

April 20, 2008

When the Going Gets Tough

As most of you know our sermon series this Easter season is focusing on the new life that came through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In particular we are talking about the new life of the early church. We have been following the growth of the church and the transformation of the people in that early church as we've journeyed through the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit transformed the people to be believers who were to be devoted to Bible study, corporate worship, eating together both as a family and in the celebration of communion, prayer, praising God and preaching. The message that they were preaching we saw last week were summed up in Peter's words from Acts 4:12 when he said, "salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." That name is Jesus.

Today we continue on and we immediately see another sign of the transformation in the very next verse of Acts chapter 4. Verse 13 says, "When they (the Sanhedrin) saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled ordinary men they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." Let's break that verse down a little bit because I think it is one powerful verse when we see what is really being said. First of all, "the members of the Sanhedrin saw the courage of Peter and John." Now let's think about what the Sanhedrin had seen. They had seen Peter at Jesus' trial and they had seen Jesus urn and look at him and then they saw Peter run away because Peter was cut to the heart he knew had just denied Jesus three times. After that they didn't see him anymore. But they had seen John both at Jesus' trial and at the cross but I think what probably they were really thinking about was after Peter denied Jesus they didn't see him after the cross they didn't see John in fact they hadn't seen any of the disciples they had deserted Jesus. In fact even after the resurrection the disciples weren't really seen they had gone back to Galilee and as we see in John's gospel they had gone back to fishing. So to suddenly go from not seeing Peter and John and the rest of the apostles to seeing Peter and John healing and preaching in the temple and then answering their question, "by what power or name did you do this?" and answering that question after having spent a night in jail Peter and John give that answer in the form very pointed sermon that blames the Sanhedrin for crucifying the Messiah and rejecting salvation. The Sanhedrin couldn't help but notice a change Peter and John had courage.

The dictionary says courage is “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere and withstand danger or difficulty.” But there’s more than just this courage.

The Sanhedrin also realized that they were unschooled ordinary men and the result was that the Sanhedrin was astonished. That’s a wonderful verse when we look at that part. What drives their astonishment? Well first of all it’s the courage that we just talked about. They are astonished that they are courageous now when before they were cowards. But second they are astonished by the simple yet undeniable truthfulness accuracy and relevance of Peter’s answer in his sermon. How could such simple men come up with such a well crafted and pointed answer? The answer comes in the third point on this verse. “They took note that these men had been with Jesus.” There it is; where did the courage and the ability to speak come from? Jesus; God had empowered them, transformed them and gave them the desire to speak and on top of that gave them the very words to speak. So often we belittle ourselves and we belittle our God by saying, “I can’t.” We say, “I can’t witness, I can’t share God’s word, I can’t do it.” And you know what? You are right you can’t but God can through you in fact this is God’s plan for you. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:20, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors as though God were making His appeal through us.” And God does this on purpose speaking about the Gospel message Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “But we have this treasure (the Gospel) in jars of clay (our bodies) to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.” That should make us pause when we want to say I can’t because God says that the worse off we are or the weaker we are the better His glory can shine through us. How else could Peter a non-eloquent, non-seminary trained, humble fisherman preach like he did? It is the power of God shining through in all honesty how can I stand here before you and preach right now? Trust me if it comes out right it is a true testament to God’s power and glory. Again, to God He looks at us and says the weaker you are the better your witness is. We just have to believe and trust Him and this is also why Paul says, “I have believed therefore I have spoken.”

Now all of this is just a prelude to a greater transformation. Peter and John are warned by the Sanhedrin to stop speaking about Jesus and they are let go. What do they do? They promptly go right back into the temple and keep on preaching whereupon they are arrested again. This time though an angel breaks them out of prison in the middle of the night. What do they do the next day? They go right back into the temple and start preaching again. This is tremendous courage we’re still not at that great

transformation. So as they're preaching again what happens? They are arrested again and they are brought before the Sanhedrin again. This time there is no questioning there's only an accusation a charge that is made. The high priest finally speaks and says, "we gave you strict orders not to teach in this name yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." Peter's response, "We must obey God rather than men." And then he continues with the second part of his response he gives another sermon and its only three verses long. He says, "The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." The Sanhedrin knows exactly what he's saying he's laying the blame for killing Jesus right on them and he is saying look at what's happening you can see the Holy Spirit is on us, you can see the courage, you can see and hear the sermons that we're giving you know you can't defeat it because its the truth its straight from God. Because the spirit is on us not on you and this leads the Sanhedrin to want to kill them. But Gamileo, a respected Pharisee who also happened to be the teacher of St. Paul, told them, "We've had many other people come along consider carefully what you do." Others came they died, they were arrested, they left give it time do nothing now because if its false they will fall away but if what they're saying isn't false you'll find yourself fighting against God Himself. They took his advice but they decided they still had to do something so they had the apostles flogged, whipped, the forty lashes minus one and then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus again.

Here's the great transformation the disciples' response. Acts 6:41, "The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name." Now that's a transformation. Rejoicing and feeling honored to be put to the test. There's an old saying the going gets tough the tough get going for Christians when the going gets tough the Christian trusts God and obeys His commands and God really gets going.

In our Savior's name, Amen.