

## #32 - Persecution - Acts 4:1-31

### Engage:

In our journey through the revelation of **God's redemptive story** we have arrived at the time shortly after the church began. In the beginning, the church quickly grew in numbers (Acts 2:41 - about 3,000; 4:4 - about 5,000 men; 5:14 - more and more men and women were added; 6:7 - their number increased rapidly and included some Jewish priests).

One of the first major set backs of the infant church was their persecution by the Jewish leaders (For example Acts 4-8 - Peter, John and Stephen; Paul, who had first been a Jewish persecutor of Christians) and then later by the Romans (For example: Acts 16:16-24 - Paul and Silas; Revelation 1:9 - John).

This story is about the persecution brought on Peter and John by the Jewish leaders because God used them to heal an "irrelevant" man who had been crippled since birth (Acts 3:1-10) followed by their bold proclamation that Jesus was the Christ and had been raised from the dead (Acts 3:11-26). These Jewish leaders would have been the group that had forced the crucifixion of Jesus.

### Thoughts about the story:

Acts 4:1-4 - The arrest. The Jewish religious leaders were "greatly disturbed" because the apostles were preaching that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Included in this Jewish group were some Sadducees. They were a small but powerful group of Jewish leaders who did not believe in the resurrection which helps understand why they were frustrated.

Note: "Not often will sharing the gospel send us to jail as it did Peter and John. Still, we run risks in trying to win others to Christ. We might be willing to face a night in jail if it would bring 5,000 people to Christ, but shouldn't we also be willing to suffer for the sake of even one? What do you risk in witnessing—rejection, persecution? Whatever the risks, realize that nothing done for God is ever wasted" (Life Application Bible).

### Acts 4:5-22 - The trial

4:5-7 - Accusation – Here we go again. The same group that Jesus stood before at His trial (Luke 22:66) is the same group that Peter and John appeared before. "It did not please them that the man they thought they had sacrificed for the good of the nation (John 11:49-51) had followers who were just as persistent and who promised to be just as troublesome as he was" (Life Application Bible).

4:6-12 - Peter's testimony/defense – The presence of and the filling of (control of) the Holy Spirit (See Ephesians 5:18; Colossians 3:16-23) enabled Peter to go on the offense by boldly defending what they had done in healing the crippled beggar (Acts 3:1-10) and to remind the Jewish leaders that they had crucified the Messiah, but God had raised Him from the dead. (Note: It has been said that the best defense is a good offense. That is what Peter did.)

Peter also referred to Jesus as being the "capstone" that enables the church to stand strong (Psalm 118:22). It is the "capstone" that holds an arch in place. In another place Paul called Jesus the "chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

Note: Peter imitated what he had heard Jesus say (Psalm 118:22 - Matthew 21:42). Lesson: "Someone is watching us, someone is listening to us, just as Peter observed Jesus. That knowledge alone should keep us on the straight and narrow path. You are the finest Christian some person in the world knows. When he talks about a real Christian, he will be thinking of you. Therefore, what you do—the way you behave, the amusements you enjoy, how you spend your time, your activities—will be copied by someone. You are his example. In the situation recorded in Acts 4, Peter did exactly as Jesus had done" (Leroy Eims - Disciples In Action).

Verse 12 is troublesome for many. But it is the clear and consistent teaching of the Bible that Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6; also 1 Timothy 2:5). There is no other way and there is no other name by which we may come to enter into a relationship with God that offers eternal life.

Note: "Other religions can tell us what we ought to be. Christ *transforms* us into what we ought to be. Other religions make us *aware* of our needs. Christ *meets* our needs. . . . Other religions can point out man's need for forgiveness. But only Jesus can forgive sins." (Eims). Also see lesson 21 of the Foundations of the Faith series - "What Do Other Religions Teach?"

4:13-17 - The accusers were so astonished at the courage of Peter and John that they questioned how they should respond – How do educated men who have a high opinion of themselves as powerful leaders respond to the power of the changed life of God's people who exhibit indisputable evidence of God working through their lives in a powerful way? Such evidence was irrefutable! Notice the weakness of their response (Acts 4:17). It was the best they could do – and it wasn't much! It will always be hard to understand how people can become so hard and closed minded.

4:18-22 - Peter and John were released by the perplexed Jewish leaders. In contrast, Peter and John responded (Acts 4:19-20) powerfully, as well as did the people of Jerusalem (Acts 4:21). Note: A good verse to remember when you are challenged to live out your faith is Matthew 10:32.

Acts 4:23-31 – God's people responded to what had happened with praise to God and then they prayed that God might help them through the situation they were experiencing, rather than remove it. They recognized that God had a plan, that it was unfolding before their eyes – and that they were part of it! And they agreed that God should keep on doing what He was doing!

"decided beforehand" - "Not that God had compelled them to act as they did, but he willed to use them and their freely chosen acts to accomplish his saving purpose" (NIV Study Bible).

Their prayer resulted in God causing the place where they were meeting to be shaken. As a result, they were emboldened by the power of the Holy Spirit to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Note: "They prayed not for vengeance but vindication. . . . They asked for strength to heal and not for means to hurt. We should remember their attitude in the midst of conflict today" (Birth of a Revolution).

"May the Holy Spirit give us boldness and insight to stand for Christ and to bear our witness for him in the (*twenty-first*) century councils of opposition!" (Birth of a Revolution).

## **Discussion starters:**

- Have you ever been persecuted as a follower of Jesus? If so, how did you respond?
- Do you think that the responses of Peter and John would be appropriate today?
- Would you select a public leader to pray that they would use their position for the glory of God? This person may or may not be a followers of Jesus.
- In what ways can you strengthen your sense of courage or boldness as a follower of Jesus at work, in your neighborhood and in your family?
- What changes can you make in your prayer life?

Note: Persecution has always been part of the experience of faithful followers of Jesus.

Here are two online resources you may want to check out:

#1 - The classic book, Foxe's Book Of Martyrs can be found at:  
[www.ccel.org/f/foxe/martyrs/home.html](http://www.ccel.org/f/foxe/martyrs/home.html)

#2 - The Voice of the Martyrs website at [www.persecution.net](http://www.persecution.net). There is current and past information about the persecution of Christians.