

Acts 4:23–37

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[0 : 0 0] chapter 4, verses 23 through 37, and can be found on page 1010 on the Bibles on your chairs.

Again, our scripture reading is from the book of Acts, chapter 4, verses 23 through 37. Please stand for the reading of God's word.

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

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, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, Why did the Gentiles rage and the people's plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city, they 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, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

[1 : 1 3] And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

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. Now the full number of those who were 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.

And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 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 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.

[2 : 5 7] And we will continue our time this morning. Just a brief moment of prayer. Father, we come to you. And as the psalmist has said, you have exalted above all things your name and your word.

We now come looking to your word, assembling under your name two things that are unrivaled in all the world.

And we ask, Lord, that through your word and through your spirit, you would impart life to your people. We pray these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. The early church has just encountered their first opposition to their efforts.

If you've been with us from the start of Acts, you may have begun to think that this movement would continue on unimpeded, uninhibited, with verses such as, there were added to their number 3,000 souls, according to the end of chapter 2.

You hear of accounts that day by day, they would assemble and break bread, pray, and the Lord would continue to add to their number day by day, those who were being saved.

[4 : 12] Chapter 4 opens up with a statement that many who heard the word believed, and the number of men came to about 5,000. Chapter 4, verse 4.

You may be tempted to think that following Jesus would be a walk in the park, or it would be sitting and standing around a campfire.

And if that's all you've heard up to this point, you may be misled to believe that the Christian life is one of comfort and ease.

On the contrary, Luke the historian would fail us if he simply recorded the triumphs without the tragedies, the victories without the casualties, the blessings without the burdens.

Peter and John have been seized. They have been confronted and threatened and commanded not to say what they've been saying. And it's not only a simple petty officer or a low-ranking authority that has confronted them, but the text itself belabors the list of who participates in their interrogation, according to chapter 4, verse 5.

[5 : 29] You have the rulers. You have the elders. You have the scribes gathered together in Jerusalem. And then you have Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander and all who were in the high priestly family assembled against them.

It's no small opposition. Luke wants us to know that those who gathered together were a powerful and significant assembly. They were the gathering of the religious elite.

It was the gathering that embodied Judaism that day. This morning we will find that Luke is contrasting two gatherings.

There's the gathering of the religious leaders that I just shared. But there is another group that has gathered together, according to chapter 4, verse 31. The religious leaders had gathered to demonstrate their own power, seeking ways to exercise their power.

And in the irony of the narrative, they were powerless to do anything. The Bible actually says that following their interrogation, they let them go, finding no way to punish them.

[6 : 38] In contrast, the disciples gathered not as a demonstration of power. Rather, they gathered in order to express their need for power, knowing the source from whom all true power came.

And this would be indicative for the early Christians, and it will prove to be so for you and I as well. Amongst the backdrop of this narrative is the looming question, who is in power?

Where does ultimate power lie? For the answers to these questions will distinguish the gathering, this gathering, from all other gatherings. It will mark a believing community.

See, the religious leaders in the text are asking the question, what do we do with these men? Namely, the apostles. In contrast, the apostles are not asking what to do.

Rather, they are asking for the power to continue to do what they have been commissioned to do. The more I reread this narrative, the more I'm struck by the irony.

[7 : 45] You would assume one thing, but Luke records for us something else that's quite amusing. The council has gotten together, and they don't know what to do. The most learned, educated, wealthiest, powerful body in Jerusalem doesn't know what to do with these men and their message.

They are confounded, confused, uncertain. On the other hand, you have a group of unlearned apostles without any significant financial backing, without the strengths of tradition or social capital.

They're not asking what they should be doing. Rather, they have resolved to continue to do what they're already doing.

Because they know. Jesus had already given the edict. The king had already given the command and the commissioning at the end of Luke's Gospel.

You know exactly what you're to do, he's saying to the apostles. According to Luke chapter 24, Christ would suffer on the third day, rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

[8 : 57] That is your charge. Those are your papers. Go and do it. And regardless of the opposition, you continue. It's reiterated in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, that they would be his witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, all the way to the end of the earth.

The commanding orders were given, and they remained unchanged. If Jesus is who he says he is, and his message does what he says it does, then we have been commissioned to disperse a message.

And disperse they would do. I want to call your attention to verse 33 this morning as the gateway into our passage. Chapter 4, verse 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.

The disciples would be those who would be endowed with great power, and the people would be those who would experience and exercise great grace. Two headers this morning.

[10 : 09] Great power to speak, and great grace to share. Great power to speak, and great grace to share.

Two marks of the early Christian community. Two distinguishing features for all God's people. A pattern provided for us to emulate. Great power to speak.

Verses 23-31. The great power the apostles received in testifying to the resurrection of Jesus was rooted in the prayer meeting that began in verse 24.

They had just been released, so they regathered with a community of believers, and together they lift up their voices to God. This is actually the second prayer that Luke records in the book of Acts for us.

And the prayer illumines the challenge of what the apostles were experiencing. Namely, who is in charge here? Who is truly in power? And the entire prayer must be understood in light of the opening address.

[11 : 13] Two words that we see in verse 24. Sovereign Lord. Sovereign Lord. He is the Supreme Lord, given authority and power.

He is sovereign over creation. He is sovereign over history. And you see that as the prayer unfolds. He is sovereign over creation. God has been at work since the beginning of creation, sustaining and preserving all that He has set in motion.

The natural laws that we observe are really the effects of His preserving power in our world. We're able to study cosmology, geology, biology, zoology, all because these are the means God uses to sustain His world.

And notice the span of His sovereignty. There's no restriction. There's no limit. There's no boundary. All that you see was and is and is brought forth and upheld by Him.

Later on, Acts will record that He doesn't reside in buildings as if He lives in places made by human hands as if He needs anything. Rather, He gives life to all mankind and breath to everything.

[12 : 27] Actually, all of creation is contingent on His very existence. He is sovereign over creation. And He is sovereign over history. God has been at work throughout the past.

Those gathered together give us a history lesson in their prayer. It's a citation lifted from Psalm chapter 2. Originally prayed from the lips of King David, the apostles now incorporate it into their very own prayer.

And it becomes the means whereby they understand and interpret their experience. What's interesting to note is this early on, the apostles, the community of believers are already thinking theologically about what's taking place.

It's striking because they are taking their experience and then they are taking what they know of the Word of God and they are trying to reason out what is unfolding.

It's a guideline for you and I this morning and today. Because our experiences often leave us in places that we're asking why or we're curious how or we're in search of what to do.

[13 : 52] And the apostles knew exactly what to do. Turn to the Word and figure it out. Well, Psalm 2 is a Messianic psalm which depicts rebellion.

You see it here because the psalm opens up, why did the Gentiles rage? Or why did the nations rage?

And the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and His anointed. You see, the psalm is laying out that God has selected His king.

He has already anointed His son yet the earthly kings, earthly rulers and authorities conspire against Him and oppose His rule. David is able to utter this psalm because he saw in his kingdom his very son assumed authority and actually tried to overthrow his very own father.

father. The psalm was uttered by King David depicting his experience and here it is applied to Jesus. Jesus is God's truly anointed one.

[15 : 05] And though Jesus Himself is anointed and enthroned, there are those who gather together against Him. And you see it in verse 27. Truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus.

Luke goes on to state explicitly that Psalm 2 is fulfilled in the treatment of Jesus. Those in Jerusalem had gathered against Him. Herod and Pilate, representative of kings and authorities and rulers, had joined forces to spurn God's anointed one and furthermore Gentiles, according to verse 27, and Israel's own people have risen up to throw off God's rule.

All that to say the apostles were not surprised in what was transpiring, for what they were experiencing was taking place under the sovereignty of God in His orchestration of history.

So committed are they to the sovereignty of God that they have actually declared it according to verse 28, God's predestined plan from the beginning. And in light of their understanding the God's sovereignty of history, perhaps what is most striking is this, they don't ask for deliverance or means of escape.

If you're like me when hardship or conflict or threat or opposition arise in life, particularly because of my Christian faith, my desire is escape.

[16 : 44] Lord, how do I, dear God, help me preserve this relationship? Don't let me end this friendship. Don't let me look like a fool. My prayer is often give me another route, Lord, through this, preferably around it.

But instead, the request of the disciples is not one of escapism or deterrence. Rather, it is boldness to endure. what is so shocking about verse 29 is this, Lord, look upon their threats.

You see the threats. And it doesn't say, and grant your servants deliverance. It reads, grant your servants to continue to speak.

God is able to surely deliver them through a whole host of means. He could turn the hearts of kings. He could surely turn the heart of the religious council, but that's not what happens.

The request is for boldness to continue to speak while being accompanied by signs and wonders. Why is the request for boldness made? It's made because the disciples begin to identify themselves with the mission of Jesus.

[18 : 02] The servants of God always seem to be rejected. The text gives us those clues. You see in verse 25, who through the mouth of your father David, your servant.

And again you see it in verse 27, your holy servant Jesus. And again in verse 30, your holy servant Jesus. And the disciples begin to identify, well, he has a servant, God has a servant in David, God has the ultimate servant in Jesus, and God has the apostles as his servants according to verse 29.

And they begin to understand, hey, I get it. if they rejected David, if they rejected Jesus, and if I'm on this team, then I experience what they experience.

I'm sure John the apostle sitting in this group understands because later in his gospel he would write, if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

And twice in his gospel, it reads this, remember the word Jesus is saying, I said to you John, a servant is not greater than his master.

[19 : 16] If they persecuted me, they will persecute you. See, the threats and the opposition were actually becoming a badge of honor for the disciples and the apostles.

Later on, you will see they begin to celebrate. Why? Because it confirms to whom they belong. Their request is granted and confirmed and in a supernatural shaking of the place they had gathered, God is reaffirming that he is with them.

The Holy Spirit comes upon them and fills them, enabling them to speak the word of God with boldness. The power bestowed on them enabled them to testify to the resurrection of Jesus and it enables them to persevere and endure.

You know what's so in, I mean, there's a lot of intriguing things. I've said that about five times in this room. But what continues to intrigue me is the fact of this.

The apostles were found doing the exact same thing during their success and when they're confronted with challenges. Because you see it earlier in Acts, don't you?

[20 : 28] They assemble together for prayer. And here again, they reassemble for prayer. prayer. And they're not reassembled. It's not because opposition has arisen that they all of a sudden call an emergency prayer meeting.

Oh, we got to pray now. It's getting hard. They have always been praying. Following the amazing incorporation of 3,000 souls, they were praying and God added to their number.

And they continue to pray, continue to pray, and continue to pray. And now they are confronted and threatened and they continue to pray, though they were warned to speak no more. And I can't help but indict myself because when challenges arise, when I feel more desperate than usual, when violent waves of life crash against me, I grow alarmed and I call my own prayer meeting.

Why? It's self-indicting. praying. Because when things are good, I haven't been praying. I seem to pray circumstantially when the need arises.

The apostles are found praying habitually, regardless of the circumstance. Peter and John boldly spoke out in chapter 4, because the text says they had likely, because they had been with Jesus.

[21 : 45] And you think of it, I think of it this way. Well, yeah, it makes sense. If I was with Jesus all three years, I you know, I would be able to do that. But I think it's probably more than that. Not only throughout his life on earth, but I can't help but believe Peter and John had been with Jesus that very morning in prayer.

Great power to speak, rest upon, rested upon God's people. And secondly, great grace to share, great grace to share.

being recipients of great grace. They became a community that was described by verse 32 of one heart and soul.

They became a community that would exercise great grace because they had experienced great grace. And it was manifested in radical generosity.

Radical generosity. I can't help but wonder. This is conjecture. It's not biblical. It's conjecture.

[23 : 01] But I can't help but wonder if Zacchaeus was among them. Now a relatively seasoned believer. father. And as thousands were coming to know Jesus and commit themselves to him, I can't help but picture Zacchaeus, small in stature, yet mighty in generosity, being amongst them.

And he's running around and people are asking, well, Zacchaeus, you followed this man far longer than we followed this man. What happened when you encountered him? Well, I'll tell you exactly what happened.

all those that I defrauded, I restored fourfold. And half of my possessions I sold and I gave to the poor. Wait, wait, why?

Is that what he commanded you to do? No. Is that what he instructed you to do? No. Is that what he legislated you to do?

No. Wait, Zacchaeus, you did this voluntarily? Willingly? Why? And he would look, I'm sure, at you and say, my sins were great, but his grace was greater.

[24 : 19] At first glance, you may actually read Marxism into this passage. But this was no coercion or forceful demand to distribute everyone's goods.

Calvin writes that Luke is not prescribing a law for people to follow. This was not legislation. These were acts of generosity, manifestations of grace, selling of property and sharing of its profits were done willingly, not begrudgingly.

They were done out of the overflow of a heart that was seasoned and had experienced God's grace. What is occurring here is a supernatural working of the Spirit of God.

When the people of God have been affected by the grace of God, they begin to behave abnormally. It is not normal to share. It is not normal to share.

I have three children. With a fourth scheduled to arrive tomorrow, Lord willing. And for all three of them, the norm is not to share.

[25 : 24] Two of the most common words out of a young child's mouth are no and mine. No and mine. And they are emblematic of human rebellion and human self-centeredness.

It's so easy to observe, but it is so difficult to change. change. Isn't it? If you're a parent.

And you as a parent, me as a parent, I cannot ignore it. Why? Because I know if I don't resolve that me, mine, always mine mentality, I know the beast that it becomes.

It becomes those pelicans or the seagulls in Finding Nemo. Mine, mine, mine. I mean, everything becomes theirs. And how do you teach a child to share?

Do you legislate it? Do you impose it? Do you mandate it? And you will find that all those efforts fall short. What needs to actually happen is a change in the heart.

[26 : 29] They need to hear of the life imparted and demonstrated by Christ. They need to see it in me modeling it to them and me modeling it to my wife. They need to see it in a parent.

They need to see it in loved ones. They need to see it here. This is a small example, but I can't help but think that on Wednesday nights when our community group gathers, my children know they will have a special time where they have access to snacks when there are usually no other guests.

You know. But I can't help but wonder if they're connecting the dots. snacks. That as the people of God assemble, they walk through the door with snacks.

Why? Because they are modeling what it means to be the people of God. To share what they have. Share what they've been given.

When I first started, when I started my first pastoral stint, I frequently did the homes of others. And I couldn't help but remember the words of my mom. She's here.

[27 : 40] But she said, Bing, you never go to a home empty-handed. Whether it means a bag of oranges, a bag of apples, dessert, you never show up empty-handed.

And I grew up understanding, oh, it's a cultural thing. It's an Asian thing. It's a Chinese thing. It's a my mom thing. But I'm beginning to see that it is perhaps more than cultural.

It may actually be biblical. The wealthy among them reinterpreted their understanding of wealth and acquisition. For as many as were owners of lands or houses, they sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold to the apostles.

Three quick things to note. Not everyone sold their houses. Acts chapter 12 will dispel that idea because they actually go into somebody's house. The house of Mary, mother of John Mark.

So not everyone sold their houses. There actually seems to be a continual selling and distributing, implying that it was not like you came to faith and everyone just sold everything at one time.

[28 : 51] Rather, it was as needs arose. Another, the NIV reads this, that from time to time, those who own land sold them.

There was a sense of, and thirdly, there was still a sense of personal and private property that we'll actually see next week. As a couple sold their land, Peter himself acknowledges that their private property was actually permitted.

And so we have to be very cautious in how we apply this text, for it can be easily misapplied. Because one can imagine, easily imagine a preacher, a deceptive preacher saying, hey, we need to be like the early church.

Sell your possessions and bring them to the feet of the church's leadership. For that's what it says. Right? But we know the hearts of men, don't we? The system would be corrupted, abused, ultimately unraveled.

What was intended to be a provision for the needy will become a cesspool for the slothful. Other sources, actually, history tells us that people mocked the early church for doing this.

[29 : 59] They were simple minded. They were easily deceived. And Christians were those who were easily duped.

And Paul would begin to see this. Because later on in the letter to the church at Thessalonica, the Thessalonians, he actually rebukes those in the church for their idleness.

And he boldly asserts, if anyone is not willing to work, let them not eat. And he began to see Paul himself, the early church, suffered. They suffered because there were those who were not earning a living, rather they were burdening the church with their continual and ongoing dependency.

So he writes to try to correct that. The Didache itself, our early Christian treatise on dating back to the first century, there were prohibitions on hospitality.

Let them stay two, three days, but if they just hang out for a long time, give them the boot. Why? Because the early church began to understand that our resources financially are not infinite.

[31 : 10] The need will always exceed the resources. And so there were safeguards that came around the Christian community so that it would protect them from being exploited.

Martin Luther writes, a Christian should help his neighbor whenever he is able to do so without harm. For our Lord God does not want this to happen, that you help a beggar and thus make yourself and your children beggars.

And Luke is willing to assert this, that there was not a needy person among them, indicating that the community of believers were living up to a principle actually established in Deuteronomy, that there were no poor among them.

And here is the challenge of the text. It is radical, and I don't want to blunt the forcefulness of these statements. The church was able to care for all her members.

It's quite astounding, and we can't lose the weight of this text. I'll close this section with a quote from John Calvin, and you're beginning to see a pattern.

[32 : 12] When there's difficulty in the Bible, you quote old dead men, and if you have problems, you can go take it up with them. But I'll close this section with Calvin.

He writes this, These things then are written for our shame and our reproach. In those days, the believers gave abundantly of what was their own.

We in our day are content, not only jealously to retain what we possess, but also callously rob others. the apostles set forth their own possessions with simplicity and faithfulness.

We devise a thousand cunning devices whereby we may acquire everything for ourselves. And lastly, note this, they sold their own possessions in those days.

They sold their own possessions in those days. In our day, it is the lust or the desire to purchase that reigns supreme.

[33 : 17] So appropriate for even today. In those days, they sold. In our day, it's our desire to show off what we can buy. Well, to the degree we have received grace, we ought to impart grace.

Have you received grace? Are you imparting great grace? How does this affect our community? These are things that we must talk about in our community groups. There are places where needs need to be expressed.

There are places where generosity needs to be demonstrated. There is a commitment to this community. We have to exemplify gratitude. Always, we have to figure out, as a community of believers, how to make this happen.

And Luke doesn't just leave us with these vague generalities. He actually gives us an example. There's a guy by the name of Barnabas who embodied this, who sold what he had and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Great power to speak. Great grace to share. And those are the two distinguishing marks of the believing community.

[34 : 28] In conclusion, perhaps you sit here this morning and you've witnessed a glimpse, though imperfectly, of these two aspects of our community. Yet you know you possess neither the great power to speak nor the great grace to share.

For you are actually standing outside this community. And taking part in opposition or rebellion against it. You see, it continues on this day, doesn't it?

Psalm is very blatant and defiant and visible. For others, it's the silence of opposition. It's a silent opposition. And the question you may be asking this morning is, how do I enter into this community?

Well, the second Psalm, which we read from, implores you to kiss the King. Kiss the Son.

Kiss the Son to turn away His wrath and His anger. You kiss in adoration. You kiss in submission.

[35 : 41] You kiss in allegiance. Luke earlier actually tells a story of a woman. There's more kissing in this passage than any other passage in the Bible.

And all the teenagers, ah, wow. Yeah. And this woman who is ashamed and her life is filled with sin, she is actually scorned by the public and the religious community, but she hears of where Jesus will be eating dinner.

And so she goes. I don't know how she got in, but she found her way in. And those who are eating the meal are annoyed and perturbed by the fact that she's there.

Because she was a grave sinner. And at this meal, this woman in tears anoints Jesus and washes His feet. The anointed one, King Jesus, was spurned by the religious elite, but adored by a sinful woman.

And the religious elite are saying, Jesus, do you even know who this woman is? And I'm sure he knew. Of course he knew. And he confronts them and he says to the religious leaders, when I got in, you gave me no kiss.

[37 : 01] But from the time I came in, she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

And grab this. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven.

And he turns to the woman and says, your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Kiss the Son. Kiss the Son. There is no other way.

Forgiveness of sins. Salvation from eternal damnation. Peace with God. All offered to a woman who could not stop kissing the Son.

Father, we come to you this morning. We know what it is to kiss loved ones.

[38 : 15] In adoration. In commitment. In exclusivity. But do we know what it means to kiss the Son? The anointed Son.

The King sovereign. Over all the rulers of the earth. And though all the earth conspires, against Him. The same Son that will crush them is the same Son that looks upon the world and offers deliverance, forgiveness, peace with God, salvation.

And so, Father, I pray, Lord, that we would, having kissed the Son, we would be a community that is able to, with great grace, speak with power.

And with great grace, demonstrate kindness. For your glory's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen.