

Commentary

Important Background:

There's lots in this story that suggests Luke wants us to make connections between the NT church and the OT people of God:

- Luke keeps quoting the OT through the early chapters (eg 2:17, 25; 4:25 etc).
- this story of Acts 5:1-11 is remarkably similar to the story of Achan in Joshua 7 (eg the unusual word for 'kept back' [2, 3] only appears here in the whole of the NT, yet is the same word as Josh 7:1).
- 'testing the Lord' (9) is exactly what Israel did in the desert (cf Exod 17:1-7).
- 'no needy person among them' (4:34) is just what Deut 15:4 says will be the blessing God will give in the Promised Land, if Israel do as he commands.
- this passage is the first time Luke uses the word 'church' (11) in Acts: for its OT pedigree, we have to go back to the Israelites standing around Mt Sinai.

32 is very similar to the 'fellowship' described in 2:42-47. It may even be that this whole passage is an expanded version of 2:42-47 explaining more fully why everyone was 'filled with awe' (2:43).

Is Luke making the point that this lifestyle is a fruit of the Spirit's work? In Acts 2, the coming of the Spirit produced bold evangelism and the church life of 2:42-47; in Acts 4, the Spirit fills the praying believers (31) who speak boldly and live together as 4:32f describes. Similarly, in Acts 2, it's those who 'received his word' (41) who 'received the Holy Spirit' (38), and the generous church was 'devoted to the apostles' teaching' (42); in Acts 4, at the heart of the generosity was 'the apostles giving testimony' (33).

The phrase 'had everything in common' (cf 2:44) does not mean there was no private ownership in the church; there clearly was (cf 34b-37; 5:1) and some continued to have homes for the benefit of the church (2:24; 12:12). Maybe that's the point: no-one held onto their possessions selfishly, but instead treated them as something for sharing.

34 'There was not a needy person among them' is strikingly similar to Deut 15:4. Although 'there will never cease to be poor in the land' (15:11 ie the need will not be totally eradicated), one of the blessings God promised obedient Israel is that 'there will be no poor among you' (4 ie you should set things up in the land to meet this recurring need). The basis for this generosity is redemption (15). In the same way, the mark of the redeemed in the New Covenant is that poverty was history!

God's intention was that the surrounding nations would look at the life of Israel and see how good it is to live as God's people, and want to know more (which is why the Queen of Sheba's visit is the high point of the nation cf 1 Kings 10). Here, that blessing is now being realised in the church (cf Isaiah 42:2; 49:6; Matt 5:14-16; 1 Peter 2:9-12).

35 There are several mentions of 'the apostles' feet' (cf 37, 5:2). This is not to make a point about their leadership style (as if they insisted everyone grovelled before them), but that their role was as 'witnesses': the church grew together in and through the teaching of the apostolic gospel, as it was faithful to what they preached. Their leadership and authority was because of the word they preached.

36-37 Barnabas is given as one example of this extraordinary generosity. (Cf 9:26-27; 11:22-26; 14:20-23; 15:36-40 for other references to him.)

5:2 It's worth being clear what the problem is. Ananias and Sapphira are clearly not being miserly (since they too bring the proceeds of a capital sale). Maybe their actions are motivated by jealousy of Barnabas (perhaps wanting some of the approval he'd gained)? But what is wrong is that they lie about how much they got for the field: they give some of the proceeds claiming that it's the lot (which only becomes clear in v8). There was no compulsion on them to sell the field, and having sold it there was no compulsion on them to give all the money (4). But there were wrong to lie about it (4).

The 'crime' is described in three ways: lying to the Holy Spirit (3), lying to God (4), testing the Spirit of the Lord (9). There is no doubt that the church is far more than a human institution: to play with God's people is to play with the holy God.

5, 10 The punishment is stark and terrible. There are many NT passages that explain that (church) discipline is necessary (cf Hebrews 12:1-14; Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:12-11; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thess 3:6-15; 1 Tim 1:12; 5:19-20; Titus 3:9-11), and perhaps 1 Cor 5:13 is clearest: 'purge the evil person from among you' because 'a little leaven leavens the whole lump' (6). Obviously drastic (and public) steps like these are preceded by lesser (and private) steps, and always there should be a longing for repentance, restoration and to bring the brother back.

But that still doesn't explain why on this occasion God brings such terrible punishment on this couple. Acts 5 is not a unique NT example (eg 1 Cor 11:30 explains that 'many of you are weak, ill and some have died' because it seems as if the way the Christians in Corinth conducted themselves during the Lord's Supper was denying the social-division-destroying unity of the gospel). Perhaps here in Acts 5, the significance is similar to Achan in Joshua 7 (whose sin is connected to the destruction of Jericho, right at the very start of the conquest of the land). In other words, the first occurrence of sin is the point for God to make it unmistakable how he views it: there can be no doubt after Acts 5 that God thinks sin in the church is very, very serious indeed.

5, 11 'Fear' is the reaction (and is also a regular response to the words and acts of God in Luke's gospel cf 1:12, 65; 2:9; 5:26; 7:16; 8:25, 35, 37; 9:34, 45; 21:26 and also in Acts 2:43; 9:31; 19:17) and it's appropriate.

Group Study Outline

Acts 4:32-5:11 Theme Sentence

The church of Jesus is to be holy, and so be a place of blessing

Launching Question:

What is your reaction when you hear public news of some church scandal?
Why do you consider it such a bad thing?

The church is to be a place of blessing

READ Acts 4:32-37

In v 31, the believers are filled with the Holy Spirit: what evidence of his work is there in v 32-37?

What does Luke say was the blessing of such extraordinary generosity?

This is very similar to Deut 15:4: why is that significant?

Why do you think money is 'laid it at the apostles feet' (35, 37)?

Thinking it through

What do you think we could learn, here at Emmanuel, from this example?
How could we be generous like this? What is the point of application to us?
Should we be giving from our capital rather than just our income?
How could we bless one another like this?

The church is to be a holy people

READ Acts 5:1-11

Ananias and Sapphira are also generous (2): so what is it that is so wrong?

In what ways are they lying to God and testing the Holy Spirit?

And why make this point: isn't lying to the apostles bad enough?!

Look back at the story in Joshua 7. How are the two stories similar?
Luke clearly intends us to understand the death of Ananias and Sapphira as divine judgement: why is God so severe?

Why does it matter that God's people are holy (and seen to be holy)?

Can the Christian church be a blessing if we're not holy? (what is this 'holiness'? are we asking for perfection?)

Thinking it through

What do we learn here about the gravity of their sin? why is it so serious?
Why is it necessary to 'purge the evil person from among you' (1 Cor 5:12)?
How might this affect how Christians today behave towards one another?
Is church discipline an out-dated concept?
When is it tricky/dangerous?

In what ways can we make holiness our serious intent as a church (without employing 'morality traffic wardens' or the thought police!)?

Can sinners ever 'rebuke' a fellow Christian? won't it always be hypocritical?

What do you think we could learn, here at Emmanuel, from this example?

In what ways does this passage show both the advancing gospel of Acts, and the threats to that advance?

Acts 4:32-5:11



The story so far ...

The ascending Lord Jesus promised to send his Holy Spirit to equip his church to be his witnesses 'in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (1:8). This sets the scene for what the rest of Acts describes.

The story unfolds in chapter 2 as the Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus (which is why the book can be fairly described as 'what Jesus continued to do' cf 1:1).

By chapter 4, we are still in the 'Jerusalem' stage of the gospel's advance (cf 6:7 for the conclusion to that section), but already we have seen remarkable church growth from 120 (1:15) to 3,000 (2:41) to 5,000 (4:4). Alongside this remarkable growth, there are serious threats:

- 3:1-4:31 describes the threat of **persecution** from outside the church, from the religious authorities. As a sign (4:16), Peter heals a lame man in the name of Jesus (3:6, 16), but the apostles face opposition to the name of Jesus (4:17-18) (- the name 'by which we must be saved' 4:12) as Peter explains the sign by 'proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead' (4:3). (This theme is repeated in 5:17-42.)
- 4:32-5:11 describes the threat of **subversion** from inside the church: the ideal of the church being attractive to the outsider, 'having favour with all the people' (2:47), is in danger from moral compromise.
- 6:1-7 will describe the threat of competing **priorities** (similar to those Jesus faced in Mark 1:33-39 ... will the hear-and-now demands of this world crowd out the preaching of the gospel?).

Behind all this, we must recognise Satanic attack, in all its varied forms. Wherever the gospel is advancing, Satan will try any old tactic to stop it.

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Acts 4:32-5:11 Theme Sentence

The church of Jesus is to be holy, and so be a place of blessing

Application

- How is God's intention to being his blessing to the world through his church being worked out in Emmanuel? **Is our church a blessing?**
- Generosity** should mark church life ... are there more ways in which I/we could share what we have rather than holding on to it all selfishly?
- Do I **hate sin and pursue holiness** in my life for the sake of the church? Perhaps I'm too lax about such things because (like Ananias and Sapphira) I think I can get away with it!
- God hates **hypocrisy and deceit**: do I hate it as much as he does?