

## Acts 4:1-31 Teacher's Lesson Civil Disobedience

**Review:** In Acts 1, Jesus ascended into heaven. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit descended upon the church. In Acts 3, Peter healed a man born lame in the name of Jesus. God did this to give Peter the opportunity to preach the Gospel. The authorities did not like their message, so as we shall study today, they decided to arrest them. (This same thing happens frequently in England today. Even though they are breaking no laws, the police routinely arrest street evangelists simply because they do not like their message. It is a form of harassment to discourage them.)

**Introduction:** Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. embodied the concept of civil disobedience. *What is civil disobedience? How is it different from armed rebellion or breaking the speed limit?* Civil disobedience is the refusal to comply with certain laws out of conscience. Civil disobedience is sometimes defined as having to be nonviolent to be called civil disobedience. Romans 13:1 teaches: "be subject to the governing authorities". Yet in Acts 4, we have an example of Christian civil disobedience. *When is it right to disobey the government? (Rhetorical).*

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**\*\*\*\*What happened despite Peter and John's arrest (4:1-4)?** Despite the rude interruption, many people responded in faith. The Greek here does not mean that 5,000 men responded to Peter's preaching that day, but that the number who did respond brought the total church membership up to 5,000 men, 4:4.<sup>1</sup>

**Based on 4:2, why were Peter and John arrested?** The temple authorities did not like **1) that** they were teaching (they were not qualified) or **2) what** they were teaching (the resurrection of the dead).

**1. In general, why did the doctrine of resurrection upset the Sadducees (4:2)?** See Luke 20:27. The Sadducees did not believe anyone would ever be resurrected from the dead (**Joke:** That's why they're sad, you see).

ESV **Luke 20:27** . . . Sadducees . . . deny that there is a resurrection . . .

**Sadducees:** The Sadducees were a political group that controlled both the temple and the high priesthood. John the Baptist called them a brood of vipers (Mt 3:7). Jesus said to beware of the Levin (doctrine) of the Sadducees (Mt 16:6). They saw themselves as conservative in their doctrine and accepted as authoritative only the five books of Moses. They denied everything else the Old Testament taught concerning the Messiah, angels, demons, immortality and the general resurrection of the dead.<sup>2</sup> contrast, the Pharisees accepted all these doctrines. The Sadducees probably viewed the Pharisees the same way Baptists view Charismatics!

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, 101. It was common then to record count only men as representatives of entire households.

<sup>2</sup> Kistemaker, 146.

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\*\*\*\***The next day, in court, how did Peter explain the miraculous healing (4:5-12)?** Peter said the crippled man was healed in the name of Jesus, 4:10.

**2. Who was this august group that Peter and John faced (4:5-6)?** It was sort of a Jewish supreme court called the Sanhedrin, composed of 71 men. This same kangaroo court had condemned Jesus just weeks before this.

- The “**elders**” were lay leaders of the community and were mostly Sadducees.
- The “**scribes**” were lawyers and were mostly Pharisees.
- The “**rulers**” were priests who held various positions in the temple and were also mostly Sadducees.<sup>3</sup>
- **Annas** held the honorary title of high priest.<sup>4</sup> He was followed in the office by his son-in-law **Caiaphas**. The **John** of 4:6 was likely Annas’ son, who later also became high priest. Control of the temple was very much a family affair, nepotism gone bad.<sup>5</sup> **Alexander’s** identity has been lost to history, but he is rumored to have later started a ragtime band.<sup>6</sup>

**3. According to 4:8, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit. What did the filling enable him to do?** See *Matthew 10:18-20*. It enabled him to boldly speak forth the truth to the council. Throughout Luke’s writings, the filling of the Spirit impacts a person’s speech. Though on trial and giving a defense of his actions, Peter actually turned the tables and went on the offensive. Peter pointed out that it was those very men to whom he was speaking who had crucified Jesus but that God had raised Jesus from the dead (4:10).

ESV **Matthew 10:18-20** . . . you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

**4. In 4:10, why did Peter sandwich Jesus’ identity (4:10a) in between two statements about the miraculous healing (4:9, 10b)?** There was no denying that a first order miracle had occurred and it had been done in Jesus’ name. Peter put the heat on the same council that crucified Jesus by declaring it was the resurrected Jesus who had healed the man!

**5. In 4:11, how did Peter account for Jesus’ rejection by the leaders?** See *Psalms 118:22, Matthew 21:33ff*. Peter understood it to be a fulfillment of Psalm 118. Jesus quoted this same Psalm in prediction of His coming rejection (Mt 21:33ff).

ESV **Psalm 118:22** The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

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<sup>3</sup> Marshall, 101.

<sup>4</sup> It was a honorary title. The Romans had deposed Annas long before, but he stayed in power behind the scenes by maneuvering his various family members into the office.

<sup>5</sup> The word nepotism comes from the Latin word for nephew. It originated with the practice of Catholic popes appointing family members to important church offices, such as cardinal (“Nepotism”, Wikipedia.org).

<sup>6</sup> Just kidding about the ragtime band.

**6. What function does a cornerstone (4:11) serve in a stone building?** It is an essential part of the foundation and the guide stone from which all other stones are laid.

**7. What very narrow-minded declaration did Peter make in 4:12?** *See John 14:6.* There is salvation in no one other than Jesus. You can afford to be narrow-minded when you are right. **Example:** I am narrow-minded about only putting gasoline in my car (not milk, not cola, not water, etc.).

ESV **John 14:6** Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

**Application:** 4:12 suggests there is no possibility of salvation through Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam or Wicca or anything else. Some hyper-dispensationalists teach Gentiles are saved through Jesus, but God allows Jewish people to be saved through Moses. The only way to heaven is through Jesus.

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**\*\*\*\*What dilemma did the council face (4:13-22)?** They wanted to mask the miracle and mute the message, but there was no denying that a major miracle had taken place. By implication the message that accompanied the miracle was true. However, they did not want the apostles declaring Jesus' resurrection, 2:16-17. The problem they faced was how to silence the message. This same council had earlier tried to cover up Jesus' resurrection by bribing the soldiers guarding the tomb to lie that the disciples had stolen the body (Mt 28:13). However, their deceit was no match for the truth of the resurrection! Their lie was coming unraveled.

**According to 4:13, what astonished the council?** *See Luke 21:15.* They were astonished that though Peter and John were uneducated men, they taught with boldness.<sup>7</sup> It was obvious they had been with Jesus.

ESV **Luke 21:15** . . . I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

**Application:** This same discipleship process is to continue today in the church:

ESV **2 Timothy 2:2** . . . what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

**8. Considering the undeniable reality of the miracle (4:14-16), why didn't they believe the message?** *See John 3:19-20, 2 Corinthians 4:4.* It did not matter what the truth was, these men were hardened in their sin.

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<sup>7</sup> In 4:13, "uneducated" is from *agrammatos* ("without letters") and "common" is from *idiotés*.

ESV **John 3:19-20** . . . the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

ESV **2 Corinthians 4:4** . . . the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel . . .

**Application:** A similar situation exists today with many people who reject the Gospel. The problem is not that the Bible is unreliable or beyond proof. It is not evolution, or Noah's ark, or the existence of Adam and Eve, or if Jonah was swallowed by a whale. The problem is their sinfulness. They are committed to their own way, despite evidence to the contrary. Proof is good and making a defense is necessary, but ultimately you can't argue someone into heaven. It is a matter of will, not facts. A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.

**Homosexuality:** Romans 1 speaks of men God turned over to depraved minds because they had suppressed the truth about God. One of the ways this depravity manifested itself was in homosexuality. The West has suppressed the truth about God and God has turned the West over to depraved thinking. That homosexuality is now rampant in the West is a sign of God's judgment on Western society.

**No Invitation:** Unlike before, Peter did not give a Gospel invitation. Perhaps they had proven themselves to be reprobate. He proclaimed the truth, but he did not offer them salvation.

ESV **Matthew 7:6** Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs . . .

**What solution did the council reach in 4:17-18?** They had to let them go due to lack of evidence. There was no case to be made against them. However, they warned the apostles not to speak any longer in Jesus' name.

\*\*\*\***How did Peter and John answer the council's injunction (4:19-20)?** See Acts 5:29. In essence, they said they could not be quiet about it. Later on, Peter said:

ESV **Acts 5:29** . . . We must obey God rather than men.

**9. Romans 13:1 instructs believers to be subject to the governing authorities. Yet here Peter and John refused to obey the rulers (4:19-20). Based on 4:19-20, when is it right to disobey the government?** See Exodus 1, Daniel 5, Matthew 2. If the church and state are on a collision course, God's people must obey God, not government. It is not right to obey Caesar if it means disobeying Christ.

**Other Examples:** When Moses was born, the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh's order to kill any male babies (Ex 1). Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship the gold statue (Dan 3). Daniel prayed to Jehovah despite the king's edict (Dan 6). The wise men disobeyed Herod's order to report the location of the baby Jesus (Mt 2).

**Limits:** **1)** Peter and John did not attempt to overthrow the council. **2)** They did not use violence to resist the temple guard. **3)** They obeyed the authorities in all other areas. The only point of disobedience came where the rulers demanded obedience in an area that would cause them to disobey God.

**Application:** In the United States there almost never used to be a clash between obeying God and obeying government. Perhaps the worst example was Christian men being forced to serve in the military (giving rise to conscientious objectors such as Alvin York and Private Desmond Doss). However, thanks to the repeated election by our populace of godless, progressive Democratic politicians who have passed bad laws and appointed godless, progressive judges to creatively reinterpret old law, we have come to the point where civil disobedience is more and more required by those of faith.

**Examples:** Christian business owners forced to pay for their employees' abortions, Christian adoption agencies forced to place babies with homosexual couples, Christian bakers forced to decorate wedding cakes celebrating gay marriage, Christian bed and breakfast owners forced to rent to unmarried or gay couples, evangelists told they cannot preach the Gospel on public streets, or home owners told they cannot host home Bible studies or house church meetings.

**Attitude:** **ESV Matthew 5:12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

**Penalty:** You may suffer financial loss, harassment, the closure of your business and even jail time for obeying God rather than government.

**ESV 1 Peter 3:14-15** . . . if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy . . .

**10. In 4:21-22, why did the council simply issue threats, but not actually punish them?**

The miracle healing was beyond doubt and well known. There was no case against them and no legal justification of punishing them. Besides, fear of how the general populace might react prevented the rulers from punishing the apostles. Thus the council resorted to threatening.

**Application:** When a government imprisons Christians for being Christians (such as in China, Turkey or Iran), sometimes it can help when many people write letters to the government appealing for their release. Bad international publicity can put pressure on government to release these believers.

**11. Why did Luke inform Theophilus that the healed man was more than forty years old (4:22)?** It was to drive home the truth that the evidence was irrefutable.

**Profound:** The Sanhedrin did not attempt to disprove the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce, 103.

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\*\*\*\***What prayer request did Peter’s friends have in response to the threats (4:23-31)?**

The friends<sup>9</sup> prayed that God would grant them boldness to continue to speak God’s word, 4:29.<sup>10</sup>

**Insight:** Duress often drives God’s people into times of earnest, concerted prayer and fasting.

\*\*\*\***What did they acknowledge about God in 4:24-28?** They acknowledged God’s sovereignty in all things, including what the rulers did to Jesus. God rules over his creation; man’s will cannot stand up against God’s will.<sup>11</sup>

**12. In 4:25-26, who are the raging Gentiles, the plotting peoples, the kings of the earth and the gathered rulers? (*Match them up*).** In general, this refers to the Romans who crucified Jesus; the plotting peoples those who cried “Crucify Him”; the gathered rulers were the Sadducees, Pharisees, priests, elders, and scribes; the kings of the earth were Pilate and King Herod.

**13. What truth is implied in David’s words as quoted in 4:25-26?** *See Acts 2:23.* The implied truth is that people oppose the Lord “in vain” (4:25). Everything they did of their own free wills was actually “predestined” (4:28). God’s purposes will be carried out, even through man’s sinful actions.

**“The appointment in Samarra” (An ancient Middle Eastern story):** A merchant in Baghdad had a servant who came to him pale and trembling. “Master, I saw the Grim Reaper in the market today, and he pointed at me. Please, give me a horse to flee to Samarra, and maybe I can evade Death.” The merchant gave him his best horse and saw the servant off from the gates of Baghdad. Then, as he was returning through the city, he ran into Death at the market and said, “Why did you point at my servant this morning? You scared him.” “Oh,” said Death contritely, “I’m quite sorry. I didn’t mean to point—I was confused. I was surprised to run into your servant here, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”

**Sovereignty:** A theme running throughout Acts thus far is that God is in complete control of everything, including Judas’ betrayal and Jesus’ crucifixion.

ESV **Acts 2:23** . . . Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

\*\*\*\***14. What prayer request did the friends have in 4:29-30?** *See Ephesians 6:19, Colossians 4:3.* They prayed that God would grant it to them to continue to speak with all boldness, despite the threats.

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<sup>9</sup> At this point there were thousands of believers in the Jerusalem church. Luke likely describes this group as “friends” because they are an intimate subset of the larger church, probably the other apostles.

<sup>10</sup> The scribes are not mentioned in 4:23. Since they were Pharisees who believed in the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, they may have played a lesser role in the prosecution (Marshall, 111).

<sup>11</sup> Kistemaker, 166.

**Application:** *Have you ever prayed this for others (4:49-30)?* See *Ephesians 6:19, Colossians 4:3*. Rather than simply pray for the salvation of the lost, perhaps we should pray more for the boldness of the saved.

NIV **Ephesians 6:19** Pray . . . for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel . . .

ESV **Colossians 4:3** . . . pray . . . for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ . . .

**15. Why do you suppose God caused the place to shake (4:31)?** It was obviously in answer to their prayer and also served to strengthen their faith. God planned to shake the whole world with the Gospel!<sup>12</sup>

### So What?

**16. Based on what happened to Peter and John, what can you expect to sometimes happen when you share the Gospel?** See *John 16:2-3, 2 Timothy 3:12*.

ESV **2 Timothy 3:12** . . . all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted . . .

**17. When and how should Christians engage in civil disobedience?**

**18. Based on 4:23-28, what do we need to remember when persecuted?**

\*\*\*\* = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
- You can hear this lesson being taught at [SermonAudio.Com/NTRF](http://SermonAudio.Com/NTRF).

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<sup>12</sup> Kistemaker, 171.