

The First Church Witnessed with Boldness!



Acts 4:1-31

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As I immersed myself in Acts chapter 4 the last few weeks, what kept coming to my mind was one of my favorite television series as a kid – Star Trek. I loved Star Trek! I also loved Star Trek: The Next Generation, so I graduated from Captain Kirk to Captain Picard. I absolutely loved almost every one of those episodes. I couldn't wait for it to come on. When the time finally came for it to come on, they would show that little snippet of what the episode was going to be about, and then suddenly it would go deathly quiet and you would see the Enterprise...then you would see space...and then, you would hear Captain Kirk's voice say, "Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year

mission: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before!" And then right in front of your eyes – light speed – the ship would disappear and we were now going where no man, literally, had ever gone before. Every episode would see them go, boldly.

When I read Acts chapter 4, I don't see the church going where no man has ever gone before, because every place we are going to go someone has already been there, but we are supposed to go. We are supposed to start in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. As we go under the leadership of God's Holy Spirit, we are to be an empowered witness. What we are going to learn today is as the early church went, as the early church lived, as the early church engaged people, they engaged people with boldness. I want to make sure you see this – as we look at the book of Acts and see the first church, we can confidently say the first church witnessed with boldness. So as we look at the picture of the church in Acts and then take a look at the church today, would God describe us as witnessing boldly, witnessing with boldness? You and I are the church. The church isn't witnessing with boldness unless *you* are witnessing with boldness, the church isn't being bold unless *I* am being bold, because you and I are the church.

In my mind, these thirty-one verses naturally break down into four paragraphs: Verses 1–4; 5–12; 13–22; 23–31. I want to try to capture the main point in each one of these sections so that you and I see the church witnessing, but witnessing boldly.

You know the context. Peter and John go into the temple and there is a man lying at a gate who has been crippled. He wants alms so he can survive the day. Peter and John say to him, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" and the man rose up and walked. We saw in chapter 3 that he didn't just walk, he leaped for the glory of God! We are going to find out in today's chapter that this man was over forty years old and had been crippled from birth. If you had been lying for forty-plus years and now you can walk, you are going to run a little bit, amen! You are going to jump a little bit, leap a little bit. Now, his healing and leaping actually caused a

crowd of people from the temple to gather and they were amazed, astonished! They just want to know what happened, and now Peter begins to explain what happened. When he finishes explaining what happened, chapter 4 begins.

Verses 1–4: Two Opposing Groups

What we are going to see in these first four verses is the message that Peter shared as an explanation of why this man was healed. There are two responses. There is a group of people there who are annoyed; Luke says they were greatly annoyed. Then, there was another group who believed. I don't know about you, but it just seems like today, if we do something for God, if God's Word is heard, there is never just one reaction, there are always multiple reactions. Some people believe and some people don't believe. The people in the story who don't believe – not only do they just not believe – they are greatly annoyed, annoyed to the point that they arrest Peter and John. Because they cannot convene the whole Sanhedrin Council and get to the root of this, they put them in jail for the night. Wow, that is pretty annoyed! These people are named as the Sanhedrin. You had the priests, the captain of the temple guard (they had their own security force), and then there were some Sadducees.

- **Unbelievers**

Now, the background to the story is the Sadducees were the dominant group of people on the Sanhedrin Council. The Sadducees are a group of people who were very conservative, but they had become more political than they were actually religious but their politics was based on religion. They were very conservative in the fact they believed the first five books of Moses, the Torah, the Law books, were the only authorized word from God to His people. They didn't believe in any other revelation that was written in the Prophets or Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. They only believed in the first five books, so if you had a belief you had to base it on the first five books of the Bible; therefore, they did not believe in a resurrection from the dead. Let me just say this – if I didn't believe in a resurrection from the dead, I would be 'sad, you see,' too. 😊

Can you imagine not believing there is a resurrection from the dead – this is your core belief, and you are in charge of everything that goes on in the temple – and now, after this guy has just been healed, there are these two guys in the temple now using this as an opportunity to teach and proclaim that in Jesus there is a resurrection from the dead...and they are in your church! They don't just disbelieve; they are annoyed, and they have the authority to have the temple guard arrest Peter and John. So they arrest them and put them in jail, and the next morning they are going to be tried. Can I just say this? When the Sanhedrin arrested Jesus, that didn't go over very well, so imagine what could possibly be in the mind of John and Peter as they are placed in jail and will be tried by the very ones who tried Jesus.

- **Believers**

But before we get into the main story, Luke tells us that many who heard believed. There was a group of Jewish people here in the temple who hears about Jesus, about His death, about His burial, and about His resurrection. Peter connects the dots...He is the Messiah...and for the first time, they come to put their faith and trust in Him and they are now believers. Then, Luke adds, "the number of the men came to about five thousand." Scholars aren't exactly sure if this is talking about men only, not counting women and children, because many times in the biblical world they didn't count women and children. They just counted the men.

Let's think about this. Before the day of Pentecost, there were one hundred and twenty in the church, and when the day of Pentecost ends, three thousand people are added to the church. Just a couple of chapters later there are at least five thousand, and possibly, it is just five thousand men. Do you see the strength of this church? Five thousand male believers – and many of them have wives and children. Luke is trying to tell us that the church is growing. But even when the church is growing, there will always be those who doubt, who don't believe.

– **Politicized Religion of the Sadducees** –

Before we are too hard on the Sadducees, let me say that most of the time what we believe is based on what we hold as the ultimate authority in our lives. So if you don't have the right authority in your life, there will

probably be a problem with what you believe. You and I can critique the Sadducees and say we can't imagine someone not believing in the whole Old Testament and just believing in the first five books. But let me ask you this – do you believe in God's complete revelation? Is your belief system coming out of what you believe to be true based on what God has revealed to us, the church? Are your actions consistent with what you say you believe based on what you believe the Word of God teaches? I see some of you getting annoyed. Should you be? You should be if it is going against what you know God has taught. But is it really what God has taught?

Here was a group of people, Sadducees, whose religion had turned into a political force and a political party. What they were primarily concerned with was preserving life for themselves, and in doing that, they lost contact with the life others were actually living. So they didn't really see God and they really didn't see others; they only saw themselves. That would never happen in the church, that our religion would lead us to be political to the point that we would try to preserve a way of life for ourselves. But that was what was happening in the life of a Sadducee who was in charge of the temple of God.

Verses 5–12: Peter and John before the Council

The next day arrives. Now we don't just have the leaders, we have the whole council, and they are named here. Basically, there are two things that will happen in this section. There will be a question asked and there will be an answer given. Peter and John are surrounded by this group of men who are the religious leaders, but they are also very political. They ask a simple question: "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Before Luke tells us what Peter answered, he adds this, "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit..." Underline that in your Bible. When Peter gets ready to speak, the words that will come out of his mouth are under the control, the influence, of the Holy Spirit of God who lives inside him.

See, the church had been baptized on the day of Pentecost with the Holy Spirit. That word, baptize, means 'to dip, to plunge, to immerse.' Get this picture...the church is immersed, is dipped, is plunged into the person of the Holy Spirit. He is our life. The third person of the triune Godhead now

lives inside the church! Wow! (Do you like strawberries? Have you ever had a strawberry dipped in chocolate? Amen! Wow! You can dip anything in chocolate and it's going to be good...except dark chocolate – don't bring me dark chocolate – real chocolate, milk chocolate!) But here is the picture... here is the church before the day of Pentecost. After the day of Pentecost, the church is dipped with the Holy Spirit, a one-time act where God empowers the church to be His witness. But we don't see the Bible say Peter *baptized* with the Spirit, we see the word *filled* with the Spirit. See, you can be baptized with the Spirit but not be under the control of the Spirit at a given moment in your life. Luke is trying to tell us is that Peter is under the control of the Spirit.

Let me ask you a question. If you were in the temple doing what you thought God wanted you to do, and now some religious people who were political in nature arrest you and put you in prison because they were greatly annoyed, is there a good chance you might be annoyed now? Sometimes the words coming out of our mouths betray that we are annoyed. I'm afraid too many times when people do things to annoy us, sometimes it causes us to be annoyed and we don't answer under the control of the Holy Spirit, we answer according to our unredeemed flesh. Some of you have actually given people a piece of your mind before, and you need every piece you've got...and most of the times the words you just said reveal you don't have much left!

If there was somebody who could have been annoyed it was Peter, but he was not annoyed even though he spent a night in jail. And he is under the control of the Spirit when he speaks. Now, this is Peter...Peter got in trouble a lot. One time, Jesus had to say 'get behind me Satan!' because of the words coming out of Peter's mouth, totally flesh words. But here, we see Peter being articulate, and basically say – *I just want to make sure I'm correct. Are you asking about me about that good deed that happened to the man who was crippled, and is now well? Is that who we are talking about?* – See, Peter knew that is not what this was really about. This was about an attack on their belief system of a resurrection from the dead. But Peter clarifies this, and he says if this is what you are talking about, then "let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel..." Under the

leadership of God, he wants everyone to know. I don't know if he knew he was under the leadership of God's Spirit or not, but we know that he is.

Can I say this as a confession? I don't always know when I'm under the control of God's Holy Spirit, but I always know when I'm not. Do you recognize that difference when the word is coming out of your mouth, the thought is coming out of your mouth, and the behavior is coming out of your mouth? Are you under the control of God, or are you under the control of your unredeemed flesh?

Here is what Peter wanted them to know. It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth that this man is now standing, not lying on his back anymore. When he talks about Jesus, he says the Jesus "whom you crucified." He just says - *You killed Him! But you didn't just kill Him you put Him on a cross! You hung Him between two thieves! You had Him beaten! You had Him flogged to within an inch of His life! As the world passed by, they thought He was a common criminal worthy of capital punishment! You crucified Him!* – Then Peter just says this, "...whom God raised from the dead." He wanted them to know that the Jesus they killed God raised from the dead, even though they didn't believe in a resurrection from the dead. And that was the reason this lame man was well and walking, leaping and standing instead of begging for alms on that day.

Then Peter said, "This Jesus is the stone..." He said they were the builders but Jesus is the stone they rejected, and He has become the chief cornerstone. Can you imagine being a builder of God's temple, a guardian of God's temple, and you are trying to build God's physical kingdom, but you reject the main cornerstone you are supposed to build on? What Peter is alluding to is that Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone, the chief cornerstone of the church. God is taking Jesus and every believer, putting them together, and building the true temple of God, the church of Jesus Christ. The church is being built on the basis of Jesus, the cornerstone, being the one who was victoriously resurrected from the grave after He died that death to defeat sin on the cross. Peter said you have rejected Him.

And then Peter says, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Do you hear this? Peter is talking to a group of people who has put faith in the sacrifice of a bull or a goat on an altar as an offering in a physical temple to roll their sins forward for a year, and to try to keep all six hundred and thirteen of the individual laws of Moses in order to earn a right relationship with God. He is talking to a group of people who believe it is God plus them. Now, he tells them there is no salvation under the whole heaven, – he doesn't just confine this to Israel, he confines it to every belief system in the world – that there is only one name by which a person can be saved, and that is Jesus. Do you believe that? Do you understand there is no salvation in Judaism? There is no salvation in believing in the Law of Moses! This statement doesn't just cover Israel; it covers Palestine. It covers Saudi Arabia. It covers Iran. It covers Iraq. It covers China. It covers Russia. It covers Germany, Poland, France, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, the United States of America! There is no other name. That is why we are commissioned. That is why God has baptized us with the Holy Spirit. That is why He has told us not to try to do this on our own but wait for that anointing, because we are going to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth and we are going to be God's witness. He doesn't just want you to know, He wants the whole world to know what He has done through His Son Jesus!

Verses 13–22: The Sanhedrin Try to Silence Peter and John

After Peter finishes talking, the Sanhedrin look at each other and decide they cannot deny this lame man is now walking. They cannot deny there is a great sign that has been done, but they are worried about this story spreading. They don't want this good deed to be talked about because this good deed that happened to this man ultimately speaks about the good deed of God putting Jesus on the cross, Him dying in our place, and God raising Him back alive so that He could make us right with Him. They wanted to stop the spread of the good news so they tell them not to speak of Jesus again.

Then, and I love this...Peter and John look at them and say – *It is not for us to decide, we are going to leave it up to you. You are the people in authority, so we are going to leave it up to you whether this is right or wrong for us to speak. You can decide, but just know here is what we are going to do...we are just going to speak about what we have seen and what we have heard.* – Wow! Amen!

Let me make a post-Covid statement to the church at Hardin. How many of us have had flesh responses to the pandemic instead of responses that were under the control of God's Holy Spirit? Peter did not defend his right. He told them it is up to them to decide whether they can or can't do this, but to know that they are just going to stick to one thing, to keep speaking about what they saw and heard. Do you know what this early church understood? No matter what was happening, no matter where they were, they were called to be a witness. That is what they decided to do, to be a witness about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Has that been our purpose for the last year and a half – to be a witness, a bold witness – not about our right, but about what God has called us to do? He has called us to be a powerful witness, and to witness boldly, for what He has done for us in His Son Jesus Christ.

Now, the Sanhedrin determined Peter and John were bold, but they were uneducated and ordinary. So, they realize the response Peter and John give, they shouldn't be giving. Why? Because the response they give wasn't them, it was God in them.

The word, bold, means to be confident, courageous. It also means the ability to take a risk. When you get bold about something, you take a risk. If you look up the word, risk, it literally means to be in danger, or to be exposed to danger, harm, or loss. So what this is trying to tell us is the early church witnessed with boldness, meaning they were confident, courageous, they took a risk. Are you taking risks? How many times do we get a witnessing opportunity but we weigh out the risk to ourselves? It happens a lot, doesn't it? That is not being bold. That is being a coward. That is being Peter before the day of Pentecost, not Peter after the day of Pentecost. Do you see this? God doesn't want us to play it safe. He wants

us to be confident in the resurrection of Jesus. He wants us to be courageous about others needing to hear about the resurrection of Jesus. He wants us to take risks but not think about what that risk is to ourselves and just be faithful to the call of God to be a witness, and to do it with boldness.

Verses 23–31: The Believers Pray for Boldness

Peter and John have been released and we have learned that the healed man is forty years plus of age. Everyone is excited and they go back to their friends. Notice it doesn't say they went back to the apostles or the church. It says they went back to their friends. I personally believe their friends here are the church, but it the part of the church they ran with. You couldn't be in a church of five thousand men with women and children and know everybody in the church. You can't even come to a church like Hardin and know everybody in this church. What is important is who are the people you do church with, because you are the church.

So, Peter and John went back to their friends and told them everything that happened, and guess what their first response was...they decided to pray. God has convicted me, because I think a lot of times in the church today, we pray before we do things, but how many of us stop and pray after God has done something for us? Most of us don't do that. This church prayed after. Why did they pray after? It was because there was no doubt that what just happened was a God thing and they didn't want to take credit for it. They wanted to give full credit to God so they began to pray.

Look at verses 24–30, there are seven verses here. In this prayer, they acknowledge God is the sovereign Lord and then they basically take five verses and talk about God. In the last two verses, they tell God what they want. When you pray, is the majority of your prayer talking about *who* God is *to* God, or is it talking to God about what *you want* from Him? Most of us are the latter. We go to God in the name of Jesus and then get down to business and tell God everything we want Him to do. That is not what they did in the book of Acts. They acknowledge three things about God. Listen to this, church. They acknowledged Him as God of creation, God of

revelation, and God of providence. They bow before God and call Him sovereign Lord. They say, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them..." Then they begin to talk to Him about how He spoke to David through the Holy Spirit, and then they quote an Old Testament Scripture, Psalm chapter 2. They acknowledge that God had spoken to them and told them what would happen to His anointed Jesus. Then, the last thing they say is in this city they were gathered together (and they name the people who gathered) to do what God's hand and God's plan had predetermined to be done. Are you with me? – We aren't going to just pick out a few verses in the Bible that we agree with, we are going to preach the whole counsel of God. – Peter stood face to face with the Sanhedrin and told them they crucified Jesus. By an act of their free choice, they killed Him! And now, when they are talking to God, they say that all of these people gathered together around His Son to do what God wanted to be done. It was His plan, His hand that predetermined that Jesus would go to a cross and die.

Please tell me you see this...We serve a God who is sovereign over the affairs of His creation. He has told us that men are going to do wicked things, but all of those wicked things are still under His sovereign control! It wasn't the Jews who put Jesus on a cross, it wasn't the Romans, it was God who put Jesus on a cross for you and for me so that He could deal with what was wrong with us. It wasn't a problem any of us had from without; it was a problem we had from within, of being a sinner, and seeing life from our perspective only. God redeemed us from a life of self-centeredness to a life of serving Him, and ultimately, serving others because we want them to know what we know. He didn't just put Jesus on the cross for us; He put Jesus on the cross for the whole world. That church, their friends, are praying to Him and thanking Him for being the God of creation, the God of revelation, and the God of providence.

Look what they do next, and I'm going to get in trouble for pointing this out. They closed their prayer with just two verses saying, Lord look at their threats against us. We want you to give us the ability to speak your word boldly. They didn't say stop the threats, or this isn't fair, or this is right. This wasn't about them (so many of us have made Christianity about us).

They say now look at the threats hanging over our heads, God, give us boldness to speak your word. That is what we in the church have been called to do, in every situation. We declare God's Word because, ultimately, the world doesn't want the good news of the good deed to be talked about, because when it is talked about, the person who hears is accountable to either believe or not believe. That is why we have been called to be a witness. We just witness about what we have seen and heard.

Have you witnessed the resurrection of Jesus? I did. Yes, I know I was born in 1961, so, how did I witness the resurrection of Jesus? Let me tell you how...According to Paul, when Jesus died, Ricky the sinner died with Him. I was there at the cross! God put me in Christ. God laid my sin on Jesus. He died in my place. Ricky the sinner died that day with Christ! Do you want to know how He is alive? It is because Ricky the sinner is not alive anymore; he is dead, and the person who now lives in this body is Ricky the saint, Ricky the child of God. I am alive from the dead and I am a testimony by the way I stand. Just like Michael in the early service, thinking he was alive when he was really dead. And then he had that defining moment when he became a believer and his whole life changed because he received a new nature. He realized he was dead to sin and alive to God. We also saw a young lady witness that the person she was, who was dead and going to hell, is now a new person in Christ. She is now alive because Jesus is alive and she got up with Him. That ought to be true of you and me. Or, are you still in that tomb of sin? Are you still alive to sin? Is that your nature to sin? No, not if you are believer. You are right with God and you want to live out a life of rightness with God. It is your life that is on testimony. It is your life that causes people to see that what happened to you was real. Hopefully you get a chance to tell someone what happened that caused the change in you, that it is because of Jesus. Don't back down, don't be afraid, don't be a coward! Let's be under the control of God's Holy Spirit.

The Bible teaches in that last verse that the whole church was all filled with the Spirit and they all spoke the Word of God with boldness. Now, I don't want to be controversial here, but there is a big debate in the church about

what the baptism of the Holy Spirit is and what happened on the day of Pentecost with them speaking in tongues. We talked about that a few weeks ago, but look at this last statement. It teaches that everybody in the church at that moment was filled with the Spirit, and they didn't speak in other languages – they spoke the Word of God, and they spoke it boldly. So there is an easy way to know if you are under the control of the Holy Spirit of God. If you are under the control of the Holy Spirit of God, you will speak His Word, boldly, unashamedly, confidently, courageously. You will take the risk because you are a witness. You just have one main responsibility and that is to testify about what you know is true, what you have seen and heard. Have you seen and heard about Jesus? Do you want all the nations to know? Then let's start right here and let's not quit until everyone knows what we know, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no salvation in Buddhism, no salvation in Islam, and no salvation in Judaism. There is only salvation in Christianity and you are a witness to that fact. Please do it boldly, not arrogantly in the flesh, but boldly under the control of God's Spirit.