

The Persecution of the Church

Freddy Fritz / General

Turning the World Upside Down / Persecution; Jewish Opposition to Christians; Holy Spirit; Evangelism; Boldness; Obedience / Acts 4:1-22
Acts 4:1-22 shows us how the church handles persecution.

Introduction

Open Doors is an organization that monitors the persecution of Christians around the world.

According to their 2024 World Watch List, “more than 365 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith” (see <https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>).

Open Doors has the following statistics for this past year on their website:

- 1 in 7 Christians was persecuted,
- 4,998 Christians were murdered,
- 14,766 churches and Christian properties were attacked, and
- 4,125 Christians were detained (for being Christian).

The persecution of Christians began very early in the book of Acts.

Sometime after the Day of Pentecost, Peter and John went up to the temple to pray. On their way in they saw a man who was lame from birth.

The lame man asked them for alms. Peter said to the man, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” ([Acts 3:6](#)). Astonishingly, the man got up immediately and walked.

A great crowd of people gathered in the temple precincts at the portico called Solomon’s. Peter took the opportunity to share with the people that this man had been healed by Jesus.

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, they were arrested and thrown into jail.

And so began the first persecution of the church recorded in the book of Acts.

Scripture

Let's read [Acts 4:1-22](#):

¹ And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

⁵ On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” 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.”

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.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.²² For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

Lesson

[Acts 4:1-22](#) shows us how the church handles persecution.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. Expect Opposition (4:1-7)
2. Be Filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8a)
3. Share the Gospel at Every Opportunity (4:8b-13)
4. Obey God at All Costs (4:14-22)

I. Expect Opposition (4:1-7)

First, expect opposition.

Peter had been telling the vast crowd at Solomon’s colonnade how the lame man had been healed. Peter insisted that it was Jesus who had healed the lame man.

It would seem that Peter had finished preaching and now he and John “**were speaking to the people**” (v. 1a), presumably answering their questions.

As they were doing so, “**the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them**” (v. 1b). Luke said that these religious leaders were “**greatly annoyed**” (v. 2a).

First, they were greatly annoyed because Peter and John **“were teaching the people”** (v. 2b). Had there been only a handful of people, I doubt that the religious leaders would have done anything. But Peter and John were speaking to thousands of people. What undoubtedly irritated the authorities was that Peter and John had no official teaching credentials. They had not gone to their official rabbinical schools.

Second, the religious leaders were annoyed because Peter and John were **“proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead”** (v. 2c). These very same religious authorities had executed Jesus just several months earlier as a blasphemer. Now these apostles were proclaiming that Jesus could not only heal the sick but could even raise the dead. The Sadducees did not believe in a future resurrection. So, the apostles’ teaching about a resurrection in Jesus was a direct assault on their theology.

Verse 3 tells us that the religious leaders **“arrested [Peter and John] and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.”** It was too late to convene a meeting of the Sanhedrin. So, they simply imprisoned the apostles until the next day.

This shows the level of opposition to the apostles and their teaching. The Jewish authorities could have simply summoned them to appear the next day. But they took the more threatening step of imprisoning Peter and John.

Keep in mind that this was the very same Sanhedrin that just a few months earlier had pronounced Jesus guilty of blasphemy and orchestrated his death by Roman crucifixion.

Luke makes a very important note in his Gospel. Rather than the imprisonment of Peter and John hurting their ministry, Luke noted in verse 4, **“But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.”** Instead of stifling the growth of the church, the church continued to grow.

The next day, the Sanhedrin convened. The Jewish Sanhedrin functioned as both the Supreme Court of Israel and the Congress of Israel. It consisted of seventy-one members, including the high priest. It was the supreme legislative and theological body in the land. The place where they met was circular so that the members could see one another.

The two apostles were brought into this very intimidating setting. Likely, the healed man was also with Peter and John because verse 14 says that the Sanhedrin could see “the man who was healed standing beside them.”

The Sanhedrin asked Peter and John a very simple question, “**By what power or by what name did you do this?**” (v. 7). That is, “Peter and John, who gave you authority to teach?”

As far as the Sanhedrin were concerned, they were the ruling authority. And teaching that contradicted their teaching was an act of rebellion against them.

Jesus was at work in his church. He was continuing to do and teach through his apostles what he himself had done. He was alive. His followers were transformed by that truth. And they were continuing what he had begun.

When Jesus is at work in the life of a church, we must expect opposition. It should not come as a surprise to us.

The first opposition to the church following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus came from the very same authorities who had pronounced Jesus guilty of blasphemy and had him sentenced to death.

Jesus had warned his disciples to expect persecution. He said to them in [John 15:18-20a](#):

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus also said, “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God” ([John 16:2](#)).

So, we must expect opposition. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, opposition is the norm.

II. Be Filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8a)

Second, be filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Sanhedrin wanted to know by what authority the apostles were acting.

We read in verse 8a, **“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them....”**
What a wonderful statement!

There are two reasons we know that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit.

First, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit because he shared the gospel so clearly. Jesus said to his disciples in [Luke 12:11-12](#), “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, *for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.*”

And second, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit because he shared the gospel so boldly. Verse 13 talks about “the boldness of Peter and John.” It was evident to the entire Sanhedrin. And they were astonished by their boldness.

The Greek word for “bold” or “boldness” occurs 11 times in the book of Acts. And every time it is associated with sharing the gospel. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to enable the bold proclamation of the gospel.

Do you want to know if you are filled with the Holy Spirit? One way you can tell that you are filled with the Holy Spirit is when you boldly share the good news of the gospel with others.

Be assured that when you face opposition and even persecution, God will fill you with his Holy Spirit so that you can boldly proclaim the good news of the gospel.

III. Share the Gospel at Every Opportunity (4:8b-13)

Third, share the gospel at every opportunity.

Peter was not at all intimidated into silence or compromise.

Rather, he took the opportunity to explain to the Sanhedrin how the lame man had been healed. He said to them in verse 8b-10:

^{8b} “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.”

Peter turned the table on the Sanhedrin. He said that they had Jesus crucified. But God raised Jesus from the dead. And it was this very same Jesus who had healed the lame man.

Then, in verse 12, Peter gave a direct invitation to the Sanhedrin to be saved by Jesus. He said, **“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.”**

Peter did not compromise his message. He did not fudge his message. He did not shade the truth.

He spoke the truth boldly and left the outcome to the Lord.

Peter Cartwright (1785 - 1872) was a great circuit-riding Methodist preacher in Illinois. An uncompromising man, he had come north from Tennessee because of his opposition to slavery. One Sunday morning when he was scheduled to preach, his deacons told him that President Andrew Jackson was in the congregation. Knowing Cartwright was used to saying whatever he felt God wanted him to say, regardless of how people might react, they warned him not to say anything that would offend the President.

Cartwright stood up to preach and said, “I understand President Andrew Jackson is here. I have been requested to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson will go to Hell if he does not repent.”

The audience was shocked. They wondered how the President would respond to this, but after the service, the President told Cartwright, “Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, I could whip the world” (R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire, Preaching the Word* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996], 64).

It was this kind of bold sharing of the gospel at every opportunity—as Peter did—that turned the world upside down.

One commentator I read said that there were around 500 disciples in 30 AD at the time of Jesus’ resurrection. Just over thirty years later, when Luke wrote the book of Acts in 62 AD, he estimated that there were over 200,000 disciples of Jesus. The world population was a little over 200 million people. There was 1 disciple of Jesus for every 1,000 people in the world.

Today, there are approximately 2.5 billion professing Christians in the world. Of that number, there are perhaps as many as 1 billion Protestants. Let’s say that

only 1 out of 3 Protestants are true disciples of Jesus. There are just over 8 billion people in the world today. Therefore, there is approximately 1 disciple of Jesus for every 25 people in the world today.

Jesus is still turning the world upside down today.

Let us share the gospel at every opportunity.

IV. Obey God at All Costs (4:14-22)

And fourth, obey God at all costs.

The Sanhedrin did not know what to say. Luke said in verse 14, **“But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.”**

The Sanhedrin dismissed the apostles. They conferred with one another. After a while, the Sanhedrin **“called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus”** (v. 18). They tried to squelch the sharing of the gospel.

“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, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard’ ” (vv. 19-20).

Peter and John refused to stop doing what God had commanded. God had commanded that they proclaim the gospel. And no court on earth could override the command of God.

So, facing persecution, the apostles made it clear that they would obey God at all costs.

And obey God they did. As far as we know, eleven of Jesus’ apostles died as martyrs for the sake of the gospel. Only the apostle John escaped martyrdom, although he apparently survived boiling oil and was banished to the Isle of Patmos.

In the past four years, we all experienced COVID and the ensuing lockdowns.

Some pastors were threatened with lawsuits and fines because they refused to stop preaching the gospel.

Some pastors were even thrown in jail because they refused to stop preaching the gospel.

This happened in just the past few years in our country!

We must obey God at all costs, even at the cost of our liberty, if necessary.

Conclusion

We have just examined the first record in the book of Acts of the persecution of the church.

If you are a disciple of Jesus, you should be prepared to face opposition and even persecution for the sake of Jesus.

In past years, you may have seen posters like, “Join the Navy, see the world!” or, “Join the military, get tuition for college.”

The harsh truth is that enlistment in the military carries serious risks.

For example, the crew and families of the USS *Cole* were reminded of that on October 12, 2000, when terrorists caused the deaths of seventeen and injured dozens more while the ship was refueling in Yemen.

Since the 9/11 attacks, 7,057 US military personnel have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Serving in the military is no picnic.

Sometimes, pastors are like military recruiters telling people about all the benefits and blessings of becoming a disciple of Jesus.

While it is true that there are incredible benefits and blessings in coming to Jesus, one should also know that one is putting one's life on the line when becoming a disciple of Jesus.

You will face opposition. You may face persecution. You may even be killed for being a disciple of Jesus.

So, be sure to count the cost if you want to follow Jesus.

If you are a disciple of Jesus, let me remind you to expect opposition, be filled with the Holy Spirit, share the gospel at every opportunity, and obey God at all costs. Amen.