.). It was never God's intention to limit Pentecostal power to the Twelve. We see this even in the original outpouring, where 120 people—a number representative of the nascent community (12X10, number of apostles times number of completion) experience signs and wonders.
- "great grace" was not just on the apostles but "upon them all." The entire community was Spirit-filled. The Spirit empowers bold and sign-validated testimony to Christ's resurrection; the Spirit also unifies.

—"there was not a needy person among them":

- Deut. 15:4: *"But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess— 5 if only you will strictly obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today."*
- Luke's similar wording communicates that the church reflects the ideals of Torah. God's vision was to establish a people so generous and a land so plentiful that everyone's needs were cared for. The fulfillment of this vision required obedience. Without their generosity, the poor would persist. Without their general obedience, the land would experience famine, not abundance (Deut. 27-28).
- Schreiner: This section "moves from a more general statement about this community to a particular Levite who properly employs his priestly status, unlike the jealous priests in the previous section. This marks the ekklesia as the genuine Torah and temple community."
- That Luke alludes to Deut. 15:4 suggests not only that the new Christian community reflects the ideals of Torah but also that God is fulfilling His end of the promise by blessing them. What does this mean, since they are no longer under the Old Covenant but the New? It means that Christ fulfilled the Old Covenant, but now in Christ, the Spirit-filled church embodies its ideals.
- In addition, it could suggest that believers (like all the meek, see Matt. 5:5) inherit more than Abraham's Promised Land; we inherit the whole earth. We experience this in principle by God's promise (see 1 Cor. 3:21-22), but in effect when Christ returns to make all things new.
- Schnabel (quoting Marshall): "If Luke expects his readers to notice this connection [with Deut. 15:4], he draws up a 'correspondence between, on the one hand, the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt and their prosperous settlement in the land, and, on the other hand, the new redemption wrought by Christ and the setting up of the new community.'"

- We as Christians should feel convicted about ensuring that within our covenant membership, there are no needy persons. If one of our own is in need, we should be quick to give. Schreiner: "The prophets of old condemn Israel for two primary things: idolatry and neglect of the poor."
- Of course, Christian generosity can be abused by hoarders, liars, and takers (as 5:1-11 illustrates). Paul would later provide standards for discernment. This summary is borrowed from David Guzik:
 - The church must discern who the truly needy are (1 Timothy 5:3).
 - If one can work to support himself, he is not truly needy and must provide for his own needs (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12, 1 Timothy 5:8, 1 Thessalonians 4:11).
 - If family can support a needy person, the church should not support them (1 Timothy 5:3-4).
 - Those who are supported by the church must make some return to the church body (1 Timothy 5:5, 10).
 - It is right for the church to examine moral conduct before giving support (1 Timothy 5:9-13).
 - The support of the church should be for the most basic necessities of living (1 Timothy 6:8).
- Schnabel: "The health of any community can be ascertained by the way in which the weakest members are treated."

—"for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them":

- At least at this time in church history, everyone who owned lands and houses sold them. Again, this was not mandatory but rather a result of God's profound visitation upon their community.
- Furthermore, Luke later presents individuals who still own homes without condemning them for such. In fact, Mark's mother houses believers at all hours of the night for a prayer meeting (Acts 12), and Lydia's home becomes a church (Acts 16). The point is not that everyone must sell everything, but rather that everyone must be generous in Spirit-directed ways. Schreiner has the same takeaway: "Though this was a generous community, it seems from the rest of the NT that people still owned houses and other property (cf. Lydia, Jason, Philip), and therefore this may be equivalent to selling off 'extra' to provide for those in need."
- Most people would not have owned land or houses. These are wealthy individuals caring for poor ones.

—"sold them... brought the proceeds... laid it at the apostles' feet... distributed to each as any had need":

- To lay an offering at one's feet was an act of submission. People entrusted their proceeds to the apostles, that they might distribute them to the poor in a way that honored God and cheated no one.
- Giving to a church is an act of trust. This can be difficult because we too often hear stories of (or experience for ourselves!) abusive church leaders who mismanage funds for personal benefit and with little accountability. The Jewish believers were no stranger to this sort of abuse. Their religious leaders defrauded poor widows to line their own pockets (Lk. 20:47)! That the early church gave so generously testifies to the profundity of God's grace at work in them. After such rampant abuses by religious leaders, they still laid their offerings freely at the apostles' feet.
- The apostles did not grow rich from these offerings, however. They "distributed to each as any had need." The need would have been great for the oppressed people group, and the provision of that need would have been evident to all. In cases where such provision is not obvious, it is essential for leaders to be accountable for how funds are distributed.
- It is best to attend a church where one can trust the leaders with finances. If someone says, "I really like the teaching, but I think they're bad stewards of our offering and thus won't give"—hard conversations should be had. None of us can grow if we are not also giving. Nor can we have real community if we do not share things in common, including our finances. An ideal situation is one where we can trust our leaders and entrust our finances for wise distribution.
- In recent decades, a flood of Christian resources have gone to missionaries and children in Africa and water wells, etc. These are all good things, and I give to some of them. However, there is also a danger that we maintain too much autonomy over our gifts. If we parcel out our gifts to a dozen charities but entrust precious little to our own spiritual community, it could (possibly) reflect a lack of trust in leadership. On one hand, I get it. It feels satisfying to support a poor child in Africa instead of, say, church overhead. On the other hand, even these organizations require overhead. Ministry doesn't just happen. More to the point, the early church laid the gifts at the apostles' feet as an act of trust. Spirit-filled community is one of trust between leaders and congregations. Leaders must promote trust by transparency and accountability. Congregants must find spiritual leaders they can trust or else have hard conversations with those they don't. In short, everyone must move toward trusting each other.

36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

—Barnabas is one of the main characters of Acts, and this is his introduction. Luke shows by it that Barnabas is qualified to lead and plant churches. Before God used him to usher in revival amongst the Gentiles, God used him to generously bless the Jews. Faithfulness at home leads to fruitfulness abroad. Faithfulness in the little things leads to fruitfulness in big things.

—His sacrifice contrasts the narrative that follows (5:1-11), where Ananias and Sapphira hold back some of the proceeds, pretending to be more generous than they are.

—The apostles called him Barnabas, meaning that he had earned a reputation among church leaders as an encourager (Barnabas means "son of encouragement").

—As a Levite, he would have belonged to the priestly class, but here he brings an offering, not for atonement, but for caring for the needy.

—"Cyprus": if he lived in Jerusalem, perhaps the property was from his homeland in Cyprus, in which case it was "extra."

—"at the apostles' feet": before becoming an apostle to the Gentiles, Barnabas laid his money at the apostles' feet. He has a submissive spirit. Before leading others, we first must learn how to be led.

—Schreiner: "He sells a field, symbolically affirming Barnabas's entry into renewed Israel not by his dependence on physical land but by his faith in the ascended Jesus. He gives up his land to gain the entire earth (Luke 6:20, 24, 38). He forsakes his riches to enter the kingdom. The openhanded simplicity of Barnabas's gift will be contrasted with the complicated closehandedness of Ananias and Sapphira."

1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

—"But":

- In contrast to Barnabas, who exemplified holy generosity; in contrast to the congregation, upon whom "great grace" rested.
- Sometimes we get rosy ideas of what church looked like in the first century. Luke interrupts our reverie with, "But"—there were hypocrites. As it is today, so it was then: even the best churches have them. The beautiful picture of oneness and fellowship from 4:32-37 was not the whole picture.

—"kept back":

- This word is translated, "stealing", or "pilfering", in Titus 2:10. The word suggests that the unholy couple took what didn't belong to them. But it was their proceeds! And their property! How could it not have belonged to them?
- The word suggests they had made a vow or arrangement to provide for the poor in Jerusalem by offering the full proceeds of their land, in which case—in that sense—the proceeds belonged to the poor, not them.
- If they had vowed to give 80% of the proceeds and then gave 80%, no one would have batted an eye. The problem is that they "kept back" / "stole" / "pilfered" from the offering box while making a show of righteousness.
- Stott: "For Luke, in declaring that Ananias 'kept back' part of the money for himself, chooses the verb, 'nosphizomai,' which means to 'misappropriate' (BAGD). The same word was used in LXX of Achan's theft, and in its only other NT occurrence it means to steal."
- Stott: "The apostle's complaint was not that they lacked honesty (bringing only a part of the sale price) but that they lacked integrity (bringing only a part, while pretending to bring the whole). They were not so much misers as thieves and – above all – liars. They wanted the credit and the prestige for sacrificial generosity, without the inconvenience of it."

—"with his wife Sapphira... with his wife's knowledge...": this sets up why she will be judged also. She was not ignorant on the matter. The gravity of their crime is heightened in that it is not just greed; it is conspiracy.

—"apostles' feet":

- This links the narrative with that which preceded. While the congregation, including Barnabas, laid their offerings at the apostles' feet, so did this couple. We should not read these stories in isolation.
- It also links the narrative with that which follows. In vv. 9-10, we read, "Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." "Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last."
- Their refusal to deal candidly and bring the full offering to the apostles' feet caused death—at the apostles' feet. The feet of those who buried her husband will bury her who refused to lay her

offering at the apostles' feet. The repetition of "feet" appears to operate as a thread that poetically binds the story.

3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."

—Peter's knowledge is supernatural. This is what we call prophecy. I am reminded of 1 Cor. 14:25, where "the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you." God's presence in the assembly is manifest through the gift of prophecy.

—Does this mean we should publicly call out sin? As a rule of thumb, no. But we must also be led by the Spirit instead of our rules. I think it's fine to approach every gathering with the expectation that we will not call out anyone's sin publicly for the simple reason that, under normal circumstances (99.9% of the time!), it is not loving. Nevertheless, it's hard to say "never" about something that happened in the Bible.

—Similar things happened in the ministry of Charles Spurgeon, although they ended in salvation, not death. These stories are recounted in the Spurgeon Archives (among other places):

- *A man was won for Christ because the preacher pointed to him and said, "There is a man sitting there who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays; it was open last Sabbath morning. He took ninepence and there was fourpence profit on it; his soul is sold to Satan for fourpence." The man was afraid to go and hear Spurgeon again for fear he might tell the people more about him, for what he said at first was all true. But at last he came, and the Lord met with him.*
- *One Sunday evening Mr. Spurgeon, pointing to the gallery, said, "Young man, the gloves you have in your pocket are not paid for." After the service a young fellow came beseeching him not to say anything more about it, and the circumstances led to his conversion.*

—Peter asks a series of questions. First, he accuses him of lying (5:3). Then the next two questions reveal that he was under no compulsion (as if it was "Christian communism") to either sell the land or make the donation. The last question mirrors the first.

—In contrast with the Spirit-filled community (4:31), Ananias lies to the Holy Spirit and is filled with a different kind of Spirit. Satan has "filled your heart to lie..."

—Stott: "Falsehood ruins fellowship. If the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira had not been publicly exposed and punished, the Christian ideal of an open fellowship would not have been preserved, and the modern cry 'there are so many hypocrites in the church' would have been heard from the beginning."

—Why do people lie? For two reasons: to manage others' perceptions of them or because it's not safe to tell the truth. In this case, the community has displayed remarkable grace, with thousands of people repenting of grievous sin in public (Acts 2:38-41). In such a community of grace, it was safe to tell the truth. Undoubtedly, Ananias and Sapphira were lying to manage others' perceptions of them.

—Again, Peter's issue is not that they failed to give enough money but that they lied and stole what they had pledged to give.

—Satan had first attacked the church through persecution (Acts 3-4). Now he attacks from the inside, through hypocrisy. Both threaten the church!

—In Acts 6, Satan will attack from another angle. Not persecution or hypocrisy but faction and distraction. There, the church grows at such a pace that the apostles can't manage it without help, and an ethnic faction develops. The apostles resist the temptation to be distracted from the word of God and prayer, but if they had not—if they succumbed to the distraction—we almost certainly would have read about the first church split between these two ethnicities (Hebraic Jews / Hellenized Jews).

—Persecution, hypocrisy, and faction through distraction. Satan employs all these attacks! In twenty-first century America, the last two seem most prevalent.

—"lie to the Holy Spirit... you have not lied to man but to God":

- Of course, they did lie to man also. But this is an emphatic way of speaking, as if to say that chiefly and centrally, he lied to God. It is not unlike David, who sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah and so many others, yet said in Psalm 51, "Against you only have I sinned." All sin is chiefly and centrally against God.
- The Holy Spirit is God. He has been called, 'the shy Person of the Trinity,' since He glorifies the Father and the Son, but He is no less God than either Person of the Trinity. He is not one-third God. The Father is fully God; the Son is fully God; the Spirit is fully God; yet there is one God.
- The Holy Spirit is not an energy force or an "it."
- Nicene Creed (after the update in Constantinople, AD 381): *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.*

- Athanasian Creed (an excerpt; not technically written by Athanasius, but I always loved the wording of it; 5th or 6th century): *For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.*

5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

—“heard... fell down... breathed his last”:

- Ananias’ punishment is precisely what God said in the Garden to those who rebelled: “You will surely die.” When we rebel against the author of life, we experience death. If death is delayed for a month, a year, or for decades, that is grace. The objection of severity betrays the assumption that we as humans deserve to live even when we rebel against the author of life. It presumes upon grace rather than taking God at His Word.
- The allusion to Deuteronomy 15:4 in Acts 4:34 suggests a theme of “inheriting the land.” Given this allusion, the story of Ananias and Sapphira matches that of Achan (Josh. 7). Achan stole some of the cursed spoil as Israel was entering the land. Upon revelation of Achan’s sin, he was stoned to death. Of course, this is not identical to the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Peter did not stone Achan; God Himself executed judgment. But the themes of entering the land, hypocrisy, theft, and judgment, are all present.
- While I think the “Achan” echoes are strongest (because of “entry into the land” allusions throughout the narrative), other scholars have found additional connections. Schreiner notes the following:
 - Gen. 3: Adam and Eve
 - Lev. 10: Nadab and Abihu
 - Josh. 7: Achan
 - 2 Sam 6: Uzzah
 - 2 Kgs. 5: Gehazi
 - Lk. 22: Judas

—The fate of Ananias and Sapphira reminds me of 1 Cor. 3:16-17: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

—“great fear came upon all who heard of it”:

- Instances of “fear” (Gk. *phobos*) in Acts):
 - [Act 2:43 ESV] 43 And **awe** came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.
 - [Act 5:5, 11 ESV] 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great **fear** came upon all who heard of it. ... 11 And great **fear** came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.
 - [Act 9:31 ESV] 31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the **fear** of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.
 - [Act 19:17 ESV] 17 And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And **fear** fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.
- The word for “fear” is always positive in Acts and is associated with “the fear of the Lord”, which is counterbalanced by “the comfort of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:31).
- The word is also translated, “awe”.
- Two (out of only five) instances of “fear” arise within Acts 5, suggesting it is a theme of the passage.
- The fear of the Lord is awe, but it is still related to what we normally call fear. They rightfully felt fear when God executed judgment by striking down lawbreakers. On one hand, we can call this awe, but it’s not like the awe of staring at the Grand Canyon from a mile away, which poses no danger. It’s rather like the awe of staring at the Grand Canyon from an inch away. We feel awe at its

immensity while at the same time feeling fear of real danger. It is a dangerous thing to rebel against a holy God and lie about it. The thought should make us tremble.

- Schreiner: "while God's presence can be a blessing, it can also be frightening."

—When the Holy Spirit moves in a community, there should be lavish generosity (4:32, 34-37), great power (4:33), bold testimony (4:31), and supernatural awe (5:5, 11)—even if there is, sadly, occasional hypocrisy.

—"young men... carried him out and buried him":

- Schreiner: "Luke includes an odd detail: they take Ananias's body up and bury him. But this is intentional. In Israel the bodies of priests who profaned the temple were removed (Lev. 10:4-5). His body has no inheritance in their land or temple, so he is buried outside."

—Were Ananias and Sapphira false believers? Or were they true believers who fell into sin and died in it? If so, what does this say about the doctrine of perseverance—that all true believers persevere to the end in faith?

- Schnabel: "Most think that Ananias and his wife Sapphira were believers in Jesus."
- Before this event occurred, everyone assumed they were believers. The community accepted their vow of an offering, and they planned to lay (some of) their money at the apostles' feet, which everyone would have interpreted as a sign of submission to the apostles' authority and teaching.
- Since they held back some of the money, lied, and died in their sin, some could argue that they were false believers all along. This is possible.
- It's also possible that they died as true believers under the Lord's discipline like the believers in Corinth who observed the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27-32). In that context, the guilty parties were clearly true believers under God's discipline, and yet they died in their sin. We should thus have a category for believers who are disciplined for their sin in a way that leads to death. Perhaps this prevents them from committing apostasy (abandoning the Christian faith) and further harm.
- I believe that all true believers persevere to the end because salvation depends not on us, but on the Father who holds us (Jhn. 10), the Son who raises us (Jhn. 6), and the Spirit who guarantees eternal life to us (Eph. 1). Furthermore, if we could lose eternal life, then it would not be called "eternal life." It would be called, "temporary life." When we are born again, we immediately receive eternal life. Inherently, this life must last forever, or else it is a misnomer.
- Nevertheless, we must define "persevere." Does it mean we all finish while sprinting across the finish line? Or do some finish while showing less exertion—like the second servant in the parable of minas, who is not told like the first, "Well done" (cf. Lk. 19:17), who earns less of a reward (19:17-19), yet who is still accepted, rewarded, and who does not reject his king like the last group that is judged eternally (19:27). In other words, he's an "in-between." He is reasonably faithful, but he is no Apostle Paul! It seems to me that in God's eyes, that can count as perseverance. Personally, I define perseverance—which God promises us—as being (at least) preserved from apostasy. True believers will never die while renouncing Christ.
- Might true believers die in other sins, like addiction? It's a touchy subject, but I think so. And I think we must be very careful about pronouncing whether someone was faithful enough in our eyes to be truly elect. As Paul tells Timothy, "The Lord knows those who are His" (2 Tim. 2:19). The Lord knows His true elect. I don't always know.
- Incidentally, this always comforts me when someone I love dies. Sometimes their faith is not as visible as I would have liked for it to be. But God knows their hearts. Perhaps they said a last-second prayer. Perhaps they were righteous in ways we never saw. If so—God saw. And He is full of mercy.
- In his book, *Kept For Jesus*, Sam Storms references Ananias and Sapphira while commenting on different verses—James 5:19-20. The situation is similar. James calls on believers to lead the wandering believer back to God and thus "save his soul from death." Storms says: *"Just a few verses earlier, in 5:15, James used the term 'save' to describe physical restoration from illness. The death in verse 20, therefore, is most likely physical, not spiritual, death (see also v. 12). Thus, James is encouraging us to be diligent to restore to repentance any brother or sister who has strayed from the truth. In doing so, we will have been instrumental in saving them from premature physical death (under the discipline of the Lord; cf. Acts 5; 1 Cor. 11:30-32). There is nothing in this passage that might lead us to believe a true Christian could lose his or her salvation."*
- Storms holds to perseverance yet has a category for those who die in sin by the discipline of the Lord. He places Ananias and Sapphira, some of the Corinthians, and the folks in James 5 in this category.

7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much."

—It's fascinating to me that it'd been three hours, and she still didn't realize her husband had passed. Clearly, they did not have social media!

—Luke's purpose in mentioning this is that she didn't have the benefit of learning from her husband's experience or the fear that had fallen on the flock. It's like the Lord is testing her, seeing if she'll come clean of her own volition. She won't. Refusing to pay what she'd promised, she pays with her life.

—Even though this sort of event is rare, we should all feel the fear of God over it, particularly as it relates to hypocrisy. To sin is one thing. To lie about sinning is another. Deceit erodes trust and makes real relating impossible. God wants a friendship with us, but we can't grow in this friendship as long as we are lying to Him, ourselves, and others. If we say we're taking our secret to the grave, our secret has already taken us to the grave. It kills us slowly by cutting us off from the Author of Life. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira—it kills them quickly. Their story is a warning to hypocrites.

9 But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."

—"agreed together": as we saw before, this heightens the gravity. It is not just sin; it is deception about sin. And it is not just an individual deception; it is a conspiracy.

—Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit; she tested the Holy Spirit. These are the same.

—The language of testing the Spirit reminds us of Exodus 17 when Israel, upon crossing the Red Sea, tests the Lord by grumbling about His supposed lack of provision. In essence, they demanded that God prove Himself by providing. To test the Lord is to say, "Prove yourself, God!" The Israelites did this by demanding water; the Pharisees did it by demanding a sign; Sapphira took it even a step further. Rather than merely demanding God's action, she presumed upon His inaction. She'd already written Him off as though she could act with impunity. Israel tested God by demanding proof; she tested God by presuming He wouldn't offer it.

—This provides another reminder of Israel's entry into the Promised Land. It began in 4:34, when Luke alludes to Deuteronomy 15:4, which connects Israel's entry to the Promised Land and the elimination of poverty in the community. It continues with the theme of God's judgment against greedy hypocrites (Achan in the OT; Ananias and Sapphira in the NT). And now we see it again here, where the couple agrees to "test the Spirit of the Lord," like the original Exodus generation.

—In Jesus, the meek inherit not just the land of Abraham but the whole earth. This is why Paul calls Abraham, "heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13)—not just Palestine. We realize this promise fully in the New Creation, but even now we are like the Exodus generation, having passed through the Red Sea of judgment by the blood of Jesus, escaped the Egyptian slavemasters of Satan and Sin, and now wandering in our future inheritance as we rely on God by faith. In these wilderness wanderings, there are dangers from the outside (cf. Acts 3-4: persecution) and from the inside (Acts 5: hypocrisy, testing God). We are wise to heed the warnings of these judgments and remain faithful at all costs.

10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

—There's not much to add by way of commentary since this is almost verbatim what happened to her husband.

—This line about "fear" adds an important component, though. This time, fear came not only "upon all who heard of these things" (5:7, 11) but specifically upon "the whole church." Both believers and unbelievers heard about these events. Many of the latter apparently are saved as a result (5:12-16; cf. 19:17). But it's also a warning for the people of God.

—"church": this is Luke's first mention of the word, even though he has described community life in great detail. Here are some other instances of its usage in Acts:

- Acts 7:38: This is the one who was in the **congregation** in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.
- Acts 9:31: So the **church** throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.
- Acts 14:31: And when they had appointed elders for them in every **church**, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.
- Acts 19:32: Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the **assembly** was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

- Acts 20:17: Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the **church** to come to him.

—What do we learn from these instances of “church” in Acts?

- The word can be translated as “congregation”, “church”, or “assembly”.
- It can refer to multiple contexts: both Old Testament saints (7:38) and New Testament saints; both secular gatherings (19:32) and spiritual ones; both individual (20:17) and regional churches (9:31).
- If “church” is synonymous with “assembly”—even sometimes meaning a secular assembly or gathering—then “church” loses its meaning if we never assemble. Like a secular assembly, we gather; unlike them, we gather to worship.
- Like the congregation of Moses in the wilderness, we gather to worship; unlike them, we gather to worship by the indwelling Spirit and under the New Covenant.

COMMUNITY GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Based on Acts 4:32-37:

- Have you ever experienced a spiritual community that cared for each other in profound ways? Tell us about it.
- Why does the Scripture so closely tie together fellowship and material generosity?
- What has caring for the poor looked like in your life?
- What has financial generosity looked like in your life?
- What is the connection between the proclamation of the Gospel in 4:33 and the lavish generosity in 4:32, 34-35 (see Study Guide if you want Michael’s answer)? What does this mean for us practically?

Based on 5:1-11:

- Does the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira feel too harsh? Why do you think God takes hypocrisy so seriously?
- Do you ever struggle being forthright with people? Do you have people with whom you can share all your secrets?
- Great fear came upon the church. Have you ever experienced such “fear” or “awe” at the presence of God? When?
- Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit. What does this tell us about the Holy Spirit? Why do you think people sometimes treat the Holy Spirit like an “it” or an “energy force”? What difference does it make to treat Him as fully God?
- Sapphira tested the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? What are some ways in which you have struggled with testing the Spirit?