

## ***Opposition and prayer...***

### **Acts Chapter 4**

#### **Introduction**

Peter's second sermon is interrupted by the priests, the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees – they arrested Peter and John because they found their teaching disturbing. The Sadducees were a Jewish sect who did not believe in the resurrection or the supernatural (see Acts 23 v 8). They were materialists, liberal and the 'power group' at that time (and generally opposed to the more legalistic Pharisees, who were the ruling sect in Jesus' time). In this chapter we also encounter the Sanhedrin, which was the 71 member Council or 'supreme court' of Israel (see Numbers 11 v 16)...

#### **Peter and John before the Council (Acts 4 v 1 to 21)**

The rulers, chief priests, elders and teachers of the law questioned Peter and John (v 7). They were simply following the injunction of Deuteronomy 13 – that if there was a teacher doing miracles they should question whether he was drawing people towards, or away from, Jehovah.

- Why do you think the Sadducees would have been particularly upset by Peter's response (v 8 on)?
- Who told Peter that Jesus is the only way to salvation (v 12)? See John 14 v 6.
- How would you describe Peter and John during this episode (v 13)?

"But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand" (v 4) – despite the opposition coming against the gospel, the number of Christians kept increasing, growing from 3,000 at the last count (Acts 2 v 41) to 5,000. Opposition did not slow the church down. This verse shows that the power plays, threats and intimidation were ineffective, as more people started following Jesus.

"If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple" (v 9) – the tone of Peter's reply shows that he was not intimidated by this court, though it was the same court that sent Jesus to crucifixion. Peter's logic was piercing: 'Why are we on trial for a good deed?'

"By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (v 10) – Peter preached Jesus, the one they crucified, the same Jesus whom God raised from the dead, and who healed this man. This is "the stone you builders rejected" (v 11) – the quotation from Psalm 118 v 22 was appropriate. Jesus was rejected by those leaders, but exalted by his Father. "Salvation is found in no one else" (v 12) – Peter did not merely proclaim Jesus as a way of salvation, but as the only way of salvation. The idea that there is no salvation in any other, and that "there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved", is hard for many to accept, but it is plainly stated.

"They were unschooled, ordinary men" (v 13) – Peter and John were certainly 'unschooled' in one sense – they, like Jesus, had no formal rabbinic education according to the customs and standards of that time. Yet they were educated in two important ways: they knew the Scriptures, and they had been with Jesus. "They took note that these men had been with Jesus" – this means that the bold statement of verse 12 was coupled with a radiant love characteristic of Jesus. If we will preach 'no other name' we should also make it evident that we have 'been with Jesus'. People should go to Jesus directly, but often they will not. The only Jesus they will see is what shines through us. We must work to make the fact that we have been with Jesus as obvious in our lives as it was in theirs.

***[MORE OVER]***

Even though the Sadducees did not believe in the supernatural, they could not deny that a spectacular miracle had taken place – the cripple who had been healed was standing there with the apostles (v 14)!

“They... conferred together” (v 15) – Luke may have found out what the Sanhedrin were discussing, because a member of that Sanhedrin later became a Christian: Saul of Tarsus. Acts 26 v 10 indicates that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin who cast his vote against the early Christians. If this is true, then we can say that Peter and John had no idea they were preaching to a future apostle and the greatest missionary the Church would ever see. In the same way, we have no idea how greatly God can use us...

“We cannot help speaking” (v 20) – Peter and John must speak of the things which they had seen and heard. They had to, not only because of the inner compulsion of the Holy Spirit, but also because of the command of Jesus: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem” (Acts 1 v 8).

### **The believers pray for boldness (Acts 4 v 22 to 31)**

- Why do you think the apostles started their prayer in this particular way (v 24)? (Remember, what did the Sadducees put their trust in primarily?)
- Verses 25 and 26 come from Psalm 2 and illustrate the folly of nations ‘taking up arms’ against the Lord God and against Christ! So against whom was the opposition? Note the roles played by Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel.
- At what point did God decide that Jesus was to be crucified (v 28)?
- Did the apostles pray for more tact, diplomacy and political correctness? What did they pray for (v 29, 30)? What was the result, and what did the believers do?

“Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (v 29) – this request is governed by a passion for God’s cause and glory, not the comfort and advancement of the disciples. They ask for things that will lead to more confrontation, not less. “Stretch out your hand to heal” (v 30) – they did not ask to do miracles themselves. They understood that Jesus heals by his hand; and that he does it from heaven through his people.

“They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (v 31) – the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, *again*. The experience of Pentecost was not a once-only experience. For Peter, this counts as the *third time* he is specifically said to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They received the boldness they asked for. Their boldness was a gift from God, received through prayer. It was not something that they tried to work up in themselves. This boldness is necessary today: we need to proclaim the gospel, and not be ashamed of it...

### **The believers share their possessions (Acts 4 v 32 to 37)**

- What was the secret of the ‘power’ and ‘grace’ shown by the apostles and believers (v 33)?

Barnabas was the wealthy uncle of John Mark (the writer of the second Gospel). A field in Cyprus was prime real estate!

*Prayer –*

*Lord, thank you for the example of Peter and John and their boldness.*

*Help us to pray as they did, remembering your sovereignty and the power of the name of Jesus of Nazareth.*

*Enable us, Lord, to speak your word with boldness, and to show kindness to those in need. Amen.*