



ATTACKS UPON LIFE: INTIMIDATION

SERIES: ACTS: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 4:1-31

9th Message

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We are entering a new phase in our series “Life Unleashed” from the book of Acts. In the first two chapters of Acts the church experienced phenomenal growth and unity of spirit, but now the apostles come under severe attack designed to silence their witness. After Peter and John healed a lame beggar at the gate of the temple (3:1-10), Peter explained to the astonished crowd that the healed beggar was evidence that Jesus had been raised from dead and was offering forgiveness and new life to all who would call on him. The age of “the restoration of all things” when God would set the world right had indeed begun. This was such great news to the people that 5000 came to faith on the spot. But it was not good news to those who were in power and had rejected and condemned that Messiah. So they arrested the apostles and took them into custody.

I. First Confrontation and Response (Acts 4:1-14)

A. Confrontation with temple police

And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. (Acts 4:1-4 ESV)

The captain of the temple guard was the commanding officer of the temple police, who belonged to one of the high priestly families and ranked second in command only to the high priest. It was his responsibility to maintain order, thus any unruly crowd would draw his attention. The Sadducees were the party to which many of the rich and powerful high priestly families belonged. Richard Longnecker explains,

The Sadducees were descendants of the Hasmonians, who looked back to Mattathias, Judas, Jonathan and Simon (168-134 B.C.) as having inaugurated the Messianic Age and saw themselves as perpetuating what their fathers had begun. As priests from the tribe of Levi, they claimed to represent ancient orthodoxy and were uninterested in innovations. Thus they opposed any developments in biblical law (i.e., the “Oral Law”), speculations about angels or demons, and the doctrine of the resurrection. Likewise, they rejected what they considered to be vain hopes for God’s heavenly intervention in the life of the nation and for a coming Messiah, since, as they believed, the age of God’s promise had begun with the Maccabean heroes and was continuing on under their supervision.¹

Politically, the Sadducees controlled the Sanhedrin and would do anything in their power to preserve national security. And now we find Peter and John, just like their master had done, creating a huge groundswell of public support and subverting established authority by the life-giving miracles that the Spirit was accomplishing through them.

God has been faithful to restore his people, but the question now becomes, who will take over the leadership of God’s people, the Sanhedrin or the apostles? If Jesus’ promise that the apostles will “rule

over the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:30) is true, how will it come about, since they are outsiders who have no money, political clout, social status or academic degrees? The issue is critical, as most of us live and work in environments dominated by powerful and manipulative people. As followers of Jesus, we are not permitted to tear down our opponents (as candidates do in political campaigns), or manipulate people, or buy our way into positions of influence. How does the life in the Spirit triumph over the forces of evil, especially when they often hold all the cards in the deck?

B. Challenge by the council

On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what [sort of] power or by what [sort of] name did you do this?” (vv. 5-7)

The day following their arrest, Peter and John are taken to Israel’s supreme court and placed in the midst of the three groups that formed the Sanhedrin. Among them are Annas, the senior ex-high priest who had privately examined Jesus, and his son-in-law Caiaphas, the current high priest who was responsible for Jesus’ execution. These are men from whom the apostles can expect little justice. In accusatory words similar to those they spoke to Jesus, Peter and John are called to account for their actions, “By what [sort of] power or by what [sort of] name did you do this?”

C. The Spirit’s response to intimidation

1. Answer to the source of life

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well [lit. “saved”]. (vv. 8-10)

How different is Peter’s response from his earlier failings during Jesus’ arrest and trial. The most common responses to fear are to fight or flee. When Peter felt his Lord was threatened in the garden, he resorted to violence and cut off the high priest’s slave’s ear. Later a slave girl confronted him and he denied that he was a disciple and fled for safety as the Romans took Jesus away to be crucified. But now Peter is calm and forthright. How are we to explain the dramatic change? Luke tells us that Peter was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Just as Jesus had earlier instructed, Peter was speaking out of the wisdom of Jesus’ Spirit that was residing in him.

“Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.” (Luke 21:14-15)

The fact that Jesus says they need not “meditate” (“prepare with careful thought and attention,” “practice beforehand”) on how to answer doesn’t imply that “being filled with Spirit” makes us mindless robots, where we simply flip a switch and we are instantly on autopilot. After his resurrection Jesus opened the minds of the apostles and gave them a new lens to understand the Scriptures. With new eyes, illuminated by the Spirit through prayer, they began to see the consistent pattern of God’s saving acts for his people and now how Jesus’s story, which was the climax of Israel’s story, was following the exact same pattern.

Luke Timothy Johnson sets forth the pattern. “Moses was sent a first time to the people, and was rejected; he went away, was empowered by God, and returned to the people working signs and wonders; he was rejected a second time (Acts 7:17-44).”² Moses wrote that after him the Lord God would raise up another prophet like him, and whoever did not listen to that prophet would be destroyed (Deut 18:15-19). Jesus was that prophet, and like Moses he was rejected. But God raised him up and empowered the apostles by his Spirit to work signs and wonders for a second offer of life. If they won’t listen, they will be cut off from the people of God. The same pattern occurs with Joseph and David. Thus, with a new lens to read the Scriptures in a fresh coherent way, they were able to see their vocation in a brand new light. No longer did they view themselves as powerless victims in a world gone mad, but rather as actors playing leading roles in God’s great drama of redemption history. And now, being summoned by the court to speak, they speak out boldly and courageously, trusting the Spirit of Jesus residing within them to speak through them.

2. *The Spirit takes the offensive*

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (vv. 11-12)

When we are in the right, we never need be on the defensive. Peter takes the offensive and turns the tables on the court and explains that Israel’s leaders, not the apostles, are on trial because they condemned Jesus. He has been raised and is now Lord—which incidentally means he has no rivals! He demonstrates this through the healing of the cripple to which you all are witnesses.

D. **Confounded in silence**

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. (vv. 13-14)

It was obvious that Peter and John were salt of the earth fisherman who had no formal training in rabbinical schools. Yet they spoke with freedom and conviction and made such a piercing application of Psalm 118, it left the court speechless. As the gravity of Peter’s words weighs upon them, and the undeniable reality of a cripple standing in full health is standing before them, it finally dawns on them—in the words of the renowned philosophical genius Yogi Berra, “It’s *deja-vu* all over again.” They recognize that the apostles “had been with Jesus.”

II. **Second Confrontation and Response (Acts 4:15-22)**

A. **Denial and damage control**

But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let

us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. (vv. 15-18)

Embarrassed, with no room to maneuver, they command Peter and John to leave the court so they can do some damage control. Behind closed doors they admit that a remarkable healing has taken place and that the whole city knows about it. They cannot deny it, but to remain in power they will have to curtail it. All they can think to do is to solemnly warn the apostles “to speak no more to anyone in this name.” Obviously it’s too little too late, as Tom Wright suggests, “They must have known, in issuing this order, that they were trying to shut a door when a howling gale was already blowing through it.”³

B. **The apostles’ response: a bold and measured refusal**

But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (vv. 19-20)

Peter and John’s response is a bold, but polite and measured refusal. They treat their enemies with the dignity as human beings and in full respect of their office. They challenge the council to examine the boundaries of their authority by declaring that they are witnesses, and a witness has a legal obligation to faithfully declare what they have seen and heard. One day they will give an account to God, therefore they must never give up our witness. In his letter, Peter offers the Spirit’s wisdom to the next generation of witnesses.

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.” (1 Pet 3:13-16)

Peter exhorts us to be always prepared to share the gospel to those who ask, even when attacked. But *how* we share is just as important as *what* we share. The message of the gospel is offensive, but we should never be offensive or tear down others. If you use social media to attack those whose politics or morals you believe threaten your values, you are dehumanizing people and bringing shame to our Lord and the gospel. Such behavior exposes our cowardice to engage people in constructive dialogue and our inability to break down walls of prejudice through compassion and understanding. It takes great skill, love and wisdom to be able to connect with those who oppose us. Perhaps the best place to begin is to invite them to your home for dinner.

C. **The official response: threats, resignation and release**

And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old. (vv. 21-22)

Despite the apostles’ defiance, the passionate praise of the crowd paralyzes the council from taking action. With resurrection life staring them in the face, all they can do was repeat their threats and reluctantly release them. What made the event even more remarkable was the age of the man who we now learn was more than forty years old, well past the age when such cures are even possible.

III. Spirit Filled Worship: On earth as it is in heaven (Acts 4:23-30)

A. Praise as Psalm 2 is unleashed

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’ —

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. .” (vv. 24-28)

What follows is a wondrous example of Spirit-filled worship that is a response to God’s faithfulness. After Peter and John were released they went straight to their “own people” and gave a report of everything the Council said to them. Upon hearing the report of God’s faithfulness they broke out into thanksgiving and praise to their Creator and Redeemer. The impetus to their praise is the fact that Psalm 2, a coronation psalm for Israel’s kings, has written history and has now become their script in the drama of redemption. The Creator, who brought forth the creation with no opposition to his creative word, is the Lord of history who anointed the Messiah to rule on his throne. The Sanhedrin might utter threats, but the Sovereign Lord scoffs at them (Ps 2:4-6). Because Israel’s leaders refuse to listen to “the prophet God has raised up,” they “are being cut out of the people God is restoring...” (Ps 2:10-12) while “the Twelve have in reality become the effective leaders of ‘the people of God.’”⁴

It’s a humbling experience when you have eyes to see God re-enacting ancient stories before you and inviting you to play a role in his drama of redemption. On my second visit to Romania in 1989 we were studying the David–Jonathan story on a secluded hillside in the forest. Several agents from Romania’s secret police were searching for us in the forest in order to arrest our hosts for housing us and conducting a Bible conference. In the midst of their intrusions into our camp, four brothers (coincidentally, all named Jonathan) put their lives on the line to protect us from the police. I had never experienced this kind of sacrificial love before. At one point I took my position on a secure height to watch for any agents who might be coming up the road, while the Romanians took cover inside a large tent to worship and study God’s word. Sitting in silence I began meditating on Psalm 27. David’s metaphors broke my soul wide open.

When evildoers assail me
to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes,
it is they who stumble and fall. (Ps 27:2)

On four different occasions the Securitate came to devour our souls, but each time they stumbled and fell. Reading further in the psalm,

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will lift me high upon a rock.
And now my head shall be lifted up

above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD. (Ps 27:5-6)

As I was reading these verses, I could hear the voices of the Romanians singing their songs of praise concealed “under the cover of his tent.” The David story and song that had shaped Jesus’ story was now shaping our lives in this new setting on a hillside in Costești, România. I was overcome with humility and joy to have a small part on the stage God’s wondrous drama of redemption.

B. Fervent petitions for life

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (vv. 29-30)

As their vision of God is clarified and his glory magnified, they are humbled and made ready to pray. First they acknowledge that it is the Lord’s battle, therefore the Council’s threats are his concern, not theirs. Second, instead of asking God to judge their enemies, they ask him that they would have a fresh supply of the Spirit to remain faithful to continue speak the word with all boldness. And third, they ask God to continue to authenticate his word with mighty deeds of his Spirit bringing healing and life to all. As it is in football, so it is true in the kingdom, the best defense is a good offense. As followers of Jesus our primary concern is to be “life-givers.” With the advantage of hindsight we can see the fruit of their petition in the conversion of Saul.

C. Heaven’s approval

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (v. 31)

1. *The sign of approval: an earthquake*

From his throne in heaven, God responds to their worship with a resounding sign of approval in the form of an earthquake. The shaking of the earth was a sign that God was going to topple the earthly powers of Jerusalem and Rome to establish the eternal kingdom of his Son upon the earth (Heb 12:26-29). The apostle John further develops the imagery of the power unleashed in heaven and ultimately upon the earth through our prayers. In the eighth chapter of Revelation he writes,

...the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (Rev 8:4-5)

After we escaped the Securitate’s attempts to arrest us in 1989, our team debriefed on a lake in Austria. On the last night, as we were fervently praying for our friends back in Romania, a lightning storm broke out over the mountains. As we watched God’s thunderous display in the heavens, a peace came over us that all would be well. Coincidence? Perhaps, but the divine symphony played again on our last night on the same lake in 1990, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2002. The poet George Herbert called it “reversed thunder.”

God’s breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth;
Engine against th’Almighty, sinners’ tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;⁵

2. *The reality: a greater filling of the Spirit to speak the word with boldness*

The results of Satan's first assault on the church were an intensified praise for God's sovereignty, a renewed dependency in prayer and a greater power in their preaching. When the devil persecutes the church, instead of extinguishing the flame of its witness, he fans the fire of its zeal. The saints come away with a heightened awareness of the majesty of God, a deepened intimacy with God and a greater boldness in the world. I conclude with my meditation on Psalm 2, a song that wrote history.

On Earth as it is in Heaven

Act 1: Voices in the News

I find it difficult to grasp the polar extremities
that converge in this poem,
designed by the poet to one end –
to grant us unflinching confidence
to follow the "Son"
despite what we hear in the news
and everything read in our newspapers.

Take a good, long look at politics under the sun
and a clear eye can only conclude
that God's righteous rule is a lightning rod for riotous rage,
a rage so fierce, it unites implacable enemies
with a fortified resolve to fight to the death.

These vicious voices terrify me.
The poet, however, has a different spirit –
his opening "why" unleashes
his "exasperation, amazement and indignation"⁶
over the absurd stupidity of the whole affair,
something akin to the tower of Babel.

Act 2: The Voice on the Throne

In the second act of this four act drama we learn the secret to the poet's unwavering faith.

Unveil my eyes, O God, that like the poet
I may perceive your immovable throne, unrivaled sovereignty,
and perhaps even catch a glimpse of the King,
relaxed at the breakfast table, sipping his espresso,
undisturbed by the morning's news.

May I feel his commanding voice
reverberating deep in my gut as he reconfirms
his covenant choice of person and place,
irrevocable choices,
immovable as his heavenly throne.

And yet I ponder, "How
does your kingdom come on earth
as it is in heaven?"

Act 3: The Voice of the Son

As the waters of baptism recede
a voice his heard, "*beni attab*" – ("You are my son")
birth, adoption, privilege,
and the simple invitation to *sha'al* ("ask")
and with it the promise
that the rebellion *sha'al* be crushed.

I am amazed that just one divine decree

becomes the driving force and end of human history.
Is this the "one thing" Mary had chosen?

Act 4: The Voice of the Evangel

Peter standing before the Sanhedrin,
Paul testifying before Agrippa,
Luther refusing to bend the knee before the pope,
Bonhoeffer resisting Hitler,
Dor's eternal songs recreated in prison,
and our beloved Bill Harman's persistent plea,
"Kiss the Son."

The record shows that whenever the simple,
yet profound message of the gospel
is courageously proclaimed,
the hope is realized
"on earth as it is in heaven."

Such hope ignited my confidence when I was young
and took my stand before my rioting peers
and intimidating professors, both home and abroad,
what JOY I found in your presence in those days.

But now my feet stumble as I consider the cost –
blood flowing everywhere
Palestine, Egypt, Aleppo, Nepal,
drug cartels swallow up Mexico
and at home, children are slain in our schoolyards –
which gives *sha'al* a whole new meaning.

Grant me courage, O God, for on most occasions
I fear that I have been ashamed.

1. Richard N. Longnecker, *Acts* (EBC 10; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), n.p.
2. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 80.
3. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One, Chapters 1-12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 68.
4. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 80.
5. John Tobin, ed., *George Herbert, The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 45.
6. Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston with Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship, A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 163.
7. *sha'al* ("to ask") is a key word in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, especially in the story of Hannah who "asks" for God to give her a son and then names him Samuel. It is also the root of the name Saul, Israel's first king who was "asked for" by the people, but ironically refuses a life of dependent prayer. *Sha'al* becomes the pivotal means granted to the Davidic kings to bring heaven to earth (Ps 2:8).