

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

The contents of this chapter are as follows:

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I. The Manifestation of evil in the church; Ananias and Sapphira.

"But a certain man, Ananias by name with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, and put aside for himself part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, laid it at the feet of the apostles. But Peter said, Ananias, Ananias, why has Satan filled thy heart that thou shouldest lie to the Holy Spirit, and put aside for thyself a part of the price of the land? While it remained, was it not thine own? and sold was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down and expired; and great fear came upon all who heard it. And the young men, rising up, wound him up for burial, and having carried him out, buried him. And it came to pass about three hours afterward, that his wife, not knowing what had happened, came in~ And Peter answered her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet and expired. And the young men came in and found her dead, and, having carried her out, they buried her by her husband" (Verses 1-10).

Up to this chapter we have beheld a beautiful picture of the work of the Holy Spirit in the gathering of those who had believed and their fellowship, as well as in the bold testimony of the Apostles. The acts of the Holy Spirit in His mighty power are fully demonstrated in the second, third and fourth chapters of this book of Exodus of the New Testament. Then we likewise saw how the enemy began to act in the arrest of Peter and John.

With this chapter the scene changes.

Beautiful is the ending of the previous chapter, Barnabas having sold his land, laid the money at the feet of the Apostles. He gave by it a striking testimony how he realized as a believing Jew his heavenly portion, by giving up that which is promised to the Jew, earthly possessions.

Our chapter begins with the significant word "**But**."

It is the word of failure and decline. All was evidently perfect; nothing marred the precious scenes of fellowship - "**but**" and with this little word the story of evil begins.

The enemy seeing himself so completely defeated by his attacks from the outside now enters among the flock and begins his work within.

The instruments were Ananias and Sapphira, man and wife. They too had an estate, which they sold. They had beforehand agreed to surrender only a part of the money they received from the sale, the balance they were keeping back for themselves.

It was deception they had deliberately planned. Behind it stood unbelief; they did not realize in faith that GOD Himself in the person of His Spirit had made His abode in the assembly of which they were a part. They did not consider this stupendous fact that the Holy Spirit had come and was present in the gathered company.

But what was the motive? The surrender of possessions as done by Barnabas was entirely voluntary. No one had asked Ananias and Sapphira to do the same thing. The motive was selfishness.

Barnabas had done a good deed in obeying the Holy Spirit and no doubt he received praise and blessing for it. This moved Ananias and Sapphira to jealousy and they desired to have the same reputation. But their hearts were covetous; they loved the earthly things and they did not want to part with all the purchase money. Human glory and money were the downfall of Ananias and his wife. They were double-minded. The Spirit of GOD was working in great power, but what they manifested was an imitation, hypocrisy, a lie. *

* There is an interesting correspondency between the sin of Achan, the first failure reported after Israel entered the land, and the sin of Ananias and Sapphira.

Satan himself had filled the heart of Ananias using his flesh to commit this sin of lying to the Holy Spirit.

Satan had begun his work in the midst of the gathered company and he worked through the flesh of those who had believed on the Lord. Swift judgment followed as to their earthly existence. They were cut off by death.

The sin they had done was "**a sin unto death**" and the sentence, physical death, was immediately carried out.

Peter is still in the foreground. We must remember here the words of the Lord which He spake to Peter, after this disciple had confessed Him as Son of GOD.

"And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19).

The same words concerning binding and loosing the Lord addressed to all the disciples (Matthew 18:18).

The binding and loosing refers to discipline on earth. It has nothing whatever to do with forgiveness of sins or eternal salvation. Peter here exercises this authority, it was the first discipline.

We must likewise remember that these events happened on Jewish, on kingdom ground.

The witness was still to the nation.

The sudden judgment which came upon Ananias and Sapphira was a strong witness to the nation that the Holy One of Israel, the Lord, dwelt in the midst of this remnant, who believed in the One whom the nation had rejected. When the kingdom is established on earth and the Lord JESUS CHRIST rules in righteousness, then, no doubt every sin will be swiftly judged by death.

If it is asked why such judgments do no longer occur, we answer that the Holy Spirit then was ungrieved; now the Spirit is grieved on account of unfaithfulness and GOD no longer acts in this way to bear testimony to His presence in the church.

Besides this it is nowhere stated that such manifestations of His presence were to continue.

If GOD would thus act in judgment in every case of double-mindedness, unfaithfulness and sinning against the Holy Spirit, it would be contrary to one great characteristic of this present age. That is "the silent heavens." The many misguided people, who think they have gone back to Pentecost, have received their Pentecost, speak with new tongues, that the gift of tongues and of doing miracles is restored to them and that they are now once more in "apostolic times," should also expect such judgments in their midst.

There are some important lessons to be gathered from this solemn event which we cannot pass by.

(1) The fact of the presence of the flesh in the believer. Ananias and Sapphira were believers. They gave way to follow the flesh, and Satan came in with his power and tempted them. The doctrine of the eradication of the old nature by having received "the baptism with the Holy Spirit" is unscriptural.

In this case of Ananias and Sapphira it is fully demonstrated what is written in the Epistle to the Galatians "**For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh and these are contrary the one to the other, so that ye cannot do the things ye would**" (Galatians 5:17).

(2) The power of Satan is revealed in the event. What Ananias and Sapphira did was suggested to them by Satan. Vainglory was in their hearts; they followed pride to win fame and get the praise from man. They had the root of all evil "**the love of money**" in their hearts and yielded to it. Acting thus in the flesh Satan came and suggested the lie to them. Their eyes were then blinded and they lost sight of the great truth so well known to them that He who is "**perfect in knowledge**" dwelt in them and in the midst of the congregation as the Lord had dwelt in the midst of Israel.

(3) The event bears witness to the fact that the Holy Spirit is not an influence but a divine person, He is GOD. Ananias had lied to the Holy Spirit. Peter tells him "**Thou hast not lied to men but to God.**" To tempt the Holy Spirit is to tempt GOD and to lie to the Spirit is a lie to GOD.

(4) All sin of the Christian believer is now against the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit indwells the believer and whenever the believer walks not in the Spirit but in flesh, when he is carnally minded, the believer sins against the Holy Spirit. Satan has then an advantage over him. But thanks be to GOD for His gracious provision! We can judge ourselves and confess our sins (not to the Holy Spirit but to GOD), and He is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse us.

5. The presence of the Holy Spirit demands separation from evil. If believers would recognize the great truth, believe it fully that the Holy Spirit dwells in them, they would walk in the Spirit and be separated from evil.

With all the singing about the Holy Spirit, the teaching and the great amount of scriptural literature on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but few believers enjoy the reality of the presence of the Spirit of GOD and are governed by it. Those who are the Lord's must be separated from evil of every form.

One has well said: "In the first days of the Holy Spirit He took out what dishonored Him. In later days He called upon the assembly to act, to purge out the leaven, to 'put away' that wicked person" (I Corinthians 5).

In these last days, when the whole has become leavened with legality, worldliness, hypocrisy, sensuality, ritualism and rationalism, the faithful are to come out from among them and be separate, to follow righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call upon the Lord out of a pure heart (that is unmixed with any evil).

In Israel the Lord judged in the beginning, at once and severely, for "**holiness becometh His house forever.**" But in later days, when all had gone aside, and they who regarded Him were but few they were told to stand apart from the whole. The condition of the professing company may change, but the grand principle remains. The holiness of His presence excluding and separating us from evil."

Oh that GOD's people in these solemn days, when judgment is so near, may hear the call of the Holy Spirit in the last Pauline Epistle, the Epistle which so clearly describes the present apostasy, Second Timothy. It is His call to separation from evil (II Timothy 2:20, 21; 3:5).

II. The Signs and Wonders done by the Hands of the Apostles.

"And great fear came upon all the church, and upon all who heard these things. And by the hands of the Apostles were many signs and wonders done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch, but of the rest durst no man join them, but the people magnified them; and believers were more than ever added to the Lord, multitudes (both of men and women); so that they brought out the sick into the streets and put them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter, when he came, might overshadow some of them. And the multitudes also of the cities round about came together to Jerusalem, bringing sick persons beset by unclean spirits, who were all healed" (Verses 11-16).

Signs and wonders were done by the Apostles. Their habitual place seems to have been in Solomon's porch. No one dared to join them. They held the position of authority. Though they had been forbidden the public ministry they are back in a prominent place. The people magnified them, too.

Then another result was that more believers were added. Added to what?

The First Hebrew Christian Church of Jerusalem? The First Jewish Christian Society? No. They were added to the Lord. The sinner believing is saved, receives the Holy Spirit, is joined to the Lord, becomes one spirit with the Lord, a member of the body of which He is the Head.

Signs and wonders were done by the Apostles. The sick were healed, unclean spirits were driven out. Multitudes of people from the surrounding country flocked to Jerusalem, bringing their sick, and they were all healed. The streets presented another strange picture. Everywhere one could see the sick on beds and couches. They waited for the time when Peter walked through these streets so that his shadow might fall on some of them. These were great manifestations of the power of GOD.

The words spoken by the Lord were then fulfilled. They did the works He did.

These signs and wonders, however, are nowhere mentioned as to their permanency throughout this age. They were only for the beginning of this age; after the Gospel of Grace and the mystery hidden in former ages had been fully made known they disappeared.

It has been said of late that **"God's gifts and calling are without repentance"** and that therefore GOD has not taken back the sign gifts and the extraordinary powers as manifested here in this chapter in connection with the testimony to Israel. The reader must remember that the verse concerning the gifts and calling of GOD is written in Romans 11 and has no application in connection with this age but refers us to Israel's calling.

Nor has GOD promised for the end of this age a restoration of these gifts. When certain men, claiming to be great teachers of the Word, speak of **"the latter rain,"** great spiritual blessings coming in the end of this age, they but reveal their ignorance. Nowhere is there found such a promise.

The testimony of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament holds out no hope for a restoration of gifts, but His testimony tells us of apostasy, departure from the faith, and delusions. There will be **"signs and wonders"** in the end of the age. But these signs and wonders will be the most awful imitations of the power of the Holy Spirit: signs and lying wonders are predicted through the working of Satan. These have already commenced, but the real working of Satan will begin after the true church is removed from the earth (II Thessalonians 2).

III. The Second Arrest of the Apostles and their Miraculous Deliverance.

"And the high priest rising up, and all they that were with him, which is the sect of the Sadducees, were filled with wrath, and laid hands on the Apostles and put them in the public prison. But an angel of the Lord during the night opened the doors of the prison, and leading them out, said, Go ye and stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life. And when they heard it, they entered very early into the temple and taught. And when the high priest was come, and they that were with him, they called together the council and all the senate of the children of Israel and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came they found them not in the prison and returned and reported, saying, We found the prison shut with all safety and the keepers standing without before the doors, but when we had opened we found no man within. And when they heard these words, both the priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests were in perplexity as to them, what this would come to. Then came one and reported to them saying, Behold the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple teaching the people" (Verses 17-25).

The startling manifestations of the Holy Spirit in signs and miracles brought forth another and more severe action of the enemy.

The second arrest of the bold witnesses is marked by greater hatred and violence than the first arrest. The Apostles were treated like common criminals and were put into the public prison.

The Sadducees, the deniers of the resurrection and the miraculous, are mostly concerned in this second arrest. Their miserable unbelief had been endangered by the supernatural manifestations and these again fully demonstrated the great truth they were denying, the resurrection of the Lord JESUS. They were filled with jealousy (the word used in the Greek). But there was another manifestation of the power of GOD.

During the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison and led them out. They were delivered by divine interference through the power of GOD by a heavenly messenger.

Critics have denied this. One recently has made the statement that the phrase "**angel of the Lord**" must be understood, "as a Hebraic expression for some divine intervention, the manner of which is not defined. It may have been connivance on the part of an officer, or the help of a friend." Such weak statements need no answer. We shall find the appearance of heavenly messengers again. It was an angel of the Lord who guided Philip, who liberated Peter out of prison, and who smote Herod when he blasphemed (Acts 12).

In the Old Testament we find "**the angel of the Lord**" (*Malach Jehovah*) and He is an uncreated angel, the Lord Himself. But here it is a heavenly messenger.

He appeared, no doubt, in the form of man, like the two at the ascension of the Lord. Such a manifestation of angels was perfectly in order at that time, and fully corresponds with the other kingdom characteristics in the beginning of the Book of Acts. But the supernatural manifestations soon ceased. Hundreds and thousands of others throughout this present age were put into prison, they remained in dungeons, were slowly tormented, walled up to die a slow death, eaten by vermin, all for righteousness sake, and yet no angels came to open their doors and lead them forth.

With this we do not say that the angels have no ministry now toward us. This would be contrary to Scripture (Hebrews 1:14). But visible manifestations of heavenly messengers have ceased like the miraculous sign gifts. It will not always be so. The heavens will speak again and there will be startling manifestations on judgment through angels and with the beginning of the coming age, angels will be manifested once more, and GOD's power and glory will be visibly displayed.

The delivering angel had also commissioned the Apostles to speak the words of life to all the people. This they did at once with the early morning. The assembled council is in great perplexity when the prison is found empty and the report reaches them, that the men are again standing in the temple teaching the people. Yet this evident miracle does not bring them to their knees to acknowledge the power of GOD.

IV. Their Trial and Witness before the Council.

"Then went the captain with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. And they brought them and set them in the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, We strictly enjoined you not to teach in this Name, and behold ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine and purpose to bring upon us the blood of this man. But Peter, answering, and the Apostles said, God must be obeyed rather than man. The God of our Fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree (lit. wood, that is a cross). Him did God exalt by His right hand as a Prince and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and remission of sins. And we are His witnesses of these things, and the Holy Spirit also, whom God has given to them that obey Him. When they heard that, they were cut to the heart and took counsel to kill them" (Verses 26-33).

With cowardly fear they led them into the presence of the council.

They did not dare to use violence as this might have resulted in an open outbreak from the side of the people, who heard the Apostles gladly. Two charges are brought now against them. They had broken the command of the council. They had been forbidden to speak in this Name and they had continued to do so, utterly disregarding the injunction.

This was the first charge and it was true enough.

The second charge was but the working of their guilty conscience. They accused them that they purposed to bring this man's blood upon them. They feared that the people stirred up by their teaching, might take them to task for having condemned JESUS of Nazareth.

But another fact stands behind this fear.

The people had cried "**His blood be on us and on our children.**" The leaders of the people were responsible for this awful word. They must have remembered it and they feared that this might soon be true in open vengeance from the side of the people against them. It is also a remarkable fact that they themselves do not speak the name of the Lord. They speak of Him as "this man" and "this name."

Once more we find the record of the apostolic testimony. It does not differ from the previous bold and powerful witnesses given. After the statement that GOD must be obeyed rather than man, we find three great facts mentioned by Peter:

1. The JESUS, whose Name they were loath to pronounce, whom GOD had raised up, they had slain and hanged on a cross. This fully establishes their guilt. Once more the blood guiltiness is brought home to their consciences.
2. The exaltation of JESUS is mentioned next. Raised from the dead, exalted by the right hand of GOD, He is a Prince and Saviour. In His Name repentance is offered to Israel and forgiveness of sins.
3. The third part of this brief and logical defense concerns the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead. They were witnesses of these things, and also the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit is now bestowed upon them that obey Him, that is, who believe GOD. The Holy Spirit was upon them and in them, and with them as a believing company. The witness concerned the three great facts so prominent in the beginning of this book, the death of JESUS, the resurrection of JESUS, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, because the Lord JESUS CHRIST is glorified, highly exalted. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are thus mentioned. The Gospel is mentioned.

Forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit is for them that obey, believe in Him, whom GOD has exalted as Prince and Saviour. Surely this is a fulfillment of that word the Lord spoke to His disciples, when He predicted future events. "**But when they deliver you up, be not careful how or what ye shall speak; for it shall be given to you in that hour what ye shall speak**" (Matthew 10:19).

But what was the result of this other powerful witness of the Apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit? Are they humbling themselves? Does perhaps this stirring testimony backed up by divine interference in the release of the Apostles from the prison make them thoughtful?

No. The witness went to the heart; it struck home. But instead of repenting they took counsel to kill them.

The story of their Lord is repeated, for they also took counsel to kill them, in order to silence His testimony. Under the control of him, who is a murderer from the beginning they are ready to shed more blood. What might have happened if Gamaliel had not stood up, none can tell. Perhaps they were ready then to rush upon them as later they rushed upon Stephen to murder him.

V. The Advice of Gamaliel (Verses 34-39).

"But a certain man, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, held in honor of all the people, rose up in the council and commanded to put the Apostles out for a little while, and he said to them, Yemen of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do as touching these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, alleging himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves and who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to naught. After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the census, and drew away a number of people after him; he also perished and all, as many as obeyed him, were dispersed. And now I say unto you, Withdraw from these men and let them alone; for if this council or this work be of men, it will come to naught. But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God" (Verses 34-39).

Gamaliel was undoubtedly an instrument of GOD to restrain the wicked devices of the council.

But who was Gamaliel?

The text itself gives the answer, a great man and teacher of the law. He is called in Hebrew writings Rabban Gamaliel the Old. His name means "*bestowed of GOD*." He was president of the council after his own father, Rabban Simeon, who was the son of Hillel. He is the great teacher at whose feet Saul of Tarsus sat. He died eighteen years before the destruction of Jerusalem, and died a Pharisee.

If his advice here seems that he favored the Apostles, his subsequent career shows that he followed the wicked devices of his contemporaries.

A prayer against the heretics (the believers in the Lord) was later formulated to be read in the synagogues, and he fully approved of it and recommended its use. The advice he gave is so well known and the words so simple that they need no further comment.

His advice is, leave them alone.

Wait for the issue.

- If it is of GOD, you then fight against GOD.
- If it is of man, like similar movements before, it will come to nought.

GOD will take care of His own honor; there would be no need of their interfering. GOD rules supreme.

But this advice has also another side. It was after all nothing but a cowardly way to dodge the issue by waiting for light by the issue itself.

Ever since up to the present time men have hidden themselves behind the wisdom of Gamaliel.

If certain movements spring up which are doubtful and contain erroneous teachings contradicting the revelation of GOD, we hear people say that they are content to wait for the issue. If the movement is of GOD it will stand, if it is of man it will come to nought. But what in the meantime?

If it does not become apparent at once whether it is of GOD or of the enemy? There is no need to follow this clever advice of the great Jewish teacher.

We are in possession of the completed Word of GOD and must test everything by it. There is no need to halt between two opinions. Evil can be detected and must be judged. But that the council acted upon this in hypocrisy is seen by what follows. And yet we must not lose sight of the fact that GOD used this politic advice of Gamaliel to keep His disciples in that hour of grave peril.

VI. The Release of the Apostles. Their Continued Testimony.

"And to him they agreed; and when they had called the Apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple, and in every house they ceased not to teach and announce the glad tidings that Jesus is Christ" (Verses 40, 42).

Nothing of all this was known to the Apostles for they had been outside while Gamaliel delivered his address. The Holy Spirit through Luke gives the full account of what had been done under cover.

The council agreed. But if they agreed, why did they beat the Apostles? It surely was contrary to the agreement. They should have let them go without laying their hands on them, but wait for the issue.

If these men were right, then according to Gamaliel's word they were fighting against GOD. This was, of course, the case. The beating was according to Deuteronomy 25:2, 3. They were treated as wicked men and received the allotted number of stripes, forty save one.

Physical suffering and shame was connected with this mode of punishment.

This was the first actual suffering of the Apostles for the Name, which is above every other name. Then we see them departing. It was a departure in triumph; they were more than conquerors.

If we could have seen them with their bleeding backs, we would not have beheld faces full of rebellion and pain, but we would have seen joyous countenances and heard words of praise from their lips, as later Paul and Silas sang and praised in prison.

It was the Holy Spirit who filled them and made them rejoice "**that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name.**"

Later the Holy Spirit speaks of suffering for CHRIST through Peter in a way which is so refreshing.

"But rejoice inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that when His glory shall be revealed, Ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye, for the Spirit of Glory and of God resteth upon you, on their part He is evil spoken of, but on your part He is glorified" (I Peter 4:13, 14).

Thus His Spirit rested upon them and they rejoiced. How little we know of such experiences in our own days!

And then they continued. Nothing could hinder them.

What a divine steadfastness was theirs. It was the result of the presence of the Holy Spirit in them. He was ungrieved because they exalted CHRIST and magnified Him. A wonderful activity they unfolded.

It was indeed true what the council had said.

All Jerusalem was filled by their doctrine. The work they did continually was not the working of miracles, or speaking in strange tongues. Some deluded Christians of our times seem to think that these outward signs were the chief things in the beginning of the age. They were not. Greater than doing miracles and speaking in other tongues is that, through which the body of CHRIST is gathered and edified. This is the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of the Word. This they did. They did not cease teaching and preaching the glad tidings (the Gospel), that JESUS is CHRIST.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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