

You Shall Be Of Me Witnesses--To The Jewish Rulers

by Ron R. Ritchie

Just before the local elections a few months ago, my wife and I were invited to a banquet sponsored by the Christian Law Enforcement Officers organization in another county. Among the invited guests was the Sheriff of that county (a non-Christian), who was running for re-election. The officers didn't really expect him to come to the function as he was heavily involved in this pressure-filled and dirty election campaign. He came, however, and when I was introduced to him he gave me the usual politician's stiff-arm greeting.

When it was my turn to speak, being very conscious of the pressure these officers were under, I addressed them as, "Fellow ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13). As I spoke I kept glancing at the Sheriff, and to my surprise he was listening to me. While I really believe this Book, I'm always surprised that anybody listens to me! Suddenly I felt the Spirit saying to me, "That's enough. Now I want you to turn to the Sheriff and speak to him." I heard myself say to him, "Sheriff, I understand that this has been a very difficult election campaign for you." All at once it seemed there was no banquet going on; it was all over, as far as I was concerned. I continued, "I just don't know how you can hold up under such pressure. If you don't mind I would like to pray for you and your wife." I began to pray for them and prayed for about five minutes. Then I sat down and forgot about it. I felt someone tap my shoulder. I turned around and saw the Sheriff standing there with tears streaming down his face. He hugged me, and then he hugged some of the deputies. He could hardly talk for weeping, but he said to me, "I've got to get in touch with you again."

This is the kind of situation God wants us to be involved in. God has called us in this, the age of the Spirit, to be available to the prompting of the Spirit to be a witness for his namesake so that men and women might be called out into a saving relationship with him. In this age of the Spirit we are to live our lives anticipating that the Spirit of God is going to use us because he lives within us. We are not "normal" people anymore, nor can we approach life as "normal" people do. We are freaks, strangers, aliens, as far as the world is concerned. We are sons and daughters of the Living God who has placed us here to be salt and light in our communities.

That is our commission from the Book of Acts. Here is the key verse of that book:

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be of me witnesses. (Acts 1:8)

When he said these words to the disciples, Jesus was not talking about electric power, or human power. He was talking about the power imparted by God's Holy Spirit living within us to use us to further the spiritual growth of his kingdom on earth. We are to have a lifestyle of testifying about the resurrected Jesus Christ--not a lifestyle of "going" witnessing, not a feeling of compulsion to witness, which is just fleshly activity. That will do nothing to further God's kingdom. Rather, we are to allow the Spirit of God to flow through us, to be constantly available to him to speak through us, to use our hands, our eyes, our tongues, our feet to honor and glorify him, just as naturally as if we were breathing. Two of my wife's French cousins came to our home for dinner last night. None of their family ever speaks of God, yet before we ate I said to my wife, "Would you speak to God for us?" We all held hands while my wife prayed in French. They loved it! We were speaking of the One we love, and we were doing it just as naturally as breathing. There was no embarrassment, no intimidation. We merely said, "We want to talk to God. Please join us."

The Book of Acts is a history of the activity of the Holy Spirit in and through the Lord's disciples. They were filled with his power and they preached a message of hope because of the resurrected Jesus Christ. In this context I have chosen a number of stories from the Book of Acts to encourage us that we are still in the age of the Spirit which began at Pentecost and which will continue until Jesus Christ comes again. We too have the power of the Holy Spirit within us so that we too can fulfill the Lord's command to "be of Me witnesses" so that God can call out a people for his namesake. These are not history lessons. They are examples of normal,

authentic Christianity. This is the way we are to live in our communities in the age of the Spirit.

Last week, in Acts 3:1-26, we saw that the apostles Peter and John went to the temple to pray. There they met a lame man and, through the Spirit, they healed him. A big crowd quickly gathered, drawn by news of this wonderful event. Peter addressed them,

"Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?"

Peter went on to say that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had by this miracle glorified his servant Jesus, the One whom they had delivered up to Pilate to crucify. The proof that Jesus was risen from the dead was the lame man standing in front of them, he said. "I know that you acted in ignorance," Peter said, "repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away."

There is always opposition to the preaching of the gospel

Then the apostle said,

For you first, God raised up His Servant, and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways. (Acts 3:26)

At this point Peter's sermon was interrupted by the local police. I'm sure he had a great closing, but he got closed out by the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees. Peter must have thought of the Lord's words, "If they persecute me they will persecute you." (Jn. 15:20)

Today we will look at what happened following this interruption.

1. A Night Of Joy In Jail. Acts 3:1-4

And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees, came upon 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.

There is always opposition to the preaching the gospel. Satan never wants to allow a clear presentation of the gospel message. He doesn't want you to finish what you start; he wants you to look like a fool. So, just as Peter is about to give the invitation (at least that's what I would have done), Satan sends in the local police.

The captain of the temple guard was the High Priest's right hand man, while the Sadducees were the wealthy aristocrats within the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of 71 members which gave Israel spiritual and political direction. What upset these people was that the disciples were teaching about Jesus' resurrection, and the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the body. They did not believe in eternal judgment either, in life after death, in angels or spirits (other than God), or that God had ever intervened in human history.

The Sanhedrin were upset by Peter's message for two reasons. One, the Sanhedrin were the lobbyists for the Roman government to the Jewish nation, and that position of influence gave them wealth, power and all the comforts of life. The Romans were tolerant toward Judaism, but showed no mercy toward civil disobedience of any kind, and the Sanhedrin feared that the great crowd which had gathered around Peter and John would start a riot in the temple area. Second, the Sanhedrin regarded Peter's message that Jesus, whom they considered a blaspheming criminal, had risen from the dead as heresy, thus these messengers had to be silenced. So they seized Peter and John and put them in jail, as the text says, because it was evening. We know that the apostles went to the temple at 3 o'clock to pray. Now it is evening, so they must have had at least three hours of preaching about Jesus to this great crowd. Thirty years later, Peter may have been remembering this and other similar occasions when he wrote these words,

If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God. (1 Pet. 4:16)

The apostles were put in jail, but the Spirit of God watered the seed which they had planted so that "over five thousand men" came to know Jesus Christ as Messiah. (You can probably triple that number if you take into account the wives and children.) The world may arrest the gospel messengers, but they cannot arrest the gospel message. You cannot jail the Spirit, nor can you jail the seed. Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a sower who scattered seed on the ground and then went to bed and slept while the soil produced the grain. That is a picture of how we are called to rest, and that is what is happening here. The preachers are in jail, and the Spirit of God is moving among men. Ray Stedman said that the best way to advance true evangelism is to lock all the preachers in jail! That has always struck me as a very good idea, and here in this story we have a beautiful example of that.

A year ago I had a three-hour lunch with a man and shared Jesus with him all during that time. When I left this man I felt convinced in my own heart that he was not listening although I sought to make a clear presentation of the gospel. As he walked away there was evident a kind of numbness in his spirit. Three days later I received a postcard from him that said, "Ron, I listened to what you said. It so stunned me that I went out on the beach and I allowed Jesus Christ to become Lord and Savior of my life." We must not depend on our feelings. We are asked by the Spirit of God to witness about Jesus and about his resurrection in a contemporary way. But then we are to leave that seed alone; we are to plant it and go to bed. Last week I heard that this man is now starting in our community a ministry for single adults. I never got a clear chance to talk to him before this lunch. We loved him and invited him to dinner many times during the previous eight years, then one day he asked, "Tell me about Jesus." So just plant the seed; God will take care of his people.

2. A Day Of Witnessing In Court Acts 4: 5-14

And it came about on the next day, that 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. And when they had placed them in the center, and they began to inquire, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" 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 very 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 marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply.

Peter and John are brought before the spiritually mature men, the religious "Supreme Court" over all of Israel, which consisted of the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law. Also present were Annas, the honorary high priest responsible for spiritual matters in Israel, Caiaphas, his son-in-law, the official high priest of all legal matters pertaining to the Roman Empire, Annas' relatives, John and Alexander, and other relatives of the high priest's family.

Peter and John are now standing before the same court, the same people, and on the same spot where Jesus stood just two months earlier. Remember that at Jesus' trial Peter stood outside in the courtyard, vehemently denying that he even knew Jesus. Now the tables are turned on Peter. Now he is standing where Jesus stood, before the same enemies of Jesus, but this time he is not denying, but preaching the same message which Jesus preached. It must have occurred to Peter that his sentence would also be the same as Jesus'--death. The

men of this court thought they had already dealt with this Jesus problem but it has now surfaced again with the healing of the lame man, and Peter and John's attributing this miracle to their resurrected Lord. We can only imagine the tension when the court asked the apostles, "By what power and by what name have you done this?" The court could not deny the fact that the man had been healed. He had been seen leaping around the temple, praising God, but the Sadducees' theology denied that God ever intervened in human affairs. The court is saying, in effect, "OK, just for the sake of argument we admit that this beggar has been healed. Our question then is, By what power and by what name have you done this?"

On hearing this the apostles must have been reminded of Jesus' wonderful promise to them when he sent them out to minister. These are words which all of us should keep tucked away in our hearts. Matt. 10:16-19:

"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak."

What an incredible promise given to the disciples and to all God's disciples in every generation! When God brings us into pressure--filled and frightening circumstances, when we are faced with life and death issues, when men of great power confront us with either or questions, Jesus tells us not to worry about what to say or how to say it.

Our natural response would be a defensive one, to talk about ourselves, etc., but that is not what Peter did. The passage says, "and Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit."

This filling by the Holy Spirit can be seen over and over again all through the Book of Acts. It happened with Stephen (in Acts 6), and Paul (in Acts 23). To be filled with the Holy Spirit means to be controlled by the Holy Spirit, to allow him to come in our lives and to say what he wants to say through us. When I talk to many of you who are going through difficult times I feel totally inadequate about how to respond. As I listen to you I say, "Lord, I have no wisdom to offer this person. I don't know what to say." Yet just then God in his grace will take over. So do not be anxious about what you will say. Just show up and be available to witness and watch the Lord speak through you. Even you will be amazed at what he says. To be filled with the Spirit is a repetitive process. (Acts 4:31). To be filled with the Spirit produces a Christlike character, and this filling produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. To be filled with the Spirit, then, is to allow Jesus Christ to control our lives, our actions, our words and our attitudes.

I was ministering in a Christian school recently and was amazed to hear from the students that some of the faculty were teaching a mixture of worldly wisdom and Christian faith. They were messing with the minds of the children, hurting them and confusing their faith. When we had an opportunity to speak to the whole faculty I was sitting there, waiting my turn to speak, quietly angry about what these professors were doing to the kids. When I rose to speak, I heard myself say, "I appreciate being here, but I want to tell you that I have been walking among the students and heard some of the things they are being taught here. Let me remind you that Jesus said, 'If you are going to mess with the minds and the hearts of my children you had better contemplate suicide.' " Then I sat down. I was amazed at what I said. For instance, I never use the word contemplate. I don't even know how to spell it! I have never talked like that to anybody. I later heard that that word had had a tremendous effect on the faculty. God will use all of us if we let him speak through us when we have to speak. If we wait on him he will give us the words.

So, filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter responded to the Sadducees' question: "In response to your question, in what name have we done this, the answer is, by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead, this man stands before you healed." "In fact," Peter says, in effect, "you've got the wrong people in court. We're innocent, we didn't do anything. If you want to blame somebody, if you want to charge somebody, then charge Jesus." We can imagine the court at that moment saying, "Oh, there's that name again. I thought we got rid of Jesus. Didn't we crucify him? Didn't we bury him? You mean, we've got to deal with Jesus again?" Peter now turns the tables on the court. He puts the

court on trial. "Remember Jesus, the one you crucified?" he says. "Well, he is our long awaited Messiah, whom God raised from the dead after you had delivered him up to be crucified. As a result of his resurrection there are three things I want you to know. First, by the name of Jesus this man who was lame from his mother's womb now stands before you in good health. This happened not by our power or our piety. We could have never done this. Jesus the Messiah, the Nazarene, the God--man whom God raised from the dead did this thing."

The rulers of Israel built their house without the Corner Stone

Peter continued, "The second thing I want you to know is that Jesus is the stone whom you builders rejected, and he has become the very cornerstone." Peter was quoting from Psalm 118. This Psalm was a prayer of a king of Israel in a time when he was surrounded by enemies and feeling rejected. Yet, based on God's promise to David and his sons that they would sit on his throne in Israel forever, the king's heart was filled with hope. In verse 22 of the Psalm the king used this illustration of the cornerstone to confirm his hope of rescue from his enemies. (The cornerstone, of course, was the very foundation stone which kept the house standing.) Notice that Peter changes the wording of the Psalm here. The passage says, "He is the stone which was rejected by you the builders . . ." while verse 22 says, "The stone which the builders rejected . . ." Peter is telling the court that they, the spiritual builders of Israel, ruled that Jesus was not good enough to be the cornerstone so they decided to put him to death and build their house without him. Peter says, "Yes, Jesus is the very cornerstone of the faith of all believers. He is our cornerstone, our Messiah. He is our Lord, our Savior and our Healer, and the proof of all this is this man who was lame from his mother's womb now stands strengthened and in perfect health in the presence of all of you. "

The third thing which Peter told the court is this astonishing claim in verse 12:

"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."

This verse bothers a lot of people. A young man came over to my house on Wednesday night last to talk about Jesus. When we got to this verse he said, "This is an arrogant verse. What do you mean, 'there is no other name by which we must be saved'? What about all the good people in the world? What about the various religions of the world? They all have a set of moral truths to live by. They are like Christians--they love their neighbors, they do works of goodness and compassion. How can you say that Jesus is the only name by which men may be saved when there are so many good moral people?" I agreed with much of what he said. I told him, "I've met people who have put my Christianity to shame and they are not even Christians. But the issue is not universal moral truth," I told him, "the issue is salvation, and doing good works will not produce salvation. Jesus is the only intercessor between man and God. Man needs to be saved from the judgment of God because of his inherent rebellion against God. Man needs to be saved from his sin, his guilt and his shame. He needs to be saved from fear, despair, anxiety, frustration, emptiness, pride, jealousy and selfishness. He needs to be saved from himself. He needs to be saved from judgment by the hand of his Creator, 'for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.'" Following our conversation, I honestly believe that that man is now in the process of becoming a born again believer.

The words "make well" and "salvation" mean the same thing. Peter is saying to the court, "The God who healed this man and made him well (or saved him) is the same God who is willing to save you. As he healed, as he saved this man, he will do likewise for you and for the whole nation of Israel if you will put your faith in the resurrected Jesus."

Man needs to be saved. Salvation means spiritual deliverance from the judgment of God; salvation means that God saves man from spiritual death through sin; salvation means that man is rescued from all that would ruin his soul in this life and in the life to come. The people living in this Greek--Roman--Jewish culture and time knew that man needed salvation. The Greeks had their gods--Jupiter, Diana, Hermes, Athena. The Romans had their gods--Mercury and Mars, etc., while the Jews had their gods of the law of Moses, circumcision, etc., by which they hoped to be saved. But none of these gods could save man, and no man could save himself. In our twentieth century day the gods being worshiped by man are, est, TM, Sun Myung Moon, Joseph Smith, Buddha, Mohammed, Hare Krishna. Are they going to save anybody? No. "Salvation is found

in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Why? Why is Jesus able to save us? Because Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the Righteous and Holy One, the Servant, the Prince of Life, the long--predicted Messiah, the Prophet to come, the Healer, the One who brings salvation was crucified for our sins but God raised him from the dead. He loves us so much that he died for us, but now he lives for us so that he can save us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever would believe in him would not perish but have everlasting life."

Two things resulted from Peter's testimony to the court. Here were two fishermen from Gallilee, uneducated and untrained, standing before the "Supreme Court" of Israel, standing on the same spot which their Lord and Savior Jesus stood on just two months earlier. First, the men on the court "marvelled" at the courage of Peter and John because they were unschooled, ordinary men, and the court recognized that these men had been with Jesus. The second thing which the court recognized was that, seeing the man who had been healed they had nothing to say in reply....

We are living in the age of the Spirit, whom God has put within us to give us power to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. Notice that this entire episode in the temple began with a good work, through the love and compassion of the disciples for a lame man. God then took that good work and turned it into a testimony for his namesake; and out of that testimony came persecution, and out of persecution 5,000 men came to salvation in Jesus. Would you want to live any other way? Life would be so dull and monotonous without the Holy Spirit within us. When you are walking in the Spirit you can anticipate these kinds of events. God will use you for his honor and glory.

Let us not leave here today the same people we were when we came in. Be available to God and watch him use you. A Jewish woman who had never been to church before was here last Sunday. After hearing the testimony of the young Jewish man who had come to faith in Jesus, she said to her friend who had brought her to church, "OK, get me a Bible. I'm going to read it." Would you want to live any other way?

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