

## Acts 5 • What to Expect from the Enemy

### Introduction

As we have often pointed out, Satan has two common modes of attack: deception from within as typified by his working as a serpent, and persecution from without as typified by his working as a dragon. This corresponds to the two most dominant characteristics of Satan that he is a liar and a murderer. Even in the earliest days of the Church we can see him operating in both spheres. What he cannot accomplish through deception he will always continue to pursue through persecution.

<sup>1</sup>But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup>and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.

### The Opposition from Within

#### [Read v.1-2]

#### Q: Who is Satan using to hinder the work of the Lord?

A: He is using believers within the Body of Christ.

**Point:** The kind of deception that is most effective against believers actually comes from within. This is why Scripture so often warns us about false teachers, false prophets, and even false apostles (Mt. 7:15; Mt. 24:11, 24; 2. Pe. 2:1; 1 Jn. 4:1; 2 Co. 11:13). These are all examples of the wolves in sheep's clothing we are warned about. (Mt. 7:15; Acts 20:29)

#### Q: What do you suppose motivated Ananias and Sapphira to do this?

A: It is most likely that they wanted to win a reputation for being more spiritual than they actually were. This probably makes more sense when we consider what just happened in the preceding chapter. It is likely that they became jealous to obtain the same kind of recognition.

*For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

— Acts 4:34–37

#### Q: Is their sin stealing from God?

A: No, Peter will specifically refute that in v.4. Their sin was hypocrisy, trying to appear more spiritual than they really were.

**Application:** Spiritual deception is not limited to subscribing to a false doctrine or joining a cult or false religion. It can simply be twisting a legitimate thing so that it is no matter used to glorify God, but to glorify self. This was the nature of the very first deception the serpent perpetrated in the garden.

#### [Read v.3-4]

#### Q: What spiritual tool is Peter using to expose what is going on?

A: He is using spiritual discernment.

**Point.** What people often refer to as the "gift of discernment" as spoken for through Paul in 1 Cor. 12:10 is actually translated in the NASB as "distinguishing of spirits". It refers to the God-given insight as to whether something is from God, from Satan, or born from the flesh.

<sup>3</sup>But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? <sup>4</sup>While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

**Q: What is the “moral of the story”, so to speak, about all sin? Is it possible to permanently hide it?**

A: Ultimately every sin is discovered one way or another. Even on rare occasions where someone is able to keep it secret in this life, it will be revealed at God’s judgment for the next. But it is worth noting that sin within the church always gets exposed because sooner or later the Holy Spirit-filled believers will uncover it.

**Q: What is the bottom line truth Peter teaches about sin?**

A: Although it may affect others as it is carried out, it is ultimately a crime committed against God Himself. We saw the same teaching in David’s confession of his sin with Bathsheba.

*For I know my transgressions,  
And my sin is ever before me.  
Against You, You only, I have sinned  
And done what is evil in Your sight,  
So that You are justified when You speak  
And blameless when You judge.  
— Psalm 51:3–4*

**Application:** *Spiritual deception is actually something that comes about because someone first allows unresolved sin to reside in their life. This is why it is ultimately an issue between them and God even though they may injure many people along the way – sin can only be committed against God alone.*

**[Read v.5-11]**

<sup>5</sup>And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup>The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

<sup>7</sup>Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup>And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?”

And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”

<sup>9</sup>Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.”

<sup>10</sup>And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup>And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

**Q: Why doesn’t God immediately strike dead every similar kind of sinner?**

A: God provides an example by which everyone from that point on must take as a warning of what will ultimately happen. Just as He struck Sodom and Gomorrah to show how that sinful behavior will ultimately suffer His judgment by fire, so here He provides the example of what inevitably happens to those who lie to Him.

**Q: How might this illuminate the kind of judgment Christ will exercise at His Second Coming?**

*From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.*

— Revelation 19:15

**Q: Why should this story sound very familiar to us? How did this similarly happen to Israel under Joshua?**

A: Here we have something happening at the beginning of the Church which parallels something that happened at the beginning of the conquest of Canaan by the faithful generation of Israelites, the sin of Achan as recorded in Joshua 7. In that account the covetous Achan tried to hide sin from God and was made a very public example to God’s people. Likewise here we have a very visible object lesson of that same behavior.

**Application:** *While a worldly definition of “deception” is to be unwittingly tricked or conned, the biblical definition of “deception” is the inevitable destination of allowing sin to go unaddressed, ultimately resulting in God’s judgment.*

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<sup>12</sup>At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. <sup>13</sup>But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. <sup>14</sup>And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number, <sup>15</sup>to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. <sup>16</sup>Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

### **[Read v.12-16]**

**Q: Could what is taking place now be related to what just happened with Ananias and Sapphira?**

A: What may be inferred here is what happens when an assembly of God's people are purged of sin, that they become unified, magnified, and ultimately multiplied. The personal spirituality is reflected in their public testimony and effectiveness.

**Q: What might be gleaned from v.13 in terms of human relationships?**

A: The church must have standards and the Spirit must lead. These early believers pursued their ministry according to God's Word and ways regardless of who did or did not join them directly.

**Application:** *The argument could be made that contrary to today's thinking that church should be "seeker sensitive" to make visitors comfortable, the biblical model of church operates according to the Spirit regardless of others' comfort level.*

**Q: This is a little tricky, but in today's Western thinking, how might the example here contradict our tendency to implement ministry through programs?**

A: True and effective ministry comes about as the result of personal faithfulness, not step-by-step programmatic planning. It is the real-life application of Jesus' teaching, "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much". (Lk. 16:10) No matter how well planned, true ministry can never take place in the absence of personal faithfulness.

**Application:** *It is a telling and repeated pattern both within Scripture and the whole of human history that because revivals and effective outreaches all begin with a return to the work of the cross and the Word, that the purging of sin and deception within an assembly of God's people results in the most effective ministries.*

<sup>17</sup>But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. <sup>18</sup>They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. <sup>19</sup>But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, <sup>20</sup>"Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life." <sup>21</sup>Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak and began to teach.

### **Opposition from Without**

#### **[Read v.17-21a]**

**Q: Why is it significant that the main instigators are identified as "the Sadducees"?**

A: In reality, by all biblical standards and through their various confrontations with Jesus, they were not actually believers. They did not hold to any of the Scriptures outside of the five books of the Torah, they did not believe in a resurrection, prophecy, or the supernatural working of God, and represent what continue with us today as "liberal theologians". While the Gospels record that there were some Pharisees who came to accept Jesus, there is no record of a Sadducee ever doing the same. While Jesus agreed with some teachings of the Pharisees, He never once agreed with any teaching of the Sadducees and actually corrected them openly.

**Point:** *Never be surprised if persecution is initiated by someone claiming to do it in God's name. Having successfully deceived a group claiming to be part of the church, that group will ultimately come to persecute the church.*

**Q: Why might it be significant that the Sadducees “put them in a public jail”?**

A: They obviously did not use the internal, religious sources available to them such as the temple guard. They are in league with the secular government to accomplish their goals. This would also make the Apostles look more like common criminals than someone charged for their spiritual beliefs.

**Point:** *Never be surprised if self-appointed religious groups align themselves with the government to persecute the true Church; when they are no longer effective by themselves they will always align their selves with anyone who will help them.*

**Q: Why were they freed from prison? Was it to be personally rescued and secured from danger?**

A: They were freed in order to go about their original calling to preach “the whole message of this Life”.

**Application:** *The ultimate goal of spiritual persecution is always to hinder the preaching of the Gospel.*

**[Read v.21b-26]**

Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent orders to the prison house for them to be brought. <sup>22</sup>But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, <sup>23</sup>saying, “We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside.”

<sup>24</sup>Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. <sup>25</sup>But someone came and reported to them, “The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”

<sup>26</sup>Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned).

**Q: What can we probably expect from the spiritually deceived who persecute us?**

A: Their behavior in all likelihood will not change. Even if they are presented with the incontrovertible evidence of Christ's working, they will dismiss it in various ways and immediately return to persecuting the Elect.

**Q: Why do you suppose that is?**

A: It is important to always remember that their actions are born out of a life which refused to address some kind of personal sin in their life. Signs – no matter how powerful or indisputable – mean nothing to an unrepentant heart.

**Q: How is this actually revealed in their response according to v.24?**

A: They were “greatly perplexed about... what would come of this”. In other words, they did not doubt that it happened, but rather their first worry was how this might damage their position and reputation – how it might be used against them.

**Q: What other personal characteristic is revealed about our persecutors in v.26?**

A: They are more worried about the opinions of man than the opinions of God.

**Application:** *Persecutors are never interested in the truth, only in silencing the truth. They are far more interested in how it makes them look.*

**[Read v.27-32]**

<sup>27</sup>When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup>saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.”

<sup>29</sup>But Peter and the apostles answered,

**Q: How are the hearts of the persecutors exposed?**

A: They refer to Jesus as “this name” and “this man's blood”. They are incapable of even pronouncing Jesus' name.

**Q: But how does this serve as a double indictment against them?**

A: In the course of persuading Pilate to crucify Jesus they screamed, “His blood shall be on us and on our children!” (Mt. 27:25) Now their position

“We must obey God rather than men.  
<sup>30</sup>The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. <sup>31</sup>He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup>And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

is stated in a way so as to be completely opposite. They are hypocrites in every possible way.

**Point:** *Persecutors of the true Church may claim some kind of spiritual heritage which they think gives them an air of legitimacy, but in reality they have no reverence, much less love, for Christ. They want to see Christians just as dead as the way they have personally murdered Christ in their own life.*

**Q: Why was it important for Peter to state, “We must obey God rather than men”?**

A: It is the politest way possible to explain to the persecutors that in reality they have no authority.

**Q: How does Peter deal with the accusation that the Apostles “intend to bring this man’s blood upon us”?**

A: He does not excuse them from this responsibility but actually states, “Jesus, whom you had put to death”. (v.30) Peter never flinches from the truth.

**Q: What might we learn from Peter’s response as to what is the appropriate response in the midst of persecution?**

A: To respond with the truth by taking the opportunity to preach the essential elements of the Gospel:

1. “...obey God rather than men.” (v.29)
2. Jesus was crucified to death but raised to life by God. (v.30)
3. Jesus has been exalted by God for the purpose of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. (v.31)
4. Our personal lives testify to the proof of the working of these things. (v.32)

**Application:** *Persecution is an opportunity to preach the Gospel in any and every circumstance.*

<sup>33</sup>But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. <sup>34</sup>But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. <sup>35</sup>And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. <sup>36</sup>For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. <sup>37</sup>After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. <sup>38</sup>So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; <sup>39</sup>but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.”

**[Read v.33-40]**

**Q: What seems wise about Gamaliel’s advice from a spiritual perspective?**

A: He is advising them not to engage in any action, sinful or otherwise, but to remain neutral to find out whether God was in this movement or not.

**Q: While that might be comforting in terms of providing an immediate relief from persecution for believers, why is this not really good advice for the persecutors and Council personally?**

A: First, no one can remain neutral about Christ. His entire earthly ministry is characterized by the sides people took as to whether He was the Messiah or not. Second, the signs and wonders not just of the prison incident but the activities of Christ through the disciples (which by the way are historically documented by the authorities of the time in the Jewish Talmud as all being factually true) testify that there is nothing further needed. Gamaliel is actually like the many Pharisees during Jesus’ ministry who after seeing a sign or miracles would immediately say, “Show us another”.

**Q: What does the history lesson about the false Messiahs of their day in the example of Theudas and Judas tell us about the spirituality of Gamaliel and the Pharisees?**

A: While they may have been wise and understanding in some areas, unlike the followers of Christ they were incapable of distinguishing

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<sup>40</sup>They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them.

between false Messiahs and the true One.

**Application:** *This is often a problem encountered when persecution comes from those claiming a religious pedigree, because being spiritually blind they assume everyone else is as well.*

**Q: How is the goal of persecution characterized in the authorities' final disposition of the Apostles?**

A: They "ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus". (v.40)

**Application:** *Persecution is always designed to silence the messengers from presenting the Message.*

**[Read v.41-42]**

<sup>41</sup>So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. <sup>42</sup>And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

**Q: What can we learn from their personal response to persecution?**

A: Although beaten before released, they went away in joy. Just because they suffered hardship they did not see this as a defeat.

*Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.*

— *Philippians 1:27–30*

**Q: How did the ministry of the church proceed?**

A: Daily, in public, and in private homes. [Note: How many lessons might there be in this single verse for how and when "church" should be conducted?]

**Q: How did the message of the persecuted change as a result of the persecution?**

A: It never changed. It was the same before persecution, during persecution, and now after. They taught and preached the Gospel of "Jesus as the Christ".

**Application:** *The way we measure our relative success in the face of persecution is the degree to which we disallow any deviation from the preaching and testimony of the Gospel.*

## **Overall Application**

*The overall theme here is that the solution to both deception and persecution are the same: personal faithfulness. Addressing the issues of personal sin in our life not only prevents spiritual deception from taking hold, but places us in the best position for our ministry and testimony to be the most effective. When persecution inevitably comes, personal faithfulness empowers us to continue living exactly the same way in times of hardship as in times of peace. Personal faithfulness ensures that the Gospel, whether applied to our personal walk or as we witness of it to others, will never be diminished.*

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