

## Could You Be Struck Dead?

Ananias and Sapphira

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The early church was a dynamic fellowship, had excitement within it, was rooted in faith in Christ, and relationships between Christians were exhibited, and they were of one accord. But we would be mistaken to idealize the early church. It was a fellowship made up of called human beings who had their flaws and problems.

There were tensions within the church and pressures from those outside who opposed the gospel message. All these forces sought to disrupt the oneness of the local body of believers and to halt its growth. There were disagreements, there was sin, there was suspicion and misunderstanding, but through it all the early church expected that God, through His Holy Spirit, would enable them to experience the unity that He Himself had fashioned in that bond which knits believers to Jesus Christ and to one another.

The fifth chapter of the book of Acts continues this portrait, but now there are divisions of the church, insincerity, and judgment. A great deal of the misery in the world comes from trying to look instead of trying to be what one is not. The name that Jesus gave to this practice is hypocrisy, which simply means wearing a mask or playing the actor. Hypocrisy is deliberate deception trying to make people think we are more spiritual than we really are.

That was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, putting on a lovely front in order to conceal the shabby sin that cost them their lives.

**Acts 5:1-2** But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 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.

The story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira is the tragedy of two insincere people who are attending God's church but who sinned against God by lying to Him and were struck dead. We will get back to their story, but first let us make some comparisons.

Ananias and Sapphira's unfaithfulness is similar to that of the Old Testament story of Nadab and Abihu, who offered improper fire upon God's altar and were struck dead. Also similar to them is the story of Uzzah, who reached out and touched God's Ark of the Covenant when it was being transported to Jerusalem, and also was struck dead.

Before we get very deeply into Ananias and Sapphira's sin, I want to take a look at Nadab and Abihu's sin. A day which should have ended with the glorious worship of God was instead climaxed with the funeral of Aaron's two sons. The Lord's acceptance of Aaron's offering in Leviticus 9 is followed on the same day by an apparent rejection of it and so joy gives way to sorrow.

The offense lies in Nadab and Abihu doing it their own way instead of in a way authorized by the Lord, and as a result they were instantly killed.

**Leviticus 10:1-2** Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.

Everything that these two men did was wrong. I am going to give you eight ways in which they were wrong.

1. They were the wrong people to be handling the incense and presenting it to the Lord. This was the task of their father Aaron, the high priest.
2. They also used the wrong instruments. They used their own censers instead of the censer of the high priest, which was sanctified by the special anointing oil.
3. They acted at the wrong time, because it was only on the Day of Atonement that the high priest was permitted to take incense into the Holy of Holies, and even then he had to submit to a special ritual.
4. They acted under the wrong authority. They did not consult with Moses or their father Aaron, nor did they try to follow the Word of God which Moses had received.
5. In burning the incense, they used the wrong fire, which scripture calls "strange fire" or "unauthorized fire" in Leviticus 10:1 (NIV).
6. The high priest was commanded to burn the incense on hot coals taken from the brazen altar, but Nadab and Abihu supplied their own fire and so God rejected it.
7. They also acted from the wrong motive and did not seek the Glory of God alone.

**Leviticus 10:3** And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace.

We do not know the secrets of their hearts, but you get the impression that what they

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did was a willful act of pride. Their desire was not to sanctify the Eternal, but to promote themselves as important.

8. They depended on the wrong energy. Verse 9-10 imply that they were under the influence of alcohol at the time.

**Leviticus 10:8-11** Then the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying: “Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink [he is making it very clear here after what had happened.], you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.”

Now this reminds us of Ephesians 5:18 where he says:

**Ephesians 5:18** And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit

So a physical source of energy should never be used as a substitute for the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why alcohol should not be imbibed before preaching. Some ministers in the past have been known to have done that and that was wrong to do.

Now Nadab and Abihu were not outsiders. Exodus 24:9-10 tells us that they were anointed priests who had seen God on a mountain. Their father was the high priest and they were trained in the service of the Lord, yet they were killed for this disobedient act. The apostle Paul warns us all about presumptuousness in I Corinthians 10.

**I Corinthians 10:12** Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

This is what happened to Nadab and Abihu. It is a serious thing to be a servant of God and our service must be empowered by His Spirit and controlled by His Word. We must serve God acceptably with reverence in godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire. We are not to take Him, His holiness, or His purity for granted and we are to uphold it to the best of our ability.

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Notice how Aaron was expected to act following his two sons being struck dead. He had two more sons, but those first two had just been struck dead and here is the instruction that was received.

**Leviticus 10:3-7** And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified.' " So Aaron held his peace. Then Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, "Come near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp." So they went near and carried them by their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons, "Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord has kindled. You shall not go out from the door of the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you." And they did according to the word of Moses.

So Aaron had to hold his peace and not mourn when his sons had just died. And also as was the custom of tearing the clothes, he was not even allowed to do that. We see there that this was such a serious offense to God that He would not even allow those two to be mourned.

Aaron, his other sons and the others were to carry on with their duties and not look back at that other than to realize that God expects quite a bit from His priesthood and from His ministry. Each and every one of us is part of the royal priesthood, so these things are warnings to all of us.

With the privileges of ministry also come responsibilities and sacrifices. Aaron was not permitted to mourn the death of his two older sons, but had to remain in the tabernacle precinct and complete the ceremony of ordination. Two of his nephews took care of the burial of the bodies.

It may seem strange to us that God killed Nadab and Abihu instead of merely warning them, but often at the beginning of a new era in God's plan of salvation, the Eternal brought judgment in order to warn the people. The priestly ministry of the tabernacle was about to begin and the Eternal wanted it to be sure the priests understood the seriousness of their work.

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When Israel entered the Promised Land, God used Achan's disobedience as a warning. But even more profound was the death of Uzzah when the Ark was brought to Jerusalem. Uzzah was also probably a Levite and he was in the service of God thinking that he was protecting the ark from falling as we will see in II Samuel 6.

**II Samuel 6:1-7** Again David gathered all the choice men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baal Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, whose name is called by the Name, the Lord of Hosts, who dwells between the cherubim. So they set the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drove the new cart. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill, accompanying the ark of God; and Ahio went before the ark. Then David and all the house of Israel played music before the Lord on all kinds of instruments of fir wood, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on sistrums, and on cymbals. [So there was quite a wonderful, exciting, celebration going on there because of the Ark of the Covenant being taken into Jerusalem.] And when they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. Then the anger of the Lord was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God.

As I mentioned before, Uzzah was probably a Levite, so he had a higher responsibility to obey God in all that He said. The instruction of course was that the Ark was never to be touched other than with the proper poles and so on.

Now it was not enough for the priest merely to teach the people the difference between the Holy and the unholy, they also had to practice it in their own lives. By Uzzah touching the Ark, he was showing that he did not uphold the holiness of God and how pure everything having to do with God was supposed to be. This is one of the burdens of the message of Ezekiel the prophet.

**Ezekiel 22:26** Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

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So although we are not under the same strict rituals as the congregation of the Old Testament, the children of Israel, was, we still have to uphold holiness and God's purity, especially at services which is a formal worship service of God and also the Sabbath—the whole 24 hour period—is very special to God. He prepared it for us so that we can properly worship Him.

Many in the church groups that we hear about, will go to the beach on the Sabbath or go do other things, seeking their own pleasure, so to speak. Doing things that do not draw them closer to God. So the use of the Sabbath today in the greater churches of God is one that has been very lax and, who knows, maybe someday God will do something drastic to change that.

The point of the story is that God will not allow His holiness to be violated, not even by members of the high priest's family. When God struck down Aaron's two sons, Aaron held his peace and he raised no vocal objection against God's justice in the death of his sons. Perhaps he was simply dumbfounded and/or terrified, but he also realized that God was holy and was to be held in that esteem.

I linked these three stories together—Ananias and Sapphira, Nadab and Abihu, and Uzzah—because all of them were a part of God's work. They were not in the same category as the heathen, the pagan, or the people of the world who were ignorant of God, or kings and the philosophers who, in the ignorance of their unbelief set themselves against God. These five people were in the fellowship of God's family and were all engaged in what we would call, either Christian worship of service or a congregation of God in the Old Testament of service.

They were all in service of the Almighty God of the universe and they were struck dead for what on the surface seemed to be trivial offenses, but that is not how God sees them. He does not see them as trivial at all.

When we put these stories together, we discover that in each instance it was a time of important new beginnings for God's people. This may explain some of the severity of the punishment. Something new was being inaugurated, a new era was about to come in. It is obvious that God established at the start of these ventures how seriously He considered the purity of the relationship of His people to Himself.

Now we cannot begin to explain Acts 5 which contains the story of Ananias and Sapphira without looking back a few verses to the end of Acts 4. There is sharp contrast between chapter 5, which tells of a great sin, and chapter 4, which speaks of a time of particular sweet harmony and unity in the church.

Luke did not have to give us the picture of ideal harmony in chapter 4, because in a way it is a repetition of what he already recorded at the end of chapter 2, about the unified life of the early church. Why is that? Luke is too fine of a historian to repeat himself. He is painting this ideal picture of church harmony as a background for the disharmony that came as a result of Ananias and Sapphira's deception.

Not only does Luke describe what this time of sharing was about in general terms, but in Acts 4:36-37 he also ties it to a particular individual. The man's name was Barnabas. Luke says that Barnabas sold a field that he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostle's feet. Very similar story to what Ananias and Sapphira did.

This was an unusual time in the history of the church. What may throw light on this time of unprecedented cheering, was to remember that Jesus had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, and He said that when His disciples saw it they were to leave the city immediately. So there was a certain amount of apprehension involved in their lives at that time.

Seeing the signs, some of the Christians remembered Jesus' words and left the city. Then the destruction finally did come in A.D. 70. In these early days, Christians were no doubt living with thoughts of the destruction of the city and this may have encouraged them to be willing to sell all that they had.

Some might have thought that God had told us that Jerusalem is going to be overthrown, our possessions are not going to do us any good. Then when that happens the thing to do is sell them and use them in God's work now. It does not say that, but that is possibly some of the thoughts that went through their minds. I cannot prove that it influenced them but it would help to explain why such exceptional giving occurred early in church history, and was not recorded as being repeated later. There was generosity, and we will see some of that, but it was not the extent that had happened there in Acts 4.

If there is an application for us here it is that someday we are going to die and the good we can do with our possessions will end then. Does it not make sense to take care of how we use our possessions and use them now? We should make them count, and I am not suggesting that you sell all that you have. Normally that would be an unwise thing to do, but I suggest that you use your possessions as wisely as possible because we are held accountable for the way that we use the material blessings we have and it will impact our reward in heaven.

In that case of Barnabas, we have one man whose possessions probably were not even

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in Jerusalem, but who nevertheless was willing to sell them and use the proceeds in God's service. If that is the case, it might help explain why this man was specifically remembered. He is mentioned several dozen times in Acts.

Barnabas did not have to sell what he had, it did not even make sense humanly speaking, but he did it perhaps reasoning, "Even though my possessions are not in Jerusalem, I want them to be used for the needy and for the expansion of the gospel." He sold his field, took the money, and laid it at the feet of the apostles.

This man was given a new name by the early Christians. He was called Barnabas, the same Barnabas who traveled with Paul. Barnabas means, son of encouragement. Now maybe they called him son of encouragement, which means the encourager, because of the way he acted. Somebody might have seen how he acted and said, "What an encouragement this man is."

Sadly, as it soon turned out, sitting on the side of the church congregation somewhere, there were two people who had noticed what was going on and who wanted to be acclaimed like Barnabas. Their names were Ananias and Sapphira.

They probably thought, "I wish people were praising us like that. Look at the attention it's getting. He sold his field and gave them money and named him son of encouragement. How great it would be to be thought of like that by our friends!" So they decided to sell their piece of property and do the same thing almost.

Sadly as we read the story we find that they were not at all like Barnabas. Outwardly they seemed to be but inwardly they were of quite a different character. Barnabas was giving his goods out of thanksgiving to God and concern for God's people and he was completely honest about it. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be treated the way that Barnabas was treated, but they were not honest.

They sold their property, looked at the money, saw how nice it was, and then kept back some of it for themselves while giving the rest, pretending to give it all. Maybe they had intended to give it all at first, but the more they looked at it the more they desired it, and so even it had not been in their hearts initially, the evil of their hypocrisy was hatched.

They probably thought, "No one knows how much we got for the sale of this property and we certainly have a lot of expenses today. Why don't we just keep part of it, nobody will know, and give the rest and then people will say, 'they are just like Barnabas.'" But they forgot one thing: God knew their hearts.

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What was Barnabas really like? How was he encouraging? Often it does not take much more than a kind word of concern or simple statement of appreciation for someone else, to boost the feeling and accomplishment of someone else. Research has found that people are much happier on their jobs if they feel appreciated for their work. This factor is found to be more important in the day-to-day job satisfaction than the amount of our pay.

Encouraging others is becoming a lost art as this society puts increasingly more distractions in front of us. Today we just get too busy to be concerned about others and this is no less than an excuse for the negligence of our fellow brothers and sisters in the church.

Now especially as Christians, we must find the time to be concerned about others, about their welfare, their happiness, their spiritual growth. We are our brother's keeper. Encouragement goes a long way to giving a boost to a discouraged friend or member of the church who must endure and persevere through a severe trial.

To other apostles, Barnabas excelled in his encouragement of others. Now what was it about Barnabas that earned him recognition for being the son of encouragement, or as some Bible translations call him, "the son of consolation"? Barnabas' background are spread throughout the book of Acts.

In Acts, Luke tells us that Barnabas was a Levite whose family came from the island of Cyprus, where some of Jews of the diaspora settled. He was a cousin of Mark. His Hebrew name was Joseph, or Joses, and he was called Barnabas by the apostles.

Now Joseph means, may God increase. Joses means, he that pardons. Barnabas means, son of encouragement. All three names are wonderful attributes of God connected with Barnabas. Since the apostles called him the son of encouragement, it may be that this was Barnabas' dominant characteristic.

Barnabas is first mentioned as a generous land owner, in Acts 4:36-37, who sold some land and donated all the proceeds to the apostles in Jerusalem. He himself later became an apostle as Luke links Paul and Barnabas together as apostles in Acts 14:14.

Tradition has it that Barnabas was one of the seventy whom Jesus Christ sent forth as lambs amongst wolves, two by two in every city. They were to carry no money, sack, or sandals, or greet anyone along the road. Jesus instructed them that they were on a special mission of peace only to those God was calling.

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They were sent out to preach the gospel to the Christian world, which Jesus designed specifically for them, as those who were sons of peace, the called of God. The seventy returned with joy and they had been greatly encouraged by the power and purpose of their mission.

Jesus clarified that their joy should not be because they had authority over demons, but rather rejoice because their names are written in heaven. Jesus gave them an eternal source of encouragement that they were to carry with them their whole lives.

Rather than allowing them to settle for consolation, they received some limited authority which they exercised over demons. They were given this encouragement that they should rather rejoice that their names are written in heaven; they are called out; they are saints; they are first fruits.

Now Barnabas was not afraid to stand by God's messengers at a time of upheaval. He was the first person to have influence and responsibility to extend his personal warrant and home to Saul of Tarsus when all of Jerusalem was still casting stones at him.

The disciples in Jerusalem, who had only known Saul as a fierce persecutor and murderer of the saints, were afraid of him. They could hardly believe that the inquisitor was converted. Although the rest shrank from Paul in fear and suspicion, Barnabas came forward and showed great kindness toward him, introduced Saul to the apostles, and then told the story of his miraculous conversion and how he had preached with power at Damascus.

As Paul came in to greater prominence, Barnabas quietly and humbly fell back into second place. Barnabas and Paul had their moments of disagreements however, and there was a serious conflict between them over John Mark. Acts 15:36-41 records that Paul was still upset over Mark's decision to depart from him in Pamphylia and not continue with him to do the work, and this led to a definite breach between them.

Sharp contention between Barnabas and Paul caused them to part from one another, heading their separate ways, which lasted for quite some time, after which Barnabas returned to Cyprus. Now this breach did not mean that they hated each other, it just meant that they needed to have some space between them to do God's work, because all personalities do not automatically get along.

Paul thought of Barnabas and Peter as hypocrites regarding eating with the Gentiles in front of the Jews as he records in Galatians 2:

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**Galatians 2:11-13** Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

The indication here is that Paul was surprised that Barnabas would act this way. Barnabas was not a perfect man, but he was certainly a man praised by the names that he was given, no doubt inspired by God. Obviously this was uncharacteristic of Barnabas, which miffed Paul. It does seem odd that Barnabas would not be afraid to harbor Saul of Tarsus in his home, thereby protecting him from a vigilante group, but was afraid to stand up to the Jewish Christians regarding eating with the Gentile Christians.

We all suffer from the prejudices of our backgrounds at times and as Christians we spend much of our lives trying to overcome them. Although Barnabas and Paul had their differences, they were not irreconcilable. The last reference to Barnabas was the one Paul made a few years later referring to the church's support of he and Barnabas, where he states in I Corinthians 9:

**I Corinthians 9:6** Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?

Here it appears that Paul had reconciled with Barnabas and we would expect nothing less from two converted individuals.

The impression that Scripture gives of Barnabas is that he was kind, encouraging, generous, and forgiving. Luke sums up his character in Acts 11 where he says:

**Acts 11:24** For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. [then an item full of meaning follows] And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Here we have a source of great encouragement and despite Barnabas' faults he received a wonderful commendation from Luke that God inspired to be recorded as a permanent example of a true witness of God. This is so opposite and contrasting to

zinnias and Sapphira.

Barnabas was a sanctifying instrument in God's cultivation of His church and Paul makes specific mention of the fact that Barnabas, who willingly impoverished himself in the interest of the church, was found working with his own hands to support himself on his journeys.

What was this encouragement and consolation that Barnabas was so well recognized for? Paul said that it is a minister's responsibility to be encouraging to the church. I Thessalonians 3:2-3 tells us that the ministers are appointed to establish us and encourage us concerning our faith.

**I Thessalonians 3:2-3** And sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.

Barnabas wisely encouraged people by pointing them in the right direction toward the coming Kingdom of God.

**Acts 11:23** When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.

In its basic meaning, encouragement is the basic act of giving hope or promise. The apostles, the elders, and the brethren in Jerusalem wrote a letter to the Gentile brethren in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, regarding the necessary things to keep rather than requiring circumcision, which troubled the Gentiles.

Paraphrasing in Acts 15:20-30, it describes the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem telling them that they did not want them to lay any heavier burden on the Gentile Christians, and that they should abstain from things offered to idols, from the blood of things strangled, and from sexual immorality.

**Acts 15:30-31** So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they [the brethren in Antioch] had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

The letter gave them hope that they could reach the goal set before them to overcome their sins and receive the gift of salvation without having to be circumcised. Hosea 6 emphasizes that mercy is better than sacrifice.

**Hosea 6:6** For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

It is possible to receive consolation from the world but the affect is only temporary. This is seen when a person feels depressed and then to console her, a friend takes her out to a restaurant or buys her flowers to cheer her up. Does she feel better? Usually the answer is yes, but it is temporary. The same is true for game show consolation prizes for those who lose. These are temporary consolations.

**Luke 6:24** "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Now compared to the rest of the world, we in this nation are very wealthy and rich, so we have to be very careful how we use our material goods. We need to use our goods in support of God, His way of life, and God's brethren.

In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus states:

**Luke 12:19-21** And I [that is the rich fool] will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

It is supreme folly to believe that riches could prolong life beyond what is allotted, or that they could divert the approach of pain and death. Only a temporary feeling of relief may be had. Jesus is the true source of our consolation and comfort. It is not anything we have done or anything we own. The apostle Paul expresses this well in II Corinthians 1:

**II Corinthians 1:5-7** For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we [the apostles] are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for

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enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.

So there is a guarantee there, inspired by God through Paul, that we will receive consolation, hope, and encouragement from our sufferings. Paul realized that to share Christ's sufferings always involved God's comfort and consolation through that suffering. He hoped that the church would be triumphant in their time of trial.

Whenever Christ's sufferings are multiplied in us, so also is His comfort. The greater the suffering, the greater the comfort from Christ, and the greater ability to share suffering and consolation with others in the church. So Paul wrote in II Thessalonians 2.

**II Thessalonians 2:16-17** Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.

Where can we look for this consolation and hope? From Jesus Christ. Paul has more to say about this:

**Romans 15:4** For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope [or we could say encouragement or consolation].

God promises that if we study His written Word, He will give us hope. What is hope? In its basic form, hope is a desire accompanied by the expectation that our desire will be fulfilled.

Ananias and Sapphira had a false hope of adulation which they tried to acquire by their own resources and deception. They were not willing to humbly suffer in their service, and they were not willing to honestly sacrifice their material possessions to receive consolation from Christ.

Paul asks rhetorical questions in explaining another aspect of our hope in I Thessalonians 2:

**I Thessalonians 2:19** For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?

So that gives us future hope, something we look forward to and something we are guaranteed to see. We receive encouragement now from having that hope.

In contrast to Ananias and Sapphira, Barnabas leaves us with a fine example. He was a good man who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith. His kindness, generosity, and forgiving attitude helped to console many in the church at that time. He encouraged the brethren with the hope that they would be raised incorruptible at Christ's return and consoled them with the knowledge that, as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.

There is no perfect church, not even the church of the apostles.

**Acts 4:32** 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.

We think, "Ah, there's the perfect church!" But even this church had Ananias and Sapphira in it. Someone once told the British Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, that they were leaving his church because they were going to find a perfect church. Spurgeon, who had a great deal of wit and sometimes was more forthright than people dare to be today and said, "When you find it, please do not join it, because you will ruin it."

Often people are quite enthusiastic when they begin attending church with God's people. They say things like, "I finally found it!" or "this is the church for me, it's what I've always wanted." I have to admit that it worries me, because I think, just let a week, a month, or a year go by and we will see if they still feel the same way. As they get to know the brethren a little bit, often their enthusiasm deflates.

Always hope because God works in us that they also find good things as well as the disappointments. If you look for fault or negative things, you will find it in anybody. I know they can find fellowship and faithfulness to God's Word, people who will be concerned for them and pray for them, but there is no perfect congregation, neither was there in Jerusalem with the apostles there.

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Of course the spiritual church of God is perfect, but not everyone that attends with God's people are in His spiritual church. We know that there are wheat and that there are tares, but of course we are not going to judge who is who, because we do not have the right nor do we have the insight to see into a persons heart.

We must pray for our congregations, we need to pray that God will help us to do better, protect us from Satan and keep us faithful to Himself. Obviously Ananias and Sapphira had little or no respect for God as they lied to Him by way of the Holy Spirit, and also for the brethren in their congregation who they had tried to deceive. Now beginning with Acts 5:3 we have Peter's reply to Ananias and it is very significant.

**Acts 5:3-6** 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? 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." [That word conceived is very interesting. You probably remember that it is exactly what James said about desire in James 1, "when desire has conceived it gives birth to sin."] Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

That was a fast process, they got rid of him so quickly. Peter addresses at least three important concerns in this response: The right of ownership; the role of Satan; and sin's offense to God. There are probably more principals there, but these are the three I wanted to pull out.

First he teaches the right of private property. This first item is not the first thing Peter mentions, but I mention it first because it is the concern of the least importance. Peter says to Ananias, "While it remained, was it not your own, and after it was sold, was it not in your own control?"

Peter is repudiating what today we call socialism and communism, even a sanctified Christian kind of communism, which is known by several names, such as liberation theology, social justice, social democracy, and progressivism, as well as several other terms.

Now some people have looked at this period of sharing in the early church and have wrongly held it as a permanent ideal for all Christians. Peter's words make it clear that

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this is not the case. Peter was not inventing the right of private property, it is something that was already established by God in the Old Testament. The obvious example is in the Ten Commandments. The eighth commandment says:

**Exodus 20:15** “You shall not steal.”

In order to steal, you have to take something that belongs to someone else, something they own, thus there is the right of private ownership. If a person does not have a right to something, then it is not stealing for someone else to take it. If he/she owns it, then taking it is wrong and this is what Peter recognized.

In affect Peter said, “you have a right to it, you did not have to sell it and after you sold it you did not have to give it.” Now the problem was not that Ananias did not give everything he had, but that he pretended to be giving it all when actually he was holding some back. The problem was his hypocrisy and lying, not the fact that he owned property. He was part of the church and falsehood destroys it's fellowship.

Now the second point Peter made was about the role of Satan.

**Acts 5:3** 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?”

When Peter spoke on this occasion, he was conscience of speaking under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Peter knew that Satan is the father of lies and deceit.

Peter was a mouthpiece for God. He was speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so when he said, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” he is certain that this is precisely what Satan had done.

People have a tendency to refer to Satan in simplistic and superficial terms. Nevertheless there is such a thing as spiritual warfare and it is quite possible to be tempted either by Satan or by one of those fallen angels who sinned with him.

In these early days of the New Testament church, Satan was outraged by what was happening in this Christian fellowship. Satan, the one who wants everything for himself and encourages people to be as selfish as possible, must have hated the spirit of generosity and unity among the early Christians.

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So with perverted reasoning he probably said to himself, "I'll turn this around and use the spirit of sharing to break down the very generosity it's supposed to be expressing. I'll get them to lie and introduce chaos into the church."

Although Satan is powerful, God limits his power. He is not omniscient as God is. He does not know everything. He is not omnipotent as God is. He is not omnipresent as God is. Only God is all powerful. Satan is not everywhere, although he certainly gets around roaming through the earth, as he said of himself in Job 1:7 and Job 2:2. Satan is not the equivalent of God but he is influential and he is a very formidable enemy.

Perhaps because of this incident, or maybe because of other things that happened to him later in his life, Peter writes in his first letter in I Peter 5:

**I Peter 5:8-9** Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. [now here is his advice] Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

Our trials are not unique to us alone, many or most of the brethren are going through severe trials. That is an important warning. If we go through periods of special blessings as these early Christians had, personally and in our church, we can expect Satan or one of his demons to attack us because Satan does not want the church of God to thrive, neither does he want the brethren individually.

Now if you are only going through the motions of serving Jesus Christ, Satan will not worry about you very much. If you are not putting forth any effort to serving God and the brethren effectively, if you are not growing in the grace and knowledge and if you are not being a true witness of God's true way of life, Satan may leave you alone and let his society and your own human nature take you down the wide, easy path to destruction, because it will not take much to make you an ineffective servant of God.

On the other hand, if you are genuinely trying to serve God and His people, if you are sincerely trying to be a true witness of God's way of life by living according to His statutes, laws, and principles, if you are repentant in overcoming your sins, Satan will attack you. We know that narrow and difficult is the way which leads to life.

Liberalism is always pushing its ugly head into the church and we see that in the greater churches of God as well. Satan is stronger than we are. He was stronger than Ananias, a man who even sat under the apostolic preaching.

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**James 4:7** Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

So we must surrender to God and fight against Satan's influences and it must be a conscience effort every day, every hour, and every minute, because the influences of the world are Satan's doing and they bombard us. Satan wants us who are in God's church, and he wants very desperately to be able to turn us to his way of life. Temptations are everywhere in the world.

Some have tried to resist the Devil without first submitting to God and have found that the Devil does not flee them. The Devil runs over us like a tank because he is more powerful than we are and we stand only when we first submit to God, because only then do we stand in God's strength. This is a very important principal.

How do we first submit to God? We do it through prayer and the devotional life of which Bible study and prayer is a part. Our example here is Jesus who resisted and overcame Satan in His temptation. Jesus had just spent 40 days in close fellowship with God, so He was entirely submissive to God's will, as He always was anyway. Then when Satan came, Jesus responded with quotations from Scripture. It is in Scripture that God has expressed his will and it is in Scripture that we can find those principals that we can bring back to mind ourselves whenever we face any trial or challenge.

When Satan tempted Jesus to use His power selfishly to make bread from stones, Jesus replied with the words from Deuteronomy 8:3 which Matthew records in Matthew 4:4.

**Matthew 4:4** But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

And when Satan urged Jesus to throw Himself down from the temple parapets, trusting God to preserve Him, Jesus used words from Deuteronomy 6:16 which Matthew records:

**Matthew 4:7** Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

Satan made a bold plea for Christ's worship. Jesus replied with words from

Deuteronomy 6:13:

**Matthew 4:10** Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'"

So Jesus knew the Old Testament scriptures inside and out because He inspired them, but when he was made as a man on earth He still had to study the Scriptures diligently to make sure they were firmly in His mind as He was growing up, which He did and obviously His parents helped Him do that. So there were two parents to be very much admired. It is a shame that we do not have more details about them, but maybe that is so people will not worship them.

The Old Testament scriptures are principals of the mind of God imparted to the Holy Spirit to every true believer.

The third point that Peter makes is the most important. Peter has affirmed the right of private property and pointed that Christians are involved in spiritual warfare and now in Acts 5:4, Peter says to Ananias:

**Acts 5:4** 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."

This was a direct breaking of the commandment. Peter raised the situation to the highest possible level affirming that the sin committed by Ananias was of great concern to God. But in positive terms, no matter what you do it matters to God, and it matters to other people as well.

We live in a world where people do not want to take their bad actions seriously. They minimize them saying, "it really doesn't matter" or "it doesn't matter much." Either positively or negatively, we often seem to think that what we do on an hourly basis is unimportant.

So we tend to ignore what we are doing minute by minute, hour by hour, even day to day, and each day we get farther and farther away from God, by having not prayed or studied our Bible, something that we have to do every day to stay close to God. It is easy to drift into the kind of thinking that nothing really matters.

Now regarding Christian morality, C.S. Lewis wrote: "Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before and taking your life as a whole with all you innumerable choices all your life long. You are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either a into a creature that is in harmony with God and with other creatures and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war with and hatred with God and with his fellow creatures and with itself."

Men and women are beings with eternal potential and if we are only creatures of this life, if we live and die and that is the end of it, it does not really matter a whole lot what we do. We can be as evil as Dorian Gray but at the end of life it is all over and all you have to deal with is the disposal of a disgusting portrait.

But if we are beings with eternal potential, then the choices we make matter eternally and they matter to God. Now back to the story of Ananias and Sapphira. The last part of the story concerns Sapphira, Ananias' wife. It is important not to forget her because she bore a full measure of guilt and responsibility. Why?

**Acts 5:7-11** Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." 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." 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. So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Well God certainly got the church's attention with that, because the church was about to enter into a new beginning, so to speak. They had of course began on Pentecost of 31 A.D, but this was another push in the church.

Luke points out her guilt in two ways. In Acts 5 he adds the phrase, "his wife, also being aware of it" or in other words with his wife's full knowledge. Now after Ananias had been judged, Luke notes that she had repeated her husband's lie.

When you and I do wrong things and when our culture does wrong things, we often work hard at shunning responsibility, usually by some form of determinism, as the modern term is. Determinism means that some outside factor has made us do what we

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did and therefore we are not responsible. It is the false belief that everything is caused by another event or action and so you are not free to choose what you do.

Now one form of this is environmental. I am what I am because that is how my parents raised me, or it is because I grew up in a particular neighborhood, or because I was teased in school. The excuses are endless.

Now there is also a determinism that is personal. We excuse ourselves on the basis of our genetic structure. I am just made like that, there is nothing I can do about it. In this way we excuse bad tempers, lying, or whatever else it may be. The problem with these excuses is that we use them for ourselves, but disallow them in the case of other people, which makes us hypocrites at times and is something we should all be careful of.

A little boy once said to his mother, "Mom, why is that whenever I do something wrong it's because I'm a bad boy, but whenever you do something wrong it's your nerves?" The mother was recognizing that her son was a creature made in the image of God and was responsible for what he did. But in her case she excused her bad behavior by her genes or whatever other excuse she had.

When we blame someone else for our conduct, in the final analysis, the person we are actually blaming is God. If you try to excuse yourself on the basis of your environment, well God is ultimately the one who is responsible for the environment. If you appeal to internal factors, well, God created or allowed those too.

Whenever you try to excuse yourself from some wrong behavior, you are actually attempting to shift the blame for your sin to God. It may be indirect, but it is still aimed at Him. The blame does not cut it; sin is still sin, God is not its cause, and in the end God will judge it.

Now let me point out that when we talk about God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, who were attending God's church with other brethren, it appears that they were tares that only God could remove.

In the Parable of the Wheat and Tares in Matthew 13, there is no doubt that the tares, from the Hebrew Zizania, denotes the weed called bearded darnel (*Iolium temulentum*), in our modern vernacular. It is a series of rye grass, the seeds of which are a strong soporific poison.

The darnel, before it comes into ear, is very similar in appearance to wheat, hence the

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command that the Zizania should be left to the harvest, lest while men pluck up the tares, the Zizania, you also uproot the wheat with them. Its roots intertwines with the wheat so much that the farmer cannot separate them without plucking up both, so therefore has to wait until the time of harvest. The seed is like wheat, but smaller and black and when mixed with wheat flour can cause dizziness, intoxication, and paralysis.

Bearded darnel is the only deleterious grain among all the numerous grasses. None but the Lord of the harvest can distinguish the seeming from the real. Man's attempt to prevent His judgment for the sake of securing a pure church by attempting to remove the tares has always failed and has only tended to foster spiritual pride and hypocrisy in those who pass judgment.

True Christians do not lose their salvation by an occasional, unintentional sin, but they very well could for habitual sin—sin as a way of life.

Now the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira, though seemingly extreme, was probably for this life only. Still it was serious and what it teaches us is that God is not indifferent to His people's sins and that He is the one who removes the tares.

Now let me make this personal. Is there any sin in your life that you have been neglecting? Over-drinking, gluttony, idolatry, Sabbath breaking? The ancient Israelites were guilty of all those things when they went into captivity. Perhaps someone has a problem with pride, hypocrisy, or self-righteousness.

All five, Uzzah, Nadab and Abihu, Ananias and Sapphira, were all struck dead for disrespect of God's righteous standards, right before the church was to enter a new beginning. God emphasized numerous times how serious He is about taking our professed Christian lives seriously, and our setting the best example possible as a true witness of His way of life. Could you be struck dead? What a terrifying thought!

Peter wrote in his first letter, possibly remembering this incident of Ananias and Sapphira:

**I Peter 4:17-19** For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now "If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?" Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.

So Peter knew that the church in his day was far from perfect and that God is the one who judges sin. The first occurrence of the word “church” in the book of Acts is at the close of this story, where we read:

**Acts 5:11** So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

This church family is always under attack by Satan, but his attacks are not always from without, they are sometimes from within, which is the case here. The lies of Ananias and Sapphira harmed the church's fellowship, therefore God moved through Peter to arrest the deception in an unforgettable, and even frightening, way.

What wonderful miracles may be done in the near future as God's end time witness to the world through the two witnesses takes place. Look what happened following the couple being struck dead there in Peter's time.

**Acts 5:12-16** And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

The church of God had gone through a very difficult experience as a result of God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira. They had been shaken by that judgment, great fear had seized the whole church, and the church may have wondered if they had lost the blessing of God permanently, or at least for a time. Harmony was broken, trust was destroyed. Would they ever find those great moments of blessings again? Luke reports that they did. In fact it appears that, in this period that followed, God did even more wonders among them than He had done previously.

There had been some miracles earlier, the miracle of the healing of the lame man that led to Peter's sermon in the temple area, for instance, but there does not seem to be very many. Here Luke tells us that God, through the apostles, performed many miraculous signs and wonders and healings among the people. So, although God

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severely punishes those who hypocritically ignore his instructions and commands, He also very abundantly showers blessings down upon those who are diligently convicted to His way of life.

Far more is expected of us as a royal priesthood than of people of the world, nevertheless greater blessings are coming our way in the future, if we are faithful.