

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 4

Day One: The Outbreak of Persecution

Acts 4 is a continuation of the healing of the lame beggar in Acts 3 and the aftermath of preaching in Jesus' name. The scene opens with an arrest and a public hearing and ends with the summary of events that formed the core of the early church. We need chapters like this one, where we see the emphasis on the Word of God, the power of the Spirit, and the unity of the believers. These three at work: *Word—Spirit—Unity*, constitute the growth and fortitude in a Christian that makes the impossible become possible. There was a holy boldness and simplicity that permeated every aspect of these believers' lives. As a result, they personified what they knew to be true of Jesus. Their courageous response to God and their obedience to the Spirit's prompting, resulted in them turning their world upside down!

Read Acts 4:1–37.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Imagine what the world would be like today if Christians united together and activated like these first-responders. What kind of impact would we/could we make? Share your initial thoughts.

Memory verse: Acts 4:12 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven
given among men by which we must be saved.*

While Peter and John were speaking to the crowd that had assembled, members of the Sanhedrin (mainly Sadducees—priests authorized to preserve and protect Jewish tradition) *came upon them* (v. 1), meaning suddenly by force with an attitude of hostile intent. They were greatly disturbed that these two unlearned Galileans would be so presumptuous as to assume their role of teaching and interpreting the Scriptures.

Peter and John's words were intolerable to these leaders, but the real issue was that they were proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (v. 2). These same Jewish leaders had put Jesus to death as a blasphemer and now the apostles were boldly proclaiming Him as the resurrected Messiah.

1. If the crowd perceived any truth to their claim, the religious leaders would be branded as heretics. Notice the different responses to the truth going forth . . .
 - a. What action did Peter and John's words prompt the religious leaders to take?
 - b. Was the crowd influenced by the Sadducees? What effect did Peter and John's teaching have upon the crowd?
 - c. What does this contrast *reveal to you* about the power of the gospel message?

Deeper Discoveries ~

This was the first act of open opposition against the early church and although it took place very quickly, it was to be expected. Notice what words Jesus gave to His followers as an early warning. Consider how you can turn them into a lesson and personal application today.

- a. John 15:18–19: What is the lesson? How can you make this a personal application?

- b. John 15:20: What is the lesson? How can you apply it?

- c. John 16:2: What is the lesson? How can you apply it?

- d. The apostles would in turn teach the inevitability of persecution to the church. What did the Apostle Paul say in his letter to his son in the faith? 2 Timothy 3:12
- e. According to Peter, what is part of the believer's calling? 1 Peter 2:21

- f. Personal: Have *you* ever been persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ? When? How should Matthew 5:11–12 your heart attitude when enduring persecution?

Day Two: Seizing the Moment

Review Acts 4:5–12.

Aware that God, not the authorities, was in control of the circumstances. Peter and John offered no resistance at their arrest or arraignment. The chief priests (rulers), elders (family and tribal heads), and scribes (law experts) made up the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the nation. They convened in a place called the Hall of Hewn Stone (thought to have been an area in the temple itself). Placing the apostles in the center of a circle, they began the formal interrogation.

1. What did the ruling party demand to know? v. 7
2. What does this text reveal about Peter that is paramount to his defense?

Submission to the Holy Spirit's control is what enables believers to handle persecution in a way that glorifies God. Because Peter was Spirit-filled, he not only endured maltreatment at the hands of his accusers, he became victorious in it. He allowed the persecution to drive him closer to God, giving him the boldness to seize the moment.

3. What does Jesus say about this in Luke 12:11–12?
 - a. How would more of the Spirit's presence make for a stronger church against today's worldly opposition? Be specific with your example.
4. Briefly summarize in your own words how Peter expressed the gospel message, issuing an invitation to repent and receive Jesus Christ as their Savior. Vv. 10–12

There are not many "ways" or "names" by which we may choose to claim salvation. There is only one: Jesus Christ. Today's Christians live in a pluralistic religious society that wants "open-mindedness" to many ways, not one. But because we preach a *one-way* gospel message, we are often branded as intolerant and narrow-minded. Half of that statement is scriptural and relevant: *Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it* (Matthew 7:13–14). The biblical view of Christianity is not one of intolerance; it is God's will that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

5. What did Jesus say about the exclusivity of salvation? See John 10:7–9; John 14:6.

Day Three: Obedient to God Whatever the Cost

Review Acts 4:13–22.

Peter's bold impassioned plea failed to soften the hard hearts of the religious leaders who marveled at the confidence of these uneducated, untrained men.

1. What ultimately stood out to the religious council as they watched and listened? v. 13

Jesus Himself produced the same wonder among the Jews who heard Him teach in the temple. Though He too was uneducated, "The people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority" (Matt. 7:28–29). Jesus' answer to their wonder was, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me" (John 7:16).

2. Personal: Do others recognize you as having been with Jesus? How?

The disciple's experience with Jesus was personal—they saw Him, heard Him, and touched Him. We cannot spend time with Him in the physical sense, but we can spend time with Him by meditating on His Word, listening to Him speak, sensing His leading by the Holy Spirit, and understanding Him as we follow in obedience. The reward for our submission to Him is a greater revelation of Himself!

The council had a difficult decision to make; a miracle had taken place and all in Jerusalem knew about it. How could they further silence Peter and John to contain it? Perhaps intimidation would work. So in order that this teaching not spread any further, they commanded them not to speak to others in Jesus' name (vv. 17 and 21).

3. Peter and John did not hesitate to answer. How did they respond? vv.19–20

Peter and John refused to obey the orders of the Sanhedrin but they did not argue with them; rather they treated them with respect, explaining that they simply could not stop speaking. Like the Apostle Paul, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16), they too were compelled to speak by a higher authority.

4. When is it alright *not* to obey those representing the government?

Peter taught that believers are to obey the government authorities (1 Peter 2:13–17). The reaction of Peter and John to the Sanhedrin's command however, establishes the limits of that obedience. They would obey as long as it did not cause them to disobey their sovereign Lord. The only instance when it is acceptable to disobey is when God's commands conflict with those of the government.

5. Personal: Have *you* had to pay a cost for your submission to Christ? How did it impact you? Please explain.

Day Four:

Prevailing Prayer

Review Acts 4: 23–37.

From the onset, as this emerging church faced opposition and persecution, the Holy Spirit was there to guide, provide, and override those who opposed the will of God. Once released, Peter and John returned to the believers to report all that the chief priests and elders had said to them (v. 23). When they heard, they raised their voice to God. Today we'll take a close look at their prayer to add to our own understanding of what it means to prevail with God.

The Acknowledgement:

The first key to answered prayer is in acknowledging to whom it is we are praying. Slow down as you examine v. 24, and note the specific things that should shape your perspective.

Notice what is happening in vv. 25–27. The quote from Psalm 2 is a prophetic utterance that unbelievers would try to come against God and against His people. The words David spoke were coming to pass and it was all in accordance with God's foreknowledge and will. Against whom were these persecutions actually aimed (v. 27)? _____

Jesus had promised the disciples that because He was persecuted they would be also. Peter would later write a word of encouragement to the believers in 1 Peter 4:12–14. Recap what he says there: _____

The Specific Request:

In the midst of strong threats, look at the confidence of their words in vv. 29–30. What is the essence of their prayer? _____

It's amazing these believers didn't pray to be free from persecution—they prayed to have *boldness in persecution!* This is the kind of prayer that prevails with God. But how often do we fall to our knees when our lives are shaken, instead of praying to be Holy Spirit shaken (v. 31)? Notice they did not all speak with tongues; what did they all speak? _____

Lesson: The Holy Spirit's empowering was not for the purpose of speaking in tongues. The *purpose* of the Holy Spirit's empowering is that we might become bold witnesses for Him.

The Overflowing Aftermath:

Because the prayer originated from the Holy Spirit, the result was also God-breathed. The "multitude that believed" experienced the overflowing grace that accompanies the outpouring of power. Jot down how God's grace was manifested among them. (Use this day's template to compose a prayer—*yours for the asking*—on day five.)

v. 32: _____
v. 33: _____
vv. 34–35: _____
vv. 36–37: _____

The first mention of Barnabas in the book of Acts is linked to him giving. Remembered for his benevolent spirit, he became recognized as the “Son of Encouragement” by the believers.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you’ve learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you’d like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week’s verse from memory.

3. What does this week’s verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer—*yours for the asking*—from what you’ve learned. Acknowledge to whom it is you make your request. Ask . . . and record the aftermath.

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