

Be Strong And Courageous

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning.

My name is Danny Wolford, and I'm blessed today. How about you? I'm blessed today because I get to do what I love to do. Today I get to preach God's Word.

And although I retired four years ago, as long as God gives me breath, and as long as God gives me life, and as long as God gives me opportunities, I'm going to continue to preach His Word.

But today I'm doubly blessed because I get a chance to do it here. See, I served on staff here for about 17 and a half years. And during that time, I served alongside some great people, some people who loved me and encouraged me, and some people who made me a better pastor.

And God certainly blessed our time here. Barbara and I love FCC. We particularly love your pastor and his family. So proud of Ray and the leadership that he has brought to this church.

[1 : 15] And we just continue to pray for him. Love your staff. You've got some great people working here and leading you in certain areas. I love your eldership. I got to work with a lot of them when I was here.

Those guys come alongside me and helped me and blessed me. And so it's always a privilege to come back here. When I'm invited to come back, it's an honor. It's a privilege. And I'm blessed to be here today.

So today we're going to talk about courage. Courage. Now, when I say the word courage, you probably think of somebody who's done something heroic. Maybe it's a soldier who's preparing to go to battle.

And knowing that, there's a good chance that they may not come back. But yet it takes courage to do what they do. Maybe you think of a fireman who rushes into a burning building to save someone. That takes courage. Maybe you think of someone who's driving down the road. They look over and they see someone maybe who's falling through the ice. And what do they do? They stop. They get out. They go down there. And at the risk of their own life, they pull this person to safety.

[2 : 19] That takes courage. Courage comes in so many different forms and facets. And yet, I have to be honest with you, when I was thinking about this, when I was preparing this, the first thing that came to my mind when I thought of courage was a rodeo clown.

Now, we call them clowns because of the way they dress, but there's nothing funny about what they do. You know, to put yourself in the path of a raging bull who has just bucked off a cowboy, who is looking for somebody to stomp, somebody to trample, somebody to gore, and you put yourself in that path.

That takes courage. Either those guys are very courageous or they're crazy. Maybe a little bit of both. But courage comes in all different facets.

So let's ask this question. If you knew something bad was about to happen to somebody that you love, would you do anything to prevent it?

And I think all of us would say, well, yes. Absolutely. Now, that being said, I hope that one of my grandsons doesn't decide to become a bull rider because I don't know if I have the courage to be their rodeo clown.

[3 : 30] But if you ask me, would I do it to save their life? Absolutely. But let's put a little twist to that question. What if by doing something or saying something to intervene, it made you look crazy or unstable or unpopular or unloving?

Would you do it then? And I think most people would say something like this. Well, I think I would.

Or, well, I hope I would. But when the moment happens, fear takes over because of what we think other people are going to say or other people are going to think of us or what other people are going to do.

So that's what we're going to talk about this morning because I think all of us would like to have the courage to do something or to say something when it comes to Jesus, when it comes to the Bible, when it comes to the message, when it comes to the truth of the Word that we say we believe in. We're afraid to speak up for fear of what other people will think or other people will say what other people will do. You know, I'm convinced that the further and further our society drifts from God, drifts from God's Word, the further our society drifts from Jesus, the more courage we're going to have to have as Christians to stand in the gap for Him.

So this morning we're going to be in the fourth chapter of the book of Acts. Take your Bible, turn to Acts chapter 4. In Acts chapter 4, Peter and John display this tremendous amount of courage.

[5 : 03] I mean, these guys have great courage in the face of significant fear in their lives. But here's what I want you to grasp, and here's what I want you to take home with you today.

The courage of Peter and John really ignites the passion of the church. We might even say that had Peter and John not displayed such courage, when they did, that the church might never have gotten off the ground.

So before we jump into Acts chapter 4, let's set it up by looking back at Acts chapter 3. In Acts chapter 3, Peter and John are walking to the temple.

This is about two months after Jesus' ascension into heaven. So Jesus has died. He's been buried. He's been resurrected. He's ascended into heaven. As Peter and John are walking in the temple, they pass the gate where there's this crippled man begging.

And he's likely a fixture that people would have seen on a daily basis. He's the kind of guy that you and I would pass by. He's the kind of guy that we probably wouldn't even make eye contact with.

[6 : 08] So chapter 3 and verse 5, it says that Peter fixed his gaze. And in great boldness, Peter says to him. In other words, Peter stops. He looks the man right in the eye. And he says to him, In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk.

Now that in itself was a courageous statement. Because what if he doesn't? What if he couldn't? Peter's going to look pretty foolish. Peter's going to look pretty bad.

But it says that the guy's legs were strengthened. He stands up. And as the old song goes, he's walking and leaping and praising God. And what does he do next?

He follows Peter and John into the temple. He walks in. And people can't help but notice him. They know who he is. They've seen him before. They know a miracle has happened. And it's this act that gives Peter the opportunity to preach the message of Jesus.

And so Peter begins to preach boldly in the name of Jesus. And in the middle of a sermon, walks in a group to interrupt him. And they're not happy. So let's pick up in Acts chapter 4 verse 1.

[7 : 17] And as they were speaking to the people, the priest and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them greatly annoyed. Why were they annoyed? Listen. Because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day for it was already evening. These people that we just read about make up what we call the Sanhedrin. There were about 71 members.

And these guys represent the rulers and the lawyers and the priests and religious leaders of that day. And why were they annoyed? Were they annoyed because a man had been healed?

Were they annoyed because a man now was able to walk when he couldn't before? No. They were annoyed because of the name in which the miracle was done. They're annoyed because Peter and John are teaching and their teaching centered all in the name of Jesus.

So what do they decide to do? They decide to arrest them. But it's late in the day, so put them in jail. Let them sit overnight. We'll deal with them in the morning.

[8 : 26] Let's go to verse 4. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of men came to about 5,000. What a significant number. If you remember back in Acts 2.41, when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, it says that those that had received the word were baptized.

There were added that day about 3,000 souls. The church was growing by leaps and bounds. Why? Because God's word was being preached with truth and boldness. But listen, don't let this passage pass you by without realizing.

And men, I want you to sit up and listen to this. Okay? It says the number came to about 5,000 men. Now, the writer of Acts is Luke. And Luke is detailed in his writing.

Luke specifies that it was men that first responded to the message. Do you know in church today, traditionally and statistically, about 60% of church volunteers are usually women.

Women are usually the first to respond and get involved. And it's usually women who are dragging their husbands and their boyfriends to church. And that's why I'm so thankful for the men here at FCC, for stepping up to take the lead, to continue to lead God's ministry here.

[9 : 45] But men, let's take it to a higher level. Let's have the courage to take a stand and meet our families and our communities, all in the name of Jesus. Let's go into verse 5.

On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem with Annas, the high priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and all who were of a high priestly family.

They brought out the big guns. And again, because Luke specifies, because Luke is specific in what he writes, Luke is naming names. So can you imagine, as Peter and John walk into the courtroom, and they see Annas, and they see Caiaphas, both of whom were part of Jesus' crucifixion.

What are they thinking? Are they going to try to do the same thing to us that they did to him? What's going to happen to us? So the trial begins, and the very first question they asked them, look at verse 7.

When they had set them in the midst, they inquired, by what power or by what name did you do this? What an interesting question. They already knew.

[10 : 54] The very reason they arrested them and put them in jail, the very reason they're on trial, was because of the name in which they had done this. So why the question? Well, there's only two reasons. One, they were hoping that they would cave into the pressure, deny the name of Jesus, and they could send them on their way.

Or, they were hoping they won't deny it, and they would have the grounds to bring them up on charges. Verse 8. Then Peter said to them. And of course, we've got to stop here, right?

Because we don't know what Peter's going to say. Peter is the guy who would show courage and wisdom in one minute, and the very next minute say something in the same time span that didn't make sense.

So let's look at it. When Jesus asked His disciples, who do men say that I am? Of course, they said, some say you're John the Baptist, some say you're Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets.

Jesus said, but who do you say that I am? And it was Peter who spoke up, and Peter said, thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus said, upon that statement, upon that foundation, I will build my church.

[12 : 06] He said, blessed are you for saying that. And then a few minutes later, Jesus is telling them, okay, now I'm going to have to go to Jerusalem. I'm going to suffer.

I'm going to die. I'm going to be raised on the third day. And it's Peter who says, no, no, no, this shall never happen to you. And Jesus says, get behind me, Satan.

You're a stumbling block to me. Peter went from being blessed for declaring Jesus as the Christ to a stumbling block in Jesus' way.

You remember the Last Supper, Jesus told His disciples, tonight, all of you will fall away from me. Well, who spoke up? Peter. Peter said, no, no, no, Lord.

Everybody else may fall away, but not me. I will never fall away. And of course, we know how that went, right? So what's Peter going to say now?

[13 : 01] What's Peter going to say in this moment? And in this case, I think it shows how much Peter has grown. So let's read it. Verse 8. Rules of the people and elders.

This is Peter. This is Peter's talking. If we're being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Are you ready for this? This takes courage. He says, Whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands before you well. But he's not done.

Verse 11. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you the builders, which has become the cornerstone, and there is salvation in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven given man by which we must be saved.

So in this moment, Peter displays this incredible courage knowing that the Sanhedrin is going to think that he's crazy, that he's unstable.

[14 : 06] And do you know that in our culture today, that that statement right there is the most unpopular statement that one can make. If you say Jesus is the only way, people will ridicule you,

they will call you names, they'll think you're crazy, they'll think you're unstable, they'll think you're unloving.

So where does Peter get the courage? Because Peter is not being vague here. Peter is not being wishy-washy. He's bold. And the reason why is because he is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's look at verse 13. Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. See, these men of the Sanhedrin, they had much knowledge.

They were very well educated. They were very well educated in religious matters. So they look at Peter and John as regular, ordinary, unschooled men.

And their attitude would go something like this. Who do these guys think they are? What makes them think that they can come here, in here on our turf, and speak with such authority?

[15:18] They don't belong here. Now let me illustrate that with this. Let's just say that you had to have surgery. You go to the hospital.

You get prepped. You're looking around. You see the doctors. You see the nurses. You see the anesthesiologist. They're all scrubbed up. They're all ready.

And then your eyes pan the room, and you spot me. And I'm standing there, and I'm holding a scalpel. I'm suited up.

I'm ready to go. I'm holding a scalpel. Your thought is this. Danny, no offense. You can pray over me today, but you ain't touching me with that scalpel.

The Sanhedrin are thinking the same thing. These guys don't belong here. But what they said next is huge. They recognized that they had been with Jesus.

[16:17] That should be an encouragement to you and me. You don't need to have a degree or a Bible college education. You don't need to speak eloquently to share Jesus with people.

Do people recognize you as one who's been with Jesus? So how do we do that? Because obviously Jesus is not here with us physically, yet we say Jesus walks with me, Jesus talks with me.

It all goes back to the work and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Have you ever heard the saying, it's not what you know, it's who you know? Do you know Jesus?

Do you recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in your everyday life? Verse 14, But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.

But when they commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, What shall we do with these men? Exhibit A was standing in front of them. They couldn't deny the miracle that happened.

[17:17] So what do they do? Well, in verse 17 it says, But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them not to speak no more in this name.

Well, good luck with that. Do you notice that they couldn't even say the name? They couldn't even say the name of Jesus. It says to speak no more to anyone in this name.

And it seems that even today it's okay if you have sort of a vague or wishy-washy spiritual religious belief. But when you specifically mention the name of Jesus, people get real uncomfortable.

In recent years, a federal judge threatened incarceration to a high school valedictorian unless she removed references to Jesus from her graduation speech. City officials recently prohibited a senior citizen's facility from praying over their meals, listening to religious messages, or singing gospel songs that specifically mention the name of Jesus.

During my 17 and a half years here, I had the privilege three times to open the Indiana House of Representatives in prayer. And all three times, I asked before I ever accepted, Can I pray in the name of Jesus?

[18:38] And each time I was given okay because if not, I would not have done it. So what do they do? They bring them back in. Well, let's read.

Verse 18. So they called them, charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 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.

For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard. And when they 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.

And I love the courage of Peter and John here. Because they basically said, You guys go ahead and do whatever you want. You go ahead and judge. You do with us whatever you will. You do with the message what you want. But we cannot deny what we have seen and heard. And what we see here is the courage of Peter and John and the lack of courage by the Sanhedrin because the Sanhedrin caved because it says all the people were convinced and were praising God.

[19 : 49] Napoleon is credited with this statement. He said, China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep. For God only knows what will happen if she ever wakes up. And I wonder what would happen if the church in America would wake up.

If the people would just begin to recognize the power of Jesus. Let's finish with this passage. Verses 29 to 31. And what you would see here is the result of Peter and John's courage and boldness.

Verse 29. 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.

It says, And when they had prayed the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they are all filled with the Holy Spirit and continue to speak the word of God with boldness. that continue to speak the word of God with boldness. And I think that many people would say today, well, if I could be superhuman, if I could be a super Christian like Peter and John, then maybe I could have that courage.

[21 : 09] But you know what I think Peter and John would say to you? Here's what they would say to you today. The same Holy Spirit that filled us is the same Holy Spirit that's available to you today this very day.

In Acts chapter 2, after Peter preached with boldness on the day of Pentecost and the people were asked, what shall we do? Peter's reply was, repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. When you acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord, when you're baptized, your sins are forgiven, you've made room now for the Holy Spirit to come into you and infuse you with power and boldness and courage.

So what say you? Well, let's say no to fear and yes to Jesus. Let's pray. Father, we are thankful for just the blessing of being able to share in this time together.

And Father, we've opened up your word. Father, and we've looked at this passage which hopefully challenges us and gives us hope for living in this world and a society that we are living in right now.

[22 : 29] Father, you need us to stand and be courageous. You need us to stand and be bold because you have called the church to be your instrument.

So Father, I pray your continued blessing upon this church. I pray, Father, your continued blessing upon the leadership of this church. I pray, Father, your blessing upon the ministry of this church throughout this community.

And Father, may you grant them your love, your grace, your mercy, and also, Father, your strength and your power.

Thank you, Father, for Jesus. And it's in His name that we pray. Amen. Amen.