

For thousands of years now, the church that began in Jerusalem and spread throughout the world, true Christ-followers around the world have been persecuted.

For the first 300 years under Rome, Christ-followers were torn apart by wild animals, crucified in a number of different positions, set on fire as human torches under Nero, and tortured in ways unimaginable even by the horror film master - Stephen King.

Thousands have been martyred, but many of them died with a calm serenity that put fear in many of the people responsible for killing them.

Traditionally it is taught with the exception of John, all the apostles died a martyrs' death.

These events did not destroy the church however, instead their deaths served as a means to cleanse and fortify the church.

The church matured the same way an individual matures... through trials and persecution.

After 300 years of torture, the church became the dominant force in the Roman empire. Tertullian wrote: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

In more recent years (at least in our part of the world) the church as a whole hasn't really faced physical persecution at this point.

C.S. Lewis's book, "The Screwtape Letters" describes how the attack of Satan to destroy the church has moved from physical persecution to a more subtle attack.

The plan today is to destroy the church through selfish pride, need for acceptance, status, compromise, and tolerant acceptance of all people coming through the doors.

Satan's plan is to destroy the spiritual influence of the church, without necessarily killing individual believers in the church.

Just letting believers be self-centered or smug, apathetic and worldly... is very effective in keeping lost people from being attracted to TRUE FAITH.

Today in many places, perhaps seen most prominent in the USA, the persecuted are ridiculed, rejected and made a public spectacle ... while compromisers who tolerate every form of false teaching are respected.

The first opposition toward Christ-followers in Jerusalem didn't take long to develop, and it came from those who executed Jesus in the first place.

Acts chapters 4,5,7,8 and 12 record these earliest persecution events.

None of the action surprised Peter and the other apostles, they expected it.

Jesus told them it was coming, John 15:18-20

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:12) years later:

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

True Christ-followers who desire to live Christ-centered lives will at some point come directly opposed to the satanic world system.

We are wise to study these records found in Acts, so that we will at least not be naïve about what could happen in this country or all over the Western Hemisphere... what is happening right now in other countries around the world.

Acts 4 is the first recorded events of persecution against the Church.

We'll divide the passage into two sections.

I. Acts 4:1-4 describes Persecution and Prison for Peter and John
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As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed 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.

Luke uses the plural for "**they**" which means that BOTH Peter and John were speaking to the people.

Perhaps Luke is painting a picture for us ... after the miraculous healing of the man lame since birth, and the second sermon Peter preached...

Now Peter and John are doing a question and answer time with individuals or pockets of people as the crowd stands around listening.

"**priests**" here are the "ordinary priests" of the temple who conduct the evening sacrifice, not those elite priests of the Sanhedrin.

In 1 Chronicles 24, King David had divided the tribe of Levi into 24 courses, or divisions with:

- 1 high priest
- 24 Chief Priests
- 24 Divisions of common priests

Each division would take turns for a period of 2 weeks to perform the duties of the common priests in the temple.

These common priests and their assigned duties were determined by casting lots.

Some of them would wait their entire lifetime to have the chance to serve for this two week period.

A priest named Zacharias in Luke 1:8-9 is the perfect example ... he probably waited most of his life to have this opportunity to burn incense in the temple.

Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

These priests (Acts 4:1) after waiting with great anticipation until it is their time to minister, just like Zacharias ... now approach Peter and John, who have created a disturbance, interrupting their once-in-a-lifetime special time of service.

"the captain of the temple guard" is the chief of the temple police force (also composed of Levites).

This captain was second in rank, and reporting only to the high priest, and was responsible for keeping order in the temple complex.

"Sadducees" we've spoken of before, were the dominant religious/political force in Israel during this time and for many years the High Priest was from this order.

They were mostly aristocratic, wealthy and landowners.

To protect this position, they constantly opposed any uprising against Rome.

In John 11 we see a secret council meeting of Pharisees and Sadducees take place where the High Priest (Caiaphas- who was a Sadducee) says:

You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.

Sadducees were all about social customs and traditions.

Yet, they constantly bickered with the Pharisees.

Sadducees = Torah (written Law) and nothing else
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Pharisees = Oral Law was greater than Torah

Sadducees didn't believe in:

- the miraculous or supernatural.

- the resurrection of the body or any future reward in heaven or punishment in hell, when you died it was just over.
- the existence of angels or demons or anything associated with the spirit world.

Saddest of all ... Sadducees totally rejected predestination and the sovereignty of God... they actually believed like William Ernest Henley in his poem "Invictus."

I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.

It was these theological liberals who first brought persecution to the Church.

"**came upon**" is "ephistemi" (ef-is'-tay-mee) ἐφίστημι

most often translates ... to come upon someone suddenly and with hostile intent

the "**priests**" were aggravated that Peter and John were even teaching ...

Peter and John were unsanctioned, they had no training credentials, they didn't attend the seminary... and yet this large crowd had gathered around them stirring up a big commotion.

These men weren't rabbis... worse, they were from Galilee... but the real outrage...

Peter and John were "**proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.**"

AND... they were doing it in the TEMPLE... the Sadducees' home turf.

The man Jesus, they had executed as a blasphemer... Peter and John, are now proclaiming as a resurrected MESSIAH.

Each of them saw this as a direct attack on the Sadducees authority.

It's really this simple: if Jesus is indeed resurrected... the Sadducees are the HERETICS.

John Polhill in The New American Commentary:ACTS writes:

... the idea of a general resurrection was an apocalyptic concept with all sorts of messianic overtones. Messianic ideas among the Jews of that day meant revolt, overthrow of the foreign overlords, and restoration of the Davidic kingdom... the notes of Peter's sermon alarmed them: resurrection, Author of Life, a new Moses. These were all revolutionary ideas. The movement must not spread. It must be nipped in the bud.

These Sadducees did exactly what we should expect of the incensed liberal mindset... they "**laid hands on them, and put them in jail until the next day.**"

Luke says "**it was already evening**" meaning Peter's sermon went a lot longer than just the recorded words of us in Acts 3.

Because it was evening, it was too late to convene the Sanhedrin for a trial on this day, and Jewish law did not allow for trials at night (which of course, we know they ignored with Jesus).

So ... Peter and John go to jail.

But this jail time didn't prevent another spiritual result:

"... the number of the men came to be about five thousand..."

This is a cumulative number ... so what started as 3,000 souls at Pentecost, now just numbering the men (excluding women and children) there were 5,000 grown adult male Christ-followers in the congregation.

Many of these 5k are foreigners from around the world, who came for Passover, stayed through Pentecost, got saved ... and didn't want to leave to go home.

After this ... the church grows too fast to be accurately recorded in number... so it is the last specific number of size in Acts.

II. Acts 4:5-31 – describes Peter and John's Response

From the passage we examine today, we find 7 ways to handle the coming persecution, modeled by the apostles.

1. Yield to Examination (4:5-7)

On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?"

There is no mention in verse 3 that Peter or John resisted their arrest... nor were they protesting or belligerent in the jail... nor argumentative when brought into the court.

Peter and John knew that God was sovereignly in control now, just as He had been at the trial of Jesus.

Just as a review, the Sanhedrin had 71 members including the high priest.

In fact, **Annas** was not the current high priest, because he had been deposed by the Romans in favor of his son-in-law Caiaphas.

Annas still bore the title of high priest.

If you were to meet our 43rd President, George W. Bush, you would address him as "Mr. President", since this is considered a lifelong title... even when not holding the office any more.

But make no mistake, it was Annas who was still the power behind the scenes.

Annas had five sons... his son-in-law **Caiaphas**... and one of his grandsons who all served at one time as high priest in Jerusalem.

Annas had a son named **Jonathan**, and many scholars believe he is the John mentioned here.

Nothing is known historically about **Alexander**, or why it is significant that Luke mentions him here.

The Sanhedrin met for interrogation in a place called the "Hall of Hewn Stone" ... probably somewhere within the temple area, but exactly where is much debated.

There they begin the questioning process with the apostles in the center.

Homer Kent, Jr. in a book "Jerusalem to Rome" writes:

... the Mosaic Law specified that whenever someone performed a miracle and used it as the basis for teaching, he was to be examined, and if the teaching were used to lead men away from the God of their fathers, the nation was responsible to stone him. (see Deuteronomy 13:1-5). On the other hand, if his message was doctrinally sound, the miracle-worker was to be accepted as coming with a message from God.

The question raised is:

"... by what power, or in what name..." did you heal this lame man?

It was the **NAME** that represented authority.

And since the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin had certainly not AUTHORIZED them beforehand... now they posed the question.

Which brings us to the second way to handle coming persecution.

2. Surrender to God's SPIRIT [4:8a]

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit...

The requirement for any powerful defense of your faith, is to be filled with God's Holy Spirit.

Luke recorded here again, Peter wasn't taken by surprise ... he had heard it from Jesus

Luke 12:11-12

... when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not become anxious about how or what you should speak in your defense, or what you should say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

Here in Acts 4, Luke is describing how Peter is completely yielded to the Spirit's control of what happens next... and what will come out of his own mouth in defense of his faith.

Pause button: TRINITY MODEL

We've been talking about the concept of LORD.

In the Old Testament the name is Jehovah, and is used to describe what we would call the first person of the God Trinity – or God the Father.

In the New Testament the name is attached by the writers to Jesus, in the title Jesus Christ our LORD ... making this second person of the Trinity – God the Son.

In Acts perhaps more than anywhere else we see the third person of the Trinity – God the Holy Spirit having all the same attributes of God the Father and Son:

- control
- authority
- presence

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS: **LORD**

Peter isn't filled with a lengthy prayer... or an emotional experience...

Peter is filled with God's Spirit because he is walking in obedience to God's command...

Peter is totally yielded, submitted to the will of God... and the power of God...

Peter is completely calm and at rest.

What we see in Peter in this story is a total metamorphosis to what he was in the gospels.

This is the foundational principle of handling persecution which may come... we must completely rest in and surrender to the Holy Spirit.

But don't mistake resting in the Spirit as being passive.

Which leads to the third aspect of facing coming persecution.

3. Seize the opportunity immediately [4:8-13]

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 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 crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health. "He is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, **THE BUILDERS**, but **WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER** stone. "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and *began* to recognize them as having been with Jesus.**

Being submissive before the court does not Peter was being a coward.

Resting in God's power and Spirit is not being passive.

Peter begins by charging these 71 men (the Sanhedrin) for putting himself and John on trial for healing a sick man.

But since they demanded to know "what makes you think you're a healer or teacher...by what name..." so, Peter tells them.

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 crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health.

This beggar is in the room and he is STANDING and he is in GOOD HEALTH.

In the power/war room of the Sanhedrin... Peter although here on trial ... exposes the truth about the men responsible for executing Jesus.

Peter shows it is these men, not himself, who are the enemies of God.

We'll see this as a common theme in the sermons preached all throughout Acts.

But what we see in this event is unrelenting courage and devotion to truth... regardless of the consequences.

Peter is not backing down from the truth.

Jesus as Messiah did not fit any Jew's preconceived notion of Israel's political/military deliverer.

But in the minds of the Sadducees Jesus couldn't be Messiah, because he couldn't prevent His own death at the cross, after blaspheming that He was equal with God.

Peter is making a point that he is not leading people away from God (Mosaic Law) but that He is leading them to the CONERSTONE of FAITH... Jesus of Nazareth.

He quotes Psalm 118:22 and applies it to the RESURRECTION of Jesus...

This one quote puts him **directly opposed** to the entire Sadducee theological belief system.

Peter says it is the Sadducees, not the apostles, leading people away from God.

In verse 12 Peter basically gives a "come forward invitation" to the very men who crucified Jesus.

Peter already told the people the lame beggar was healed in Jesus' NAME... now he tells the Sanhedrin ...

...there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved...

Peter proclaims Jesus is the source of physical healing... but also Jesus is the ONLY source of spiritual healing.

But! Peter didn't invent this idea... it came from Jesus Himself.

John 14:6

I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.

The EXCLUSIVITY of the belief system of Jesus, described in John 14:6, is unacceptable to the majority of our religiously diverse society today.

We preach an exclusive message of salvation ... in an all-inclusive world of liberal tolerance where all faiths or religious systems are seen as valid.

The most popular verbiage is "all roads lead to heaven."

How dare we narrow-mindedly insist that ours is the only Way?

But in reality there are only two spiritual paths.

According to Jesus in Matthew 7, the narrow One that leads to life... and wide one that leads to death and destruction.

Peter's words didn't even phase the hard hearts of the Sanhedrin.

It only caused them to look at the apostles differently... not unlike looking at a science experiment in a biology lab, or an unusual exhibit at the zoo... you might say to yourself ... wow... that's odd.

The Sanhedrin now captivated (marveled) at these uneducated/untrained men of Galilee and their arguing so effectively from scripture.

As they pondered or marveled... it dawned on them... oh yeah, these were followers of Jesus.

They were acting JUST LIKE HIM... boldly and fearlessly responding to their interrogation.

Jesus had no rabbinic training either ... but He could use the scripture better than any Sadducee or Pharisee of the Sanhedrin... to prove His points.

And He had performed MANY miracles during the past torturous three years while they watched and waited for the moment to put Him away.

Peter and John boldly seized this opportunity to speak out truth.
But the next part goes along with the boldness...

4. At all costs be OBEDIENT [4:14-22]

And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they *began* to confer with one another, saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we

cannot deny it. **“But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name.”** And when they had summoned them, **they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”** When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

It was a convincing argument.

Here’s the man, Peter... giving glory to God... leading people to God... not away from God.

Now these esteemed leaders of Israel ask: **“what do we do with these men?”**

To punish them will be risky... the miracle is known already and by the same time tomorrow every household throughout Jerusalem would know of it.

Even THEY couldn’t deny it... the healed lame beggar is standing right there in front of them.

They are re-living their worst nightmare... they had killed Jesus for claiming to be Messiah.

Now, here are two of His followers, doing the same things He did, using the same arguments He used... and saying He is resurrected ... the single miracle authenticating their claim... this healed man.

They were compelled to stop this going any further... so **they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.**

Intimidation... or so they thought... would be their solution.

It’s ironic isn’t it? [Pause]

That early Christ-followers had to be THREATENED to stay quiet... while many modern day “believers” have to be COMMANDED or coerced to speak up in defense of their faith?
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Peter and John wasted no time in deciding their response.

Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.

Now the Sanhedrin is in the thick of it.

They certainly didn’t want them continuing this line of preaching ... but they couldn’t instruct them to obey men instead of God either.

PAUSE: One striking observation is the Sanhedrin representing the governing body makes no subsequent action to disprove Peter and John’s claim that Jesus is resurrected.

If the Sadducees could disprove this one thing, the movement would collapse... but they couldn't.

Peter and John refused to submit to the command to stay silent... simply saying: "we can't do that."

They weren't even going to pretend they would ... because the message would continue... with them or without them.

So the Sanhedrin let them go...

Which brings us to the next way to handle persecution that might come to us...

5. Report to the FELLOWSHIP of the local body of Christ-followers [4:23]

When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

They went immediately to their fellowship group... not the church at large... since it was LARGE now... and they had no building.

Probably the apostles... and some of the original 120 who met at Pentecost... came together, maybe even back to that same upper room which might now serve as the makeshift headquarters.

What we see is a simple truth.

Persecuted believers around the world today, find a way to often draw together for mutual support in stress-filled times.

If we are faithfully speaking God's word in love to a lost world around us, there will always be pushback... even if it isn't like the persecution the apostles faced... yet.

If... or when this becomes our reality in this country... it is this unity and fellowship with other Christ-followers, which defines a true believer.

Next ...

6. Be THANKFUL [4:24-28]

And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, 'WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? 'THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.' "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

Peter and John returned to the group not in fear... but exhilarated!

They had faced direct opposition ... and they took complete comfort in God's sovereignty in all matters.

They knew... what David said in Psalm 2:1-2 was not just about Jesus, but also about themselves in this moment.

This prophecy was fulfilled in their own lives!

Every person involved... was involved in fulfilling the ultimate purpose of God.

"predestined" is "proorizo" (pro-or-id'-zo) προορίζω
... to be determined beforehand

God is the ultimate historian... writing all of history... before it ever started.

The Sanhedrin had done the worst they could to Peter and John, and only fulfilled God's plan from the beginning...

Psalm 76:10 **For the wrath of man shall praise You...**

Last, Peter and John...

7. PRAY for even greater BOLDNESS [4:29-31]

"And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and *began* to speak the word of God with boldness.

Intimidation? I don't think so.

In fact the apostles are anything but... timidly cowering in fear.

They don't ask for places to hide... they ask for more boldness and more courage in proclaiming the truth of Jesus!

They ask that God continue to heal, and do signs and wonders glorifying Jesus!

And God didn't take very long to answer!

The room shook!

The Holy Spirit filled them with peaceful rest, and confident assurance... resulting in bold, powerful PREACHING (speak the word)

Here's the thing...

It is not necessary for them to speak OTHER LANGUAGES... for those from other countries are now saved and can speak in THOSE languages to people all over the world.

In fact now there are 5,000 adult men who can carry this gospel truth around the globe... in their own native tongue (language).

The miracle now is not in languages... but in the power of speaking THE Truth.
Now the church has faced and survived the initial stages of persecution.

Instead of cowering in fear... all these people become more courageous and contagious with their excitement.

It draws the fellowship together.

Opposition only made them stronger.

And it will be true one day again... perhaps soon... before Jesus comes again.