

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Lord God, our Father, may we take hold of the treasury of life that You have given us with joy, purpose, love and wisdom. Save us from becoming trapped by the sin and evil that creeps up on us unawares, and alert us to our vulnerability. May we always reject the works of the enemy, and may we never fail to accept Your many great gifts; in the name of Jesus we pray; AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: FARMING

**1. For yourself**

*Pray in thanksgiving for the food you eat; let your thanks be specific and let your heart be blessed as you think of all that you enjoy in your food and drink*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray in thanksgiving for the meals you share with your family and friends.*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Praise God for the meals you share within the family of the church, remembering that the Lord's Supper is essentially a meal*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Use the internet to explore any current issues in the world of farming, and pray about these.*

### Meditation

Lord God, Holy Father, Almighty Saviour and Lord;  
Embrace us, empower us, enrich us, inspire us!

Our lives have no meaning without the power of Your Name;  
Energising, controlling, motivating, guiding.

Our spirits long to feed on the nourishment of the Father;  
Creatively, lovingly, artistically, scientifically.

Our souls crave the love and affection of our Redeemer;  
Cherishing, cleansing, nurturing, enlivening.

Our bodies cry out for the healing touch of our Saviour;  
Restoring, remaking, reviving, rebuilding.

Our minds thrive on the challenge of living for Your Word;  
Intellectually, practically, logically, thoughtfully.

Halleluiah! For this is the abundant love of our God;  
For now, and forever, and 'till the end of time!

---

## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Acts 5: 1-11

<sup>1</sup> Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife's full knowledge he kept part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and placed it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said,

'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the proceeds of the sale? <sup>4</sup> Was it not yours before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money yours to do with as you wished? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God!'

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down dead; and great fear gripped everyone who heard of it. <sup>6</sup> Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> After about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her,

'Tell me, is this the price you obtained for the land?'

She replied,

'Yes, that is the price.'

<sup>9</sup> So Peter said to her,

'How could you agree to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.'

<sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down dead at his feet. Then the young men came, they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

<sup>11</sup> Great fear gripped the whole church and everyone who heard about these events.

## Review

***This is surely the most chilling New Testament story. Two people in the early church decide to bend what it means to 'share everything', and pay the ultimate price. Trying to get to grips with the whole event has been taxing, ever since it happened.***

Without a doubt, the last verse of our reading remains true; all who hear or read this story are gripped with fear. There is no escaping the implications of this passage of Scripture; the story of Ananias and Sapphira warns us that those who hold back what is promised to God bring a terrible curse on our heads.

We can try and make this passage more palatable, perhaps by thinking of it as a parable, warning us not to hold anything back from the Lord. When put like this, the message remains powerful but somehow softened. But if we try to mitigate the message of the story, then we do a disservice to ourselves and Scripture. Two people died that day; it is an awful story, and to deal with it we face one of two options. Either we get angry with God because people died, or we dig deeper in our study to try and understand why. The first route opens us up to the same demonic authorities that filled the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira (5:3), but the second means walking a path of faith that takes us to the very edges of our discipleship.

At the start, we need to remember what was happening in the early church. Looking back to Acts 2:45 and 4:32-37, we can see that the selling of property and distribution of money reflected the common will of the people God filled with His Spirit. This did not happen because of the rules of a church with structure and discipline. Peter and John had not told the disciples to distribute property on pain of death. Rather, they did it because the Holy Spirit prompted them, and Ananias and Sapphira knew this from the start. This was one of the visible characteristics of the church.

So, when Ananias and Sapphira held back some of the proceeds of the sale of their property, they broke no commandment, they broke the 'spirit' of the early church community. And there is more, for the nature of the sin was deception. When Ananias came to Peter and John with his gift, no one would have known the details of his transaction and how much was due, but Peter was led by the Spirit to expose the sin. It was the first recorded example of a 'word of knowledge' in the New Testament church (see 1 Cor 12:8), and it laid bare the truth. Ananias and Sapphira had '*lied to the Holy Spirit*' (5:3) and '*lied ... to God*' (5:4), because they felt at liberty to break the common spirit of the community. They failed to appreciate the totality of the Christian call.

At this point it is worth remembering that Jesus Himself had said,

*'every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit'*

From that time onwards everyone has asked what it is that might be called a 'sin' or 'blasphemy' against the Holy Spirit, that is, the 'sin that cannot be forgiven'. From the records in Matthew (12:31) and Mark (3:29),

this was something that certainly perplexed the disciples. It may be that when Peter and John saw what happened to Ananias, they thought that Jesus' words were being fulfilled before their eyes, and when Ananias died, it was not because Peter commanded it. Rather, it was a stunned reaction to the exposed truth, so when Sapphira came next, Peter had Jesus' words in mind. Some believe that when Peter said '*the feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door ...*', he had in effect cursed the woman. But this was the voice of open honesty, so profound that it struck Sapphira's heart and she died, as her husband had done.

There can be no doubt that the story of Ananias and Sapphira was seminal in the life of the early church, and Luke had to report it however difficult it was. Just as Adam's sin marks the difference between humanity in its sinless state and its fallen state, so the sin of Ananias and Sapphira now marks the difference between the church in its perfect state after Pentecost, and the worldly state in which it is found today.

So, this awful story of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us that the church is a broken and sinful institution. No church since those days has achieved the perfect vision described in Acts 2:43f. and Acts 4:32f., but no community can claim to be the church of God unless it aspires to the highest ideals of God's Kingdom, and one of these is the challenge to share wealth. Now the church may be beset by sins similar to those of Ananias and Sapphira, and we may regret that such sins go unpunished. But Ananias and Sapphira will have died in vain if we do not learn from their bitter experience. The church is God's creation and He works through it despite its sins, to redeem people and bring them into His Kingdom. If we are to be the church of God today, then we must grasp again the vision God has already given us of what He wants of His people.

## Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The names of Ananias and Sapphira
- Is God vengeful?

### **Notes on the translation of the passage**

#### **V3 'Satan has so filled your heart'**

##### Other translations:

*'can Satan have so possessed your heart'* (New Jerusalem Bible)

*'so filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit'* (NIV)

There is a degree of uncertainty about what the original Greek word here is. The majority of ancient texts have 'so filled your heart ...' but some argue that the idea of Satan 'filling' the heart is foreign to the New Testament that a different word must have been used, such as 'possessed' (New Jerusalem Bible). Satan is said to 'possess' people, not to 'fill' them. I am of the opinion that the idea of being 'possessed', but Satan is as awful as being 'filled' with him, and the difference in meaning is so small as to be inconsequential. So I have translated the passage as the Greek suggests and the majority of ancient manuscripts confirm.

### **The names of Ananias and Sapphira**

In Jesus' day, people commonly spoke a form of Aramaic related to ancient Hebrew, and the name of Ananias, after travelling a route from Hebrew to Aramaic to Greek, means in English 'The lord is gracious'. Similarly for the name of Sapphira, which means in English, 'beautiful'.

Whether or not these names had any significance within the story as first told, is uncertain. However, the juxtaposition of the death of Ananias and his name is startling, for it seems that the Lord has not been gracious to Ananias! The truth however is that Ananias and Sapphira chose to walk a path that was contrary to that of blessing in the life of the first church. Their selfishness meant that they could not receive God's favour and grace.

#### **Is God vengeful?**

The question often left in people's minds after reading this story is similar to the one that crops up often when people read the New Testament. What is this God of wrath we read about here, and is this really the God of love we find in the rest of the pages of the New Testament? Too many people reckon that the angry God of the Old Testament is something they can do without and they leave off reading it, to concentrate on the New. However, this is not the only place in the New Testament where we read that God sometimes does things that do not fit with our perceptions of His character of love. Another example of God's wrath in the New Testament is to be found in Jesus' parables, where he speaks of God's judgement, including those who are

condemned to *'weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth'* (Matt 8:12, 13:42,50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30, Luke 13:28).

In general, the nature of God is indeed that he is a God of love, but the best way of explaining what we think of as His wrath is to liken it to the anger of a broken heart. God has loved all His creation, but those who reject Him take their own pathway to eternal damnation. It is not God's choice that people turn away from Him, He wants them to turn back, but he will not rescind free will.

The full force of God's wrath is felt not so much by those who turn from Him, but against those who purposefully go against His will, and create havoc for the growth of His Kingdom as a consequence, and that is where Ananias and Sapphira come in, as well as the 'sin against the Holy Spirit'. Those who reject God and then deceive His people call down on themselves not just the consequences of their rejection, but God's action to protect His people and His Kingdom. We can perceive none of this fully, and neither can we say that we can call down God's wrath on others, even though we sometimes do. God is the judge of His own actions, and we know that He will always pursue His plan of redemption in the world, and He is sometimes forced to brush aside those who stand in His way.

---

## Discipleship

### Application

#### ***Judging others***

You may feel that this study borders on condemning the many people in our churches who do not submit their all to the Lord. Firstly, this is not a judgement we can easily make about others, and we need to trust in God that He will do this. Remember, Peter exposed the sin here by a 'word of knowledge', which is a reasonable route towards dealing with such a sin, but the use of such a gift is of course subject to discernment. Scripture records that Peter got it right; and he needed to do so. We would be unwise to put up an opinion about someone else unless it was truly a word from the Lord, and we knew this and were willing to submit the matter to the discernment of others.

#### ***The importance of true church fellowships***

Secondly, I am not at all convinced that it is the common mind amongst God's people today to put this great call of God into effect, so in these circumstances, I cannot foresee many people falling foul of the Spirit on this matter. The problem here is an institutional one; too many churches are bound by the decision making and governance of a self promoting elite. Whether you are speaking about established churches or new churches with apparently dynamic leadership, very few churches are made of a true fellowship of believers who have a common mind about Christ, let alone anything else. You may feel that my assessment is damning, but I sincerely reckon that if you are in a fellowship that has a common mind about the things of God, and you know it, then you are one of few in the church today, unfortunately. Established churches already have their mind made up about most things and they struggle now with applying the details. And unfortunately, too many new churches, unbeknown to themselves, ape modern leadership traits and management that are far removed from the models of leadership found in God's Word.

The day is not dark, however, for more and more people are realising that the true church is indeed a genuine fellowship of equals, and where this happens, the church is more able to be true to its New Testament roots.

### Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group the different reactions you have to this dramatic and terrible story. Do your reactions reflect a true understanding of what this passage might mean as God's Word?
2. Is it right to put 'the Spirit of the Lord' to the test (5:9)? How does the church assess the mind of Christ, and know what God wants of His people?
3. What does the story of Ananias and Sapphira tell us about the life of the church today?

### Discipleship challenges

- *Ask yourself what you think this passage of Scripture says to you. Does it suggest that you should give your entire possessions and savings to the life of the church? Or should you strive with all the*

*fibres of your being to establish a church that is a true fellowship based on a common mind about the things of God? Think and pray about these things in earnest.*

- *When you have decided what is appropriate for you to give to the church as to the Lord, then make a plan as to how you will put this into action. Remember, maintaining fellowship is part and parcel of what it means to give your resources to the church*

---

## **Final Prayer**

Lord God Almighty, bless us as we go about our everyday living, and guide us on the right pathway as we seek to be Your people. When we find it hard to be a practising member of Your church, help us to maintain common fellowship and love those with whom You have placed me. May my love be a spark that either starts or sustains a fire amongst Your people, glowing brightly for all to see and guiding others into all truth.  
AMEN

---