

## The Church Alive – What Do You Expect? (Part 1 - Acts 4:5-22) Acts 4:5-12

**5 On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; 6 and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. 7 When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead — by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 11 He is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED** by you, **THE BUILDERS**, but **WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER** stone. 12 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.”**

How many of you have heard of “Operation Deep Freeze 4”? Is it some special military operation on the continent of Antarctica? Is it some method of preserving poultry as practiced by Tyson Foods? Is it your annual defrosting of the freezer in the garage? No, and while I must confess that I had never heard of it and that information surrounding it is rather sketchy, Operation Deep Freeze 4 were excursions to both the North and South Pole. As reported by John MacArthur in his commentary on Acts, in February 1959, a group of men, on an expedition built a chapel at the North Pole. The chapel contained an altar that included a picture of Jesus, a crucifix, a star of David, and a lotus leaf (representing Buddha). I am not sure why there was no crescent and star representing Islam, perhaps Islam was too far removed from these men’s radar in 1959. But engraved on the wall near the altar was the inscription, “*Now it can be said that the earth turns on the point of faith.*” Interestingly enough, that chapel built over 50 years ago, portrays the predominant attitude concerning religion today.

The attitude is that pretty much anything goes when it comes to religion. It is called pluralism, the idea that there are many gods and many ways to “heaven” – whatever heaven is actually. But in this age of pluralism and religious tolerance, there is one “god”; one “way” and one “religious” system of belief that the world does not want to hear about and is becoming increasingly intolerant. The world does not want to hear, must less consider Jesus, at least not the Jesus of the Bible.

Do not mistake me here; for the world has no problems with a watered-down version of Jesus, a sentimental do-gooder, a moral teacher, a mere ethical philosopher of his day; but to speak of Jesus as something more; as the Son of God, truly God Himself come to us wrapped in a body of flesh and blood; who comes as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of world; as the One who Himself clearly taught that He Himself was the only way, the only truth, the only life and ultimately then the only way to God; such words cause great offence and are regarded as narrow, bigoted and intolerant.

Yet this is exactly what Jesus said in John 14:6, “***I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but through Me.***” And when we share such a teaching, the sensibilities of our world’s thinking are lost. How could anyone make such an exclusive claim?

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*"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).*

Who could be so arrogant as to think they have a corner on the market of truth? The world hates such assertions and claims. The world says we must accept every possible assertion except this one; that Jesus is both Lord and Christ; God's beloved Son to whom alone we must listen. The world longs to proclaim that you can believe anything you want as long as you do not say it alone is exclusive truth. In such a climate, it can be hard to be a faithful, vocal Christian. We have come to expect that to speak of the Biblical Jesus in certain and in increasingly more circles is to invite controversy, argument and trouble.

For most of us in here this morning however, we do assert that Jesus is the Savior, and the *only* Savior who can reconcile sinners to God. Most of us realize, even if we are not good at practicing it, that God's will for us is to call all people to repent and believe in Him. But why is this practice difficult? It is difficult when the world tells us, directs us, and seeks to force us to be quiet. With the Christmas season soon to be upon us, I am already hearing both sides, the Christians and the Atheist preparing for the battle of keeping (or striking) Christ in Christmas?

But let us not think this is anything new to our day and age. The early church faced the same dilemma just weeks after Jesus returned to heaven. Therefore we need to give special attention to Acts 4; for if it is our intention to be effective in speaking up for Jesus, then we must know what to expect, not just from our culture, or any particular culture, but rather what to expect from fallen sinners who will resist and ridicule what we have to say about Jesus. For when we know what to expect, then we can better respond and better point people to Jesus. To that end, from our text, just considering this morning Acts 4:5-8a, let us note the first two of four expectations we are to have as we speak of Christ to others and then consider our responses in light of those expectations.

## **I. We must expect opposition (5-7)**

Let me quickly recap the first three chapters of Acts. Beginning in Acts 1, we have Jesus charge to His disciples to be His witnesses before the world and then His ascension back into heaven. Then, in Acts 2, we have the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the believers in Jerusalem along with much proclamation of salvation in Jesus. This resulted in a great response to Christ where some 3,000 people were saved and baptized. Then we come to Acts 3, where Peter and John, while on their way to the Temple to pray one afternoon, meet this lame man and see him healed both physically and spiritually. Because of this, a crowd formed wanting to see the men who had supposedly healed the man. But Peter told the men about Jesus and as a result of this sermon, the church grew to include some 5,000 men. What could be better than such rapid church growth? What could please people more than seeing individuals turn from their sins and embrace the person and the practice of Jesus Christ?

Well, not everyone who witnessed these things was impressed. The Jewish leaders, some political, some religious, had Peter and John arrested and put into jail. Their intention was to charge and try them in court, seeking to squelch and squash this public proclamation of Jesus. And so, in case you missed it, here we have the beginning of the opposition for the church. And, in case you missed this as well, it has not stopped since. But our text points out two ways in which this opposition was revealed for Peter and John, two ways that again, continues for all believers who would take a vocal stand for Jesus

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

## A. Peter and John faced intimidation (5-6)

*5 On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; 6 and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent.*

The first form of opposition was that of intimidation. To intimidate means to make timid or fearful. It is usually using some means to overawe or overwhelm a person into fear. The big bully uses his fist to intimidate. Luke carefully identifies the opposition in our text and it is no small force. In verses 1-6 he mentions eleven [11] individuals or groups of individuals who were opposed to the fledgling church. Let us note these. In verse 1 he mentions the priests, the captain of *the* temple guard [as a side note, the captain of the temple guard was the second most powerful person in Jerusalem next to the Romans and the high priest). Luke also mentions the Sadducees. Then, in verse 5, we find the rulers, elders, and scribes or teachers of the law. These three groups made up the ruling counsel of the Jewish people called the Sanhedrin, which was the most powerful decision-making group among the Jews. The Sanhedrin was both the senate and the supreme court of the Jewish nation. It was made up of seventy-one members. The high priest presided over the meetings. In verse 6, Luke names some of the opponents by name including Annas, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander. But that is not all, for Luke includes that "all who were of high-priestly descent" were present as well. You want to talk about being intimidated! How would you like to defend yourself with all the members of our United States Supreme court along with all who had ever served in such a position.

For Peter and John, this was a kangaroo court – a lop-sided display of power meant to overwhelm Peter and John into submission. We have the entire family of the High priest. Annas had served years before and now his son-in-law, Caiaphas, served in his place. History tells us that five of the sons of Annas held the office of high priest at one time or another! This was a power hungry and corrupt court. But it is even worse than that. The names of Annas and Caiaphas might ring a bell. You have heard these names before, as they are the ones who conspired against and brought Jesus to trial. And what did they do to Jesus? They had Him crucified. Now, if you are Peter and John standing before these two men, of what might you be fearful? If they took Jesus out, they might certainly take "us" out as well. This is a horrific situation, but it continues to degrade.

Back in verse 1 we learned that it was the Sadducees that played the initial role in having Peter and John arrested. They also held the majority position in the Sanhedrin with the Pharisees making up the minority position – kind of like our US Senate with the Democrats in the majority and the Republicans in the minority. I am not trying to draw a parallel between the Democrats and the Sadducees but there is not a lot of good to say about them. The Sadducees were the religious "liberals" of the day. They denied the supernatural, angels and anything miraculous as recorded in the Old Testament. They were materialistic, rationalists and greedy for power. One of the saddest positions of the Sadducees was their denial of anyone, much less Jesus rising from the dead. They denied resurrection (Mark 12:18).

When they read of the Messiah in the Old Testament, they considered "him" simply as an ideal to be obtained and that the messianic age was simply a process to go through, not a true time of Messiah's reign on earth. The Sadducees rose to power between the time of Malachi, the last Old Testament book and the arrival of John the Baptist. During this time they created priestly nobility. They were the educationally and financially elite. But as one commentator put it, "they

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were also the unprincipled collaborationists, political sycophants who would sell their mothers to stay in power...They were evil control freaks, and they did not want anyone rocking their boat.” (R. Kent Hughes).

This is what Peter and John were up against; pure, undefiled intimidation. The so-called trial here was to be nothing but a mockery of justice. This court used its power in any way it could to intimidate the followers of Jesus. This is nothing new. Some of you are familiar with the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who was arrested and eventually executed by the Nazis. From his Flossenberg cell in 1937 he wrote these words: *“Suffering...is the badge of the true Christian. The disciple is not above his master... [Martin] Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the church as the community of those ‘who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel’s sake.’ ... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.”* Followers of Jesus Christ, if they are speaking of Him, are to expect opposition and this is what we find is true for Peter and John as they are being intimidated in order to silence them or to cause them to recant. But opposition does not simply come in the form of intimidation, but can also include antagonism.

## **B. Peter and John faced antagonism (7)**

*7 When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?”*

There is something easily missed in our English translation of verse 7 and that is the scornful emphasis that is placed upon the pronoun **“you”** at the end of the text. Let me read this how it is to be understood: “By what power, or in what name have YOU (people like you) done this?”

All these powerful men standing around Peter and John and the long awaited charge is about to be uttered. But wait, there is no crime charged. What charge could the Sanhedrin issue against Peter and John? What is their heinous crime? *“Ahem, Peter and John, you are guilty of healing the lame man!”* Interestingly enough, they do not even try to deny the miracle – this ruling council whose majority party does not even believe in miracles. So what did they do? They asked a question. And notice it is a question about what? It is a question of power! **“By what power, or in what name have you done this?”**

What was at stake for the Sanhedrin was a control of power. This is a true power struggle. And so, just the Jewish leaders had responded with antagonism towards Jesus, with scorn and malice, they are now doing the same towards His followers. Why, because Jesus threatened their power. And now these followers of Jesus again threatened their power. The ruling leaders of the Jew rejected Jesus, their Messiah because He was messing up their plans and marginalizing their power and showing them that they were not really in control. Is this not the very reason why people continue to reject Jesus today? Jesus messes up their plans and demands that He be submitted to as Lord. And so this ruling council wants to demean Peter and John, asking a question that they hope will cause them to shrink and crumble. Remember, there is not crime charged here, just intimidation and antagonism designed to shut them up. What would Peter and John do? Would they take a stand?

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It can be hard to take a stand period, much less under condition like the one we read of here in our text. I read an account about Nikita Khrushchev, who served as premier of the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1964. During this time, Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience. “You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?” And in fast, fierce and firm tone, Khrushchev roared back, “Who said that?” An agonizing silence followed as not one person in the room dared to utter a sound. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, “Now you know why.”

There is great power in intimidation and antagonism. It is the power to cause a person to fear. I read of a test that was conducted by a university where ten students were placed in a room. On a board were drawn three lines of varying length. The students were instructed to raise their hands when the instructor pointed to the longest line. Now previously to this class, nine of the students had been instructed to raise their hands when the instructor pointed to the second longest line. So then, only one student did not know what was happening. So, when the instructor pointed to the longest line, the usual reaction took place, the one student to put his hand up. But as he did, he looked around, and realizing he was all alone, some 75% of the time, that student would pull his hand back down. This reminds us that it is hard to stand alone.

Beloved, it can be hard to stand alone, particularly as you stand for Jesus. It can be hard to be the only one bowing your head to pray before you eat when you are with your friends at school or with your co-workers at work. It can be hard to be the only family member who arrives late or has to leave early from the reunion because your church is a priority. It can be hard to be the only one in the office who does not laugh at the joke filled with “colorful adjectives” or with sexual connotations. Proverbs 29:25 tells us, **“The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in Yahweh will be exalted.”**

Peter and John were standing in a room where just three months before, the Lord Jesus had stood; and before the very same officers. And just three months before, how did Peter respond when asked about his relationship to Jesus? He said, *“I don't know the man!”* Peter then caved under the pressure, folded because of the opposition. But not this time. Peter neither runs nor denies. He had come to expect the opposition and now, in order to be effective in communicating Christ, he expects that this was his opportunity. This was his time to proclaim Christ.

## II. We must expect opportunities (8a)

We read at the beginning of verse 8, **“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...”** Beloved, we must not only expect opposition, but then we must know that with opposition, we can expect opportunities - God-given; God-granted, divinely appointed opportunities of which we must take advantage. Notice the connection between the Spirit's filling and boldness in speech. Truly the fruit of the Spirit – the evidence of the Spirit at work in you is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22) – but equally, a manifestation of the Spirit is boldness in speaking about Christ. We fail when we seek to speak up for Jesus in our own strength and honestly, that is what we do far too often. Let us not forget that we are weak, but He is not!

Do you remember what Jesus once taught His disciples about being His witnesses in Luke 21? Beginning in verse 12-13 we read:

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

**12 But before all these things [the end times], they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. 13 It will lead to an opportunity [we must expect opportunities] for your testimony.**

That's all great, but what in the world would I say in such a situation? Jesus goes on to tell them what He will do for them in their hour of need in verses 14-15 where we read,

**14 So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute.**

This is what we find Peter doing right here in Acts 4. Listen again to his response in verses 8-12:

**"Rulers and elders of the people, 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead — by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 11 He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. 12 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."**

What did Peter do here by saying what he said? He took his current situation and turned it into an opportunity to speak about Jesus. A Gallup poll conducted some time back indicated that out of all evangelical, American believers, "only two percent had introduced another person to Christ." I have no reason to believe that stat has changed, for the truth of the matter is this, that most Christians have never led another person to faith in Christ. And why is this? Because they rarely even speak about Jesus to those who need to hear about Him most.

I love how all these principles stayed with Peter all his life, for listen to what he wrote some 30 years after the events of Acts 4 in 1 Peter 3:13-15a:

**13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, 15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...**

We are always looking for easy and receptive opportunities to share Christ. Maybe we should see a difficult situation as an even more prime time to share Christ. Here we find Peter practicing what he preached. When the opportunity to speak of Christ presented itself, he was ready. *He turned opposition to Christ into an opportunity to speak of Christ.* This is what we must

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learn to do: to see opposition, trials, and difficulties not as obstacles but rather as tools by which what we say about Jesus becomes more meaningful to those to whom we are speaking. And how do we learn to do this? Very simply, it must become an increasingly settled goal of our lives to speak of Christ. Every day, whether the day is filled with opposition or cooperation; antagonism or reception; sickness or health, is it your goal to speak to someone about Christ? Was this Peter’s goal, to speak of Christ regardless of opposition? Absolutely. Notice that Peter did not seek to defend himself, nor did he even draw attention to himself. His goal, our goal, is to be proclaiming Christ.

Peter knows that he may be crucified like His Savior by speaking the truth, but rather than being intimidated by the opposition he uses this as an opportunity. He looked into the eyes of these men and told them of Christ. I love what James Boice suggests may be Peter’s thinking here: “In all my life I have never had a chance like this; I may never have a chance like this again. Look at this audience: the priests, the captain of the temple guard, the Sadducees, rulers, elders, teachers of the law, Annas, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and all the other members of the high priest’s family. I will never do better than this again. Why, if we had put on a great advertising campaign, we could never have gotten all these important people to come. But here they are. So I must preach Jesus.”

Peter preached Jesus in spite of the opposition, in spite of the intimidation, in spite of the antagonism. Will we preach Jesus regardless of our circumstances, but most especially when doing so appears to put us in a difficult situation. I love a line in the song, “Blessings” by Laura Story. She closes the song with the words, “*And what if trials of this life; the rain, the storms, the hardest nights; are Your mercies in disguise.*” Opposition to Jesus is often a mercy of God in disguise as it affords you the opportunity to speak clearly about Jesus. I know that some of us struggle with what to say about Jesus. Well, our text instructs us in this, but if you want to know what is to be included in your conversations about Jesus, well you will have to come back next week. For now let me simply ask you this, as you reflect upon your life and conversations of the past week or month or so; where could you have depended upon the Spirit of God to aid you in a more bold proclamation of Jesus? Will you commit to looking at the next time some one opposes your faith as an opportunity to speak of Christ? I pray we all will to the glory of God.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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