

THE CHURCH – COURAGEOUS

Acts 4:1-13

The foundation of all courage is faith in something or someone. The highest or noblest motivation to exhibit courage is love. We could probably argue that fear is maybe one of the strongest motivations to exhibit courage; however, fear could also result in cowardice rather than courage. Maybe faith is the thing that is missing when fear results in cowardice.

One of the things that characterized the followers of Jesus immediately following His death was that they were fearful and they were careful to stay out of sight and not do things that would cause the religious or political “powers-that-be” to notice them. That situation certainly changed when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they received power to be Christ’s witnesses.

We are familiar with the account of the attention they received when the evidences of the coming of the Holy Spirit were heard and seen by people in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. We recall the message that Peter delivered in response to the question of the Jews who asked “What shall we do?” We marvel at the initial response of nearly three thousand souls who were added to the group that we call the church. Their dedication, eagerness to learn, their generosity and fellowship helped the group to grow stronger in their faith. God was obviously at work in the church based on the evidence that signs and wonders were not uncommon.

One of the miraculous healing incidences was highlighted by Luke in chapter three where Peter and John were going to the temple to pray around mid-afternoon. We are not told how long after Pentecost this happened. It could have been days, weeks, or months. They noticed a man who was lame at the entrance gate. He was asking for alms since his physical condition was such that he could not work to earn a living. As we know, the early church had few of the “advantages” that some ministries boast of and depend on today. They did not have big budgets with a benevolent fund to help those outside of the fellowship. What this early church had was far more valuable than silver and gold and more importantly they were willing to share what they did have.

The outcome of that interaction was that the lame man was healed and that caused quite a stir or commotion among the people who were at the Temple. Of course, the crowd focused initially on Peter and John who were quick to point the focus away from themselves to Jesus. That situation was an opportunity to share the truth with this group of people which Peter did very effectively as we can read in Acts 3:12-26.

The focus of attention in Peter’s message was on the Lord Jesus Christ starting with how the rulers of the people had rejected Jesus and had Him put to death. Then Peter told them how God had overruled their actions and accepted Jesus and raised Him from death. The Jews were anticipating a “national blessing” with the coming of the Messiah and they had rejected the very One they needed to receive. Peter did not permit the “national blessings” to overshadow the personal responsibility of the individuals listening to his message. God raised up Jesus Christ and sent Him to *each one* who would turn away from his iniquities. National repentance depends on and must start with personal repentance. This is still the response needed from individual sinners to the message of salvation. Peter was addressing a large crowd, but he still made the application personal.

His message produced two opposite results: The first was that about five (or two) thousand Jews believed the Word and were converted. The second and opposite result was that the religious leaders of the nation rejected the message and tried to silence the messengers. This marked the beginning of the persecution about which Jesus had already warned His followers.

We see this beginning of resistance in Acts chapter four.

The Resistance – 4:1-3

¹ As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple *guard* and the Sadducees came up to them, ² being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. Acts 4:1-3 (NASB95)

There were several issues and multiple participants involved in this confrontation that occurred in the Temple area. We have already mentioned Peter and John and what they were doing. We have an indication that the people were excited by what they had witnessed since they “ran together” and were “filled with wonder and amazement.” Apparently, they had calmed down enough to listen to Peter’s message.

The captain of the guard would have been alerted to the possibility of a riot or disturbance because the crowd had ceased behaving in a random manner (everyone going about his own business) and had all started doing something in a unified manner. The potential for a crowd of people that starts acting as a unit can be powerfully good or powerfully bad.

Think about what happened in Germany in the 1930's. In hindsight we can see that early intervention was needed in that case. In that case, the leader needed to be challenged and the crowd dispersed to return to their own selfish individual interests or there needed to a replacement with someone who had noble objectives and could lead the crowd in a unified effort for a good outcome.

Returning our attention to Jerusalem and looking at this objectively, the captain of the guard was doing exactly what he should have been doing in order to allow an assessment to be made to determine if the outcome was going to be “good” or “bad.” He was not in position to know whether this should have been encouraged or discouraged.

The priests showed up since the temple area was their responsibility for making sure that things were done in a proper way. It is very likely that these priests saw what was happening and immediately alerted the captain of the guard and the leaders of the Sadducees since most of the priests were Sadducees in their religious beliefs. The Sadducees apparently were not concerned that someone was healed or that a miracle had happened; they were disturbed because of what Peter and John were teaching.

We would expect the Sadducees to oppose the message because they did not believe in the resurrection of the human body. Peter’s fearless declaration that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead ran contrary to their religious beliefs. If the common people questioned the theology of their spiritual leaders, it could undermine the authority of the whole Jewish council. Instead of honestly examining the evidence, the leaders arrested the Apostles and kept them in custody overnight, intending to try them the next day.

The Result – 4:4

⁴ But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. Acts 4:4 (NASB95)

There are some uncertainties among various commentators regarding the number of people added to the church that day. Some believe that five thousand additional people were added and others believe that the total of all believers that made up the church at that point was five thousand. That would mean that two thousand were added that day. It is still a large number. It is very likely that some who were present in that area did not believe and did not choose to become part of the church. As we think about this, we would have to conclude that there were a lot of people in the area that was known as Solomon’s Portico. This was not in the

Temple itself. The professor of Judaic Studies at Brown University, S.I.D. Cohen, shared the following information on the Temple area during this time.

The [Temple] building itself was very small. The actual building of the Temple could fit inside the infield of any baseball stadium. However, the large structure all around it, the large plaza, the porticos, the columns, the staircases, all of that, were built up by Herod the Great on a monumental scale, filling up, I think something like ten football fields.... So we have then a very large, very conspicuous, grandiose, grand... structure in the center of Jerusalem which attracted pilgrims from near and far, both Jews and gentile....

There was a lot of space to accommodate a lot of people. Think about the culture of that time. What were thousands of people doing in the middle of the afternoon milling around outside of the Temple? Did they just stop whatever they were doing and head to the temple area at prayer time? Unless this event was close to a festival time, then we see a significant priority that the Jews placed on religious observances. Even today, we see some of this type of priority in the observances of the Muslims who literally stop what they are doing and pray toward Mecca five times a day.

This kind of activity of large numbers of people going to the temple area at prayer time gives us an indication of the devotion of these Jews to their religious practice. Such devotion and strong beliefs would indicate how significant the conversion experience was for those (two or five thousand) who turned to Christ that day. Even the arrival of the temple guards and the arrest of Peter and John did not prevent 5,000 men from trusting Jesus Christ and identifying themselves with the believers in Jerusalem.

The Challenge – 4:5-7

⁵ On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; ⁶ and Annas the high priest *was there*, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. ⁷ When they had placed them in the center, they *began to inquire*, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” Acts 4:5-7 (NASB95)

The religious council of the Jews was dominated by several influential Sadducee families. The statement that they were of “high-priestly descent” would suggest that they could trace their ancestral lineage back to Aaron. One of the most influential was a family whose patriarch was named Annas. Members of this family held the office for about thirty-five of the seventy years from the birth of Christ to the destruction of Jerusalem and included eight of the twenty men who were designated high priests. The other twelve high priests from the other families would serve for periods of time before another one of Annas’ family would be appointed. It is likely that the various families would bribe the Roman officials to influence who was appointed to the office.

These families tended to embrace Greek philosophy and practices of the gentiles rather than being strict adherents to fundamental Judaism that was associated with the Pharisees. However, at this time, the President of the Sanhedrin was a Pharisee named Gamaliel. The council operated by permission of the Romans and they were allowed to deal with religious issues rather than strictly civil matters.

The fact that Peter and John were placed in the center of the group would tell us that the members were seated in a circle and the placing of someone in the center was probably an intent to intimidate that person. It was likely very intimidating for most people who were brought before the Council. The question was asked in a way to be somewhat open-ended. They were hastily called together for the meeting to decide what the official response should be to Peter and John and they were not at all sure what, if anything, had been done that resulted in their being arrested and held overnight. Notice that the “this” in their question had not been defined. That

may have been a deliberate attempt to get Peter and John to do some self-incrimination. They obviously did not have Miranda rights in their court.

There were two things that Peter and John had done. The first was to be used of God that resulting in a significant healing miracle. We would not think that would be against any rules of the Temple. The other thing was that they had spoken to the people in a public forum. Again, that was not against Temple rules since it was fairly common for people to teach in that environment. The Council did not want to acknowledge that a significant miracle had happened and they did not want to acknowledge that a significant teaching message had been delivered to the people.

The question with regard to “power” was apparently related to the healing of the lame man and the question of “authority” could have been directed to the fact that they taught in the temple area. I don’t think that they were issuing “speaker permits” that would authorize someone to teach in the Temple area.

It is interesting that the religious leaders recognized a significant miracle had occurred. They knew this was not just a coincidence and they knew Peter and John did not have the ability (in and of themselves) to cause this to happen. Just as the Roman Catholics pray to various saints for specific needs, the Jews practiced calling upon the name of dead patriarchs in their prayers. The Council had called Peter and John to give an answer as to which name they had used or by what power this miracle occurred. They also recognized the possibility that the devil and the forces of evil can do mighty acts. They had heard the stories of how the magicians of Pharaoh’s court had duplicated some things that Moses had done to convince Pharaoh that God had sent him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The Sanhedrin may have been concerned that Peter and John had used demonic powers.

I do not think we should fault the Sanhedrin for attempting to discover the source of the power demonstrated. We need to be on guard regarding spiritual matters. The Scriptures warn us that the devil will appear as an angel of light and that in the last days the devil will deceive many with “lying wonders” even to the point of causing fire to come down from the sky.

The Answer – 4:8-12

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, ⁹if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health. ¹¹“He is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED** by you, **THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone.** ¹²“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:8-12 (NASB95)

Jesus Had promised His disciples “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time *you will be given what to say*, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” (Matt 10:19-20) The time had come for that promise to be fulfilled and as Peter spoke the Holy Spirit enabled him powerfully.

Peter was probably aware of their concern regarding demonic power. He was careful to point out that what had happened was not just a stunt to impress people. It was a good deed done for someone in need. The fact that good had come out of what had happened should have been an indication of the source. James tells us “every good and perfect gift comes to us from the Father of Lights in Whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning.”

Peter knew this was the same group of people who had condemned Jesus as a blasphemer and had concluded He should die. This knowledge did not stop him from telling them what had happened was by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It took boldness to confront these

religious leaders on their own turf.

Lest there was any doubt about Whom he was speaking, Peter reminded them they had crucified this Man. Though they were powerful in their society, God had overruled them and had raised Jesus from death. Peter then went on to relate Jesus to the Messianic promises and to show what they (the Sanhedrin) had done was prophesied many years before. This same Jesus was “the stone that the builders rejected.” The Gospel of John tells us that “Jesus came unto His own, but His own received Him not.” That was not the end of the story. Our rejection of Jesus does not change the fact that He is Lord. In the words of the Psalmist, “He has become the Chief Cornerstone.”

They proclaimed the truth of the Gospel message that day in the hearing of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus is God’s ONLY provision for salvation. No other name, in heaven or earth, is sufficient.

The Recognition – 4:13

¹³ Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and *began* to recognize them as having been with Jesus. Acts 4:13 (NASB95)

This was not the first time a seemingly uneducated and common person had stood in the midst of the Council and was not intimidated and spoke with clarity and courageous confidence. They still remember what had happened several months prior to this when a Galilean from Nazareth had stood before them and declared Himself to be the Messiah. It should not surprise us that Peter and John would have reminded them of that incident since the same Holy Spirit was in operation through them as was the case with Jesus.

Just as the Council did not know what to do with Jesus in a proper legal manner they used the lame and impotent tactics with Peter and John and tried to implement something that would be popular with the people so that they could maintain their positions of control. The populist methodology was to issue threats and ultimatums – to draw a line in the sand which they had no intent of carrying out the threat. Just as people today do not take such threats seriously neither did Peter and John. They stood their ground and challenged the Council to do what was basic to their very existence or to go against the principles of that basis. The basis of and reason for the existence of this Council was to enforce obedience to the law of God. So Peter challenged their threat with a question that they could not answer: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”