

The Persecution Begins

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[0 : 00] So welcome here for this Sunday, June 16th, everyone. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here this morning. And every Sunday, I guess.

It's neat to me to be doing this this morning because it gives me a different experience. I was saying to Michelle that it gives me the opportunity to not be stressed about the sermon because I'm stressed about that first.

And then stressful transition here. But that's special to me to be able to share the gifts with Len and Connor and to be able to sing.

Len said a few weeks ago when he asked us, or last week, I guess, he said, oh, wouldn't that be nice to do that on Father's Day? And I thought to myself, oh, so stressful. Is that a Father's Day? But it's awesome. So it is awesome. So as today is Father's Day, I want to take a moment to recognize dads this morning. So speaking from experience, being a father is one of the greatest adventures and challenges and joys of my life.

[1 : 09] Particularly now. Because we're watching our children as they continue in their young adult journeys. So our hands are off the wheel, but it's hard not to keep trying to grab it.

But I remember that my own father let go. He became an advisor, a friend, and didn't parent me quite as much. But this morning, as much as we recognize the pleasure and great joy there can be in fatherhood, it can be hard at times, for sure.

So as a father, I have made bad decisions. I have said or done things that I regret. And sadly, in our world, we recognize that there are broken families and divorces more common than we would like to admit.

We recognize that men can become fathers in less than ideal situations and circumstances. And without having perhaps had healthy models of fatherhood themselves.

For others, they deeply miss their fathers. They long for one last conversation. One last shared experience.

[2 : 23] And for some men, other men, they may reflect on a father that they never really knew. A father who is never there for them. Or in fact, maybe they're even glad that that person is not involved in their life at all.

We recognize that Father's Day can be challenging for women, too. If they find themselves missing their own fathers, that's a hard reality today.

Missing the father of their children. Or any other challenging emotions that are associated with this day. So this morning, we recognize that Father's Day can be a time of celebration for some.

For many, perhaps. But a time of grief and longing. Or even anger and frustration for others. So regardless of your circumstances today, may it be a time of joy and reflection if that is your experience and your situation.

And may God bring peace and comfort and healing to you if that's your circumstance today. And in all these things, we can celebrate that we have a good God.

[3 : 38] Who is our Heavenly Father. Who loves you. And thankfully, me too. Just as we are. Happy Father's Day.

So, let's dive right in. We're continuing in our sermon series, Acts to All the World. Which we're now 11 deep into, I think. Through this series, we are exploring the New Testament book of Acts.

And some of you know it well. Some of you may not know it that well. So as we considered last week, Acts 3, 1 to 26. Our sermon was titled, The Second Gospel Sermon.

And we recognized a few important things. I'll just recap quickly. Following Peter's healing of the lame man and that second gospel sermon, the religious leaders in Jerusalem became extremely disturbed and concerned.

And as we learned, people also came to believe and receive Peter's message. And approximately 5,000 people by that time had received Jesus.

[4 : 44] So this morning, we're going to be exploring Acts 4, 1 to 31. So let's look at that now. If you have your Bible with you, you can open it. And turn to Acts 4, verses 1 to 31.

There are Bibles in the pew in front of you. Or you can just listen. 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.

They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people. Proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.

But many who heard the message believed. So the number of men who believed grew to about 5,000. The next day, the rulers, the elders, and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem.

Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them.

[5 : 49] By what power or name do you do this? Then Peter, 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 whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

Jesus is the stone the 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. 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. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.

So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. 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.

[7 : 10] 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. Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

But Peter and John replied, 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, they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over 40 years old.

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. 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. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David.

[8 : 16] Why did the nations rage and the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant, whom you anointed.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 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. 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. Our sermon this morning is titled, The Persecution Begins.

[9 : 16] And we've just gotten some important context for that. The conflicting reactions to and the reception for the early gospel message led to the persecution of the church in Jerusalem.

So, what did this persecution look like? Persecution sermon on Father's Day. Just worked out that way. So, what did the persecution look like?

What were some of the lessons that we can learn from it? So, let's unpack Acts 4, 1 to 31 together and we'll see what we can learn. So, first, there's a lot of references, but that's just to keep you in line with what I'm talking about so you don't get lost.

So, Acts 4, 1 to 4 says, So, we can recognize, We can recognize a process here, right?

We don't really know how much time passed between when Peter was speaking to the crowd and when he and John were arrested, but it seemed to have happened quickly.

[10:44] So, we read that an organized group of priests, the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees all got together quickly again to come to check it out, what was going on.

They did not like what they heard, right? We recognize that. What Peter and John seemed to be teaching, they didn't like it and they arrested them. And we read that they were put in jail overnight because it was evening.

So, perhaps it was too late in the day to have any kind of trial. Maybe that's the reason. Continuing in Acts 4, 5 to 7, we read, So, there's a comprehensive council of religious leaders that's convened. There's a lot of people in that group. And that included, as we read, Caiaphas the high priest, the top of the top, even members of his family. So, interesting that that's included.

Peter and John were formally questioned about things that they had said and done. This was a big deal. And they were also questioned as to what authority they were doing this by.

[12:13] So, we read Peter's response in Acts 4, 8 to 12. Then Peter, 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 is 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.

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.

So, Peter begins, it's interesting to me to note there, Peter begins by asking, Really? Really? You're going to call us on account for this?

We healed a man who's been lame most of his life. We did it with the best of intentions, by the authority of Almighty God Himself, and you're going to ask us about this?

[13:24] You're going to question why we've done it? Question our motives? Showing a kindness to a lame man. Really? Really? Peter says, really. So, I've never been accused of a crime.

I won't see a show of hands. I've never been questioned by a lawyer. I have a couple of good friends, actually. One very good friend who is a lawyer.

I've never been questioned by her. Knock on wood. May come. And I've never even questioned Michelle, mostly. But here, Peter is pushing back on the ridiculous nature of their concerns.

We see this, right? Peter's also making the case, he takes the opportunity to claim his authority under Jesus. He also reminds them of the circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and his fulfillment, Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy, ancient prophecy.

Psalms 118, verse 22, in particular. He also points out, by the way, fellas, as he's talking, the only source of salvation, yours, mine, everyone's, is Jesus himself, period, right?

[14:42] Mic drop by Peter. Man, Peter knows how to seize an opportunity to share the gospel, doesn't he? Oh, you're gonna challenge me? Let me tell you something.

So, how does the council react to this, right? Peter gets out, eek, gets out his soapbox, stands up. How do they react and respond to what Peter said? Well, Acts 4, 13 to 18, shed some light on that. When they saw the courage of Peter and John, it says, and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.

But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together.

What are we gonna do with these men, they asked. Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we can't deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them, Peter and John, to speak no longer to anyone in this name.

[15:56] Then they called them in again and commanded them, not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. So we read there that they perceived Peter and John to be uneducated, unschooled, Scripture says, at least by their standards.

We know their standards were high, but also skewed in a particular way. And they recognized Peter and John as having been with Jesus. These were not total strangers.

They knew Jesus' ministry. They knew Jesus' apostles. So it's also interesting that the man who had been healed was standing with Peter and John. Because you get a sense right there, and the way Scripture says it, that they were trying to work around the situation, trying to get out of a situation and regain authority and control.

But clearly, he's standing there. They can't question it, right? They can't say, well, that didn't really happen, because he's standing right there. So they dismiss the apostles.

They dismiss Peter and John. They dismiss the man who had been healed so they can discuss in private, right? They're strategizing now. Okay, here's reality. Everyone has seen this.

[17:12] What do we do? So the council concludes that something definitely happened. Oh, they're sharp, right? There's educated people saying, well, something must have happened here.

But there was a notable sign, Scripture says. There was a miracle that happened that could not be denied. He was living, standing proof.

But they also perceived that the actions of Peter and John, the legacy of Jesus, and the growth of the church is dangerous to them anyway.

So they're concerned about it spreading. Scripture uses that word, spreading. Like a disease, perhaps. They decide to threaten Peter and John, because that's what people who feel their authority being questioned tend to do.

They threaten other people. Threaten them to try and shut it down. So they call Peter and John back in. Scripture tells us they command them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

[18:17] You ever tried to command a child to not do something? What will they do? They will do it. So I think this reveals something very important about the religious leaders and the members of this council.

They were not interested, they were more interested, sorry, in their own agenda. They were more interested in that than about how God might actually be at work.

So these were religious leaders who you would think would be seeking God's will. And yet they're saying, this may be God's will, but it's not our will, so we've got to shut it down.

So they're more interested in their own agenda. And then they want to restrict preaching or teaching in the name of Jesus. Interesting.

So that's pretty telling about their motives as well, I think. So let's look at Acts 4, 19 and 20, to hear Peter and John's reply to their sentence.

[19:18] This is what's been handed down on them. But Peter and John replied, which is right in God's eyes, to listen to you or to listen to him?

You be the judges. As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard. Again, we see that rather than just doing as they're commanded to do, Peter and John are also challenging human authority.

They weigh that against the authority of God. We see that, right? And then they're clear that they won't easily be silenced in sharing what they have personally been taught, what they have personally experienced for themselves.

They will not be silent. So what happened next? Well, Acts 4, 21 and 22. After further threats, they let them go.

They could not decide how to punish them because all the people were praising God for what happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over 40 years old.

[20:25] So I was curious, as I reread this, what further threats were made to Peter and John? Well, don't ever do this. And another thing, right?

Further threats. So if the council's deterrence that they already gave them, they commanded them to not do this anymore. If that wasn't enough of a deterrent, what else did they say?

What were further threats? Well, obviously they ran out of ideas, I think, because we read that they could not decide how to punish them. Because, as I said before, we recognize that the evidence was literally standing in front of them.

The people had recognized God at work through Peter and John in the life of this man. Public display. So sometimes, shaking your fists at clouds just makes you look crazy.

So they need to be careful here, right? There's a balance of riling up a crowd to try to wrestle back control versus just taking the loss and walking away.

[21 : 38] So they ran out of ideas. So the public profile and awareness of all these events obviously seemed too risky, I think is what we can read out of that.

Seemed too risky for them to take more serious action against them. And as we know, as the early church continues to grow, things happen that are, people are willing to take more extreme measures to silence this.

So we've been reminded here that the persecution begins with threats. So now that we've recognized that, second, we're going to look at the response, both from Peter and John and the church as a whole.

So Acts 4.23 says, on their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

So it's very interesting to me that rather than wringing their hands or complaining about how Peter and John have been treated, we read in this passage that the people respond to the situation by immediately turning to God in prayer.

[22 : 49] Their perspective is clear. Acts 4.24-30 says, 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. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David.

Why did the nations rage and the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one. 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.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, they pray, 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. What a powerful prayer, isn't it?

[24 : 02] It's addressed to God himself. It features several prophecies about Jesus that come from Psalm 2. Then we find an appeal to God that's specifically related to what's happened to Peter and John.

They ask God to consider the threats that have been made by the council, by the religious leaders to them. And then they also request that God give them the power and confidence they need to speak the truth in the face of opposition and persecution.

And then they also ask for the power to heal and perform miracles that will bring glory to the name of Jesus. Very focused prayer and again, to have not, they don't panic, right?

That early church community says, no, this is a situation that we need to bring to God first. So as we've considered about prayer in the past many times, God always hears prayers and answers our prayers.

Sometimes the answer is no. Sometimes the answer is wait.

[25 : 20] Sometimes the answer is yes. And we read about God's response in Acts 4.31. 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.

Prayer answered? Prayer answered. Talk about an instant and powerful response to prayer. We can recognize here they were asking God for the power to do his will.

That's the focus, right? The power to bring attention to the name and message of Jesus. And God responded with a pretty significant yes.

God demonstrated that he heard them. He was with them. And he filled them with the kind of power that only God could give. The power of the Spirit to speak the word of God boldly because they asked for it.

So we've considered this morning how the persecution begins for the early church. The powers of the world did not want to hear this message.

[26 : 36] They didn't want to hear the message of Jesus because it was counter to their desire for power and control for themselves. But Peter and John wanted that message to be heard.

They wanted God's will to be done no matter the cost. The persecution begins with threats. Do not speak or teach in the name of Jesus.

And we saw that Peter and John were not afraid to stand against those threats. Instead, the early church encouraged each other, sought to do God's will together as a community, and to share the

gospel, share the good news of Jesus without fear.

They prayed for confidence. They prayed for boldness. They prayed for the power from God and through the Holy Spirit to do that.

So while we may not face significant opposition, significant fear of persecution in our lives, like our brothers and sisters in many other parts of the world do, we can't become complacent.

[27 : 50] No matter our age, no matter our circumstances, our education, our perceptions of not being good at it. I needed air quotes there.

Good at it. I'm not good at it, Pastor Kent. I, well, neither am I, but I'm willing to try. We're called to share the same message that Peter and John declared, the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, of who he is and what he has done.

Because, my friends, only Jesus can change our lives, can change our circumstances, can transform this hurting world, but only if we trust and obey.

Let's pray. Father God, we come to you now recognizing the powerful example that you have given us through Peter and John and the early church.

Remind us to turn to you for confidence, for boldness, as we seek to follow the call of Jesus, to share what he has taught and how he lived.

[29 : 02] Help us to be confident in the face of any resistance we may face, and give us the words and opportunities to share the truth of Jesus with our family, our friends, our neighbors, and everyone we meet.

We pray all these things in Jesus' precious and powerful name. Amen.