

## Acts 4:1-14

### Introduction

This morning, we come to “part 3” of the miraculous healing of the lame beggar. In “part 1” (3:1-10), Luke recounted the healing itself in language meant to remind us of Isaiah 35 and how in the days of Messiah’s kingdom, the lame would leap for joy. In “part 2” (3:11-26), Luke recounted Peter’s own explanation to the people of what the healing of the lame man meant for them (and so, also, what it means for us). Jesus is the “seed” promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through whom “blessing” will come to all the families of the earth; as such, He is also Yahweh’s suffering—and now glorified—Servant—in Isaiah 53. Jesus is the one who looks now with satisfaction upon His own “seed”—who are the “true” seed of Abraham, taken from all the nations of the earth. Jesus is the “prophet like Moses,” the one to whom all the “true” seed of Abraham will listen—while the physical seed (the Jews) who do not listen will be utterly destroyed from among the people. Those Jews, however, who repent and return (those Jews who change their mind about Jesus and believe in His name with the faith that is, itself, through Him) will have their sins wiped away and experience “seasons of refreshing” that come to them from the presence of the Lord until the “times of restoration of all things” when God sends Jesus, the Messiah appointed for His people.

Last week, Peter addressed “the people” (3:11-12) who were marveling and gazing at Peter and John as if by their own power or piety they had made the lame man walk (3:12). In verse 17 of chapter 3 he said: “And now, *brothers*, I know that you acted in ignorance, *just as your rulers did also*.” If last week Peter addressed “the people,” this week Peter will address their “rulers”—proclaiming once again what the healing of the lame man means. But contrary to “the people,” the rulers are not marveling or looking at Peter and John as if by their own power or piety they had made the lame man walk. We read in chapter 4, verses 1-3:

**I. Acts 4:1-7** — Now as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came upon [*ephistemi*] them, being greatly agitated because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. Now it happened that on the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; and Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. And when they had placed them in their midst, they began to inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?”

From a human perspective, this is a formidable and intimidating scene. Notice, first of all, how detailed and extensive is Luke’s description of the religious leaders of the people. In verse 1, Luke mentions first, “the priests,” then “the captain of the temple guard,” and finally, “the Sadducees.” “The priests [were] the officials responsible for the temple (particularly for the sacrifices), for other rituals at the Jewish festivals, and matters such as the temple tax” (Schnabel). The captain of the temple guard was “a member of the high-priestly family and the number two man at the temple (second only to the high priest).” His was “an elite position among the Levites who made up the temple guard... (often called temple police), which

consisted of 200 priests and Levites” (Bock & Schnabel). The captain of the temple guard “was always chosen from one of the families of the priestly aristocracy... [he] had ultimate responsibility for order in the temple grounds [as well as] the power to arrest” (Polhill).

The Sadducees were a party composed of the wealthy aristocracy. “By the time of Jesus they included the families who supplied the high priests, as well as other wealthy [lay or non-priestly] aristocrats of Jerusalem” (EBD). It’s possible that “Sadducees” (from the Hebrew *šēdūqīm*) derives from “Zadok” (*šā-dôq; צדוק*), who was a priest during the reign of David (1 Kings 1:32-46) and high priest during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 2:35). Or it may derive from the Hebrew word for “righteous (one)” (*šād-dîq; שׂדִּיק*)—or both. The Sadducees, it would seem, were in some sense the “priestly, temple party,” which would explain why after the temple was destroyed in AD 70, the Sadducean party ceased to exist. The Sadducees rejected the oral “tradition” of the Pharisees and accepted only the written Scriptures (with an emphasis especially on the first five books of Moses). And yet they also denied the existence of angels or spirits, as well as the resurrection of the body (Lk. 20:27; Acts 23:8) and any afterlife for the soul. They were, therefore, very “materialistic” in their outlook, focusing on “righteousness” only as it pertained to this life. This means that they were also much more willing to make alliance with their Herodian and Roman overlords (EBD; Bock), which, in turn, meant that it was consistently from the Sadducees that the Romans appointed the chief priests—the highest, most privileged, and most powerful position in Judaism (Polhill). It seems that the Sadducees made up the majority of the 71-member Sanhedrin which was the central governing authority of the Jewish people. One commentator concludes: “The prime concern of the Sadducean aristocracy, of whom the high priest was the chief spokesman, was the preservation of order [and] the avoidance at all costs of any confrontation with the Roman authorities” (Polhill).

So now Luke tells us that it’s “the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees”—the most powerful political and religious leaders of the day—who “came upon” (descended upon) Peter and John (ESV; ASV; NKJV; cf. HCSB; NLT; Peterson; Bock; cf. Lk. 21:34; 1 Thess. 5:3) and arrested them. Why? Luke tells us: “[they were] greatly agitated because [Peter and John] were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” In the first place it was the role of the priests to be teaching the people, and Peter and John certainly weren’t priests—nor were they from any priestly family, nor were they from the landed aristocracy (we remember what Peter said to the lame beggar: “I do not possess silver and gold [3:6]). In the second place, the Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead based on their “materialistic” reading of the Law and the Prophets. And thirdly (and likely more important than any of their theological concerns), the Sadducees worried that the message Peter and John were proclaiming (the resurrection from the dead in Jesus) “was an apocalyptic concept with all sorts of [popular] messianic overtones” (Polhill). They worried that “the apostles’ teaching was politically... and religiously destabilizing to their relatively good relationship with Rome” and therefore that it threatened their personal interests (Bock). To sum up: What right did these poor and uneducated “nobodies” in the context of the social and religious authority structures of the day—What right did they have to be teaching “the people” (*ho laos*; the covenant people of Yahweh)—teaching the people not only what the Sadducees rejected, but what they believed could stir up trouble with Rome? Putting ourselves in their shoes, we can, perhaps, see why they were so “greatly agitated.” The whole idea of these two Galilean fishermen teaching the people was preposterous—and dangerous.

In verses 5-6, Luke tells us that “on the next day, their **rulers** and **elders** and **scribes** were gathered together in Jerusalem; and Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent.” Again, the scene is formidable and shows up Peter and John as the “nobodies” that they are. “Rulers is a general term, which would certainly have included the chief priests” (or the members of the high-priestly family), some of whom Luke goes on to mention by name (Peterson). “Rulers” emphasizes the political and religious authority of the chief priests. “The ‘elders’ [were] senior officials, members of the Jewish elite that presumably included both priests *and laymen*, among the [laymen] presumably the rich landowners” (Schnabel). “Elders” emphasizes the respect and honor that was accorded to these men. And finally, the “scribes” were the trained interpreters and teachers of the law of Moses. Most of the scribes were lay (non-priestly), Pharisaic scholars. While the aristocratic Sadducees were the majority party in the Sanhedrin and held the greatest political power, it was the Pharisees who were most popular with the people, and who therefore still had their way in many of the religious affairs of the people. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection and the afterlife and accepted the existence of angels and spirits. “Pharisees” is derived from the Hebrew, *p<sup>e</sup>rûšîm*, which means “separated ones.” The Pharisees were zealous for ritual purity. Compared to the Sadducees, they were far more “devoted to detailed questions about the law and piety” (Bock). They sought to interpret every aspect of life with reference to religion (the written *and oral* Torah), something the Sadducees weren’t willing to do (EBD). The generally non-priestly Pharisees exercised their influence especially in the synagogues (a development in exile after the destruction of the temple in 586 BC), which explains at least in part why the Pharisaic party continued even after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. But, of course, the Pharisaic scribes were no more favorable to Peter and John than were the Sadducees. They were the highly trained, “ivy league” educated scholars of the day. They spent all their lives studying and expounding the Torah (understood most broadly as God’s “instruction” in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings). And yet Jesus had reserved his harshest words of criticism and even of condemnation for the Pharisees. For their part, they had judged Jesus to be a blasphemer deserving of death. Jesus, they had crucified. What right, then, did these two uneducated Galilean fishermen have to be “teaching the people [the covenant people of Yahweh] and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead”? What right did they have to be leading the people astray and threatening the popular influence and prestige of these Pharisaic scribes?

When Luke refers to the “rulers and elders and scribes *gathered together in Jerusalem*,” he’s identifying a formal meeting of the Sanhedrin (4:15) as the central governing authority of the Jews in the religious capital of Judaism. Luke tells us specifically that “Annas the high priest [was there], and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent.” Annas was no longer technically the high priest, but “he was the patriarch of a family that held high-priestly power for several decades” (Bock). It was his son-in-law Caiaphas who was currently the Roman-appointed high priest, and it was his son, Jonathan (John?) who would be appointed high priest after Caiaphas. Annas, Caiaphas, and likely Jonathan (John?), were all present at this meeting of the Sanhedrin, as well as another apparently prominent man from the high-priestly family named Alexander and, indeed, “all,” says Luke, “who were of high-priestly descent.” The 71-member Sanhedrin was arranged in a semi-circle (“like the half of a round threshing-floor”; m. Sanh. 4:3) so that all the members could see each other. Luke assumes this arrangement when he says: “And when they had *placed* [Peter and John] *in their midst*...”

For the Jews, it couldn't get any more intimidating than this. Summoned before this august gathering of wealthy, ivy-league educated, influential, and powerful religious rulers and authorities, who were Peter and John? They were "nobodies." They were two poor, comparatively uneducated, socially inferior men (previously Galilean fishermen), who had been acting outside their station in life.

The scene is vivid, and—more importantly—full of “redemptive-historical” significance. In chapter one, Luke tells us that Peter “stood up in the midst of the brothers (a crowd of **about 120 persons** was there together)” (1:15). In chapter two, Luke wrote: “and that day there were added **about three thousand** souls” (2:41). A few verses later, he says: “And the Lord was adding to **their number** daily those who were being saved” (2:47). And now, after telling us how Peter and John were arrested and put in jail, and before telling us how the Sanhedrin was gathered in Jerusalem and Peter and John placed in their midst, Luke says: “But many of those who had heard the message [preached by Peter and John] believed, and the number of the men came to be **about five thousand**” (4:4; cf. 21:20). Why does Luke emphasize the increasing numbers of those who believed and were being saved? Does this mean that numerical growth is the measure of success or the sign of obedience and God's blessing?

Luke's emphasis on numbers has to be understood specifically within the context of God's sovereignty (“*the Lord* was adding to their number”) and also within the context of this specific redemptive-historical moment. The Old Testament prophets never recorded the numbers of those who responded to their message because that was irrelevant. The question was always whether *the people* (as a whole) would repent and turn to God. When a number was recorded, it was a number that only God could identify because it was the number of a “hidden,” believing remnant within the covenant people of Israel (cf. 1 Kings 19:18; Ezek. 9:3-5). But now, God is creating a new people—a New Covenant Israel distinguished and marked out by faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Luke's emphasis on numbers, therefore, is an emphasis on the birth and initial growth of a new and visibly identifiable covenant people—a separate and distinct people who have repented and been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. 3:22-23). If Peter and John, then, represent the leadership (or the spokespersons) of this New Covenant Israel (the number of which has now come to be about 5000 men), what do we see in the Sanhedrin before whom they're now standing? Immediately after identifying the *number* of those who had believed the message preached by Peter and John, Luke says: “Now it happened that on the next day, *their* rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem...” “*Their* rulers and elders and scribes” makes a distinction between the leadership of the Old Covenant Israel marked only in the flesh and now the New Covenant Israel created in the Spirit (Rom. 2:28-29). What we have vividly portrayed in this scene is the leadership of the new, eschatological Israel (two poor, comparatively uneducated, and socially inferior men) arrested and placed in the midst of the leadership of the old Israel—the Israel of the broken and now obsolete Old Covenant (at least 71 of the wealthiest, most highly educated, and most influential and powerful men in Judaism).

“And when they had placed them in their midst,” Luke says, “they began to inquire, ‘By what power, or in what name, have you done this?’” At first, this might seem like a strange question. Don't they already know the answer (cf. 4:2)? Are they really wanting to learn? What we have to remember here is the context in which this question is asked—the scene that Luke has already

painted. The leadership of the “old Israel” already assumes itself to be in complete and total control of the situation. They feel supremely secure and sure of themselves (wealth, education, power, authority, prestige, numbers). On the one hand, it’s obvious that Peter and John didn’t heal the lame man under the God-ordained authority of the Sanhedrin, but rather as those teaching in opposition to the Sanhedrin. On the other hand, just as obvious to the Sanhedrin (if not to the people) is the fact that they didn’t heal the lame man by any religious authority or power of their own. What, therefore, can the real significance of this healing be? (“By what power, or in what name, have you done this?”) The members of the Sanhedrin assume that Peter and John, standing before *them*, must be compelled to recognize who they really are (or aren’t) and fall into line. Of course they must. But now we read in verses 8-10:

**II. Acts 4:8–10** — Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people [*ho laos*], if we are being examined [tried; *anakrino*] today for a good deed done to a sick man, as to how this man has been *saved* [*sozo* vs. *iaomai*; from his sickness], let it be known to all of you [all 71 members of the Sanhedrin] and to all the people of Israel [the people you don’t want us to be teaching], that by the name of Jesus Christ [Messiah] the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name [neither by your authority nor by our authority, but by this name] this man stands here before you in good health.”

Is Peter fearful? Is this former Galilean fisherman overwhelmed or intimidated by this assembly of wealthy, educated, influential, and powerful religious authorities in Jerusalem? Obviously not. And why is this? Because Peter isn’t there to promote himself. Nothing could be more obvious from Peter’s words than that he cares nothing at this moment for his own self-advancement—for wealth, or power, or influence, or prestige. Peter cares nothing for the fact that in the midst of this great assembly, he is, in fact, a “nobody.” For Peter, who *he* is—or who *he* is not—is irrelevant because he’s there not to promote his own name, but to proclaim the name of the one who sent him and authorized him (Acts 1:8). He’s not there to promote himself, but to proclaim the name of Jesus—the one by whom “this man,” he says, “has been *saved*”; saved, certainly, from his sickness, but saved also in the ultimate, eschatological sense of being welcomed into the true, Messianic Israel. And here’s the second reason Peter is not timid or fearful.

Yes, this healing was performed outside of—and even in opposition to—the religious structures of Judaism, but this, too, is supremely irrelevant to Peter because these rulers and elders and scribes represent, now, an Old Covenant Israel that’s obsolete. The “true” Israel is marked out now by faith in Jesus as the Messiah—crucified, buried, and raised from the dead—and by baptism in His name and the filling of the Spirit. Therefore, what Peter sees, here, is that he and John are not ultimately the ones being tried and judged, rather it’s the old leadership of the old Israel who are being tried and judged (cf. 3:22-23): “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** [*hon hymeis*] crucified, **whom God** [*hon ho theos*] raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health.” Peter goes on then to quote from Psalm 118:

**III. Acts 4:11** — “He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders [“whom you crucified”], but which became the chief corner stone” [“whom God raised from the dead”].

Peter remembers the day probably not more than three or four months earlier (and so does Luke) when “the **chief priests** and the **scribes** with the **elders came upon** [descended upon; *ephistemi*] [Jesus]” and said to him (even as they’ve said now to Peter and John), “Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority” (Lk. 20:1-2). After Jesus had exposed their hypocrisy (Lk. 20:3-8), He told them this parable (Lk. 20:9-16). An owner of a vineyard rented his vineyard out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time. At the harvest time, when the owner sent his slave to the vine-growers to receive some of the fruit from the vineyard, the vine-growers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. This happened with a second, and then a third slave. Finally, the owner of the vineyard decided to send his beloved son, in the expectation that they should certainly respect his son. But when the vine-growers saw him, they said to one another: “This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours.” Jesus concluded: “What... will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others.” And then Jesus quoted from Psalm 118 (just like Peter quotes from it now): “What then is this that is written: ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone?’” (Lk. 20:17).

When Jesus quoted this psalm to the chief priests and scribes and elders, He had not yet been made the chief corner stone because He had not yet been raised from the dead. But now, when Peter quotes this passage again to the chief priests and scribes and elders (and in answer to the same question), he can announce triumphantly that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that in this way He has now become the chief corner stone. No longer will the rulers and elders of the Old Covenant Israel be able to plead ignorance (cf. Acts 3:17).

The “chief corner stone” was the first stone laid in the construction of a new building to support the joining of two walls and determine the orientation of the entire building. Jesus has become the chief corner stone, therefore, of a new building which, “being joined together, is growing into a holy sanctuary in the Lord, in whom [all those who believe] are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit [God’s “true” temple]” (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). In other words, God has now taken the kingdom away from Old Covenant Israel with its leadership and given it to His New Covenant, Messianic Israel, in fulfillment of Jesus’ word (cf. Mat. 21:43) and ultimately the word of the psalmist and of all the Old Testament prophets. And yet Peter isn’t just accusing and condemning the rulers and elders of the obsolete Old Covenant Israel. We’ll see in a moment that he’s boldly preaching the Gospel to them and calling them to repentance and faith.

In the context of the psalm Peter quotes from, the king is returning from battle against his enemies at the head of a triumphal procession, and then we hear the joyful shout of the people:

- Psalm 118:22–26 — “The stone which the builders [the unbelieving nations] rejected has become the chief corner stone. This is from Yahweh; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which Yahweh has made [the day of deliverance and salvation from all our enemies]; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O Yahweh, save [*sozo*]! O Yahweh, succeed! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of Yahweh [the king at the head of the returning triumphal procession]; we have blessed you [the king] from the house of Yahweh.”

What is marvelous in the eyes of the people is that Yahweh's *salvation* is now to be found in the stone that the builders rejected.

This, too, is marvelous in Peter's eyes, and so he concludes:

**IV. Acts 4:12** — And there is salvation [*soteria*] in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved [*sozo*; "saved" in the fullest, eschatological sense of that word]."

Is Peter timid or fearful? Is this former Galilean fisherman at all overwhelmed by this great assembly of wealthy, educated, powerful, and influential religious authorities in Jerusalem? Not in the slightest. And *why* is this? First, because Peter isn't there to promote his own name, but to proclaim the name of the one who sent him and authorized him, the name of **Jesus, the Messiah**. Second, because all this great assembly is now the leadership of a covenant Israel that's obsolete, while the "true" Israel is a living temple which has for its chief corner stone **the Messiah, Jesus**. And therefore (thirdly), because Peter sees that all this great assembly stands in need of the same salvation **in Jesus' name** that he stands in need of ("by which *we* must be saved)—a salvation that is marvelous in his eyes. This is the day of salvation which Yahweh has made, and Peter will rejoice and be glad in it.

Why is Peter so fearless? Why is He filled with such confidence and courage and boldness? Not because of who he is (obviously not!), but because (borrowing the words Peter himself would write some thirty years later), being filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8), he has sanctified Christ as Lord in his heart (in his heart he has confessed and honored Jesus as Lord over all—including *the rulers and elders of the people*; 1 Pet. 3:15a). Therefore, he is ready to make a defense to everyone who demands from him an account for the hope that is in him (1 Pet. 3:15b). So we read in verses 13-14:

**V. Acts 4:13-14** — Now as they observed the confidence [*boldness/courage; parresia*] of Peter and John and comprehended that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply [no way to refute them; *anteipon*; cf. Lk. 21:12-15].

We're going to break off this morning in the middle of this scene, because this is the perfect place to be reminded of these words of Paul in 1 Corinthians:

- **1 Corinthians 1:26-31** — For consider your calling, brothers, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may abolish the things that are, so that no flesh may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

When we've truly learned to boast in the Lord, when we've truly learned to sanctify and honor Christ in our hearts as the crucified and now resurrected Lord over all, then we, too—though we be according to worldly standards foolish, and weak, and base, and despised—we, too, can be utterly fearless and bold when the world demands from us a defense for the hope that is in us—though the world be ever so “wise,” and “mighty,” and “noble.” We, too, can be living proof that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:25). But to the extent that we are timid and fearful and afraid—what must this mean?

May God help us not to boast according to the flesh—not to highly esteem that which is detestable in the sight of God (cf. Lk. 16:15), but to boast and glory only in Christ Jesus. May it truly be marvelous in our eyes that the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. And so may we be able to say with the Apostle Paul—and no doubt with Peter and John—with all our hearts:

- Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.