

Audio Transcript of Sermon
December 19, 2020
Acts-Stephen

Hello. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Tom Laign with Sabbath Bible Study. As we concluded our continuing study of the Book of Acts last time, we saw how the brethren were selling their goods and had all things in common, and that because of the generosity, everybody's needs were met. Some have looked at the early actions of the church as a reason to support certain political ideologies. The reality is if everyone sold everything they owned, soon there would be nothing left to provide any support as everyone would be in need. People were most likely selling property and household items they no longer needed and pledged the sales proceeds to the church, almost like what in the United States would be called a garage or yard sale. It seems like everybody was honest and followed through with donating the sales proceeds to the church with the exception of a husband and wife, Ananias and Sapphira.

They sold land they no longer needed to support the church, and together knowingly did not contribute the entire sales amount to the church. They held on to part of the money for reasons that are not given to us. We do know that when they gave the money to Peter, Peter asked them why Satan had filled their heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and withhold part of the money. Peter explained that it was their choice whether to sell the land, and after it was sold it was their choice what to do with the money. He asked them why they had lied to God in withholding money.

From the passage, we can't determine if Ananias and Sapphira misrepresented the amount of money they were donating to the church. Maybe they told the apostles they were donating, for example, two hundred silver coins and in reality were only donating one hundred ninety silver coins. Maybe they stated they would donate the entire sales price to the church and didn't do this. Exactly how Ananias and Sapphira conspired to lie to the Holy Spirit and to God we can't tell. Acts five verse one.

Acts 5:1-11

1. But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession,

2. And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

3. But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?

4. Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was 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.

The consequence for Ananias was swift. He dropped dead right then and there and everyone took notice. Younger men who were there took it upon themselves to bury his body and a few hours later Sapphira came looking for her husband. Peter asked her if she and her husband had sold the land for a certain amount, to which Sapphira agreed. Peter then told her the fate of death that had fallen on her husband would also be her fate, and Sapphira died. From the dialog between Peter and Sapphira, again, we cannot tell for certain if Sapphira and Ananias misrepresented the value of coins being donated or if there was a misrepresentation of the sales price of the land. We do know that like her husband, Sapphira dropped dead and was soon buried. Verse five.

5. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.

6. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

7. And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in.

8. And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much.

9. 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.

10. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.

11. And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

We know from the teachings of Jesus, that Jesus taught that our yes needs to be yes and that our no needs to be no, because it is by our words we will be judged. Matthew five beginning with verse thirty-seven.

Matthew 5:33-37

33. Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths:

34. But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:

35. Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.

36. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black.

37. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

Today we think of people taking an oath in a court of law or as they assume public office. There are many ways we can swear without even thinking about it. For instance, if we verbally commit to something we have effectively said yes we will do this and we need to follow through with whatever we verbally commit to. Legally, the standard may require a written agreement, or legally, a written agreement will have more weight than a verbal agreement. For Christians, the standard for us is our word is our bond. When we say we will or will not do something, we need to uphold that standard and follow through with our verbal agreement. From the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we cannot tell if they lied about the value of coins being donated or if there was an issue with them sticking with their word. We do know how God responded to the deception of Ananias and Sapphira and what Jesus taught, and we must do what Jesus taught.

Back in the Book of Acts we next find the apostles through signs and wonders captivating the people at the temple and word of these miracles began to spread. More and more people started believing, so many that a number is not given. Just like Jesus was known to heal people, the apostles were known to be able to heal the sick, and people brought sick people to them and close to them just with the belief that if Peter's shadow fell on the sick person it would cause the sick person to be healed. Intellectually, we could debate whether these people had faith or were just trying to get a result for the sick person, and what cannot be denied is that they took action based on their belief. Similarly today, we cannot ascribe

selfish motivations to an act of faith. We must recognize that all people are inherently selfish and that it is through faith we grow in the ability to care for and love others. Every person who came to Jerusalem to be healed was healed. Acts five verse twelve.

Acts 5:12-42

12. And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch.

13. And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them.

14. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.)

15. Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them.

16. There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one.

It did not take long for the high priest and the Sadducees to become angry, because these people came to Jerusalem to see Peter and the apostles to be healed and not them. They saw themselves as the religious authority and Peter and the apostles as in open rebellion and had them jailed. Because it was not God's will for Peter and the apostles to be in jail, God sent an angel to open the prison doors and gave them a command to go back to the temple and preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God and the resurrection from the dead. The angel was telling them that even though God had spared them from prison, they were to go right back to where they were and continue doing what they did to originally get placed in prison. The high priest was unaware of what had happened and had assembled his religious council and called the civil leaders to the meeting as well and sent for the prisoners. Verse seventeen.

17. Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation,

18. And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison.

19. But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said,

20. Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.

21. And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught. But the high priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

The apostles were not found in the prison which was confusing because the prison officials confirmed that the doors were locked and guards were posted outside the exits, yet the men were not found in the prison. As this information was shared with the high priest and the religious and civil authorities, they began to wonder what other problems this latest story would cause for them, and then word got back to them that the apostles were already teaching back at the temple. The apostles were brought back to the council without any physical altercation because the council knew the people would be angry with them to the point of death if anything happened to the apostles. Verse twenty-two.

22. But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told,

23. Saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within.

24. Now when the high priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow.

25. Then came one and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people.

26. Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned.

With the apostles before the council the high priest asked the apostles if they had in fact been told to not preach about Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, and the Kingdom of God, and that they had in fact done just this. They told the apostles that the apostles were preaching in an effort to bring guilt on the religious and civil authorities for the death of Jesus. Peter spoke for the apostles and told the council that they needed to obey God rather than men, the God who brought Jesus to earth and raised Him from the dead, that they were sharing with the world what they had observed and were now filled with the Holy Spirit. Verse twenty-seven.

27. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them,

28. Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.

29. Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

30. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.

31. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.

32. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

Imagine if you were the high priest or one of these council members who believed the apostles were religious rebels who had just claimed to have the very essence of God, the Holy Spirit, within them. How do you think you might feel? The high priest and council members became enraged and began talking about how the apostles should be put to death, remembering that throughout Jerusalem were people who they also feared would seek their death if anything happened to the apostles.

Given a choice between two potentially bad outcomes, it was Gamaliel, a well-educated Pharisee, a professor of the law that proposed a more cautionary approach. Gamaliel told the council to take caution before bringing any harm to the apostles. He reminded them of others who falsely claimed divine intervention, such as Theudas who before his death had more than four hundred followers and who after death had his followers scatter to the four winds of the planet never to be seen again.

He reminded them of Judas of Galilee who amassed a large following, and how after his death his followers became nothing. He added that if what the apostles were doing was solely of men, they too would come to nothing, and then he told them that if what they were doing was supported by God what they were doing could not be overthrown by them. After hearing Gamaliel's advice, the council decided to spare the life of the apostles, and instead warned them to not preach about Jesus, the resurrection from the dead, and the Kingdom of God, and then

beat them before letting them go. Naturally, the apostles continued to preach. Verse thirty-three.

33. When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them.

34. Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space;

35. And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men.

36. For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought.

37. After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed.

38. And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought:

39. But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

40. 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.

41. And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.

42. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.

As the early church grew a concern arose among the brethren. People of European descent were claiming discrimination against people of Hebrew descent citing a difference in how widows of European descent were cared for compared to widows of Hebrew descent. The first recorded controversy of the church was a controversy about race and ethnicity. Two thousand years later, society and the church still has controversies about race and ethnicity. Acts six verse one.

Acts 6:1-15

1. And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.

The apostles had it brought to their attention that they were ignoring the needs of widows of European descent and the situation caused a debate that led to the creation of the office of deacon within the church. In the creation of this office, the apostles addressed the immediate need of European widows but did not resolve the issue of racial and ethnic disparities. It would be a different time and place before Peter could even begin to understand how there was a need to change. The apostles asked the disciples to find seven men of good reputation who the people would choose to be deacons who could handle the day to day needs of the church so the apostles could tend to spiritual matters. The recent history of the church is that the ministry chooses the deacons and that is inconsistent with the practice of the early church where the people chose who would be deacons. Verse two.

2. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.

3. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

4. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

The people chose Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. The apostles prayed over the men and anointed them into the office of deacon and the church continued to grow. Verse five.

5. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:

6. Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

7. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Stephen stood out among all the deacons and representing the church in the community as he went about along with the other six disciples in caring for the widows of the church. He became known for wonders and miracles and like the apostles with the high priest, and like Jesus with the Pharisees, soon found himself at odds with the leaders of the synagogue. They understood he spoke with great wisdom and like they did with Jesus needed to set up false witnesses who accused Stephen of speaking blasphemy against the law of Moses and against God who testified against Stephen before the council. Verse eight.

8. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9. Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

11. Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

12. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

13. And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

14. For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

15. And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

After hearing the testimony of the false witnesses, the high priest asked Stephen to defend himself against the charges of blasphemy and Stephen began by giving a narrative of Abraham's calling and the birth of Isaac and Jacob. Acts chapter seven verse one.

Acts 7:1-60

1. Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

2. And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,

- 3. And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.**
- 4. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.**
- 5. And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child.**
- 6. And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years.**
- 7. And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.**
- 8. And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.**

Stephen explained how Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and how this betrayal would lead to the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. Verse nine.

- 9. And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,**
- 10. And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.**
- 11. Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance.**
- 12. But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.**
- 13. And at the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph's kindred was made known unto Pharaoh.**
- 14. Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to him, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls.**
- 15. So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers,**
- 16. And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor the father of Sychem.**

17. But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt,
18. Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph.
19. The same dealt subtilly with our kindred, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live.
20. In which time Moses was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months:
21. And when he was cast out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and nourished him for her own son.
22. And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.
23. And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel.
24. And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian:
25. For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.
26. And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?
27. But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?
28. Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday?
29. Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons.
30. And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush.
31. When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold it, the voice of the Lord came unto him,
32. Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then Moses trembled, and durst not behold.
33. Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground.
34. I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt.

35. This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush.

36. He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the wilderness forty years.

Stephen used the story of Moses to remind them that even Moses foretold of a prophet that God would raise up who like Moses would need to be heard. Stephen told the council that Moses was the person who had spoken to God and received the tablets of stone and reminded them of how the people back then turned their back on the God of heaven and instead worshipped a god, small g, made in the form of a golden calf, and how the children of Israel had later turned their back on God and had worshipped pagan gods, small g. Verse thirty-seven.

37. This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.

38. This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:

39. To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt,

40. Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.

41. And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

42. Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?

43. Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.

Stephen added that the very tabernacle and temple that was used for worship at that time was based on the design given to Moses, and how this temple had fallen into the hands of the gentiles who controlled Jerusalem even at the time of Jesus, when God had previously driven the gentiles out of the land during the time of

David. Reviewing history, he explained how David had found favor with God and through this favor was established that Solomon his son would build the temple. He then reminded them that the God of heaven does not need to be bound within the walls of a house because God's throne is not within the temple but in heaven, that the very materials that were used to make God's house were originally created by God. Verse forty-four.

44. Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen.

45. Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David;

46. Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob.

47. But Solomon built him an house.

48. Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet,

49. Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?

50. Hath not my hand made all these things?

Stephen then made a statement reflecting on the lesson learned from history, stating that people resisted the will of God, betrayed the will of God including betraying Jesus who Stephen referred to as the Just One, who was betrayed and murdered by people, disobeyed the law as given by God. Because these people saw themselves as the religious authorities, they had decided long ago through their hierarchal system of governance that what they did was holy and just before God. Stephen was pointing out an error in their understanding and would pay a heavy price for his honesty. Verse fifty-one.

51. Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

52. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:

53. Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.

The council was angry hearing what Stephen said because it directly challenged what they believed. They believed they were the only true religious authority and would not tolerate disobedience to their teachings and religious concepts. They were snarling mad by this point at what Stephen was telling them as they attempted to reconcile the truth that Stephen was sharing with what they had previously accepted as truth. It was in this moment of emotional and intellectual uncertainty that Stephen had a vision of heaven. By this time he was no longer looking at the people before him and was looking up to heaven, and he saw the glory of God with Jesus standing next to God.

Stephen shared this vision with the people in front of him telling them that he saw heaven opened with the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. This was the group that had already determined that Jesus was a blasphemous person to their religious authority while unable to explain any of the miracles performed by Jesus or even the apostles. Verse fifty-four.

54. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

55. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

56. And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

This infuriated the council so much that they cried out with a loud voice, because they had had enough. No longer would they allow this man to threaten their religious authority, that because of the political climate ensured the religious elites a level of civil control. The council ran to Stephen just like a mob out of control and took him out of the city where they stoned him to death. The witnesses to this stoning laid down their clothes at the feet of Saul, who would go on to be the apostle Paul. Verse fifty-seven.

57. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

58. And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

As they stoned Stephen he called upon God knowing he would soon die and asked Jesus to receive his spirit. His final words as a mortal man was to ask God to forgive these people for what they did, and Stephen said this loudly so that all could hear. Stephen then died. Verse fifty-nine.

59. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

60. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

The early church continued to grow even though it had faced its first controversy with widows stemming from a claim of discrimination based on race and ethnicity. This claim led to the establishment of the office of deacon, where the men were selected by the people and ordained by the priests, and one of these deacons, Stephen, would go on to die a martyr because his work as a deacon gave him many opportunities to act with not only believers, but the non-believers including the religious authorities of the day.

Thank you for joining us today. God-willing we'll get together next time on the Sabbath. Until then, thank you for joining us today.