

## Motivation — By Jennifer Deans

I can imagine that it was quite a crazy day. I'm not sure what it would have been like to have been there, but at the church Peter and all the disciples were there, and in comes Ananias. And Ananias says, "I have an amazing gift for you!" and he lays down his bags of money at the feet of the apostles. And he says, "This is the money I got from selling my field!" As soon as he was done speaking, Peter looks at him, and says, "Ananias, why have you lied to the Holy Spirit?" And at that moment, Ananias falls dead. Everybody stops, and they stare, a little unsure. Some men come and wrap him up, and they take his body out. Even before the men come back about three hours later, everybody's still hanging out. Peter's there.

Later Sapphira, Ananias's wife, shows up. And when she shows up, Peter goes over to her and greets her and says, "Hey, how are you doing?" Then he says, "You know, I'm wondering, just wondering, is this the price you got for your field?" "Oh yes, that's the price we got for our field." Peter says, "How could you have conspired with your husband and lied to God?" And *she* falls dead. The same men who have just buried her husband wrap her up and take her out, and fear grips the entire church of God.

This is a very strange story, and a lot of people wonder, *Why in the world is this story in the Bible?* A lot of people have twisted the story of Ananias and Sapphira in a lot of unhealthy ways, from saying that "If you don't give God 100 percent of everything you have, then you're going to drop dead," or "God couldn't love you," or "You're not really committed."

Some people have said, "Here's what we need to do. Sign on the dotted line. We need your bank account number and your Social Security number, and you need to give everything. You can't have anything nice. Everything goes to the church." But you know, as I've studied the story, that's not really what this story's about at all.

In order to understand what's really going on with Ananias and Sapphira, and to get your heads around this crazy, scary story, we need to understand the context. If we back up a little bit, in Acts 4 we get a picture. Peter and John are on their way to the temple, and on the way to the temple they run into a crippled man who's sitting by the gate. The man says, "Alms, alms." He's asking for money, and Peter and John look down at him, just like the child's song says, and they say, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6, NIV). With that, the young man stands up, and he tests his legs, and he leaps and he jumps around, and there's like this praise session in the temple. In the

temple, Peter and John are standing with this man and they're preaching, and the scribes and the Pharisees are not okay with this, because Peter and John are preaching that Jesus, whom they just crucified, is the one who raised this man and who healed him.

So Peter and John are called into the "principal's office," and the scribes and the Pharisees and all the religious leaders question them. They say, "How did you heal that guy?" And Peter and John say, "We healed him because of Jesus Christ whom you crucified but the Lord raised from the dead." This did not go over well! It was kind of like salt on a wound. And because of that, the teachers of the law were trying to figure out how they could punish these guys, but unfortunately, the crippled guy whom they had just healed was standing right behind them. He was still in the temple, so they couldn't really do anything about it. So they said, "Stop preaching in the name of Jesus, or else!" And then the teachers of the law let them go.

Peter and John go back to the believers, and in Acts 4, they have a praise service. This is the prayer that's recorded for us, because it's a powerful prayer that they prayed together. Acts 4:24-28 says, "When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God. 'O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying, "Why were the nations so angry? Why did they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah. In fact, this has happened here in this city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to Your will" ' " (NLT)

You notice that little sentence in this prayer? Everything that has happened was determined beforehand. You know, God is in control of a lot more than we give Him credit. He's in control of everything! And the prayer continues: "And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (vss. 29, 30, NLT)

The prayer that these early Christians are praying is for great boldness. And what happens immediately after the prayer for great boldness? Well, another Pentecost happens. The Holy Spirit descended on the room and the meeting place shook and was

filled with the Holy Spirit, and after that, they preached with great boldness. Immediately following that, in a few short verses, just before we get to the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we find the story of another disciple—Barnabas. And here in this story he decides that God is calling him to support a ministry—a new church. So he sells a field, he brings the money to the church, and after that, he is nicknamed a “son of encouragement.” Everyone was so excited that Barnabas had sold this field and had given all of the money to the church, and they were able to do amazing ministries.

I’m sure that Ananias and Sapphira had been there through this whole time. They had been there through the testimony of what Peter and John had gone through, how God had delivered them. They’d been there through the prayer, and in the middle of the prayer for boldness, God was convicting people on how they could be part of His ministry. You see, God doesn’t need our money. But you know what? He chooses to use us and our finances for His ministry and His glory. And while they were praying for boldness, Barnabas knew that a lot of the people who were becoming Christians were Jews and were being ostracized from their jobs. They didn’t have homes. They didn’t have a way to feed their family. So the church needed money. They needed a way to take care of the people who were becoming Christians, who were following their convictions. So when he was prompted, he sold his field and gave the money to the poor.

Everybody in the church was so excited about this. Ananias and Sapphira see, and they hear, and they want the same praise. They, too, want to be called sons of encouragement. So they decide that they are going to sell a field, and they make an announcement: “We too are going to sell our field!” The problem was, when they sold the field, they got a lot of money—way too much money. I can imagine the conversation went a little bit like this between husband and wife: “I didn’t think we were going to get this amount of money! This is a lot of money!” “Well, we said we were going to give it to the church.” “Yeah, but it’s a *lot* of money, a lot of money to give to the church.” “Well, you know, it’s so much money. If we gave *part* of it, people would still *believe* it was the full amount.” “That’s a great idea, ‘cause then we could give *part* of the money, and we could still get the praise, and we could then keep some of the money for ourselves.” So between them, they are talking it out, and they conspire together, and they decide to go and misrepresent how much this field actually sold for.

You ask, “Is that really that big of a deal? And why did God expect them to give the full amount of the field?” Acts 5:1 says, “There was a certain man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. He brought part of the money to

the apostles, claiming it was the full amount" (NLT). With his wife's consent, he kept the rest. The word here in my Bible that says "claiming it was the full amount" is "embezzled" in the original language.

How can you embezzle money that's yours? You see, the moment that Ananias and Sapphira had promised the money to God, it no longer was theirs to keep. You ask, "Well, what if Ananias and Sapphira *needed* the money? Maybe as soon as they promised to give the money, the proceeds to the church, maybe Ananias lost *his* job. Or maybe Sapphira's aunt got sick, and they needed it to take care of her. God of course would understand these things." Well, yes, God would understand these things. And you see, what we need to understand is that when we give to God, and we make promises to God, we're in relationship with Him. Had Ananias and Sapphira come to the apostles and said, "Hey, I just need you guys to understand that I promised to give you the whole thing, but we've come on financial hard times, and it's just too difficult. We just can't give that full amount," I believe God would have worked with them.

But what did they do instead? They lied to the Holy Spirit. Peter looks at Ananias, and says, " 'Why have you let Satan fill your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit' " (Acts 5:3, NLT). You see, this whole thing is not about money; it's about a relationship with God. And we *know* that this isn't about money because there are plenty of other people in the early Christian church who didn't sell their properties. In fact, Mary, where Peter ends up going to a little bit later in the book of Acts, has servants. So she has a big enough house and lots of money. She didn't give everything to the poor. In 2 Corinthians 9:7, it says that God wants us each to determine in our hearts how much *we* would like to give, and He loves a cheerful giver.

The problem with Ananias and Sapphira is that they believed they could pull one over on God. But as we look at the context of where the story falls, the story happens right in the beginning of a baby church, as the Christian church has just been born. What was happening is that they believed they were pulling one over on everybody. The problem is, in a small town, people would have known this was untrue. We know for a fact that there was at least one other person who knew how much the field sold for, and that was the person who bought the field and who paid this price. In a small town, the word would have gotten out, and had God allowed this to go on in His church, it would have been a disease that would have infected His early church.

The problem was not about the money that was given or not given; it was about their relationship with God, and the fact that they were lying and believing that they could pull one over. They wanted the accolades, they wanted the praise for doing things right, without changing their hearts. You see, our motivation for why we give—for the way that we give to God and connect with Him—is what He cares about.

You notice in the story we do not have a single dollar amount. Why is it that? Jesus, you know, was sitting in the temple one day with His disciples, and while He was there, people were making a huge show of dropping big bags of money into the collection bins. And they were making a huge show of parading their money and dropping it in one at a time so it would clink and it would clank and everyone would see their great gifts. All during this show, Jesus notices out of the corner of His eye that there is a widow. She walks in, and you can kind of see she's hiding a little bit. She doesn't want people to notice her. She tries to give her money when everyone's paying attention to somebody else who's giving, and she takes two small coins and drops them into the bin. And then she turns and scurries out. Before she can get out, Jesus calls His disciples' attention to her, and He says in Mark 12:44, "They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything--all she had to live on" (NIV).

You see, it's not the *amount* that we give; it is the way that we give, the desire of our heart, the relationship. Ananias and Sapphira, in wanting the benefit, in wanting the glory for the gift that they were giving without giving fully, were lying to God. Had God allowed it to continue, this would have been a disease that would have corrupted the church, and it would have hurt this baby church.

You say, "But I know plenty of people who are doing the same thing today." Yeah, and you know what? It tells us in Hebrews 13:8 that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (NLT). What does that tell you? Well, it tells me that if God didn't want a lying relationship, if He didn't want somebody pretending and putting on a show just to check all the marks of being Christian, then He certainly doesn't want it now. You know, if God was as literal today as He was back then, it would be very dangerous to sing to Him, "I surrender all. All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give." Because is that really how we feel?

Let me ask you a question. How do you lie to God? Maybe you say, "I'm paying tithe. Well, not a whole tithe 'cause that's a lot of money, God, but I'm giving something in the tithe category." Or maybe you say, "I'm a Christian every day of the week except for Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. I'm a Christian on Saturday." Or maybe—I don't know how it is that you lie to God—maybe it's, "I'm going to pray for people." Someone comes and shares a burden with you and they share what's in their heart, and in the process you say, "I'm going to pray for you—I care about you," and then you're just trying to get out. "You say that just to stop the conversation."

You see, the problem with this is that you are lying to God the same way that Ananias and Sapphira were lying to God, because what we are worried about is how we look to others and what we're going to get out of this whole thing. God doesn't care about how we look; He cares about our hearts, about our motivation. God cares about the early church. You see, this whole story is not about money; it's in response to a prayer for boldness. In this prayer for boldness, part of being bold is God saying, "I've got a lot of work that needs to be done, and I need you to trust Me that I need you to help in this major work." So part of the boldness is being willing to let God use you, like Peter and John did right after they got in trouble for preaching in the temple. Immediately after after the Ananias and Sapphira story, do you know what happens? They go right back into the temple and begin preaching about God. And as they're preaching about God, they are arrested and they're put in jail this time. Well, in the middle of the night, an angel lets them out of jail, and says, "By the way, you need to go back to the temple in the morning and keep preaching." So that's exactly what they do.

In the morning when they wake up, they go immediately straight back to the temple and they begin preaching about the name of Jesus. Now let me tell you, that is boldness! Amazing boldness, because what had the religious leaders done to Jesus? They had crucified Him over stepping on their toes. And now Peter and John are going right back into the lion's den, going right back to where they had gotten in trouble before, and they're preaching. And you know what? The religious leaders go to the jail to look for them, and they're not there. So now they're a little upset. They have no idea where Peter has gone. Finally word comes: "They are back in the temple!" That's boldness.

But you know what? God doesn't necessarily call each one of us to preach. God doesn't necessarily say that you need to go preach in the temple, you need to be a pastor, or you need to know how to give Bible studies. Boldness could be, "God, You have convicted me that You want me to give X amount of money. But You know, God, I don't have X amount of money to give."

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, it says, "Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia. They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor" (NLT). Do you get that? They are very poor. "But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed into rich generosity. For I testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it out of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift of the believers in Jerusalem. They even did more than what we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do" (NLT).

Jump down to verse nine. It says, "You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich" (NLT). You see, what this verse tells us, it shows us a glimpse of what it means to truly have our motivation right. This church in Macedonia, they didn't care that they didn't have anything. They heard of a need, they heard of a way that they could get involved, and that they could minister where God was working. So what they did is, they kept giving and giving out of their poverty they gave. So you see, sometimes when we pray for boldness, it's not just the courage to talk to somebody about God. Sometimes boldness means giving an amount to God—"that there's no way you can possibly afford that amount."

If you were in conversation with God, my challenge is, if you spend time praying and talking to God, and He convicts you, "Hey, I want you to support this ministry, and I want you to support by giving of your time." If you do that, God will help you to be able to afford that time. He will help you carve that time out of your schedule. And if God gives you a number, and says, "I want you to give \$10,000," and you're like, "I don't have \$10,000! How can I give \$10,000?" Well, you know what? God will help you give \$10,000 if you allow Him to work through you. You see, it is God who convicts, it is God who is in charge of the church, and it is God who builds the church. All of this is God, but He chooses to use us. One of my favorite Bible passages is in 1 Corinthians 1:27, where it says that God chooses to use the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

God can use us in our "not enough." He can use us when we don't have it figured out. Boldness sometimes looks like the willingness to step out and to do what God has asked us to do. My question for you is, Where do you stand in this picture? This baby Christian church, their whole focus was on sharing God's love, and regardless of the cost, they wanted people to know about Jesus. So because of that, they prayed for boldness when they got into trouble. And because of that, Barnabas became

this amazing man who, when God convicted him, he sold his property and gave all the money to the poor. As a result, later on in the book of Acts, he did amazing things with his life—not for the fanfare, not to get accolades, but because that’s Who he cared about. He cared about God and doing what God had done.

So what happened to Ananias and Sapphira? Because their motivation was, “We want to keep money for ourselves, that’s too much, it ended badly for them. If God knew my situation, He would really ask for all of that money. God just asks for too much!” I have no idea what was going through their heads, but these things run through my head sometimes. I know these things run through other people’s heads. So together they conspired, and they lied to God. They wanted the accolades. They wanted the praise. They just didn’t want the sacrifice. What happened as a result? We have a dead couple.

There’s something else I want to bring our attention to in this story that is so important. You see, especially in the Bible, most of us assume that women didn’t have very much say or very many rights. But you know, in God’s society—in His culture—all of us have to make our own decisions. What’s amazing about this story is when Ananias comes to the church, and he says, “This is the amount of money we got from the field,” and he drops dead. But thankfully, Sapphira didn’t drop dead that same moment. Sapphira herself was given the opportunity. She was given the opportunity to come clean. And when Peter asked her the question, “Was this the amount really that you got for the field?” she could have said, “You know, it’s not. We had planned to give the full amount to the church, but we ran into this problem or that problem. I’m not sure what to do. Could you just help me figure this out?” I don’t think she would have died, because she would have been honest. She would have been open in her relationship, and it would have been a dialogue, and she wouldn’t have been trying to pull one over someone.

You see, Ananias and Sapphira let each other down. God gives us people in our lives so that we can encourage each other and buoy each other up, especially husbands and wives. In this scenario, instead of being someone that inspired the other one to greatness that showed, “We can trust God no matter what,” and instead of keeping their focus on God, their motivation wasn’t on Him. I don’t know who started the conversation. Maybe it was Ananias, maybe it was Sapphira. But when the first one said, “That’s a lot of money. We can’t afford to give that amount of money,” or “We don’t want to give that amount of money,” the other one should have said, “But we promised God. God never asks us for something that’s going to hurt us, and He’ll provide another way. We don’t need that money. We don’t need to be rich.” The other one should have helped. The other one should

have been an accountability partner who pointed back to God. But because neither one of them had the courage to do that, and both of them had the motivation of wanting to look good and be better, both of them died.

As we talk about money in the Bible, it's one of the topics that is talked about over and over again. The first thing I want you to understand is that it's not about the amount of money we give God; it is about our relationship with Him. God wants a relationship with you, and He wants you to pray for boldness, and in that moment, sometimes He will ask you to give financially. But come back to because it is not about how much you give; it is about the *way* you give. God loves a cheerful giver! And because He was a cheerful giver, He wants you to give because you love Him, because you are passionate about where He is working in your life, and you want to be involved.

As we close today, I'd like to challenge you. If you've been lying to God in an area of your life—maybe you said you'd pray for someone and you didn't, or you're claiming to give more than you are—maybe it's something else, and I don't know what it is. I want you to spend time this week, and I want you to say, "God, please forgive me," and give that to Him, and then make things right with Him. I also want you to pray for boldness. I encourage you to pray this prayer that is in Acts chapter 4:29 " 'Lord . . . give us, your servants, great boldness' " (NLT). And that boldness will look like amazing things! God will ask you to go outside your comfort zone. He will ask you to give financially. He will ask you to give of your time and your talents. If you pray for boldness and you are willing to be used, God will use you for great things.

I also want you to ask God to give through you. Ask God, "You know what? I don't have finances, but I am trusting that whatever You impress upon me in terms of finances, that You will provide." So if God is calling you right now to give to your church, I want you to spend time in conversation with Him. "God, what does it look like for You to give through me, and what does boldness look like when I trust You and I give back?" I pray that each one of you will not be like Ananias and Sapphira. I pray that you will be like Barnabas who gave and became a son of encouragement. And if you resist the temptation to become like Ananias and Sapphira, God can do amazing things for you.