

The Free Exercise of Religion: Peter's First Amendment Moment

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Locked Up with Nowhere to Go

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Gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank you now for the Scriptures, we thank you that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We pray that you would hide your word within our hearts. Come, Holy Spirit, help us to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now this morning we continue in our series "Locked Up with Nowhere to Go," and what men and women of God learned during periods of incarceration and we have looked together at five Old Testament characters including Joseph and Samson and Daniel and Jonah and so on, and last week John the Baptist in the New Testament, and today our reading is in Acts 4 and we're going to look at Peter and John, though our focus will be on Peter, two of the disciples who are locked up in prison for the evening. This is Acts 4 and the first 22 verses.

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.

Well, so far the word of God.

We are about two months or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus and maybe six weeks after Pentecost, so approximately two months has passed by and something of a revival has taken place in Jerusalem. At Pentecost there were 3,000 men and Luke uses the specific word for men rather than women so if you include the women, at Pentecost there may have been 6-7,000 if you include the children, maybe a little more, and now it's gone up to 5,000 so possibly 10,000-12,000 people in a city at that time that would have no more than about 50,000. So maybe 1/5 of the city are now Christians, professing the name of Jesus. They are still Jews, of course, they're still attending the temple, they're still engaging in much of Jewish ritual, but something has happened in Jerusalem and it all comes down to this man whom they crucified who has been raised from the dead, whom these followers and Peter and John among them, are claiming is God himself, the second person of the Trinity.

Well, they are suffering for their faith. There was a Puritan by the name of John Geree, he lived in the 1640s, at the time of the writing of the Westminster Confession and the Catechisms, and John Geree among other things wrote a tract called "The Character of an Old English Puritan." He wrote it because there was much opposition to Puritans in the 1640s and he was trying to give an apologetic for the doctrines and way of life that characterized Puritanism, and in it he described his own personal motto as "vincit qui patitur" in Latin meaning "He who suffers conquers," and therefore at the very heart of the Christian faith, at the very heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus is this idea of suffering.

Well, Peter and John are suffering because of a healing incident that took place in chapter 3 and this is a man who is, we're told at the very end of this reading, verse 22, that he was

over 40 years old and back in chapter 3 we learn that he had been a cripple since his youth. So perhaps from his teenage years onwards possibly for 25 years, he had been brought to the temple, he would be a beggar, of course, he would beg for food and sustenance for each day, and therefore he would have been a well-known spectacle there at the entrance in Solomon's portico on the outskirts of the temple facade, and everybody in Jerusalem would have known him and therefore his healing was something that caused quite a stir. It wasn't so much the healing that got under the skin of the Jewish leaders, the captain of the temple like the chief of temple police to ensure order within the temple precincts, but also the Sanhedrin and the governing officials and the Sanhedrin were comprised of 71 elders, they were like the Supreme Court within Jewish jurisprudence, and it wasn't the healing so much, it was the fact that this healing had been done in the name of Jesus. It was the prominence of this name Jesus and, of course, the Sanhedrin bear still the stigma that they had crucified this Jesus and now Peter and John are proclaiming his resurrection. And at the heart of early Christianity and this is very early Christianity here, barely two months into the development of the Christian church as such, and there really is nothing that we would recognize as a Christian church just yet, these are Jews, they're still reading the same Old Testament Scriptures, they're still singing the same Old Testament Psalms, no decisions have yet been made about kosher food and circumcision and Shabbat, Sabbath, and so on. What is distinctive now about this group that has emerged, this Jesus group that has emerged, is the predominance of Jesus. Jesus is at the heart of this movement.

And I want to look at what Luke brings out by way of a response. They are imprisoned overnight and they're brought before the Sanhedrin the next morning and I want to pick out six things that Luke seems to highlight and the first is that, and remember this is Peter, this is Peter who two months before had denied ever knowing the Lord. Three times he had denied him and Jesus in one of the resurrection appearances would come to Peter and say, "Do you love me?" And say it three times, "Do you love me?" This frail disciple, this broken disciple, this flawed disciple is the one that Luke is drawing attention to here and what has happened to him, and the first thing is in verse 8, "Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them," and so on. Filled with the Holy Spirit. Well, back in chapter 2 in Luke's account of the day of Pentecost, Luke says they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and it's possible, though unlikely, it's possible that Luke is simply confirming that he is still filled with the Holy Spirit, but I think Luke is drawing attention to something more than that, that just as Paul in Ephesians 5 puts it in the form of a commandment, "Be filled with the Holy Spirit." There is a sense in which when we become believers, when we have a new heart, when we first put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus, God sends his Holy Spirit to regenerate us and quicken us and we are filled with the Holy Spirit. But the New Testament seems also to say that on special occasions when we need special strength or we need special insight or we need special wisdom, that God fills us once again with the Holy Spirit.

And my dear friends, that's what we need right now. We need it every day but we especially need that right now. We are at an end of ourselves. We are at an end of our strength. We cannot do anything by ourselves, we need the help and sustenance and support of the Holy Spirit. He is our helper. He is our advocate. He is our paraclete. He is

our strengthener. We need to be filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit of God. That's the first application today, that wherever you are right now, whatever circumstance you find yourself in, whatever measurement of trial and suffering and difficulty you may be facing, pray for the fullness of the Holy Spirit to strengthen you and equip you and enable you day-by-day.

Well, that's the first thing. The second thing and you see it in verses 8 through 12, is that Peter proclaimed the same message. He's being interrogated, they've spent the night imprisoned, in custody, and now they're being interrogated by the Sanhedrin to explain themselves and Peter doesn't flinch. His incarceration has only emboldened him further. It's only made him more and more resolute and instead of apologizing, although he is technically giving an apologia in Greek, he's giving an explanation, a reason for the hope that lies within you, that's Peter himself speaking in his first epistle in chapter 3, "Be ready. Be ready to give a reason, an apologia, for the hope that lies within you." And here is Peter facing that moment. He's being asked, "In what name was this cripple healed?" And he is doing something that always makes me smile because he quotes from Psalm 118. Psalms 113-118, the Hallel Psalms are the Psalms that were sung during Passover week and the final one culminates with the allusion to the stone that the builders have rejected. You imagine a builder and he's looking for stones to put in the wall, a certain size and certain shape, and he picks one up and he throws it aside and the Psalm says God took that stone that they threw aside and made it the chief cornerstone. Well, of course, it's referring to Jesus.

Now Peter, of course, has a thing about stones. We have an elder, he's a neighbor of mine, I'll call you out, Dan, who loves bricks. You can just ask him a question about bricks and three hours later he's still talking about bricks. He loves their shape and size and color and so on. He's fascinated by bricks. Well, Peter was too because Peter had been told by Jesus, "You are Peter and on this rock," yes, he was Rocky, and I think Peter forever afterwards whenever he saw masonry, whenever he saw building, he would look at those stones, he would look at that cornerstone and he would be reminded of his calling.

Now remember Peter is the chief apostle at this stage. Paul will emerge after chapter 12 to be the chief apostle but right here and now Peter is the chief apostle and he's calling attention to one of the Jewish Psalms, one of the Passover Psalms, the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. And what is Peter doing? He's preaching Jesus. He's preaching Christ. He understands now the Old Testament in a way that he perhaps had never understood before. The scales had been lifted from his eyes and now when he reads the Old Testament Scriptures, when he reads the book of Psalms, he sees the allusions and prophecies and signs that point to the coming of the Messiah, to Jesus, and the Old Testament Scriptures are fulfilled in Jesus. It's what Jesus did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24; beginning with Moses and in all the prophets, he expounded to them the things concerning himself. And here is Peter reading now the Old Testament but he's reading them through the lens of the promised seed of the woman that would crush the head of Satan.

Well, he's filled with the Holy Spirit and he reads now the Old Testament as through the lens of Jesus but then, thirdly, Luke draws attention in verse 12 to what precisely Peter said. "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the chief cornerstone. 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 preached not just Jesus but exclusively Jesus. It's only through Jesus that we are saved. It's not through Buddha. It's not through Mohammad. It's only Jesus.

Now some people find that hard and some people find that negative and some people find that burdensome, and I have to tell you that this is the teaching of the New Testament, this is the teaching of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth and the life, and no man comes unto the Father except by me." There's a trend, it's a very disturbing trend, the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II has been proclaiming a sort of anonymous Christianity that you can be a Christian and you can be assured of heaven even though you've never heard of Jesus. But even within Evangelicalism there has been a disturbing trend. Rob Bell's book, "Love Wins," where he speaks of hopeful universalism. And then there's Brian McLaren who wrote a book called "A Generous Orthodoxy," and listen to his sentence. "I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion." What? Really? The only thing that's opposed to that is the entirety of the New Testament. The New Testament knows absolutely nothing about anonymous Christianity.

It's in the name of Jesus and in the name of Jesus only that we are saved and Peter was resolute about it. Oh, you can say, "My opinion is this or my opinion is that," but your opinion doesn't matter two hoots. What matters is what does the Bible say? What matters is what do the apostles say? What matters is what does Jesus say? How can you believe in Jesus and then turn around and say that Jesus was mistaken? Jesus was absolutely resolute, there is salvation in no other name.

So if you're not a Christian this morning and you may just happened to have tuned into this live stream this morning, I say to you the time is short and you need to believe and trust in the Lord Jesus because there is salvation in no one else. No other name under heaven given amongst men whereby we must be saved. Turn to him. Cry out to him. Plead to him today while it is still called today. Do it now. Call upon him.

Well, then in verse 13 Luke draws attention to something else, "when they saw the boldness," the "they" here is the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin are amazed by the boldness of Peter and John. Boldness. They must obey God rather than men. When later they're sent out and they deliberate and so on, and then they come back and they say they must not preach in the name of Jesus anymore, and Peter and John have what I call their First Amendment Moment. There's an opportunity now, are they going to obey the rulers that be, or are they going to obey God? And there are times, yes, the New Testament approves of revolution, there are times when it's right and proper to have revolution, to disobey the powers that be, but the only occasion that you can disobey the powers that be is when the powers that be are asking you to do something that is contrary to the word of God, otherwise you should obey them. It's one of the reasons why we obeyed this Covid-19 season, not just because the governor who sits up here, and not just the governor who is a

member here, but it's New Testament, obey the powers that be. Obey the king. Obey the rulers that be. But if they ask something that is contrary to the word of God as clearly they were here, not to preach in the name of Jesus, and Peter says with absolute conviction and courage, "We can't do that. Whatever the consequences, we can't do that."

Well, we need courage. We need courage to put one foot in front of another. We need courage to be resolute in our conviction about the gospel when all around us there are clarion voices calling upon us to compromise. We need courage when the trial is so great that we cannot see the way ahead. We need courage to believe the promises of God that are yes and amen. None of us know how we would respond if we were in Peter and John's shoes but I want to be able to say, I want to be able to say that God would give me strength at that moment to do the right thing, to do that which glorifies the Lord Jesus. And it may be, maybe this is you, too many times perhaps at work when there's been an opportunity to quietly and gracefully speak about the Lord Jesus not in some aggressive way and not in a way that usurps the time that your employer is paying you for, but maybe at a break and somebody comes and there's an opportunity but you've been silent and maybe you need to pray for courage, my friend, as I need to pray for courage. We all need courage.

Then in verse 13, a fifth thing. They were unlearned. They were unlettered. They were just common people. Now behind this is an issue that's similar to the issue at the time of the Reformation. The Sanhedrin wanted to have control about who reads the Scriptures and who interprets the Scriptures. It was the same at the time of the Reformation and then it was, of course, the Roman Catholic Church because the Scriptures then were in Latin and very few people understood Latin, so the common people had no access to the Scriptures. And the fact that these common men, these illiterate men, these unlearned men, and they were probably not illiterate but the vast majority of people, I think, in the first century were illiterate and that's one of the reasons why the New Testament gives a command not to neglect the reading, the public reading of Scripture because people couldn't read. Well, at the time of the Reformation, think of Thomas Cranmer who translated the Bible into English because the common plowman in the field could then read the Scriptures for himself. He would still need the help of preachers and teachers and others to explain, but the fundamentals, even the most common person reading the Bible can get a grasp of the fundamentals of the gospel. It's very important. Thomas Cranmer gave his life. He was burned at the stake and his body, I think, was quartered just because he translated the Bible into English. Unlearned men.

Then finally, I want to draw attention to what is said in verse 13. This is an observation that the Sanhedrin make about Peter and John. They recognize that they had been with Jesus. The courage that they had, the convictions that they had, the message that they had demonstrated that they'd been with Jesus. Now remember in the eyes of the Sanhedrin these were not Christians, they were followers of Jesus. Christians, that term would come later. And there is no, it's just a movement within Judaism at this point and they want to control it, and the one thing that marks out this movement, they're still obeying many of the rituals of Old Testament temple worship, no decisions have yet been made about circumcision or food laws or Shabbat, so in many respects they were still attending the

temple and preaching in the courts of the temple. It was a Jesus movement within Judaism. Now later, of course, it would separate but the one distinctive thing about this emerging movement and now there are, what, 10-12,000 people in Jerusalem professing the name of Jesus, they believed in one God but they also believed with absolute conviction that Jesus was God, God in the ultimate sense, God in the supreme sense. There's only one God but there is more than one who is that one God. And there's no debate about it. You know, there's debate about lots of things in the New Testament, debate about justification, for example, but there's no debate among the disciples about the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, as Jesus as the second, in language they would develop later, as the second person of the Trinity. They called him Lord. They called him, they didn't use the term Yahweh, they were Greek speakers so they used the translation of Yahweh in the Greek translation of the Old Testament is the word Kurios, and that's the term that they used of Jesus. At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and tongue confess that he is Kyrios, he is Lord, he is Yahweh, he is what we used to call Jehovah. That was their conviction. A mutation. Larry Hurtado's wonderful little book "Destroyer of the Gods," and he refers to what is happening here as a mutation within Judaism, and that mutation is caused by the identity of Jesus.

Well, we're going to sing in a minute "Turn your eyes upon Jesus and look full in his wonderful face," because when you do that everything changes and the only explanation for Peter here, of course, two months before he was denying Jesus, the only explanation of what has happened here is that they've encountered the Son of God, they've encountered the risen Messiah and it's changed their lives and it's changed their views and it's changed their convictions. Everything now is seen through the lens of Jesus. And oh, my dear friends, in this very strange period in which we're passing, may we do the same, may we see everything through the lens of Jesus.

Father, we thank you, thank you for your word, thank you for the boldness and courage of Peter and John and we pray for similar boldness and courage in our time. And hear us, Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.