

ACTS 4

THE IMPACT OF PERSECUTION ON THE EARLY CHURCH

So far, in the first three chapters, we've observed Jesus ascending back to heaven. We saw the Holy Spirit come at Pentecost. When He came He rested on 120 followers of Jesus who were meeting together. They were filled and empowered and went out and started proclaiming the mighty works of God in all of these different languages. The crowds witnessing this were astonished. They said, "How are they doing it?" Peter stood up and began to preach boldly about Jesus. The result was that three thousand people got saved. The church in Jerusalem grew exponentially and flourished. Indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the apostles began to heal people just like Jesus had done.

One day Peter and John were going to the Temple. The church was so young that they had not started meeting in people's homes yet. So, they still met in the Temple, which was their practice. They encountered a man at the Temple gate who had been lame from birth. He sat there begging for money. Peter told the man, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" The man stood to his feet. He walked and leaped around the Temple complex praising God. The people in the Temple recognized him as that lame beggar who had been at the Temple gate all those years. The crowds were amazed to see him walking around.

Word spread about what happened to the lame beggar. People rushed to the Temple to see for themselves. Peter took advantage of the large crowd that gathered and he began to preach right there in the Temple. He delivered the kingdom message that Jesus had given His apostles to preach. This message included the repentance of sins. Peter points to the man who was lame and he tells his audience, "By faith in the name [of Jesus] has this man been made strong whom you see and know. The faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence

of you all.” There was no denying what God had done. The miracle was obvious for everyone to see.

Now, up to this point the church has yet to face any persecution. It’s in its infancy. But as we will see in today’s lesson, here in Acts Chapter 4, that’s about to change. When persecution finally does come, it will NOT take the apostles by surprise. After all, Jesus had told them it was coming. We flash back to the last night Jesus was with His disciples. They are in the upper room on the evening of Passover. This is one of the things Jesus told His disciples: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you [strong words]. Remember the word that I said to You: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me [and they did], they will also persecute you. If they kept My word [and some did], they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of My name, because they do not know Him who sent Me” (John 15:18-21).

Chapter 4 opens with the arrest of Peter and John right there in the Temple. Persecution begins. And what was their crime? We just covered it in Chapter 3 – preaching in the name of Jesus. That was it.

READ Acts 4:1-4

Peter and John’s preaching about Jesus doesn’t sit well with the Jewish religious leaders. They’ve been standing there in the Temple listening in the background, but now they along with the captain of the Temple come forward and arrest Peter and John and put them in jail. So powerful and convicting is Peter’s message that 5000 men are saved. This is just the men. Probably more that were saved since we don’t know how many women and children were there. So it was 5000-plus.

The Sadducees are one of several Jewish groups. What distinguishes them is that they do not believe in the resurrection of the dead. An old preacher once said, “They didn’t believe in the resurrection, so they were

sad, you see.” At the heart of Peter’s message is that Jesus had died but then had been resurrected back to life again by God. It says in v 2 that they were “greatly annoyed” by this message. Even though what the apostles were saying was true – that Jesus was resurrected – it did not fit the Sadducees’ theology. Most people when they’re confronted with a truth that disagrees with their own belief, rather than admit they’re wrong, they get angry and defensive. And that’s what happens here with the Sadducees. Now, there’s another group of Jews not mentioned in this passage but we know they are there. That is the Pharisees. They are also upset at Peter’s preaching, but for a different reason – the teaching about Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Remember, they had rejected Jesus and His claims – that He was the Son of God and the Messiah. They had turned the people against Jesus. They had put political pressure on the Romans to have Jesus crucified. After Jesus’s resurrection they were the ones who launched the disinformation campaign claiming that Jesus’s disciples had stolen His body. Peter in his sermon in Chapter 3 refuted that lie.

In a short period of time, the Holy Spirit’s power has led to 8,000-plus conversions to Christ, people being saved and added to the church (5,000-plus the day before and 3,000 at Pentecost). The Jewish religious leaders, unlike many of the Jewish people, do not repent. They dig in their heels in unbelief. They move quickly to try and put an end to this annoying Jesus movement. It’s getting way out of hand!

READ Acts 4:5-7

“...did you do this?” is a reference to healing the lame man. How dare they? The Sanhedrin – all 72 members – convenes to discuss what action to take against these troublesome apostles. This is basically the same group of Jewish religious elites who just two months before had plotted to get rid of Jesus. Now they meet in an attempt to get rid of the church. As you can imagine, this is a rather hostile setting for Peter and John.

The question they ask is interesting... “By what power or by what name did you do this? Now, they had heard Peter preach. They knew what

he said. Peter told the people: "By faith in His name—Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all." Maybe they thought they were going to intimidate Peter. But that's not what happened!

READ Acts 4:8-10

Peter pokes the bear with jabs at both the Pharisees and Sadducees. Peter isn't intimidated at all, is he? Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter speaks with great boldness and clarity.

READ Acts 4:11-12

Peter quotes here from Psalm 118:22 which was a well-known Messianic prophecy. Peter is basically telling them, "You rejected your Messiah. You fulfilled this prophecy, You killed your own Messiah!" What an accusation!

In v 12 Peter makes that great statement that has been used by many Christians when sharing the Gospel – "There is salvation in no one else [obviously speaking of Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

As John Phillips says: "Not the name of Confucius, Buddha, or Allah, not the name of many or any of God's choicest saints. Not the name of Abraham or Moses. Only in the name of Jesus is salvation to be found."

READ Acts 4:13-14

There is stunned silence for a moment. They cannot deny the obvious miracle they can see standing before them. And they can't deny the name by which the miracle was performed. Peter has made that pretty clear. They are at a complete loss to explain any of this. They really have no case against Peter and John.

READ Acts 4:15

They call a "timeout" to discuss what to do next.

READ Acts 4:16

“What are we going to do?” They are trying to figure out how to respond to this obvious miracle.

This is a good place for me to pause and bring up a point I have made before. When Jesus performed signs and miracles, what was their primary purpose? To validate that Jesus was who He claimed to be. OK, so what was the purpose of this miracle, the healing of the lame man? The same. It was to validate Peter’s message of salvation. You see, the physical healing of the man was done in the name, by the authority of Jesus. Likewise, then, this salvation message Peter has been preaching about is also in the name of Jesus. These signs simply act to validate that the messenger, and therefore his message, are indeed from God Himself.

You would think that, given all those miracles – such as raising Lazarus from the dead – that the Jewish leaders would have paid more attention to Jesus. But they did not. You would think that they would also listen to what Peter has to say given the miracle they see before them. But again, they do not. Their hearts are cold and hard.

Well, after much deliberation the council finally reaches a decision...

READ Acts 4:17-18

I like what the quarterly says... “The Sanhedrin issued the ancient equivalent of a gag order.” This prompts Peter and John to give a classic response basically defying their order.

READ Acts 4:19-20

In essence they tell the Sanhedrin, “We can either do what God has told us to do or we can do what you are telling us to do. We intend to go right on preaching what we know to be the truth. We are going to do what God says to do. We are going to keep right on preaching Jesus!” They are not intimidated at all, are they?

READ Acts 4:21-22

For the first time in the story we learn that the man who was healed was forty years old. This means that he had been lame for 40 years when God miraculously healed him. Amazing!

The religious leaders have no choice but to release Peter and John. Punishing them would be counter-productive. It would prompt the people to riot against them because the people viewed the miracle Peter and John had performed as being an act of God, which it was. I find it very interesting (but sad) that the Jewish people here in Jerusalem appear to be more spiritually perceptive than do their own religious leaders. V 21 says, "when they had further threatened them..." So, let me ask you, do you think the apostles are the least bit intimidated by these threats. Read the book of Acts. Not one bit!

READ Acts 4:23-28

The arrest and interrogation of Peter and John is the church's first taste of persecution. It's only the beginning. Things will only get worse moving forward. However, like I said before, this does not take them by surprise. Jesus told them it would happen. And now it's begun. The church's response that we just read is to **pray**. Their prayer starts out by praising God for who He is. He is the sovereign, all-powerful Creator of the world. He's in control. He is on the throne. That is always a good way to start your prayer out with.

Then, as part of their prayer they quote scripture, specifically Psalm 2. David, in the first part of this psalm, is foretelling the rebellion of the world against the LORD's Anointed, the Messiah. They see what happened to Jesus and now what's happening to them (the church) as partial fulfillment of this prophecy. The believers had hoped that the Jewish nation would repent and turn to Christ. But now they can see, based on the reactions of the Jewish leaders, that a national revival is not likely to happen. Given all that, here is how they close their prayer...

READ Acts 4:29-30

What I want you to see is that the believers do NOT pray for God to take away or lighten the persecution. Instead, they pray for boldness in preaching Jesus, to proclaim the Good News.

READ Acts 4:31

This is amazing. They were praying with such fervor that the place was shaken! I want to talk about that phrase "filled with the Holy Spirit" which appears several times in the book of Acts. What does it mean? There is a lot of bad doctrine out there, so let me give you the best information I can. I don't want you to be misled.

I have a really good quote from Billy Graham from his book "The Holy Spirit." This is what he says it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit: "Society speaks of people being 'under the influence.' Someone, for instance, who is controlled by alcohol, is dominated by alcohol. Its presence and power have overridden normal abilities and actions. To be Spirit-filled according to Scripture is to be controlled or dominated by the Spirit of God's presence and power (see Ephesians 5:18). The Apostle Paul was using this as an example when he wrote Ephesians 5:18. As believers in Christ we're to be filled with the Spirit, or 'under the influence' of God's Spirit. God will not mislead us as we obediently follow Him. But when other things outside of Christ fill us, these "things" can lead us down paths that don't honor and glorify Him.

To 'be filled with the Spirit' pictures a continual filling. We're not filled once for all but filled constantly. Christians aren't to be emptied of the Spirit to later become full again; rather they should constantly draw on the direction and energy of the Spirit."

That is exactly what we see happening with the early church here in Acts Chapter 4.

READ Acts 4:32

We have seen that phrase "had everything in common" before, back in Acts Chapter 2: "And all who believed were together and had all things in

common" (Acts 2:44). Same concept. What does this mean? John MacArthur defines it like this: "This phrase conveys not that the early Christians lived in a commune or pooled and redistributed everything equally (it was not an early form of Communism), but that they held their own possessions lightly, ready to use them at any moment for someone else, as needs arose." That's how MacArthur defines it. To put it in my own words, they were **completely unselfish**.

Chapter 4 ends like this...

READ Acts 4:33-37

This shows you the compassion and self-less giving that defined the early church. Barnabas, who will become well-known later as one of Paul's missionary partners, is put forth here as an example of the type of giving that was being displayed by the early Christians as a whole. Luke mentions Barnabas as a positive example here in Chapter 4. Why does he do that? Because in Chapter 5 he is going to bring up a negative example of giving. So, Luke is contrasting these two extremes. Both existed in the early church.

I close with a question. How did persecution impact the early Christians? Positively or negatively? Some would argue negatively because persecution is painful and unpleasant. But it was actually a positive thing. It made the early believers stronger in their faith; it made them more committed to Christ; it united the body in a bond of Christian love. They were as v 32 says, "of one heart and soul." So persecution was mostly positive.

So, what can we take away from Acts Chapter 4?

- There is great power and authority in the name of Jesus.
- God allows negative circumstances into our lives for a reason. Rather than praying for those to be removed (our desire), we should pray for strength and wisdom in the middle of that circumstance. We need to pray that God's will be accomplished in our lives.

- God does a lot of refining work by allowing us, as His children, to face difficulty. It allows us to grow and change as we need to. If life was easy, we would never grow, we would never develop patience and perseverance.
- The persecution of Christians leading to suffering or death is a reality in parts of the world. However, in our culture, we rarely face such persecution. Instead, our enemy (Satan) attacks us with worldliness, selfish pride, need for acceptance, and status. These things hurt our witness for Christ and must be avoided.
- We are to be filled with the Holy Spirit (as Ephesians 5:18 commands us to do). If we are going to have any success as individual believers or as a church, we must operate “under the influence” of the Holy Spirit.