

The Persecution Begins

A Study in Acts Chapter 4



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Acts Chapter 4

Chapter 3 tells us that if the Jewish nation had truly repented and turned from their wicked ways, then God would have responded in mercy and grace (Acts 3:19). In chapter 4 we learn that the leaders of the nation not only rejected the clear message of Peter and John, but that they attacked the messengers by way of persecution. God was able to take the fires of persecution and work these events together for good in order to purge and strengthen His beloved body and bride.

The gospel can be proliferated in amazing ways even in the midst of fierce persecution. An example of this would be when communism took over China in 1949. This resulted in the expulsion of perhaps three thousand missionaries by the communist government. The believers remaining in China were threatened and persecuted. Thirty years later observers were able to look behind the Bamboo Curtain to find not one million, but an estimated 30 million Chinese believers. Today that figure has probably doubled. Why is this so? Persecuted believers are forced to pay a great price for their faith, sometimes with their own life's blood. Such fiery trials eliminate shallow profession, hypocrisy, corruption and much false teaching. With his life on the line, why would one claim to be a believer if it were not really true? Perhaps a good dose of persecution would actually strengthen the American Church in these days of laxness and complacency. The God who did wonderful things for the Church in China is the same God who, centuries before, did wonderful things for the infant church in Jerusalem.

Acts 4:1

The leaders who persecuted the early disciples were the same leaders who had delivered the Lord Jesus to the Romans for crucifixion. The priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees, all willing instruments of Satan, came upon Peter and John as they were still speaking to the people. Peter and John were not even allowed to conclude their gospel proclamation. The Sadducees were not as numerous as the Pharisees but in many ways they were more powerful. They controlled the temple, the priesthood and the Sanhedrin (the council or ruling body of the Jews consisting of 70 members, most of whom were Sadducees). When the gospel accounts mention the "chief priests," this usually is a reference to the Sadducees. The captain of the temple was the head of the temple police force, second in authority only to the High Priest. Certain Levites served under his command.

The Sadducees were not nearly as popular as the Pharisees in the eyes of the common people. They were less patriotic and more favorable to Rome. They were more concerned about pleasing Rome than pleasing God. The Sadducees were in many ways unorthodox in their beliefs. They denied that people would be raised from the dead and did not believe in angels (Matthew 22:23; Acts 23:7-8). They denied the supernatural, believing that "souls die with their bodies." This was a denial of the immortality of the soul. Much like liberal theologians today, they did not believe in hell or eternal punishment.

The Sadducees rejected the tradition (oral law) of the Pharisees and insisted that the Scripture alone was authoritative. Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote, "The Sadducees say, only what is written is to be esteemed as legal...what has come down from tradition of the fathers need not be observed" (Ant. xiii, 10,6). The High Priest was usually chosen from among the Sadducees.

Acts 4:2

The word “grieved” means to be disturbed or greatly annoyed even to the point of anger. The verb is also found in Acts 16:18 and Mark 14:4. These Jewish leaders were grieved for two reasons: 1) Peter and John taught the people, and they thought that uneducated fishermen had no right to set forth spiritual teachings and comment on the Hebrew Scriptures. These men had never received rabbinical training, and the Jewish leaders considered them totally unqualified to speak on such matters because they lacked proper credentials. 2) Peter and John boldly proclaimed that Christ rose again from the dead. This truly bothered and angered these leaders. A dead Christ was no problem. They thought they had gotten rid of Jesus of Nazareth by way of a public crucifixion witnessed by all. But then their plans collapsed and they had to try to explain the empty tomb. How could they silence the many believers who claimed that they had seen Jesus alive from the dead? The Sadducees, according to their belief system, did not think a resurrection from the dead was even remotely possible. Their view is in harmony with almost all world-class influential scientists in all the major universities on Earth today. These brilliant scientists likewise deny the resurrection of the dead because it seems to contradict scientific principles and cannot be verified by the scientific method. Yet, God specializes in doing spectacular things that cannot always be explained by human reason.

Acts 4:3

It was evening time, probably about 4:00 p.m. The hour of prayer was over and the Temple was closed at this time. These Jewish officials laid hands on Peter and John and took them into custody. They could not put them on trial that night due to a Jewish law which said that trials could not take place at night, a law that was totally violated in the case of Jesus.

Acts 4:4

Even though the leaders of the Jews rejected Peter’s message, the Spirit of God was working in the hearts of numerous souls in the audience and “many who heard the word believed.” The figure given of “about five thousand” gives the total number of men (males) who had been saved since Pentecost, not counting women and children. Darby, Kelly, the NASB, and many other translations correctly render the verb “became” (not “was,” KJV). That is, due to Peter’s preaching in Acts 3, the number of men “became” or rose to about 5,000. This figure would include the 3000 who were baptized at Pentecost (Acts 2:41). The Church of Jesus Christ was experiencing a remarkable growth in numbers. If women and children were included, the total would probably be over 10,000. Do these numbers indicate that the Jews were accepting the reoffer of the Kingdom? No, because those who believed were a minority compared to the hundreds of thousands of Jews who did not believe. They were a significant minority, but a minority nonetheless.

When the nation Israel is saved in the future, it will be a massive majority: “And so **all Israel** shall be saved” (Rom. 11:26). God will use a time of great tribulation, “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jer. 30:7), to purge His nation and to remove unbelievers from it. In Ezekiel 20:38 we learn that “rebels” will be purged from among the Jews. According to Zechariah 13:8, two-thirds of the Jewish people will not survive that time of great trouble, and the remaining third will be refined and tried as gold, and God will claim them as His people (Zech. 13:9). This universal turning to the Lord on the part of the Jews did not happen in the early chapters of Acts, but thankfully, a significant minority were wonderfully saved as God was building His Church.

Acts 4:5-6

The Jewish leaders were alarmed at the increasing numbers of believers and wanted to put a stop to the preaching that was resulting in so many conversions. At this point in Jewish history, the ruling Jews formed a council known as the Sanhedrin. This ruling body consisted of 70 members plus the High Priest, for a total of 71. Members of the priestly families were involved, most of whom were Sadducees. The Sanhedrin acted as both the senate and the supreme court of the Jewish nation. The head of the Sanhedrin was the acting High Priest.¹

Annas (Acts 4:6) was the most powerful and influential man in Jerusalem. He served as the High Priest from 7-15 A. D. Even after he was removed from office in 15 A. D., he still retained the title (see Luke 3:2; John 18:19, 22; and Acts 4:6 where he is called the “High Priest” even though he was not the actual High Priest). So great was his influence over the priestly party that five of his sons as well as his son in law Caiaphas and his grandson Matthias each served as the High Priest. Josephus, the Jewish historian said this about Annas: “Annas proved a most fortunate man; for he had five sons, who had all performed the office of a High Priest to God, and he had himself enjoyed that dignity a long time formerly.”²

Annas used his sons and relatives as his willing instruments. At the time of these events recorded in Acts, Annas was a man of great age and experience, and also great wealth. He reaped a huge profit from the terrible temple sales (Matt. 21:12-13), which transformed the house of God into a den of thieves. Though not holding the actual office or title, he was considered the High Priest in the eyes of the people, and on any matter of great import, he was always the man to consult. This explains why, in the trials of Christ, Jesus was led to Annas first (John 18:13). He is also listed first in Acts 4:6. He was the real power and influence behind the acting High Priest.

Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas. The Romans appointed him as High Priest in 18 A.D. and he held this office for 18 years (until 35 A.D.). He was replaced by Jonathan, the son of Annas, in 36 A.D. According to some Greek manuscripts this Jonathan is mentioned in Acts 4:6 (variant for “John” in the Western text). Otherwise, the John mentioned in Acts 4:6, along with Alexander, were prominent members of the priestly families, but the New Testament does not give us further information about these two men. This Alexander should not be confused with two other men by the same name (Acts 19:33; 1 Tim. 1:20).

Acts 4:7

We have an amazing confrontation between the supreme court of the Jewish nation and two unlearned, unschooled Galilean fisherman. At first glance they seem totally outmatched by the ruling powers, but Peter and John had a Name and they had a Power that far exceeded anything their enemies possessed (Zech. 4:6). Their situation seemed hopeless and they seemed outnumbered, but the living God specializes in hopeless situations and when men are on God’s side, they are never outnumbered (Rom. 8:31; 2 Kings 6:15-17).

¹Israel’s modern “Sanhedrin,” the Knesset, makes official decisions in their unregenerate condition where they are described by Paul as “broken off branches” (Rom. 11:17-24).

²The Antiquities of the Jews, XX. ix. 1.

In their spiritual blindness, it is possible that the Jewish leaders were thinking of Deuteronomy 13:1-5. Peter and John had performed a great sign miracle, and yet they were promoting the cause of Jesus of Nazareth, a mere man in their view who blasphemously claimed to be God. The passage in Deuteronomy 13 speaks of a prophet predicting a sign or wonder and the sign actually comes to pass. However, the message of the prophet is clearly against the ways and words of God, encouraging the people to follow false gods and idols (Deut. 13:1-2). In spite of the sign and wonder, this false prophet is to be put to death based on his false teaching and ungodly instruction (Deut. 13:5). The Jewish leaders could see a similarity in this divine warning against false prophets. A great wonder had taken place which no one could deny (Acts 4:16). Yet, in their view these men were promoting the teachings of a man who was a blasphemer, claiming that He Himself was the Son of God, making Himself equal with God (John 5:18; 19:7). Therefore, Peter and John were false prophets deserving of death.

This Jewish supreme court asked, “By what power have you done this?” This is similar to when the Lord performed undeniable miracles in their presence, a key example being the blind and dumb man healed in Matthew 12:22. The Pharisees could not deny the miracle, but they denied that it was done by the power of God. Instead they accused the Lord of performing this miracle by the power of the devil (Matt. 12:24-30). It is possible that the Jewish leaders in Acts 4 may have attributed the power of Peter and John’s miracle to demonic sources. Their question gave Peter a perfect opening for His powerful response.

Acts 4:8

Christ’s servant had just the right answer for this difficult occasion. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and Christ had promised him in Luke 12:11-12 that the Holy Spirit would teach him exactly what to say in this type of situation before powerful authorities. How faithful God is to His Word! Peter once again assumed the role as spokesman, and he was ready to give an answer for the hope that was in him with meekness and fear (1 Pet. 3:15).

Acts 4:9

Their great crime was helping a man who had been crippled for over forty years, for his entire life! Peter introduced his defense by stating what should have been obvious to all, that what he did for this man was **a good deed!** The miracle brought about a wonderful result, causing all who witnessed it to marvel. His logic was irrefutable: How can doing a good deed be wrong?

Acts 4:10

Peter spoke with great God-given boldness, and later, in spite of vicious threats, Peter and John would pray for even more boldness (Acts 4:29), and God would wonderfully answer (Acts 4:31). They were asked in what name they did their deed, and Peter was not ashamed to tell them that it was done “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” They were proud of the One whom these Jewish leaders despised, and whom they crucified. The God who powerfully raised up Jesus from the dead had no problem raising up a lame man from his crippled condition and granting him perfect health. It took courage for Peter to declare that their miracle was done in the very name of the One that his listeners had murdered. “You crucified Him; God raised Him up!” Among those leaders who heard this were a number of Sadducees who did not believe in a bodily resurrection. Peter did not argue about the resurrection; he simply declared it! This same Peter had cowardly denied the Lord not too

long before in much less threatening circumstances. What a difference the power and filling of the Spirit can make. God can transform His servants!

Acts 4:11

Peter may have been an unschooled fisherman, but he was very familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures! He cited Psalm 118:22, a passage which the Jews recognized as Messianic: “The stone which the builders refused [rejected] is become the head stone of the corner.” Jesus had also applied this very passage to Himself in Matthew 21:42, and He warned that those who rejected this Stone that they would be crushed (Matt. 21:44). The Jewish leaders had gotten the message and had wanted to kill Him for these sayings (Matt. 21:45-46).

Indeed, the future kingdom will come in stone-like fashion, according to Daniel 2:44-45. The Messiah will be like a stone cut out of the mountain by God Himself (“without hands”), and the entire image of man’s kingdoms will be smashed beginning with the toes, then following with the feet, the legs and all the way up to the golden head. After these kingdoms are crushed, the stone will become a great mountain which will fill the whole earth. This kingdom will not evolve slowly (as postmillennialists may suppose) but it will arrive suddenly, supernaturally and catastrophically. The day of men will end and the King of kings will exercise His authority over all human beings in terms of global government.

Later in his first epistle Peter made reference to this great Stone that was rejected by men but made the Head of the corner (1 Pet. 2:6-8). Paul also spoke of Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). The Church could not be founded upon a more solid Rock (Matt. 16:18)!

Acts 4:12

The word “saved” [sozō] at the end of this verse is the same word used of physical healing in verse 9, where the lame man was “made whole.” Here in verse 12 the word is used of spiritual healing, of people being cured from the terrible disease of sin. Peter also uses the word “must,” the same word used in John 3:7—“Ye **must** be born again.” Men **must** be saved; it is essential and necessary, for there is no other way to avoid eternal judgment.

There is only one Savior for everyone living under heaven. There is only one Name, Jesus Christ of Nazareth (v.10), by which men can be saved. There is no other Savior and there is no other Name. Jesus is the only way, and no one can come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). This is sobering exclusiveness and wonderful inclusiveness! It is exclusive in that everyone who does not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is excluded from heaven and will not receive the gift of eternal life. It is inclusive because God has provided full salvation for every sinful soul on planet earth without exception (John 3:16; 4:42; 6:33-35), but each person must come to Christ in order to obtain eternal life. There is no other way. No one is excluded from God’s free and gracious offer of salvation except for those who exclude themselves by unbelief (1 Tim. 2:4; Rom. 10:8-13; Rev. 22:17).

According to the gospel of political correctness, every religion must be recognized as equally valid, and no religion should ever be condemned or labeled as a false way leading to destruction. However, various religions make contradictory claims. For example, Christianity proclaims a risen Saviour; Islam teaches that Christ never rose from the dead. These beliefs are contradictory and cannot both

be true. God's Word is truth (John 17:17), and any valid belief system must line up with God and His Word. Those who are politically correct and relativistic are quick to condemn Christianity for insisting that God has revealed absolute truth and that God has absolute rules and laws which govern man both for time and eternity.

We are sometimes told that it does not really matter what people believe, as long as they are sincere in their beliefs. Let us test this theory. Does it matter if a sincere pharmacist puts the wrong pills in a bottle? Does it matter if a surgeon sincerely believes he removed a kidney when in fact he removed the liver? Does it matter if a woman eats a poisonous mushroom, even though she thought it would be quite nourishing? It does matter what a person believes. It can make a life or death difference.

One of the most widespread but unsound religious teachings of our day is that there are many roads to God. If men are sincere, we are told, it does not matter which path they travel—in the end they will all reach the same destination. Speaking to a large audience on God's eternal purpose in relation to man, a nationally prominent educator said that all men are brothers, and at the last great gathering not even the most erring ones will be missing. The speaker depicted a beautiful palace standing in a delightful garden. There was only one entrance to the castle, though there were many roads that led to it from all directions. On these roads throngs of pilgrims traveled. Many climbed over tortuous mountain trails; others followed less rocky paths; some, with songs and laughter traversed smooth and flower-bordered ways. But all, finally arrived at the palace gates, and then it mattered not that some had found the journey hard and painful, for all the sufferings of the way were forgotten in their complete and perfect joy.

A pretty picture, this—but *not* a true one! Since by divine revelation alone we can discover the way to God, we must turn to the Bible, rather than to man's imagination, for our guidance. Jesus Christ, describes two roads open to men. One is a straight, narrow pathway leading to God and eternal life. The other is a broad and easy road leading to final destruction. On this broad road are many travelers, enjoying the fellowship of their comrades and thinking little about their destination. On the narrow way are fewer pilgrims, but a heavenly radiance lights their pathway.³

A person is either with the few on the narrow road which leads to life or he is with the majority who are on the broad road leading to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). Jesus is the only way and there is no salvation apart from Him.

Philosophical pluralism is the belief that all views in society are equally valid. No one can claim that his ideas or beliefs are superior to another's. No one can declare another religion to be false. If there are no absolutes, then one viewpoint is as valid as another, and there is no objective standard by which to judge any human opinions. Pluralism preaches tolerance for everyone, with the exception that there is little or no tolerance for those who hold to absolute truth. They are the ones who are often mercilessly attacked. The tolerance of pluralism is now known as political correctness. Christians, who uphold the politically incorrect notion that some things are right and others are wrong are increasingly despised in society. Pluralists have no tolerance for people who express any kind of dogmatism, and yet pluralists themselves can be extremely dogmatic about their politically

³From a tract published by the American Bible Society entitled, *The Way to God*.

correct views. What should the believer's response be to all this? Christian truth demands that falsehood be rejected and error be exposed. In these days of relativistic confusion, God's people need to lovingly but firmly proclaim the truth of the gospel, even as Peter did so boldly here in Acts chapter 4.⁴

Acts 4:13

It had not been too long before this that certain Jews witnessed the cowardice of Peter. Peter had been in the courtyard warming himself by a fire during the trials of Christ when he denied the One he loved. On this later post-Pentecost occasion the Jewish leaders saw a very different apostle, one who was filled with the Spirit and who spoke very boldly for his Savior, without fearing the consequences of his powerful speech. How encouraging and hopeful it is to know that our God can transform people into what He would have them to be. "The word *boldness* properly denotes *openness* or *confidence in speaking*. It stands opposed to *hesitancy*, and to *equivocation* in declaring our sentiments. Here it means that, in spite of danger and opposition, they avowed their doctrines without any attempt to conceal or disguise them."⁵

The terms "unlearned and ignorant" must not be misunderstood. These terms simply mean they had no rabbinical education and no special training in the theological schools of that day. Peter and John were fishermen by trade, but by no means were they ignorant or stupid when it came to understanding and communicating God's truth. Peter's messages in Acts 2 and Acts 3 demonstrate an amazing ability to pierce the hearts of his hearers, and they also give evidence of Peter's mature grasp of passages in the Hebrew Bible. No objective person could read John's five New Testament books and Peter's two epistles and not be impressed by the brilliance of these human penmen whom God used in a special way. They each knew at least two languages, and were very comfortable writing in Greek. Men who truly know the Scriptures are not ignorant: "I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation" (Psalm 119:99). So the verse is simply pointing out that these two men were not accredited by rabbinical standards and thus would be rejected as teachers by the religious establishment of that day. In God's eyes, they were fully qualified and able to proclaim His good news to all men.

These Jewish leaders marveled and took note that Peter and John had been with Jesus. There was something about these men and their preaching that reminded them of Jesus, whom they despised. They spoke boldly, as Jesus had done. They presented truth which was unanswerable, as Jesus had done. Their words convicted their audience of sin, as did their Master's. These religious leaders thought they had gotten rid of Jesus, but here were two men, very much like Jesus, standing in their midst and causing them great consternation.

Not only had Peter and John been with Jesus during his three and a half years of public ministry, but they were presently with the risen Christ and enjoying daily fellowship with Him. The One who sat on the right hand of God was, at the same time, working with His disciples who were preaching on earth (Mark 16:19-20). Not only was Christ with them, but He was living in them (Gal. 2:20). They enjoyed His indwelling presence (Rom. 8:10). Precious reality!

⁴For a fuller discussion of pluralism, see Jarl K. Waggoner's article *Pluralism: The Death of Truth*, in the Fall Quarter 2001 of *The Baptist Bulletin*, 2001.

⁵Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes*, his commentary under Acts 4:13, p. 80.

Acts 4:13 also illustrates the spiritual principle that fellowship must precede service. “And He ordained twelve, **that they should be with Him**, and that He might send them forth to preach” (Mark 3:14). Notice the order: before they were sent forth to preach, they needed to be with Him. Being with Him means to be in His presence, to be in His company, to enjoy close association with Christ. It involves fellowship and companionship. Mark 3:14 indicated that these men would be with Him in a unique way, to eat with Him, to travel with Him, to learn from Him in His private dealings with them and in His public dealings with others. They were to be with Him, which involved constant companionship and intimate daily fellowship with their Master. Fellowship precedes service. Devotion precedes duty. Being a disciple (a learner) precedes being an apostle (one who is sent forth). Being a witness (Isaiah 43:10-11) must precede witnessing. Sitting at His feet like Mary precedes serving like Martha. Before there can be an outflow there needs to be an inflow. Out of our innermost being must be rivers of living water before we can be a blessing to others. Moses was with Him 40 years in the backside of the desert. David was in the wilderness watching the few sheep of Jesse. Paul was three years in secret before he went to Jerusalem to see Peter. W. Barker has said, “See to it that your service is the outcome of communion with Christ. Be careful to allow nothing to hinder your enjoyment of divine love, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. Seek to realize for yourselves the exceeding preciousness of Christ, so that when you speak of Him it may be out of the fulness of a heart made abundantly happy.” The early opponents of Christianity “marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

Acts 4:14-15

How the formerly crippled man ended up in the same room with Peter and John and the Jewish council is not explained, but there he was! As we saw in Acts 3:11, this man had a joyful bond with the men who were instrumental in his healing. He stuck close to them. Peter’s amazing testimony before the council was confirmed by this man who may have still been jumping up and down and giving a remarkable gymnastic demonstration of his newly acquired physical skills. They could say nothing against this. How could they possibly criticize this miracle? That a good deed was done was very obvious to all, and to deny it would be silly, if not absurd. The logical thing would be to fall down and worship Jesus Christ, in whose Name and by whose power this healing was done. Instead they told these three men to leave the room so that they could privately deliberate about these matters.

Acts 4:16-17

The Lord’s enemies described this miracle in three ways: 1) It was “notable.” It was noteworthy, remarkable and known to all. If they had had newspapers, it would have been the headline on the front page. If they had had television, it would have been the lead story found on all the cable news channels. 2) It was very public. It was witnessed by a great crowd, and those who did not see the miracle soon heard about it. The crippled man was well-known (Acts 3:10), and the people were filled with wonder and amazement at his healing. It was a miracle that was “manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem” (v.16). 3) It was undeniable: “We cannot deny it” (v.16). It could not be explained away. It really happened and everyone knew it.

So what course of action should the Jewish leaders take? This was a great dilemma. It would not look good if they were to punish Peter and John. If this were done, the public would want to know why two men were punished for doing such a good deed. They leaders would have loved to get rid of Peter and John, but this was not the time to do it in light of the public’s response to this event.

What bothered them the most was the preaching that accompanied the miracle, because it exalted Jesus Christ, the very One whom they crucified. Their only solution was to try to silence the preachers by threatening to punish them if they spoke.

The reasoning of these Jewish leaders came from their depraved hearts and was strongly influenced by Satan and his demonic host. It was impossible for these leaders to think clearly and logically. They were spiritually blinded. We are reminded of what Jesus told the spiritually blind Pharisees in John 9:39—"For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind." These religious Jews thought they could see, but Jesus reminded them that they were spiritually blind and that their sin remained (John 9:41). We must never forget that the vast majority of self-appointed intellectuals and so-called experts in the realms of science, philosophy, psychology and even religion are totally blind when it comes to the revealed truth of God (1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Acts 4:18

The council called them back in and gave them a strong command accompanied by threats of punishment. They were commanded to cease from any kind of speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus. They were forbidden to do what God had told them to do in His Great Commission (Luke 24:47; Matt. 28:19-20). In other words, they were commanded to disobey God. Their choice was clear: Should we obey God or man?

These believers were commanded to keep quiet, yet they refused to obey. Sadly, many believers today need all kinds of encouragement and persuasion to speak of a great God and to bear witness for Christ. What should be our privileged and glad duty has often become a matter of serious neglect. Consider Colossians 4:3-6.

Acts 4:19-20

Peter's boldness was not affected by these threats. He threw the matter right back into their laps. What is the right thing to do in the sight of God?⁶ Should we listen to you or should we listen to God? Should we obey you or should we obey God? You be the judge of this! As for us, we know what we are going to do. We have no other choice. We are God's witnesses (Acts 1:8) and we must speak the things which we have seen and heard. We have seen the risen Christ. How can we keep silent about that? He has entrusted us with His gospel, and woe unto us if we do not preach it (1 Cor. 9:16). "We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20, NASB). Literally, "We are unable not to speak." That is, it is impossible for us to keep silent.

Peter knew the importance of submitting to those who are in authority. He himself wrote, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake" (1 Pet. 2:13-15). But he also knew there are times when men must disobey authorities in order to obey God. Here are some Biblical examples:

- 1) The Jewish midwives were told by Pharaoh the king to kill male babies (Exodus 1:15-16).

⁶In these relativistic days when absolute truth is rejected on every side, we need to be reminded that only God decides what is right and wrong, not man and not society. Determining what is right *in His sight* is all that matters.

The midwives feared God and disobeyed Pharaoh (Exodus 1:17).⁷ Disobeying Pharaoh could have very serious consequences, but they wanted to honor God, even though they were not completely honest with Pharaoh (Exodus 1:19).

2) Daniel's three friends refused to bow before the great image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up (Daniel chapter 3). They respected and honored Nebuchadnezzar as their king, but they refused to worship anyone or anything except for God. "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (Dan. 3:17-18). It took a huge amount of courage to be willing to honor God, even if it meant being burned alive in a fire so hot that it destroyed those men who tossed them in it (Dan. 3:22). God delivered them in a remarkable way (Dan. 3:27).

3) Daniel was given the command not to pray, but as soon as the decree was signed Daniel prayed anyway (Dan. 6:7-11). Daniel would not submit to the king's unjust command, but he did submit to the punishment, and God delivered him from the hungry lions (Dan. 6:16-23). Daniel knew that if a choice had to be made between obeying a human king and obeying the Heavenly King, he must obey God.

4) King Herod gave strict orders to the wise men: "And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found Him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship Him also" (Matt. 2:8). However, God gave orders that directly contradicted Herod's mandate. God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. They obeyed God rather than Herod. They did the right thing.

Acts 4:21-22

The Jewish leaders would have loved to severely punish Peter and John, but they feared the people. Such punitive actions would not have been well received by the multitudes who were giving God glory for what had taken place. They had no choice but to release God's two servants.

The beggar had been crippled from birth (Acts 3:2) and he had remained in this condition for over forty years (v. 22). This needy man had been a common sight among the people of Jerusalem for decades. But now they witnessed the new version of this man: healthy, robust, leaping and rejoicing in the Lord for the great miracle that God had performed. His age shows the greatness of the miracle. Normally a man who has had an inborn defect or disability for over 40 years is beyond the hope of a cure. It is interesting to ponder that when Jesus was born, this man was about seven years old!

Acts 4:23

Peter and John immediately went to the gathering place of their fellow believers and gave them a full account of what had happened and what the religious authorities had said. They reported everything, including the threats they had received and their courageous response to those threats. The report served as a very fitting prayer request.

⁷John Zeller, commenting on this passage, observed that Pharaoh had a midwife crisis!

Acts 4:24

As soon as the believers heard this report they lifted up their voice to God in prayer. There were many believers present, but only one voice. They were so unified and so much of one accord that they spoke and prayed as one. With the powerful Jewish Sanhedrin lined up against them, they appealed to One who was far more powerful. The word used for “Lord” is not the common word [*kurios*] but the word *despotēs* which means absolute sovereign Ruler who has all authority and power. They appealed to God the Creator, the One who by His awesome power and might created the heavens, the earth, the sea and everything that is in them (Genesis 1).

These believers, who were well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, knew that their help came from the omnipotent Lord, the One who made the heavens and the earth (Psalm 121:2). If God could create the mountains, the heavens, the earth, the seas and everything in them, then helping believers in need would be a cinch! Our biggest problems are no problem for Him! If they had gotten their eyes away from the Creator, then the Sanhedrin would have looked very big and terribly threatening. But if they would turn their eyes upon the Creator, then the opposition would suddenly become minuscule. “Our help is in the name of the LORD, **who made heaven and earth**” (Psalm 124:8). “Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God: **which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is**: which keepeth truth for ever” (Psalm 146:5-6). Isaac Watts wrote:

To heav'n I lift my waiting eyes,
There all my hopes are laid;
The Lord that built the earth and skies
Is my perpetual aid.

Acts 4:25-26

In the midst of their prayer, they appealed to the Scriptures, in particular to Psalm 2. So likewise, our prayers need to be saturated with Bible truth. The more we are in agreement with God's Word, the more we are in harmony with the God of the Word, who delights when His children are aligned with His revealed truth.

Verse 25 begins with a good reminder of the precious doctrine of inspiration. God is the One who spoke the words of Psalm 2, but how did He do this? He spoke by or through the mouth of His servant David. David was the instrument that God used to communicate His Word. David was God's mouthpiece. He was the penman God used to give us the divinely inspired words of Psalm 2.⁸

The Psalm 2 prophecy speaks of a time at the end of this present age when the world's rulers and nations will be gathered together against God and against His Christ (His anointed One) at Armageddon. The issue with these ungodly people will be that they want to do their own thing and will not want God to rule over them. They will want to be totally free from God's sovereign

⁸Such a clear affirmation of God's method of inspiration is seen in many passages, Matthew 1:22-23 being just one example. The great prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 was spoken “**by the Lord through the prophet**” (verse 22). God was the speaker; Isaiah was His mouthpiece. Isaiah did not dream up this prophecy on his own (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

influence and control (Psalm 2:3). The Lord's response to this will be to laugh and have them in derision (Psalm 2:4). The thought of puny man seeking to overcome the Almighty by way of military conquest is rather humorous if not outright pathetic. Keep in mind the prophetic context of this passage. The Lord Jesus is preparing to return to the earth to establish His kingdom at the time of Israel's conversion. Satan and his demonic generals will bring all these kings and rulers and armies together against God and against Israel. Little do these armies realize that it will be the sovereign Lord of Hosts who will be behind this gathering of the nations (Zech. 14:2), and they would soon fulfill God's all-wise purpose and plan.

Acts 4:27-28

These praying disciples made a very fitting application of Psalm 2 to their present situation. Psalm 2 was not fulfilled in Acts chapter 4, but the principles of Psalm 2 were appropriately applied to the situation in Acts chapter 4. Indeed, this is exactly what we should do with God's Word—understand its original meaning and then apply it to our particular situation.

The word "child" is again the word "servant" (*pais*, as in Acts 3:13,26; 4:30), reminding us that Jesus is the servant of Jehovah, the One Isaiah spoke of repeatedly, even our Sin-bearer (Isaiah 53). He is the Christ, the Anointed One, and the anointing of Jesus by God the Father is a reference to the Lord's baptism when the Spirit of God came upon Him as a dove. "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38). Jesus Christ is our great Prophet, Priest and King. In the Old Testament, prophets and priests and kings were anointed with oil before they commenced their official service, symbolic of God's enabling power upon them.

According to Psalm 2, future world rulers and their armies will be gathered together against God's Anointed One. So in a similar way Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles (Romans) and the people of Israel were gathered together against Christ at the time of His crucifixion. Some of these same enemies (the Jewish leaders) were gathered against Peter and John, threatening them and anyone else who would dare preach about a resurrected Christ. What are a handful of Jewish leaders compared to the whole array of the world's armies that will someday fight against the Lord Jesus and blaspheme His Name, in spite of the things that He will bring upon the earth in the form of supernatural sign miracles of judgment (seal, trumpet and bowl judgments)?

Those who gathered together to crucify Jesus did exactly what God had predetermined that they would do. They acted on their own, in accord with their own wicked plans, but then ended up doing what God wanted and fulfilling His plan, even fulfilling numerous prophecies! Judas Iscariot did what he wanted to do in betraying the Lord, but ended up doing exactly what God had predetermined (Luke 22:22). It is wonderful how God can use the wicked acts of men to fulfill His plan. So it was also with Joseph's brothers. They thought evil against Joseph and carried out their wicked schemes, but God meant it for good, and it all worked together to fulfill God's good plan (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28). With respect to the crucifixion, these wicked people were doing what was predetermined for them to do, but they did it willingly on their own initiative and therefore they were fully accountable and responsible for that they did.

In John 6:37 we also find this remarkable interplay between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility: "All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out." No man can come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). No one in heaven will say, "I tried to come to Christ but I was blocked and was forbidden to do so." No, those who do not come to Him do not want to come and they choose not to come. It is not that they

desire to come and can't. No, they are unwilling to come: "You are not willing to come to Me that ye might have life" (John 5:40).

The saved person thankfully says, "I'm in heaven because of God!" The lost person must truthfully say, "I'm in hell because of me!" Those who are damned will never be able to blame God or say, "I'm damned because God did not choose me!" Their damnation is based not upon God's rejection of them but upon their rejection of God: "He that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16). "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). "Of sin, because they believe not on Me" (John 16:9).

Man does not contribute to his own salvation. It is the work of God, "not of works lest any man should boast" (Eph.2:8-9). God does not contribute to man's unbelief. That is man's work. God alone must do the saving. Man must do the believing. God must get all the glory and all the credit. Unbelieving man must take the blame. "To God be the glory **great things He hath done!**" "Oh to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!"

The rulers and people who were gathered together against Christ ended up doing exactly what the Lord had preplanned. Donald Gray Barnhouse told the story of a wealthy landowner who had beautiful trees on his estate. But he had a bitter enemy who said, "I will cut down one of his trees; that will hurt him." In the dark of the night the enemy slipped over the fence and went to the most beautiful of the trees, and with saws and axes he began to work. In the first light of morning he saw in the distance two men coming over the hill on horseback, and recognized one of them as the owner of the estate. Hurriedly, he pushed the wedges out and let the tree fall; but one of the branches caught him and pinned him to the ground, injuring him so badly that he died. Before he died, he screeched out, "Well, I have cut down your beautiful tree," and the estate owner looked at him with pity and said, "This is the architect I have brought with me. We had planned to build a house, and it was necessary to cut down one tree to make room for the house; and it is the one you have been working at all night."⁹

For an additional discussion of the marvelous interplay between man's responsibility and God's sovereignty, see our comments under Acts 2:23.

Acts 4:29

It is instructive to think about what these disciples did not pray. They did not pray that the threats from their enemies would stop. They did not pray that the Jewish authorities would become more lenient and tolerant. They did not pray for relief from persecution. Indeed, they remembered that their Lord had told them to expect persecution: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you....If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you....But all these things will they do unto you for My Name's sake, because they know not Him that sent Me" (John 15:18-21). See also our Lord's warnings about being persecuted and brought before authorities in Matthew 10:16-20.

These brave disciples prayed "grant unto Thy servants [bond-slaves], that with all boldness they may speak Thy word" (Acts 4:29). Their simple request was that they would have courage to speak the Word of God without fear, regardless of the consequences. They did not want anything to hinder

⁹Cited by William MacDonald, *One Day at a Time*, p. 43 (under Feb. 5).

the proclamation of the message of a risen Savior who could meet the deepest needs of the human heart. They knew their responsibility was to preach the gospel no matter the cost, and they did so gladly and confidently. God gives each of us opportunities to share Christ with others. When we are tempted to keep silent due to the fear of man, may the example of these brave disciples encourage us to likewise speak with boldness.

A similar response to enemy threats is found in Isaiah chapter 37. The kingdom of Judah had received threats from the most powerful kingdom on earth, the Assyrians. Hezekiah took those blasphemous threats and presented them before the Lord. In essence he said, “Lord, we want to honor You. We are Your people. Jerusalem is Your city and this is Your temple. In light of these threats, we want You to be glorified.” God marvelously blessed Hezekiah and 185,000 Assyrian soldiers fell dead in one night!

Acts 4:30

They not only prayed for boldness but for power by way of sign miracles and wonders. The purpose of these healing miracles was to authenticate the message and put God’s stamp of approval on the messengers: “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will” (Heb. 2:4). We have already seen that the healing of the lame man drew a huge crowd of eager listeners and gave credentials to Peter and John.

Acts 4:31

God delighted in this prayer! God caused a mini earthquake to take place, indicating that He was moved and pleased to respond to the request of His servants (compare the earthquake in Acts 16:26 when Paul and Silas were in prison). Perhaps this should be a lesson for our prayer meetings of today (for those Churches that still have prayer meetings). Instead of praying for someone’s ingrown toenail or instead of praying for wisdom to decide what color of paint to use on the sanctuary walls, perhaps we could start praying for things that really matter, so that God might start moving in our midst.¹⁰

Compare this verse with Acts 2:4. The filling of the Spirit is an experience that needs to be repeated. It is not a once for all event which never needs to happen again. Every day brings new opportunities, and we need a fresh filling of the Spirit, allowing Him to control our lives and live out His life in us (Gal. 2:20). We need repeated fillings of the Spirit for these three reasons: 1) There are times when we grieve the Holy Spirit due to sin in our lives (Eph. 4:30); 2) They are times we quench the Spirit by refusing to follow His revealed will (1 Thess. 5:19); 3) There are times when we fail to walk in the Spirit, by failing to depend fully on the Lord moment by moment (Gal. 5:16). The believer needs to be daily reminded that “without Me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Boldness is a key theme of Acts chapter 4. Peter preached with great boldness, noticed even by his enemies (Acts 4:13). The climax of their prayer was that they might speak with boldness (Acts

¹⁰It is true that God is concerned about the most minute details of our lives, including ingrown toenails and every hair on our head (Matt. 10:29-31). But we don’t want to lose the big picture of what God is doing and how He wants to use us in accomplishing His purposes.

4:29). God shook the place where they were and answered that prayer in a remarkable way (Acts 4:31).

Acts 4:32

The early Church had a remarkable unity. Persecution often serves a useful purpose of bringing believers together in a wonderful oneness. They, being many, had one heart and one soul. They had one desire: to please Christ. They had one goal: to glorify God. They had one mission: to obey the Great Commission and preach the gospel to every creature. You could tell that they were true disciples by the love they had one for another (John 13:35). This love was demonstrated by their desire to help their persecuted fellow believers, and they were willing to sacrifice their own personal possessions to do so.

Sadly, Satan has succeeded in dividing Christians into countless numbers of groups and movements and denominations. Today men see the Church sore oppressed “by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.”¹¹ There is no way to recover the unity that the primitive Church once enjoyed. This kind of oneness will never be experienced again until one split second after the rapture when God’s Church will be totally unified in its glorified state, free from sin and free from carnal divisions. We will be like Him, transformed into His image, for we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

A true disciple of the Lord Jesus must not be attached to possessions: “So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). The term “forsake” means to renounce or say farewell to. The reason we claim no right to anything we possess is because we are not our own, and all of our possessions belong to the Lord. We are to be faithful stewards over all that God has given us, but we must recognize that none of it is our own. These early disciples shared their possessions with the needy. This was strictly voluntary and it was done out of love.¹²

Acts 4:33

God was doing a special work in their midst. They had great power and great grace, resulting in great boldness! They were filled with the Spirit and the gospel message was going forth in power. The Sadducees, in particular, were especially offended by the message that Christ rose again from the dead. In their view, a resurrection from the dead was impossible, much like those of today who hold to a humanistic, naturalistic world view. The doctrine of the resurrection is paramount. If Christ rose again from the dead, then this proves that He is everything He claimed to be (namely God!), and it establishes as true everything that He taught. Every true Christian believes and confesses this great truth (Rom.10:9-10).

Acts 4:34-35

The needs of the believers were met as lands and houses were sold. The money was brought to the apostles, whose job was to make sure it was properly distributed to those who were truly needy. We must recognize that what is described here was a very rare and temporary practice that was fraught

¹¹From the hymn, *The Church’s One Foundation*, by Samuel J. Stone.

¹²See our comments under Acts 2:44-45.

with all kinds of dangers. We do not read of this type of practice elsewhere in the book of Acts, nor in the Epistles. What is described in Acts 2 and Acts 4 should not be confused with the Catholic “vow of poverty.” And certainly wicked communism is not in view. Marx and Stalin certainly did not point their followers to the book of Acts as their model. Communism is a godless system responsible for the deaths of nearly 100 million people in the 20th century alone, including 65 million by China and 20 million by Russia.¹³ Communism preaches that everything should be shared in common but in practice the powerful elite take the money and the control, and everyone else ends up with very little. Not only do the people lose their money, but they lose their personal freedoms.

Acts 4:36-37

In these closing verses of the chapter we are given one actual example of a man who sold his land and contributed all the money to the apostles for distribution to the needy. His name was Joses (Joseph in some manuscripts), but the apostles give him the nickname Barnabas which means “the son of consolation” or “the son of encouragement.” His life and faithfulness must have been an encouragement to many. He is mentioned 24 times in the book of Acts, and he was Paul’s companion on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:2). He was a Levite from the large Mediterranean island of Cyprus (west of Syria and south of Turkey). Cyprus was the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. Thus he was not from the Holy Land, but was part of the diaspora, which refers to the dispersion of the Jews to lands beyond Israel. He probably visited Jerusalem during the three annual festivals.

What was this Levite doing in Cyprus and why was he a land owner? In Deuteronomy 10:9 God’s law did not allow the Levites to have an inheritance with their brethren. The Levites were meant by God to be ubiquitous, traveling, ministering and helping people as they would come to worship God at the temple. The Levites were not one of the twelve tribes in terms of territory. There were twelve territorial allotments, but this was because Joseph got a double portion, divided between his sons Ephraim and Manasseh.

Barnabas brought his money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. That is, he turned it over to them to handle appropriately in light of the desperate needs of many of the believers. Keep in mind that when Jewish people received Jesus Christ by faith and embraced Him as their Messiah, they would normally be ostracized, excommunicated from the synagogue, disowned by their families and left in a destitute condition. Such was the case of many Jewish converts in America’s past history.¹⁴

In the following chapter we will see how this practice of selling property for the needs of the saints was abused, and how God forcefully dealt with sin in His Jerusalem Church.

¹³For documentation of these staggering figures, see the article “The Black Book of Red Blood” by Jeremiah Reedy, *The Schwartz Report*, November 2003, p. 6.

¹⁴This is illustrated by the life of Civil War surgeon Dr. M. L. Rossvally, who trusted in Christ because of the testimony of a dying drummer boy and was disowned by his wife and children. See <http://middletownbiblechurch.org/helpseek/coulson.pdf>.