

Were Ananias and Sapphira Believers?

Were Ananias and Sapphira believers who were judged by God because of their blatant sin? According to one prominent pastor, they were not, since things like this do not happen to believers in Jesus, to those under grace, since the Lord already took our judgment on the cross. Is this pastor correct?

Actually, the text does not tell us explicitly whether they were believers or not, but without a doubt, this account was recorded as a lesson for all of us, and the New Testament makes very clear that the Lord sometimes judges His own blood-bought people who engage in blatant sin.

Are we willing to accept the testimony of the Word of God?

This pastor, who is a gifted teacher with many good things to say, claims that in Acts 5, it is “very clearly stated” that Ananias and Sapphira were not believers, and for him, the lesson we learn from this passage of Scripture is that God will judge those who try to hurt the church, which is “very consoling” for him.

Of course, the New Testament does say clearly, “If anyone destroys God’s temple [which refers to us, His people], God will destroy him” (1 Cor. 3:17, ESV), but again, that is not the lesson of Acts 5.

To be clear, nowhere does Acts 5 say that Ananias and Sapphira were not believers. It only says that they conspired to deceive. So, we are not told about whether they were unsaved deceivers or believers who conspired to deceive.

What we do know is that as a result of the judgment that fell on this couple, “great fear came upon the whole church and

upon all who heard of these things" (Acts 5:11). Great fear!

If this was God's protective hand, keeping the church from being deceived by this unsaved couple—as this pastor alleges, and which he finds "very consoling"—then why did "great fear" come "upon the whole church"?

For argument's sake, let's say that Ananias and Sapphira were not true believers. The church still saw this as an example of God's holiness and of the reality of the presence of His Spirit, as a result of which great fear came upon the believers (as opposed to great consolation).

What about this pastor's teaching that "even when you sin, there is no more judgment," because Jesus took our judgment on the cross?

Actually, the Word says that there is no condemnation—meaning final judgment, damnation—for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), so in that sense, absolutely, Jesus took our judgment at the cross. In Him, we will never be condemned, and that is something to shout about. Praise God for that!

But the New Testament plainly states that God does judge His people, meaning that He brings loving discipline and correction, sometimes sternly. And while it is gloriously true that our sins are forgiven in Jesus, there can be still consequences to our sins in this life, just as an alcoholic forgiven for decades of drinking may still develop cirrhosis of the liver.

Paul addresses the question of divine discipline in 1 Corinthians 11, where he rebukes the believers there because of their abuses at their communal meals where they partook of the Lord's Supper. Some were getting drunk on the wine while others were eating all the bread before the other hungry believers arrived, which made a mockery out of this sacred meal.

He wrote, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world" (vv. 27-32).

Some hyper-grace teachers argue vigorously that it was unbelievers at Corinth who got sick or died when they partook of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.

But the overall text of 1 Corinthians makes such an interpretation impossible, since Paul writes to the church (*ekklesia*) in Corinth, to those sanctified in Messiah Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 1:2), and every time he says "you" or "we" or "us," he is referring to believers, often in contrast with the lost. (See, for example, 1 Corinthians 5:9-10; 6:1-6; 14:23-26.)

The immediate context of 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 also makes clear that Paul is speaking about believers, referring to "many of you" being sick (with some even dying), speaking of the need for us to judge ourselves so that we will not be judged by the Lord, and stating clearly that when He does discipline us, it is so that we will not be "condemned along with the world." (This does not mean that God makes us sick; the sickness and dying were evidence of something being very wrong, pointing here to divine discipline.)

But these are not the actions of an angry, mean-spirited, fault-finding, nitpicky God. They are the actions of a compassionate and holy Father who loves us more than we could ever imagine and who, in strong actions motivated by love, sometimes disciplines us to keep us from destroying ourselves,

destroying others or bringing reproach to His name.

This should cause us to walk in holy fear—meaning reverential awe—before Him, as Peter wrote: “And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:17-19).

It was Peter who also wrote, “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Pet. 4:17).

Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 that the judgments God brought on the Israelites in the wilderness were written down for our benefit, so that we would not follow in their footsteps. May I quote a portion of this to you?

“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.’ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (vv. 6-12).

Why give these warnings if we could not possibly be judged (again, I didn’t say condemned) or disciplined by the Lord? And why did Paul say over and over again, “Don’t do this and don’t do that,” if, as is commonly taught by hyper-grace leaders,

the New Testament way of turning believers away from sin is to speak only of the goodness of God, since it is His goodness alone that leads us to repentance?

The fact is, just as the fear of the Lord came on Israel when Nadab and Abihu were judged in Leviticus 10 (for the context, be sure to read the previous chapters), the fear of the Lord came on the early church when Ananias and Sapphira were judged in Acts 5. This teaches us an important lesson about God's holiness, a lesson about the sacred responsibility of ministering before Him (see Lev. 10:3).

That's why Hebrews 12 closes with this exhortation for us as children of the new covenant, for those who have not come to Mount Sinai but to the heavenly Jerusalem: "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ... Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (vv. 25, 28-29; the CSB renders verse 28 with, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe.").

This too is part of the New Testament message of grace.

Will we receive it, or will we turn the Word on its head to conform it to what we already believe?

Please do give this prayerful consideration before the Lord. We cannot afford to trivialize these holy truths.

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