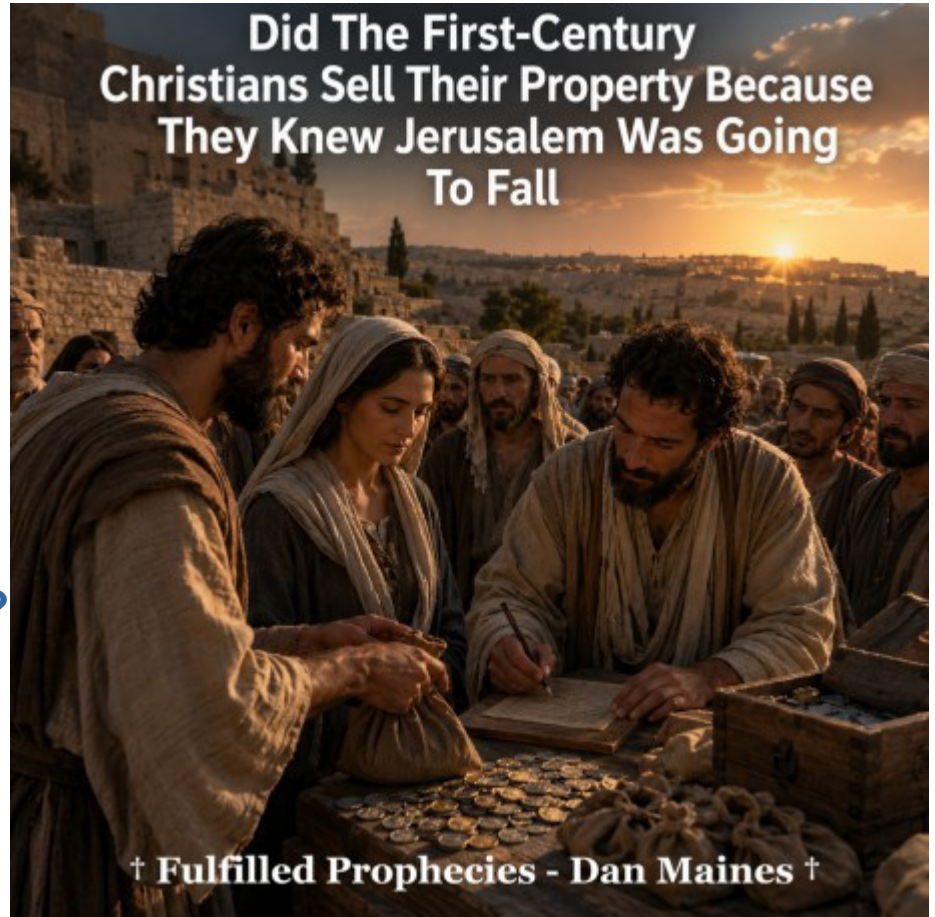


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Did The First-Century Christians Sell Their Property Because They Knew Jerusalem Was Going To Fall?



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† The book of Acts records something remarkable. Believers sold lands and possessions and distributed the proceeds among those who were in need. The immediate reason stated by Acts is unmistakable, they were caring for one another in extraordinary generosity and unity.

† But there's another part of the historical setting that shouldn't be ignored. Jesus had already warned His disciples that

Jerusalem and the temple were heading toward catastrophic judgment within their generation (Matthew 23:36; Matthew 24:2, 34).

† That raises an interesting question. Did some believers recognize that holding property in and around Jerusalem wasn't nearly as important as it once had been because Jesus had told them what was coming?

† Scripture never says that the believers sold their property because they expected a real estate crash. We shouldn't turn an interesting possibility into a biblical statement. However, the coming judgment certainly changes the context in which their extraordinary behavior should be understood.

† Acts emphasizes charity and communal needs, while Jesus' warnings explain why first-century believers could hold earthly possessions unusually loosely. Paul likewise described his own generation as living through a present distress in which ordinary priorities, including marriage and possessions, had to be viewed differently (1 Corinthians 7:26-31).

† The evidence therefore points to immediate generosity as the explicitly stated reason, with first-century eschatological urgency forming part of the larger background.

Acts 2:44-45

And all the believers were together and had all things in common; and they would sell their property and possessions and share them with all, to the extent that anyone had need.

† Notice the reason Luke actually gives. Their possessions were distributed according to need. This was an extraordinary expression of love and fellowship among the believers.

† The text doesn't say they sold everything because they expected property values to collapse. That idea goes beyond what Luke actually wrote.

† At the same time, these believers were living in the very generation Jesus had warned about. They knew Jerusalem's covenant world was approaching judgment (Matthew 23:36; 24:34).

† Their generosity shouldn't be separated from their first-century

circumstances, but neither should we replace Luke's stated reason with speculation.

Acts 4:34-35

For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each to the extent that any had need.

† Again Luke tells us exactly what happened. People who owned lands or houses sold them, and the money was distributed according to need.

† This wasn't ordinary Christian teaching requiring every believer in every generation to liquidate his property. Acts describes an extraordinary situation in the Jerusalem church.

† Their actions demonstrated that people had become more important to them than property. They were willing to surrender earthly wealth to care for brothers and sisters during a unique period of transition and increasing difficulty.

† We should also notice that Acts speaks of possessors of lands or houses selling them. Whatever restrictions existed concerning ancestral inheritance under the Mosaic system, Scripture itself presents these transactions as legitimate acts of generosity.

Acts 4:36-37

Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), owned a tract of land. So he sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

† Barnabas provides a specific example. He owned a field, sold it, and gave the proceeds for the work of the believing community.

† This is especially interesting because Barnabas was a Levite. Luke doesn't condemn the transaction as illegal. Instead, he presents Barnabas as an example of generosity.

† Therefore, we need to be careful with the claim that selling

property would necessarily have been illegal because of family inheritance laws. The Old Testament contained important regulations concerning land, redemption, inheritance, and tribal holdings, but Acts plainly records believers selling property.

† Whatever legal details applied to particular parcels of land, Luke doesn't portray these sales as violations of God's law.

Acts 5:4

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.

† Peter's words concerning Ananias give us an extremely important detail. The property remained his while he possessed it, and after it was sold the proceeds remained under his authority.

† This means the selling wasn't compulsory. The Jerusalem church wasn't practicing forced confiscation of private property.

† Ananias' sin wasn't that he retained property or money. His sin was deception concerning what he had done (Acts 5:1-3).

† This makes the generosity described in Acts even more significant. People were voluntarily releasing possessions for the benefit of others.

Matthew 24:15-18

Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place—let the reader understand—then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get things out of his house. And whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak.

† Now the prophetic background becomes impossible to ignore. Jesus told His disciples that a time would come when people in Judea needed to flee immediately.

† Think about what that meant for attachment to property. Jesus told the person on the housetop not even to go back into the house for possessions. The person in the field wasn't to return

for clothing.

† Jesus wasn't teaching ordinary financial planning for Christians throughout history. He was preparing His first-century disciples for a specific approaching crisis in Judea (Matthew 24:16, 34).

† A house that someone wouldn't be able to return to and land that someone would have to abandon suddenly couldn't provide ultimate security.

Luke 21:20-22

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are inside the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city; because these are days of punishment, so that all things which have been written will be fulfilled.

† Luke makes the historical setting even clearer. Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies, and those in Judea were commanded to flee.

† Jesus wasn't telling them to defend their homes, protect their property values, or preserve their land. He told them to leave.

† This doesn't prove that the Acts believers sold property specifically because they were anticipating the Roman siege. Scripture never directly makes that statement.

† But it does show that the early Jerusalem believers lived under a prophetic warning that made permanent attachment to property in Judea very different from ordinary circumstances.

† When the sign Jesus gave finally appeared, survival required leaving property behind.

1 Corinthians 7:26-27

I think, then, that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

† Paul gives us another important piece of the first-century picture. He specifically refers to the distress that was upon

them.

† This is why Paul's advice about marriage sounds unusual if it's removed from its historical setting. Paul wasn't declaring marriage undesirable. Elsewhere he spoke positively about marriage (1 Corinthians 7:2; Ephesians 5:25).

† He was addressing believers living through extraordinary circumstances. Starting a family during severe and approaching distress could create additional burdens.

† This demonstrates why we shouldn't automatically turn every first-century crisis instruction into a universal command for every Christian generation.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

But this I say, brothers, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the present form of this world is passing away.

† Paul's language is striking. The time was shortened. Those who bought were to live as though they didn't possess.

† This fits remarkably well with the attitude we see among the early believers in Acts. Their earthly possessions couldn't be allowed to control them.

† Paul wasn't saying the physical planet was about to disappear. He was describing a present and rapidly changing situation in their world (1 Corinthians 7:26).

† Marriage, buying, possessions, sorrow, and ordinary social life were being viewed through the reality of an extraordinary first-century crisis.

† This is powerful supporting evidence that the early church's unusual relationship to property shouldn't be interpreted without considering the historical circumstances surrounding them.

Hebrews 10:34

For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted

joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better and lasting possession.

† First-century believers were learning that earthly possessions weren't their ultimate treasure.

† Some had their possessions taken from them and accepted the loss because they understood that what they possessed in Christ couldn't be destroyed.

† This doesn't mean Christians today should deliberately abandon property or financial responsibility. It means earthly possessions must never become more important than Christ, His kingdom, or His people.

Historical References

† Josephus describes the terrible conditions surrounding Jerusalem during the Jewish War, including famine, internal violence, destruction, and finally the Roman conquest of the city in AD 70. His account demonstrates how completely normal economic and social life collapsed during the catastrophe Jesus had warned about.

† Josephus also describes people losing homes, property, security, and life itself during the siege. Whatever property had once been worth, ownership provided little security once Jerusalem was surrounded and destroyed.

† Eusebius later reported that believers belonging to the church at Jerusalem departed the city before the war and went to Pella. His account reflects an early Christian tradition that the Jerusalem believers escaped before the city's destruction.

† These historical accounts don't prove that Acts 2 and Acts 4 were describing a calculated attempt to sell property before a market collapse. They do, however, show why Jesus' warnings about fleeing Jerusalem had enormous practical significance.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We shouldn't read Acts 2 and Acts 4 and conclude that Christians today are commanded to sell their houses, land, retirement accounts, or other possessions.

† We also shouldn't tell Christians not to marry because Paul

said it was good for certain believers to remain as they were during the distress that was upon them.

† Historical context matters. The first-century church was approaching events that Jesus had specifically predicted for that generation (Matthew 24:34).

† The spiritual principle remains powerful. Our possessions belong under the lordship of Christ. We should willingly help believers who are genuinely in need (1 John 3:17).

† Houses, land, investments, and money are temporary. They can be useful blessings, but they aren't the kingdom of God and they aren't our ultimate security.

† The Acts believers understood something that Christians in every generation need to remember, people are more important than possessions.

† So, did they sell because they knew the Jerusalem real estate market was going to crash? Scripture doesn't say that, and we shouldn't say that it does.

† Did they sell because fellow believers had immediate needs? Yes. Acts explicitly tells us that.

† Did they also live with the knowledge that Jesus had predicted Jerusalem's coming destruction and commanded His followers in Judea to flee when the time arrived? Absolutely.

† The strongest biblical conclusion is therefore not either-or. Their selling was explicitly motivated by love, generosity, and immediate need, while the extraordinary prophetic circumstances of that generation help us understand why possessions could be held so loosely.

† They weren't building their hope around property that could be lost. They were building their lives around a kingdom that couldn't be shaken (Hebrews 12:28).

Q & A Appendix

Q: Does Acts actually say Christians sold their property because they knew Jerusalem would be destroyed?

A: No. Acts says the proceeds were distributed according to people's needs (Acts 2:45; 4:34-35). Connecting the sales directly to Jerusalem's coming destruction is a reasonable

historical consideration, but Scripture doesn't explicitly state that this was their motive.

Q: Is it accurate to say they knew the real estate market was going to crash?

A: Not as a direct biblical statement. Jesus did tell them Jerusalem would be surrounded and Judea would have to be abandoned (Luke 21:20-22). That certainly meant property couldn't provide lasting security, but Scripture never describes their selling as an attempt to beat a real estate crash.

Q: Was selling property mandatory for Christians?

A: No. Peter told Ananias that while the property remained unsold it was his, and after selling it the money was still under his authority (Acts 5:4). The giving was voluntary.

Q: Was selling family property illegal under biblical inheritance laws?

A: We need to be careful with that claim. Israel had laws regulating ancestral land and inheritance (Leviticus 25:23-34), but Acts openly records believers selling lands and houses, including Barnabas selling a field (Acts 4:34-37). Luke doesn't portray these transactions as illegal.

Q: Why did Paul suggest that some men shouldn't seek marriage?

A: Paul connected his advice to the distress that was upon them and said the time was shortened (1 Corinthians 7:26, 29). This wasn't a condemnation of marriage. It was practical instruction during extraordinary first-century circumstances.

Q: Should Christians today sell everything because the believers in Acts did?

A: No. Acts doesn't establish compulsory property liquidation as a permanent Christian command. The continuing principle is generosity, caring for people in need, and refusing to make possessions our ultimate security (1 John 3:17; 1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Q: What does all of this tell us about Matthew 24?

A: It reminds us that Jesus' prophecy wasn't abstract theology to the people who first heard it. His disciples lived in the generation He warned, and His instructions eventually affected

practical decisions about homes, possessions, families, travel, and fleeing Judea (Matthew 24:15-18, 34; Luke 21:20-22).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:34-35; Acts 4:36-37; Acts 5:4; Matthew 24:15-18; Luke 21:20-22; 1 Corinthians 7:26-27; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Hebrews 10:34

† Historical writers: Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, Books 5-7; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.5

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