

The First Real Opposition

Acts 4

DT- Order your life around Christ.

Acts chapter 4 picks up right where we left Peter and John last week. They had healed the crippled beggar and were speaking to the crowd that had gathered around them at the temple. As they were speaking the priests, the temple guards, and some Sadducees confront them. They were put off because Peter and John were teaching that Jesus was God and that Jesus rose from the dead. The Sadducees would have been especially upset because they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, that's why they were sad you see. Bad joke but a good way to remember what the Sadducees believe.

Peter and John are thrown in jail for the night, but we learn that the church has been growing that last few weeks and is up to 5,000 men not including women and children. Essentially 5,000 families have heard their message and believed. Now with the first real opposition to this brand-new movement occurring; how would the disciples and the church as a whole respond. Let's pray and we will see what happens.

PRAY

There are 3 main factors that helped the early church grow so rapidly. First was a Spirit filled preaching. Peter was being filled by and led by the Spirit. The second thing that helped them grow so rapidly were the miracles, signs, and wonders that were performed, like the miracle of the healed beggar in Acts 3. The third main factor that contributed to their rapid growth was prayer. The early church knew how to pray so that God's hand could work in some mighty and powerful ways.

When the British preacher Charles Spurgeon was asked to explain the secret to his flourishing ministry he said, "My people pray for me." Augustine said, "Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as though everything depends on you." Prayer should never be our escape from responsibility, but rather a response to God's ability. Prayer should energize us and ready us for service and for battle. At the end of Acts 4 we will see how this early church used prayer as one of those main factors for growth.

Before we can see that we need to turn our focus back to the trial.

1. The Trial.

Part of the reason Peter and John, and most likely the beggar, were thrown in jail is because the Jews did not perform trials at night. At least that was the rule most of the time. It was a cooling off period for both the accused and those who would judge them. Jesus told the disciples in Mark 13:9, "When these things begin to happen, watch out! You will be handed over to the local councils and beaten in the synagogues. You will stand trial before governors and kings because you are my followers. But this will be your opportunity to tell them about me."

Jesus warned them that this time was coming, but to not be afraid because it was their opportunity to tell people about Jesus. He goes on in Mark 13 and tells them not to worry about what they will say because the Holy Spirit would help them. That's exactly what we see happening here in Acts 4. The next morning the whole council is there. Acts 4:5-6 says, "The next day the council of all the rulers and elders and teachers of religious law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, along with Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and other relatives of the high priest."

The full Sanhedrin has shown up for the trial. This was essentially their Supreme Court except they had 70-72 members. Peter and John would have been placed in the middle of this group, standing while the Sanhedrin sat all around them. The question that this council wants an answer to is asked in Acts 4:7, "By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?"

The text says that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, just like Jesus said they would be, and he answers their question with a question of his own. Acts 4:8-12 Peter says, "Rulers and elders of our people, are we being questioned today because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? Let me clearly state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, 'The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."

What a powerful statement. There is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved. Peter repeats what Jesus had said back in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."

Peter introduces the image of a cornerstone. That's not something Peter came up with on his own, it was a direct quote from Psalm 118. Different translations will use different words for what Peter said here. You will find 3 options: cornerstone, capstone, and keystone. This is a picture of a keystone. That stone right in the middle of the arch was a keystone. Those arches were dry staked without mortar and that keystone was cut to fit perfectly so the arch would not collapse. These still exist today in construction, but they generally aren't quite as structurally important as they were in ancient times.

This next picture is a capstone. The capstone went on the very top of a pillar to form a cap from which you could continue to build, and it gave more stability to the pillars underneath it. This last picture is what a cornerstone looks like. This is more of an exaggerated version, but the cornerstone was incredibly important to the foundation of any structure. It had to be placed level, plumb and solid so the rest of the wall could be built up around it.

This Christmas while we traveling we ended up driving through Siloam Spring Arkansas, which is where John Brown University is. Abby got her masters there and I worked on the grounds crew for 3 years. While I was there we built a u-shaped retaining wall. After we had excavated and compacted the rock really well we spent a lot of time making sure that the very first stone at the corner was level, plumb, and square. That first block had to be right for the rest of the wall to be stable for years to come.

We drove by that retaining wall, while we were eating Braum's ice cream, and it was still there and looked just as solid as the day we finished it. Peter says you rejected the stone, you rejected and killed Jesus, but God made Jesus the cornerstone. The stone that everything would be built upon. It may not be politically correct, or socially acceptable to say that Jesus is the only way to heaven, but that's what the Word of God says, that's how Jesus described himself, and that's what Peter told the Sanhedrin that morning.

If the company I'm keeping is Jesus, and Peter; I'm okay with being politically incorrect. Because I believe the Bible knows more than any politically correct professor on some campus somewhere. Those people didn't die for your sins, Jesus did. No other religious leader rose from the dead except Jesus. There is no one comparable to Jesus at all. I'm with him. That's what Peter told these men and Acts 4:13 says, "The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures."

The phrase ordinary men is the Greek word idiotai, where we of course get our word idiot. The meaning is a little different. Idiotai means ignorant in Greek. Then Luke writes this in the second part of Acts 4:13, "They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus."

Do you spend enough time with Jesus that people recognize it?

- Do you spend enough time with Jesus that people recognize it?

Wouldn't you like this to be said about you. There's a difference between being academically smart or intellectually smart and being spiritually wise. You could become more academically advanced in your understanding of theology, but You will only become more spiritually wise by spending time with Jesus. Spending more time in the Word. True wisdom and power come from the Word of God.

Why did the religious leaders say this about Peter and John? What was it that made them recognize these guys as having been with Jesus? Maybe because they sounded like Jesus. They certainly were preaching with the same boldness of Jesus. Maybe it was how they used scripture to prove who Jesus was. We don't know for sure but I don't think there could be a better complement than this. I don't think I'm there yet, but I hope someday when God calls me home people will say at my funeral; he may not have been the best preacher, the best father, the greatest husband, or a perfect pastor, but there was no doubt he spent time with Jesus.

Do you spend enough time with Jesus that people recognize it? The Sanhedrin recognized Peter and John as men who did just that. They weren't really sure how to handle this situation especially with the man who had been healed standing right there as physical proof. They were speechless the text says. So they told Peter and John to leave the council chamber in order to discuss the matter. The word that Luke uses to describe their discussion means to toss back and forth.

They really aren't sure how to handle this. Do they kill them? That's not going to go over very well. Do they just ignore them? They're awfully bold, I don't think this is going away. What did they actually do wrong? They did blasphemy God according to their standards. They can't deny that a 40+ year old lame man is now walking around. Finally, we get the decision.

2. The Decision.

At this point they want to avoid a scene and a potential riot so Acts 4:17-18 says, "To keep them from spreading their propaganda any further, we must warn them not to speak to anyone in Jesus' name again." So they called the apostles back in and commanded them never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus."

Basically they told Peter and John don't do that again. Stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus. We don't like that, we don't believe in what you've said, because if we did that would have been a huge mistake on our part. We aren't going to own up to that. They didn't want to take responsibility for what they had done so the decision was to just confront Peter and John and tell them to hush. Peter and John, filled with the Spirit had other ideas. After the Sanhedrin tells them to stop speaking and teaching in Jesus name Peter and John say this in Acts 4:19, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard."

That's a bold statement and the council really didn't expect that. They threatened Peter and John a little more but end up just letting them go because they didn't know how to punish them without causing some major uproar. Everyone around them is praising God for this miracle so publicly punishing Peter and John is not a good idea.

What Peter and John said to the Sanhedrin was a great question. Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? It's somewhat of an unfair question. Obviously the Sanhedrin believed in God so obeying God is the right answer but that puts them in a precarious position. The question we need to wrestle with after reading this text might be this; when is it right to disobey your leaders?

- When is it right to disobey your leaders?

I could ask that more specifically. When is it right to disobey the government of the United States? That question is more relevant today than perhaps it has ever been before. Think of the OT examples of this. The Hebrew midwives refused to kill the firstborn Israelite males. Daniel disobeyed the King's order not to pray. 3 Hebrew men refused to bow to the king's image and were thrown in a fiery furnace. We see it happening in the OT and here in the NT with Peter and John.

Bob Russell wrote a blog post about this very topic a few years ago. If you want I can send you that post. Let me quickly share with you just a few points that he made when it comes to this question of when is it right to disobey the law of the land.

First Bob mentions that the legal order or law must be in direct violation of God's Word. Not just something we think is illogical or unfair. It must contradict scripture. Bob also says that if you choose to object, your reason must be clear and communicated to the proper authorities. Peter and John certainly did that. Bob also reminds us that our disobedience must be civil. Peter and John were not violent or uncivilized with their disobedience to the Sanhedrin.

The last thing Bob mentions is that if we choose to disobey then we must be willing to accept the consequences. Daniel knew the consequences and he prayed anyways. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew they would be thrown into the fire for their refusal to bow down. You have to decide for yourself when it is right to disobey the leaders of the land. I found a phrase that might help you in that decision. This is from the last line of what is called The Manhattan Declaration. It says this, "We will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar's. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God's."

That's the position Peter and John took with the Sanhedrin that day. They are both released and when they get back to the other believers we see the response.

3. The Response.

Peter and John report what had happened and what the Sanhedrin had told them, and the response of the church is found in Acts 4:24-31 where it 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 very 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. 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." After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness."

Their response to the news from Peter and John was to pray. This prayer is different from the way we normally pray for a few reasons. First, they are telling God what he has already said. They quote Psalm 2 in their prayer to God, and then in the prayer they interpret the Psalm their quoting and apply it to what happened to Jesus. It's a very interesting prayer. Psalm 2 mentions nations, kings, and rulers. They interpret those 3 groups in their prayer to represent Herod, Pilate, Rome, and the people of Israel.

Those groups or people represent nations, kings, and rulers. Psalm 2 says that the nations were angry, the kings prepared for battle, the rulers plot against the anointed one. This all fits with what happened to Jesus. There was a plot to kill him. People were angry. Preparation was made to have Jesus crucified. That's all these believers quote in their prayer, but if you read on in Psalm 2 it paints a perfect picture of what God accomplished through the death of Jesus.

Listen to what psalm 2:3 says, "Let us break their chains," they cry, "and free ourselves from slavery to God."

The nations, kings, and rulers wanted to free themselves from God by killing Jesus. Now listen to what happens next in Psalm 2:4-6, "But the one who rules in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them. Then in anger he rebukes them, terrifying them with his fierce fury. For the Lord declares, "I have placed my chosen king on the throne in Jerusalem, on my holy mountain."

You kings and rulers and nations think you're in control. God says I don't think so. In fact, he laughs at what they planned. God says my king, my Son is still on the throne even though you tried to kill him. These believers pray this psalm back to God and then they ask God to give them great boldness to preach the word. They ask him to keep performing the miracles. They are asking him to help them do the very things the religious leaders told them not to do.

This kind of prayer is known as an imprecatory prayer. An imprecatory prayer is when you pray that someone else is judged or defeated. You pray that someone else's sin might come into the light. One of my professors described it like this. Just as you came into Joplin on I-44 there was an adult video store. When he would pass that store he would pray that every man in that store would get caught by his wife, his mother, and his daughter. He didn't pray that the store would burn down because he would rather they go bankrupt so that a church could take over the building. When he asked God to catch those men in the act he was praying an imprecatory prayer.

This group of believers is praying that same kind of prayer. God we want to go against what the religious leaders have said. Give us the boldness to fight back in our preaching. Give us the overwhelming victory over your enemies through the miraculous signs and wonders you are allowing us to perform. Can we pray imprecatory prayers?

- Can we pray imprecatory prayers?

Absolutely you can. You can pray that the enemy be defeated. You can pray that someone who is walking away from God because of sin have that sin exposed so that they can be restored and come back to God. You can absolutely pray these kinds of prayers but be careful with them. Be specific and God will answer if it is truly his will.

After this prayer the place they were meeting in shook. They would interpret that shaking as a judgement from God. In other words, the shaking told them that God was going to answer their imprecatory prayer, which he does as we will see the answer to this prayer unfold in the coming weeks. Prayer is a powerful thing. Just a few weeks ago when Damar Hamlin the safety for the Buffalo Bills went down, prayer was all anyone knew to do. Announcers were speechless. Sport debate shows didn't even know what to say or do, but they knew enough to pray. One of them even prayed out loud during the show. When was the last time that happened. Probably never.

I'm convinced that we don't pray because we don't need to, or at least we think we don't need to. But as soon as something tragic happens, something out of our control happens, people pray. They pray to God; yet 5 minutes ago they couldn't have cared less about God. Until you posture yourself in a position where you need God your prayer life will probably not grow any deeper. Until you take a risk, until you put yourself in a position that without the help of God you could not carry out his ministry, you will never know what it is like to truly pray. I'm pretty sure the biblical word for that is faith.

We need to start asking what the NT church asked for. Part of our problem is that we pray for non-scriptural things. The things we pray for aren't bad, but we need to pray for things like wisdom. James chapter 1. We need to pray for boldness like we see here in Acts. We need to pray for things over and over again like Jesus tells us to in Luke 11. We need to pray for more workers to go out into the harvest fields, Matthew 9:38.

I told you at the beginning of the sermon that there were 3 main factors that helped the early church grow. I think we have to expand that to 4 main factors. Maybe next week I'll have 5. The 4 things God gave this early church to help them evangelize and grow was powerful, Holy Spirit filled preaching. Miraculous signs and wonders. Powerful prayer like we just saw, and the fourth one I would add is economic unity. Every now and then Luke mentions how they shared their possessions with one another and we find that here at the end of chapter 4. This was not communism this was community. Communism says, "what's yours is mine, I'll take it." Community says, "what's mine is yours, I'll give it."

Those 4 factors contributed so much to the growth and health of the early church. Those 4 things can still help us grow today. Here's what I want you to hear from this message today. Order your life around Christ. Don't order your life around your career. Don't order your life around your family and the kids activities. Don't order your life around some sports team. Don't order your life around the accumulation of wealth. Order your life around Christ. If you do that people will recognize that you spend time with Jesus. If you order your life around Christ you will know when to obey and when to disobey the leaders of the land. If you order you life around Christ prayer is something you will continuously grow in, maybe even to the point where you do occasionally offer an imprecatory prayer.

If you really want to see the lost be saved and the saved be sanctified then order your life around Christ and who knows, maybe someday the ground underneath our feet will shake too.