

Grace Church Roanoke, Virginia

Dr. Jack L. Arnold Lesson #11

ACTS
How To Cope With Persecution
Acts 4:13-31

How should Christians react when persecution comes to them for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ? What kind of response should Christians give when they are convinced the establishment is wrong and they are being persecuted unjustly? How can Christians cope with lies, half-truths and unfair demands from the enemies of the gospel? Acts 4:13-31 shows us how the early church learned to cope with persecution.

You remember from our previous messages how Peter and John were hauled off to jail and haled into court by the Sanhedrin, the ruling body in Jerusalem, which was the political, judicial and religious establishment in Jerusalem. With them was the former lame man who had been miraculously healed when Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene -- walk!" This healed man, who had never walked before, began immediately to walk, run, jump and leap all through the temple, and this, of course, drew a crowd. Peter seized the opportunity and preached to the 'crowd the truth of the resurrected Christ. This Christ, according to Peter, was the Messiah who the Jews crucified but God raised from the dead to prove that He was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. Because the preaching of the resurrected Christ was touching many people (some 5,000 were converted) the Sanhedrin, composed mainly of Sadducees, felt threatened by the teachings of Christianity. The Sadducees were the wealthy aristocrats and intellectuals who denied any supernatural phenomena. The preaching of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead not only threatened their doctrine of naturalism but, because so many were turning to Christ, it was a threat to their plush way of life since they had a financial monopoly on all the animal sacrifices sold in the temple. The Sanhedrin reacted and put Peter, John and probably the healed lame man in jail and then on trial. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, then put the Sanhedrin on trial and said, "You crucified the Messiah!" He warned them of their rejection of Messiah, for He alone is the only name under heaven whereby a person can be saved. "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" (Acts 4:12). Knowing that the Sanhedrin had the power to take Peter's life, he still was as bold as a lion and spoke up for Christ.

Acts 4:13-31, shows us how the early church reacted to and coped with persecution from the religious establishment. The principles are still valid today. We must learn to cope with persecution, for it is my opinion that the church of Christ in America will be facing more and more social persecution as we draw closer to the Lord's return.

KNOW YOUR OPPOSITION

Acts 4:13-18

No Respect for God-appointed Preachers (4:13): "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." -- The Sanhedrin saw the poise, confidence, boldness and assurance of these Apostles and they were absolutely flabbergasted. They were as cool as a cucumber while they were sitting before the Sanhedrin on trial. These highly educated intellectuals had disdain for Peter and John because they had not been to any Rabbinic university. The disciples had no formal training in the minutiae of the law. While the Sanhedrin looked down their noses at the disciples, they could not miss the fact that they were exceptional men. They finally concluded that these men had been trained by Jesus Christ, the man they put to death just a few weeks before this time.

The Sanhedrin was filled with brilliant men but they were not saved. They were not born again. They had no spiritual understanding because they did not know Christ, the source of all knowledge and wisdom. As it was in those days, so it is today. Intellectuals poo-hoo the whole idea of the supernatural and state that all Bible-believing Christians are idiots, uneducated and bigoted people. They have no respect for preachers or Christians who are committed to Christ and supernaturalism.

"For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God" (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

The Sanhedrin did recognize the disciples as 'having been with Jesus.' They saw in Christ, when He was before the Sanhedrin on the night he was betrayed this same calm, poise, confidence and assurance that they now saw in the disciples. They were reflecting the same spirit of Christ. The Sanhedrin observed the very same attitude in the Apostles as they saw in Christ in an hour of crisis. The Council came to realize that anyone who had anything to do with Jesus Christ began to act differently, and seemed to have a boldness and confidence in the midst of pressure. Every Christian is to have the mind of Christ. "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philip. 2:5). Christian people ought to have a demeanor in the midst of crisis that people can say, "Those people are different because they have been with Jesus."

Spiritual wisdom comes from God, and, if a person will give himself to an understanding of the Bible, it will not be long before he has more spiritual understanding than even liberal seminary professors. "I have more insight than all my teachers for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, because I have observed Thy precepts" (Psa. 119:99,100).

No Outward Acceptance of the Miraculous (4:14): "And seeing the man who had been

healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply.” -- The Sanhedrin saw the lame man healed and they could say nothing to repudiate this miracle. Yet, outwardly they would let no one know of their doubts about their anti-supernaturalism.

Unbelievers, atheists, agnostics, humanists and liberals will deny the supernatural in public but in the quiet of their own thinking they must wonder whether the possibility of the supernatural exists, seeing they come into contact with many evangelicals who claim to know the resurrected Christ.

It should never surprise us when non-Christians take a dim view of supernaturalism. They cannot understand divine phenomena because they are blinded by Satan to the truth.

"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (II Cor. 4:3,4).

No Logic About Supernatural Phenomena (4:15,16): "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.'" -- It was only when the Sanhedrin was by itself would they admit that a miracle had taken place. These men prided themselves on being logical and reasonable men and they had to declare that a supernatural act of healing had taken place. However, they were not consistent men because, instead of allowing this miracle to cause them to search for more truth about Christ, they hardened their hearts by commanding the Apostles to stop preaching about Christ. The logical and sensible reaction of the Sadducees should have been to openly accept the miracle and support the Apostles.

Infidels and liberals are very reasonable and logical men about most things in life but when it comes to accepting the Bible and supernaturalism, they become unreasonable and lose any consistency in their thinking. They want a Bible without supernatural phenomena. They want Christ without a supernatural resurrection. They want salvation without a supernatural new birth.

People today say, "If I could only see a miracle, I would believe in Christ!" That is not true. The Sanhedrin saw a miracle, believed it to be a miracle but refused to believe in Christ. The problem is not of the mind but of the heart and will. Unbelief is not because of a lack of facts, but because of a condition of the heart.

No Sympathy with the Gospel (4:17, 18): "But in order that it may not spread any further among the people, let us warn them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." -- The Sanhedrin, hoping to use scare tactics on Peter and John commanded them not to speak the name of Christ. They were to keep quiet, for the Council adopted a hush-hush policy. They did not say that the disciples could not speak or teach but they could not speak or teach in the name of Jesus. They could have a Bible class on the Law of Moses. They could preach on the prophecies of the Messianic kingdom. They

could have meetings but they just could not speak about Christ.

Modern day Sadducees (the liberal theologian, who strips the Bible, Christ and salvation of all supernaturalism) says that to preach Christ as the God-man who has risen from the dead will rock the liberal establishment. The evangelical who speaks up is told to hush up and is many times threatened with ostracism. Liberals say, "Don't preach Jesus, the Son of God, only Savior who rose from the dead, who died for sinners," and above all, "Don't take the Bible literally or seriously, for it is filled with figurative language and is open to many different interpretations." "These kinds of conservative, evangelical beliefs," they say, "are not acceptable in the twentieth century. Have your Bible studies, church meetings and youth activities but don't preach outmoded doctrine of supernaturalism." The gospel is rejected because liberals have never experienced the supernatural power of Christ in salvation.

"But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:23,24).

Liberals have a humanist religion without the supernatural Christ. A preacher once said to a woman, "Do you have religion?" "No, thank God," she replied, "I lost religion and it was nearly the death of me, but now I have Christ!"

KNOW YOUR COMMISSION Acts 4:19-22

Compelled By God (4:19): "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: . . .'" -- Again we see the inconsistency of these Sadducees. They, as rulers in Israel, were supposedly committed to doing the will of God for Israel, and they should have known it is more important to obey God than to obey men. To go against one's conscience before God is a very serious matter. After all, Christ had told the disciples by commandment to preach repentance to all nations. "And that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations -- beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:47). Christ also told them that the gospel was to be preached to the ends of the earth.

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

For the Apostles to disobey God would bring a much more serious blow to their consciences than to disobey man. Each Christian must be convinced that it is his God-given responsibility to give the gospel of Christ to this world. If he is commanded to stop preaching, he must disobey man and obey God.

Compelled by Experience (4:20): "For we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard." -- The Apostles had seen the resurrected Christ and had heard Christ's teachings directly from Him. They had experienced Christ in their lives. They knew

Christ personally and they had to speak of Him to others. If we know Christ, we must speak about Him to others.

When these Apostles were commanded to keep quiet, they did not say, "Wow, we got out of that tight spot, so we will just tone down our message to keep everybody happy. Let's stop preaching Christ and the resurrection because it infuriates the Sanhedrin." No, they could not stop preaching what they had seen and heard.

This section of scripture brings up the whole problem of civil disobedience. The Apostles were forbidden by the Jewish government to preach Christ. They disobeyed the constituted authorities and went on and preached Christ. This incident in Acts has been misused by radicals through the history of the church to justify defying authority over racial strife, draft evasion, violent demonstrations, boycotts and strikes. The Apostles defied authority but it was not for political, sociological or economic reasons but for religious and spiritual reasons. God, according to the Bible, has ordained human government and it exists to maintain law and order in society.

"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (Romans 13:1-7).

Even bad government is better than no government. It should be pointed out that the Roman emperor in power when Paul penned Romans 13 was Nero, a wicked, vile and godless man, and one of the worst emperors the empire ever had. However, the established government is not always right, and when it is wrong, God's laws must take precedence over man's laws. God also sees the state as existing to allow the gospel of Christ to be preached, but when the state forbids the preaching of the gospel, the church must disobey the state and obey God rather than man. The only time, according to the Bible that a Christian can defy the state is when the establishment moves into the religious realm and makes it impossible for Christians to function spiritually. There are no political reasons given in the Bible for revolt but there are spiritual reasons. Whenever the state takes away the Biblical right to propagate the gospel, to read God's Word or to meet together for Christian worship, then Christians must disobey the constituted authority. The form of disobedience would probably not be revolution but the church would go underground. Church history shows that the early church went underground in order to preserve the Faith but there is no record of them bearing arms

against the Roman or Jewish governments.

Confidence That God Will Deliver (4:21,22): “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 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 could find no guilt, for there is nothing wrong with doing a good deed of healing. They did not want to let the disciples go but they feared the masses of the people who at this time were in sympathy with the Apostles, even though they may not have been Christians. What the Council did not know was that persecution has a tendency to extend and establish the faith it was designed to destroy. They reasoned that the disciples were few in number, had little influence and even less wealth, and, if they were arrested and threatened, they would be brought into subjection and the new movement of Christianity would be squelched. Persecution always causes the church to grow in purity and numbers. Whatever, these disciples had confidence in their God and knew that He would deliver them and He did.

J. Klausner, a Jewish scholar, in his book From Jesus to Paul said concerning this first persecution of Christians,

This, says a Jewish scholar, "was the first mistake which the Jewish leaders made with regard to the new sect. And this mistake was fatal. There was probably no need to arrest the Nazarenes, thus calling attention to them and making them 'martyrs.' But once arrested, they should not have been freed so quickly. The arrest and release increased the number of believers; for these events showed on the one hand that the new sect was a power which the authorities feared enough to persecute, and on the other hand they proved that there was no danger in being a disciple of Jesus (he, of course, being the one who had saved them from the hand of their persecutors!)"

KNOW YOUR BRETHREN Acts 4:23

“And when they had been released, they went to their own companions, and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.”

Undoubtedly the whole Christian community in Jerusalem knew that Peter and John had been thrown in prison and tried before the Sanhedrin. There must have been much prayer for them. When they were released, the first thing they did was go find their fellow Christians who knew them and loved them. They explained the whole incident and most certainly they gave the glory to God.

This was the first prayer and sharing time of the early church which arose out of persecution. Their prayer and sharing was meaningful because they were battling the unbelieving world and God was doing great things for them. They had something very exciting to share with the brethren. If Christians are witnessing, they have plenty to share with their brothers and sisters in Christ because exciting things happen when Christians are faithful in carrying out the Great Commission.

KNOW YOUR GOD Acts 4:24-28

Who He Is (4:24a): “And when they (the whole church) heard this, they lifted their voice to God with one accord and said, O Lord, . . .” -- When this incident was told to the church at Jerusalem, they burst out into prayer and praise to the God who supernaturally delivered them. They immediately realized that this deliverance came from the hand of a sovereign God. They addressed their God as “Lord” which literally means “despot” in the Greek. This prayer was to “O mighty Despot, Tyrant, Ruler over all men and events.” They clearly understood God was controlling and overruling all events and men. They knew who their God was, the Sovereign One, and no puny Sanhedrin could do anything to them if God did not permit it.

What He Does (4:24b): “(O Lord), it is Thou who DIDST MAKE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, . . .” -- God is sovereign and He not only made the heaven, earth and sea but He controls and rules over every created thing in heaven, earth and sea. They clearly understood that God had permitted their persecution and deliverance for a purpose in His total plan, and the disciples rejoiced to be a part of God's plan for this world. They knew that the world is in the palm of God's hand, and He is intimately involved in every human event.

“The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD. He turns it wherever He wishes” (Prov. 21:1).

“And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings” (Dan. 2:21a).

“It is He who sits above the vault (circle) of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers” (Isa. 40:22a).

“Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales. Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust” (Isa.40:15).

“And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

The early Christians knew God was sovereign and they cast themselves upon the sovereign power of God at work in history. It seems as though many Christians today are not sure that God is sovereign, and the church, because of its low view of God, has given up a strong emphasis upon the supernatural. The early Christians did not depend upon their wisdom or the popular support of the people but they cast themselves upon the Sovereign God of the universe and that is the single greatest power to alter the course of history. Whenever the church has stopped trusting in a sovereign God and put more emphasis upon man, the church has made a lot of noise, created a lot of activity but it has accomplished very little spiritually which has altered the course of history and had eternal

effects.

Where He Is Revealed (4:25,26): "Who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Thy servant, didst say, "WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES (Jews) DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND! AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER, AGAINST THE LORD, AND AGAINST CHRIST (Messiah)." -- The disciples quoted from the Bible, Psalm 2:1,2, to point out that the Jews and the Gentiles, religious rulers and secular kings, would oppose the Lord Jesus Christ.

When they were persecuted and undergoing crisis, they found their comfort in the Word of God. They trusted the truth and the accuracy of the Bible and this brought them the peace which passes all understanding. They knew that God had predicted this opposition they faced. The Christian under pressure should always go to the God of scripture for comfort.

How He Works (4:27,28): "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy Servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod (King) and Pontius Pilate (governor), along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur." -- This verse clearly teaches that Gentiles as well as Jews put Christ to death. Some people have blamed the Jews alone for the death of Christ which has caused a great deal of anti-Semitism. Jews have been called "Christ killers" which is true but Gentiles are "Christ killers," too. However, the final "Christ killer" was God Himself. He put Christ to death, for it was a definite part of His plan that Christ should die for sinful men and take them to heaven.

These early Christians saw the opposition and the hatred of Christ as under God's sovereign control. Therefore, their own persecutions were not surprising or unexpected, and certainly they were not beyond God's control. However, the most amazing statement of all was that the evil actions of Herod, Pilate, Jews and Gentiles in putting Christ to death were also part of God's plan. The God of history uses opposition to accomplish His own purposes. Men tried to derail God's plan but God used their actions for His own purposes. God used even the enemies of Christ to somehow supernaturally accomplish His will. God, being sovereign, somehow works through the free actions of men to accomplish His own will. There is a mystery to us but it is true, and we must understand the mystery of history (God in control of events and men) if we are going to react kindly and lovingly to persecution when it comes our way.

What the disciples understood was that Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, Nero and every Caesar were just puppets in the sight of their sovereign, omnipotent God. Do we understand this, beloved? God is behind the mystery of history and when we realize this we are connected up with the most powerful force in the universe and we become instruments of God to alter the course of human history.

KNOW YOURSELF Acts 4:29,30

Pray Unselfishly (4:29): "And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence, . . ." -- These disciples not only knew their God, but they knew themselves and how prone they were to ask for selfish things. Notice, however, that they did not pray for protection. They did not pray for the persecution to cease. They prayed in a manner which enabled them to rise above self. They prayed for boldness to speak the gospel in confidence. They needed courage to declare Christ faithfully and they knew God would take care of them.

The reason Christians do not witness for Christ is that they are afraid of social persecution. They are more concerned about self image and self protection than they are about the glory of God. We must be constant witnesses for Christ and we must constantly pray for boldness to speak. Winning souls is God's business but we must proclaim the message of Christ.

Pray for More Blessing (4:30): "While Thou dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy Servant Jesus." -- These Christians did not ask for less blessing so they could get less persecution, but they asked for more blessing from God, knowing full well this would bring more persecution. Remember, when God works hardest, the Devil works harder. Try to rise above your selfishness and see the glory of God in your prayer life. Be like these disciples who said, "Pour it on Lord!" The more God blesses, the more will be the opposition to the truth of Christ.

KNOW YOUR SOURCE OF POWER Acts 4:31

Prayer Brings God's Presence (4: 31 a): "And when they had prayed, the place, where they had gathered together was shaken, . . ." -- At the end of this prayer meeting, God gave them a supernatural sign that He was with them by the shaking of the building. This shaking was also given to these Christians to remind them again it is God who shakes men by supernatural power. God will shake rejecters of Christ in judgment. He would judge Jerusalem, for in less than forty years, He would destroy the city by the Roman armies of Titus (70 A.D.). God judged Israel for their rejection of Messiah. For almost two thousand years no Jewish government was on this earth, and only in 1948 were the Jews permitted by God to have a nation.

God can also shake men in His sovereignty to receive Christ. He could shake Annas, Caiaphas, Herod and even that feisty little Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, if He wills to do so. Yes, God shakes men and brings them to Christ by supernatural power.

Prayer Brings the Filling Of the Spirit (4:31b): "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness." -- Notice carefully in this verse that the filling of the Spirit came upon these Christians while they were in a season of prayer. As a result, they spoke the gospel of Christ with boldness. God commanded the disciples to witness for Christ, but He also provided the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit for men to witness effectively and with boldness. Do we know anything of the filling of the Spirit to give us boldness and courage to speak for Christ? Our source

of power in witnessing is in the Holy Spirit and His filling work. Are we filled with the Spirit? If we are, we shall be witnessing for Christ with boldness and confidence.

CONCLUSION

The God who supernaturally shakes buildings also shakes men. He shook Peter and John, and all the Apostles, and He shook Saul of Tarsus, that brilliant Pharisee who became the most dynamic Christian of all time. God shook the first century Christians and every Christian for the last two thousand years. And, my friend, He may shake you! God in His sovereignty has the power to shake and shake and shake until you bow your will to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

How do you know God is shaking you? Do you sense a need for Christ? Do you feel a conviction in your heart about your sinfulness? Do you find a struggle going on in your heart about receiving Christ. If you do, God is shaking you and you must stop fighting and receive Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin and as your Lord, who has the right to rule in your life.