

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

ACTS CHAPTER 4

“WHERE THERE IS FIRE, THERE IS SMOKE!”

The *USA Today* newspaper headline caught my attention: "Jet Restroom Smoker Caused Bomb Scare." Instantly I needed to know more. It turns out that a diplomat from the Middle East nation of Qatar was smoking in the bathroom of a United Airlines airplane bound for Denver. Passengers noticed the smoke; next thing they knew, military fighter jets were alongside their plane. The man was arrested by federal air marshals, the plane landed safely, everyone was interviewed by authorities, and the incident was over.

The Apostles of Jesus were not from Qatar but Jerusalem; they were not aboard a flight but they were ambassadors on a mission; they were not smoking but were on fire for Jesus and smoke got in the eyes of the enemies of Christ, disciples were arrested - that's what Acts chapter four is about. Chapter 4 is the culmination of the events that began in Chapter 3.

THE CHURCH UNDER FIRE**Acts 4:1-22****There Were The Persecuted. v.1a**

"Now as they spoke to the people...."

These were men who were denied freedom of speech; these were men who were not a menace to society but a blessing to society; these were healers of the sick, having just healed a man who had not walked for forty years; these were men doing the work of God. We are reminded by Paul that, *"all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."* (2 Timothy 3:1 2)

There Were The Persecutors. Vs.1b-4

"..... the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand."

Peter's stinging sermon in Chapter 3 had found its mark. You will remember that:

- He charged them with rejecting Christ – Verses 13-15;
- He challenged them to repent - Verse 19;
- He confronted them with the return of Jesus Christ - Verses 20, 21.

The Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, pierced their hearts and they struck out at those who wielded the Sword of Truth by trying to detain them with the insinuations that they were unlearned and unauthorized preachers.

Who were the prosecutors? The priests, Sadducees and religious leaders! This was not persecution from the general populace but from the Jewish leaders. The greatest hindrance

to the Gospel today is not in the form of opposition from the world in general, but opposition from within religious circles.

The Book of Acts is the history of the young church of Jesus Christ. The establishment of the church met with much opposition in a world already filled with religion. Since Christianity is not another religion, it was, and continues to be, a threat to man's way of salvation.

Religion is man trying to climb up to God while Christianity is God coming down to man. Christianity teaches that God, in the person of his son Jesus Christ, came down to raise man up. Religion does not like that idea for humans have the propensity to want to save themselves. Religion's mantra is: "Please! I'd rather do it myself!" However, Jesus Christ said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me."* (John 14:6).

John Bunyan was arrested three times, and spent 13 years in prison, all for the crime of "unauthorized preaching." The warrant for his third arrest, which resulted in his imprisonment in Bedford prison, where he wrote "the Pilgrim's progress," reads as follows:

"Whereas information and complaint is made unto us that one John Bunyan hath divers times in contempt of his Majesty's good laws, preached or taught in other manner than according to the church of England. These are therefore in his Majesty's name to command you forth with to apprehend and bring the body of the said John Bunyan before us. Given by our hands and seals the fourth day of March in this the seven and twentieth year of the reign of our most gracious sovereign Lord King Charles II."

The Jerusalem hierarchy of Paul's day was no more kindly disposed toward "unauthorized" preaching than was the English hierarchy of the 17th century. The first preachers of the Gospel had their authorization from the Lord himself, but since they had no diploma from the school of Gamaliel, or letters from the high priest, or license from the Sanhedrin, they were termed irregular.

Provocative preaching is not popular to say the least. People do not want to be provoked to think or act. Peter's preaching was provocative. The Gospel always provokes, therefore it meets with resistance and even contempt. There are always two types of reaction to the Gospel message:

- It provokes to resistance. *"Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day."* (v. 2, 3)
- It provokes to repentance. *"Many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand."* (v. 4)

There Was Prosecution. Vs.5-6

"And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem."

This was a hand-picked courtroom crowd. Notice the words, *“the family of the high priest”* in verse 6. Annas the high priest, was the Father-in-law of Caiaphas. (John 18:1 2-14) How soon the words of Christ in John 16:33 were fulfilled, *“In the world that you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”*

There Was Proclamation. Vs.7-12

“And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, “By what power or by what name have you done this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, 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 stands here before you whole. This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

The Prosecution began with an interrogation: *“By what power or by what name have you done this?”* (v.7) Little did the Sanhedrin court know that when they asked for an explanation, they would become a congregation listening to a sermon! Peter was pleased by their unconscious invitation and seized upon the opportunity and preached to them Jesus. They did not fly into a rage against their accusers for their mistreatment. This was not the time for pitying self. This was the time to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ and this they did in clear and concise terms.

This is the first time in the history of the church that there was civil disobedience and Peter and John put it in these terms: *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.”*

There is a higher law than the law of man. There is a voice that has more authority than the voice of a human judge: it is the voice of God. They did not lead a riot or carry placards. They simply declared the truth and they personally declared the Gospel all of their lives until martyrdom. These men were further threatened, then let go. But they were not silenced.

When asked by whose authority they had acted Peter arose and preached a sermon. The apostles did not propound theories. They proclaimed certainties. The pulpit is the place to give an authoritative message, not an "I think so" message but a "this is what the Lord says."

Peter's proclamation was threefold:

- a. Christ the Sovereign - *“By the name of Jesus Christthis man stands here before you whole.”* v.10
- b. Christ the Stone – *“This is the stone which was rejected by you builders.”* v.11
- c. Christ the Savior - *“no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”* v.12

Peter and John spoke with such power and authority that the Jewish courtroom crowd marveled. (Acts 4:13) The people recognized in the disciples qualities that identified them with Jesus Christ although they were men from private life, having never been trained professionally, they had turned the city upside down. What a testimony to these early Christian's lifestyle.

It has been said repeatedly that a Christian is like a good watch: he has an open face, his hands are busy, he is made of pure gold; he is well-regulated and full of good works. These things identify the believer with Christ and set him apart from the world around us today.

Lyman Beecher was a Boston pastor many years ago. Someone asked him why his church was so successful. He replied, "I preach on Sunday, but I have 450 members who preach all week with their lives wherever they go." The Christian community is a powerful witnessing force to the salvation of Jesus Christ offers in our world. Living for Christ is witnessing for Christ. It is something contagious.

When we open our lives to Christ, He enters, lives in us and uses us. He lives His life out through us. His contagious spirit reaches out through us to influence one life after another as we come in contact with people. This is how Peter and John witnessed for Christ. People noticed that they had been with Jesus. They said to the rulers, *"we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."*

Our words, our actions and our attitude show a marked difference after we've been in the presence of the Lord. We cannot help but absorb His characteristics into our personalities. If we spend time with Jesus we will become more kindly, more compassionate, more understanding and more loving toward our fellow man. These qualities in our lives draw others to Christ. What a wonderful blessing it is to be known for our Christ-like characteristics.

There Was The Predicament. Vs.13-17

"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, "What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name."

The Jewish Court was in quite a predicament. The man who had been healed was standing before them; the healing was a marvel recognized by the general population and therefore, the rulers had to tread softly. They certainly did not want to come across as opposing healings, however, they did not want to place a stamp of approval upon the healers either!

There Was The Prohibition. Vs. 18-22

"So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed." (Vs.18-22)

The Jewish rulers threatened the disciples and told them not to speak anymore in the name of Jesus. They might as well have told the sun not to rise again or the tide of the ocean to cease flowing.

The apostle Paul later wrote, "*necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.*" (I Cor.9:16) And Jeremiah had declared long before, "*If I say, I will not make mention of him, or speak anymore in his name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I cannot contain.*" (Jer. 20:9)

The more vigorous the enemies of the cross of Jesus Christ became in trying to stamp out the fire, the more rapidly it spread. The threats of the Sanhedrin tribunal seemed to serve as fuel for the fire, for we read in verse 2 that when the disciples were let go they went to their own company and praised God!

The religious hierarchy was not only disturbed by the unauthorized preaching of the apostles, they were disconcerted by the unquestionable power which the disciples displayed. Their message was accompanied and confirmed by deeds of the miraculous order for the healing of the lame man was evidence to all that these men were empowered by God. The marvel was all the greater because the man was over 40 years old who was healed.

The members of the Council frankly admitted their dilemma. They asked in verse 16, "*What shall we do with these men? For that indeed a notable miracle has been done by them and is manifest to all that dwell in Jerusalem and we cannot deny it.*"

Can Christianity today produce that which the world of skeptics and atheists cannot deny? Yes! The greatest evidence for Christianity is a genuine Christian! There are many today who are trying to be a Christian but who have never met Jesus Christ. They have read about Him and heard about Him from others but they have no relationship with Him. To become a Christian one must meet Jesus Christ!

Illustration: Many years ago I read about a boy who wanted to be a lion tamer, so he got a book from the public library describing the proper way to subdue and control wild animals. He read and reread the book until he could quote most of it from memory. With all of this information in mind, one night he went to the local zoo and climbed into the lion's cage. There he found himself face-to-face with the king of beasts. The lion attacked and killed him. The boy had never met a lion tamer or observed a lion tamer working with the animals. To become a lion tamer one must be taught and trained personally by a lion tamer.

The devil is characterized as a roaring lion and anyone who thinks they can overcome the power of the devil and become a Christian without personally meeting the Lord Jesus Christ is just as foolish as the boy who tried to be a lion tamer by simply reading a book. A head knowledge of Christ is not sufficient. We must personally meet Him and have a personal relationship with him in order to be a Christian. It should be underscored again that it was noted by the Jewish court that "*they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.*"

The court agreed that they should warn Peter and John that "*they speak to no man in this name,*" (v.17) that is, the name of Jesus. "*So they called them and commanded them not to*

“speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.” (v.18) Peter and John had declared “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (v12) “There is no other name” (v.12)

Illustration: A blind man once stood on a bridge in London, England, reading aloud Acts chapter 4 from a Braille Bible. A gentleman on his way home stopped at the edge of the crowd that had gathered to listen. At that very moment the blind man lost his place. While trying to find it, he kept repeating the last three words that he had just read: “No other name,” “No other name.” “No other name.” Many people in the crowd smiled, but the inquisitive bystander walked away impressed. He had been searching for inner peace and was therefore greatly impacted by a few well spoken words. The phrase “No other name” kept going through his mind. During the night he surrendered and accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. He said later “I’ve been trying to be saved by my own works but Jesus alone can save me. There is no other name whereby I must and can be saved.”

The name of Jesus Christ is the singular name, the sufficient name, the sweetest name, the only saving name! Such truth is too dogmatic for our liberal minded friends who think that man can climb up to heaven on his own.

Illustration: Many years ago in downtown Atlanta, Georgia the Wyancoff Hotel burned during the night and more than 100 people perished. Just two blocks from the hotel was a fire station. When the fire trucks arrived, their rescue apparatus was not adequate to help the people on the upper floors. The fire hoses and the ladders were too short!

There is no other way of salvation from sin and escape from eternal damnation but through Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death on Calvary. Any human attempts are too short!

What you do with Jesus Christ determines your relationship to God and decides your eternal destiny. Do you stand with those who crucified Christ or are you among the many who through the centuries have trusted Him as their Savior?

THE CHURCH ON FIRE **ACTS 4:23-37**

THE CONDUCT OF THE CHURCH ON FIRE. Verses 23-28

“And being let go, they went to their own company and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.” (v.23)

Where one goes when let go, is an indicator of where he will go in eternity! When Peter and John were released from prison, they went to their own company. Everyone has their “company.” With what company do you identify? As for me, I want to be with Christ’s crowd!

They Praised. Vs. 24-28

“So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: “Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: ‘Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the

LORD and against His Christ.’ “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.”

They Prayed. Vs.29-30

“Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.....”

They Proclaimed. v.31

“..... and they spoke the word of God with boldness.”

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH ON FIRE. Verses 32-37

There Was Unity. v.32

“Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.”

There Was Ministry. v.33a

“And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.”

There Was Beauty. v.33b

“And great grace was upon them all.”

There Was Generosity. Vs.34-37

“Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

Many years ago, as the ushers were receiving the offerings from the worshippers, a small boy tugged at the sleeve off one of the men, whispering, "Please put the plate down on the floor." Shocked and perplexed, the usher obeyed. And to further complicate matters, the lad stepped into the offering plate. Later he said, "That was my way of saying, "I give my life to you, Lord." That boy was Robert Moffat, who became a pioneer missionary to Africa and the father-in-law of the saintly missionary, David Livingstone.

God desires nothing we have unless and until He has us! The early New Testament church was composed of generous believers, for the most part, who were still living under the afterglow of Calvary and the open tomb, reminding them of the One Who gave His all for them. Can we do less than give Him our best and live for Him completely, after all He has done for us?

JdonJ