

Opposition and Prayer

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[0 : 00] If you would open Acts chapter 4 on page 115. I'll give you a B- for the singing of that hymn.

It was better than last service, but only just. Acts chapter 4. I was going to say that this is the passage where Peter and John appear before diocesan council to answer formal charges. But I thought that might be a bit too scandalous. So what I want to do is I want to say to you that the big issue in the book of Acts is the progress of the word of God.

The risen Jesus Christ commissions his people to be witnesses. The Holy Spirit is poured out and as the church grows and as Jesus continues to minister from heaven, the way in which the book of Acts speaks about this is it says the word of God grows, the word of God multiplies, the word of God increases and I wanted to show you this.

If you keep your finger in chapter 4, turn over to 6-7 for just a moment. Chapter 6, verse 7. And the word of God increased.

[1 : 17] What does that mean? The number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and miracle of miracles, a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. That is a miracle when you consider where they were.

Let's turn over to chapter 12 before I get into any more trouble. Verse 24. This is a wonderful passage.

The passage before it, Herod, meets a very sticky end which I'm going to leave for Neil to preach on when the time comes. And then in verse 24 we read, The word of God grew and multiplied.

Same thing. Or turn over to 1348. When the Gentiles heard this they were glad and glorified the word of God. And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.

And the word of the Lord spread throughout all the region. And one more in chapter 19, verse 20. Again, as people are soundly brought to Christ, the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.

[2 : 29] Let's go back to chapter 4. So the big issue is the spread of the word of God. But no sooner does the word of God appear, and no sooner is the gospel being preached, and no sooner are men and women being saved through repentance and faith through that word than vicious and consistent hostility and persecution breaks out.

I've said before from the pulpit there are three ways to destroy the church and we're going to look at each of these over the next few weeks. Starting here in Acts chapter 4, going right up till today, we find Satan's most obvious and brutal strategy, and that is the use of violence, intimidation, and coercion against Christians.

And Satan's purpose remains the same. He will do what he can to silence the ministry of the gospel. He wants to stop the spread of that word and the spread of salvation, and he continues to work ceaselessly to stop the spread of the word of God.

Everything that the word has done until this point in the book of Acts has been just lovely. You know, Jesus has gone to heaven. He's given to his disciples this brilliant purpose of bringing his blessing and his name to the ends of the earth.

The Holy Spirit has been poured out on the church and it's created this community that's marked by radical generosity and true community and generous hospitality and deep love.

[4 : 08] And the apostles go out and they speak about the resurrection of Jesus Christ because it's the most brilliant thing that's ever happened and people start coming to faith in him. And in chapter 3 as they're preaching, there is a man who is lame from birth for 40 years and they heal him in the name of Jesus Christ.

And as we come to the end of chapter 3, there they are, the man who's been healed is standing there and they are preaching about Jesus Christ and all the blessing of God and they are

interrupted.

Chapter 4 verse 1. And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, annoyed, infuriated.

Because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. So they arrested them, put them in custody until the morrow for it was already evening.

But, very big but, many of those who heard the word believed. And the number of the men, and that's the word for men, so you can multiply this by 2, 3, 4, came to about 5,000.

[5 : 15] Now the fact that this is the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees tells us that this is an issue of power and authority.

And it's no accident they come upon the apostles. It's not they wander into the temple and there they are preaching. No, this is a carefully devised strategy.

They've met with their legal team and they are going to use as much legal force as they can get away with. They hide behind their use of the law but all they really want to do is to silence the apostles, to stop the spread of the name, to extinguish this fire of the Spirit before this movement gets out of hand.

And it is, of course, an abuse of the office of priest. It infuriated them that these men, Peter and John, were preaching the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

And the thing about the bodily resurrection of Jesus is you just can't control it. And I don't know if you've noticed this about Christianity but when you talk about and believe in the resurrection, it automatically puts you into some sort of power struggle.

[6 : 29] Powerful control in my own life. Powerful control in religious institutions and with the world. That is the nature of the resurrection. But it is even worse for the Sadducees because the Sadducees did not believe in any kind of resurrection.

That is why they were called Sad-U-C. So the preaching of the risen Jesus Christ enraged these guys.

And I've got to say, if you were wanting to market the gospel to the Sadducees in Jerusalem, it's a very stupid thing to do to talk about the resurrection.

I mean, you'd want to play down that part, wouldn't you? I mean, it's clear that Peter and John need some savvy media training. Well, they don't get it.

Instead, they're thrown into prison. This is less than two months since this same group of authorities managed to have Jesus executed. And I guess that they probably think to themselves crushing this movement may not take too much trouble.

[7 : 38] And they put them in prison overnight. And I tell you this because this is written for our encouragement. If you are seeking to follow Jesus Christ, if you are seeking to walk in step with the Spirit and to spread the Word, you will have a negative reaction.

It doesn't matter how gracious, how sensitive, how intelligent, how loving you are. You will have a negative reaction somewhere. And the lovely thing to see is that this tactic that Satan uses of persecution and coercion and intimidation, it backfires.

There are the apostles stewing away in prison. Lo and behold, they become bold. The very people who this is supposed to intimidate, it makes them bolder and the Word spreads and grows.

You find this throughout the New Testament. Authorities, both religious and secular, lock up Christians. Christians keep talking about the Gospel. The Word spreads.

So here in this chapter 4, we have a conflict. And the conflict is basically between human authority and the authority of God. And I have divided it in two.

[8 : 57] The long court scene from verses 5 to 22, I call the failure of human power. And what you see here is the priests and the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin council motivated by their own power and position and Peter and John motivated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And as I said to you earlier, those things will always come into conflict. And as we go through this, it's good to examine ourselves. If we're motivated by power and position and public opinion, that'll put us in conflict with the risen Jesus.

And as it begins in verses 5, 6 and 7, a shiver goes down our spine. Peter and John are brought up by the very men who executed Jesus.

You see, the temple was controlled by one family. And the temple, Martha, was headed up by the godfather, who's Annas.

Annas was high priest between 6 and 15 AD. Five of his sons then became high priests. One son-in-law and one grandson.

[10 : 09] Every high priest until Jerusalem fell in 66 was part of this family. And they draw Peter and John out before them and in verse 7 they say this.

By what power, by what name did you do this? The issue is one of power and authority. They see this as a matter of jurisdiction.

What the apostles are doing and what the apostles are preaching threatens their structures. Their concern is not whether the miracle actually happened. Their concern is not whether the resurrection truly took place.

Their concern is not truth at all. Their concern is by what authority they act or spoke. Who gave you the right to speak this way? How dare you go outside the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin?

And here is Peter, who only two months before, in the very same place, denied Jesus Christ, because he was afraid of being exposed by a teenage girl that he belonged to Jesus Christ.

[11 : 21] And now he stands in front of the most powerful assembly in all Israel. What does he do? Well, we don't know whether his knees were knocking, but we do know this.

He's respectful and he's forthright and he's truthful. And even though he's being treated as a common criminal, he takes the opportunity to preach the gospel.

And as David read it for us, I hope you noticed, it only takes one sentence for him to get to the person of Jesus Christ. He says, look, if you're interested in how the miracle took place, it's very simple.

It was Jesus. And then when he gets to Jesus, he preaches the gospel. Look at verse 10 with me. He had known to you all and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, now he gets to Jesus Christ, the sermon is plain sailing, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well.

This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, such which has become the head of the corner. 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.

[12 : 38] It is a one point sermon with two applications, which is a very helpful thing for us preachers. The one point of the sermon is this.

Your view of Jesus and the way you treated Jesus is the diametrically opposite way than God's. You crucified him, but God raised him from the dead.

And the resurrection shows not just that he's alive now and able to do miracles, but that he is God's chosen Messiah. That's the point of the resurrection. Now, I don't think this is a very helpful way to defend yourself against the Sanhedrin if you want a happy ending.

Peter is not apologising for preaching the resurrection. He's in trouble for preaching it and then he preaches it again. The reason he does that is this. Although he knows the council hates the gospel, they're not going to come to believe the gospel until God opens their ears and opens their eyes.

And the way in which God does that is through the preaching of the gospel. So he makes two applications. The first in verse 11, he says, you are the builders of the religion of Israel.

[13 : 55] But if you leave Jesus Christ out, everything that you are building is going to crumble. You may build a very fine edifice of religion with all sorts of things in it, but unless Jesus Christ is the centre and the heart and the key, God will not be part of it and it cannot transform or help anyone.

Second application in verse 12, there is no other name under heaven given by God by whom we must be saved. This is remarkable. He is saying to the council, if you reject the risen Jesus, you reject the only salvation that God offers you.

The very name that you wish to extinguish is your only hope. And all your ceremonies and all your prayers, apart from Jesus, are anti-religion.

Now don't you find it helpful for us in our modern, pluriform, post-modern culture that the Apostle Peter should put it this way.

If Peter is right, if there is salvation in no other name, it means at the very least that there is no salvation in Muhammad or Buddha or Krishna.

[15 : 11] There is no other name because only Christ has come from God. Only Christ has died of sins. Only Christ has been raised from the dead. Only Christ will come again in glory.

It is only through Christ God offers forgiveness of sins and his Holy Spirit. Not just the healing of our bodies, but the healing of the deeper dreaded disease of sin and deliverance from judgment. It is very bold, isn't it? And the council is not a little astonished in verse 13 and notices their boldness. Even though these guys were not theologically trained and laymen, they speak with this freedom and this courage and they keep insisting on the resurrection.

And it provides a terrible problem for the council. Interesting as a sideline, neither here nor anywhere in the book of Acts do the enemies of the gospel ever try and disprove the resurrection. You know, if there could possibly have been a way for them to have done it, you can be guaranteed that they would have. So, what they do is they send Peter and John out of the council and they talk together and they decide that their best bet is damage control.

[16:26] Verse 18, they bring them back in and they place a complete ban on any mention of Jesus' name. When you see this phrase the name of Jesus, it's not just a lucky charm.

If you say Jesus, something will magically happen. The name of Jesus is the person of Jesus. It is the specific understanding of Jesus who is the one who was crucified, is raised, is coming again, by whom God is building, by whom God alone saves.

The Sanhedrin want Peter and John to promise their canonical obedience, to keep silent about this because they are the rightful authorities. And then we read verse 19.

But Peter and John answer 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. Very interesting, isn't it? Peter and John are respectful and polite to the lawful authorities of the church and then they state flatly that they are going to disobey.

[17:41] They have no idea what it is going to cost them long term but their obedience to Christ outweighs their obedience to this council or any other factor.

And I just point out to you as we move through this passage that there are times for Christians if you want to be obedient to God it will mean you must be disobedient to the duly appointed lawful authorities of the church or of the state.

If the duly elected and lawful authorities of the church or state call upon you and me to do something that is contrary to the will of God it is your Christian responsibility to disobey.

That's what this passage is about. It's the conflict between human authority and the authority of God between human word and the word of Jesus Christ the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical and national councils and the jurisdiction of Jesus Christ.

The reason for this of course is that underneath all our commitments is our commitment to Jesus Christ. Not all our commitments are equal. We seek to live as good citizens here in British Columbia and Canada enjoying the benefits of generations that have gone before but the reason we do that is because of our prior and deeper commitment to please Jesus Christ.

[19:06] So that's human power and let's move secondly and briefly I want to just I call this the success of human weakness in verses 23 to 31.

As soon as they're released Peter and John race back to the fellowship together and the first thing they do is that they pray and there are two features of the prayer that are very important for us this morning.

The first is this they take refuge in the complete sovereignty of God. They don't go to God and cry out oh Lord everything's out of control.

They don't say oh God you've let us down our good guys have been arrested. No they pray to the sovereign Lord and the first two thirds of the prayer they are recollecting God's matchless control of all things.

They say Lord you created all things the heavens and the mountains and the stars and the sea and you revealed through the mouth of your David that people will rage against you and will rage against Jesus Christ and this has been fulfilled in our experience.

[20:12] Brothers and sisters this is very important for us. the sovereignty of God does not turn aside when wicked things happen. The sovereignty of God doesn't turn aside and allow those things to happen.

Nor is it so much that God's sovereignty works around wickedness. But what the apostles are saying here is that the very wickedness of men and women promotes and prospers the purpose of God.

in verse 27 and 28 they remember the crucifixion of Jesus an act of desperate wickedness where the sinless son of God is put to death by plot. And yet they know that even through that wicked act God is working our salvation and that is the shape of every event since.

It's the same for us today. And I don't know what your circumstances are. I don't know what you are facing. But the arm of God is no shorter today than it was on the day of Jesus' crucifixion.

And his sovereign power is no less today than it was at Peter and John's trial. And he is working all things for the glory of his son and we can rest on that and we can take deep comfort in that.

[21 : 32] That's why that's why they pray about his sovereignty pray to his sovereignty. And the second feature of the prayer is what they pray for. In verse 29 and 30 it's very interesting that they don't pray for deliverance and protection and safety.

They don't pray Lord save us and give us a quiet life. They pray for boldness which is the very thing that got them into hot water in the first place.

It's wonderful isn't it? Here they are in prayer and they see that the real issue is not their comfort and their long term security and their life goals. The real issue is the glory of Jesus Christ and the primary way he's glorified is through the spread of the gospel.

If they hadn't been bold they would not have been arrested and now they pray for more. It's unnatural don't you think? Well it is I think.

but the reason they pray is that the aim of these early Christians is not just to be faithful. The aim of these early Christians is to be obedient and Jesus Christ has called them to be witnesses and to move the word of God forward.

[22 : 47] And if I could say to us as a congregation God's will for us is not just to be faithful and to stand but is to move forward with the word of God. Because you and I are caught up in this same conflict today.

And Satan's desire remains to silence the gospel if he possibly can. The map has changed considerably. Our culture now takes great pride in having outgrown all forms of religious intolerance.

At least that's what it thinks. Actually it has replaced the old religious intolerance with a new form of religious intolerance. So our post-modern elites and media take every opportunity they possibly can to persecute the message of Jesus Christ subtly and in an entertaining fashion.

And we may not be arrested but we run the risk of being silenced by intimidation and by embarrassment and just by shame. And you and I will probably never be paralysed with fear of imprisonment or execution but merely by the possibility of looking stupid.

there is a concerted campaign to silence the gospel. And as we finish this morning the question is how do we respond?

[24 : 04] And I want to leave you with two things. Firstly do not fear but rest on God's sovereign power and grace.

When you are suffering or when you are under attack it is natural to feel anxious and fearful. When your life is out of control when there is conflict when there is opposition when you don't know the way ahead it's natural to feel fearful.

And later in the book of Acts the apostle Paul says to some new Christians it is through many trials that we must enter the kingdom of God. But it is the kingdom of God.

It is under the rule of Jesus Christ who has risen from the dead and God still sovereignly rules and he's still sovereignly committed to his purposes.

And I want to say this morning God will provide and he will care for us and therefore each of us in our circumstances must rest on his sovereign power and his sovereign grace.

[25 : 13] And secondly do not be silenced but pray for boldness because opposition and hardship can either make you more timid or more bold.

And I don't know what boldness would look like for you in your circumstances it will be different than what it looks like for me but this week I encourage you to pray in your family and in your circle of influence that you would be bold.

because if Christ is risen and if God is sovereign we have the freedom to speak and to be bold. And I finish with these words from Jesus that were read to us earlier.

blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.