

Why did God kill Ananias and Sapphira for lying?

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is found in Acts 5, and it is a sad story, indeed. It actually begins at the end of chapter 4 with the description of the early church in Jerusalem, a group of believers so filled with the Holy Spirit that they were of one heart and one mind. Great power and grace were on the apostles, who preached and testified of the risen Savior. So knit together were the hearts of the people that they held all their possessions loosely and willingly shared them with one another, not because they were coerced but because they loved one another. Those who sold land and houses gave of their profits to the apostles, who distributed the gifts to those in need.

Two members of this group were Ananias and his wife, Sapphira; they also had sold a field. Part of the profit from their sale was kept back by the couple, and Ananias only laid a part of the money at the apostles' feet. However, Ananias made a pretense of having given all the proceeds. This hypocritical show may have fooled some, but not Peter, who was filled with the power of the Spirit. Peter knew instantly that Ananias was lying—not just to him but to God—and exposed his hypocrisy then and there. Ananias fell down and died (Acts 5:4). When Sapphira showed up, she, too, lied to Peter and to God, saying that they had donated the entire proceeds of the sale of the land to the church. When her lie had been exposed, she also fell down and died at Peter's feet.

Some speculate that these two deaths were from natural causes. Perhaps Ananias died from shock or guilt, but Peter pronounced Sapphira's death before she died, and the coincidental timing and place of their deaths indicate that this was indeed God's judgment. The question is why. Why would God kill two people for lying?

God's reasons for bringing about the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira involve His abhorrence of sin, the hypocrisy of the couple, and the lesson for the rest of the church, both then and now. It can be easy today to gloss over the holiness of God, to forget that He is righteous and pure and that He hates sin wholeheartedly. This particular sin of hypocrisy in the church was dealt with swiftly and decisively.

Were Ananias and Sapphira saved? We believe they probably were. Their story is told in the context of the actions of "all the believers" (Acts 4:32). They knew of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3), and Ananias's lie could have been an earlier promise that he would give the whole amount of the sale to the Lord. But the best evidence that they were children of God may be that they received discipline: "If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all" (Hebrews 12:8; see also 1 Corinthians 5:12). Ananias and his wife had conspired to garner the accolades of the church; but their conspiracy led to the sin unto death.

The case of Ananias and Sapphira illustrates the fact that even believers can be led into bold, flagrant sin. It was Satan that had filled their hearts to lie in this way (Acts 5:3) and "to test the Spirit of the Lord" (verse 9). Covetousness, hypocrisy, and a desire for the praise of men all played a part in their demise.

The sudden, dramatic deaths of Ananias and Sapphira served to purify and warn the church. "Great fear seized the whole church" (Acts 5:11). Right away, in the church's infancy, God made it plain that hypocrisy and dissimulation were not going to be tolerated, and His judgment of Ananias and Sapphira helped guard the church against future pretense. God laid the bodies of Ananias and Sapphira in the path of every hypocrite who would seek to enter the church.

Furthermore, the incident involving Ananias and Sapphira helped to establish the apostles' authority in the church. The sinners had fallen dead at Peter's feet. It was Peter who had known of the secret sin and had the authority to pronounce judgment in the church (see Matthew 16:19). If the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira had succeeded in fooling Peter, it would have severely damaged the apostles' authority.

The sad story of Ananias and Sapphira is not some obscure incident from the Old Testament regarding a violation of Mosaic Law. This occurred in the first-century church to believers in Jesus Christ. The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a reminder to us today that God sees the heart (1 Samuel 16:7), that He hates sin, and that He is concerned for the purity of His church (1 Corinthians 11; 1 John 5). As Jesus told the compromising church in Thyatira, "All the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds" (Revelation 2:23).