



## *The Book of Acts*

Bringing in a New Dispensation

### Acts 4:1-31 | Encircled by the Enemy: Persecution, Threats, and Censorship

#### Acts 4:1-3 | *The Persecution Begins*

Verses 1 —

In chapter three, Peter and John, performing an Apostolic kingdom miracle, got the attention of *all the people* gathered at the Temple by healing a man who had been *lame from his mother's womb* (Acts 3:2). Peter addressed the people with a message of *national repentance for rejecting and killing their Messiah* (Acts 3:14-19).

Now, in chapter 4, both Peter and John continue confronting the crowd with the truth of Jesus. As **they spake unto the people**, they were interrupted by the unbelieving leaders of Israel. **The priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees.**

We can only wonder how many would have turned to Jesus as their Messiah had the leaders believed. But, as is often the case with those in positions of power, many are threatened by the loss of their power. They are consumed with themselves (This love of money and power, and often sex, shows up in John 8:7) is what drives corruption.

**Captain** is the Greek word *strategos*. There is some historical indication that the **captain of the temple** was ruthless with his temple guards. Some historical accounts claim the **captain of the guard** occasionally set aflame the clothes of a guard found sleeping on his watch. This is all to say, the confrontation about to take place is not a friendly one.

**Sadducees** were a religious party and part of the ruling assembly (as were the Pharisees who are not mentioned here). The Sadducees denied the resurrection (Luke 20:27)? This is undoubtedly why they come on the scene here, because Peter is speaking about **God, having raised up his son Jesus** (3:26).

Sadducees were part of the aristocrats, or the upper class, which makes the encounter even more intimidating and tense, since Peter and John were, in the eyes of these rulers, lower class (and certainly they would have looked on the man healed with disdain). The Sadducees will appear again later in Acts. The Sadducees' denial of the resurrection, and a future hope, led to their wickedness<sup>1</sup> and produced a

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<sup>1</sup>See this philosophy in the apocryphal book. Wisdom 2:1-24.

philosophy of “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Elite, establishment leadership leads to repression of the people. They will often suppress someone who may have a differing view, and they do it by patronizing the person or talking down to them. Here is a modern day example from a popular pastor, John MacArthur.

*“I was looking at the Internet the other day. Some wistful girl said, “How I became a Calvinist and left Calvinism.” Well, the sophomoric comment like that coming from somebody who, uh, should keep her thoughts to herself because she has no idea what she is talking about, is to be measured against someone who for fifty-years has taken every text of the Bible and put doctrine into that text and see if it survives, and I can say that it has.”*

People never change. This is the same type of disgusting, arrogant and self-righteous leaders Peter and John are up against.

**Priests** refer to the various priests in the temple. The priesthood had become corrupt and they could be bought and sold. During Jesus’ life, they had allowed the Temple to become a den of thieves (Matthew 21:13).

These are not honorable people who are confronting Peter and John. The first persecution is breaking out. This was a confrontation between the political and religious elite and the so-called uneducated Galileans.

Verse 2 —

The *Sadducees* **being grieved** (annoyed) **that they** (the apostles) **taught the people...through Jesus, the resurrection of the dead**. They were not **grieved**, in the sense of grieving for a loved one. Just like the John MacArthur quote, these religious leaders were *offended, troubled, or annoyed*.

Verse 3 —

**Laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day**. It is likely that a few hours have passed since the healing in chapter 3. It was **eventide**, which would mean no authoritative body was available for any kind of trial (although in Jesus’s case, they had held an *emergency* hearing).

## Acts 4:4 | The Ekklesia Grows

Verse 4 —

Despite the persecution, the assembly (ekklesia) of Jews still experienced growth. Three thousand Jews already believed in Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 2:41). In Acts 2:47, more were being added daily. After the

healing of this man, and Peter's and John's preaching, about five thousand more believed, or the number had reached 5,000. Either way, this enormous crowd gathered in Solomon's Porch on the temple grounds. We could be talking 10,000 or more at this point. Sometimes this assembly is referred to as "Peter's little flock." A phrase that has been parroted and repeated so much that people believe it. But this phrase is a misnomer. First, there is never a reference to Peter's little flock in Scripture. Second, there was nothing little about it. It comes from a misunderstanding or misapplication of Luke 12:32, where Jesus is referring to His disciples as a "little flock" and merging it with John 21:15-17, where Jesus told Peter to "Feed His sheep." If anything, it is Jesus' flock, not Peter's. One other place where people squeeze out the phrase "Peter's Little Flock" is 1 Peter 5:2, where Peter exhorts the elders to "Feed the flock of God, which is among you." Notice he doesn't say, "Feed my little flock, which is among you." It's God's flock.

I guess it is not a big deal, but we should try not to parrot phrases, and treat them as Scriptural, when they are made up.

Peter and John were detained overnight. This was the first confrontation, but not the last.

### Acts 4:5-12 | Encircled by the Enemy, Before the Sanhedrin, Seeds of Hatred Sown

Verse 5, 6 —

The next morning, the council of **rulers, and elders, and scribes**, including **Annas the high priest... Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander...kindred...gathered together**. There is no clear agreement on who these groups and individuals were, but seems clear these men made up the council called the Sanhedrin.<sup>2</sup>

These same leaders are identified in Luke 22:66 after the arrest of Jesus when he was led into "their council." A good rule of interpretation is to *use the clear passage to interpret the not-so-clear passage*. As we read further down in Acts 4, we come to verse 15, where the context explicitly identifies them as the council. This word council (found in the Gospels, and in Acts) is translated from the Greek word *Sunedrion*: *sun=together* and *hedra=seat* (*The Sanhedrin*). It means those who "sit together." The Sanhedrin/Council was the *court of justice*, like a *senate*.

Since Israel was not a sovereign nation, Rome ruled through local aristocracies (elite, usually unelected, rulers who received their title based on inheritance; as in, "He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth), in this case it was the Sanhedrin.

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<sup>2</sup> They are not mentioned here, but Pharisees also constituted part of the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin exercised autonomous authority and administered civil cases following Jewish law (and more often, traditions of men). The Council also took part to a great extent in the punishment of crime.<sup>3</sup> The Sanhedrin could, at times, inflict capital punishment even on Roman citizens for a non-Jew entering the interior holy place of the temple. Later in the Book of Acts, for example, we will read about Paul being accused of bringing Greeks into the temple and polluting the holy place. For so doing, although it was a false accusation, he was about to be killed (See Acts 21:28,31). In the case of Paul, it does not explicitly say the Sanhedrin were *about to kill him*, but it may be implied that they were behind the plan.

The wealthiest elite were elevated to these positions of power, and in this case, the passage says the **kindred gathered together**. The *family*. **Annas, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander** were likely related to each other. And, while **Annas** is referred to by Luke as **the high priest**, (vs. 6) **Caiaphas** is also called the high priest in other passages (Matthew 26:3, 57; John 11:49; 18:13,24). Some say this is a contradiction, but both Annas and Caiaphas were of the *high priestly family* and even when not ruling in that position, still carried the title (Luke 3:2). The high priest's role in the Sanhedrin was to break a tie.

Tradition states that there were 71 members of the Sanhedrin. These members probably comprised the Jerusalem aristocracy and wealthy landowners in the vicinity and the group's membership was probably self-selecting. When that happens, corruption is perpetuated. This occurs in totalitarian states and it leaves people trapped and at the mercy of the dictatorial rulers. There is no way out except for some kind of overthrow, civil war, or coup.

The point in verses 5 and 6 is that what is happening at the temple is such a big deal that the entire council of the Sanhedrin is meeting to question Peter and John.

These were real events and real people. As a side note, the bones of Caiaphas were discovered in 1990.

Verse 7 —

**Set them in the midst.** Tradition also states that the Sanhedrin sat in a semicircle. You can picture Peter and John standing before this large council with all eyes on them. We can only speculate what Peter and John might have been talking and praying about that night in prison and now as they stand before the council: But Jesus had warned them of coming persecution (Matthew 24:9, Luke 21:16, John 16:1,2).

As they are led to the front of the chamber, The first question the council wants answered is, **By what power, or by what name, have ye done this** (that is, healing of the man born lame). *As the question is put to them, did they think back to the time when Jesus was in the Temple, before his arrest, when he was asked "By what authority doest thou these things? And who gave thee this authority?"* Matthew 21:23.

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<sup>3</sup> Hirsch, Frank E. "Courts, Judicial." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, edited by James Orr et al., vol. 1–5, The Howard-Severance Company, 1915.

*They are asking* a great leading question! It is a question that allows Peter and John to speak publicly of the power of Jesus Christ. The Sanhedrin were likely appalled that there could be any other power but their own. This was out of the realm of their power and authority, so they were against it. What the apostles did by healing this man was to challenge the priestly authorities. Corrupt leaders do not want to lose power or have their power challenged!

Verse 8 —

This is the first of many confrontations with the enemy the apostles will face. Peter doesn't shy away from the question. With boldness, he is ready to answer. Later, when writing his first letter, Peter may have been thinking of this encounter with the Sanhedrin when he wrote, *"Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear."* (1 Peter 3:15). Filled with the Holy Ghost, he begins courteously, **Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel**. But meekness does not mean weakness. By verse 10, he is going to let loose on the Council.

That he was **Filled with the Holy Ghost** was certainly a fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus prophesied that when this time came, the apostles would know what to say (See Luke 12:11-12). How is one **filled with the Holy Ghost**? For the apostles, He came upon them as promised. But what about for us? Scripture doesn't tell us. Some would say Ephesians 5:18-21 show how we in the body are filled with the Spirit. But is that what that passage is talking about? Perhaps *we are filled with the Spirit the moment we believe, when we are immersed into the body of Christ. "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."* (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Verse 9 —

They are **being examined** (standing trial) for doing a **good deed** and making him **whole**. These rulers were calling a **good deed**, evil. They had been warned about this in Isaiah 5:20, *"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil."* In fact, what Peter was doing was pointing out that they had not committed any crime. Peter and John had done a good thing and were put in jail for it. This puts the leaders in a bad light.

Verse 10 —

**Be it known unto you all...** This is a rhetorical device to prepare the listener for a shocking statement. We might say *You might want to sit down before I tell you...* Let me tell you by what name, **the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth**, and by the way, he is the one **whom ye crucified**, remember him? And by what power? He is also the one **whom God raised from the dead**. The power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth who conquered death. The Jesus who is "Lord both of the dead and living" (Romans 14:9). He is the reason **this man is able to stand here before you whole**.

That is the answer to their question, but Peter doesn't stop there.

Verse 11—

**This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders.** He cites Psalm 118:22, "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner." This is a prophetic Psalm. It is one about the future salvation of the Jewish nation that will occur when the Messiah returns to set up his Kingdom. It will be a day of rejoicing! "*This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it*" (Psalm 118:24). In quoting this passage, Peter is making the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, these **builders** (All those mentioned in Acts 4:5,6) are the ones who rejected the Messiah, as prophesied. **Head of the corner**, that is, the capstone which is the final stone fitted into place to hold the others in place. Those in the first century would have understood this imagery completely.

Verse 12—

Continuing with the imagery put forth in Psalm 118, Peter proclaims, **Neither is there salvation in any other.** Peter is preaching a gospel about their future and physical salvation—the gospel of Christ's Kingdom. Their national salvation would come if they repented of their sins and said, "*blessed is he that cometh in the name of the LORD*" (Luke 13:35)

For us in the body of Christ in the dispensation of grace, that is, anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ; we now have individual and immediate salvation by grace through faith.

Thus far, in the book of Acts, we have yet to find salvation by grace through faith. That is because Paul has not come on the scene, and it will be given to him first. At this moment, in Acts, there is no salvation by grace through faith. Everything concerns national salvation. Are these believers in Acts "in Christ"? Yes, but they are not in Christ by grace through faith, and there are no Gentiles saved by grace through faith either. All of that will come about with the dispensational transition between the kingdom gospel (Law) and the individual gospel (Grace) progresses. As the nation of Israel fades, and the Body of Christ, made up of neither Jew nor Gentile, appears.

### Acts 4:13-22 | **Boldness and Censorship**

Verse 13 —

**When they saw the boldness of Peter and John.** The apostles were not intimidated in front of the 70 members of the Sanhedrin Council. It may have caught these elitists off guard since they **perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men.** The Greek word **unlearned** is *agrammatos*. You can hear the word *grammar* in it. The word *grammatos*, with an "a" as the prefix changes the word from a positive to negative. They were without grammar. Or, the learned men **perceived** these men as *without*

*learning, or unlettered.* They didn't speak sophisticated words. And they **perceived** they were **ignorant**. That is the Greek word *idiotes*. They were not *book smart*. But never judge a book by its cover. Because of what the council **perceived, they marveled** that these men could hold their own in front of them.

Additionally, they recognized these men **had been with Jesus**. You are known by the company you keep! It had been only two or three months since Jesus had been crucified—the same council would have been in session when Jesus was on trial.

The name Jesus (Greek: iesous) is Jehoshua, or Joshua in Hebrew. It means “Salvation of Jehovah, or Jehovah the Savior.”

Verse 14 —

We discover in this verse that three of them stood before the council; Peter, John, and the man who was healed. In regards to the man who was healed, **standing with them** (with Peter and John) the council **could say nothing against it**. “It” apparently referring to the miracle.

Verse 15, 16 —

**They conferred.** Greek is *sumballo*. *Ballo is to throw* (like ball), and *sum* is translated elsewhere as ponder, confer. They threw around the question among them. They had a back-and-forth discussion **saying, what shall we do to these men?** Question: “Why do anything to them? They did a good deed (that was Peter’s point in 4:9). The council could not **deny** this was a **notable miracle** which was **manifest** (openly seen) by **all them that dwell in Jerusalem**.

These men of the Sanhedrin were politicians through and through. We may wonder how Luke got the information about this closed-door meeting—we can speculate there was a leaker or two in the group!

Verse 17, 18 —

Politicians are always worried about things spreading! Free speech is essential for a truly free society, but free speech is also threatening to the power players. **That it spread no further among the people, they threatened them that they speak henceforth** (from now on) **to no man in this name**. We have seen in our own U.S. political body how facts can be presented, and yet no one listens to them or investigates if they are true or false. During COVID we experienced, some of us first hand, how social media would censor us for speech not to their liking. YouTube was notorious, and still is.

The Sanhedrin’s choice to control the situation? Censorship. Any government or religious body that censors its people must be disobeyed. As we have seen throughout history, suppression only makes people more determined to push back. Free speech is what always brings balance. **Not to speak at all**

**nor teach in the name of Jesus** means not to speak as his representatives. They didn't want any attention going to the one they had put to death.

The Sanhedrin did what all men whose power is threatened do—they chose to overlook the actual miracle and the name in which it was performed. Threatened by the apostles rising popularity and leadership of the people, they believed they could stomp out any further mention of Jesus of Nazareth, the one they crucified, and maintain their power. Their mantra, even today, is “shut up” and move along.

Verses 19-20—

Peter and John (and all the apostles) will disobey this mandate, but notice how they still use respect here, **whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken (listen) unto you more than God, judge ye** (you make the choice; or, you can pass judgment). But, **we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard**. Romans 13 tells us to be *subject unto the higher powers*. That doesn't mean to be *subject to politicians and their every decree*.

We are subject to the judgments that may come down from *higher power*. I think the key in Romans 13 is that Christians are not to go against the *ordinances of powers* maliciously. There are times to resist, and when you do, you are to be subject to the judgments that may come with that resistance (Romans 13:2 is not referring to *eternal damnation*). That is precisely what the apostles will do—they will resist the threats not to speak in Jesus's name, but they will face the judgment that comes with that resistance. Peter and John openly refuse to comply.

There are Old Testament accounts of civil disobedience that Peter and John would have been familiar with. Notably, in the book of Daniel: 3:1-18; 6:1-13. In each case they disobeyed, but were subject to the judgment, that is, fiery furnace and the lion's den, respectively. We will see later in the book of Acts more civil disobedience by Peter and the other apostles.

Verse 21—

After being **further threatened** they were let go. The political pressure of the thousands of **people** was too great since **all men glorified God for that which was done**.

Verse 22—

This healing is even more miraculous since the man had been born disabled; forty plus years have passed. Now he is walking and leaping. While God certainly can heal, miracles of healing like this were for the apostolic dispensation. We do not have this type of kingdom authority today. It was given only to the apostles. If you were with us during our study in 1 Corinthians, it is my belief that there are no



manifestations of the Spirit given today. We have the Word of God. **Shewed** (different spelling of *showed*).

### Acts 4:23-31 | *Lifting up the Lord among the Likeminded*

Verse 23—

**Company** is literally, *their own*. There is no indication how many were present. Today, if this were to happen to one of us, we would *go back to our own church and report* There is no completed *body of Christ*. We will not see the church as we know it today until later in the book of Acts.

Verse 24-31—

What they didn't do should be pointed out; they didn't go out in the streets and march (not that there isn't a time and place for that). What they did was *pray*. **They lifted up their voice to God with one accord**. This is not a passage to build a doctrine on. It is historical, and a rule of thumb is "don't build a doctrine from a historical event." This is not teaching us how to pray. I don't even think this means they all prayed out loud at the same time. Although, they do quote a Psalm, so it is possible they recited it together in the prayer. But it may mean they were like-minded in their prayer. Even more literally, *they had the same passion!* They were following Jesus's command in Luke 6:28 to "*Bless them that curse you, and pray for them with despitefully use you.*"

After addressing **God**, the Creator of **heaven, and earth, and the sea, and that is in them**; Psalm 2 is cited; a Messianic Psalm.

**Heathen...** (vs. 25, ethnos; nations) **against the Lord and against his Christ. Holy child** (Can also translate as, Son, or Servant).

Prayer for **boldness** (vs. 29). Notice the Holy Ghost does the filling at his own bidding. Along with that filling came boldness.

We will cover this more in our next class.