

# Episode-217

## Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Today Jeff, Kevin, and I are continuing our Difficult Passages in the Bible series. After several episodes on the Old Testament, we're going to jump into the New Testament today. So Jeff, Kevin, welcome back. Something that we've seen over and over again is if an interpretation seems ridiculous, if someone is presenting a passage and explaining it a certain way, it's like, wow, that really doesn't make sense, or that sounds absurd, or that says something of God that's not true, maybe that's a really good reason to reevaluate the interpretation. I think that applies somewhat to today. I mean, ultimately, the truth of this passage, of what's going on here, the core truth is that yes, God struck down a couple for lying, but as we're going to discuss, there's a lot more going on in this passage than just two people lying about something they did.

## Shea Houdmann

So if you haven't guessed already, we're going to be in Acts chapter 5 today, the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Let me go ahead and read Acts chapter 5, verses 1 to 11. But a man named Ananias and 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? 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 man rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

## Shea Houdmann

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 her last. When the young man came in and 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.

## **Shea Houdmann**

So here's the story in Acts chapter 5 of Ananias and Sapphira, selling some property, donating a portion of the money to the church. The issue was, they claimed that they had given all of it. We sold the property for this much money, we're giving all of it to the church. And when you read the end of Acts chapter 4, it talks about the church had all things in common, that people were selling their property and giving it all to the church. So it seems like Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be identified among those who were super sacrificially giving everything they had to support the early work of the church. They were lying about it. But let's dive into a little bit more of what's going on here. So Jeff, what are some of the insights that you bumped into as you dug into this passage?

## **Jeff Laird**

This is one that's so short, but it covers a lot of different topics. There's things that get drawn into this because of the background. Questions like, is God angry because they're not giving enough money? Is God expecting them to give everything that they have under all circumstances? Is Peter the one who is pointing his finger and making people drop dead? Why would God do something like this for being so extreme? So there's a lot of things in here that kind of pull us in different directions.

## **Jeff Laird**

One of the things you find out when you really take a step back, you understand the context of where it's coming from, is the idea that God is just spitefully killing people because they didn't give enough money doesn't make sense. What does make sense is this idea that you've got people who are pretending to be better than they are. And one of the things that Jesus just constantly went after the Pharisees about was hypocrisy. You do things so that people will think well of you, but in reality, you're not doing the right things. Even the things that you do that are good are actually bad because you're doing them for those reasons.

## **Jeff Laird**

So I think as the early church is being established, you see God sending this very clear signal that everything is going great. And then two people decide they're going to sort of pull a pharisaical thing and they're going to pretend to be something that they're not. And Peter even makes a comment in there where he says, nobody was expecting you to do anything in particular. You could have done what you wanted. So the sin is not the money, it's that they want to pretend to be something that they aren't. And at that phase, God needed to send a signal. And there's other times in scripture where we see parallels to that. But I know that the background, what comes up before this,

really helps to set the stage for that. So I think that's a good thing for us to explore.

### **Kevin Stone**

Yeah, things were going great in the early church. You go back to Acts chapter 4. It was just a great time. In fact, Acts 4 and verse 33 says that with great power, the apostles continue to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. So there's great power being manifest in the early church. There's great grace. That same verse and then the next verse, verse 34, says God's grace was so powerfully at work in them that there were no needy persons among them. They had all things in common they were sharing. And so there's great generosity as a part of this great grace that they're receiving from God.

### **Kevin Stone**

There's great growth. Chapter 4 and verse 4 says that many who heard the message believed, the number of men who believed grew to about 5,000 people. So just phenomenal growth, explosive growth in the early church.

### **Kevin Stone**

And then there's great unity. As has been mentioned in verse 32 of chapter 4, all believers were one in heart and mind. And so with all of these good things going on, we read about in chapter 5, how does that chapter start? It starts with the word but. I think the NIV says now, but a lot of the other translations say but. But there was this guy named Ananias. And a shadow is cast over all these great things that are happening in the church because now they're facing great danger. And Satan has been doing the, he's been trying to oppress the church from without. The apostles are already being dragged before the Sanhedrin and things. But now Satan is trying a new tactic. He's coming inside the church. Satan has weaseled his way in. He's wormed his way in and he's got his man on the inside and his wife.

### **Kevin Stone**

And Peter actually mentions to Ananias that Satan has filled his heart to do this. He asks Ananias, why has Satan done this? He's filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. And so this is obviously an attack from the inside by Satan, who is trying to establish a beachhead in the early church. And thankfully, God just blows this up right away. He does not allow this beachhead to be established, does not allow this sin to continue.

### **Kevin Stone**

Was the sin of hypocrisy, it was the sin of pride. It was Ananias and Sapphira wanting to, pretending to be something that they weren't. They were pursuing the plaudits of men. They were grasping for recognition. If we put on a show like we are, these big donors in the church, we're going to have all these

accolades given to us. And it was all fake. They were lying about it. And they weren't robbing God of money. They were robbing God of glory. They were trying to seek glory for themselves. God said, no, not going to happen. This is not how we're going to start off with founding the church.

### **Kevin Stone**

George MacDonald, Scottish pastor and writer of yesteryear, said this, half of the misery in the world comes from trying to look instead of trying to be what one is not. Trying to look like what you're not instead of actually trying to be what you should be. And I think those are wise words from Pastor MacDonald.

### **Shea Houdmann**

I think it's a great point in that the hypocrisy of it and wanting to make yourself look good. So Ananias and Sapphira had decided they sold property and they donated seemingly a significant portion of it, at least, to the church. That is an amazing thing to do. If I were to have some property and sell it and decide to donate it to my church, I'm under no obligation to do that. That is in itself a generous thing to do.

### **Shea Houdmann**

But it's the whole doing a good thing for the wrong reason. Ananias and Sapphira were doing it so that they would be recognized, so that people would just, oh, they're so amazing that they did this, so that they would be included among the people who were genuinely selling the property and giving all of it to the church. They were lying. And I think as we talked about this passage, it's not just about lying, but lying is a major factor. Peter specifically says, you've lied to the Holy Spirit. And then later, what is also a key passage for proving the divinity of the Holy Spirit, a few verses later he says, you have not lied to men, you've lied to God, identifying the Holy Spirit as God. Lying to the Holy Spirit is a serious matter.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So yes, Ananias and Sapphira's primary sin was lying, but behind it was a false motivation, was a deceiving or a selfish reason, was lying to the Holy Spirit, was being a hypocrite. So for so many things, God judged this sin very harshly, we would say. I mean, there's not a whole lot of times where you see someone being essentially put to death for this sin. I mean, the Old Testament, the death penalty was not the appropriate penalty for lying. It was for some other things, not for lying, not for giving false testimony. But the story of what's actually happening here, that God is making a statement about what he wants the church to be about and what he doesn't want it to be about, I think that's very important for us to look at. Far more going on in this passage than just a couple lying about how much of their proceeds from a property sale they gave to the church.

### **Jeff Laird**

And that it's extreme is a little bit part of the point. Sometimes even in modern government or judicial things, you'll hear somebody say, I'm going to make an example out of somebody. We know that probably most of the times that people commit certain sorts of crimes, very few people hear about the eventual punishment that comes down for that. That's just the nature of the way it goes. So sometimes when you have a sort of a high profile crime that occurs, a defense attorney will warn the person who's getting up for sentencing, they just say, you're going to get slammed because they're going to make an example out of you. They're going to want to make sure since everybody's watching this, that they know exactly what could happen if you do it. So Ananias and Sapphira, you have a very high profile moment where God is saying, this was a big deal and I'm not going to let that moment get ruined by this sort of sin.

### **Jeff Laird**

We see parallels to that in the Old Testament. There's a passage in Joshua chapter 6 and 7 where the people walk around Jericho according to God's instructions, the walls come down, the people are told, don't keep any stuff. It all either has to be completely destroyed or certain things go into the temple and that's it, just period. And one person sees some stuff that he likes and decides to take it back and hide it. And the next battle the Israelites go out to does not go well. And when Joshua doesn't understand, God says, it's because you guys didn't listen. So they go through a process and when they finally find out the person who hid the stuff, he said, yeah, I did. I kept this stuff and I buried it in my yard. And he's put to death along with his entire family. Which again is really rough, but it's the same idea. This was one of the first times where they had instituted this conquest of the promised land and God is saying, I'm not kidding when I tell you that this is the way it's supposed to be.

### **Jeff Laird**

And God also did the same thing to Aaron's sons going back a little bit further where you have Nadab and Abihu who, when they're establishing the right way to worship, we don't know exactly what happened. It just says that they offered strange fire. They did something that they weren't supposed to. And that was it. God killed them for that. The fire came out and destroyed them. And that was also, that's a severe thing, but there's reasons for it. It's not just God randomly doing it for no reason. It's not like they were just in the middle of nowhere. It was because of the specific circumstances that are happening. So the whole making an example thing, I think is part of what we have to look at when we read this passage.

### **Kevin Stone**

And I think that's significant. Those two Old Testament examples that you give, Jeff, Nadab and Abihu, their judgment came at the very beginning of the tabernacle worship. Tabernacle was a brand new thing and here they were disobeying God's instructions and God deals with it swiftly and severely.

### **Kevin Stone**

Same thing we see with the time of Achan. It's a brand new beginning for the people of God. As they've just come into the promised land and as they're laying the foundation there for the conquest, God says, I'm not going to tolerate this type of disobedience. And he makes an example of Achan and his family right there.

### **Kevin Stone**

And then in Acts chapter 5, we have the start of the church, another new beginning for God's people. And again, likewise, God says, I'm not going to be tolerating this type of hypocrisy and pride. 1 Timothy 3 verse 15 says that the church is the foundation, the pillar and ground of the truth. And so we can't have lies down there. We can't have lies being poured into the foundation of the church. It is to be the pillar of the truth. And so I think God deals with it very swiftly and severely as this is a new beginning for God's people.

### **Shea Houdmann**

I think the point that both of you raised about God setting an example or making an example out of them, if you read verse 11 of chapter 5 in Acts, in great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. So mission accomplished. God got people's attention with this. It's like, wow, our attitude, our hypocrisy and lack thereof, our motivations, why we're doing things, how we're doing things. This is serious stuff. God expects us to operate in a manner that honors Christ, that follows God's instructions, that doesn't seek to deceive the apostles, His appointed leaders of the church. This is a big deal. We need to operate the way that God wants us to.

### **Shea Houdmann**

And then also the cleansing.

God would not allow something impure, unclean, something false, something a lie to be a part of the foundation of His church. And He's cleaning house. He's making very clear what His expectations are, especially at the very beginning of what we talked about, a new thing that He's doing.

### **Jeff Laird**

When we take a look at everything that's going on, there's some things. I don't want to say it's easy to come to a conclusion, but we can kind of grasp the idea of being made an example of and so on and so forth. But there's still other questions that come up in the passage that sort of stick out there.

One is the whole idea of the giving. As Kevin was saying in chapter four, you have people who are being very generous and they are not necessarily possessing everything in common, but they're holding everything in common. Everything I have is ready to be used for whatever it's needed for the entire church family.

### **Jeff Laird**

And then some people were going and selling land and giving the money. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look as good as Barnabas, who had just done something like that. And then they lied about it. But Peter makes a point of saying, when you sold it, it was yours. Before you sold it, it was yours. You didn't have to do anything. So that I think should dispel the idea that what God's expectation was, is that they take everything that they have and give it. And that's why he was coming after them. That's something that we kind of get stuck on.

### **Jeff Laird**

There's the question of Peter, but Peter doesn't seem to be giving a command. When he talks to Sapphira, he seems to be anticipating probably through the Holy Spirit that she's going to have the same result that the husband did. But he doesn't point his finger at her and say, whatever the word is from Harry Potter, I'm not even going to try because they'll probably slap me with a copyright thing. He doesn't do that. He just says, this is what happened and it's probably going to end. Yep, there it goes. And the same thing happens to her.

### **Jeff Laird**

Probably the thing that for me personally, I struggle with in this passage is not necessarily the passage itself, but just in a very honest sense, I wouldn't feel comfortable if this was something God did all the time. Because if God was in the habit of striking people dead, just because they were a little bit dishonest or a little bit hypocritical, I would be dust a long time ago. So I don't necessarily want to subject myself to that level of judgment. However, I wonder sometimes, I struggle sometimes at thinking about how many times we have seen people who have used the name of Christ as a lever or an excuse or a cover or a costume to do truly evil things. They have said and done bad things, either abuse and money and things like that. And that hasn't been the response. And that's not me saying that God should have done that in those circumstances. It's just me saying, I can get the reasons why Ananias and Sapphira got it. That makes perfect sense to me. But then I also look at some of these other situations and I shake my head and I say, Lord, why not there? Why not at that moment? So this is one of those that kind of pulls us in

different directions, and some of them are more about what is God doing in the world today that parallels this? And maybe he's not.

### **Kevin Stone**

Yeah. Like many things in the book of Acts, this particular event is not normative. And aren't you glad that it's not? Because can you imagine if God did this in today's church? If every time somebody played the hypocrite, you know, God dealt with it swiftly and severely. Every time somebody told a lie in the church, you know, that's it. Praise the Lord for his patience and his grace with us.

### **Kevin Stone**

But we do need to take this warning passage very seriously because God takes hypocrisy seriously. Can you imagine what would have happened, though, if God had not stepped in, if God had not given Peter the discernment to see through the lie and to know the truth? Ananias and Sapphira would have given this gift. Everybody would have been lauding them for, you know, giving 100%. What sacrifice, what great donors they are. And they would have been soaking it in. They'd just been eating all of this up, all of this attention, and they probably would have gone on to become very influential people in the early church. They would have had some type of influence. One of the things God is saying here is that I don't need to have liars in influential places in the church. And so, God takes care of it right then and there.

### **Kevin Stone**

I think another thing that God might be doing is he's helping to show the transition that we have in the book of Acts between the old covenant and the new covenant. Because in all of this, the judgment is not happening on temple grounds. The judge in this matter is not the high priest. It is Peter in the assembly of believers. And so, the temple of Jerusalem does not factor into this at all. The Levitical priesthood is not mentioned. The old way of doing things under the old covenant has been fulfilled. And this is the start of a new covenant. And now we have God working in and through the church. And his chosen spokesman in this story is Peter. And I think that's part of the stuff that's going on here as well, is God is transitioning between the old covenant and the new covenant. It is a different dispensation.

### **Jeff Laird**

And that idea that they could have become somewhat influential in the church, that's part of where I look at it and shake my head and say, Lord, you know, and I don't, of how some things happen today. But that also raises that question of were Ananias and Sapphira actually believers? Were they truly born again in that moment? And really, there's nothing in, I don't want to say there's nothing in there to make us suspect that they weren't. Blatant



hypocrisy is a reason to think maybe, but Christian believers are perfectly capable of lying and being hypocrites and saying things like that. So, there's nothing in the passage that makes it seem like these were obviously false believers. So, when you say that they probably would have gone on to be influential and important people in the early church, that would make sense. They probably would have gone on to do good things in good ways. We think, we hope, or they might have gone on to be just as hypocritical and self-centered and corrupt, and they would have, you know, poisoned the early church in the way it was. But in terms of whether or not they were actually believers or not, there's really nothing there to make us think that they weren't. We just know that they were not the believers that God wanted in the early church and in that time.

### **Shea Houdmann**

I think that's an excellent point. And there's 11 verses that talk about Ananias and Sapphira. We have no idea what was going on behind the scenes. We have no idea of all the things that were in the earth. We don't even know for sure. Jeff, as you were just saying, were Ananias and Sapphira, were they believers or were they unbelievers? That's the fact that Satan had filled Ananias' heart to do this. I mean, that's definitely not a good thing. So, what was their true motivation? Were they false teachers hoping to buy this to gain influence in the church? As Kevin hinted at, there's so many what-ifs.

### **Shea Houdmann**

If it sounds like, I don't know that there's enough in this passage to warrant God striking them dead, I mean, that's not what I'm saying.

If that's your mindset, well, just understand that God knows everything that's going on. God knows what was in the hearts. God knows what the future would be with the early church with Ananias and Sapphira still in it. We can't base our interpretation on what-ifs or what's between the lines or what's behind the scenes, but we can also recognize that there's more going on than just we can find in these 11 verses. I think that's important for us to remember as well.

### **Shea Houdmann**

And then what I love, later in the book of Acts, there's another person named Ananias, and he was the man that God called to go minister to Saul, who had just become a believer and later became the Apostle Paul. When no one else would, this Ananias had the courage to go and minister and basically reiterate the gospel to him, pray with him, resulting in the Apostle Paul, who wrote nearly half the books of the New Testament. So, in a sense, the name Ananias is redeemed later in the book of Acts. I kind of like the—Kevin, you

like sort of the juxtaposition between the two Ananiases. I think that's a beautiful story in and of itself. So, yeah.

**Jeff Laird**

See, if you're going to use the big words, you got to mispronounce it so that Kevin cannot correct you and it can get published on the podcast and people can bust your chops about it later. But I don't know anything about that.

**Shea Houdmann**

Yes, so Kevin can get a little itchy for me mispronouncing, misusing impressive sounding words. But no.

**Kevin Stone**

I have my own words that I like to mispronounce, so.

**Shea Houdmann**

Yeah, exactly. So, here, Acts chapter 5, the story of Ananias and Sapphira. It's a difficult passage to understand in that, like we've talked about, this is not a normal thing, even in Scripture, for God to enact such severe judgment for something like this. But ultimately, we trust God is good, God is just, and we've been repeating that again and again as we've gone through this, that even if we don't understand why He did something a certain way, that should not cause us to trust whether He is just and right in the decision that He made. That's true here with Ananias and Sapphira, and that's true in all the difficult passages that God is God, everything He does is true and right and holy, including what He did here.

**Shea Houdmann**

So, whether there's enough behind-the-scenes between the lines going on that makes us more understandable or not, God had a reason for what He did here with Ananias and Sapphira. And it was to set an example, to purify the local church, to serve as a warning, to remove false prophets from the church, to so many different things. God had His reasons, and we can trust Him because He is always right in what He does.

**Shea Houdmann**

This has been the Got Questions podcast on why did God strike Ananias and Sapphira dead for what they did in Acts chapter 5. I hope our conversation has been helpful to you, I hope you understand this passage a little better. And as always, if you have any questions about this episode or this passage, you can ask us at [gotquestions.org](http://gotquestions.org). So, Got Questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.