

# The Death of Ananias and Sapphira

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THESE were dramatic events which occurred very early in the history of the Christian Church and which produced a very sobering reaction on the believers. There are many lessons to be learned from this experience, but we will focus only on the role that God played in their untimely deaths.

Did the Lord stand toward them as the direct executioner of the sentence against transgression, or did they expire as a natural consequence of their deception and hypocrisy?

The evidence seems to point very strongly to God's being the one who, in His hot anger at their sin, personally cut them down. Certainly this is the way that the average person would view the matter. But, before we arrive at any conclusion, let the case be reexamined with care to see what role the Lord really did fill.

## The Background Details

A wonderful spirit of self-sacrificing love filled those who received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and thereafter. Covetousness vanished from their lives as they came to regard material possessions as having value only as they could be used to further the cause of God.

## Acts 4

<sup>32</sup> Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.

<sup>33</sup> And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.

<sup>34</sup> Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold,

<sup>35</sup> And laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus,

<sup>37</sup> Having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

These actions on the part of the earnest believers were divinely ordained to meet a need that had arisen because of the fierce persecution that was developing against the believers in Jesus.

### **The Acts of the Apostles, p. 70-71:**

As the disciples proclaimed the truths of the gospel in Jerusalem, God bore witness to their word, and a multitude believed. Many of these early believers were immediately cut off from family and friends by the zealous bigotry of the Jews, and it was necessary to provide them with food and shelter.

The record declares, "Neither was there any among them that lacked," and it tells how the need was filled. Those among the believers who had money and possessions cheerfully sacrificed them to meet the emergency. Selling their houses or their lands, they brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet, "and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need."

This liberality on the part of the believers was the result of the outpouring of the Spirit. The converts to the gospel were

“of one heart and of one soul.” One common interest controlled them—the success of the mission entrusted to them; and covetousness had no place in their lives. Their love for their brethren and the cause they had espoused, was greater than their love of money and possessions. Their works testified that they accounted the souls of men of higher value than earthly wealth.

Thus it will ever be when the Spirit of God takes possession of the life. Those whose hearts are filled with the love of Christ, will follow the example of Him who for our sake became poor, that through His poverty we might be made rich. Money, time, influence—all the gifts they have received from God’s hand, they will value only as a means of advancing the work of the gospel.

Thus it was in the early church; and when in the church of today it is seen that by the power of the Spirit the members have taken their affections from the things of the world, and that they are willing to make sacrifices in order that their fellow men may hear the gospel, the truths proclaimed will have a powerful influence upon the hearers.

In the midst of this marvelous spirit of Christian benevolence and love, were two people from within whom the evil of selfishness had not been eradicated. Yet, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit and in the presence of the beautiful examples of the believers around them, they had been inspired to dedicate to God’s cause, the proceeds from the sale of assets which they had.

## **Practicing Deception**

But later, when they were no longer in the company of those filled with the Holy Spirit, their disposition to covetousness resurfaced and they agreed to give only a portion of their income to the Lord, while professing to give it all. Of their course it is written:

### **The Acts of the Apostles, p. 71-72:**

In sharp contrast to the example of benevolence shown by the believers, was the conduct of Ananias and Sapphira,

whose experience, traced by the pen of Inspiration, has left a dark stain upon the history of the early church. With others, these professed disciples had shared the privilege of hearing the gospel preached by the apostles. They had been present with other believers when, after the apostles had prayed, “the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.” *Acts* 4:31. Deep conviction had rested upon all present, and under the direct influence of the Spirit of God, Ananias and Sapphira had made a pledge to give to the Lord the proceeds from the sale of certain property.

Afterward, Ananias and Sapphira grieved the Holy Spirit by yielding to feelings of covetousness. They began to regret their promise and soon lost the sweet influence of the blessing that had warmed their hearts with a desire to do large things in behalf of the cause of Christ. They thought they had been too hasty, that they ought to reconsider their decision. They talked the matter over, and decided not to fulfill their pledge.

They saw, however, that those who parted with their possessions to supply the needs of their poorer brethren, were held in high esteem among the believers; and ashamed to have their brethren know that their selfish souls grudged that which they had solemnly dedicated to God, they deliberately decided to sell their property and pretend to give all the proceeds into the general fund, but really to keep a large share for themselves. Thus they would secure their living from the common store and at the same time gain the high esteem of their brethren.

This was a very serious sin for them to commit. They were living a lie. While pretending to be and do one thing, they were practicing the very opposite. This is hypocrisy, and:

**The Acts of the Apostles, p. 72:**

...God hates hypocrisy and falsehood.

## **The Punishment That Followed**

Swift and terrible was the punishment visited upon them. The husband arrived first to present his contribution which

was only a portion of the amount actually promised. Under inspiration, Peter exposed the man's transgression with the result that the guilty one dropped dead on the spot. When his wife arrived some time later, she suffered the same fate. The record of it is written in:

### **Acts 5**

<sup>1</sup> But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession.

<sup>2</sup> And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> But Peter said, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?

<sup>4</sup> While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.

<sup>5</sup> Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things.

<sup>6</sup> And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

<sup>8</sup> And Peter answered her, Tell me whether you sold the land for so much? And she said, Yes, for so much.

<sup>9</sup> Then Peter said to her, How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.

<sup>10</sup> Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband.

<sup>11</sup> So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

## The Wrath of God

These two people were guilty of a great sin against God and they were immediately and dramatically punished for their crime. But how, specifically, did they die? Certainly they did not die at the hand of any man. No sword was raised to cut them down, or spear leveled to thrust them through; no headman's axe severed their heads from their bodies, or hangman's noose broke their necks. No human hand or weapon was laid upon them. Neither did they take their own lives.

To many this leaves only one other alternative—They were struck down by supernatural power wielded by God in the role of a divine executioner. This conviction seems to find conclusive support in the following statements. The first one to be quoted declares that the death of this couple was a signal manifestation of the wrath of God which was necessary to guard the young church from becoming demoralized:

### **The Acts of the Apostles, p. 73-74:**

Infinite Wisdom saw that this signal manifestation of the wrath of God was necessary to guard the young church from becoming demoralized. Their numbers were rapidly increasing. The church would have been endangered if, in the rapid increase of converts, men and women had been added who, while professing to serve God, were worshiping mammon.

This judgment testified that men cannot deceive God, that He detects the hidden sin of the heart, and that He will not be mocked. It was designed as a warning to the church, to lead them to avoid pretense and hypocrisy, and to beware of robbing God.

So, they died under the wrath of God in a judgment designed to keep the church pure and free from selfishness and hypocrisy. The objective achieved certainly justified the cutting off of the couple who had so seriously violated the divine principles.

In this next statement it is described as a "...swift and terrible judgment," and a "...signal manifestation of His justice..."

**Counsels on Stewardship, p. 312:**

They had practiced fraud toward God, they had lied to the Holy Spirit, and their sin was visited with swift and terrible judgment. They lost not only the present life, but eternal life.

The Lord saw that this signal manifestation of His justice was needed to guard others against incurring the same guilt. It testified that men cannot deceive God, that He detects the hidden sin of the heart, and that He will not be mocked. It was designed as a warning to the young church, to lead them to examine their motives, to beware of indulging selfishness and vainglory, to beware of robbing God.

The next statement declares that God dealt summarily with them, that He slew them both.

**Medical Ministry, p. 126:**

They thought they had been successful in their scheme; but they were cheating the Lord, and He dealt summarily with this, the first case of deception and falsehood in the newly formed church. He slew them both, as a warning to all of the danger of sacrificing truth to gain favor.

**The Great Controversy, p. 44:**

The Spirit of truth revealed to the apostles the real character of these pretenders, and the judgments of God rid the church of this foul blot upon its purity. This signal evidence of the discerning Spirit of Christ in the church was a terror to hypocrites and evildoers.

**Testimonies for the Church, vol. 4, p. 462:**

This one marked evidence of God's retributive justice is fearful, and should lead all to fear and tremble to repeat sins which brought such a punishment.

**How Did God Destroy?**

These are powerful statements in which there is a wealth of living truth, but, as usual, anyone who has not learned the difference between God's and man's ways of justice and retribution, will conclude that the Lord came against them as the executioner of their sentence. They will form the standard

conclusion that God was infuriated by their miserable attempt at deception to the point where He not only decreed their punishment, but actually carried it out.

It must be admitted that this would seem to be the obvious conclusion to draw. Because the average person is unable to see any alternative explanation, he feels that he is limited to this one.

But, obvious as this conclusion may seem to be, it is not the correct one. The great, inviolable truth remains that:

**The Great Controversy, p. 36:**

God does not stand toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression; but He leaves the rejectors of His mercy to themselves, to reap that which they have sown.

There is no exception to this rule. When the great day of final accounts comes and every man truly understands that the wages of sin is death, there will not be a single individual who will be able to rise up and testify that the Lord executed him. All will know that it was sin that destroyed them, and that the Bible statements that God slew the sinner have to be understood in a way that is different from men's slaughter of other men.

God destroys, it is true, but not as man does. God kills only by trying to save. It is by rejecting His loving advances that men separate themselves from life and salvation.

As we are already well versed in the principles which establish the truth that the Lord is not the one who kills and destroys, we will not take the time and space here to repeat the evidences to this effect. Instead we will devote the time and space to discussing how they really did die.

In the struggle to understand that under no circumstances does God take the life of even the most sinful of His children, it is very helpful to understand what actually did take place.

For instance, when we understand the developments in the natural world that brought about the flood, it is much easier to accept that the Lord did not use His personal power to engulf the earth with ruin. Rather, it is seen that not even the Lord could prevent the flood once the earth's inhabitants had become irredeemably committed to a life of rebellion against the Most High.

So, if the forces which robbed Ananias and Sapphira of their lives can be understood, it will be much easier to see that it was their sin which killed them and not the hand of God. We will also comprehend why the same swift punishments do not destroy the sinners in the church today.

In a word, Ananias and Sapphira died of shock. Their nervous systems were unable to withstand the terrible, crushing force which attended the revelation to them of the sheer magnitude of their guilt. For them, death was instantaneous. God did not execute them. It was the guilt of their own transgression which took their lives.

## **David's Description of Guilt**

But, some will contend, if this is so, then why do we not have many more instances of the same thing happening? For instance, when David was guilty of adultery with Bathsheba and of the murder of her husband, he did not drop dead when the prophet Nathan laid his sin before him just as Peter laid before Ananias and Sapphira their sin!

The fact is that David came perilously close to the same fate. When the terrible sense of his guilt fastened on him, he became a desperately ill man requiring many months for recovery. We can come closest to understanding what he went through by reading his description of it in the *Psalms*.

### **Psalms 38**

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your wrath, nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure!

- <sup>2</sup> For your arrows pierce me deeply, and Your hand presses me down.
- <sup>3</sup> There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor is there any health in my bones because of my sin.
- <sup>4</sup> For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me.
- <sup>5</sup> My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness.
- <sup>6</sup> I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long.
- <sup>7</sup> For my loins are full of inflammation, and there is no soundness in my flesh.
- <sup>8</sup> I am feeble and severely broken; I groan because of the turmoil of my heart.
- <sup>9</sup> Lord, all my desire is before You; and my sighing is not hidden from You.
- <sup>10</sup> My heart pants, my strength fails me; as for the light of my eyes, it also has gone from me.
- <sup>11</sup> My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague, and my kinsmen stand afar off.
- <sup>12</sup> Those also who seek my life lay snares for me; those who seek my hurt speak of destruction, and plan deception all the day long.
- <sup>13</sup> But I, like a deaf man, do not hear; and I am like a mute who does not open his mouth.
- <sup>14</sup> Thus I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth is no response.
- <sup>15</sup> For in you, O Lord, I hope; You will hear, O Lord my God.
- <sup>16</sup> For I said, Hear me, lest they rejoice over me, lest, when my foot slips, they magnify themselves against me.
- <sup>17</sup> For I am ready to fall, and my sorrow is continually before me.
- <sup>18</sup> For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin.
- <sup>19</sup> But my enemies are vigorous, and they are strong; and those who hate me wrongfully have multiplied.
- <sup>20</sup> Those also who render evil for good, they are my adversaries because I follow what is good.
- <sup>21</sup> Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, be not far from me!
- <sup>22</sup> Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!

When David wrote these words, he was describing the desperate physical condition to which he had been reduced because of the shock to his nervous system caused by his awesome guilt. Only those who have passed through a similar experience can truly understand what he is trying to describe. They will know as David did, that human language is too inadequate a means of communication to successfully impart a real comprehension of how desperately sick he was or how close he came to death's door.

## **The Crushing Effect of Guilt**

Ananias and Sapphira were stricken with the same destructive forces that attacked David, but to so much greater an extent that they died whereas he managed to survive. Guilt crushes the life forces:

### **The Ministry of Healing, p. 115:**

The love which Christ diffuses through the whole being is a vitalizing power. Every vital part—the brain, the heart, the nerves—it touches with healing. By it the highest energies of the being are roused to activity. It frees the soul from the guilt and sorrow, the anxiety and care, that crush the life forces.

The greater the sense of guilt, the greater the crushing effect. It would be safe to say that the consciousness of guilt felt by the husband and wife team in the early church would be more intense than that felt by Israel's second king. It was in an atmosphere intensely charged with the actual presence of the Holy Spirit that Ananias and Sapphira were mightily moved to dedicate their funds to the cause of truth. To withdraw their offering under those circumstances would have required a considerable spiritual effort which in turn would have filled them with a terrible contamination of sin.

When they were confronted with the Spirit-filled man, Peter, and their secret sin exposed before their very eyes, the resulting shock was too much. The awful sense of their guilt

crushed the life forces completely.

Every sinner who is confronted with his evil course by a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit, will feel the crushing, destructive power of that guilt in direct proportion to the circumstances under which the revelation comes. The more present the Holy Spirit, the heavier and more life threatening will the experience be. It is because the Holy Spirit's presence has been largely withdrawn from the church that the sin of Ananias and Sapphira has been oft repeated among God's people without the same awful retribution cutting down the guilty ones on the spot.

**Counsels on Stewardship, p. 312:**

In the case of Ananias, the sin of fraud against God was speedily detected and punished. This example of God's judgment was designed to be a danger signal to all future generations. The same sin was often repeated in the after-history of the church, and it is committed by many in our time; but though not attended with the visible manifestation of God's displeasure, it is no less heinous in His sight now than in the apostles' time. The warning has been given, God has clearly manifested His abhorrence of this sin, and all who pursue a similar course of action may be sure that they are destroying their own souls.

The most successful way to keep a church free from sinful elements is for the true believers to live so close to the Lord and so much like Him, that the hypocrites will be unable to stand in their presence but will actually desire to depart. The truth of this is confirmed in the following statement:

**The Great Controversy, p. 44:**

The apostles encountered those in the church who professed godliness while they were secretly cherishing iniquity. Ananias and Sapphira acted the part of deceivers, pretending to make an entire sacrifice for God, when they were covetously withholding a portion for themselves. The Spirit of truth revealed to the apostles the real character of these pretenders, and the judgments of God rid the church of this foul

blot upon its purity.

This signal evidence of the discerning Spirit of Christ in the church was a terror to hypocrites and evildoers. They could not long remain in connection with those who were, in habit and disposition, constant representatives of Christ; and as trials and persecution came upon His followers, those only who were willing to forsake all for the truth's sake desired to become His disciples.

Thus, as long as persecution continued, the church remained comparatively pure. But as it ceased, converts were added who were less sincere and devoted, and the way was opened for Satan to obtain a foothold.

## **Frightened to Death**

Those who have never felt the life-crushing force that attends a burden of guilt, may well doubt that it could be so severe as to take a person's life instantly. But there are on record, stories which demonstrate that guilt or fear can be so destructive as to take a man's life instantly. One such story appeared in *The Reader's Digest*, and reads as follows:

In the early 1960's, at an airfield near the Baltic coast, the KGB caught two Jewish dissidents trying to flee in a small plane. They were dragged off and stuffed into the bomb bay of a military aircraft. Pretending to take off, the pilot taxied the plane down the airfield, then revved the engines to a high pitch. The two dissidents were told the plane was losing altitude and they had to be jettisoned. The bomb bay doors were opened and the men fell a meter to the ground beneath the stationary bomber. The psychological shock killed them both. Lyalin saw them literally frightened to death, and he never forgot.<sup>1</sup>

Locked in the total darkness of the bomb bay, and mentally expectant of a flight to some distant prison, the young men would have no way of knowing that they had never left the ground. When they were told they were losing altitude, they fully believed it, and were filled with absolute terror at the im-

<sup>1</sup> *The Reader's Digest*, (Australian Edition), September, 1985, page 95.

mediate prospect of being dumped from several thousand feet. When, a moment or two later, the doors snapped open, the shock killed them. They died from fear just as Ananias and Sapphira died from guilt and fear.

## **A Story from Canadian History**

In the earlier days of Canadian history, an Indian tribe caught a white man who had been systematically stealing fur-yielding animals from their winter traps. They took him to their village where he adamantly declared his innocence. In reply they told him that they had a way of testing a man's innocence.

They took him to the head of a street between two rows of teepees and told him that, buried beneath the powdered snow were a number of bear traps at spaced intervals. He was required to walk that street. If he was innocent, he would miss every trap, but if he was caught in any one of them, they would know he was guilty and would torture and execute him.

Shaking with terror and tortured with guilt, he began the walk with his eyes searching the snow for some sign of the location of each trap in succession. Carefully, he put his right foot forward, testing the snow and only letting it take his weight when he was satisfied there was no trap beneath.

Slowly he progressed toward the end, his heart pounding painfully in his chest, his sweat pouring down his face, and his breath coming in agonizing gasps. Being caught in the trap would be terrible enough, but it was nothing compared to the fate that awaited him at the hands of the Indians.

Finally, there were but two steps left and he had not sprung a trap. He stood still for a long time with anger mounting in his heart. Now he was convinced that his tormentors had placed all the traps at the end of the course. They would be so close together that it would be impossible to avoid them, yet

he must go on.

He raised his foot and lowered it to the surface of the snow. Gently, he applied pressure. The strain on his nervous system was fearful. His vision blurred, his heart pounded heavily in his chest. He lowered his foot a little more.

Unseen by the thief, a brave hidden in a tent right beside the guilty man, crouched over a bear trap set on the floor of the teepee. At this critical moment, the Indian thrust a stick against the trip plate of the trap which crunched shut. One horrible cry escaped the throat of the man outside and he instantly dropped dead in his tracks. The Indians had their revenge. They demonstrated they understood the power of psychological shock.

And that is the way the couple died in the early Christian Church. Men did not kill them, neither did the Lord. It was sin, the destroyer, which took their lives as it will the life of every unrepentant one before the end shall finally come.