



PERSECUTION, PRAYER, AND POWER

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

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Acts 4:1-31

Seventh Message

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The Book of Acts records the birth, infancy, and adolescence of the church. This history details the acts of the risen, living Lord, working through his people to build his church.

In chapter 3 of the book, however, we find that the church begins to face opposition by forces of darkness seeking to dismantle it. In his commentary, John Stott says that Acts and Revelation tell the same story. Revelation gives a glimpse of these invisible forces at work. In Acts it is human beings that oppose the church, but in Revelation the curtain is lifted, revealing that the enemy is the devil himself.¹ For example, Revelation 12 presents a beautiful woman wearing a crown of twelve stars. The number 12 indicates that John, the writer, has the church in mind. In the apostle's numerology, 12 is always a symbol of the church, whether it is 12, 24, or 144.

This woman wearing 12 stars indicates that she represents the church, the church of the Old Testament. She is about to give birth to Jesus Christ. But a great red dragon with seven heads, ten horns and a swishing tail, the devil, stands over the woman, ready to devour the son at his birth. But the Christ-child is protected by heaven. His plot foiled, the dragon furiously turns on the woman's other offspring, the church.

In the highly imaginative symbolism of Revelation, then, we see the same phenomenon of the fierce antagonism of the devil towards the church. It is the historic battle that goes back to the Garden of Eden, between the Seed of the Woman and the seed of Satan.

This antagonism of the devil is the main theme of Acts 3-6. In chapter 4 we learn that this is a reaction to what took place in chapter 3, when Peter healed a man who had been born lame and had lived in that condition for forty years. Afterwards the apostle delivered a powerful sermon explaining the miracle. But, the devil cannot endure the exaltation of Jesus, so he stirs up the Jewish leaders to persecute the apostles.

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. (Acts 4:1-2, NIV)

The Sadducees were the rich aristocrats of first century Judaism. Politically, they cooperated with Rome. They regarded the apostles' teaching as subversive. Theologically, they were on the far left. They were liberal believers. They did not believe in the resurrection. They discredited much of Scripture. They viewed the apostles as troublemakers and heretics, and their message as heresy. They saw them as men who were just stirring up trouble.

Luke says they were "greatly disturbed" ("annoyed," RSV; "exasperated," NEB; "indignant," *The Message*). They launch an attack on the apostles.

They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand. (4:3-4)

Luke places these sentences back-to-back as a reminder that the messenger can be arrested, but not the message. The numbers grow from three thousand, in the last report, to five thousand. This number probably refers to heads of households; it does not include wives and children. Conservatively, the church now numbered about fifteen thousand.

The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. (4:5)

The "rulers" were the Sanhedrin, composed of the High Priest and seventy elders; the "teachers of the law" were the scribes, whose job it was to copy, preserve, and interpret the law. These were the most intellectual, powerful and influential people in Israel. They were the aristocracy, drawn mainly from the upper classes.

Luke isn't through with the who's who. Verse 6:

Annas the high priest was there [the former high priest had been deposed by the Romans, but he was still the power behind the throne], and so were Caiaphas [the current high priest and Annas' son-in-law; Annas and Caiaphas were well-known characters in our Lord's trial and condemnation] John [the son of Annas, who later became the high priest, succeeding Caiaphas], Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. (4:6)

The fact that Luke mentions these men without further explanation indicates they were well known in the Roman Empire. These were the movers and shakers.

The memory of Jesus' trial probably was forefront in the minds of the apostles. They must have wondered if they were about to suffer the same fate as their Lord. If he did not get justice, how could they expect a fair trial?

They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?" (4:7)

Eugene Petersen, in his paraphrase *The Message*, highlights the scorn in their question: "Who put you in charge here? What business do you have doing this?" In other words, "What authority do you have to stand in the temple area and teach the people? Who do you think you are? I find it harder to handle to scorn than actual physical attack. Ridicule is never easy to face. That is what the apostles are facing here.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is

'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.'

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (4:8-12)

How poised and confident Peter and John are in the face of this pressure. Peter's heart must have been pounding, his adrenaline flowing. I am also sure they remembered what Jesus had told them: "they will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."

The Holy Spirit steadies them and inspires their speech. Peter is filled with the presence of God. Though the pressure seems inordinate, more than a man could bear, the Holy Spirit is that counteracting pressure inside. Peter doesn't raise his voice or respond with sarcasm and ridicule, returning evil for evil.

Notice how the apostle turns this formal defense into an opportunity for proclamation. When he is done it is hard to know who is on trial, the apostles or the Sanhedrin. He begins by saying, "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed...You need to know that Jesus did it, not us." The apostle is standing before the very people who murdered the Lord. Jesus Christ of Nazareth is responsible for this healing, and if anyone is guilty of anything, they are, because they put to death the one who bestowed perfect health on this man.

Peter again makes that powerful statement, "You crucified him but God raised him." To help them understand that their rejection of Jesus and the Father's resurrection of him were the fulfillment of God's saving plan, Peter quotes Psalm 118: He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.'" Peter changes one word. The psalm says, "the stone which the builders rejected," but here it is "the stone which *you* builders rejected." Peter adds the word "you," applying the psalm specifically to them.

People in the apostles' day knew that Psalm 118 was a Messianic Psalm. It referred ultimately to the Messiah. Applying the psalm, Peter says that stone whom they identified as Messiah, who was rejected by them, the builders, has been replaced by the architect. Everyone in the room knew exactly what Peter was saying. They were the ones who were on trial now. Furthermore, the apostle says, they put to death the one that brought salvation to the world: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Peter uses a word-play with the word "save." He uses it both to describe the man's healing, in verse 9, and the universal need for salvation. He says, in essence, "This crippled man lay without hope until Jesus saved him, making him whole. Likewise, the nation of Israel is without hope. They are helpless until they turn to Jesus the Messiah, who will save them." There is no other Messiah coming, is the point. There is no one like Jesus: no one else; no other name. Jesus sets Christianity apart from other religions. His death and resurrection give him the authority as the one and only Savior.

The court is astonished by the boldness of Peter and John.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. (4:13-14)

Incredibly, they have nothing to say in response. Even the scornful, witty Caiaphas, who could so flippantly comment at our Lord's trial, "It is better...that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (John 11:50), has nothing to say.

In the embarrassing silence they do make some observations. They were taken back by the apostles' courage and forthrightness. Peter and John weren't brash or rude, but kind and direct, unshakable and unflappable. The leaders found this to be all the more amazing, because the apostles had no background in rabbinic theology. They had no theological training at all, and yet they understood the Hebrew Scriptures. Their arguments were irrefutable.

These two observations make the leaders realize a third: the apostles had been with Jesus. He too lacked a seminary education and professional status as a rabbi, yet he had that same profound insight into the Scriptures and the same ability to use the Word to confound his opponents. They probably remembered a debate or two they had with Jesus. They could never answer him. He had that same poise under pressure. On the night of his arrest and trial, when it seemed that everyone and everything was out of control (even Peter was running around swinging a sword), Jesus manifested poise and peace. He arranged his own trial and crucifixion.

It must have seemed like *déjà vu* to these men. They see the same confidence and poise, the same uncanny understanding of the Scriptures, from the apostles. They thought they had gotten rid of Jesus, but now it must have seemed to them that there were copies of him all around.

The final thing they see is the man himself. The indisputable evidence of the healed cripple, who had never walked in his life, was now standing before them. So the text says, there was nothing they could say. John Stott sums it up: "They could not deny it, but they would not acknowledge it."² In their embarrassment, they order the men out of the room for a closed session.

So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must

warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.” (4:15-17)

John Stott makes the important observation that the Jewish leaders make no attempt to discredit the apostles’ preaching of the resurrection, even though they know it was the central point of their message.³ If they wanted to silence this movement, and they did, and if the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus, as some people argued, then it would have been easy to stop this movement by producing the body. But they didn’t, which is proof positive that they didn’t possess it.

Some wonder how Luke got the verbatim account of this closed meeting. He probably got his information from the apostle Paul, who may have been at the meeting, or from Paul’s teacher Gamaliel.

Having no legal precedent to do anything, they revert to intimidation, warning the apostles not to speak any longer in the name of Jesus. Notice that they can’t bring themselves to even pronounce the name.

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old. (4:18-22)

Peter and John again respond with confidence and freedom, and yet with respectfulness. They appeal to these leaders: “You are religious men. Tell us, should we obey God or men? As to the authenticity of our message, we saw Jesus risen from the dead. He himself commissioned us to preach. As for us, we must obey God.”

They are guilty of civil disobedience. They will disobey the government. How do we reconcile their actions with Peter’s own words to the church, in 1 Peter 2, that we are to be in subjection to the government? Human government was established by God to maintain law and order and justice (Rom 13:1-7), and therefore has a rightful place in the world. Christians are not anarchists or rebels. Without government, society would descend into chaos. We need government. But government is not the ultimate authority. There is a higher authority: God himself. When any government asks us to do something contrary to an explicit command of Scripture, then we must obey God rather than man, and humbly and graciously face the consequences.

That is the basis for civil disobedience. We are never to rebel against the principle of authority, or attack government *per se* or their right to punish evildoers. If we disobey, we must do so respectfully, and we must be willing to face the consequences. The apostles were beaten and thrown into prison. Most of them lost their lives because they disobeyed. But they were never insolent. Both our manner and our message must be consistent. We find that beautiful integrity displayed here.

If anyone should have been delighted at this healing it was the religious establishment. This crippled man had no

hope, and Jesus healed him. They weren’t happy about that. They tried to suppress the movement. It will always be so. Don’t feel discouraged when the world does not understand you and tries to suppress the gospel. Don’t be surprised, Peter will later say in his epistle, that you suffer for the name of Christ. We tend to get bitter and upset when that happens, but the Scriptures teach that we should expect it. It’s the name of the game. Some people will never appreciate or understand your efforts to better society. You will be persecuted for the name of Christ.

The apostles’ reaction to this ban is given in verses 23-31.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

**“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the Lord
and against his Anointed One.’**

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (4:23-31)

Upon their release the apostles went straight back to the church to report what had happened. Afterwards they all turned to prayer. They raised their voices together, and said, “Sovereign Lord.” How wonderful! Those are the first words to come out of their mouths. The Jewish consul might utter threats and prohibitions, but God was the sovereign Lord.

We get the word “despot” from the word they use for “Sovereign Lord” here, *despotes*: “Lord, you have absolute power over the universe.” They were convinced that the actions of men were subject to the control of God. Notice that before they asked God for anything they remind themselves about his sovereignty. They were thinking, “You are the king of kings, the ruler of rulers. Caiaphas, Annas, the Roman officials, aren’t really in charge. You are the king, the creator of the universe. You made it. You sustain it. We have nothing to fear.”

Then the apostles quote from Psalm 2, describing a time when king David’s enemies were conspiring against him to dethrone him: “Nations...peoples...kings...rulers...raging...plotting...taking their stand...gathering together against the Lord’s anointed.”

But it is all in vain. Psalm 2 declares that God will break

the nations like a vase, with a rod of iron. Therefore, nations kiss the King! Submit to him, because God will have the last word.

Then Peter applies Psalm 2, a Messianic Psalm that foretold the world's opposition to his Christ, to their day. Verse 27: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and the people of Israel are the nations, and peoples and kings and rulers, conspiring against God's anointed one. But notice what Peter says in verse 28: "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

He is the Sovereign Lord: *Despotes*. The rulers wanted to frustrate the progress of the gospel, to put God to death, to drive him from the earth so that they could rule. But their opposition only brought about salvation. Surely then, any suffering that these believers, or we, endure, isn't outside God's control. It will only serve to advance his kingdom. This principle is evident throughout Scripture.

Last year on our annual high school ministry to Mexicali we had what we thought was a setback. Some religious leaders became upset over the preaching of one high school group in a park. They protested to the mayor of Mexicali that the law held that only licensed ministers could preach in Mexico. The local officials demanded that all the leaders of the entire ministry to Mexicali come to the government office within twenty minutes. If not, they would ask that all seven thousand high schoolers be sent home immediately. We had the meeting they demanded, and we agreed that from then on only licensed ministers would be permitted to preach; and we would work through the local churches. Secondly, we agreed to perform much more community service than we had been doing up until then.

Now I have been going down to Mexicali for more than twenty years on this ministry project, and at various times have written my reflections. When we returned last year, I was reminded of two reflections I had about the weaknesses of the Mexicali ministry. First, we were too independent; we were not working through the local churches. And second, we didn't leave anything behind to help improve conditions for the local community. But last year, God dealt with these two weaknesses through what at the

time seemed to be an effort to bring the entire ministry to a halt. The result was that this year's ministry was far more effective, as every church group had to work through the local churches, to care for them and encourage the local believers in the work of evangelism. And this year our high schoolers performed scores of community service projects. They painted dozens of schools, and did a multitude of other projects in Mexicali. This confirmed for me the fact that God uses all of these apparent setbacks to advance his kingdom.

Now notice in our text that the apostles' assurance of God's sovereignty affects their petitions. We would have rushed into making requests far sooner. Verse 29: "Now, Lord, consider their threats." And what? Frustrate them? Confuse their politics? Let them feel your divine wrath. No! Keep us safe from physical harm and let us sleep well! No! "Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." In other words, confirm this apostolic word with signs and wonders.

In answer to their prayer the whole place was shaken. Notice, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. It was not just Peter and John now. The whole church was filled. And they "began to speak the word of God with boldness." They shook the world with the gospel because this opposition became just another opportunity for God to work.

That is the way we must look at life. Don't be discouraged by the pressure, because there is an equal and counteracting pressure within. The risen Lord who indwells us is adequate for anything. That is why Paul can say, in 2 Corinthians 2, "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession" (2 Cor 2:14). Always! We may not see it, but by faith we believe it.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 89.
2. Stott, *Acts*, 98.
3. Stott, *Acts*, 98.