

I remember some years ago Voice of the Martyrs did a presentation for us and the speaker made the comment that many preachers hardly ever preach about persecution and I remember wondering how they managed to do that because persecution is such a big topic in the Bible. The Bible is the story of the conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God plan of salvation is about overcoming opposition. And so if a preacher is going to avoid the topic of persecution, he is going to have to ignore an awful lot of what the Bible teaches.

So we have come to Acts 4 in our study of the book of Acts and the topic is about the opposition to the preaching of the gospel. This is a continuation of the opposition to Jesus. There was opposition to Jesus throughout his time on earth. That opposition led to his death. And now it continues as the apostles preach the message of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Peter had healed a lame man in the power of Jesus. A crowd had gathered and Peter had taken advantage of that to proclaim the message of Jesus calling people to repentance and promising them salvation if they did so. Chapter 4 picks up the story. "And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead."

These were Jewish religious leaders. These were the same people who had engineered the crucifixion of Jesus. They did not believe that Jesus was the promised Saviour that Israel was waiting for. They considered him to be a blasphemer because he claimed to be equal with God. They were afraid that he would stir up trouble and cause the Roman oppressors to brutally squash that trouble. And they had Jesus killed as a trouble-maker. And now a few months later Jesus' disciples were attracting large crowds and preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead. No wonder they were displeased.

It's no wonder that they were greatly annoyed. They had gone through all the trouble of having Jesus killed to make the "Jesus problem" go away and now Jesus' disciples had done a miracle in Jesus' name and were claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. And people were listening. Many were believing and the number of Jesus' followers was growing. For those who try to make the "Jesus problem" go away, Jesus and his followers are very annoying – infuriating actually. Because they will not stop preaching about Jesus. And trying to stop them has not been very effective most of the time.

There have been times when those determined to stop the followers of Jesus from proclaiming the message of Jesus have been quite successful. But for the most part the message still gets out and the church continues to grow – sometimes slowly – sometimes quite dramatically – like today in China. There is the saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." It is a paraphrase of something that the church father Tertullian wrote. That has not always been true, but in many cases it has been true. Certainly in the book of Acts and in the NT in general, attempts to stop the spread of Christianity were not very effective. And we see that in these opening verses of Acts 4. Verses 3-4, "And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men

came to about five thousand.” On the one hand the authorities are trying to stop the spread of Jesus’ followers and on the other hand the number of believers continues to increase. And that has often been the case in the history of the church.

The next section describes the confrontation between Peter and John and the religious leaders of the Jews. After spending the night in prison Peter and John are brought before a gathering of the religious leaders and asked, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Clearly the religious leaders feel that they had the authority to regulate what was being taught religious wise in Jerusalem and area. They had tried to stop Jesus from preaching his message and when he would not stop they had him executed. And now they had arrested Peter and John for preaching a message about Jesus that annoyed them. And this has often been the case. We see it today in any country that does not have religious freedom. Governments feel threatened by messages that they judge undermine their vision for their country and often they either try to control the message by regulation like what is going on in China or ban the message of Jesus altogether. And many fear that that might be coming to the West as religious freedom begins to be threatened.

Now clearly Peter does not accept that he needs the authority of these Jewish religious leaders to proclaim the message of Jesus. That is the gist of everything that follows in these verses. The background here is the great commission. Jesus had told his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the world. The short answer to the question, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” is by Jesus’ power and in Jesus’ name. The authority to preach the message of Jesus risen from the dead comes from Jesus himself and the followers of Jesus recognize no authority on earth that tries to regulate or to stop that message.

It is clear from the Bible that God has given authority to governments to protect citizens from evil-doers and keep order, but this passage makes it clear that the authority to preach the message of Jesus comes from Jesus himself and this is an area where civil governments have no say.

Now Peter’s response to the question of by what authority they did this miracle in Jesus’ name and proclaimed that Jesus had risen from the dead, was basically to preach Jesus. He addresses them respectfully. “Rulers of the people and elders....” And he continues, “if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, 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 is respectful to these leaders, but he does not hold back from declaring that it was by Jesus’ power that the lame man had been healed and that God had raised Jesus from the dead. And he does not hold back from confronting them with their sin of crucifying Jesus. He proclaims the exaltation of Jesus by saying that “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone” (Verse 11). Peter

there is referring to an OT text, Psalm 118:22 which says, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

So Peter compares Jesus to a stone that would be used to build a building. He is compared to a stone that the builders rejected. The religious leaders of Israel had rejected Jesus, but Jesus has become like the most important stone in a building, the cornerstone. Peter’s message was that the religious leaders had crucified Jesus. They had rejected him and his claims. But God had exalted Jesus and confirmed his claims by raising him from the dead. Jesus is still active from his place in heaven. It was by his power that this man who had been lame had been healed.

Now Peter’s response to the religious leaders here shows us something else about the message of Jesus that makes it offensive to those who do not receive it. It confronts its hearers with their sins. And it does not matter how powerful the hearers are. Peter is talking to powerful people. But he does not hesitate to confront them with the fact that they had crucified the one whom God had sent into the world. The message of Jesus is confrontational in that it confronts us with our sins. In this case Peter confronts the religious leaders of the Jews with their sin of rejecting Jesus and crucifying him. And this is always a part of the message even though the sins which are confronted are different.

This is one of the reasons that the message of Jesus often arouses opposition. None of us like to be told that we are sinners. And it takes a miracle of grace to bring us to the point where we are willing to accept the message of our sinfulness and humble ourselves before God. If that miracle of grace does not happen the response is often anger. The message of Jesus is good news that there is forgiveness for sinners who humble themselves and confess their sins, but it is a humbling message and those who are not humbled by it often feel insulted.

Then Peter goes on to claim that salvation in Jesus is the only way of salvation. Verse 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.” These words assume that we need to be saved. The message of Jesus is about salvation and it assumes the need of salvation. The name “Jesus” means saviour. In connection with Jesus’ birth, Joseph had been instructed, “[Y]ou shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus himself taught that “the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.” John 3:17 says, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Every person in the world needs salvation. Paul writes in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” He speaks of salvation in terms of being saved from the wrath of God. Romans 5:9, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” We are all sinners. We are by nature children of wrath. If we are not saved we will spend eternity in hell. This is what Peter assumes when he speaks about salvation.

And receiving salvation through Jesus is the only way of salvation. “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 was telling the religious leaders who were telling him to stop preaching Christ that by rejecting Christ they were unsaved – under the wrath of God – on their way to eternal condemnation.

This is the big question for all of us – Are we saved? Jesus said, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). This is the most important issue of our lives. Am I saved or am I not? If we gain the whole world and are not saved, our whole life is a tragedy. If we live a life of poverty and trouble but are saved, we are better off than any person who is not saved. This is the question of all questions, the issue of all issues ... are we saved?

And there is only one way to be saved. Jesus is the name by which we must be saved. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. It is through believing in Jesus and repenting of our sins. It is through submitting to Jesus as Lord and trusting in him as our Saviour. There is no other way.

This teaching is offensive to the world. It means that the adherents of all other religions are lost. It means that the multitudes who claim no religion are lost. It means that all people, except believers in Jesus, are under the wrath of God unless they repent and turn to Jesus. That includes nice people as well as terrorists. That includes philanthropists as well as members of the mafia. Being a devote follower of another religion will not save. Being an upstanding member of society will not save.

It is no wonder that that teaching is offensive to those who reject Jesus. It sounds arrogant to say that Jesus is the only way of salvation. But it has to be that way. There is only one true God. There is only one ultimate truth. The true God has revealed himself to us in his word. Those who receive that word are no smarter than others. It is all grace. But it means proclaiming a message that we know will be offensive to many people.

This goes with the territory. That is why Jesus tells us to count the cost. That is why following Jesus means taking up our cross. The message of salvation in Jesus is truly good news. It is about offering salvation in Jesus to whoever will listen. But we know ahead of time that those who do not receive it will find it offensive. That is why Jesus said to his disciples, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). We follow a Saviour who was persecuted and executed because of his claims and his message. And so being despised and hated by the world goes with the territory.

And yet salvation in Jesus is worth the hatred of the world. It is being saved from the wrath to come. It is being reconciled to God. It is having eternal life. It is loving God and being loved by God. It is being released from the bondage of sin and enabled by the Holy Spirit begin to live the satisfying life of obedience. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17, “For this light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison....”

Now the leaders of the Jews were astounded at the boldness of Peter and John. They were astounded at their ability to speak so clearly about Jesus in the light of the fact that they were uneducated men. And it certainly is amazing. Think of Peter before Pentecost. He had been quite confident that he would never deny Jesus, but when Jesus was arrested and he was identified by a servant girl as a follower of Jesus he denied that he even knew Jesus. But look at Peter now. He knows what has happened to Jesus. The religious leaders that he is speaking to were the ones who had condemned Jesus to death. It was not unreasonable to think that they might do the same to Jesus' followers who refused to stop preaching about Jesus. And yet Peter is bold. He seems to have no fear.

The difference is because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and with a special empowerment of the Holy Spirit that equipped Peter for this confrontation with the Jewish rulers. Verse 8 tells us that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit. This was a special filling of the Spirit to give Peter the courage and the ability to proclaim Jesus in this threatening situation. In Mark 13:11 we have Jesus' promise of the help of the Holy Spirit when they would later be brought before the authorities. "And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit." The boldness of Peter and John here is clearly the result of the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Now given the fact of the hatred and mockery of the world, it takes a certain boldness to be a Christian. Not everyone has the same calling to preach the gospel in hostile situations like Peter and John here or like Paul later on in the story. But we are all called to acknowledge Jesus before men (Matthew 10:32). We are all called to have no fear if we are called to suffer in the name of Christ. 1 Peter 3:14-16, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord who is holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you the reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

It takes courage to be a Christian in a hostile world. Everyone's experience will be different, but there will be times when acknowledging Christ before men will take boldness. And our text shows us where that boldness comes from. We may not feel very bold. But we see how the Holy Spirit gave Peter great boldness while apart from the Spirit Peter was not very bold at all. That is something for us to pray for – that we will be filled with the Spirit and given the boldness so that we will acknowledge Christ before men in whatever situation that is called for.

So the religious leaders of the Jews were astonished at the boldness of Peter and John and the text goes on to say that "they recognized that they had been with Jesus." This is an interesting comment. The boldness of Peter and John and the fact that they were able to speak with such authority in spite of the fact that they had no formal training reminded them of Jesus. Jesus had also astonished his hearers with his authority and with his

wisdom in spite of the fact that he did not have the formal training of the rabbis. John 7:15 says of Jesus, "The Jews therefore marveled, saying, 'How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied.'"

This is not to say that there is no place for formal training of ministers. Paul was formally trained and the church generally has put a significant emphasis on the training of ministers. Jesus himself, of course, in his humanity had the Holy Spirit without measure and he was able to understand the Scriptures through his own study of them. And the 12 apostles had Jesus for their teacher as well as the special inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What is most significant here is that Peter and John reminded the religious leaders of Jesus. Maybe they just remembered seeing them with Jesus while he was still on earth, but these words about them remembering that they had been with Jesus suggests that the apostles were reflecting Jesus in their boldness, insight and authority. As one commentator puts it, "Peter and John had obviously been taught by Jesus and shared something of his wisdom, insight into the Scriptures and prophetic authority!" (Peterson, 194)

Now we of course cannot be with Jesus in the same way that the apostles were, but we certainly can be with Jesus through prayer and the study of the Scriptures and being together with God's people. And those are ways that we can become more like Jesus and so reflect him in our lives. And certainly this is an important part of the way that we can be filled with the Spirit and so equipped to be bold in the face of the hostility from the world.

Now the religious leaders of the Jews were facing a conundrum. They were unwilling to believe the apostles' message about Jesus, even as it had been confirmed by the healing of the lame man. And yet, the miracle had happened and the people of Jerusalem knew about it. So they decided to let them go and to order them to stop preaching about Jesus. Verse 18, "So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." They did not want more people to hear about Jesus and believe in him and so they told Peter and John to stop preaching Jesus.

But that was one thing that the apostles could not do. Verse 19-20, 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.' Here is a clear instance of conflict between what Jesus had told the apostles to do and what the leaders of the Jews were telling them to do. And Peter and John are very clear on whom they will obey. They would not obey human leaders who were forbidding them from preaching the message of Jesus.

Now there is controversy right now whether following the restrictions that impact on church meetings is obeying man rather than God. Your elders and the vast majority of our presbytery as well as most other church leaders believe that this is a case of obeying God by obeying our government leaders as they seek to manage this pandemic. It seems clear to most of us that government restrictions managing a pandemic are in a different category than what the Jewish leaders were demanding of Peter and John even if they impact on worship services. That is not to say that there are not legitimate criticisms of how the government is treating

churches, but it is to say that what we are dealing with is not the same as what Peter and John were dealing with.

But if the time comes that the government tries to tell the church what it can or cannot teach from the word of God then we are clearly in a situation where we must obey God rather than man. Many Christians in the world are facing that today and many of them continue to be faithful and are suffering for it. We are not there yet, but it does seem to be coming and we need to be aware of that.

How do we prepare for that? There is no special way. The principles for the Christian life are the same regardless of the degree of persecution we are facing. We are to use the means that God has provided for our spiritual growth. We are to pray for and seek for laying up treasure in heaven rather than treasure on earth. We need to do the hard work of putting sin to death and growing in obedience. We need to heed Jesus' word in John 6:27, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the good that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you." The way to prepare for greater persecution is to seek to live faithfully in Jesus by the Spirit in the situation that we face right now – with all its temptations to worldliness and self-indulgence. May this teaching about persecution remind us that to be a Christian is always to heed Jesus' call, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."