

OBEYING MEN OR GOD

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

By Steve Zeisler

In Acts 3 we read of the miraculous healing of a lame man, and of preaching that followed (Discovery Paper #4744). Chapter 4 is a continuation of those events, and beginning in this chapter we find an element that has been missing so far in Acts: antagonism. In chapter 2 when they heard Galileans miraculously praising God in many different tongues, some just laughed and walked away, explaining it as drunkenness. But there was no organized, direct resistance.

Another experience familiar to us that has been missing so far in Acts is Christian failure and hypocrisy. The church described in chapters 1-3 was filled with love, courage, boldness, and grace. Believers were well respected by everybody in the community, and many were being added to the church. There were signs and wonders, awe and humility. But you and I don't go to a church like that. We worship in churches that have weak and foolish saints in the congregation.

Perhaps you have been looking in vain to find in Acts what we take as our normal experience—the enemy's fighting back against the word and work of God in the world. Well, starting in chapter 4 we are going to begin to see the evidence of that in failed Christians and growing opposition from the world.

Acts 4:1-4:

As they [Peter and John] 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.

The jailing of Peter and John and the growth of the church are not unrelated. Courage is attractive. The church now numbered about five thousand men, most likely meaning heads of household. The city of Jerusalem probably had a permanent population of no more than eighty thousand at this time. The followers of Jesus were becoming hard to ignore.

Verses 5-22:

And it came about on the next day, that their rulers and elders and scribes [this is another way of describing the same opponents, the priests, guards, and Sadducees] 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, 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. But when they had ordered them to go aside out of 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 in order that it may 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 what we have seen and heard.” And when they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which they might 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.

The Sanhedrin, or Council as it is called in verse 15, was a formal body of Jewish leaders that met in Jerusalem. It was made up of seventy-two members—Pharisees, Sadducees, who were in the majority, priests, and as we note here, elders, rulers, and scribes. These were the folks with the most power, authority, wealth, and status. Peter, John, and the healed man were brought into the center of a semicircular arena and put on trial before them.

Fraudulent importance

The council members remind me of the Wizard of Oz. Dorothy and her companions had come to the throne room of Oz. A terrifying voice thundered, “I AM OZ THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE!” and smoke billowed up. But Toto simply pulled aside a curtain and revealed a little man operating machinery. “PAY NO ATTENTION TO THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN!” the voice blustered. The wizard was a fake!

Similarly Sadducees and priests gave orders that were not obeyed. They issued threats that went unheeded. They had to agree that the ones they were accusing were telling the truth, and everyone else knew it. Their threats would get worse, there would be more jailings and beatings to come, and eventually there would be an execution. But at no point were they able to direct the followers of Jesus to obey them.

Those who are important, especially the self-important, have often fooled themselves enormously. They have believed their own press releases for too long, and they think they are a bigger deal than they are. We serve Someone greater. The clear and resounding message of this text is, “We are going to obey God, not men.”

Verse 13 says the rulers were disdainful of the fishermen before them, in particular because they didn’t have advanced theological degrees. Peter and John were ordinary folks. They were clearly literate, bright people, but they had been tutored only by Jesus, a carpenter.

But think of the judgment of history. Whose books have been studied over and over through every generation? Peter’s and John’s books. What writings are works of genius? What telling of truth is so profound that the world will never be the same? Whose thinking has the depth to answer real questions? The Sanhedrin members John and Alexander are so obscure that historians can’t even find reference to them. We pay attention to Caiaphas and Annas only because they are mentioned in the New Testament. The only reason such “great thinkers” haven’t slipped entirely from view is

because the unlearned ones wrote the greatest books ever written, the greatest telling of the truth there is. Everything about the way these Sanhedrin members are painted unmasks what they thought impressive about themselves, takes down facades, pierces bubbles. It's important to know that if we are "strong in the Lord, in the strength of his might" (Ephesians 6:10) to stand up to the ones who are most intimidating, they prove to be no match for the power of the gospel.

These priests and Sadducees were blind to spiritual realities, but their blindness was not due to a lack of information. "The fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all..." they said. For forty years this man had been lame, and now he was walking and leaping and praising God. Peter spoke about Jesus "whom you crucified" and insisted that his tomb was empty because he was raised, and they knew all that too. They had investigated it themselves. They were the ones who had asked the Romans to place guards at the tomb. They were the ones who had feared the story of the resurrection and had planted the false story of the disciples' stealing his body. Their accusation that these men had been with Jesus meant that they knew enough about Jesus to have an opinion about the kind of disciples he would have.

But the problem was, they didn't believe any of it. They resisted it. They were hardened to the implications of it. What they said when they conferred together was, "What shall we do with these men?" It never once occurred to them to ask, "What shall we do if what they say is true? What if God is actually speaking to us? What if the miracles mean something? What if the resurrection has implications?" They didn't know how to ask the right questions, to draw the right conclusions, because of their hardness of heart. That remains true of people today as well.

Blindness is tricky business, and I want to issue a warning to us. Our staff has been studying through Mark, and we considered the passage where Jesus says, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins" (Mark 2:22). It's easy to have vested interests we don't acknowledge to ourselves, to not want to hear news of some enterprise of God or moving of the Spirit because we don't like the implications.

Now let's learn from our friends in the dock, Peter and John.

Bold servants of God

The unmistakable challenge is their boldness and courage. Tossed in jail? No problem. Threatened? No problem. Eventually they'll be jailed again and beaten. No problem. Even in Stephen's death by stoning, never once will the courage of these believers fail. That ought to inspire us. What can we learn from their strength?

Let me suggest three things that made them this way. First, when Peter was accused, it says in verse 8, "Filled with the Holy Spirit, [he] said to them..." The foolish alternative Christians have is to try to fight back with the weapons that they are being attacked with. If their opponents have prominence and wealth and political connections, then believers will advance the cause of Christ by seeking prominence and wealth and political connections of their own. But it's always a mistake to do that. The cause of Christ is best served when the odds are something like seventy to three, when the faithful have nothing to fight with except the truth and the filling of the Spirit. Peter confounded his enemies! The truth has a way of defending itself.

Second, verse 13 says that they had been with Jesus. They had listened to him, traveled with him, and watched him die. By the witness of the Spirit they had now come to understand the things he taught. Being with Jesus makes a person courageous, wise, humble, sensitive, and strong. And we have the option of being with Jesus as much as they did. We'll find him in Scripture. We'll find him in the hearts of our companions. We can still be attentive to Jesus, spend time with him during the day. We can listen, actively seek him out, long to learn from him, and apply the lessons he taught. If we are the companions of Jesus, we will become as these were, changed people as a result.

Third, our friends had made an obvious decision. They said, “You’re telling us to do one thing. God is telling us to do something else. Now, whom shall we obey?” They had decided prior to this situation to obey God. Sometimes we don’t know what to do. But when it’s clear, we need to have made the decision ahead of time: “I will obey God rather than men.” A prior determination to obey makes us bold, influential, wise, and authoritative.

I preached on the final paragraph of this chapter in the message *Consider Their Threats and Enable Your Servants*, September 16, 2001. If you would like to read that message, please go to <http://www.pbc.org/dp/zeisler/4718.html>, or request a copy of Discovery Paper #4718 from Discovery Publishing.

That paragraph tells us that when the apostles were released, they went back to their friends and had a marvelous prayer meeting. Here is their beautiful and inspiring prayer. Verses 24b-30:

“O Lord, it is Thou who didst make 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 Thy servant, didst say,
‘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 Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur. And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence, while Thou dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus.”

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