

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

We begin a new year in great hope and anticipation that God's Son Jesus the Christ will return and establish His earthly kingdom, just as the Jews awaited the Messiah two thousand years ago. What is God's plan for each of us this coming year - have you sought Him out, are you earnestly seeking to do His will in the coming year? Let us resolve together, today, to turn toward Christ; and in the days, weeks and months ahead, commit to following Him more closely than ever.

In our last study we saw that God used the healing of one beggar to spread the gospel, and 5,000 souls were saved in a single afternoon. We noted that the Apostles continued to be bold in their proclamation of the Gospel and their condemnation of the Jews who rejected and crucified Christ.

Also, by way of review, I passed along the following information on the Pharisees and Sadducees -- something we should review again today before beginning our study of Acts chapter 5. As you may recall, we learned the following about these two groups:

1. The Pharisees

- The most important group within the Jewish religion
- Name means "The Separated Ones"
- About 6,000 in number during the time of Christ, according to Josephus
- Controlled the Synagogues and the people
- Changed Judaism from a religion of sacrifice to one of law
- Developed the "oral tradition", such things as how far one could walk on the Sabbath, no healing because that was work on the Sabbath, etc.
- Taught that the way to God was through keeping the law, i.e., works-based
- They were opposed to Jesus because he rejected their oral tradition
- They believed in demons and angels, life after death, and the resurrection of the dead
- Took the entire Old Testament as authoritative, then built their oral tradition on top of it – even today that tradition carries more weight than God's actual word

2. The Sadducees

- The Aristocrats of Jewish Society
- The party of the rich and the High Priest families
- In charge of the Temple and its services
- Opposed the oral law, and at odds with the Pharisees on many levels
- They only accepted the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible as authoritative
- Materialistic in their outlook
- Did not believe in life after death, nor did they believe in judgment, punishment nor reward after this life
- Denied the existence of demons and angels
- A politically savvy group, supporters of whoever was in power – as long as it did not threaten their lifestyle and position
- Opposed Jesus, who threatened their stature and place in society and who taught resurrection, judgment, and life after death

This week we'll study Chapter 5 of the book of Acts and see firsthand the rapid growth of the Church, the impact that the Apostles' miracles were having, and the rapid spread of the Gospel message resulting from their imprisonment and suffering – which led to rejoicing. And we will read the story of two people who stole from God, and the punishment that He brought on them. We will see congregational responsibilities being carried out, and how a small group of faithful witnesses grows into a very large Church without walls, in spite of all the obstacles.

We will also learn a lot this week regarding honesty, congregational roles, the role of suffering in the church, the role of discipline within the church, and God's role in growing the church.

For our study this week, read Acts Chapter 5 and answer the following:

1. In Chapter 5, verse 1, we read that Ananias - together with his wife Sapphira - "also" sold a piece of property. What does the "also" refer to? (See Acts 4:32-37)
 - a. ANSWER: Everything was "in common", a holy community was evolving where everyone saw each as an equal and shared equally. Many would sell things of value, including land, to support the ministry that they believed in.
2. Ananias and his wife both knew what they were doing. Why do you suppose they did it? How was their motivation different from those mentioned in Acts 4:32-37?
 - a. ANSWER: Rather wanting to support the ministry, I would suggest that they wanted the "credit", "glory", or recognition that came with being a large property donor - but the sale amount was so large that they ultimately couldn't bear to part with it all. It was these selfish motivations that lead to their punishment and death.
3. Who told Peter that Ananias had held back some of the money?
 - a. ANSWER: The Holy Spirit
4. What does Peter's question "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold?" mean? What is he actually pointing out to Ananias?
 - a. ANSWER: He was pointing out that the land, and the money that came from its sale, were Ananias' responsibility as God's steward - just as we are responsible to be good stewards of that things that God provides to us.
5. Peter's statement to Ananias that he has not lied to men, but rather to God, speaks volumes to each of us. When we lie to someone, we are sinning against God. What kind of testimony is that for a follower of Christ? What was Ananias' response to Peter's claim that he lied to God?
 - a. ANSWER: He dropped dead immediately.
6. Who were the young men who wrapped up Ananias' body, carried it out, and buried it? (verse 6)
 - a. ANSWER: They were members of the congregation - converted Christians.
7. In verses 7-10, Ananias' wife arrives. What happens to her when Peter confronts her with the lie?
 - a. ANSWER: She dies immediately, and the same young men who've just returned from burying her husband now bury her beside him.
8. What is the reaction of the congregation following these two deaths? (see verse 11). Why?
 - a. ANSWER 1: Great fear seized them.
 - b. ANSWER 2: They realized how serious a matter it is to lie and steal from God.

9. What can we learn from this incident that applies to us today regarding our possessions and our stewardship responsibilities? Does it tell us anything about what God expects from us and our possessions? There are at least three lessons from these verses - Can you fill in the blanks below?
- We are to recognize the needs of the CHURCH that we support and give as we are able to provide for that support.
 - We are to be honest in all of our dealings; stealing from the CHURCH is stealing from God.
 - Credit, glory, honor, or special recognition should not be our motivation for supporting the ministry of the CHURCH through large offerings.
10. In Acts 5:12-16, we continue to observe the Apostles faithfully going to the Temple to teach, pray and heal; and we see the dramatic affects of those activities as God continues to bless their work. However, if we look closely at this passage, we can also see that the general population still doesn't get it, and it still doesn't comprehend its God at work. How do we know this? Where were the people placing some of the sick? - in Peter's shadow. What was wrong with this? (refer back to Acts 3:11-16)
- ANSWER: The people still didn't understand it was Christ who doing the healing and not Peter - or his shadow.
11. In verses 17-21, the Apostles are imprisoned by the same group that imprisoned them before - the Sadducees. The Apostles had again ignored their orders. Who set them free? Who is this "Angel of the Lord"?
- ANSWER: Christ.
12. What does Christ command the Apostles to do after they had been freed? (Acts 5:20)
- ANSWER: Go back to the Temple courts and proclaim this new life.
13. So what exactly is "this new life" that they are to proclaim?
- ANSWER: A forgiven life, a saved life, a re-born life - the new life that comes with having your sins forgiven and your debt paid by the shed blood of Christ; the new life that brings with it the hope of heaven and the hope of the resurrection and power over death.
14. In verses 21-32, the Apostles do as they are commanded, and as a result, are brought before the Sanhedrin - both Sadducees and Pharisees are present in this body. They want to put the Apostles to death, but one Pharisee stands above the rest and argues why this should not be so. His name is Gamaliel. See what you can find on this Pharisee... What did the Jews of the day think of him?
- ANSWER 1: Gamaliel was very highly regarded, seen as the last honest and true teacher among the Pharisees. Upon his death, the Mishna (entire body of Jewish religious law) records that "the Glory of the Lord ceased and purity and abstinence died".
 - ANSWER 2: He was the most famous rabbinic teacher of the day.
 - ANSWER 3: He was the first Teacher designated as "Our Master".
 - ANSWER 4: He went on to become President of the Sanhedrin.
 - ANSWER 5: He died in 52 AD.
 - ANSWER 6: He was a rigorous teacher of Jewish scripture and the extensive rabbinical commentaries.
 - ANSWER 7: Required all students to learn a trade so they would not be a burden to the people.
15. After Gamaliel convinces the Sanhedrin not to kill the Apostles, the Sanhedrin instead has them flogged and sent out, again with the command to stop preaching and teaching. What is the Apostles' reaction to having been flogged? (Oh that this would be our reaction as well!)
- ANSWER: They were honored that God had found them worthy to suffer for God's Church.
16. The chapter ends by informing us that the Apostles continued day after day, never stopping, teaching and preaching the Gospel. Where does verse 42 tell us that they did this? Was it just in the temple?
- ANSWER: Both in the Temple and house-to-house.
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Easily we see from this week's lesson the importance of being honest with God and, equally-important, we are to use whatever God has provided us to support the work and ministry that God is doing both at home and outside the walls of our local church. We also see the great testimony of the Apostles who celebrated their persecution, acknowledging that God had chosen them for this most important work. In everything they did and everything they said, they never ceased to praise and honor God.

Oh that we could be so bold, and have such as a walk with Christ!

Yours in Christ,

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