

## Acts 5:1-11

### Introduction

In this module, we explore a story from the New Testament where violence occurs under the watch of Jesus' followers.

### Orientation to the Text

The New Testament book of Acts tells how some of Jesus' earliest followers – known as “apostles” – spread the message about Jesus and repentance. This happens after Jesus' death and resurrection, and the text presents the apostles as guided and empowered in their work by the Holy Spirit.

The first part of the story takes place in Jerusalem, where the apostles, led by Peter, preach to the crowds and work miracles through God's power. Many people accept the message.

Just before the passage printed below, the story reports that there were no needy people in the group, because some people would sell land or houses that belonged to them and lay the proceeds at the apostles' feet, and the money would be distributed to any people in the group who had need (see Acts 4:32-37). Two of the characters in our passage – Ananias and Sapphira – seem to be members of the group, and do something similar.

The book of Acts was written in Greek in the first or early second century CE.

### Getting Familiar with the Text

*Read the short excerpt from Acts printed on the next page. As you read, answer the following questions, which are designed to help you get familiar with the contents of the text.*

1. According to the text, what do Ananias and Sapphira do that is problematic? (Pay special attention to Peter's remarks in verses 3-4.)
2. What happens as a result? Name at least two things.

**Acts 5:1-11 (translation: New Revised Standard Version)**

<sup>1</sup> A man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira,<sup>a</sup> sold a piece of property; <sup>2</sup> with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!"

<sup>5</sup> Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup> The young men<sup>b</sup> came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

<sup>8</sup> Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband 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, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."

<sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

**Digging Deeper**

*After discussing questions 1-2 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:*

3. What is your initial reaction to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in the story? What thoughts or questions do they raise for you? Discuss these with other members of your group.
4. Do you think your reaction to the story would be different if Ananias and Sapphira had been killed by physical force (for example, if Peter had physically struck them)? If so, how?

<sup>a</sup> The text does not say anything else about Ananias and Sapphira beyond what is included here.

<sup>b</sup> The text does not say who these "young men" are.

5. This story is found in the New Testament.
  - a. How do you feel about the fact that the New Testament contains this story? Discuss.
  - b. How do you think you would feel if the story was from the Muslim tradition and the main character was the Prophet Muhammad rather than the apostle Peter? Discuss.
  - c. How do you think you would feel if the main character was Moses rather than Peter? Discuss.
6. Suppose a friend asks you, “Do you think that the presence of this story in the New Testament might encourage people to be violent?” How would you respond?

### Further Reading

- To help put Acts 5:1-11 in context, you may enjoy reading the rest of the book of Acts, which is freely available on the internet. As you read, pay attention to other miraculous events that occur, and notice any similarities and differences.
- For other examples of miraculous “punishments” in the book of Acts, see Acts 12:20-23 and 13:4-12. What similarities and differences do you notice?

### Summary of Key Takeaways from this Module

- The New Testament contains stories where violence occurs under the watch of Jesus’ followers.
- Violence in scriptures is sometimes carried out physically by humans, and at other times without human physical action.

## Further Information for Leaders and Facilitators

### General Guidance

General tips and guidance about how to organize an event and facilitate discussion are contained in the *Scripture & Violence Event Leader's Guide*, available at [www.scriptureandviolence.org](http://www.scriptureandviolence.org).

While the current module can be used on its own, it may help the quality of your discussion to have your group watch the introductory videos on our website first, or to read some of our other introductory resources. Scriptural interpretation is a complex process, and the relationship between scriptural texts and real-world actions is multi-faceted. Our introductory resources give a brief overview of key concepts and ideas.

### Tips and Guidance on Module Questions

Here are some tips and guidance on the questions posed in this module.

In order to allow participants to make their own discoveries, it is best to read the scriptural passage and discuss the questions in an open-ended manner first, before referencing these notes. Often, group members will come up with these ideas themselves, as well as many other interesting thoughts and questions that are not discussed below.

This guidance is not meant as a set of “answers” that participants need to reach, but is designed to help leaders feel confident facilitating discussion. Leaders do not need to be “experts.” The group can have a stimulating discussion, even if some questions arise that no one in the group is able to answer.

Participants should generally be allowed to discuss freely. Leaders should draw upon the material in these notes primarily when the conversation gets stuck.

### *Getting Familiar with the Text*

1. *According to the text, what do Ananias and Sapphira do that is problematic? (Pay special attention to Peter's remarks in verses 3-4.)*

As participants may observe, it is not clear from the text whether Ananias and Sapphira are faulted for keeping back some of the proceeds of the sale, or only for lying about their actions. Are they *obligated* to hand over the entire sum? Or is the problem only that they attempt to *claim credit* for a more significant act of generosity than they had actually performed? Incidentally, most scholars today opt for the latter interpretation, that the couple sins only by acting deceitfully.

2. *What happens as a result? Name at least two things.*

Participants may ask what “fear” means in the passage, and notice that the exact connotations are not clear from the text. While it may involve some element of being “frightened,” the Greek word can also be used to denote “awe” and “reverence.” The same word appears in Acts 2:43, where the “awe” results from “wonders and signs” done by the apostles, which could include things like miraculous healings and exorcisms that do not involve any sort of “harm.” (See also Acts 19:17.)

### ***Digging Deeper***

3. *What is your initial reaction to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in the story? What thoughts or questions do they raise for you? Discuss these with other members of your group.*

Some participants may feel uncomfortable with the story. It can be helpful to discuss that openly.

4. *Do you think your reaction to the story would be different if Ananias and Sapphira had been killed by physical force (for example, if Peter had physically struck them)? If so, how?*

Question 4 encourages participants to think about whether they react differently to this scriptural text than to others where people are killed by physical force. This is especially important, because many people from Christian backgrounds think that the New Testament does not contain violent passages, and might draw contrasts with other scriptures in that regard.

As participants may notice, it is not clear from the passage what role Peter plays in the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. Does he merely have supernatural knowledge about what will happen? While that is possible, it is not uncommon for characters in ancient Jewish and Christian literature to perform miracles simply by speaking. Early audiences may therefore have understood Peter’s words to play a direct role in bringing about the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. The killing in that case would be done by the power of God, but also at Peter’s command. (Compare Acts 13:4-12.)

5. *This story is found in the New Testament.*
  - a. *How do you feel about the fact that the New Testament contains this story? Discuss.*
  - b. *How do you think you would feel if the story was from the Muslim tradition and the main character was the Prophet Muhammad rather than the apostle Peter? Discuss.*
  - c. *How do you think you would feel if the main character was Moses rather than Peter? Discuss.*

Question 5 may help some participants realize that they have implicit biases for or against particular religious traditions or scriptural texts. For example, some people may report that they were more surprised to find out that the *New Testament* contains such a story than they would have been if it had been in the “Old Testament” – which would reflect differing pre-existing assumptions about the content of each. Alternatively, they may respond, “I don’t have any particularly strong feelings about the presence of this story in the New Testament,” or “I would feel the same if it was about Moses or the Prophet Muhammad.” Regardless, the questions can be a springboard for discussion, based on the particular responses given in your group.

6. *Suppose a friend asks you, “Do you think that the presence of this story in the New Testament might encourage people to be violent?” How would you respond?*

Participants should be encouraged not merely to say “yes” or “no,” but to flesh out their argument. Participants could discuss what aspects of the passage they think might or might not encourage people to be violent in actual practice, whether there is scientific evidence that reading texts about violence actually leads to more violent action in general, and whether Christian communities in the real world actually seem to become more violent as a result of this passage.

We encourage you to work through some of our introductory resources – such as watching our introductory videos – before answering this question.