

Struck Dead for Lying (Acts 4:32-5:11)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Review of Prior Lessons

- a. Peter and John had miraculously healed a lame man in the temple area, in **Acts 3**.
- b. The two, along with the man healed, were brought before the high priest, members of his family, and the Sanhedrin for questioning, in **Acts 4**.
 - i. Peter spoke boldly, applying the prophecy of **Psalm 118** (designated **Psalm 117** in the LXX) to his opponents: “the *stone you builders rejected* has become the chief cornerstone.”
 - ii. After being warned and threatened, they are released without being punished.
 - iii. They gather with the other apostles, recite part of **Psalm 2** regarding the rulers gathering together against the Lord and against His Christ, and pray for boldness.
- c. Thus far, in **Acts 1-4**, Peter has quoted or alluded to *13 different prophecies* (by my count) regarding the betrayal, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Recall that in **Luke 24:44-46**, Jesus explained that all the things “written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” concerning His passion, death and resurrection had been fulfilled. The prophecies we have discussed thus far in **Acts** include:
 - i. Two prophecies from the Law of Moses:
 1. **Genesis 22** (one prophecy regarding the seed of Abraham that could be from a few places in **Genesis**) and **Deuteronomy 18**.
 - ii. Prophecies from eight of the psalms:
 1. **Psalms 2, 15/16, 68/69, 88/89, 108/109, 109/110, 117/118, and 131/132**.
 - iii. Additional prophecies:
 1. **1 Samuel 2, 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17**.

II. A Unified and Generous Church

- a. Read **Acts 4:32-37**.

- b. The church at this early stage was marked by:
 - i. Extraordinary unity; described as being of “one heart and one soul”.
 - ii. Love for one another: no one among them who lacked; those with possessions sold them and laid proceeds at the feet of the apostles. (**Acts 4:34-35**)
 - iii. Shared all things in common: similar to **Acts 2:41**, where it said in the beginning they had “all things in common”. (**Acts 4:32**)
 - iv. Here we are introduced to Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus, who would become closely associated with Paul and his missions to spread the gospel.
- c. One might say that the church, though facing persecution from the Jewish leaders, is in a ‘honeymoon phase’. As the first days in a marriage are (for some people), everything seems perfect at first.
 - i. Then problems come up.

III. Ananias and Sapphira Struck Dead for Lying

- a. Read **Acts 5:1-11**.
- b. The storyline:
 - i. Ananias joins with those who, having land, sell it and give the proceeds to the apostles to distribute the money to meet needs in the church.
 - 1. However, Ananias secretly decides (with his wife’s knowledge) to hold back some of the proceeds, but pretends he is giving the full amount of the sale to Peter.
 - ii. Peter becomes aware of the deceit (presumably informed by the Spirit) and confronts Ananias directly with his deceit.
 - 1. Ananias drops dead on the spot, and his body is immediately buried by young men.
 - iii. His wife Sapphira arrives three hours later, unaware of what had happened to her husband.
 - iv. Peter confronts her and asks if the amount of money Ananias gave him represented the full price the land was sold for.
 - 1. She lies (trying to cover for her husband and perhaps for herself as well).

2. Peter announces that the men who carried her husband out to his burial will carry her out as well.
- v. Sapphira drops dead immediately and is carried out and buried next to her husband.
- vi. Great fear (of God) grips the church and comes upon all who hear about these things.
- c. There are moral lessons for us in this story.
 - i. **Question:** What were the *sins* of Ananias and Sapphira?
 1. Greed and deceit.
 2. “Testing the Spirit of the Lord” (**Acts 5:9**)
 3. (Perhaps) vowing before God to do something, but then not fulfilling that commitment.
 - a. For more on this last point, see comments by early Christian writer Cyprian in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 543.
 - ii. **Question:** Why such a dramatic, severe punishment?
 1. To teach a lesson to those who saw it and heard about it, *including us*.
 2. I recall reading a surprisingly practical article on how to use short Bible stories to instruct children by John Chrysostom (c. 347-407 AD, bishop of Constantinople). This story of Ananias and Sapphira would be a great one to use in connection with the approach he recommends.
 - a. For those interested in pursuing this further, see Chrysostom, John, *An Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children*. See running discussion and insights in sections 38-56.
 - b. While there are some things in this work that I would not agree with, and some are more pertinent to another time in history, there are some very practical and useful insights in this work, if you are able to “eat the meat and spit out the bones”.
 - c. This work is available in English, for example at the following website:

- i. http://strobertbellarmine.net/books/Chrysostom--Vainglory_and_Children.pdf
- d. The sin of lying and deceit.
 - i. Peter concluded to Ananias: "...Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? *You have not lied to men but to God.*" (**Acts 5:4**, NKJV)
 - ii. This story reminds me of the account of Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, after Naaman is miraculously cured of leprosy.
 - 1. Read **2 Kings 5:14-27** (designated **4 Kingdoms 15:14-27** in the LXX)
 - 2. Elements that these two stories share in common include:
 - a. The main character is a religious person who is associated with a famous person of faith.
 - b. The main character is a religious person yet secretly greedy, which leads to being deceitful.
 - c. When confronted and given an opportunity to tell the truth (as Sapphira was), Gehazi lies and remains in spiritual darkness.
 - d. A dramatic punishment follows for the greed and deceit, providing an unforgettable lesson for all of us!
 - iii. Over several decades as a Christian, I have encountered a few people who, although members of the church I was attending, were religious people who turned out to be liars. (For those who may naively assume that all Christians they encounter will be good and righteous people, please re-read the New Testament!)
 - 1. One example of a religious 'Christian' who turned out to be a compulsive liar was a preacher in the full-time (supported) ministry. The story of him being exposed begins when he was assigned to do expository preaching from the text of **Hebrews 12**.
 - a. He did not know how to do expository preaching and instead reverted to giving a 'canned' topical sermon on a subject he was more familiar with.
 - b. When I called him on that in a private setting, with two other church leaders present, he acted shocked at my criticism. He asserted (convincingly, at the time) that the message was so well received by the church

that 50 people had asked him for a copy of his sermon notes after he gave the message.

- c. In the middle of the night, it struck me that what he told me could not possibly be true. There was no way that 50 members of that church would have requested the notes from that message. It became clear to me that I was dealing with someone who was a very skilled, convincing, pathological liar!
 - d. I asked other church leaders to confront this problem, and they uncovered more and more lies piled on to cover the initial lie. This exposed a very deep spiritual problem in this preacher's life!
2. A second example of a severe liar I encountered in the church was a sister in the fellowship who had been rather close to church leaders. She was chronically overweight, yet insisted she was on a diet and that she had been losing weight.
- a. Somehow I encountered the weight scale she was using, and I noticed there was something strange about it. She had taped another, distorted fake paper dial over the scale's real dial.
 - b. Upon being exposed, it became clear that there was a long pattern of deep deceit. Soon after that, other deceitful things came into the light as well, and she ended up leaving the church shortly thereafter.
- iv. **Question:** Why are there liars in the church? Does it mean that there is something wrong?
- 1. This calls to mind the parable that Jesus told about the wheat and the tares, in **Matthew 13**.
 - a. In that story, the owner of the field sows good seed in his field. However, after that, the enemy sows tares among the wheat (**Matthew 13:24-25**).
 - b. Jesus later explains that the sower in the story represents the Son of Man, the good seeds are sons of the kingdom, and the tares are sons of the devil. He further explains that at the end of the age, the Son of Man will send His angels to "gather out of His kingdom all things that offend and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire." (**Matthew 13:37-43**)

- c. For more information on how early Christians understood and applied this parable, see the audio teaching message by David Bercot, *What the Early Christians Believed about the Kingdom Parables of Jesus*, available through Scroll Publishing.
- 2. The letters of the apostles are full of warnings about corrupt people who will enter the church. In addition to the warnings in **2 Peter** and **Jude**, we also have warnings from the apostle Paul in his speeches and letters.
- 3. So yes, in one sense, something is wrong when we find liars and other wicked people in the church.
 - a. Yet, we also see wicked (including deceptive) people among God's authentic servants in the examples of Gehazi with Elisha, Ananias and Sapphira with Peter, and even Judas with the twelve Apostles and Jesus.
 - b. Therefore, we should not be surprised when we encounter liars and other serious sinners hidden within the church. We have been warned about it!
 - c. We also need to be vigilant and apply church discipline when we uncover these kinds of problems in the church, as Jesus outlined in **Matthew 18** and as Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 5**.
- v. The character of God, and the character of Satan.
 - 1. God always tells the truth. It is *impossible* for God to lie. This is something we can count on, something that is *inherent in the character of God*.
 - a. "Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began..." (**Titus 1:1-2**, NKJV)
 - i. When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that as a virgin, she would conceive and give birth to a son who would inherit the eternal kingdom of David, the angel reinforced his statement by reminding Mary, "for with God nothing will be impossible" (**Luke 1:37**). By that,

the angel meant that God was able to do anything and could perform any miracle.

- ii. However, in another sense, there is something that is “impossible” for God to do: He can *never* lie!
- b. In **Hebrews 6**, the writer reminds us of a promise that God made to Abraham, and encourages us to persevere in view of the hope we have based on God’s promises, stating “it is impossible for God to lie”. (**Hebrews 6:18**)
- c. One of the most important reasons for us to be immersed in the Scriptures every day is because we need the truth in a world filled with lies and deceit.
 - i. The Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and God always tells us the truth. We may not like what it says sometimes, but it is *always the truth*.
 - 1. This is in contrast to Satan and the false teachers, who are happy to tell us what our “itching ears” want to hear. (**2 Timothy 4:3-4**)
 - ii. Any promise God makes, He always keeps. We need to pay attention to who the promise applies to, and not take it out of context. Also, we need to pay attention to any conditions required to obtain the promise. But God always speaks the truth.
 - 1. Don’t be like King Ahab of Israel. When King Jehoshaphat of Judah asked if there was a prophet of the Lord of whom they could inquire before going into battle, Ahab replied:
 - a. “There is one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah by whom we may inquire of the Lord. But for myself I hate him because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but only evil.” (**1 Kings 22:8**)

- iii. **Challenge:** Do you always love the truth, or can you tend to be like King Ahab, and only want to hear comforting 'good news'?
 - 2. Satan is first and foremost *a liar*.
 - a. Read **John 8:37-44**.
 - i. Jesus said He spoke the truth, but they rejected Him.
 - ii. They were not sons of Abraham, but sons of Satan.
 - 1. He is a liar and the father of lies.
 - 2. There is no truth in him.
 - b. God told the unpleasant truth to Adam. Eating the fruit of the tree would lead to his death. (**Genesis 2:16-17**)
 - c. In contrast, Satan is introduced as telling lies to Eve. He said that she would *not die* if she ate of the forbidden fruit; instead, she would become "like God". Satan implied that God had lied to Adam. (**Genesis 3:4-5**)
 - i. Satan tells Eve what she wants to hear. The fruit looks appealing to eat.
 - vi. In the spiritual battle, we must be protected with the *belt of truth*.
 - 1. "Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness...." (**Ephesians 6:14**, NKJV)
 - 2. Read **Ephesians 4:17-27** (similar to **Colossians 3:5-10**).
 - a. Put away lying.
 - b. Speak the truth to one another.
 - 3. Read **Zechariah 8:14-17**, which Paul is quoting in the preceding passage from **Ephesians 4**, regarding the sin of lying.
 - a. God hates falsehood. He wants His people to put away falsehood, and to speak the truth to one another.
 - vii. **Question:** When is it hardest for you to tell the truth?

1. Fear of consequences. (Often, this comes from fearing man more than fear of God.)
 - a. Jesus warned his disciples that they should not be afraid of men, but instead should fear God.
 - i. “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”
(**Matthew 10:28**, NKJV)
 - b. Peter, in denying Jesus three times, feared for his life.
 - c. Example: story of my daughter Julia, at the age of about 2 years, writing on the wall of our home.
 - i. She was afraid of punishment when confronted and asked if she was the one who had written in crayon on the wall. She at first blamed her brother (who at the time was an infant only a couple of months old, who could not possibly have done it).
 - ii. It is very important to train our children to be honest and to tell the truth and admit it when they have done something wrong.
 - iii. Children who grow up in homes where lying is seen or encouraged, or who are living in terror of unstable parental over-reaction, are most prone to revert to lying.
2. Tempted to lie when we are suddenly (and unexpectedly) put on the spot.
 - a. Example: In a work situation recently, I was asked, “Did you check the work you did on this assignment against X?”
 - i. (I told the truth that I had not done the thing that was asked, but for an instant had a fleeting temptation to lie or in some way misrepresent the truth in order to make myself look better.)
3. Tempted to lie when there is a lot at stake.
 - a. A story I heard from a preacher long ago.
 - b. Person No. 1: Would you lie for \$1M?

- c. Response from Person No. 2: For \$1 million? Sure!
 - d. Person No. 1: Would you lie for 10 cents?
 - e. Person No. 2: (*Indignantly*) What kind of person do you think I am?
 - f. Person No. 1: Well, we have already established that. *Now we are just dickering over the price!*
- 4. An honest person always stands for the truth, no matter what. He or she cannot be bought nor sold at any price.
 - a. In our work and professional settings, that applies to things like timesheets, taxes, financial transactions, and work commitments.
 - b. We cannot misrepresent, exaggerate, twist or distort the truth in any way.
 - c. We cannot bend the truth (lie) even in cases where we believe that doing so might help advance what we consider to be a very important, greater 'noble objective' (such as evangelizing the lost or helping the poor).
 - d. This kind of commitment to a life of always telling the truth *is hard!*
- viii. The church needs ongoing, practical preaching and teaching that addresses specific sins (such as lying) if we are to remain spiritually strong and healthy.
 - 1. As a garden needs to be weeded.
 - 2. Recently, visiting a friend in PA, the drain from the kitchen sink to the septic tank in their yard was clogged with grease. After several attempts with a mechanical plumber's 'snake' and even grease-eating chemicals, it was still plugged.
 - 3. The drain had to be flushed out with a high-pressure water line attached to a power washer, in order to blow out all the accumulated grease and clear the line.
 - 4. Similarly, strong teaching on specific sins from time to time can help us to clean out the sins that may have accumulated (like grease) in our own lives.

- ix. **Challenge:** Take inventory, repent, and tell the truth always. Love the truth, even when it hurts.
 - 1. “Buy the truth, and do not sell it, Also wisdom and instruction and understanding.” (**Proverbs 23:23**, NKJV)
 - 2. “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’” (**John 8:31-32**, NKJV)
- e. Another possible lesson in this story (referenced by one early Christian writer): Peter’s special role in ‘binding and loosing’ in the earliest days of the church.
 - i. Tertullian, an early Christian writer from Carthage, North Africa, mentioned this story regarding the role of Peter in the early church, in fulfillment of what Jesus had said to Peter in **Matthew 16**.
 - ii. Jesus had told Peter: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (**Matthew 16:18-19**, NKJV)
 - iii. Tertullian remarked that Peter’s “binding and loosing” was demonstrated by:
 - 1. Peter was the one who preached the message of salvation, the way to be loosed from our sins, in **Acts 2**.
 - 2. Peter was the one who opened the kingdom up to Gentiles in **Acts 10**, as he then explained at the Council of Jerusalem in **Acts 15**.
 - 3. From Tertullian, writing c. 212 AD in *On Modesty*:
 - a. “(Peter) himself, therefore, was the first to unbar, in Christ’s baptism, the entrance to the heavenly kingdom, in which (kingdom) are “loosed” the sins that were beforetime ‘bound;’ and those which have not been ‘loosed’ are ‘bound,’ in accordance with true salvation (**Acts 2**);
 - b. “and Ananias he ‘bound’ with the bond of death (**Acts 5**), and the weak in his feet he ‘absolved’ from his defect of health (**Acts 3**). Moreover, in that dispute

about the observance or non-observance of the Law, Peter was the first of all to be endued with the Spirit, and, after making preface touching the calling of the nations, to say, 'And now why are you tempting the Lord, concerning the imposition upon the brethren of a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to support? But however, through the grace of Jesus we believe that we shall be saved in the same way as they.' (**Acts 15:7-11**) This sentence both 'loosed' those parts of the law which were abandoned, and 'bound' those which were reserved."

- c. (Source: Tertullian, *On Modesty*, chapter 21; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 99)
- f. Important things to learn about the Holy Spirit from this account of the story of Ananias and Sapphira, from **Acts 5** include:
 - i. There are many mentions of the Holy Spirit we have seen thus far in the first four chapters of **Acts**.
 - ii. Things we have learned about the Spirit thus far include:
 1. Jesus gave commands to the apostles "*through the Holy Spirit*" (**Acts 1:2**).
 2. The apostles were *baptized in the Holy Spirit* when the Spirit came down upon them on the day of Pentecost.
 3. Peter said that the Holy Spirit spoke through the mouth of David in the prophecies in the psalms regarding Judas. (**Acts 1:16-20**)
 4. When the people repented and were baptized, they were promised they would *receive the Holy Spirit*. (**Acts 2:38**)
 - iii. Read **Acts 5:3-4**, and **5:9**
 1. The divinity of the Holy Spirit.
 - a. "But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...? ...*You have not lied to men but to God.*'" (from **Acts 5:3-4**, NKJV)
 - b. Peter says here that lying to the *Holy Spirit* is lying to *God*.
 - c. The Holy Spirit, therefore, is divine (here referred to as 'God'; similar to how the Father and the Son also

are referred to as 'God' in other places in the Scriptures).

2. The Spirit has a *personality* (in other words, is not just a *force*). A person can *lie to* the Spirit and can *test* the Spirit in a sinful way. (**Acts 5:9**)
- iv. We also can see the divinity of the Holy Spirit reflected in statements found elsewhere in Scripture.
 1. Read **1 Corinthians 6:18-20**.
 - a. Our bodies are referred to as *temples of the Holy Spirit*.
 2. Read **2 Corinthians 6:14-16**.
 - a. Here our bodies are referred to as *temples of the living God*.
 - b. God said, "I will dwell in them."
 - c. I believe that this reference to God stating He would "dwell in" people in the future may be based on what it says in **Ezekiel 36:26-27, 37:1-6** and **37:14**.
 - i. "I shall put my Spirit within you..." (**Ezekiel 36:27**)
 - ii. "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live... then you will know that I am the Lord." (**Ezekiel 37:14**)
- g. The first mention of Satan in the book of **Acts** is in this passage.
 - i. "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?'" (**Acts 5:3, NKJV**)
 - ii. Let us remember the importance of studying the strategies and tactics of our enemy.
 - iii. "He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil." (**1 John 3:8, NKJV**)
- h. Fear of God is still a good thing.
 - i. It can keep us from sin. (**Deuteronomy 5:29**)

- ii. "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king."
(**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)