

## We Are Empowered in Persecution

Acts 4:1–31

Studies in Acts #7

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If I asked you to write up a list of non-negotiables that are necessary to build a church, what would you list off? I would hope at the top of your list you would include the Word, prayer, the sacraments, love for each other, and a heart of the lost. Of course in our context, other things are closer to the top of the list: music, age-appropriate ministries, multi-media, and programs for the community. But in both these lists there is something not mentioned. How important to you is persecution and suffering? Certainly in our wisdom this is not important.

But in God's wisdom we see it in Acts 4. As Jesus builds his kingdom on earth by the power of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the apostles persecution is central to that task. And it still is today—at least it should be! I want you to see this in the big contrast of the story:

1. *The Imprisonment of the World*
2. *The Empowerment of the Spirit*

### **The Imprisonment of the World (vv. 1–7, 13–18, 21)**

We see here *the imprisonment of the world*. We've just come out of the two powerful chapters of 2 and 3 where the gospel was preached and the kingdom of light invaded the world of darkness. But now there is a counter-offensive from the forces of

darkness. We read that **as Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead** (vv. 1–2).

One of the big theological points we learn throughout Scripture and see here in Acts 4 is that persecution is inevitable. Why? Persecution is the response of the powers of darkness to the power of God. Acts 4 is just the next episode in the drama of Genesis 3:15. Does it surprise you to read on your favorite news site that the Chinese government is bulldozing churches? Does it shock you that anyone such as ISIS slaughters Christians? It shouldn't. In fact, just go to The Voice of the Martyrs' website and you'll see accounts every day on every continent of the world.

Acts 4 is also inevitable because this is exactly what Jesus said would happen after he left: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you...If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 15:18, 20; 16:2).

So how does the world persecute? The world uses the force of law: **they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day** (v. 3). The Sadducees were the ruling class of wealthy aristocrats. Politically they were aligned with Rome. Theologically they believed the Messianic age had already come, so they denied a coming Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. Therefore they saw the apostles as agitators politically and heretics theologically. And the apostles were unlicensed preachers. The world weds itself

to various Christian groups to use the power of the State. Eventually it should not surprise us to see regulation, licenses, and taxes to hinder the church's ministry.

The world also uses the force of threat. Notice that they could do nothing and even **had nothing to say in opposition** (v. 14). They never refute the fact that Jesus rose again, do they? They cannot escape the fact that Jesus healed this man: “**a notable sign has been performed through them is evident...and we cannot deny it**” (v. 16). And these **uneducated, common men** were full of **boldness** leading them to be **astonished** (v. 13). So they conspired and all they had left was threats: **So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus** (v. 18). At some point I expect that because the law is still on our side that I will be required to turn in sermons, our church's website will be hacked, our services will be protested, and the list goes on. But as we saw recently in our series through 1 Peter, this is not something bad that just happens to us; persecution is the will of God. Christ uses it to build his church.

### **The Empowerment of the Spirit (vv. 8–13, 19–20, 23–31)**

And that's the second thing I want you to see here. There is the imprisonment of the world and there is also *the empowerment of the Spirit* through persecution. I want you to see it in Peter and then in all Christians, including you.

What do you think made the difference in Peter, transforming him from a coward to a man of courage; from a denier of Jesus to a proclaimer of Jesus? The Spirit! Notice that Peter is *immediately filled with the Spirit* in verse 8: **Then Peter, filled with the**

**Holy Spirit.** And it is in the power of the Spirit that he proclaims Jesus Christ as crucified, raised, and therefore the only way to salvation in verses 10–12. This proclamation must rocked the Jewish leaders to their core. The Old Testament proclaimed that the Lord alone was the Savior and that his coming kingdom would be a kingdom of salvation. Now Peter says that salvation has come and it is found in no one else but Jesus of Nazareth! Not only is Peter declaring that the Messianic age has come in Jesus, but salvation is found only in the one whom the Sanhedrin had ordered crucified. And notice that this filling of the Spirit made Peter so bold that he was even allowed to stand up to tyrants: **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard”** (vv. 19–20).

But this is not just something that happened two thousand years ago to Peter. Persecution was also the occasion for the Holy Spirit to empower the church and it’s here that we learn so much for our own church. Peter was immediately filled with the Spirit, but the *church is filled with the Spirit through the means of prayer*. After hearing the report of Peter and John (v. 23) the church prayed (vv. 24–30). And after they prayed we read that **they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness** (v. 31).

Treasure this point! It’s amazing that this morning those of us who come early to set up thought it was just another perfunctory morning to show up early and serve without any fanfare. But then we opened the doors! In the chaos we rallied together, got on our hands and knees, and cleaned this place. I think this is a parable for us. We need

to think of our church more in terms of chaos, more in terms of desperation, more in terms of pressure so that we will come together more, rally together more for prayer. The culture is pushing us more and more into the corner and threatening us not to teach the whole counsel of God. The devil is constantly within these walls causing discouragement and discontentment. We have tangible needs of time to serve without burning out, men to serve, more members to serve, financial stability, and the list goes on. Where will we turn? We need to pray!

How? We need to pray to the **Sovereign Lord**, a rare word used of God that was used in ancient society for despotic rulers of unchallengeable power. God has this power as evidence in being the one **who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them** (v. 24).

We need to pray according to Scripture. This God of creation is the God of revelation as we need to address him as the church did: **who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit** (v. 25), then citing Psalm 2 (vv. 25–26). We pray for “traveling mercies” but how often do we pray so boldly with Scripture on our lips, applying it to our situation like here in Acts 4?

We need to pray for God to intervene. Notice how active they expected God to be—do we pray this way: **look upon their threats...grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness...stretch out your hand to heal** (vv. 29–30).

We need to pray together: **And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God** (v. 24). Let's do that tonight...