

As God's people, we want to be guided by His Word and empowered by His Spirit to look more like Jesus. This Scripture Guide is based on this morning's passage to further equip you with what God's Word says.

Week 6 Acts 4:1-21

Overview

How do Christians respond to persecution? Here we have the first persecution of believers and their response.

Scripture

vv.1-4 After the healing of the beggar and Peter's second speech in Jerusalem, Peter and John are taken into custody by the Jewish leaders of the temple. The elites of the temple were annoyed at the apostles teaching of the resurrection of the dead. The high priests were typically Sadducees, a sect of Judaism that rejected the resurrection of the dead on account of it not being mentioned in the Torah. This teaching also asserted that they were responsible for killing the Messiah and that the people of Israel should listen to Jesus instead of the teachers and that salvation comes through Jesus as opposed to the priests. Yet they are only "annoyed" right now. Conventional Jewish teaching said that the Messiah would conquer the enemies of the Jewish people, not die a criminal. So they are not yet worried about a movement with a dead figurehead. In spite of this Luke records that the number of the believers is up to 5,000 men (Acts 4:4).

vv.5-7 The trial commences in the morning when the high ranking priestly family brings Peter and John to the Sanhedrian, the Jewish high court. The hierarchy of the temple is described in Exodus through Deuteronomy.¹ It involves a patriarchal priesthood, descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses. These priests would offer sacrifices on behalf of the people, with only the high priest allowed in the Holiest of Holies once a year on the day of atonement. Additionally, there were descendants from the tribe of Levi, to work at the temple as helpers.² These high priests were from the Maccabean family who were given control of the temple by Herod the Great.³ They owed their power and prestige to Gentile sources and so ended up catering to the Romans and were very conscious of Jewish people claiming to be kings. Luke also mentions a group of people referred to as scribes (4:5). These people would probably be Pharisees, as the Greek word γραμματεὺς (transcribed as *grammateis*) denotes someone who is familiar in laws and regulations and not just someone who copies down or duplicates information.⁴ So we see both Pharisees and Sadducees meeting to put the apostles on trial. They ask Peter and John, "By what power or by what name did you do this (Acts 4:7)?" They intend to either have them incriminate another leader or pronounce something demonic. Instead Peter responds with the aid of the Holy Spirit.⁵

vv.8-12 Peter dodges the question of authority at first by analyzing why they are on trial to begin with. He first points out that their imprisonment was related to the healing of a man. There was nothing strictly demonic about healing; it was in fact an attribute of God (Mal 4:2). He then answers their question by declaring that this healing was accomplished through the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Acts 4:10). The proof that there is healing in the name of Jesus is that the beggar is standing up in the same room! This man was rejected and killed, but was in fact the cornerstone the builders should have seen. Peter

¹ See Exo 28-29

² See Lev 3:1-13

³ Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews

⁴ "Acts 4." *NET Bible*, Bible.org, <https://netbible.org/bible/Acts+4#>. Accessed 11 February 2022.

⁵ Jesus had promised the very thing before in Luke 12:11-12.

quotes Psalm 118:22 to tell the Sanhedrin that the cornerstone that once was the temple is now perfected in Jesus of Nazareth and salvation now comes through His name alone.

vv.13-20 Whatever the Sanhedrian expected, it was not the boldness that came from the disciples. Luke records that the leaders were “astonished” at these “uneducated, common men⁶ (Acts 4:13).” They also recognize that they had been with Jesus (v.13). John Crystostom wrote, “Now their great outspokenness shocked them. For it was not only by their words that they revealed their lack of concern over the accusations they faced... (but) by everything about them they showed the outspokenness with which the confronted the people.”⁷ Yet they cannot deny their claim, as there is proof of Jesus’ healing standing before them. They again underestimate this movement and decide to only warn them to not speak in the name of Jesus again. But Peter and John respond in a way that combines meekness and boldness. They ask the leadership to evaluate whether listening to the priests or God is more important while also declaring, “we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (v.20).” Peter referred to the cornerstone earlier to say that God has brought forth a new cornerstone and the faith must be built upon it rather than the religious leaders. If God has brought this message to them, how could they not talk about it to the masses?

vv.21-22 The leaders have no choice but to release them, as the people can clearly realize that the apostles have done something miraculous. The miracle is not proof in of itself, but gives credence to the truth of the name the apostles are teaching about. God would not bless people who are teaching lies against him⁸, so the people praise God for this healing (4:21). The man in question was over 40 years old, which indicates that he did not get better on his own and calls back to the 40 years the Israelites spent in the wilderness. The number came to be associated with trials and suffering. This healing allegorically indicates that after this time of suffering and waiting, there is healing in the name of Jesus that needs to be proclaimed.

Conclusion

The recording of the trial here in Acts is a model for believers to use when they end up “on trial” for their faith. The contrast and comparison between Peter and John in front of the high priests contrasts with how Jesus interacted with the Council in Luke 22:66-71. Jesus speaks with coy, hidden rhetoric, while the apostles speak with boldness about what has come to pass. There will be many “trials” of Christians before Christs returns and believers should take this advice to speak boldly and adamantly about their faith, without slander or name calling against those who do not believe.

⁶ Jewish culture at the time had a system of education that began at childhood under teachers hired by the community. Most students would begin to learn a trade around adolescence while still studying on the side. Jesus finds Peter and John fishing, meaning they were not the cream of the crop students and had no formal rabbinic training other than Jesus. *Mishneh Torah*

⁷ Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 10. Ancient Commentary on Scripture.

⁸ There are instances in the Bible where witchcraft or sorcery creates magic (Exo 7:11-12, 1 Sam 28:8-19, Acts 8:9-13) but this should be seen as the exception instead of the rule.