

Persecution Arises

Lesson Scope: Acts 4

Lesson Focus

The events surrounding the day of Pentecost were "noised abroad." No doubt the Jewish leaders were fully aware of what had taken place, what was preached, and how the people responded. Now, only days later, the healing of the lame man brought great crowds running, and Peter took the opportunity to preach Jesus to the people.

The Jewish leaders lost no time. They had paid the soldiers "large money" to falsify the details of the resurrection. They understandably were grieved that the apostles "preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead." They intended to intimidate and silence these unlearned and ignorant Galileans, but they had little idea of the dynamic they were opposing.

While the word persecution often has a negative connotation, our goal in this lesson is to be encouraged by observing how the early church rose above opposition. Christ's power is more than sufficient to resist the forces of evil. Although evil may seem to triumph over the righteous now, evil will ultimately be destroyed. We should choose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Hebrews 11:25).

We are blessed with an unusual history of freedom to worship as we please. God will hold us accountable for how we use this blessing. We would do well to remember those who are suffering in other parts of the world (Hebrews 13:3).

It is interesting to note that, although Peter and John were treated unfairly, they did not resist in any way. They kept silent until asked for a response and then based their words on Christ's authority. We have no record that they condemned the rulers upon their release. Instead, they prayed for wisdom and boldness and were answered in a convincing way.

"Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." God, however, gives His children sufficient boldness, power, and grace to faithfully endure opposition.

Lesson Aim: To learn 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:

Arrested for Preaching

[Acts 4:1-4](#) ¹ 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.

Threatened by the Authorities

[Acts 4:7-21](#) ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, By what power, or by what name, have ye done this? ⁸ 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. ¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, ¹⁶ Saying, What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them *is* manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny *it*. ¹⁷ But that it spread no further among the people, let us straitly threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name. ¹⁸ 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.

Emboldened by the Spirit

Acts 4:23-24 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 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

Arrested for Preaching

1. Why did the preaching of Peter and John bring persecution?

Threatened by the Authorities

2. How did Peter and John's wisdom differ from that of the Jewish leaders?

3. What was the purpose of the threats leveled at the apostles?

4. What methods are used in attempting to silence our testimony?

Emboldened by the Spirit

5. How did Peter and John counter the threats of the council?

6. How can persecution embolden a believer?

7. What will be the result of confidently expressing our faith?

Analyzing the Passage

Teaching the resurrection offended the Sadducees, who denied the possibility of a bodily resurrection. Both the Sadducees and Pharisees denied

Jesus' resurrection. The Sadducees were of the aristocracy and, as such, exerted the greater influence in Jewish political circles.

The challenge raised in Acts 4:7 was essentially the same question that the Jewish leaders had earlier asked Jesus (Luke 20:2). To these proud masters of the Law, it was unsettling to see the boldness of Peter and John. They "took knowledge" (Acts 4:13) that the apostles had been with Jesus. Like Jesus, they had never studied in the rabbinical schools, yet they taught boldly and with authority.

The Jewish leaders found themselves in an awkward position. They could not deny that a miracle had occurred. The evidence was sufficient, and five thousand men had believed in Jesus. The common people glorified God for the miracle. To punish Peter and John would arouse the displeasure of the multitudes. To allow this teaching to spread would erode the Jewish leaders' influence. They chose to further threaten and then to release the apostles (Acts 4:21).

Far from slinking away intimidated or even scheming how to secretly continue, the apostles boldly stated their intentions to obey God and proclaim what they had seen and heard.

Peter and John reported to the other believers all that had occurred, and together they prayed for boldness. God granted their prayer by a manifestation of the Holy Spirit's power as "the place was shaken" (Acts 4:31). He bestowed great grace (Acts 4:33) upon them all.

Principles and Applications

Arrested for Preaching

1. Facing opposition victoriously requires faith in the resurrected Christ (Acts 4:2). Perhaps we do not face a serious threat of physical harm for our beliefs, but the world and carnally-minded individuals call us to compromise in our Christian life. Our position on nonconformity, non-resistance, the sacredness of marriage, and the sanctity of human life are frequently challenged and ridiculed. To stand firm, our focus must be on our resurrected Lord and His infinite power, not on the so-called advantages of compromise.

2. The success of the Gospel message provides inspiration in the midst of opposition (Acts 4:3-4). The apostle John would later write (he was destined to a lifetime of opposition), "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4). Dedicated ministers are encouraged in their labors by a faithful flock. Caring parents find life's burdens grow

lighter as obedient children mature into service-oriented youth. New congregations formed in response to seeking souls are greatly inspired as they witness the power of the Gospel at work in others' lives.

Threatened by the Authorities

3. We can face opposition victoriously when we recognize that all power and authority reside in Christ (Acts 4:8-11). Critics understand that to discredit Christianity they must disprove the validity of the Scriptures. Some have spent a lifetime in their efforts against God and His Word. While their writings are quickly forgotten and fade out of sight, the Bible is available to more people today than ever before. The Holy Spirit's power, evident in the transformed life, is a powerful testimony to the authority of Christ.

4. Holding the fear of God in higher regard than the fear of men enables one to face opposition victoriously (Acts 4:18-20). Hebrews 11 mentions countless people who lost their position, livelihood, wealth, family, and even their lives because they feared God rather than man. We must "[esteem] the reproach of Christ greater riches" than the fleeting pleasures this world has to offer those who are willing to jeopardize their eternal souls for temporary enjoyment.

5. Sensing the urgency of our mission enables us to face opposition victoriously (4:18-20). If we truly believe that one soul is worth more than the whole world, the result will be self-evident. Do our day-to-day lives reflect our belief that the Lord could return at any time? Over a dozen times in the New Testament we are commanded to "watch" or to "watch and pray." "Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

6. Fellowship with the company of God's people aids in facing opposition (Acts 4:21-23). Peter denied the Lord while in association with the ungodly. Fellowship with the righteous provides mutual edification and encouragement to diligently pursue all good works. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25).

Emboldened by the Spirit

7. Worship and supplication result in boldness from the Spirit to respond rightly to opposition (Acts 4:24, 29-31). We cannot expect the Holy Spirit to grant us boldness if we neglect our relationship with the Lord. Bible study and prayer prepare us to respond to challenging questions that may come. Sharing with other believers gives us encouragement, even in the

face of continued opposition.

8. The unity of the Spirit and abundant grace are poured upon those who press forward with the Gospel message despite opposition (Acts 4:33).

Opposition can unite or fragment a group. As a church unites in prayer in the face of opposition, God will meet their needs. He desires that His people go forward with the Gospel. As we are obedient to His will, He will grant sufficient grace to withstand any opposition.

Important Teachings

1. Facing opposition victoriously requires faith in the resurrected Christ (Acts 4:2).

2. The success of the Gospel message provides inspiration in the midst of opposition (Acts 4:3-4).

3. We can face opposition victoriously when we recognize that all power and authority reside in Christ (Acts 4:8-11).

4. Holding the fear of God in higher regard than the fear of men enables one to face opposition victoriously (Acts 4:18-20).

5. Sensing the urgency of our mission enables us to face opposition victoriously (Acts 4:18-20).

6. Fellowship with the company of God's people aids in facing opposition (Acts 4:21-23).

7. Worship and supplication result in boldness from the Spirit to respond rightly to opposition (Acts 4:24, 29-31).

8. The unity of the Spirit and abundant grace are poured upon those who press forward with the Gospel message despite opposition (Acts 4:33).

Additional Teaching

A vibrant relationship with Jesus is essential in facing opposition victoriously (Acts 4:13).

Answers to Questions

1. Why did the preaching of Peter and John bring persecution?

They were preaching a resurrected Saviour, by whose power the lame man was healed. Since the rulers did not want to acknowledge Christ as the Son of God, they were grieved. The Sadducees did not believe in any resurrection. Furthermore, they had paid large bribes to the soldiers to deny that Jesus had risen. To deny the truth of the apostles' message, they sought to intimidate them into silence.

2. How did Peter and John's wisdom differ from that of the Jewish leaders? Peter and John had likely attended a local school until they were in their early teenage years. The Jewish rulers had probably gone to Jerusalem and studied for many additional years under renowned teachers. However, their superior knowledge of the Law and its distortions in Jewish tradition prevented them from accepting the simple truth of the Gospel as presented by Jesus and these humble fishermen. Peter and John desired to use the wisdom of God to bring salvation to lost souls. The Jewish leaders desired to impress people with their wisdom and supposed righteousness.

3. What was the purpose of the threats leveled at the apostles?

The leaders feared to take public action against Peter and John because the apostles had the people's support. Afraid of losing their influence, they used threats to intimidate and silence these unlearned men.

4. What methods are used in attempting to silence our testimony? Authorities may try to deny us the use of corporal punishment in training our children. Carnally-minded relatives might pursue activities in our presence that they know we do not approve of. Liberal theologians may try to explain away truths found in God's Word by saying that certain practices, such as the Christian woman's veiling, nonresistance, or practical separation, are not for our time or that the original Greek means something different.

5. How did Peter and John counter the threats of the council?

They went to their own company and reported all that had been said to them. Their purpose was not to frighten the others but to find support and encouragement to continue. They prayed together for boldness, acknowledging God's purpose to direct events for His glory.

6. How can persecution embolden a believer?

Persecution or adversity should cause a person to seek God's help in responding rightly to the situation. Persecution provides incentive to know and study the Word in order to answer those who oppose the truth. As a believer looks to God, he will receive power to face adversity through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

7. What will be the result of confidently expressing our faith?

Doing so will strengthen the faith of other believers, witness to the unsaved about us, encourage our resolve, glorify God, and ultimately bring Him eternal glory in heaven.

Summarizing the Lesson

Throughout history, God's people have been brought before authorities who desired to silence them but were unable to withstand the power of their words. While it is unpleasant to consider facing opposition, we can find comfort in knowing God will enable us to speak His words.

It is interesting to note that the saints appealed to the Scriptures in their prayer (Acts 4:24-30). And in every circumstance, they glorified the Name and Person of Jesus. We do well to follow their example.

Research Guide

Read the sections pertaining to Acts 4 found in Exploring the Book of Acts, by Lester Bauman.