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Persecution Begins

Acts 4:1-22

Intro: In **ch3**, the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple by Peter and John led to yet another opportunity for Peter to preach the Gospel to all who assembled as a result of the healing. Peter knew his audience and he began his presentation by grappling with the guilt of their sin. It didn't matter that they were all at the temple to participate in religious ceremonies and rituals; the activities of the temple were steeped in centuries old tradition but none of them could address the problem of sin. Peter confronted them about their sin and then offered them a great encouragement. He told them that yes, they had sinned but they had done it in ignorance and could receive complete and total forgiveness from God if they would only repent and flee to Jesus Christ as their refuge.

Peter gave a clear and effective presentation of the Gospel; one that was tailor-made for his audience; one that had some amazing evangelistic results. But the truth is; Peter's preaching produced 2 very different responses.

1-4 –This is the record of the first persecution to come against the church. We look at vs1-4 and are amazed at the polar opposite responses that it produced. In the middle of his sermon, both Peter and John are accosted by the authorities, immediately arrested and hauled off to the slammer for the night. Yet, in spite of that legal fiasco, another 2000 individuals are apprehended by the Gospel, are arrested by God's grace and are added to both the church as new believers and to the kingdom of God as His children. How is this possible?

Though it may be confusing, it shouldn't be surprising. Jesus told us in **Mt 10:34** "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword." This may seem contradictory to what the angels declared on the night Jesus was born – "Peace on earth" – but it's not. Jesus does bring a lasting, abiding, comforting peace to all who trust in Him but the reality is, since the Gospel calls the individual to a radical commitment to Jesus Himself, it is a message of peace that divides between those who accept it and those who reject it. It's this division that is

laid out for us in stark contrast throughout this chapter. We'll see the authority that each choice has access to and the power that comes from that authority. Everywhere Jesus went, He brought division – division between those who accepted Him and those who refused. Even though He is gone in [ch4](#), His message and the power of His name is still divisive.

So far in the Book of Acts, things had been going pretty smooth. The disciples waited in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit, their patience was rewarded by a great move of the Spirit on the church 3K souls were saved through Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost. The church was growing and great things were happening. Then later, a man was miraculously healed and Peter was able to preach to another large crowd but then things went sideways.

Luke doesn't say if this turn of events caught Peter and John off guard but I doubt it did. I'd say that the Holy Spirit quickly reminded them of that bit of encouraging prophecy Jesus had given to them back in [Mk 13:9-11](#). Jesus wasn't trying to scare anyone off; He was merely warning them of a spiritual reality. Whenever God blesses the work of the Gospel, Satan shows up to oppose the work and silence the witness. Jesus even warned the disciples that, "it is impossible that no offenses should come..." ([Lk 17:1](#)). This is the legacy of division, of the sword that Jesus brings. I don't know if Peter and John were thinking about these verses or not but they don't appear to be much surprised. It may be that they were even encouraged because now, everything Jesus foretold earlier was being fulfilled and it was going to continue to be fulfilled in similar situations again and again as the church grew and expanded.

5-6- It seems upon hearing this story, Luke was impressed with the great power arrayed against the disciples. Keep in mind, by all outward measures, Christianity was very weak at this early point. They were few in number – 3100 to 3500 at the most. There were very few leaders and none of them had much experience at being leaders. They were commanded not to fight by their Master and their doctrines directly opposed religious institutions that had been in place for centuries. When measured against the total number of Jews, they were microscopic. When measured against the rulers of the day, they were very weak.

Luke seems to want to emphasize this contrast since from [vs1-6](#), he list no

fewer than 11 different individuals or categories of individuals who were opposed to Christianity. 3 of them are in v1: the priests, the captain of the temple (guard), and the Sadducees. The priests refer to the established priestly caste – those that controlled the temple, not the Levites that ministered in the temple. The captain of the temple refers to the Jewish police force that guarded the temple. These were not Romans, the captain was not a Roman officer but this was still a force to be reckoned with. These were the soldiers who had arrested Jesus. The captain of the temple was the 2nd most powerful person in Jerusalem, aside from the Roman governor and army. The Sadducees represent the upper class, the political elites as we would call them today. They had established ties with the Roman authorities early on so they had some clout.

These were the most influential people in the land and theirs was a formidable opposition. But that's not all...

In v5, we're given 3 more categories: the rulers, the elders, and the scribes. The scribes were tasked with knowing and copying the Scriptures. Elders were the distinguished older men who lived in Jerusalem and had great influence. Rulers were likely people in various positions of authority, the heads of government departments and committees.

In vs6 we meet 4 other individuals as well as the family of the high priest. These were all present and they were all arrayed in opposition against Peter and John.

Think of the mind set of these 2 Apostles. The opposition came upon them suddenly; they laid hands on them; made threats against them and then threw them in jail. The entire scenario was unnecessary from a legal stand point but from an intimidation stand point, the atmosphere of the whole situation was intended to make the disciples afraid – to soften them up before they are called out on the carpet the next day. But that was probably their first mistake. They thought that a night in the temple slammer might help “cool their heels” but it seemed to have the opposite effect. It actually gave Peter and John a lot of time to pray, think and seek the Lord for wisdom, courage and strength. All the forces of Israel were gathering against these 2 Apostles but Peter and John were being kept by God's power.

7- Why were they so upset with the Apostles? Was it because they had healed a man who had been lame in his feet from birth? No, what bothered

them about the Apostles was that they were teaching the people. The rulers, scribes, Sadducees – these had gone to the accepted rabbinical schools, they were the credentialed teachers and teaching by any others would undermine their authority. That's what bothered them so much about Jesus. He hadn't gone to any of their rabbinical schools but He taught with authority and the people flocked to Him and marveled.

These men were the ones who had Jesus killed. Now they suddenly had an entirely new group of people to contend with and they were just like Jesus! None of them had been to the rabbinical schools either but they were teaching as Jesus taught – with authority – and the people were listening to them too!

There was another thing that disturbed them even more – it wasn't just that the disciples were teaching *like* Jesus, they were teaching about Jesus! In fact, the central point of their teaching was that God had raised Him from the dead. If they had been teaching about the resurrection only, it might not have been so bad, even the Pharisees believed in the resurrection. But the disciples weren't just teaching about the resurrection generally, they were teaching about the resurrection of Jesus. That changed everything. If it was true, it proved that Jesus was who He claimed to be, the unique Son of God. It also proved the divine nature and immense value of what He came to do.

So, these rulers used the world's methods in their opposition against the Apostles. They used their power – the power to intimidate, to threaten and forcibly imply their displeasure. The world still operates like this and that's one reason why the Christian witness often fails or is given in an ineffective way. If Christianity is true, it is the greatest message in the world. Yet we're often afraid to proclaim it and the major reason is the world's intimidation. We fail to speak because we're afraid someone might laugh at us or harm us.

Luke emphasizes the power of the opposition so he could insert a sense of irony at this point. Here these men were, trying to intimidate the apostles, threatening them. Yet even before they give their witness, Luke says that "many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of men came to be about five thousand." Membership went from 3K after Pentecost to 5k here. That's an increase in attendance of 60% but whose counting, really.

The world thinks that it can stop a spiritual movement by threats, force, imprisonment, and death, but it can't. A good idea, especially a true spiritual idea, will always spread. A good idea will always thrive and eventually permeate a culture. You might slow it for a while but you can't stamp out Christianity. The rulers were trying to stamp it out. But what we discover in Acts and in later church history is that the more the church is oppressed, the more the gospel spreads. Justin Martyr said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

8-12- We've seen the power that's relied on by those who oppose the Gospel and the methods they use to exert that power. Now Luke is going to show us the power of God and the methods His people use. The power on the side of God's people is the Holy Spirit. As we read through Peter's response to this kabal of worldly power, he's clearly not intimidated. Why? Because he was filled with the Holy Spirit! And, as has already been mentioned, whenever it is mentioned that someone has been filled with the Spirit, what follows, on every occasion, is a strong verbal testimony of Jesus Christ. When people are filled with the Holy Spirit they always speak about Jesus. That's how you can know you're filled with the Holy Spirit, and Peter was!

Note that Peter wasn't simply trying to defend himself. The council asked what name (authority) he operated under and he told them "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth." He could have stopped there, he had answered their question honestly but Peter couldn't leave well enough alone! He had the message of God's truth and was filled with the power of God's Spirit. He wasn't satisfied with just a defense. He saw an opportunity to witness for Jesus to a captive audience and he took full advantage of it. The council considered Peter and John their captives but the reality was, Peter knew they weren't going anywhere anytime soon so he might as well preach to them too!

Consider this: if Peter and John had hired the best advertising company in Jerusalem and had paid for the greatest ad campaign ever designed, they still would never have gotten all those important people to come to one location at the same time. Peter had never had a chance like this before and probably would never see this again. He could've tried to save his skin and say as little as possible but he wasn't intimidated – he was encouraged. He was a servant of the living God with the greatest message in the world. Here

they all were – let's preach Jesus!

There are 4 points to his sermon: 1) They were guilty of crucifying Jesus. The Jesus he speaks of was the Jesus they had put to death. It wouldn't have done them any good to deny it. It didn't do Pilate any good to wash his hands of the matter either. The washing did not excuse Pilate, and there was no excuse for these Jewish rulers. They were guilty. That's the first thing Peter reminds them of. It took courage to remind them of the crime they had committed.

2) Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus' resurrection proves everything essential about Christianity. It proves Jesus is God, He is the Savior, death is not the end for anyone and there's a resurrection. Peter also says God is the one who has done this, the very God they claimed to worship. They killed His Son, but God vindicated Jesus by raising Him from the dead.

3) The purpose of God was established in spite of opposition. "The stone which was rejected by you builders . . . has become the chief cornerstone" (Ps 118:22). When Luke quotes from the OT, he almost always quotes from the Septuagint. But here, Luke changed the quote slightly, adding the word "you." Why? That's how Peter probably said it. He added the "you" to reinforce his 1st point: their guilt. He took an impersonal OT text and made it personal.

God does accomplish His purposes. He does so whether men accept Him or reject Him. You may resist Him to the end. But in the end, it will be His will rather than yours that will be done. We don't like that, because the essence of sin is thinking and saying, "I can do without God. I can resist God. I do not have to do what God wants." But, we're not our own masters. We're God's creatures. Thus, it's always God's purposes that will be established, not ours.

4) Jesus is the only way of salvation. The world hates that truth too! If you want to be laughed at, scorned, hated, even persecuted, testify to the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ; that Jesus is the only Savior; that only by believing in Him can one escape hell. The world will fight you to the death, because nothing is so offensive to the natural man as teaching that we can't save ourselves, that we can't choose our own way of salvation, and that if we are going to be saved it must be by God in the way he has appointed.

Why did Peter insist on this fact? He knew there is nobody else like Jesus Christ. There is no man who is God except Jesus, no one who could die for the sins of others. That is why Peter could proclaim him fearlessly.

Why would Peter risk his neck to tell these powerful men something they really didn't want to hear? Saving his neck wasn't Peter's main concern; his primary concern was salvation and it can be found nowhere but in Jesus Christ. He also knew that salvation was the imperative need of these powerful, yet sinful, men. What had happened to the physical condition of Lt. Dan in [ch3](#); that he had been made whole (saved) was a parable for the healing of the whole man by the power of Jesus Christ. These men needed that as much or more than Lt. Dan did and Peter knew it!

13-22 - Well, the leaders were stuck! They were aghast when they saw that the Apostles could teach with rhetorical skill and boldness, even though they were "uneducated and untrained." But they were incensed that the apostles preached about Jesus and His resurrection. It appears they were even a bit dismayed as they realized from their own observation that Peter and John had been with Jesus. They had performed some strenuous legal and political contortions to rid themselves of Jesus and they were successful. But His influence was still with them and spreading!

As much as they desired to eliminate the influence of Jesus through the preaching of Peter and John, they still could not deny the truth of the miraculous healing. I mean the evidence was literally standing before them! He wasn't just with the apostles, he was standing with them, a man who previously couldn't stand. His healing, his wholeness was a symbol of the true power of the Gospel that Peter and all the others were preaching and it couldn't be denied.

Unfortunately, although it couldn't be denied – it could still be opposed! They believed they could contain any further damage to their positions by a naked exercised of authority. They demand that the apostles "Cease and Desist" any preaching or teaching in the name of Jesus from that point on. The issue here is one of authority – the authority of the rulers, who were opposed to Jesus and authority of Jesus, who commanded the apostles to be His witnesses.

Peter and John had no doubts as to whose authority they were under in this

instance but this brings up the issue of civil disobedience and how we as the church should approach it. The council forbade the apostles from preaching or teaching about Jesus but they had been commissioned by Jesus Christ to do exactly that. They had no other recourse; they had to disobey the council. But, how are we to respond to government al overreach today?

We must be extremely careful in this area because we are sinners and we tend to rebel easily. In fact, we usually rebel when we should clearly submit. Having said that, we may some day find ourselves in a position of having to choose between a clear directive of the state or being obedient to Jesus Christ. Since the state is not as wise and perfect as God, there will inevitably be some situations where the state will demand compliance contrary to God's law. In those few, rare instances, if you're following God, you're going to have to disobey the state.

Take, for instance, this present quarantine order we are under. This order was not aimed solely at churches for the purpose of shutting us down (or up), it was adopted and is enforced across the cultural board for public safety. The order doesn't include a C&D on preaching, just assembling. 10 yrs ago, this would have been a death knell for most churches but today, we just switch over to online church. Satan thought he was going to shut down churches all over the world but God just opened them up in nearly every home instead.

But what if this changes? How should the church biblically respond? We respond by recognizing that the state does have legitimate authority but that authority has been delegated to them by God. Thus, the state is accountable to God for what it does with its authority. Accountability to God puts limits on civil authority. When they attempt to thwart the work of the Church by outlawing what God has called us to do, we should obey God. When the state forbade the apostles from doing something God had told them to do, Peter and John disobeyed. They did not deny the state's authority. The state had the right to make whatever judgment it thought best. Basically, they said, "We're going to do what we need to do. Y'all just do what you need to do."

As believers, we are part of something eternal. The kings and kingdoms of this world come and go but the kingdom of God will never pass away, it is eternal. What kingdom do you belong to? Where is your ultimate

allegiance? Is it to the state? Is it to the culture or lifestyle that surrounds you? Is it to you? Each of these things is temporary so any allegiance to them is misplaced. Only Jesus can forgive, heal, save and His kingdom is everlasting! 😊