

# Acts 4 - Earnest in Persecution

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Verses:

## Acts 4

### Peter and John Before the Sanhedrin

<sup>4</sup> The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people.

<sup>2</sup> They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup> They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. <sup>4</sup> But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

<sup>5</sup> The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. <sup>7</sup> They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

<sup>8</sup> Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! <sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> Jesus is

"the stone you builders rejected,  
which has become the cornerstone."<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

<sup>13</sup> When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. <sup>14</sup> But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. <sup>15</sup> So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. <sup>16</sup> “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup> But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

<sup>18</sup> Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup> But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! <sup>20</sup> As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

<sup>21</sup> After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup> For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

### The Believers Pray

<sup>23</sup> On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

<sup>24</sup> When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
<sup>26</sup>The kings of the earth rise up  
and the rulers band together  
against the Lord  
and against his anointed one.”<sup>[b]’[c]</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.  
<sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

<sup>31</sup> After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

### The Believers Share Their Possessions

<sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all <sup>34</sup> that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

## John 15:18

<sup>18</sup> “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

## Psalm 118:22

<sup>22</sup> The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

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Good Morning. If you remember from last week, John and Peter, two very different personalities, are on their way to the temple for evening prayer and they encounter a lame man outside one of the temple gates. Peter heals the man in the name of Jesus Christ, and the crowd is amazed and Peter seizes the opportunity and shares the Gospel with them.

**What we say and do has consequences.** Sometimes those consequences are good, and sometimes they are not. This is a basic truth that I am trying to teach my children.

Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican political activist, author, and speaker from the early 1900's once said:

“Men who are in earnest are not afraid of consequences.”

I would add to this, you just better be sure what you are earnest about. Peter and John are earnest about Jesus Christ. As we should be today.

Today we will see our first glimpse of the division brewing between the people and the Jewish leaders.

## Acts 4:1-2

***1 And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, 2 greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.***

**The captain of the guard was basically the right-hand man of the chief priest.** He had authority.

The Sadducees were one of the three major Jewish theological and philosophical groups in the Jewish religious sphere. **They did not believe in angels or demons, nor in a future resurrection from the dead.**

**Whenever you speak the truth, you will annoy someone.**

And Luke tells us the leaders were particularly annoyed with the idea of a resurrection from the dead through Jesus.

These leaders believed it blasphemous to preach that Jesus is the Messiah, and they did not want to provoke the Roman authorities to take notice and clamp down on Israel. It is always about power.

## Acts 4:3-4

***3 And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4 But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.***

Being so annoyed, they arrest Peter and John and keep them overnight.

So 3,000 came to believe in Jesus on Pentecost, and now and additional 5,000 believe.

**This is the first time we see followers of Jesus imprisoned for preaching the Gospel.**

**According to Open Doors in the last year:**

- ***Over 260 million Christians living in places where they experience high levels of persecution***
- ***2,983 Christians killed for their faith***
- ***9,488 churches and other Christian buildings attacked.***
- ***3,711 believers detained without trial, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned***

In the United States we live detached from the truths of persecution, but persecution should come as no surprise. Jesus Himself said this would happen.

**John 15:18**

***“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”***

While the world may have seemed to changed a lot since the time of Peter and John, people have not.

**Suffering and rejection is often the result of faithfulness, but it is also a blessing.** Jesus promises nothing less than blessing to all who remain faithful to Him in the midst of suffering.

Also, **suffering of the church is often the very means that Jesus uses to bring others into his family.** Even though Peter and John are taken into custody, 5,000 men came to trust Jesus that day.

**God uses our faithfulness, in the face of persecution, to embolden others believers and draw unbelievers to Himself.**

**The result of preaching the Word of God, even in the middle of controversy and antipathy, will result in many people believing the Gospel because of the faithfulness, the earnestness, of the one preaching.**

The growth of 5,000 men on that day reveals the explosive power of the faithful gospel preaching.

We could go to a myriad of conferences and spend days learning the latest church growth techniques, but the reality is that the method that works is simple, **faithfully preaching the Gospel to the lost.**

**Acts 4:5-7**

***5 On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, 6 with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7 And when they had set them in***

*the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”*

Peter and John are now going to face some tough questions by the leaders of the temple. **Notice who is there, Annas and Caiaphas, the same people who questioned Jesus during His trial.**

When Jesus had turned over the tables in the temple courts, the chief priests and the scribes asked Him, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” (Mark 11:28)

Now Peter and John will be asked basically the same thing, by what power or name are you doing this.

If there was any question that Peter and John would want asked, this is the one. This is like tossing up a softball to be hit out of the park. **The door is again open to share the Gospel.**

But this question also reveals a lot about these leaders:

1. **Ignorance - These leaders were supposed to know everything about the scriptures, but they failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.**
2. **Arrogance - The Scriptures warn against taking a hand against one of God’s prophets, but that is what they did. They crucified the only begotten Son of God.**



3. **Fear: Their authority with Rome was threatened. They wanted to know the “name” of the person who told them to preach the Gospel. They were more afraid of Rome than of God.**

#### Acts 4:8-12

***8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. 11 This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. 12 And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”***

Peter’s main concern is to **point everyone to Jesus**, the resurrected Lord and Messiah.

Peter also calls Jesus the **cornerstone**. In the 1st century Jewish world, the cornerstone was an ornamental stone that gave the building dignity. The cornerstone gave the building meaning and made it distinctive.

Peter quotes Psalm 118:22

***The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.***

**This is a prophecy about the rejection of the Messiah.** The religious leaders and the Jewish people are the builders, and Jesus was rejected by them but is now the cornerstone of a new covenant.

**Peter makes it clear that the message of the Gospel is exclusive.** There is but one path to salvation, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ.

And while the Jews associated words like victory, freedom, and justice with the coming of the Messiah, Peter wants them to understand that most of all they need salvation, as we do today.

**We are all sinners and we need a savior, and that Savior has come.** We need salvation from our sins and the eternal consequences of those sins.

We do not need self-improvement, self-esteem, or self-renovation. We need salvation.

**Salvation is at the very heart of what Jesus accomplished for those who respond in faith and repentance.**

He is the only Savior.

## **Acts 4:13 -22**

***13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. 14 But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. 15 But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, 16 saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." 18 So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, 20 for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." 21 And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. 22 For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.***

The leaders of the temple can noticeably see the confidence that Peter and John have. This confidence enabled the apostles to confront unbelief with the Gospel and truth concerning Jesus Christ.

John and Peter were uneducated men. They did not grow-up in the tradition of the priest and religious leaders. They were commoners.

And while this is not an insult, it is a reality that they were fishermen and not scholars of the law. This is shocking to the leaders. How is it that these simple men are able to communicate such a well-articulated message? How did they know so much about the scriptures?

The answer is simple. **In verse 8 it said that Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit.**

We see here the very fulfillment of a promise of Jesus

**Matthew 10:19**

***When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.***

You and I can rest assured that we too will be given the words to say when the time comes. **But we must be faithful and confident not in what we know, but in who we know.**

Not knowing what to do with Peter and John, they instruct them to not speak in the name of Jesus anymore.

But Peter and John appeal to a higher authority and ask whether they should listen to God or to man. The answer is very obvious, God of course.

The Apostles are so earnest and confident in what they are saying that they say they cannot not speak of what they have seen and heard.

Amazing. **The Gospel must be proclaimed.**

The religious leaders were blind and deaf to the salvation power of Jesus Christ. They craved their own power and control. They wanted keep the message of Jesus quiet to keep their own positions in Jewish society. But all they could do is threaten them and then release Peter and John.

**May we to have hearts transformed that we “cannot but speak” of Jesus.**

**Acts 4:23-31**

***23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “ ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’— 27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate,***

*along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*

Once the believers are back together again, they hear about what happened to Peter and John. **And what is the first thing they do? They praised God in prayer.**

For many of us, prayer as a response for something good happening is not even on our radar. But this early church prayed without ceasing; it was a natural reflex in any situation.

**If we want to be Gospel people in a Gospel community, prayer must become our natural reflex.**

The primary theme of their prayer is the **sovereignty and power of God.**

The prayer begins with praise and adoration leading to the quoting of scripture. Scripture ignited the prayer life of the early church, and it should do the same for us today.

You and I should pray with the same boldness and confidence in God's sovereignty. When we do so, we recognize that God is involved in every aspect of creation and in every part of our lives.

Nothing surprises God. Not even the foolish things that you and I do sometimes. He ordains all things according to His will, even the actions of the wicked accomplish his perfect purposes.

We should pray confident in the truth that God is truly sovereign. No area of our lives is outside the bounds of His reach and sovereign plan.

What is most interesting is what they did not pray for. **They did not pray for God to spare them any further confrontation or suffering.** But they prayed for boldness to speak the Gospel.

It is not wrong to pray against suffering and persecution, but we should never be fearful of the opposition to the Gospel. We must prioritize the mission of spreading the Gospel over our personal security.

## True Unity

**Acts 4:32-37**

***32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that***

*belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

**The Christian life is a public life. It cannot be cloaked in secrecy and hidden deep like some sort of secret club. One way our faith in Jesus is displayed to those outside the faith is the visible fellowship of believers.**

If we claim to be Christian, we must live in unity with God through Jesus Christ, and live in unity with God's people. This first congregation was marked by unity.

Today churches try to pursue unity by dismissing doctrinal differences or smoothing over the rough edges of the Gospel message, like the exclusivity of Jesus or the reality of hell. This may look like unity, but this is a false unity. It is not biblical.

**Biblical unity is based upon sound doctrine and the clear teaching of God's Word.**



The church in Acts is so unified they are willing to sell their own possessions to provide for those in need. This is a complete rejection of materialism. To be a Gospel community, we must realize that our material gifts are from God and are to be used for His glory.

## Takeaway

- **We are called to pray to God and live in harmony with other believers as we seek to share the Gospel with our communities.**
- **We need one another for strength in difficult times of persecution that are sure to come.**
- **We must have an urgency to share the Gospel.**
- **We must be bold in the face of trials, because it is through trials that we are strengthened and the church grows in number and in depth.**
- **May we be generous with the gifts God has given us, for His glory and His kingdom**

Let's Pray

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## **Go A Little Deeper**

1. Peter and John landed in jail because of their testimony about Jesus following that healing. Why does sharing the gospel of Jesus provoke people to oppose the message and the messengers?
2. If you were arrested, brought before a judge, and accused of testifying and witnessing about Jesus Christ, how do you think you would respond?
3. What does the fact that Peter and John seemed so “ordinary” communicate about the work of God? In what ways can this encourage us in our relationship with God?
4. What are some of the most common excuses Christians make for not sharing the gospel with others? How do the principles of today’s study challenge such excuses?
5. What are you willing to risk in order to share the gospel? What is one practical step you could take this week to grow in your love for Christ and your passion for the gospel?