

"Persecution, Prayer and Possessions"

Acts 4:1-37

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Let me begin our session today with a question for you to consider. *Can you think of a time when doing the right thing directly conflicted with what an authority figure told you to do?* That can be a difficult situation to navigate especially if you are one who hates to cause confrontation.

In the fourth chapter of Acts, Dr. Luke describes the opposition received by Peter and John for their part in the remarkable healing of a lame man which we learned about last week (Acts 3:6-10). The author describes the antagonism as coming from three groups of religious leaders - the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees.

From chapter 3, we learned that because Peter and John took the opportunity to preach following this divine healing with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, many people became believers. The message must have been a showstopper for the religious authorities in the temple because the confrontation that ensued became recognized as the first great challenge that the early church faced.

As we dig into Acts chapter 4, we will look at a snapshot of how individual Christians demonstrated supernatural boldness under intense pressure, the response of the Christian community as a whole which fused together in unity and prayer, and ultimately sparked a radical generosity that ensured the welfare of those in need.

But first, let's talk about the challengers to Peter and John and their message. While the apostles addressed the crowd that gathered in the portico of Solomon in chapter 3, they also captured the attention of the Jewish religious authorities in the temple. I am referring to three groups of men who approached this gathering. They were the priests, the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees.

According to Dr. Charles Swindoll in his Living Insights - New Testament Commentary on Acts, the **priests** had the responsibility of ensuring that the Law of Moses was observed and *officiating* at the worship services in the temple. You might say they were the "influencers" of the day for the Jews as they held sway over the Jewish people.

The **temple guard** was the police force of the temple precincts. They protected temple treasures, made certain the Jews knew their place, which was not to pass the "Corinthian Gate" in Jerusalem, and kept the peace. In fact, they were part of the arresting force of Jesus.

The **Sadducees** were a small, but politically powerful group. They were mostly aristocrats and they controlled the temple, but they did so at the "pleasure of Rome." The Sadducees "rejected all notions of life after death, resurrection, angels, and an eternal punishment or reward...They felt punishment for sin was the duty of the people and should be merciless and severe." (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 2, 162-166.)

Peter and John were arrested in the evening. The charge against them may have been suspicion of teaching dangerous ideas. They were not questioned that night because nighttime trials violated their law unless the arrestee's name was Jesus. I am sure that Peter and John spent an uncomfortable night in lockup, but by all accounts, they maintained their fervor to defend the gospel.

The next day, Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership which consisted of rulers, elders, and scribes (v. 5). There were also four individuals who would not normally attend such a "hearing": Caiaphas, who officially held the office of high priest, Annas, Caiaphas' father-in-law who previously held that position and who was recognized as the true power holder, and two other family members were present.

The question the religious elite asked the apostles was, "By what power or what name did you do this?" (v. 7). Did you notice that this first question asked by the council did not probe for truth but challenged the apostles' authority?

Verse 8 informs us that Peter, who was filled with the Holy Spirit said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people. If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed."

Peter went on to quote Psalm 118:22, "Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Matt. 1:21; Acts 10:43; 1 Tim. 2:5).

It is worth noting that Peter did not have to rely on his own wisdom and courage for his response. He was filled with the Holy Spirit (vs. 8). God did the filling and Peter did the submitting to God's Spirit.

While in Kenya on a mission trip in 2013, I had a significant experience with the leading of the Holy Spirit which I would like to share. I ask that those of you who have heard this story before will forgive my repeating it. While I was waiting to pray with a young Muslim woman, I asked William, my translator, if I should avoid any language that might be offensive to her either culturally or spiritually. He replied to me with a

biblical answer, "Don't worry mum, the Holy Spirit will give you the words to share." He was right and this experience became a significant lesson in my life. I learned that I had nothing to fear when I share the Gospel because God is in charge. He will supply the words. My responsibility was to share those words. The Holy Spirit will guide the transformation of a nonbeliever into becoming a follower of Jesus if that person will open their heart to accept Jesus as their Savior. When we submit to the Holy Spirit, we, too, can call upon the Holy Spirit to supply us with the appropriate words and enable us to speak with confidence as we witness to others.

This year, I came across a verse that reminded me of William and his wisdom. Luke 12:12 tells us "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." I gave praise once again for William and his very wise answer to my question. I believe this passage encourages us to be bold, authentic and trust in God to supply the words we need when we share our faith with others.

Consider the courage that Peter and John demonstrated in this very formal setting where the accused stood in the center of the room surrounded by the members of the Sanhedrin. The "defendants" did not have the benefit of legal representation. Here is the number match up - religious leaders 74, defendants 2. The intimidation level against the apostles was high.

We need to keep in mind that this is where Jesus probably stood before facing a mock trial with Annas and Caiaphas officiating which resulted in His crucifixion by the Romans. I am convinced that these apostles understood full well that they could share the same fate as their Lord and Savior; and that these religious and political officials were determined to silence them save for the fact that the Holy Spirit was in control.

Dr. Swindoll noted that Luke's mention of the presence of the unscrupulous Annas and his relatives added a sinister element to this "already-dark scene." Dr. Swindoll gives us insight as to what he describes as a remarkable display of how power operates in the absence of truth in the following passage:

People in power who have no concern for truth will follow a predictable pattern. When challenged by their constituents, they use:

- *Intimidation* to strike fear into the hearts of those holding opposing views (as seen in verses 4:1-6).
- *Tradition* to invoke the long history of believing something and doing something a certain way. They don't conduct a genuine investigation, and refuse to hear opposing arguments (4:7).
- *Coercion* to manipulate the behavior of opponents using any means necessary: threats, bribes, blackmail, flattery . . . and if necessary, eliminate them altogether (4:13-18).

The Jewish religious leaders used these tactics to intimidate, and the Holy Spirit trumped them all. Rather than being “rattled” into recanting their preaching, Peter addressed two key points: authority (4:9-10) and truth (4:11-12). Peter reminded the leaders of the man’s miraculous healing. They could not deny that this 40-year-old man’s healing had been the result of a miracle. It was common knowledge that he had been lame since birth and now he was dancing on the temple grounds. The apostles’ authority came from the resurrected Messiah to whom the members of the Sanhedrin should be submitting.

The religious leaders were clearly not looking for the truth. Peter boldly stated: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.” The Jewish leaders could not deny that Peter spoke the truth.

Peter shrewdly turned the Sadducees’ accusation of treason to show that they were the treasonous ones. Peter and John boldly stood in front of the Sanhedrin and drove home the fact that it was the religious leaders who killed the Messiah, and that He was alive and in order for anyone to receive salvation, everyone must come to Him and no other!

The council members were in a dilemma. They could not deny the miracle, because the disabled man was obviously disabled no longer. In addition, they could not explain how uneducated and untrained men could perform such a mighty deed. Peter and John were ordinary fishermen, not authorized ministers of the Jewish religion. Because they spent time with Jesus, they had a direct line to absolute truth - Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. When we spend time with Jesus, we have a direct line to the Savior as well.

Peter and John were sent out in order for the council members to confer – not to determine the truth, but to decide how to stifle the two men and maintain their hold on religious and political power. When intimidation didn’t work and their appeal to tradition failed, the council resorted to coercion. But they failed to understand their opponents.

Peter and John would not succumb to the threats of power or the suppression of truth because the apostles had both – the truth of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit!

Eventually, the Sanhedrin backed down for fear of the power of public opinion. But it was only a temporary retreat. The campaign to crush the church had only begun.

My courage is nowhere near that of what Peter and John demonstrated in this “showdown.” Have you ever asked yourself if you have the courage to stand firmly for the Lord should you be confronted with such opposition? When we choose to do what is right, we can walk boldly and courageously with steadfast peace deep within. When we choose to yield to the control of the Holy Spirit, we, too, will be bold in sharing the gospel message even in the face of persecution, knowing that the Lord understands, approves, and rewards those who remain faithful.

We learn from verse 18, the council called the apostles in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. I love the apostles’ response: “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to Him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

After further threats, the council members let them go. They could not decide how to punish them because all the people were praising God. Talk about the power of public opinion! The results of this confrontation were astonishing. The apostles were released and they returned to their own people and shared all that the council members had said to them.

David Guzik in his *Enduring Word Commentary* shared these words in describing the results of the two who would not succumb to the intimidation of the Sanhedrin: “They glorified God for what had been done: This whole situation started out looking pretty bad. Peter and John were on trial before the same court that sent Jesus to Pilate for crucifixion. It was meant for great evil, but when it was all over, see what God orchestrated . . .

- 2,000 more people came to believe on Jesus.
- Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit again.
- Peter got to preach Jesus to the leaders of the Jews.
- Hostile examiners confirmed a miraculous healing.
- The enemies of Jesus were confused.
- Peter and John were bolder for Jesus than ever before.
- God was glorified.

It is in verses 23-31, we see the response of the early Christian community to all that had occurred. The people were drawn together in unity. Rather than fracturing, it grew in numbers. They raised their voices together and they prayed aloud.

I love how the people prayed spontaneously and in unity. They didn’t break out into small groups and pray for ten minutes and then break up to visit the refreshment table. It was full on prayer as they celebrated God’s sovereignty (verses 4:24-28) and requested the encouragement of God (4:29-30).

Notice how the believers prayed. According to the *NIV Study Bible Commentary* – “First they praised God, then they told Him their specific problem and asked for His

help. They did not ask for Him to remove the problem, but to help them deal it. We can follow this model when we pray. We can ask God to remove our problems, and He may choose to do so. But we must recognize that He may leave the problem in place and give us the strength and courage to deal with it."

In this prayer, the people quoted Psalm 146:6 which affirms God as Creator and their acknowledgement of His supreme authority and power. They also cited Psalm 2:1-2 which says: "Why do the nations conspire and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against His anointed..."

This passage reminded me of today's world affairs. It is interesting to think that the Sanhedrin couldn't overcome the predetermined plan of God and neither can the world powers of our times.

Verses 29 and 30 are cited as the end of their prayer: "Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

The people admitted their weakness, and called on their Master for help as they asked for confidence. They continued their prayer with a statement of faith: "while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus." This Jewish community wanted to be part of God's plan.

Luke closes this episode in the history of the church with a description of God's answer to their prayer. Verse **4:31** tells us: "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken." The 1994 Northridge earthquake happened at **4:31** a.m. I am sure you will agree with me that this is just an interesting coincidence, right?

As we complete our study of chapter 4, we find that two results flowed from the people's spontaneous prayer. . .

First, they "began to speak the word of God with boldness" giving powerful "testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:31 and 33). The impact of their transformation continued, causing the believers to be bold and unhesitating in their preaching.

Second, the church became extraordinarily generous. In verses 32-45, the individuals are described as "being one in heart and mind." No one claimed that any of their possessions were their own; their possessions belonged to the Lord and therefore, to one another.

The church followed through and made it their practice to sell off their abundance and share it with the whole community. Verse 33 tells us that God's grace was so powerfully at work in all of them that there were no needy persons among them. In fact, from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Luke transitioned from the generosity of the community to introduce a man named Joseph who was a Levite. The apostles gave him the nickname of Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36). We will learn more about Barnabas as the story of Acts unfolds. At this point, we are given a glimpse into his character. He was one of those who sold off his property and brought the proceeds to the apostles for use in the ministry of the church.

It is easy to see why many describe the church in Acts as the ideal model of how a church should exist. I subscribe to that idea. Some have suggested that this is an early form of communism. I don't believe that is accurate. Dr. William Sanford LaSor points out that "Communism says, 'What is yours is mine; I'll take it.' Koinonia (which represents a profound spiritual unity and an intentional sharing of life) says, 'What is mine is yours, I'll share it.'"

I will close with a few ways that we can apply the three learnings that we read about in chapter 4 - being bold and courageous for Christ, the power of prayer, and developing generosity for others.

Persecution for our faith is not as common here as it is in other parts of the world. Perhaps that is why we do not feel the urgency to tell others about our Savior. Perhaps we are afraid to talk about Jesus to those with whom we associate because it might be uncomfortable or we may fear rejection. That is exactly what Satan is counting on. I pray that we will be bold and share the Word with every non-believer with whom we come in contact - co-workers, neighbors, your mother-in-law, and your grandchildren.

If your courage to share the gospel has weakened, pray that your boldness may increase and remember Jesus' promise, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32). **Share the Word – it's powerful!**

We examined the way prayer unified the Christian community. Prayer is important on an individual basis as well. I feel compelled to share a song by Christian composer and singer, Matthew West which inspired me to be more persistent in my prayer life and to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). At his recent concert, he sang the song "Don't Stop Praying." I have taken the liberty to combine some of the lyrics which are both inspirational and encouraging. Here are a few lines from the song:

What's your impossible? Your "I need a miracle"
What's got you barely hanging by a single thread?
What looks so hopeless now? What weighs down your heart with doubt?
You beg for a breakthrough, but no sign of breakthrough yet

Don't stop praying
Don't stop calling on Jesus' name
Keep on pounding on Heaven's door
And let your knees wear out the floor

Don't stop believing
'Cause mountains move with just a little faith
And your Father's heard every single word you're saying
So, don't stop praying.

Don't stop praying for the prodigal or for the miracle.
Don't stop praying that addictions end.
Don't stop praying for deliverance, for the sickness healed
and for His power revealed.
No, don't stop praying for the 'Kingdom come'
Don't stop praying that His will be done-
Hallelujah, hallelujah, and amen!

Lastly, I pray that we will learn to be like the generous people we read about in chapter 4. Our generosity does not have to be financial, and we may not be able to grab the hand of a lame man and say to him, "In the Name of Jesus, stand up and walk," but there are other things we can do. Our generosity can be shown by the way we use our time and acts of kindness. If you are serving in the nursery, you can change a diaper or two in the Name of Jesus. You can give a cup of cold water in His Name. You can carry the "good news" to a person who is despairing.

Personally, I have recently experienced many kindnesses. My husband has just been through hip replacement surgery and his recovery may be a little tougher than most due to his Parkinson's condition. My heart was touched when I received a card of encouragement from a caring friend, a phone call from an encouraging sister in Christ, prayers from my small group, and a lovely loaf of banana nut bread from a wonderful baker. It was so thoughtful of caring individuals to ask how the "old boy" was doing. I give thanks to God for the generosity of all of those who demonstrated kindness and caring during this time.

I believe that Peter and John were able to stand before the Sanhedrin courageously because they yielded to the control of the Holy Spirit. They brought glory

to their Lord and they became instruments of God's will. May we, too, become the instruments of God's will.

Will you please stand and join with me in singing "Because He Lives" and then I will close in prayer.