

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 12, chapters 4 and 5

Keep your Bibles handy; we're going to be doing a lot of reading today in both Testaments.

Depending on who does the counting, the New Testament consists of somewhere between 45% and 55% Old Testament quotes. In other words, the Bible characters of the New Testament regularly use Old Testament quotes to prove their case or to make a point. So if we were to carefully go through our New Testaments and cross out the Old Testament verses, our New Testaments would shrink to around ½ the size they are now.

The CJB that we read from for Torah Class makes it easy to spot the OT passages because it uses bold type to highlight the OT quotes in the New Testament; and a footnote tells us where in the Tanakh each particular quote appears. However it is not exhaustive and doesn't include them all. Thus what we see in Acts chapter 4 is Peter quoting a number of Old Testament passages in his explanation of the Gospel message and in condemning the Sadducean High Priests for their role in the execution of Yeshua.

One of the major themes in Acts 4 is Peter connecting the well-known Psalm 118 passage about the stone rejected by the builders becoming the cornerstone, with the salvation offered in Christ. This Psalm was well known by most Jews and committed to memory by many because it was part of the Hallel that was used in the Synagogue and as part of Festival liturgy. Peter says of Psalm 118 that Jesus is the stone that was rejected by the builders; and that the builders are represented by members of the Sanhedrin that he was standing before. This was more than metaphor; these same Sanhedrin members indeed had only a couple of months earlier decided that Yeshua should be killed, and enlisted the help of the Romans and Pontius Pilate to do it for them.

The Sanhedrin that was examining Peter and John could find no legitimate cause to punish them, so they released them with the warning that they were never again to do miracles (including healing) in the name of Yeshua; to which Peter said he would not comply. Upon being reunited with the other Believers in Jerusalem who were overjoyed that Peter and Jonathon came back to them unharmed, they prayed together a common prayer that was Psalm 2, verses 1 and 2. This Psalm of David asked why the nations (meaning gentiles) raged and tried to thwart God's plans, when there was no hope of them defeating the Lord. And this Psalm goes on to depict the national leaders of the gentiles conspiring to fight against Yehoveh and His Messiah Yeshua.

Let's re-read the last part of Acts chapter 4.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 4:25 – end

So Peter sees Psalm 2 as a prophecy about the Messiah, and says that this has been fulfilled

in the persons of Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with both gentiles and the peoples of Israel (meaning Jews in a broad sense but in reality those who formed the Sanhedrin). This particular Herod Peter mentioned is Herod Antipas and he was not the king over Judea at this time; in fact the history record seems to indicate that there was no king over Judea and Jerusalem for perhaps a 3 or 4 year time span. Antipas ruled over the Roman controlled provinces of Galilee and Perea as a Tetrarch, a governor. Judea was ruled by Pontius Pilate as Procurator (a higher position than a Tetrarch), meaning he had nearly autonomous power and reported directly to Caesar. So by invoking Herod and Pilate, Peter was indicting the political leadership of most of the Holy Lands as co-conspirators who joined together to oppose the will of Yehoveh.

But Peter, at the same time in verse 28, acknowledges that despite how it might seem to earthly eyes, all that happened to Yeshua was preplanned by His Father Yehoveh and so essentially Antipas and Pilate and those Jews and gentiles that were complicit in the murder of Messiah were but unwitting tools in God's hands. Please note something of vital importance: it is that God foreknew that these people would do these wicked things but that doesn't somehow now make them righteous people, nor does it absolve them from their evil intents and deeds. There has been much heartburn and difference of opinion within the world's churches over just how to view Adolf Hitler because it was his horrific attempt to stamp out the Jewish race that brought us the Holocaust. Yet at the same time the result of the Holocaust was a guilty Western world who felt they had little choice but to give the surviving Jews a homeland for their own. And of course that homeland turned out to be their ancient ancestral home, Israel.

As we are well aware this rebirth of the nation of Israel fulfilled several OT prophecies about the exiled Jews being returned to their homeland, and then to be eventually joined by their brothers, the legendary 10 Lost Tribes. This prophecy of return is best expressed in Ezekiel 36 and 37.

^{CJB} **Ezekiel 36:24** *For I will take you from among the nations, gather you from all the countries, and return you to your own soil.*

And then in Ezekiel 37:

Ezekiel 37:21-22 ^{CJB} ²¹ *Then say to them that Adonai ELOHIM says: 'I will take the people of Isra'el from among the nations where they have gone and gather them from every side and bring them back to their own land.*

²² *I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Isra'el; and one king will be king for all of them. They will no longer be two nations, and they will never again be divided into two kingdoms.*

But as with the issue of Herod and Pilate, are we to give Hitler credit and merit because his satanic actions directly led to the Jews being given back their homeland thus fulfilling God's prophetic promise? Hardly. It is just that in some unfathomable way God sees and controls history from horizon to horizon, and is able to orchestrate the bad intentions of wicked people

to bring about His plans for good.

As the group of joyful Believers was being led in prayer by Peter, we are told that the place where they gathered was shaken as they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. First, was there an actual physical shaking as with an earthquake? We don't know; it could be, or it could just as easily be an expression meaning that this group of Believers was spiritually and physically overwhelmed by the power and presence of the ***Ruach HaKodesh***. I mentioned this in our last lesson but it bears repeating: being filled with the Holy Spirit in this context does NOT mean that these folks were receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit for the first time; nor does it mean that the Holy Spirit comes and goes; nor does it mean that there are numerous baptisms of the Holy Spirit upon the same individual. Rather this is a common way of speaking that means that some kind of special inspiration of God, delivered by the Spirit, overcame them. And as we find in the Bible (as with Moses and his 70 elders and at Pentecost), often a special inspiration of God's Spirit manifests itself in human speech. So not surprisingly we find that what accompanied this special inspiration was an ability to **speak** God's message of salvation with boldness. In Greek the word that we translate as boldness is ***parrhesia*** and it means free and fearless confidence. And when we understand what has just happened to Peter and John with their arrest and the threats from the Sanhedrin to never speak of the name Yeshua again, we can understand why these ordinary everyday Believing Jews needed to be divinely filled with fearless confidence.

Isn't it the lack of free and fearless confidence that keeps many of us from presenting the Gospel to people we meet; even to family and friends? How often I've heard shy Believers explain that they don't see it as their job to present the Gospel because it's not how they are wired. Pastors, those trained in the Bible, and people with the gift of Evangelism are to do that. I'm sorry to tell you that this is not at all what Jesus or any of the writers of the New Testament instructed. Rather they agree unanimously that it is the responsibility of all Believers, without exception, to spread the Gospel. On the other hand I can assure you that spreading the Gospel has more to do with your personal countenance, your behavior, and your decision every day to live a life of holiness and righteousness than any persuasive words of the Good News you might utter. Nevertheless speech is important, and speaking the Gospel goes hand in hand with living it out for all to see. We aren't given the option of substituting one for the other or choosing to do only one or the other.

Beginning in verse 32 until the end of the chapter we are told how this spirit-filled community of Jewish Believers manifested their faith in their daily living. And it began with adopting a lifestyle much like the Essenes had been living for a few decades by now. That is, these Believers worked together with a remarkable selflessness and togetherness, and members even gave up rights to their own private property, sharing it with other members or selling it and using the proceeds for the good of the community. Unlike the Essenes, however, this sharing of private property was neither required nor forced, it was voluntary; a Believer was not compelled to sell or share his assets in order to become and remain a member of the Believing community in good standing.

It is interesting to me that the Kibbutzim of Israel generally live in this way to this day (and more strictly so a few decades ago). That is, no one in a Kibbutz owns property and assets

privately; it all belongs to the Kibbutz community. But then each member is provided housing, food, clothing, education, and almost all their needs. They work together for the common good. This isn't Communism whereby the national government owns everything and simply directs what everyone must do. Rather those who join a Kibbutz have this understanding of sharing for the common good from the beginning, and each Kibbutz is fully independent. So for those who have been to Israel and have seen Kibbutzim and know their lifestyle, what we are reading here in Acts 4 is a close parallel so it gives you a good way to visualize it.

This chapter ends with an example of the type of community spirit that the Believers in Jerusalem had. Yosef, who was a Diaspora Jew from the Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus, sold a field and gave the proceeds to the disciples to disperse as they saw fit. Interestingly he was not technically a Jew but rather was a Levite, and had been given the nickname of Bar Nabba meaning the Exhorter. I mentioned at another time that the Priesthood was at this time not operating at all according to the Torah regulations, but instead it went by manmade traditions. Levites, like Yosef, by Torah regulation were not supposed to own land. Levites had been given cities to live in and fields to be owned communally just outside those city walls. So it is apparent that other than for some of the ritual procedures, the Levitical laws concerning Levites and priests had become abandoned by Christ's era.

Let's read Acts chapter 5.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 5 all

It would have been far better not to put a chapter change between Acts 4 and 5 where it has been placed because it blunts the intended impact. We ended chapter 4 with a brief story about Yosef who sold a field and gave the money to the disciples for the good of the Believing community. Now to start chapter 5 we get a similar story although it is essentially designed to draw a contrast and distinction between the two situations that both involved selling personal property and giving proceeds to the disciples.

A man named Ananias (which was quite a common name in this era) and his wife Sapphira more or less tried to imitate what Yosef had done, but the less than honorable intent of their hearts was exposed and it resulted in their immediate deaths. We're going to examine this story in depth for a number of reasons; but one of the main reasons is that this is a story that has created much anxiety and embarrassment within Christianity because the consequence of death seems so harsh in comparison to the crime. That is, it is a Roman Christian tradition that the harsh merciless justice of the Old Testament and the Law has supposedly given way to the loving and forgiving justice of the New Testament and grace. Or to put a finer point on it, the God of the Old Testament, the Father, has been set aside for the God of the New Testament, Christ. And while the Father might quickly punish and chastise, Christ would only lovingly forgive us and so Believers bear no consequence for our sins. This is the classic case whereby false manmade doctrines are established but God's Word shows us something quite different. The result? A concerted effort to defend the manmade doctrine, and much confusion for Bible students.

Because God is a God of patterns we find a corollary to this story of Ananias and Sapphira in

the Old Testament. It concerns a man named Achan and we find it in Joshua chapter 7. Let's read it.

READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 7 all

So this fellow Achan took some of the spoils that belonged to God. This is a violation of the Law of Herem, also called the Law of the Ban. And the idea is that in a Holy War all the spoils of war belong to God. After a great victory at Jericho, when the spoils should have been piled up and burned (since burning them up was the only way to sanctify them and give them to God), a fellow named Achan misappropriated some of the spoils for himself. This act not only was personal sin; it had the effect of cursing all of Israel. Thus in their next attempted conquest, the city of Ai, the attack was a disaster and a failure. The enemy soldiers of Ai chased away the Israelites, killing several of them, and thus Ai was not taken. Joshua and the Israelites were devastated because they felt God had promised them victory. So how can they understand and explain this humiliating defeat?

God explained it to them; He said that someone had taken property, which belonged to Him, and that this person had to be identified and properly judged.

Achan turned out to be the culprit, he admitted his crime, and the result was that Achan and his entire family was stoned to death and the family's possessions along with their lifeless bodies were burned to ashes. So fire and burning can on the one hand sanctify (as we see in the Law of Herem), but on the other it can be used to utterly destroy (the consequence of the sin of not obeying the Law of Herem).

There is yet another OT principle and pattern that needs to be applied to our story of Ananias and Sapphira to help us understand God's severe reaction towards them. It involves the Biblical principle of vow offerings. And, once again, many denominations don't like this because in the mainstream, Christianity doesn't believe that anything of the Old Testament and the Law applies to New Testament Believers (and Ananias and Sapphira were, by Church standards, New Testament Believers). And yet what happened here is directly tied to the Law of making vows. And if we don't apply the Law of Herem and the Law of Vows to our story in Acts 5, then we can't make any sense of it. In Deuteronomy chapter 23 we learn this:

Deuteronomy 23:22-24 CJB

²² "When you make a vow to ADONAI your God, you are not to delay in fulfilling it, for ADONAI your God will certainly demand it of you, and your failure to do so will be your sin.

²³ If you choose not to make a vow at all, that will not be a sin for you;

²⁴ but if a vow passes your lips, you must take care to perform it according to what you voluntarily vowed to ADONAI your God, what you promised in words spoken aloud.

So to break the Law of Herem, or to break the Law of Vow offering, and not give to God what

was promised is classified as an intentional sin; or better for our English vocabulary, a high handed sin. It is the worst of the worst kind of sin and for this kind of sin there is no atonement available (at least not through the Law). I think it would be proper to define these sins, as with Ananias and Sapphira's sin, as blasphemy of the Holy Spirit of God, because in verse 4, the final words of Peter to Ananias are: "You have lied not to human beings but to God". And in verse 9 to Sapphira Peter says: "Then why did you people plot to test the Spirit of the Lord?" Listen to Christ's own words about this subject in Matthew 12:

Matthew 12:31-32 CJB

³¹ ***Because of this, I tell you that people will be forgiven any sin and blasphemy, but blaspheming the Ruach HaKodesh will not be forgiven.***

³² ***One can say something against the Son of Man and be forgiven; but whoever keeps on speaking against the Ruach HaKodesh will never be forgiven, neither in the 'olam hazeh (this world) nor in the 'olam haba (the world to come).***

So here is what happened with Ananias and Sapphira and why it happened: it followed the patterns that God had laid down. The first thing to recognize is that from the first moments of the inception of the body of followers of Christ, Believers were not perfect, nor did they become perfect. There is nothing here to indicate that Ananias and Sapphira's actions were those of pretenders; rather they were merely weak Believers.

Second, just as with Achan in the Book of Joshua, Ananias and Sapphira held back for themselves some of what now belonged to God. Why did the proceeds of the sale of their own property belong to God? Because they had made a show of selling their property and giving it all to the Believer's community; God saw this is a vow. But instead of following through they falsely reported the selling price, and then gave that lesser amount to the disciples keeping the rest for themselves. It was a deception designed to make them look good in front of everyone.

The Deuteronomy 23 passage we read says that no one is required to make a vow; that is strictly up to the individual. But, once the vow is made, God will hold us to it. Yeshua speaks about making vows in this way:

Matthew 5:33-37 CJB

³³ ***"Again, you have heard that our fathers were told, 'Do not break your oath,' and 'Keep your vows to ADONAI.'***

³⁴ ***But I tell you not to swear at all- not 'by heaven,' because it is God's throne;***

³⁵ ***not 'by the earth,' because it is his footstool; and not 'by Yerushalayim,' because it is the city of the Great King.***

³⁶ ***And don't swear by your head, because you can't make a single hair white or black.***

37 Just let your 'Yes' be a simple 'Yes,' and your 'No' a simple 'No'; anything more than this has its origin in evil.

Ananias and Sapphira should have heeded their Master Yeshua. They had no need to vow to sell property and give it all to the Believers Community. Peter says in verse 4 of Acts 5: "Before you sold it, the property was yours; and after you sold it, the money was yours to use as you pleased." Ananias and Sapphira did nothing wrong in selling property and giving however much or little of it they preferred to the disciples. What they did would have been simple charity; what they did wrong was to turn voluntary charity into a sacred vow to give it all to their fellow Believers. The instant they did that, the proceeds of the sale belonged to God as His holy property. Ananias and Sapphira transferred ownership to the Lord (whether they realized that or not), and then took some of what was now God's holy property for themselves.

This is a lesson for us in modern times. Making a vow to God is a serious matter; it was then and remains so today. I'm not saying that if you break your vow that God will surely kill you; but He did choose to kill Ananias and Sapphira. And Jesus, knowing the hardness of our hearts....including the hearts of Believers.....strongly warned us to simply make our yes, yes and no, no without invoking a vow in the name of the Lord. Because then it changes the entire equation to something holy and therefore dangerous.

So what did God intend to accomplish with the dramatic deaths of the Blasphemers Ananias and Sapphira, beyond divine justice? Verse 11 gives us the answer. "As a result of this, great fear came over the whole Messianic community; and even over everyone who heard about it." I think if we are honest, we see a little of Ananias and Sapphira in ourselves. Who among us hasn't made a promise in our heart to do something righteous, or to not do something selfish or bad, and either changed our minds or forgotten all about it? Or even more, directed a prayer towards God that if He would do thus and so for us, then we would respond by doing thus and so for Him; and He did His part but we didn't follow through with our part. Besides, no matter how we look at the God principles involved with their deaths, doesn't it seem to our natural sense of fairness that receiving the death penalty for not turning over 100% of the proceeds of the sale of their own property to the Believing community is extreme?

I have little doubt that the Believers who witnessed or heard of this event truly understood the God principles about what happened with Ananias and Sapphira. Yet as F. F. Bruce said in his Commentary on Acts: "The fear which fell on the whole community suggests that many a member of it (like many an Israelite when Achan was exposed) had reason to tremble and think: There, but for the grace of God, go I". Amen to that.

The Holy Scriptures are there to inform, to inspire, but also to warn. So for those who still haven't been convinced, just yet, that God's laws and commandments from the Hebrew Bible are every bit as relevant and required of us to obey them as are the instructions to us from Christ and His Disciples in the New Testament, let the horrific deaths of Ananias and Sapphira.....followers of Christ.....be a lesson. Fear God.

We'll continue with Acts chapter 5 next week.