

Opposition to the Gospel

A couple of weeks ago, I had the opportunity to have coffee with a guy I've known for a couple of years. At one point in our conversation, I was able to ask him about his spiritual journey. I said that I didn't know much about how he thought about God, spiritual things, church, etc. and would love to hear if he felt okay sharing that information. He did, and so he shared how he thought about these things. After he was done, I told him I felt honored to hear a little of his story and then I asked him if I could share how I thought about these things. He said he would love to hear. And so, I shared my testimony including what I understood the Bible to teach about how one comes to know God. We had an amazing spiritual conversation. Before we left our time together, I asked him if we could continue the conversation in the future. He said yes. I walked away from the time thankful that Jesus had opened the door for that conversation.

Jesus has called us to make him known. This is part of our calling as followers of Jesus. And for the most part what I experienced in that interaction is a common way that sharing the good news about Jesus happens in our context here in the United States. I'm not saying it always does, sometimes there is opposition, but the reality is that what I experienced is a pretty normal experience for us.

A number of years ago in a *Christianity Today* editorial, David Neff made the comment that American Christians do not lead typical Christian lives. He said:

The typical Christian lives in a developing country, speaks a non-European language, and exists under the constant threat of persecution . . . it is they who live the normal Christian life and we who exist in a parenthesis of toleration.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1996/april29/6t5014.html>

Now maybe there is less and less toleration for the Christian faith in our country than when Neff wrote that, but we still do exist in a "parenthesis of toleration." We can share the gospel with little real threat. Maybe we will be judged for being intolerant or narrow-minded for claiming that Jesus is the only way, but for the most part that is the nature of the opposition we face if we face any at all. For most Christians around the world, however, it is a very different thing. They face opposition for sharing the gospel. And what they experience is the normal Christian life for most Christians who have ever lived. Opposition to the gospel.

Today, we are looking at Acts 4 where we see the beginnings of opposition to the gospel. This opposition will grow in intensity as we move through the book of Acts. As we look at this passage today, we will see several things that enabled Peter and John to share the good news about Jesus even in the face of opposition. What enabled them to be bold in the face of opposition are the very same things that we need to believe and hold onto to take the risk of bringing up a spiritual conversation with a friend.

And so, let's look at the passage. Acts 4 hangs tightly with what we looked at last week. Peter and John had healed the lame beggar and had done so in the name of Jesus. As the crowds

responded in wonder to the miracle, Peter stood up and proclaimed that it was by the power of the risen Christ that the man had been made well. Peter urged the crowd to repent and turn to God. And that if they would do so, they would find forgiveness and times of refreshing.

His message that found great receptivity among the people, but opposition from the religious leaders. As we heard read a few moments ago, the religious leaders are annoyed that *they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead* (v. 2). And so the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees come and arrested Peter and John.

The Sadducees were a group of priests from the wealthy ruling class who did not believe in the bodily resurrection. They were also loyal to the Roman government and sought to maintain the status quo. Everything about what Peter and John were teaching the people was in contradiction to what they believed. But also, if the people began to follow this new teaching, it would destroy the authority of the religious leaders. And who knew what the political implications would be if that happened.

And so, they arrest Peter and John, but the message has already fallen on receptive hearts. Luke says:

⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

The actual number of new believers was obviously much higher when you include women and children. This new moment has grown from the 120 believers in Acts 1; to the 3000 in Acts 2; to over 5000 believers now. It is amazing growth, explosive growth.

In verse 5, Luke says:

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

This a gathering of the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish supreme counsel. Annas and Caiaphas are there. Annas preceded Caiaphas as the high priest, and apparently, they continued to refer to him as the high priest due to his influence. Caiaphas was the current high priest. Both had sat in judgment of Jesus at his trial. Peter and John are facing an intimidating, powerful group.

⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"

They want to know their authority. Specifically, they want to know if Peter and John will insist on tying this miracle to Jesus. If they would simply profess that by the power of God they did this, there likely would have been no problem. But if they insist on making a connection between the miracle and a claim that Jesus was bodily resurrected, that he was alive, that he had

done this, that could not be tolerated. And so, they confront them with this question. *By what power or by what name did you do this?* Talk about an open door, right?

⁸ *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them,*

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit had come upon Peter and all the believers as a permanent indwelling presence. This is a reality for any believer. When you come to faith in Jesus, the Spirit of God comes to dwell within you as a permanent indwelling presence. What is happening here is a special empowerment by the Spirit for this moment. Jesus had told his disciples not to worry how to respond when they would be persecuted and brought before situations just like this because the Spirit would tell them what to say (Matt. 10:17-20; Luke 21:12-15) and that is exactly what happens here. And so Peter, empowered by the Spirit, says:

“Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ 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.

Peter DOES make the connection between the man’s healing and the risen Christ. He says it is *by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth* that this man now stands before them in perfect health.

When Peter says, *by the name of Jesus Christ*, he is saying “by the name of Jesus the Messiah.” The religious leaders had failed to recognize Israel’s promised Messiah. Instead of believing in him, they *crucified* him. But Peter boldly proclaims that God raised Jesus from the dead. And the fact that the man now stands before them in perfect health is evidence that Jesus is alive. Of course, Peter knew he was alive. He had seen him. He had spoken with him. He had eaten with him.

Peter then uses Psalm 118:22 to give a theological explanation of their rejection of Jesus:

¹¹ *This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.*

A *cornerstone* was the massive stone that was laid in the extreme corner of a building to take the weight of the building and to set the angle of a building. It was essentially the foundation of the building. Jesus is the cornerstone. Through their crucifixion of Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders had rejected the One who was the ultimate fulfillment of the Jewish faith.

Peter has answered the question, *by what power or by what name*, they had performed the miracle, but he doesn’t stop there. He goes on to proclaim that Jesus alone is the source of salvation.

¹² 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."

In Jesus alone is salvation found. To reject Jesus is to reject God; it is to reject salvation. Peter is essentially saying that the religious leaders had missed the whole point of Israel's religion. Rightly understood it all pointed to Jesus, the Messiah. But they missed it.

If we could see the faces and the body language of the Jewish religious leaders, I'm sure there was anger oozing out of them. Peter had just declared that a man that these leaders had determined to be a criminal, was the Messiah. Peter essentially had said that these leaders, who controlled worship in the temple, who controlled all aspects of Jewish religious life, who included the high priest who supposed to be the mediator between God and his people, the one who entered the Holy of Holies once a year to offer sacrifice on behalf of the Jewish people, they were unsaved because they had rejected Jesus.

¹³ 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.

These men, who just a few short weeks ago had fled in cowardice and fear when Jesus was arrested, now stand before this powerful group, and speak with boldness. The Jewish religious leaders knew these men were *uneducated* (i.e., they didn't have formal rabbinical training); they were *common men* (they were laymen), but they spoke with a kind of power and authority that they had seen in someone else . . . Jesus. They *recognize that they had been with Jesus*.

The leaders are in a quandary. They want to shut down the message of a resurrected Christ. They are opposed to the gospel that Peter and John are preaching. And yet they cannot deny the miracle. And so, they send Peter and John out of the room to deliberate. In verse 17, we see their solution:

¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

The Jewish religious leaders believed that the power and the authority of the Sanhedrin would be enough to intimidate the disciples into silence. How wrong they were.

¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

"We must obey God. He is our authority." Jesus had commanded them to be witnesses to the resurrection (Acts 1:8). And they were convinced of the resurrection because they had seen Jesus. And so they literally could not stop speaking about what they had seen and heard. They

were convinced of these things. They understood that salvation in Jesus' name was at stake. And so, they would not submit to the religious leaders and stop speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus. They were loyal to Jesus.

21 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. 22 For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

They wanted to punish the disciples but couldn't because that would essentially send a message to the people to stop praising God for the miracle. And so, all they can do is threaten and release them. Next week we will look at how the early church responds to this threat by seeking God in prayer.

Now, as we think about what we see here as the early church begins to experience its first opposition to sharing the good news about Jesus, there are several truths that we see modeled that can help continue to be a witness for him regardless of whether or not we are facing opposition.

First, **there is a higher authority to be obeyed.** Peter said:

Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge,

The religious leaders commanded them to stop speaking, but Peter and John had a higher authority. Jesus had called them to be witnesses and so they would listen to him instead of the leaders. He was the higher authority. They were loyal to him.

If we experience any pressure to not speak about Jesus, from our friends, from our families, or even just from ourselves, we need to remember that there is a higher authority who has called us to be witnesses. I think we will increasingly experience cultural pressure to not speak about Jesus. Even if that pressure becomes true opposition to the gospel, we have a higher authority to obey. Our loyalty needs to be with Jesus.

In saying this, let me make it clear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that because we have a higher authority that we have a right to be insensitive. I'm not saying that we should force the gospel into every conversation or situation. There are times when the most helpful thing to do, to help someone move closer to God would be to not share the gospel at that particular moment. We need to trust the Spirit of God to lead us in terms of the timing and with people's readiness to hear about Jesus as we think about sharing the gospel.

Secondly, **there is a power to be experienced** – the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8 when Jesus commanded his disciples to be his witnesses, he promised that they would receive power

when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Peter experiences that here. God gave him courage, boldness, and the words to say in this moment.

This same Spirit dwells within us. As we seek to be witnesses for Jesus we are not alone. It isn't up to our wisdom or eloquence as we share about Jesus. The Spirit helps us. The Spirit empowers us. The Gospel of John also tells us that the Spirit is active in convicting the world of its guilt regarding sin (John 16:8). And so we can know that when we step out in faith to have a conversation about Jesus, the Spirit is there empowering us as well as working in the other person's heart. And so trust the Spirit to lead you as you seek to be a witness for Jesus. There is a power to be experienced.

Third, there is **the reality that salvation is found in Christ alone**. Peter couldn't be any clearer. There is salvation in no one else (v. 12). Jesus came and lived a perfect, righteous life on our behalf. He died to pay the penalty that we all deserve for our sin. He was raised from the dead in victory over sin and death. No one else has done this. No one else has made a provision for sin. Jesus is the only way of salvation.

Staying clear about this reality can help us live with appropriate urgency and boldness. And we DO need to stay clear about this, because the culture around us more and more believes all religions are essentially the same; that all roads lead to God. But the reality is that salvation is found in Christ alone.

Do you believe this? Is this truth settled in your mind? The early church was convinced of this reality, and it gave them courage and boldness to keep proclaiming Christ even in the face of opposition. My encouragement to you is to meditate on this truth. Let it move you from any kind of timidity or complacency to action.

Now, I know that there are some here this morning who are not sure of what you think about Jesus and God and all of this. We are so glad that you are here. I would encourage you to wrestle with what Peter says. Peter, who walked with Jesus, who saw the resurrected Jesus, is stating that for any of us the only way to God is through Jesus. It's not through church attendance. It's not through living a good life. It's not through being born into a church-going family. It's not through any other religion. Salvation is found only in the forgiveness and new life that is found in Jesus. If you would like to learn more about why this is true, I would encourage you to reach out to me or one of the pastors here at Faith, or talk to one of your Christian friends.

There is a higher authority to be obeyed. There is a power to be experienced. And, there is the reality that salvation is found in Christ alone. These are the truths that led Peter and John to stay faithful to their calling to be witness of Jesus. It is these truths that gave them courage and boldness to proclaim Jesus in the face of opposition. It is these truths that can give us courage and boldness when we are sitting down with a friend over coffee to ask them if they would share their spiritual story and what they think about God, and then to ask them if we can share what we think. It is these truths that can help us continue to be loyal to Jesus in the face of whatever opposition we may face.