

Testing the Holy Spirit...
The Mistake of Ananias and Sapphira

1. Gain a contextual understanding of the incident involving Ananias and Sapphira. Summarize what has occurred in Acts 4:1-37.

After being incarcerated for a day by the Sadducees and found innocent of any punishable offense by the Sanhedrin, Peter and John returned to the church and shared what had happened with their companions. Upon hearing what the Sadducees and Sanhedrin said, the companions of Peter and John petitioned God in one voice for boldness in proclaiming His Word and supernatural abilities to heal and perform signs and wonders in His name.

While the church was filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the filling of the spirit occurs again after their prayer is made. As in the prior instance of the spirit filled church, three characteristics are exhibited: 1) bold evangelism (Acts 4:31), 2) the performance of signs and wonders (Acts 5:12), and 3) great generosity and sharing of food and possessions (Acts 4:32-37).

2. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?

Ananias and Sapphira sold their property and gave only a portion of the proceeds. While it may seem that the sin was about giving only part of the money, the sin was really all about lying (Acts 5:4).

3. What did Peter mean with the statement, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit... (Acts 5:3)?

The Bible portrays Satan as one who “does not stand on the truth”, “is a liar”, and is “the father of lies” (John 8:44).

The Greek verb for “filled” is “*ep̄lērōsen*” which brings a sense of control or influence. Revealing Ananias and Sapphira’s intent to deceive, the Holy Spirit causes Peter, at minimum, to conclude that Satan influenced Ananias.

What is debated among theologians is whether Ananias was demonized. Was Ananias controlled by Satan because of some unrepented or previous sin? The question concerns the debate of whether a Christian can be demonized. On this matter, the Bible is not clear.

4. What did Peter mean with his question to Sapphira, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test” (Acts 5:9)?

Of particular note to our contemporary culture is that Peter called Ananias and Sapphira’s attempt at deceiving the church as putting “the Spirit of the Lord to the test.”

There are at least two instances in which Believers are commanded not to do this:

Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.’” (Matt 4:7 – Jesus’ response to Satan while being tested in the wilderness)

“You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him in Massah.” (Deut 6:16 – Moses teaching the Israelites the statutes and ordinances at Beth Peor just prior to the Conquest)

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To understand what God means “to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test,” Massah is mentioned as the location when this offense occurred. And the Hebrew term “Massah” means “Testing.”

To begin understanding this, it is important to note that God tests those He loves. For example, in Exodus 15:25, God tested the Israelites with challenges that revealed whether they responded in trust or mistrust.

At Massah (Ex 17:1-7), the Israelites camped after witnessing the reality of God in the parting of the sea and the defeat of Pharaoh, and receiving the provision of water, manna and meat during their journey.

Yet when water was lacking, the Israelites “tested the LORD saying, ‘Is the LORD among us, or not?’” In this passage at Massah, the testing of the Lord appears to have two components:

- a) A disbelief that God is present.
- b) Despite witnessing supernatural proof of God, His reality, and His promises, people continued to make demands on God to meet their needs all the while not trusting Him.

In the case of Ananias and Sapphira, similar characteristics can be seen as well:

- a) Ananias and Sapphira, in their conspiracy to withhold money, did not believe that God was present and would know of their deceit.
- b) Despite belonging to the church that was filled by the Holy Spirit where great generosity (and other supernatural signs and wonders) was displayed, Ananias and Sapphira did not trust that God would meet their financial needs. Their deceit demonstrated that instead of being secure in the Lord’s provision and timing, they sought to find security on their own.

The “testing of the Lord” by the Israelites during the Exodus would become a reminder to Believers of what not to do (Ps 78:18, 41, 56; 95:9; 106:14).

God would later reveal in Numbers 14:22, “Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice.”

“Tempting the Lord” would be a phrase that referred to a human being that would demand something from God in exchange for the promise to believe and submit to Him, which is a promise no human being can possibly meet.

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