

Acts 5:1-11

Spiritual warfare

(What does Satan want to do in and through us?)

See theology files #316, #317

Introduction

1. There are some passages in the Bible that leave us stunned and perplexed because they do not seem to fit our theological framework.
2. We will look at one such text today.

A. Satan's agenda

"¹ But a certain man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² 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. ³ 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? ⁴ "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." ⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ And the young men arose and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

⁷ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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 shall carry you out {as well}." ¹⁰ And she fell immediately 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. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.

Context

1. This text is difficult for one reason – It is assumed that God judges these two people and the judgment seems too harsh and unreasonable. Frankly, I have found the explanations offered by most commentaries to be inadequate. They usually suggest that the early church was fragile and there was a need for great integrity if the Gospel was to spread. God was therefore setting an example that would sober the early church. But I must ask, when did the agenda change so that such harsh judgment was no longer necessary? Why are deceivers not struck dead today? What of the grace of God offered through repentance and forbearance?
2. Critics have understandably found this story hard to reconcile with the graciousness of Jesus (toward Judas and Peter) and the Apostles toward other sinning believers (I Corinthians).

3. The story of Achan's sin in Joshua 7:1-26 uses the same language seen here. There is little doubt that the parallel is intentional on Luke's part. This does not help us in that we have the same questions about the actions of God concerning Achan.
4. The parallel with the account of Adam and Eve in Gen.3 is remarkable – both were connected with Satan, both lied, both disturbed the harmony of the community, both experienced death.
5. The first word “but” suggests a contrast with what has gone before.

#1 The father of lies (Jn.8:44).

1. Barnabas' generosity (4:36-37) and respect is to be contrasted with the Ananias and Sapphira's desire to share the respect without the generosity or integrity.
2. Were Ananias and Sapphira disciples of Christ? They are not identified as believers but they were associated with the church. There is so much in this story that we would like to know but cannot because of the brevity of the text.
3. We know that Christians can be sinners.
 - a. This is the first but not the last revelation of embarrassing behavior among believers.
 - b. It is clear that the N.T. not only teaches the existence of the carnal Christian (I Cor.3:1-3, Gal.5:16; Eph.5:18) but of true Christians who persisted in their carnality up to the point of physical death (I Cor.3:15; 5:5; 11:30; Heb.10:29; I Jn.5:16-17).
4. The sin is not just against the church. We can too easily reduce sins to their effect on other people and forget that any sin is an offense to God. There may be some sins that are (relatively) victimless but this does not mean that they are insignificant.
5. Money and honesty are big issues in our spiritual lives. The Scripture gives much attention to both.
6. Peter notes that the sin is against the Spirit vs.3 and God vs.4. This suggests that the Holy Spirit is equated with God.

#2 The angel of death (Jn.8:44).

1. The word for filling (vs.3) by Satan is the Greek word PLEROO which (when used of the Holy Spirit) suggests control through maturity of character (not a dramatic charismatic filling as in 4:31).
2. Peter makes a big issue of Ananias' responsibility for his actions even though Satan is at work in him. It was something that he had “conceived in his heart” vs.4.
3. The filling of Ananias by Satan tells us something about the nature of their relationship to Satan.
 - a. We have here a frontal attack on the church by Satan in the most dramatic but subtle way. Satan as the father of lies majors on deception and distortion just as the filling of the Spirit leads to seeing the truth of the resurrection and its implications for us.

- b. The filling, while empowering us in one direction, does not compel us to act in a certain way. Ananias was responsible for his actions.
- c. It is possible that this couple were in bondage to and under the control of Satan in the same way that the Spirit controls a mature believer. This would suggest that they might not have been believers at all. They are not introduced as believers.
- d. Satan's relation to Christians
 - 1. He deceives in regard to God's word (Gen.3; Matt.4:6).
 - 2. He bribes with material things (Lk.4:5-7).
 - 3. He sows "tares" (false believers) in the church (Matt.13:38).
 - 4. He accuses and slanders the believer (Rev.12:10).
 - 5. He incites persecutions (Rev.2:10).
 - 6. He tempts to lie (Acts 5:3; Jn.8:44).
 - 7. He works lying wonders (II Thess.2:9).
 - 8. He promotes anger (Eph.4:25-27).
 - 9. He takes advantage of our mistakes (II Cor.2:11).
 - 10. He comes as an angel of light (II Cor.11:13-15).
 - 11. He counterfeits God (Matt.13:25-28).

#3 The Proud Adversary (I Pet.5:8).

- 1. The context of I Peter 5:8 (5-9) suggests that "pride" is an issue where Satan tempts us. After all, it was pride that led to his fall.
 - a. **Ezekiel 28:11-19**
 - 1. This text deals with 3 subjects - Tyre, the king of Tyre, and Satan.
 - 2. Satan was an anointed cherub (vs. 14), created perfect (vs. 15), full of wisdom and beauty (vs. 12), until the sin of pride (vs.17) was found in him (vs. 15), resulting in his expulsion from heaven (vs. 16).
 - b. **Isaiah 14:12-17**
 - 1. This text deals with the expulsion of Lucifer (Satan) in greater detail
 - 2. Verse 17 suggests that his fall came between Genesis 1:1 and 2.
 - 3. Satan's motive was to be like "The Most High" (vs. 13-14), counterfeiting God (II Cor.11:14). His sin is described in I Tim.3:6 as pride.
- 2. When Peter points out to Ananias that his lie is a challenge to God, we get a hint at the proud spirit of Satan that is filling him.

B. Who done it?

- 1. What was the source of the fear that came over the people? Was it the fact that Peter was able to discern facts that were unknown to others apart from the Spirit? The fact that these

sudden deaths scared the believers is not hard to understand. What is hard to understand is the point of all this and how it fits our understanding of the graciousness of the gospel.

2. What was the source of the fear that came over the people? Was it the fact that Peter was able to discern facts that were unknown to others apart from the Spirit? The fact that these sudden deaths scared the believers is not hard to understand. What is hard to understand is the point of all this and how it fits our understanding of the graciousness of the gospel.
3. We have more questions than details from which we can understand all that is going on here. But we must conclude that there is a lesson to be learned from the details that we do have.
4. Are these sudden deaths a judgment by God, the work of Satan, or a collapse of the human soul because of shame?
 - a. Nowhere does the text say that the deaths are the result of God's judgment. It simply indicates that when these two individuals are exposed, they fall and die. Was it the shame, Satan, or God? We do not know. The text does not say that the multitude that heard about this feared **God**. It simply indicates that they were struck by fear. Could it be that they were afraid of what might happen within each of them should they find themselves in the same place? We do not know.
 - b. Every card that sin deals says "death" on it. To play in the card game of sin is to invite one's own death. The more one sins, the closer his or his death approaches (and the more miserable his or her present experience becomes). Being eternally secure does not exempt believers from the death-dealing consequences of sin.
 - c. It is quite evident that this description is not typical of what happens every time a believer is less than forthright in dealing with God. It does however send a message to all disciples that there are sins that can result in our destruction and death.
 - d. I am tempted to see the deaths as the result of Satan's work. This is what he wants to do with each believer – control (fill) them and then destroy them.
5. Could this be related to the sin unto death described in I John?
 - a. In I Jn.5:16-17 we read "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death."
 - b. There is nothing in this text that suggests that death is a judgment by God on certain sins and not on others. All sin leads to death but some sins can, by their nature, bring physical death while others do not. The death could be the "natural" and irreversible consequence of the sin.
 - c. In I Cor.11:30 we read "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep." In verse 29 it is explained that by abusing the Lord's Supper people bring judgment upon themselves. This is apparently what is illustrated in vs.30. Could it be that this self-imposed judgment is an act of self destruction? I don't know.

C. What is the point?

1. Spiritual warfare involves conflict with Satan. In this story we see direct and indirect evidence of Satan's agenda and the temptation that follows.
 - a. Satan traffics in distortions of the truth.
 - b. Satan wants to distort our hope, placing it in:
 1. **The respect and admiration of people.** In this case Ananias may have wanted the respect of Barnabas but without paying the price.
 2. **The temporal security of material wealth.** Ananias was wanting it both ways. He wanted to be respected by others as a member of the community but also wanted to have a hedge account running on the side.
 - c. Satan wants to destroy us. The death of Ananias and Sapphira may be a dramatic illustration of what Satan wants to do with all believers.
2. If we are to be wise in "resisting Satan" (I Pet.5:8) we should expect the battle to take place in these three areas.
 - a. Hedging the truth.
 - b. Living to win the respect of people more than God.
 - c. Finding security in things rather than God.