

The Apostles Face Opposition

Lesson Scope: Acts 4

References in brackets refer to Acts 4 unless otherwise specified

Lesson Focus

The first chapters of Acts show God's plan moving forward successfully. Even after Jesus rose from the dead, many of His followers were confused and uncertain as to what the future held. That picture changed on the day of Pentecost. The one hundred twenty souls who faithfully awaited Christ's promise of the Spirit were rewarded not only with Spirit infilling for themselves, but also with the privilege to present the complete plan of salvation to others. This resulted in the salvation of three thousand souls on the day of Pentecost. News of these developments spread rapidly, and many devout Jews looked seriously at this new doctrine.

With the healing of the lame man (Acts 3) and the growing number of believers, the Jewish leaders became greatly concerned. They felt obligated to protect their beliefs and their agenda from demise. They did not realize the pride and deceitfulness of their own hearts or the intense hatred of Satan for God's plan. "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." God gives His children sufficient boldness, grace, and power to faithfully endure opposition.

Jesus had told His disciples that they would face opposition (John 15:18—21; 17:14—15). In seeing how fierce the opposition had been for Christ, the disciples knew that they were not humanly prepared to face all that lay ahead of them. They knew, however, that their power lay in allegiance to God and His Word, and they prayed for boldness to face the opposition victoriously.

We also are Jesus' disciples and will face opposition today. While we may not be called before authorities to answer for our belief in Jesus, the subtle undercurrents that Satan uses today will just as surely challenge our faith and commitment. Point out practical areas where we face pressure, such as the resistance of apostate Christians and the

world in general to Biblical positions on nonconformity, non-resistance, God's plan for the home, the sanctity of human life, and more.

Just as opposition is sure, so is God's power to face opposition victoriously. Point out the resources that God has given us, such as Christ's example, Holy Spirit infilling, the Word of God, and the support of our brethren. We can lay hold on these resources by faith, prayer, and a willingness to stand for God in every circumstance.

Lesson Aim: To teach how to face opposition victoriously.

Theme Verses: **Matthew 5:11-12.** Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Lesson Text

“By What Power . . . Have Ye Done This?”

Acts 4:1-4

¹ (KJV) And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, ² Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they laid hands on them, and put *them* in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide. ⁴ Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand.

Acts 4:7

⁷ (KJV) And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?

“They Could Say Nothing Against It”

Acts 4:8-14

⁸ (KJV) Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, ⁹ If we this day be examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole; ¹⁰ Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, *even* by him doth this man stand here before you whole.

¹¹ This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. ¹² Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. ¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.

“Grant Unto Thy Servants . . . Boldness”

Acts 4:18-24

¹⁸ (KJV) And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. ²⁰ For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. ²¹ So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all *men* glorified God for that which was done. ²² For the man was above forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing was shewed. ²³ And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. ²⁴ And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou *art* God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is:

Acts 4:29-33

²⁹ (KJV) And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, ³⁰ By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus. ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. ³² And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any *of them* that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. ³³ And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.

Questions for Study

“By What Power . . . Have Ye Done This?”

1. What factors contributed to the rise of opposition?
2. What is the unseen power in the Christian’s life, and how can we best portray it?

“They Could Say Nothing Against It”

3. How did Peter’s words reach to the core of the opposition?
4. What did the opponents of Peter and John see (4: 13-14)?
5. How can we display a proper balance of boldness and meekness in facing opposition?

“Grant Unto Thy Servants . . . Boldness”

6. How did Peter and John respect these authorities without obeying their orders?
7. What was the contribution of the larger church body to this conflict?
8. What special opportunities does opposition bring us? What special challenges?

Analysing the Passage

The grief of the religious authorities (4:2) seems to have been most keenly felt at the teaching of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. The chief priests had given “large money” to the soldiers that had guarded the tomb so that the news of the resurrection would not leak out (Matthew 28:11-15). That plan obviously failed. Also, many in this group were Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection.

The boldness of Peter and John stands in sharp contrast to the perplexed authorities. The rulers marvelled “that they were unlearned and ignorant men” (4:13). These had not studied in any rabbinical schools, yet they taught with authority. “They took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus” (4:13).

The disciples did not pray that the opposition would be relieved. Opposition was an unquestioned result of standing for truth (4:25-29). They rather prayed that they would have boldness to face the opposition, and God answered that prayer (4:31).

Principles and Applications

“By What Power . . . Have Ye Done This?”

1. The power of the resurrection knows no defeat (4:2). Satan-inspired men will sense this power, and may try to use physical means to oppose God's people. Though they rage or marvel, they cannot pluck the souls of faithful men out of the Father's hand (John 10:29).

2. Response to the Gospel message gives inspiration amid opposition (4:4). Many suffering saints have taken courage that their testimony has resulted in the salvation of others. Our lives have a positive influence on the souls around us, and God has seen fit that few of us need to stand alone. We must keep our primary focus on the needs of men rather than on our need for inspiration.

3. Speaking for the Lord nurtures a positive attitude toward opposition (4:7). The main focus of opposition is the Christ we serve. Opposition is not the end of the road, but rather an opportunity to more clearly represent our Lord. Defending His cause is more than an obligation; it is a privilege. His name and power give us identity and authority, and we ourselves give His message credence by the lives we live.

“They Could Say Nothing Against It”

4. Victory is possible when we go forth as instruments empowered by God (4:8). The same Spirit who convicts the world of sin and of judgment gives the saints assurance and power. When nothing stands in the way of a right relationship with God or our fellow men, we can boldly say, “The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Hebrews 13:6).

5. Making men whole is a work of God, so we need not take personal offense at opposition (4:9-10). Men will oppose us because of their hatred for God. But we should remember that we move at the command of God. Any good that our lives accomplish is by God's power. Any suffering that may come is for Christ's sake.

6. Changed lives at times silence opposition to the Gospel message (4:13-14). Many times men will at least secretly admire those who choose truth and stand for it. The answer to facing opposition is to not water down truth. Changing our position will slowly but surely move us to the side of the opposition. The answer is to stand for truth consistently and leave the opposition in the hands of God.

“Grant Unto Thy Servants . . . Boldness

7. Fearing God rather than man enables one to face opposition victoriously (4:18-20). Sometimes appealing to the higher law of God will

move the hearts of men and they will make allowances for our religious beliefs. Facing opposition victoriously is not about mitigating the opposition; rather, our faithfulness is the key ingredient. “The fear of man bringeth a snare” (Proverbs 29:25), but “in the fear of the LORD is strong confidence” (Proverbs 14:26).

8. In the face of opposition, we are encouraged through fellowship with the body of believers (4:23). Nothing encourages us quite like sharing with brethren who can understand our difficulties and offer encouragement or counsel. Even when we are not able to personally encourage those who are facing trials, we can by faith meet “around one common mercy seat.”

9. Fervent prayer is a part of facing opposition victoriously (4:29-33). The prayers of the saints can defeat Satan’s efforts and allow God to move in ways beyond our comprehension. Prayer also gives us wisdom, strength, and fortitude beyond our own. How often we save for last resort what ought to be our first impulse!

10. Great grace enables men to press forward with the Gospel message despite opposition (4:33). Grace is given us by measure as we need it. Sometimes those far away from a given situation may ask, “How could you ever bear up under the pressures of the situation you have been called to face?” The answer is that God gives great grace to those in great need.

A limiting factor is our willingness to surrender our wills to God’s and to be used of Him in whatever way He sees best.

Important Teachings

1. The power of the resurrection knows no defeat (4:2).
2. Response to the Gospel message gives inspiration amid opposition (4:4).
3. Speaking for the Lord nurtures a positive attitude toward opposition (4:7).
4. Victory is possible when we go forth as instruments empowered by God (4:8).
5. Making men whole is a work of God, so we need not take personal offense at opposition (4:9-10).
6. Changed lives at times silence opposition to the Gospel message (4:13-14).

7. Fearing God rather than man enables one to face opposition victoriously (4: 18-20).
8. In the face of opposition, we are encouraged through fellowship with the body of believers (4:23).
9. Fervent prayer is a part of facing opposition victoriously (4:29—31).
10. Great grace enables men to press forward with the Gospel message despite opposition (4:33).

Answers to Questions

1. What factors contributed to the rise of opposition?

The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection, and the Pharisees chose not to believe that Jesus had risen. But the disciples of Jesus were preaching this doctrine, and it was gaining a significant following. The healing of the lame man displayed power that these authorities were not sure how to reckon with. Beneath the surface were Satan's sinister efforts to oppose God's plan to save men.

2. What is the unseen power in the Christian's life, and how can we best portray it?

The power is that of Christ and of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. We best portray it by our actions. Changed lives that consistently produce the fruit of the Spirit are irrefutable evidence. We will sometimes need to explain our actions or position. At such times, clear references to the power of God and the law of God are necessary.

3. How did Peter's words reach to the core of the opposition?

He denied that he and John had any power or authority of themselves. He pointed to the power of Christ, bringing these rulers to make a decision for or against truth. He affirmed that God raised Christ, suggesting that to decide against salvation in Christ was to decide against God. Words like these sparked Gamaliel's logic (5:34-39), which, wise as it was, fell short of repentance.

4. What did the opponents of Peter and John see (4:13-14)?

They saw the boldness (frankness, unashamed speech) of Peter and John. These men had been detained overnight by the authorities, but they did not mince words to stay out of trouble. They saw that these men were unlearned and ignorant and that they clearly reflected the influence of Jesus on their lives. They saw that the power in Peter and John could affect other lives as well.

5. How can we display a proper balance of boldness and meekness in facing opposition?

We are bold in our stand for truth, bold in proclaiming the power of our Lord, and bold in reproving sin or failure in the lives of others.

We must be meek in acknowledging the right of others to examine us, meek in acknowledging our part in the salvation of souls, and meek in not trying to manipulate the decisions of others.

6. How did Peter and John respect these authorities without obeying their orders?

They used titles of respect and did not slander these men. They appealed to their ability to make Wise judgment, yet made it clear that they would abide by the higher law of God Where there was conflict. It does seem that this time they did not immediately return to preach in the temple, but found other ways to spread the Gospel without openly rebelling against the wishes of the authorities.

7. What was the contribution of the larger church body to this conflict?

In a way, they were the cause of the conflict, since some of the concern of the Sanhedrin seems to be related to the multitude who in faith joined the apostles. Yet certainly they were praying for the apostles.

When the apostles reported on their interview with the authorities, they all prayed about the situation. Then there was simply the moral support of those who knew, who understood, and who supported Peter and John in their stand.

8. What special opportunities does opposition bring us? What special challenges?

Opposition brings opportunities to witness of the power of Jesus to change lives. Others can see a Christian response to difficult situations.

We can be drawn closer to God and to our brethren as we examine ourselves and our motives and share together in the challenges we face.

These challenges include relating to conflict without enjoying conflict, relating to the lost or the weak without being judgmental, and knowing when it is wise to speak and when it is wiser to keep silent. We face the challenge of brotherhood unity in facing our multifaceted foe.

Summarizing the Lesson

Opposition does not usually strike us as desirable. But opposition is the

Christian's opportunity. The Christian's response to opposition is the opposite of the response of a carnal man and will draw attention. Our responsibility is to point men to Christ's enabling power and to be consistent in our representation of Him. Victory in the face of opposition is not about convincing every opponent, but rather it is about faithfulness personally and collectively. 'Hold the fort for I am coming,' Jesus signals still; waves the answer back to heaven, 'By thy grace we will' ” (Philip P. Bliss).

Research Guide

1. Search for related Scriptures using such key words as hate, council, and persecution in Strong's Concordance.
2. Read some church history. The story is one of constant struggle and many victories.