

Acts 4:32-5:11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 4 verse 32 to chapter 5 verse 11. Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds, and brought only a part of it, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But Peter said, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?

[1 : 11] And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man, but to God. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last, and great fear came upon all who heard of it.

The young men rose and wrapped him up, and carried him out, and buried him. After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?

And she said, Yes, for so much. But Peter said to her, How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.

Immediately she fell down at his feet, and breathed to last. When the young men came in, they found her dead, and they carried her out, and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.

In Acts chapter 4 and 5, we read another episode in the life of the early church in Jerusalem. We learn more of the behaviour of the early church in providing for those with need, and also of the sin and the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira.

[2 : 24] What stands out in the early church in Jerusalem is the intensity of the unity of the community. They are of one heart and one soul. They don't even treat their possessions as their own, but hold things in common.

As we read further on, it seems clear that they were not required to donate their possessions to become part of the church. Rather, this was something that they voluntarily did. In some cases, it would involve selling and giving the proceeds.

In other cases, it would mean putting things at the disposal of the church. All of this is a result of the fact that they feel so bound up with each other, being one heart and one soul, that they don't withhold anything from each other.

The benefit of the other is the benefit of oneself. In this practice, we can also see something of the practical import of the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. If you love your neighbour as yourself, you will not withhold from him and his need what you would not withhold from yourself.

His good is not set over against or detached from your good. As he rejoices, you rejoice. As he mourns, you mourn. The practice here might relate to what Roman Catholics have called the universal destination of goods, the fact that God has given the world to all humanity in common.

[3 : 35] Private property is appropriate and a form of stewardship, but it does not ultimately undermine the fact that God intended the creation for all of his creatures. This can also be related to the church's spiritual ministry.

The one united gift of the Holy Spirit has been given to the entire church at Pentecost. However, that one gift is ministered in a great many different ways through the stewardship of the spiritual gifts that have been given to each one of us as individual members of the body of Christ.

In the same way, we have all been given some stewardship in the common gift of the one creation that God has given to all of his creatures, and we will give an account of our stewardship, whether more or less has been given into our charge.

We will have to answer for whether we have served others and glorify God with what he has given us, or whether we have used it merely for our own selfish gain. Having a personal stewardship in the form of private property is a very good thing.

It enables us both to enter into a fuller enjoyment for ourselves, a greater sense of God's gift as it relates to us, and also to serve others and to bless others with what has been committed to our charge.

[4 : 43] In Acts chapter 4 and 5, we have a sense of both aspects of this. It is important that people love their neighbour as themselves with their expression of the gifts that God has given to them.

On the other hand, it is important that these things are not just taken from people. People can actually express these things as a true gift of themselves. In this way, God makes us participants in his giving process, as we give to others what God has given into our stewardship, we share in God's own generous giving.

No one requires Ananias or Sapphira or Barnabas to sell their property. They do it of their own free will. But as they act freely in this sort of way, they're expressing something about the way the world really ought to be, a world where the rich do not get rich on the back of the poor, but where the needs of all people are met, and every single person knows something of the goodness and the grace of God in his generous giving.

This was the vision set forth in the Old Testament, and in the practice of the early church, we should see something of a restored Israel. Thinking back to chapter 1 of the book, we should recall the way that the numbers of people associated with the church serve to evoke the memory of Israel and the idea of the restoration of Israel.

This is the core of a restored Israel, a sign of what Israel more generally could receive if they accepted the Messiah Jesus, and had the times of refreshing from God come upon them.

[6 : 06] This description of what Israel really ought to be can be found in places such as Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 1 to 11. At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release, and this is the manner of the release.

Every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbour. He shall not exact it of his neighbour, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it, but whatever of yours is with your brother, your hand shall release.

But there will be no poor among you, for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess. If only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.

For the Lord your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.

If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

[7 : 14] Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart, and you say, The seventh year, the year of release is near. And your eye looked grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cried to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin.

You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land.

Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land. The meeting of all the needs of the poor in the community then would have been a sign of God's presence within the community, and a sign of the community's faithfulness that was fulfilling the purpose of the law.

Laying money at the apostles' feet for them to distribute among the community was also a way of devoting things to the Lord. Back in Exodus, the people donated to the building of the tabernacle voluntary gifts that were brought forward that expressed the people's heart in the very materials of the building.

Now God is building a new building, and these voluntary gifts are part of what will build it up, a building made of people. They are also a new family, as families hold things in common.

[8 : 27] People do have their private property, but it is not held over against other people as something that will not be shared. If there is ever any need, the property of an individual person within the family will be shared with the others.

Individuals like Mary, the mother of Mark, may continue to have large houses in Jerusalem, but they don't treat those houses as if they were purely their own to use as they wanted. Rather, they want to use them for the benefit and the building up of God's people.

At this point, we are introduced to a character who provides an instance of this practice, an exemplary character called Barnabas. As Luke does elsewhere, he introduces this character as a minor one first, before he will become a major one later on in the story.

He does the same with the character of Saul a few chapters later. Joseph, called Barnabas, is a Jew, a Levite, from Cyprus. Cyprus would become a key location later on in the story.

In chapter 11, men of Cyprus spoke to the Hellness in Antioch, which then became a base for the Gentile mission. One of the prophets or teachers mentioned of the church in Antioch in chapter 13, verse 1, is Barnabas.

[9 : 31] It seems likely that he is one of the men who went from Cyprus at that point in chapter 11. selling property to give to the needs of the church was a means of laying up treasure in heaven.

The early Jerusalem church was taking properties that would soon be quite depreciated in value after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, selling them and using them for something that would endure for eternity.

They were also taking an approach to their money and possessions that was truly remarkable. The love of money has destroyed many unwary souls, and we'll see in the example of Ananias and Sapphira two such examples.

Later on, Simon the sorcerer will try and buy the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter and will be judged as a result. The selling of fields and possessions and using of the proceeds to build up the body of Christ is exactly the opposite of what Judas, who by love of money had been led to betray his master, had done back in chapter 1.

Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out, and it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, field of blood.

[10 : 42] Judas has sold his master's body, taken the money which had then been thrown at the feet of those who had taken his life, and then that money was used to buy a field. This is the exact opposite of the actions of Barnabas and others, who are taking the money of fields that they have sold to build up the body that Judas sold to be crucified.

Barnabas is named Joseph. Barnabas may be a nickname playing upon the meaning son of prophet. Here it's connected with the meaning son of encouragement. Barnabas, in his faithfulness, is juxtaposed with the characters of Ananias and Sapphira in the chapter that follows.

Luke often has husband-wife or male-female pairings, and Ananias and Sapphira are a negative example of one of these. At first, Ananias and Sapphira's action looks very similar to that of Barnabas.

They sell a piece of property with the intention of laying the money at the apostles' feet. However, they only intend to lay part of the money. They secretly withhold some of the money for themselves.

It is important to consider such gifts against the backdrop of the Old Testament commandments concerning devoted things and vows. In Leviticus chapter 27, there is extensive treatment of devoted things.

[11 : 53] In verse 28, for instance, What Ananias and Sapphira are doing then is devoting something, the proceeds of the item that they have sold, to the Lord, and then withholding some of that for themselves.

But having devoted that to the Lord, they are both lying to the Lord, and they are stealing from the Lord. Both of those things are very serious offences. The vow aspect of this can be seen in places like Deuteronomy chapter 26, verses 13 to 14, which, although it speaks about the tithe of the third year, can give us a sense of the vow character of devoting something to the Lord.

Then you shall say before the Lord your God, I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover, I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all your commandment that you have commanded me.

I have not transgressed any of your commandments, nor have I forgotten them. I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead.

[13:16] Perhaps we should here recall Satan entering into Judas' heart back in the Gospels when he betrayed Christ. Peter goes on to give a clearer sense of where the offence lay. It was not in the fact that the possessions were demanded by the Lord.

It was only when he devoted it to the Lord, lying to the Lord, and stealing from the Lord, that the judgment came upon him. Peter makes clear he has lied not to man, but to God.

We might connect this with the judgment upon the rebels of Korah. There are also similarities with the sin of Rechab and Ba'anah, presenting the head of Ish-bosheth to David, thinking that they will be approved when they are actually put to death for their actions and the young men take them out and bury them.

This occurs just after the worship of the tabernacle has been established. They are killed by the Lord, and fear comes upon the people. The same sort of thing happens here. After judgment fell upon Ananias, three hours later, Sapphira came.

The result of all of this is that a godly fear falls upon the church and the people round about. They can see that God's presence is among the disciples, and they have a clearer sense. of the seriousness of sin.

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