

Lesson 6: Acts 4:1-31 External Threat from the Jerusalem Establishment

Introduction



The awakening in Jerusalem has led to the salvation of thousands of Jews. Believers and non-believers alike are in awe of the wonders and signs accomplished through the apostles. The four reports of Acts 1-3 have all been positive. The commission and ascension of Jesus, the replacement of the twelfth Apostle, the miracle of Pentecost followed by a sermon from Peter, and the miracle of the lame man followed by a second sermon from Peter. It's all going well. If we were there in those days, we could easily imagine the growth of the church taking over the heart of Israel with the Temple of Judaism becoming a Temple to the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. With all the excitement and power and jubilation that's going on, we could picture the Gentile nations streaming into Zion to hear the Word of the Lord proclaimed by the twelve Apostles. The vision of Isaiah 2:3-4 becomes possible.

³ And many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
That He may teach us concerning His ways
For the law will go forth from Zion

⁴ And He will judge between the nations,
And they will hammer their swords into plowshares
Nation will not lift up sword against nation

To the house of the God of Jacob;
And that we may walk in His paths."

And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

And will render decisions for many peoples;
And their spears into pruning hooks.

And never again will they learn war.

But as much as it may feel like this might be the right time for those who were present at this moment, this is not the time. Jesus Christ is not coming to restore the Kingdom to Israel. The restoration of all things is set for a far distant future. This is the time for witness. The nations will not stream in. Christians will have to stream out. The awakening is about to experience opposition.

The men who hold power and position in the dominant institutions of Israel are not excited by this stirring up of Jerusalem. They will attempt to end this new movement before it grows any larger. Threat against the new community will not be limited to external forces. They will also experience internal problems. They are growing fast. Will they be able to administrate a movement grown from 120 to over 5000 in a few days? Will the new members of the movement align with the teaching of the Apostles? Will the Apostles maintain their own integrity and focus as they grow in power and influence?

¹ David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 28-31.

The next four reports in Acts alternate between external threat and internal threat. We begin with an external threat. The new community is growing, it's dynamic, it's reformative. They bring new teaching, new methods, new life. They participate in the established norms of institutional religion, attending Temple prayer times and celebrating feast days. But not quietly. Their worship and teaching disturb the way things have always been done. And they go beyond, showing a dangerous independence from the established institutions. They listen to their own teachers. They have their own prayer times. They have their own rituals of baptism and the Lord's Supper. They meet in homes outside of Temple and synagogue. They are even independent from the financial system of the Temple and government, giving out of their own means to care for one another.

It is not quite correct to call this new movement, the Church, or to call the members, Christians. We could do that in retrospect, but nobody is calling it that now. But even using the word, member, at this stage of growth probably brings up the wrong idea. They are members of a movement by their own participation and conviction, but nobody has gone through membership classes. Nobody has got their names put on a list. This is a grassroots movement by Jews within the established society of Israel within the established religion of Judaism. It is not something different than Judaism at this point. It is a movement within Judaism. They are not trying to start a new religion. They are inviting all Jews to be true Jews in their reception and worship of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ. They understand themselves as fulfilling Old Testament religion, not opposing it. They don't think they need to convert the Temple into a worship of Jesus. The Temple ought to already be dedicated to the worship of the Son.

In their fervent convictions, they are critical of the current leadership. Quite literally, they have accused these leaders of murdering the Messiah. They would argue that the current religious institutions and practices need reformation before they can even be understood as rightly following the intent of Old Testament religion. And then, having reformed the current wineskin, they would need to give it up for a new wineskin. In that sense, the new movement is after more than reformation and revival of the Old. Their revival is to lead to something New, not disconnected from the Old, but understood as a fulfillment of the Old that leads to something different, in some ways radically different from the Old.

How do we expect the keepers of the institutions to respond? There were the keepers, the priests and nobility, the lawyers and clerks, Temple workers, synagogue leaders, religious laymen - they all take a great pride in the longevity of Judaism. They ground their identity and their family's identity in being Jewish, and we've always been Jewish, and this is the way we've always done things. They arrange their yearly schedule according to Jewish ritual and feasts. Their honor in society comes from regular attendance at synagogue and temple and raising up obedient sons and daughters to do the same. They are the establishment, the keepers of Jewish institutions.

We are familiar with this type of dynamic between the old conservatives and the new reformers. Historically, think about the Reformation. Martin Luther desired to reform the Roman Catholic Church according to biblical morality and doctrine. He was not out to start a new church, a new institution. But severe opposition led to something new that became labeled as Protestant. Similarly, John Wesley, a major figure of the great Evangelical Revival in Britain, had no initial desire to separate from the Anglican Church. He sought reform. But as more and more doors were closed on him and he had this growing flock that was outside of the Church, that opposition from the establishment, that Church, led to the ostracization led to them being labeled as, Methodists. And they began to organize and a new institution came into being.

If you live in a country with a strong state church, whether it's Eastern Orthodox, or Roman Catholic, or Anglican, or Lutheran, or Reformed, you can likely identify with the tension between the establishment and newer, Gospel-centered movements. It's going on all the time. You can also identify with this tension if you come from a place where you have belonged to an older, mainline, Christian institution, such as a Methodist, Episcopalian or Presbyterian denomination. There is

struggle between those who want to keep things the way they are, and those who want to see change and reformation. If you are around church long enough, I believe that it is inevitable that you will experience this tension to some degree on a local level as younger generations challenge the teaching, and morality, and enthusiasm of the older establishment. New is not always better. Old is not always better. The question for both the young challenge for reform and the old established conservatism comes down to the will of God for the community based on the Word of God and the mission God has given the church. We need to stay true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to the Word of God, and when we get out of alignment, we need correction.

In the example of the Jerusalem Awakening recorded in Acts 1-6, we see that the old establishment has wandered far from God. And we see that the new movement is in line with the will of God to bring about a new way of doing things, that fulfills the promises of the old, according to the New Covenant teaching of Jesus Christ.

Everything has gone splendidly up to this point. Jesus said, “Wait for the Holy Spirit and then witness to my name.” They have. And crowds of people responded in faith. But the keepers of Jewish religion, tradition and institutions are not going to sit by quietly while these Jesus followers upend society. In Acts 4, the establishment responds, giving us our first report of external threat.

We will address this external threat in three parts. We start with the arrest and defense of Peter and John in Acts 4:1-12. Then we consider the threat and release from the ruling Council in verses 13-22. And we end with the prayer and witness of the new community in verses 23-31.

We begin with the arrest and defense of Peter and John. This is Acts 4:1-12.

Arrest and Defense of Peter and John (4:1-12)

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. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. 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?” ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, ⁹ if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, ¹⁰ let 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.”

That is awesome. That’s when you imagine how you wish you would have done it. This is exactly it. We start with a strong contrast between the Temple leaders and the gathered crowd. The commotion in the Temple at prayer time has attracted official members of the establishment who, we are told, are disturbed that Peter is teaching the people and particularly disturbed by his assertion that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. In contrast, verse 4 reports, “But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.” Wow! Five thousand! Three thousand believed after Peter’s sermon at Pentecost. This sermon brings the new community up to five thousand. Peter’s witness continues to bear astonishing fruit.

The political and religious establishment in Jerusalem, however, is not excited about this spiritual enthusiasm. In this text, the response inside the Temple grounds comes from the priestly class:

priests, captain of the Temple guard, Sadducees. Let's clarify some of the establishment terminology we are going to encounter through Acts.

When left to themselves, the Sadducees and Pharisees engage in heated debate over the understanding and application of the Law. In the Gospels, their animosity towards Jesus brings them together. Both are movements within Judaism. Both are religious and political. The Pharisees support an oral tradition that clarifies and adds to the laws of Moses. Many Pharisees held positions as priests but also valued making a living through some craft, like Paul the tent maker.² This meant they could move from town to town and gave them influence throughout Israel. Even after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans later, the Pharisaic movement will live on through Rabbinic Judaism.

Sadducees were connected with the priestly class in Jerusalem. They held to a more limited application of the Law of Moses, leaving them open to criticism by the more observant Pharisees. They interpreted the Law as giving no promise of an afterlife and rejected the belief that the faithful would be resurrected. They were more concerned with the present life and the status quo, which ensured their own positions.

Luke gives two reasons why the Temple officials were disturbed. They were disturbed that Peter and John were teaching. That alone was a problem. What position or education do they have that gives them the right to instruct people who have come to the Temple to worship? In addition, they are disturbed by the claim Jesus was raised from the dead. This is a problematic claim for all Jerusalem's leaders, considering that they are the ones who had Jesus put to death. The resurrection vindicates Jesus and condemns them. It is an especially problematic idea for the Sadducees who deny the resurrection all together. Not only does Peter's claim of resurrection communicate they were wrong about Jesus in particular, but it also communicates that the whole Sadducean movement is wrong concerning the Biblical teaching of an afterlife.

In verse five we get another list of those who stand against Peter and John: rulers, elders and scribes. Ruler here refers to leaders of the priestly class, including the current high priest, and former high priests, and other priests high up in the hierarchy. The term, elders, includes non-priestly members of the Jewish nobility. And scribes are men who can read and write. In this context they are lawyers and administrators in Jerusalem.³ These men make up the ruling council known as the Sanhedrin, which will be referred to in verse 15 as the Council. F. F. Bruce calls the Sanhedrin, the Senate and the Supreme Court of the Jewish nation.⁴ The Sanhedrin existed within a Roman political model that allowed extensive, but still limited self-governance for the Jews. Though not a fixed rule in practice, the number of Sanhedrin members was theoretically 71 in reference to the 70 elders God told Moses to appoint in Numbers 11:16, with Moses making up the 71st member of that group. So the idea is that you have 70 representatives on the Council and then you have the high priest and that's 71. It can't be determined from the records whether the Sanhedrin met inside the Temple grounds or just outside of the Temple grounds.

This is the Jewish establishment that just two months previously voted to execute Jesus. They were led in that judgment by the high priest Caiaphas and his father-in-law, the ex-high priest Annas, both of whom are present also in this passage, being disturbed with the other members of the Sanhedrin by the activity of Peter and John.

² B. D. Chilton. *Judaism in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. B. Green & S. McKnight (Eds.). (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 403.

³ J. B. Polhill. *The New American Commentary: Acts*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992) 141.

⁴ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 91.

Having clarified the opposition, we can pick back up in the trial of the two Apostles with the question posed in verse 7, “When they had placed them in the center, they *began to* inquire, ‘By what power, or in what name, have you done this?’”

We discussed in our last lesson how the name of Jesus is shorthand for the true nature of Jesus. His name is who he is; Jesus that Nazarene, a real man raised in a historical time and place; Jesus the Christ, the Son of David who will reign forever; Jesus, the prophet, the one like Moses who institutes New Covenant; Jesus the servant who came to lay down his life to bear our iniquities; Jesus the Son of God, distinct from and yet one with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. This is who Jesus is. This is his name.

Another nuance is implied by the Sanhedrin’s question. By what power or name do you do this asks, “To whom do you owe allegiance, to whom do you look to for power and authority? Who is your patron, or who is your Lord, or who is your God? By what name do you operate?” In this sense of the word, name, Peter and John act as ambassadors or servants on behalf of someone else. They do not act, in the name of Caesar or in the name of Herod or in the name of the high priest. They do not have letters from the high priest that’s allowing them to do what they’re doing. They act in the name of Jesus. Their commission is from Jesus. Peter does not hesitate to declare his allegiance. This is so good, I’m going to read it again. Verses 8-12.

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, ⁹ if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, ¹⁰ let 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.”

That is bold. “The man you crucified just 50 days ago! That man you had on trial here before you! That man, Jesus the Messiah, the Nazarene! It is by his authority and power, by his name that the healing of this man has taken place. It is by his power and we act under his authority.”

Peter quotes here from Psalm 118, which, by the way, is the same Psalm that contains the words shouted when Jesus entered into Jerusalem, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD! (Psalm 118:26).” That’s verse 26. Here, Peter quotes a different verse, verse 22, “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner *stone*.” Peter updates that prophecy, identifying the members of the Sanhedrin as the builders, “He is the stone which was rejected by you.”

Psalm 118 is a Psalm of thanksgiving for salvation. Verse 14 and 21 declare, “The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation... I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me, and You have become my salvation.” The stone rejected by the rulers has become the chief corner stone. That’s the prophecy of the Psalm and that’s what Peter says is happening right here. The whole edifice depends on the cornerstone. The cornerstone must be solid, it must be true. It must be unmovable. Having laid the cornerstone, the walls of the building run true if the angles of the cornerstone are perfectly fashioned at 90 degrees. Each wall that comes off that corner runs straight if the cornerstone runs straight. If the angle of the cornerstone does not run true, the walls angle in or angle out. Jesus is the cornerstone. When you understand who he is and build your life and institutions - movements, churches - based on the reality of his name, your walls run true.

The people of God need true leadership that saves, guides, teaches, protects. We need a Messiah who can save and lead humanity as a man and yet, without the weaknesses of man. The Messiah we need, the true cornerstone, must be both God and man. The true Messiah must both die and reign. The true Messiah came as the cornerstone that makes sense of the Old Testament promises and enables the construction of a New Covenant people. The leaders of Israel rejected this vision of the

Messiah. They rejected the idea that he could be the cornerstone of truth. They rejected Jesus. And they were wrong.

They could not prevent him from becoming the chief cornerstone. But they could ensure that the institutions that they led, that they held on to so tightly would veer off at wrong angles. They could ensure the demise of the Temple, the demise of Judaism as they knew it. Every good spiritual institution that wanders away from Jesus, wanders away from God, wanders away from truth, those institutions die. They may remain for ages to come as lifeless shells opposed to the God they claim but the life in them will go out. This is a warning to us.

Every Christian institution must regularly re-evaluate whether its purpose and allegiance continue to run true based on the chief cornerstone. Do we exist for the glory of God and his will? Do we align ourselves to his purposes, under his lordship, according to his Word? Do we remain committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as he has revealed himself to be?

Or do we exist to exist? To continue on the traditions we have established, living in a past that is truly past, holding on to our positions out of our own desire for prestige, value, and security? Have we veered away from the truth of who he is, such that our allegiance is given to a god fashioned for our own liking? And how long has this been true? Have we not noticed that the Lord has already left his Temple?

Jesus is the cornerstone. We can add cornerstone now to the list of names for Jesus Peter has given us in his two sermons. And Peter adds here another name here. His name is, Savior. "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 4:12)." To this point, Peter has made clear that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. "Repent and return so that you may be forgiven and experience refreshment in the presence of the Lord." Here, Peter makes clear that not only is Jesus Savior, there is no other. He is exclusively Savior. Buddha has not died for you, nor could he. Mohammed has not died for you, nor could he. Mary has not died for you, nor could she. John F. Kennedy has not died for you, nor could he. No religious leader, or political leader, or humanitarian leader, or King, or President, or Pope, or Rabbi, or Imam, or Guru, or Saint has died for you, nor could they.

We have a universal problem. The wages of sin is death. We have one universal solution, the Godman who gave up his life for the sin of the world to take our place. Peter is exclusive because the solution is exclusive. For these Jews who claim allegiance to Yahweh, Peter's call to repent and return indicates that they have gone off on the wrong trajectory. They have based their understanding of Yahweh on the wrong corner stone. Their vision of Yahweh is, in fact, not Yahweh. The Yahweh who rejects Jesus Christ is not the Yahweh who is. The salvation of Yahweh comes through the name, Jesus Christ. "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."

This is what Peter was teaching the crowd just before he was arrested. "And on the basis of faith in His name, *it is* the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which *comes* through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all." Faith in the name gave that man physical healing. Faith in the name of Jesus, and Jesus alone, is God's provision for your spiritual healing. The crowd responded with faith. Many more believed and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased to 5000. These members of the establishment sought a way to shut down this movement before it got completely out of hand. They are ready to take an initial shot at the leadership, but being political leaders, they are held back somewhat by the current atmosphere. The populace is with the Apostles because of the amazing, public miracle of healing a recognizable man they had all known to be lame for forty years.

In this environment, the Council only threatens Peter and John and then releases them. This is the middle section of our passage, verses 13-22.

Threat and Release of the Ruling Council (Acts 4:13-22)

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. ¹⁴ And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. ¹⁵ But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they *began* to confer with one another, ¹⁶ saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ "But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name." ¹⁸ And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; ²⁰ for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." ²¹ When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; ²² for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

Let's start with the initial observation. How do we take this observation from the members of the Sanhedrin?

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.

Uneducated and untrained. You know, these two were fishermen, right? How can they speak like they speak? How can they stand up so boldly and with such insightful use of Scripture and such clear conviction of their claims? How? How does this happen from uneducated and untrained men? They're amazed. Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would give them words to speak when they are opposed by people of power and influence in the world. That is happening right now. Peter's boldness has to call forth our respect. He is standing before the Senate and Supreme Court of the Jewish people, a body that brought about the crucifixion of Jesus, and rather than defend himself, he goes on the attack. "The name by which we healed is Jesus. He is the corner stone. You murdered him. Only by his name can a person be saved." That's aggressive. That's not defensive.

Luke has reminded us throughout that the Holy Spirit is at work. He is at work both in giving boldness and insight to the Apostles in their witness and in convicting the 5000 Jews who have turned to Jesus. We recognized that the Spirit is at work. This Peter who fearfully denied Jesus while standing in the courtyard of the high priest couple of months ago now himself is on trial, fearlessly testifying to Jesus, even reversing the charge to judge his judges.

How do we account for this radical change in Peter, from denier to witness? I have been taught as a young Christian that the change is due to the Holy Spirit. You know, what's the difference between Peter in the courtyard and Peter himself on trial? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had not come yet. The Holy Spirit is here now. And that makes sense to me. The indwelling power of the Spirit changes a man. I accept that the primary reason for the change is the Holy Spirit. Though I now want to say that it is a bit more complicated than that, that there is more to it. You do not place your faith in Christ, experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and then immediately become like Peter.

First, the charge that these men are uneducated and untrained men is a false charge based on the pretensions of the elite. Yes, by way of class, these two men are fishermen. The assumption is that, if you did not go to a Sanhedrin approved university then they can't truly be educated. It is the Ivy league schools, the Harvard and Yale, looking down on everybody else. Or just the university and college kids looking down on people who haven't gone to university. Like you can't be intelligent and knowledgeable if you haven't gone to university. In the Jerusalem system, the training and education

of these men would have come through the Temple establishment. Peter and John have no experience at all with the Temple establishment. They weren't trained here.

So, are they really uneducated? The Apostles heard the full sermons that Jesus gave through three years of ministry, not only the excerpts we get in the Gospels. They heard a lot more. Now, Luke has told us that Jesus opened the Scripture and explained to Apostles all about himself from the Law and the Prophets. Where do all the great Old Testament quotes come from in Peter's sermons? He is not uneducated. They learned about the Word of God and Kingdom of God from Jesus. They even got to discuss his sermons with him after the crowd left. And yes, they may have appeared pretty poor students at times, but that's ultimately the education process. The professors are not often dismayed by wise sayings of first and second year students. If they understood everything right away, they would not need educating.

We can also ask, are they untrained? No. They had better training for ministry than any of the men sitting in judgment against them. Peter and John saw Jesus preach about the kingdom of God, then they were sent out by Jesus in pairs, then they returned to Jesus to give feedback and receive further instruction. They were in training with Jesus.

And these men of power notice that Peter and John "had been with Jesus." But their elitist prejudice does not make the connection between being with Jesus and being educated and trained.

They were apprenticed to Jesus. They didn't just come to Jesus to sit in classrooms. That's not what a disciple is. They did sit at his feet, and that was a good thing. Mary was praised for that kind of thing, to sit and to learn from the instruction of Jesus. But along with that they learned actively with Jesus. They saw the model of Jesus. They were given instruction by Jesus. They were taught how to do things by Jesus. They learned prayer from the instruction and model of Jesus. They learned about wealth from the instruction and model of Jesus. They learned about morality from the instruction and model of Jesus. They learned compassion, and worship, and tough love from Jesus. And they learned this in the context of life and relationship. Jesus cared about them, spent time with them, taught them, discussed with them, gave them assignments, evaluated their ministry.

Were these men uneducated and untrained? Only if you limit your definition of education and training to the official, Rabbinical institutions.

I believe we need to add Peter's education and training as a component used by the Holy Spirit to explain how he is able to stand here and speak the way he speaks. He is bold, both because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and because he had been with Jesus over time.

I think we need to add a third element that worked in his character to make him into the man that he is as he stands firmly before the Sanhedrin. A critical element of Peter's formation is failure. Now, past failure does not automatically lead to future success. But on the other hand, it is impossible to grow in character without failure. I am often kicking myself for my failures, and I have these regrets built up, and I go back and think, "Why didn't I say that differently? Why didn't I do that differently?" And I just wish it had never been. But would I be who I am today if I hadn't failed in the way I had failed in the past? If I'm wishing away the failure, I am also wishing away the development that the failure brought, what I learned from the failure. And I do wish it away, some of them. The sinful ones, the painful ones, where I hurt other people. And yet, I also have to acknowledge that God has taken that and used it to mature me. Peter had a number of failures to grow from. The most significant was his denial of Jesus. Peter the leader was humbled. He boasted about his faithfulness to Jesus and then he failed to live up to his boast. Two keys for Peter's growth from failure are: one, he knew Jesus and: two, Jesus restored him. Otherwise the failure wouldn't have worked in his favor. But he knew he could come back to Jesus because he believed in Jesus. More importantly, Jesus reached out to him. The story of John 21 where Jesus three times causes Peter to confess, "I love you" was the love of Jesus, giving Peter a chance to overturn his denials. And each time Jesus entrusted him with responsibility. "Feed my sheep. - I love you. - Feed my sheep. - I love you. - Feed my sheep." That

does something to a man. To fail and then to be forgiven, to be able to get it out, and be restored to position.

Apprenticeship to Jesus, failure and restoration by Jesus and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, these are the things that changed Peter into the bold witness standing strong and giving testimony in the hall of power.

The Council members go on to issue a command, “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”

Peter and John continue in boldness, responding in verses 19 and 20,

“Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

There is one of your best examples for civil disobedience. You can compare that to Romans 13, where Paul instructs believers to civil obedience. When civil obedience requires disobedience to the command of God, we go with God. Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses.” Peter and John cannot stop speaking in his name. There are certain non-negotiables that prevent reconciliation. In the case of established religious institutions, if they reject foundational truths, such as the fact that salvation is found in no other name but Jesus, then reform is not possible. If that doesn’t change, reform cannot be. The Jewish hierarchy is not willing to budge on rejection of Jesus and the Apostles are not willing to budge on the centrality of Jesus. And we have an impasse.

Interestingly, Psalm 118 that contains the reference to the cornerstone, also contains this in verses 8-9. “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.” Peter and John are taking refuge in the Lord.

For now, from the human perspective, Peter and John are protected from the Sanhedrin by the populace who recognize the man healed as one who was lame for forty years, attesting to the validity and power of the miracle. The leaders say, “We can’t deny it. We can’t lie about it.” So the Sanhedrin has them beaten, but considering that Jesus was crucified after he stood before this Council, the beating is a lighter punishment. And they rejoice that they might suffer for Jesus.

We close this lesson with the response of the new community after this threat and release, a response of prayer and witness. This is Acts 4:23-31.

Prayer and Witness of the New Community (Acts 4:23-31)

²³ When they had been released, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard *this*, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, ²⁵ who by the Holy Spirit, *through* the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, ‘WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? ²⁶ ‘THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.’ ²⁷ “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. ²⁹ “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, ³⁰ while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and *began* to speak the word of God with boldness.

I am impressed by the way the new community of believers uses God’s Word in prayer back to him as a way to frame their current circumstances. Prayer focuses how we see our circumstances.

Sometimes our prayer focus stays fixated on our own view of our circumstances. In our prayer we never really lift our eyes to God. And that is unfortunate. Much of the fruit of prayer comes when our focus shifts from the way we perceive our circumstances to the way God perceives our

circumstances. When our eyes lift up in prayer, off our troubles and onto God, we are then able to look back down at our circumstances from his perspective.

This community models that shift of perspective by using the Word of God to help them understand God's viewpoint. Prayer actively engages them in relational communication with God. They are looking up. They turn their eyes from the threat of the Jerusalem establishment to their Creator God. The Word of God then enables them to frame their circumstances in a way that agrees with God's thoughts and God's will.

These are their circumstances. God is doing something wonderful through their witness. But the highest powers in the city, who control the religious and political and social institutions have issued an edict to forbid further teaching and witnessing in the name of Jesus. Peter and John have already been tried and beaten. From a human perspective, it can only get worse if they continue on as they have been doing. How does God see this threat?

They start big in framing their prayer. "You God made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them (Exodus 20:11)." God is the right ruler of all things. Then they quote Psalm 2:1-2, establishing that the response of the men of influence is not a surprise.

WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.

First, the rulers are not gathered together primarily against the disciples. They are gathered together against the Lord and against his Christ. This principle of rulers taking their stand against God and his anointed one was recognized long ago, it's not new. So these gathered believers can understand the threat they have received as part of this long battle between the leaders of the world and God and his people.

That truth helps them understand what happened to Jesus. The Gentiles will rage against the Anointed One. "Yes. That happened. Pontius Pilate and Herod came against Jesus." And the peoples will engage in futile opposition. "That too. The peoples or nations includes Rome and Israel who both planned the execution of the Messiah." That intense opposition and cruel suffering inflicted on the Righteous One was predestined by God. So yes, these rage. And they're guilty. Pilate, and Herod, and Annas, and Caiaphas, and everybody around them, they are guilty of planning to undo the Anointed One. But God is in control. All of this was predestined.

"Predestined" here does not mean that God just looked ahead into the future, saw what was going to happen, and then declared that it would happen. "Predestined" means that God orchestrated events in such a way to bring about the end; to bring about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ at the hands of evil men. God knew that if Christ came in humility and truth, the forces of the world would want to snuff him out. And God controlled the timing. Jesus died at Passover because God wanted Jesus to die at Passover. That wasn't a nice coincidence of history. That was God's timing. The Roman and Jewish leaders acted out of their own will, determined to do evil. They were free and responsible agents. God knew he could count on the wickedness of their hearts. He proceeded with his plan, counting the cost, fully aware of the suffering ahead because he had predetermined the outcome.

As usual, the Biblical text does not attempt to reconcile the reality of God's sovereign will and man's accountability. The Bible teaches both as compatible truths. And rather than seeking an explanation to how God is sovereign, the new community recognizes the Biblical truth of God's sovereign will over events to find courage and understanding in their circumstances. They are not dismayed by opposition because they trust God has a plan, even if that plan includes suffering. Suffering is not a surprise to the Christian. The threat to shut down the Awakening does not mean that God has lost control and that God's plan is thwarted. The opposition is part of God's plan. He saw it coming ages ago.

Verses 29-30 give us the actual request.

And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.

Prayer based in Scripture has framed the circumstances in a way that leads to this particular request. The request is not that God would remove the threat. That would be an understandable and good request. And we do that all the time. “God, please, make it stop hurting.” “God, please, take away these evil leaders.” “God, change these circumstances.” Those aren’t bad requests. It is just not their request. Instead, they ask for confidence, boldness to continue in their witness despite the threats. They seem to express both a request that God would continue to work through healing and miracles and a confidence that God will continue to work through healing and miracles. Maybe it is more of the latter. It’s the confidence. As you do your part, God, please, help us to do our part. Help us to focus on what you are doing, not on what your enemies might do, so that we can be your servants in your work, not distracted by opposition or hardship or setback.

The prayer concludes with an affirmation that Jesus is central. “We know, God, that the miracles taking place are through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

This is a critical moment in the life of the new New Covenant community. In Exodus 19:18, Moses tells us that when God spoke at that critical moment in the life of the new Israel, “the whole mountain quaked violently.” We have already seen the similarity in the birth of the Church and the birth of Israel in the fire and the smoke of Sinai and Pentecost. In the early days of both Old Covenant and New Covenant peoples, when they were coming to be, God worked miracles to affirm the new communities of his presence during the critical days of their new formation. As the mountain shook then, the earthquakes now. The room they’re in shakes. And they are filled with the Holy Spirit.

The last phrase of the passage tells us that as a result of being filled with the Holy Spirit, “[they] began to speak the word of God with boldness.” And you could take that as something that happened right there in that prayer gathering. They began speaking the Word of God. That’s possible. I think it speaks more to what happened as they left the prayer gathering. They had asked God for courage to witness despite high-level opposition. And that is what happened. As they went back into their ministry, for the Apostles, or normal work and family life for the great majority, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness.

Rather than derail the early Church, the first major threat has further catalyzed their resolve to witness for Jesus. The threat that comes up in the next passage is more subtle and more dangerous, originating not from without but from within.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 4:1-22. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What motivates Jewish leaders to arrest Peter and John? How do you explain their harsh response after a great miracle has been performed?
3. What claims does Peter make about the gospel in his words to the Sanhedrin? What new claims or clarifications not yet mentioned in his previous two speeches?
4. In what way is it true that Peter and John were uneducated and untrained? In what way is it untrue that Peter and John were uneducated and untrained?
5. What do you think about Jesus’ method of preparing his disciples for ministry? Can his method be employed in some way in your own church or movement?
6. Read the community’s response in Acts 4:23-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
7. Apply the model of prayer by this community to a situation in your own life.