

ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT
A SERIES ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
(3) ADVERSITY TO FAITH

Acts 4:1-22

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PROLOGUE

In Acts chapter 3 we can read about the Apostles Peter and John at the Temple in Jerusalem. They were instrumental in the healing of a man who had been lame since birth. They gave credit for the healing to Jesus of Nazareth. In chapter 4 we read of the response of the religious authorities to this healing and to the things Peter and John said about it.

SCRIPTURE

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, ²much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. ³So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

⁵The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’

¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

¹³Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. ¹⁴When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. ¹⁶They said, “What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all

who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. ¹⁷But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” ²¹After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. ²²For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old (Acts 4:1-22 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

What do you do when you face adversity because of what you believe? Historically, for most Americans, this would be considered a strange question. Our constitution guarantees freedom of religion. But for millions of Christians around the world, from the ancient past to the present day, this is a seriously pertinent question. Christian believers living under totalitarian governments or as minorities in countries where the majority religion is antagonistic to the Christian faith frequently face harassment and persecution.

Of course, Christians are not the only ones who experience persecution. And, sadly, we also have to admit with shame that sometimes it is Christians who are the ones who are doing the persecuting of others. We need to clearly communicate that this is an un-Christ-like behavior and humbly pray that those involved will repent of this and resolve to demonstrate Christ-like compassion to one and all.

In terms of sheer numbers, though, it is far more likely that someone in the world who is suffering for his or her faith will be a follower of Jesus. Church historians often refer to the first three centuries of Christianity as the "Age of Persecution." But the reality is that more Christians were martyred in the 20th Century than all other centuries combined. And even today, upwards of 200 million Christians around the world face the possibility of persecution on a daily basis.

The Bible makes it clear that if you cling to what is right and true, you should not be surprised if there are people who despise you. Jesus said to his followers, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (John 15:20). Now they may not openly persecute you in this country. But you may have to deal with subtle hints of unacceptability, the "goody-two-shoes" label, remarks about hypocrisy or being judgmental, as well as the double-standard that the world gives religious types.

But the real question is not so much, “Are you willing to die for your faith,” as it is, “Are you willing to live for your faith?” If you are serious about your faith, you will stick out. Christianity falls short whenever it is so wishy-washy that the wicked of the world no longer persecute it, but ignore it. If you wanted a comfortable religion, according to C. S. Lewis, you should never have picked Christianity; it is the most uncomfortable religion in the world.

The first recorded opposition to the Christian movement is found in Acts chapter 4. How Peter and John handle persecution is, I believe, instructive for any and all of us facing adversity for what we believe.

1. CONSCIENCE

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed (Acts 4:1-2a).

The first lesson is this – We are better able to deal with adversity if we have a clear conscience.

Of course, there may be situations where we may need help in order to tell if we have a clear conscience. On an examination paper, a certain professor required his students to sign a form stating they had received no outside assistance while taking the exam. Unsure of whether he should sign the form, a student told the professor that he had prayed for the assistance of God. The professor carefully studied the student’s answers and then said, "You can sign with a clear conscience. God definitely did not assist you."

The healing of the lame man took place in a crowded part of the Temple. A great many people saw what Peter and John did and heard what they said and responded favorably. Into this crowded scene came the priests, the captain of the Temple, and the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a small but highly influential priestly party. For all practical purposes, they controlled the Temple. They were seen as corrupt collaborators with Rome. Their power and wealth grew out of this collaboration. Their chief goal was to maintain the status quo – a status they thought was threatened by Peter and John’s presence in the Temple.

Peter and John were arrested and placed in custody overnight. The next day they were brought before the Sanhedrin – a kind of supreme court for the Jews. But Peter and John had done nothing wrong. Peter underscored this with his implied question, “Are we being brought up on charges because we helped a man who was sick?”

There was no denying that the man had been helped. His was not a temporary injury that

might have healed on its own. He had been lame all of his more than forty years of life. Peter knew his conscience was clear. He had been doing good and not evil. He would later write:

Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God (1 Pet 3:16b-18 NRSV).

If you suffer for doing something that is morally wrong there is no gain in that and much that can be lost. The shame is all on you. But if you suffer for your faith while doing what is right then there are at least three benefits. One – You put the shame on your attackers. Two – You are following in the footsteps of Jesus, walking in the way your Savior has already walked. And Three – your suffering may lead to your attacker's redemption. This is what happened to Paul. He persecuted the earliest Christians but later became one of Christianity's greatest champions.

2. RESURRECTION

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead (Acts 4:8-10).

We are better able to deal with adversity if we have a clear conscience. And we are better able to deal with adversity if we stand on the resurrection.

The Sanhedrin contained both Pharisees and Sadducees (as well as others¹). The Pharisees were another small but influential religious party in ancient Judaism. They believed that a righteous person who died would someday be resurrected and experience life in a new age. The Sadducees did not recognize any kind of afterlife. But they tolerated the Pharisees because they considered the Pharisees' belief in the resurrection to be a theoretical and distant hope.

¹ The Sanhedrin had seventy-one members including: the high priest, various other priests (most of whom were Sadducees), scribes (who were experts in traditional law), Pharisees, and several elders (respected men from the community).

Then along came Peter and John with the emphatic message that the resurrection was no longer theoretical nor distant. It happened to Jesus of Nazareth. He was killed by his enemies and within three days seen alive again by hundreds of witnesses.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the foundation stone of the Christian faith. If it is true then it has profound implications for how we view Jesus, how we relate to God, how we think about life, how we connect to other Christians, and how we make use of the time we have been given.

Our faith stands on the resurrection. It is an essential belief worth suffering for. In contrast, there are some beliefs so trivial in nature which, if held in the face of persecution, would deny glory to God, rob the martyr of nobility, and remove the possibility of redemptive suffering.

Dan Ericksen tells of an interesting story from American church history. In the 1890's there was a small Baptist church in Mayfield County, Kentucky that split into two congregations. One group believed that there should be a small wooden peg on the back wall for the pastor's hat. The other group believed that was an outrage and insisted that there should never be a peg on the back wall for the pastor's hat. Today the residents of Mayfield County still refer to the two churches as Peg Baptist Church and Anti-Peg Baptist Church. Question: Is it worth it to suffer, maybe even be killed, because of your beliefs about pegs on a wall?

On the other hand, belief in the resurrection is not only worth suffering for, the reality of the resurrection makes suffering bearable. What people may do to us is only temporary. What God does lasts forever. Lloyd Ogilvie has said:

The worst that [people] can do is only a prelude to the best that God has to offer.²

3. PRIORITIES

But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

We are better able to deal with adversity if we have a clear conscience. We are better able to deal with adversity if we stand on the resurrection. And we are better able to deal with

² Ogilvie, L. J., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1983). Acts (Vol. 28, p. 89). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc.

adversity if we know our priorities.

This is an election year and elections always challenge our priorities. But animals seem to do better than people. Question: “What’s a horse’s top priority when voting?” Answer: “A stable economy.”

The Sanhedrin referred to Peter and John as “uneducated and ordinary” – terms far more insulting than the English translation suggests. But, as always, there is a difference between education and insight, between intelligence and wisdom. A really smart person could figure out a dozen ways to break into a bank vault. A wise person knows *not* to do it. Intelligence can tell you how to do something. Wisdom tells you whether it is right to do it. Through their experience with Jesus, Peter and John had become wise.

The Sanhedrin told the Apostles to cease teaching about Jesus. In response, Peter and John raised a rhetorical question, “Are we supposed to obey you and disobey God or obey God and disobey you?” They had the right priorities. Their first allegiance was to God.

How do you know if civil disobedience is justified? This is not an easy question to answer. It is made more complicated by the fact that our fallen natures can rationalize almost any kind of bad behavior. So we must be on our guard.

There are certain principles that Christians have used down through the ages to guide them in this matter. They are not foolproof, but I believe they can be a practical guide for most situations. Generally speaking, you can and must disobey an authority if they:

- Forbid you to do what God requires. For example, if a law was passed that made Christian worship illegal, as it is in some places in the world, a Christian is still obligated to worship God. There may be consequences to this. Faithfulness to God may mean persecution or some other kind of suffering (Matthew 5:10-12).
- Require you to do what God forbids. If someone in authority whether parent, teacher, pastor, general or president, orders you to do wrong, such as murdering someone, you are not to obey.

Please do not use these principles as an excuse to expand your level of disobedience. Even if a particular authority violates one of these principles, that is not a license to completely reject that person or ignore what they say in other matters. If the government says you cannot worship and it also tells you not to rob banks then you must disregard the first law but are still obligated to keep the second.

The important question is, "Do you know your priorities?" In other words, "To whom do you listen?" Do the voices of your peers sound louder in your ears than the voice of God?

As Peter and John have demonstrated, we must listen to God. And if we are willing to stand up and be counted because we belong to the Lord, we join a noble company. Jesus declared, "For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11). It is to join with the prophets and apostles of old and share their same fellowship. It is to be numbered with all those who have given themselves to the grand and glorious adventure of serving God in the world. Let us keep our consciences clear, stand on the resurrection, and listen to God.