

Ananias and Sapphira

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now and then when reading the Bible, you run across a story that is so difficult to understand that makes even God a bit harder to understand that you wonder if it was a good idea to include that story. Very early in the Bible, in Genesis 22, we find such a story when God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. But similarly, very early on in the New Testament we run into another scandalous story. It happens in Acts 5 when a husband and wife named Ananias and Sapphira drop dead on account of having told a lie. It is quite a startling, eye-widening tale; so today on *Groundwork*, let's dig into this strange story to see what it may mean.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are in our second program here of a series of seven programs, it will finally be, from the stories of the book of Acts, written by Luke, it is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. This is where we find out the story of the earliest days of the Church, as we saw on our previous program on Acts 2 and the story of Pentecost. In many ways, what we find in Acts is instructive for us for what the Church is still to be today, but one of the things we also noted in that first program of this series was that one of the things that is most helpful about the book of Acts is it does not sugar-coat the early Church. It does not present it as some golden age that we could all aspire to. It is the Church, warts and all, in Acts; but that is instructive, too, in terms of how do we deal with our own struggles, even to this day?

DAVE BAST

Yes, you are right, and so we decided to include this story from Acts Chapter 5; although I have my doubts, you know, about wanting to do this. I went back and looked through my files when we were preparing this program, and I discovered that I actually preached on this story in 1976, four months after I was ordained and I was in my first year, and I have not touched it since.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It went well, huh?

DAVE BAST

Young people rush in and then we fear to tread later.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Recently on *Groundwork* we did a series on some of the stories in Genesis and we also tackled that tough one that I mentioned in the opening from Genesis 22, and the sacrifice of Isaac. One of the things we said then was it really is risky for the Holy Spirit to put a story like that so early in the Bible because if you had started reading at Genesis 1 and you get 21 chapters in and you get to that story, you might just want to close the book for good. So also, we are not very far into the book of Acts, into the story of the early Church, and we get this one in Acts Chapter 5.

DAVE BAST

¹Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ²And with his wife's full knowledge, he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the Apostle's feet. ³Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴Did it not belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold was not the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings, but to God." ⁵When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died; and great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶Then some of the young men came forward, wrapped up his body and carried him out and buried him. ⁷About three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "That is the price." ⁹Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen, the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door and they will carry you out also." ¹⁰At that moment, she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in, and finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I should say. So, twice in this story we are told that great fear gripped the early Church and well, you can certainly understand why. It is starting to look a little more like a high-stakes enterprise here than maybe they thought.

DAVE BAST

So, let's get this straight. These people are pulling a little bit of a fast one and they are giving – they are giving money, they are just not giving the whole thing – and God strikes them both dead. We are supposed to believe that and this is somehow a good thing?!

SCOTT HOEZEE

The story is startling, too, because – so, we looked at Acts Chapter 2, but we could read 3 and 4; we will not be doing that in this series, but if you read Acts 3 and Acts 4, things are going great. The Church is growing by leaps and bounds; Peter and the others have gotten arrested and confronted a couple of times, but the Spirit gives them the words to say, just as Jesus promised, and the authorities cannot pin anything on them. They are healing people. It is just going great; and again, the people are supporting each other, sharing things, sharing money; and then all of a sudden, boom, we come to Acts 5 and two people drop dead on account of a lie. They did not murder somebody. They had not robbed somebody's home or beat somebody up or cursed God to his face; no, they sold a piece of property for twelve hundred bucks, kept four hundred back, gave eight hundred bucks to the apostles, and on account of the lie that that was the full selling price, they are both dead?! That is more than a little startling; more than a little troubling.

DAVE BAST

Yes; now, do you think if we look at the text carefully, it does not say that God killed them explicitly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, no it does not.

DAVE BAST

It does not say God struck them down or God hit them with a lightning bolt the way we read about Zeus and gods like that; but the clear implication is that this was a sort of judgment on them for what they had done.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, Peter makes it...

DAVE BAST

Do we fudge that a little bit?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, that would make it easier, wouldn't it? But probably means we cannot do it. Peter makes it clear: Look, you lied to the Holy Spirit, and that is it. Maybe they were so shocked that they had gotten caught that they dropped dead, but I do not know anybody who gets that shocked. So, it is a very, very, very troubling thing, and we are going to be want to be thinking more about exactly what was about the nature of this particular sin – lying is a bad thing to do, let's admit – and sometimes lying can lead to great mayhem. People have told lies that have gotten people killed. People have told lies that have gotten people fired. This lie was not even quite that bad, but there is something going on here; and it think it might also be important to point out, Dave, that it does not look like it was an absolute requirement that they give one hundred percent of the selling price. The sense of the story is that if they had come and said: Look, things are a little tight at home so we kept four hundred of the twelve hundred, but here is eight hundred for the Lord, I think it would have been okay. It is that they palmed it off as the full selling price, and Peter says: You think you are lying to me? You think you are lying to James, John? No, you are lying to God and to the Holy Spirit, and that is what seems to have led to their demise, and the great fear that then gripped the community.

DAVE BAST

I think there is another preliminary point we need to make before we dig more deeply into the implications of their act, and that is that this does not seem to have set up a pattern for the Church; we are not in the capital punishment business, and there never has been another story like this; certainly not in the New Testament, of somebody actually dying directly as a result of a sin that they commit. So, there is something going on here; maybe because it is the very first thing that we experience that makes this almost a unique – there are a number of cases in Acts where we are told stories that do not seem to have to been repeated in Church history – so, maybe it is to make an initial point, and then we live on after that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This has the feel of a cautionary tale – a public event meant to instruct the Church about something that is going to be very, very important from then on out. In just a moment, we will wonder what that might be.
Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are wrestling – and wrestling is the right word – with the story of Ananias and Sapphira – this husband and wife tandem. Let's look a little bit at what they were doing, and as you said, Scott, a moment ago, they did not have to make this offering. This whole communal property business that was going on in the earliest Church was totally voluntary. In fact, again, if you read through Acts, a little bit later in Acts we are going to read about a woman who was the mother of John Mark who had her own home in Jerusalem, and the Church was gathering there, but it was her home. Nobody had to sell up and give everything. The problem with Ananias and Sapphira is they wanted the reputation for doing that without paying the price. So there is a kind of vanity at work. They want to present themselves as these super spiritual people who, oh, are sacrificial. There is greed going on at work because they wanted to have the appearance of giving an offering without having to actually come through with the money. It is like somebody who makes a big, fancy pledge to some mission project and then never actually pays.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They never actually do it, but they got the PR.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, there is greed, vanity, and hypocrisy to go along with the lying.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and as you said, also, Dave, thankfully, this is a unique story. In the rest of the New Testament – I mean, if just sinning were reason to have people drop dead, then the whole church in Corinth should have dropped dead because they had so many things going wrong in Corinth, as we can see in 1 Corinthians. The Galatians all should have dropped dead because they had given up and compromised on the Gospel, but that did not happen, but it happens here; and we can only, I think, surmise and believe that a lesson is being taught that is going to be important for the Church from here on out. Maybe we can just from the text itself discern some clues. One might be Peter said when Ananias came Satan is behind this; Satan himself, the great enemy of the Church. He does not say: Hey, you just came up with this on your own, Ananias. Peter pegs it to Satan and to an attack on God himself and on God's Holy Spirit. Well, if that is so, and we believe the apostle's insight was correct, that certainly raises the stakes. Of course, we could also say Satan is behind every sin, so that still does not quite get us there why this one had them dropping dead, but there is something here going on that reveals the high stakes of what is going on in the Church. You mentioned hypocrisy a minute ago, Dave; there is something in this story that I think the early Church had to learn even through a terrible story like this one, and that is that as a continuation of what Israel had been in the Old Testament, so now the Church in the New Testament as the new Israel, they are a holy community; they are to have holy integrity, and nothing threatens integrity and holiness more than hypocrisy; the people who are pretending to be what they are not, that is a hindrance to the Gospel. It always has been and here is a very dramatic example from the earliest days of the Church.

DAVE BAST

Right. You know, it is interesting that you just bring up the Old Testament, and there is some continuity in this story. There is a phrase where Peter talks about them keeping back – keeping for themselves – some of the money; that is in verse 3. “You have kept for yourself some of the money you received from the land,” and that is the very same phrase that is used in the Old Testament story of Achan, who kept some of the spoil of Jericho and hid it in his tent and brought disaster upon the whole people of Israel because that had been forbidden by God. That was supposed to be totally devoted to him. So, this sense that there is a communal aspect to this, it is almost like they are violating – can I use this analogy?) They are violating the virginity of the Church. This is the first time it has happened and that is why such a huge example is made of this. The idea that there needs to be discipline in the church – this is coming through clearly in this story of Ananias and Sapphira. Peter gave each of them a chance, especially Sapphira; he said: Are you sure? Stop and think. You can just see her thinking to herself: Oh wow, did they find out? No, I better stick to the story we agreed on. No, this is it.

The Reformers, and even through all the ages, serious people have said the Church needs discipline of its members. There needs to be a sense that Christian obedience, Christian behavior, is not optional – take it or leave it – that if you do not really obey God, there are consequences, and this might be a foreshadowing of the ultimate consequence of choosing to lie to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and the Church, of course – we are the community of grace – we are saved by grace and we know that. We are not a community of judgmentalism, and so forth; but we cannot witness to God's grace – we cannot witness to the Gospel – the Church is God's flying wedge through history; the Church is the hope for humanity because we have been entrusted – the Church has been entrusted with the Gospel that Peter proclaimed in Acts 2 the day the Church began. That has been an amazing thing to be entrusted with. The stakes are very, very high. If the Church does not get this right; if the Church cannot witness to the Gospel authentically and well and be transparent to Jesus, then nobody can be saved. Your analogy to Achan and Jericho and Israel is very, very interesting and strikes me as very, very apt. We are a holy, set-apart people, and if we act just like everybody else in the world, where everybody is out for number one, or people are duplicitous, or they lie, or they try to make themselves look good at the expense of hurting other people – if that is how we act in the Church, then where is the Gospel? It is lost, and how can they hear it if it is lost through hypocrisy?

Hypocrisy is a huge sin here, and maybe this story is a way that the Spirit flagged that very early in the history of the Church as public enemy number one is hypocrisy.

DAVE BAST

And it sends a message loud and clear, doesn't it? You cannot mess with God. Better you find that out sooner than later because there is another judgment that is coming, and if you have been found to be hypocritical there and holding forth an image for faith and sanctity while the reality is far different; well, then you are in even bigger trouble. That has always been the point when the Church has tried to hold up the ideal of discipline of its members. Not that we are sanctimonious; not that we are better than you and we are going to punish you, and all that. This is a serious business and God cannot be messed with.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we said in the earlier program – our first one in this series – a friend of mine who wrote a commentary on Acts, somebody asked, “What is Acts about?” and my friend said, “It is about God.” And it is about God, and this story is about God and God's community; and therefore, that has implications for the 21st Century Church, and we will look at what some of those implications might be in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are digging into a tough part of scripture today, the story in Acts 5 of Ananias and Sapphira, and so far in this program we have suggested that this highly unusual, never to be repeated type of apparent judgment or punishment of people who, as Peter put it, lied to the Holy Spirit, is supposed to be instructive for the early Church in Acts, but it is also to be instructive for us. So, what do we do with a story like this today? Today, as is only right, the Church wants to be known as a place of grace, of love and acceptance; we sing the song: All are welcome, all are welcome; and we believe that and want that to be true; and certainly today the Church does not want to be a turn-off, where most churches that want to grow and attract new members do not want to be known as places of dire judgment because nobody is going to come then. So, what do we do with a story that is about judgment? What does it mean for us today?

DAVE BAST

I think what we do is inject a little fear and trembling in our understanding of God and his holiness, and the nature of the Church and the importance of honesty and repentance in our own lives. You know, I mentioned earlier the story of Achan in the Old Testament...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Joshua.

DAVE BAST

Right – his reserving of some of the things that belonged to God; that had been devoted to God; but it also reminds me of a passage later in the New Testament, where Paul writing to the Corinthians, in the context of worship and the Lord's Supper especially, urges people to examine themselves and so eat and drink because whoever eats and drinks, he says, without discerning the body of Christ eats and drinks judgment upon themselves; and then he goes on to say, “That is why some of you have fallen sick and some of you have even died.” So, I read that and I think, “Wow, worship could be hazardous to your health.” This is not something to take so lightly or casually.

SCOTT HOEZEE

These passages – it is possible, of course. Even the story of Achan and Jericho and the holy war that God authorized, apparently, in Joshua when they were conquering Canaan – some of that in the Old Testament, or some of the judgment, even, in Isaiah or Amos – it is easy for us today to look at that and say: Well, that was in the Old Testament. That was in a different stage of God's working with humanity; a different stage of salvation history before the cross and resurrection, before the Gospel – all true; however, you cannot do that with Acts 5 or with that passage in 1 Corinthians 11; this is in the era of the Church now, which is what we are still in; and so, we have to take some of this seriously; and indeed, maybe, as we said earlier that twice in this story we are told that great fear gripped the community, and understandably so; but we do not want our churches to be places of fear, fearfulness in the sense of being scared of God, but there is that other sense of fear in the Bible, in terms of holy reverence and awe, and that I think we do definitely still need, and sometimes it is a question of whether we really do approach God in worship with that kind of reverential awe.

DAVE BAST

Well, and let's not totally empty it of the scared factor. Our God is a consuming fire, says the writer to the Hebrews. You do not mess around with him. Or, in my favorite quote on this whole thing from the Narnia stories: You know, he is not a tame lion, one of the characters says at the very end of the last of those Narnia books: He is not a tame lion.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is good, but he is not safe.

Dave Bast: Right; good but not safe, as another one says. This sense that we have a tremendous capacity for self-deception, especially when it comes to God and the Church and spiritual things, and that is why we need to examine ourselves. Is there hypocrisy in my life, in my approach? Do I want the reputation for sanctity without paying the price and having it in reality? Am I a phony, to some extent? Well, yes, we all are, and the way to deal with that is not to go on pretending, but to really be honest before God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we cannot trifle with these things. The writer, Annie Dillard – and this is oft quoted nowadays – but the writer, Annie Dillard wrote a while back that if we Christians really knew what we were doing in worship, and what worship of the one true God truly involves, then maybe instead of wearing our best coat and tie or dresses and skirts to church, we would wear crash helmets, realizing that to encounter the living God is an awesome thing. Worship is always a balancing act, I think, between on the one hand, knowing that we stand in grace; we have access to God in grace; the Gospel is good news, not bad news; it is all grace; God welcomes us in worship; the Holy Spirit welcomes us in worship; and that is all true, but we always need to balance that, and I am not always sure we do with the sense that it is also God; it is not our next-door neighbor, Fred. This is the holy God of the universe, and maybe sometimes in our worship services we get a little chummy – we seem a little over-familiar with God – a little too casual in the presence of the almighty God of the universe. So, it is a balancing act between not being scared to death because we know about grace, but also not being just so laid back and casual that it is no big deal to meet with God. I think that is something that this chapter can teach us even yet today.

DAVE BAST

I agree with that, and I think it is also a cautionary tale lest we think we have God completely figured out. I remember reading – I think it was Martin Marty – quoted a bishop from the early church; an otherwise unknown who said once: I know God better than he knows himself. Sometimes maybe we can give the impression of that. We who are leading the church give the impression of that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The preacher and teacher of preaching, Fred Craddock, said in a sermon I heard not too long ago, he said: You know, we really need to keep some size to our faith; some mystery. He said: I have heard way too many

sermons that are so neat and tidy that you got the impression that the preacher had walked all the way around God and took pictures. Like there is no mystery left to God; we have him all cased in our catechisms, and figured out; not so.

And maybe a story like in Acts 5 that startles us this way reminds us that there is yet awe; there is yet mystery; and there is yet grandeur to our God.

DAVE BAST

But I think you will agree, Scott, our bottom line is we do not have this one figured out. We cannot quite exactly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The story itself is an example of just that mystery.

DAVE BAST

Right, we have tried to talk our way through it and around it, and inside out, and I am still not completely satisfied that I understand what is going on here, but we do believe God is not out there whacking people over the head, and that there is forgiveness; so we need to humble ourselves before him.

Well, that is our take, and thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we could help you continue digging deeper into scripture. You could let us know by going to groundworkonline.com and tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/ananias-and-sapphira>

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