

EMBOLDENED

Acts 4:8-21

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. Mike Lotzer of Mercy Road Church wrote “Without courageous actions, our faith is incomplete; some might even call it dead.”

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 Acts chapter three where Peter and John were going to the temple to pray around mid-afternoon. The outcome of that interaction was that a lame man was healed and that caused quite a stir or commotion among the people who were at the Temple and Peter was used by God to tell the people what was happening.

The focus of attention in Peter’s message was on the Lord Jesus Christ starting with how the rulers and 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.

The outcome of his message was twofold: 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.

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.

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 in the Sanhedrin.

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. They questioned Peter and John by asking "By what power or by what name did you do this?" 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 resulted in a significant healing miracle. We would not think that action 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 publicly 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 demanded Peter and John to give an answer regarding 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 knew 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 certainly 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.

Truth Delivered – 4:8-12

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:8–12 (ESV)

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 also 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.

Silence Demanded – 4:13-18

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, ¹⁶ saying, “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Acts 4:13–18 (ESV)

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. The Sanhedrin still remembered what had happened several months prior to this when a Galilean from Nazareth had stood before them and declared Himself to 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.

The Council did not know what to do with Jesus in a proper legal manner and they did not know what to do with Peter and John. They had not gotten to the point of being able to blatantly lie in the face of the obvious facts. They realized that they could not get away with simply stating that the man who had been lame had NOT been healed. They were not so jaded that they could say that they had NOT demanded that Jesus be crucified. However, they had arrived at the point where they were willing to ignore the obvious and to carry out actions that were inconsistent with the truths they were avoiding. There are people today who have come to the point that they are willing to not simply ignore the facts, but also to blatantly lie about anything even when all the evidence is contrary to what they are stating.

The situation with the Sanhedrin had created such a conundrum that they temporarily removed Peter and John from the Council area so they could devise a plan that would minimize the damage that had been done to their credibility as the true leaders of God's people.

Their solution was to issue a "gag order" to John and Peter to not tell anyone about the man being healed and to not make any references to Jesus of Nazareth when they spoke to anyone either publicly or privately.

Testimony – 4:19-21

¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." ²¹ And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. Acts 4:19–21 (ESV)

Since no laws had been broken, all the Sanhedrin could do was to issue threats and ultimatums – to a draw line in the sand which they had no intention of carrying out whatever the threat was. 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 laws of God. So, Peter challenged their threat with a difficult situation for which they had no solution: "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." This challenge from a Galilean fisherman who had been with Jesus, who had been a coward at the crucifixion of Christ, who had trouble initially believing the resurrection had happened, and had been subsequently filled with the Holy Spirit has been the model for many pioneers of the faith throughout history who have found themselves to be at odds with the religious rulers of their time.

What will we do when we try to speak about what we have seen and heard as we follow the command of Christ to make disciples as we go about life and the world forbids it or ridicules it or tries to intimidate us?