A CROSSROAD

Weary after traveling far from home, a young minister was exhausted when he arrived at a small hotel. He started to watch something to relax. The problem was that he and his wife decided not to watch regular video content and to focus only on spiritual issues during Sabbath hours. His brain kept arguing, “Yes, but you are so tired! You don’t need to watch something harmful. Just find something relaxing. After all, you are alone!”

He suddenly realized that this was a crossroad in his life. First, while passing through the channels, he would risk paying attention to an inappropriate thing. Second, the decision to act in dissonance to his beliefs and the agreement with his wife would start a precedent. What would be the next thing that he would do while trying to hide it from his wife and children? Third and more important: Was he keeping the Sabbath for others to see? One invisible Being was there, who could see and know all things, even his thoughts. He decided to sleep instead.

The pastor said that the episode influenced other subsequent decisions in his life, even the way he tithed. He could have pretended to return tithe while giving a lesser amount than what is expected by God. But he remembered that he was not alone. There was One who knew and always knows, and nothing is hidden from Him.

Through this week’s account we will review the spiritual consequences of a lack of integrity and unfaithfulness, the seriousness of vows, as well as God’s readiness to accept the sinner and to forgive those who confess their sins.
Write out Acts 5:1–11 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Acts 5:3, 4. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map it.
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Go back to your scribed text and study the passage.

Circle repeated words/phrases/ideas

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you

Draw Arrows to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases

What special insights do your marks seem overall to point to?

Memorize your favorite verse in Acts 5:1–11. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.

If all are expected to bring tithes and also offerings to the Lord (Mal. 3:8), why in Ananias and Sapphira’s case could they have chosen not to give the land and remain guiltless?

In your opinion, is God’s omniscience against or for us?

A PLANNED THEFT

While persecution was doing its job of purifying and reviving early Christians, many were cut off from their friends and family because of the prejudice of the Jews. Now they were vulnerable and in great need of food and shelter!

Luckily the answer of the brethren was quick. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, their focus was to help each other and God’s cause. No one lacked anything, because no one considered themselves owners of their goods (see Acts 4:32–37), having all things in common, the “possessors of lands or houses sold them” (v. 34) laying the proceeds at the apostles’ feet. Resembling the Old Testament storehouse system with which they were familiar, all goods were collected at a centralized point and distributed in an equitable way, “as anyone had need” (v. 35).

It is interesting to note that before the Pentecost, the people would dedicate their properties and bring the proceeds to the storehouse and to the Levites (i.e., Lev. 27:14–25). But in Acts 4:36 we see an inversion of this order. Joses, a Levite from Cyprus, sells his field and brings the money to the apostles’ feet (who were not Levites). By the Holy Spirit indicating the new locus of His storehouse in the New Testament era, the church and its appointed leaders became the new ministers of the storehouse. After all, the temple would be destroyed in a few years.

Ananias and Sapphira were deeply impressed by the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in wonders and miracles. No undue influence compelled them to give. Instead, they opened the door to the Holy Spirit, who softened their otherwise selfish and greedy hearts. Under that strong conviction, they pledged to sell their property, bringing the proceeds to the Lord.

But after a while the conviction subsided, and they started to regret what they vowed. They could have thought that it was out of emotionalism and that they had decided too fast. So they agreed to reconsider their pledge.

Attempting to keep the high reputation conferred upon those who sold their properties, and also to remain entitled to be maintained by the general fund, they found a solution. This pair would keep part of the proceeds for themselves and remit the remaining part.

The rest of the story is well known. When they “brought a certain part” (Acts 5:2) of the proceeds, laying it at the apostles’ feet, they were met with swift judgment from God. What Peter says in Acts 5:3, 4 before their death is significant. First, they allowed Satan to fill their hearts. Am I allowing Satan to fill my heart with thoughts or information that discourages me to give, or to keep my vows made to the Lord?

Peter said that by keeping back part of the price, they had also lied to the Holy Spirit. This is an indication that giving is a transaction with God, and not with other mortals. How could they dare to believe that God would not know what was happening? Did they forget that our omniscient “God is not mocked” (Gal. 6:7)?

Peter adds that they were free to keep the land to themselves, meaning that no one was forced to sell and to give. But once vowed, they were no longer owners. Only then, retaining a part or the totality would constitute theft.
FEAR OF DEATH

Why was the judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira so serious? The early church would be demoralized if love of money and pretentious spirituality (generosity included) would mark its members. Giving is a spiritual discipline, fundamental for spiritual growth, and is motivated and weighed by the Holy Spirit. It leads to deeper trust and closer intimacy with God, generating a peace “which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).

At the same time, Satan uses fear to prevent our growth in trust. Paul indicates that “fear of death” may lead us to become “subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:15). It is by “fearing the death” (or loss) of our appetites, emotional life, or reputation, just to mention some examples, that we are tempted to sin. It is by trying to remain alive to this world that we avoid dying to self, eating what is inappropriate (quality and amount) and when inappropriate, developing inappropriate relationships, and trying to parade ourselves.

The Bible teaches us that the only way to be truly alive is to die to self. Many times our natural inclinations, what seem right and desirable to us, lead to death (Prov. 14:12). Paul understood the importance of dying to his own preferences when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

Those who are subjected to the “fear of death” are invited to die for a life controlled by themselves, and to live a new life, now controlled by the Holy Spirit. By keeping part of the money, Ananias and Sapphira rejected the idea to become vulnerable, deciding to be their own providers, instead of relying completely upon God. They believed that by giving all that was promised, they would lack ability to acquire property or to gratify their desires. By deciding to remain in control of their own lives, they excluded Christ from the throne of the heart.

It is also by fearing to die for (or the loss of) competence or abundance, and refusing to trust, that some people refuse to tithe, or give a pretense tithe (they give a smaller percentage of their income than which is required by God). Usually a pre-tense tithe is given in an attempt to save their face before others, who may criticize them if they don’t tithe. But doesn’t God know how much do we earn?

Another way to allow fear to take control and incur in Ananias and Sapphira’s deception is by refusing to return the proportion of the income that was promised as a regular offering. Different from tithe, which is holy by God’s designation, when a proportion (or percentage) of the income is vowed for some period given in addition to the tithe, that proportion becomes holy during the period that was proposed. The giver has no longer any right to that portion.

Using those funds that belong to God in an emergency, even if planning to repay them later, or giving a different percentage than what is expected or was vowed, “is no less heinous in His sight now than in the apostles’ time.” (Ellen G. White, The Acts of the Apostles [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911], 76.)

Ananias and Sapphira: The Unfaithful Givers
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Psalm 76:11  
Deuteronomy 23:21  
Proverbs 20:25  
Ecclesiastes 5:4–6  
Malachi 1:14  
Psalm 15:1–4  
Romans 2:4  
Isaiah 55:6, 7

What other verses come to mind in connection with Acts 5:1–11?

(Cont. from inVite p. 94): something under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we are now regretful about our pledge. The love of money and lack of trust are overcoming us, and we are ashamed to confess that we are not even sorry about it. Please, remind us about Your goodness and give us true repentance” [see Rom. 2:4]. Please, send us Your Holy Spirit to change our heart, making us like You”? Would God not have treated them with mercy instead of with judgment?
A PREDICTABLE GOD

In different parts of the Bible, including the account of Ananias and Sapphira, the Creator of heaven and earth is presented as a God that knows all and sees everything. He even knows our thoughts and weighs them (i.e., Prov. 21:8). He has the authority to judge and to apply justice because He is the Creator and is omniscient. Numbers 14:18 presents two possible reactions that God may display while dealing with sin in His creatures (all of us). The first one sounds encouraging to us because although He knows our sins, God is depicted as being “longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression.”

On the other hand, His second possible reaction to our sins seems disturbing. Here God is shown as the one who “by no means clears the guilty, visiting [judging or punishing] the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.”

Of course, He used this last approach while dealing with Ananias and Sapphira, but was it arbitrary? Is He an unpredictable, unstable, harsh God, subject to human passions, which may unexpectedly be merciful with some or capriciously change His mind and visit others with judgment? If He is this kind of unstable God, could He be appeased through self-denial or sacrifices?

The Bible tells us about a loving, highly predictable, self-sacrificing God whose behavior is not subject to variation, who cannot be bribed by any human action (works). Instead, when the human race deserved death, He chose to sacrifice Himself, becoming the offering and dying for the sins of all! In that way the judgment and vengeance that we all deserve were laid upon Him, constituting our only hope for receiving mercy.

If He died for all, why then weren’t Ananias and Sapphira treated with mercy? Because it is only when someone recognizes their sins and confesses them that mercy becomes available. Those who never confess, who never transfer their sins to Jesus, will end up dying the eternal death.

Judgment will finally be executed upon them because judgment is executed upon sin (regardless of where it is found), and sin is with them. Sins transferred to Jesus by confession have already been paid for by our Savior through His suffering and death. But if sins are not confessed, they remain with the sinner, and judgment will overtake them, because they are identified with sin. Contrary to the Laodiceans, which did not confess their sins because they felt they were good in their own eyes, David did not trust his own perceptions, but asked, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties [thoughts]; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23, 24, NKJV). Not running from guilt at any cost (as many do today), David was interested to know the worst details of his case, so that he could confess! Once confessed, sin is laid upon Christ—God’s offering for us—and the sinner is forgiven (1 John 1:9). What if, before coming to Peter, Ananias and Sapphira had said, “Lord, we promised (cont. on p. 93)
If the stewards of God do their duty, there is no danger that wealth will increase so rapidly as to prove a snare; for it will be used with practical wisdom and Christlike liberality. (Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1940], 158.)

Let no one, when brought into a strait place, take money consecrated to religious purposes, and use it for his advantage, soothing his conscience by saying that he will repay it at some future time. Far better cut down the expenses to correspond with the income, to restrict the wants, and live within the means, than to use the Lord's money for secular purposes. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 79.)

Would you make your property secure? Place it in the hand that bears the nail prints of the crucifixion. Retain all in your possession, and it will be to your eternal loss. Give it to God, and from that moment it bears His inscription. It is sealed with His immutability. Would you enjoy your substance? Then use it to bless the suffering. Would you increase your possessions? “Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase: so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.” (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 49.)

Many who profess to be Christians provide abundantly for themselves, supplying all their imaginary wants, while they give no heed to the wants of the Lord’s cause. They have thought it gain to rob God by retaining all, or a selfish proportion, of His gifts as their own. But they meet with loss instead of gain. Their course results in the withdrawal of mercies and blessings. By their selfish, avaricious spirit, men have lost much. If they had fully and freely acknowledged God’s requirements and met His claims, His blessing would have been manifest in increasing the productions of the earth. The harvests would have been greater. The wants of all would have been abundantly supplied. The more we give, the more we shall receive. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 90.)

God reads the covetous thought in every heart that purposes to withhold from Him. Those who are selfishly neglectful in paying their tithes, and bringing their gifts and offerings to the treasury, God sees. The Lord Jehovah understands it all. As a book of remembrance is written before Him of them that fear the Lord, and that think upon His name, so there is a record kept of all who are appropriating to themselves the gifts which God entrusted to them to use for the salvation of souls. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 87, 88.)

There are many who will not be blessed till they make restitution of the tithe which they have withheld. God is waiting for you to redeem the past. The hand of the holy law is laid upon every soul who enjoys God’s benefits. Let those who have kept back their tithe make an accurate reckoning, and bring to the Lord that of which they have robbed His work. Make restitution, and bring the Lord peace offerings. “Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; and he shall make peace with Me.” If you acknowledge that you have done wrong in misappropriating His goods, and freely and fully repent, He will forgive your transgression. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 87.)
Ananias and Sapphira: The Unfaithful Givers

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What is wrong with the act of parading our possessions (ostentation)? What does it indicate about someone’s spiritual life and their relationship with Jesus?

Why does Malachi 3:9 say that those who rob Him are cursed? Is it an appropriate motivation returning tithes to avoid the curse?

If it is far easier to recognize others’ sins than our own, how do we develop an honesty which allows us to identify them? Which of God’s provided tools are intended to help us in that endeavor?

Do you believe that, based on what the Bible says, there is a healthy guilt? Can anyone truly confess their sins before acknowledging themselves as guilty?

Must someone feel sorry about it before confessing a sin? Are sinners naturally able to feel sorry about a sin they like? Is repentance a feeling or an attitude?

Ananias and Sapphira: The Unfaithful Givers