

“How to Respond to Jesus’ Opponents”

Acts 4:1-31

The incredible miracle story in Acts 3 is not over as we come to Acts 4. Acts 3 is the celebration and joy of the miracle. Peter and John healed the lame man who had been begging daily at the Eastern Gate of the Temple called Beautiful. And it was in the power of Jesus’ Name that this man was healed when Peter and John commanded him to stand up, giving life to limbs that had never walked. And he leaps and praises God as do so many people. It’s a grand and glorious day. But not everyone is happy. While chapter divisions are helpful for dividing up the Bible into manageable chunks, they sometimes disrupt a scene like here. Ch. 4 in the Greek literally reads,

‘But as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came at them suddenly ...’

For this to happen so quickly means the apostles were being watched and people with human power were not going to stand for anything to do with Jesus. In Ch. 4 we go back and forth from the reaction of those who oppose Jesus’ followers (vv.1-7) to Jesus’ followers’ response in vv.8-12; then back to the reaction of Jesus’ opponents in vv.13-18 and then the response again of Jesus’ followers in vv.19-31. And I think we’ll look at this passage from these two perspectives. Why do people reject Jesus and His followers and what can we, as Jesus’ followers today, learn here on how to respond to them.

None of us enjoy opposition to the gospel. It can get ugly. Jesus told us to expect it. But its helpful if we

Understand Why Some People Reject Jesus **(4:1-7, 13-18, 21-22)**

Some people react very angrily to Jesus or the gospel and us, His messengers, who simply want to share the good news of hope with them. And this is what happens here. The word for ‘came up to them’ can imply hostility and anger. We get the strong impression the religious leaders were prepared to round up these Jesus followers when we read

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them [like they are already there]

The Sadducees are in charge of the Sanhedrin, made up of 70 Jewish aristocrats who sat as judge and jury over all religious issues. These were the same people who arrested and tried Jesus sentencing Him to death only weeks earlier. The Sadducees didn’t believe in resurrection; so they didn’t believe in an afterlife. And so any talk of Jesus still being alive and acting through His followers was extremely unsettling.

And this is important for us to understand. People who reject Jesus as the only way to God who have been brought up in a different religious background where they were taught your salvation depends on your own efforts. Or, non-religious people or those who gave up on religious teaching and adopted a fatalistic approach to life believing we cease to exist at death. So when someone like us comes along and says, there is a God and there is only One way to Him and that is

through accepting His Son who sacrificed Himself for our sins, this rattles people's core beliefs. The way they look at their own life. And as a result, the gospel causes them to

Fear losing control of their life (vv.1-7)

The religious leaders thought when they had Jesus crucified that this 'rebellion' was done and they could get back to 'normal' which for them was telling the people how they felt one could be right with God. But since their 'religion' didn't believe that Jesus was God's Son and didn't believe in a resurrection, then they were teaching a religion of no hope beyond this life. This is the essence of the gospel; that death is not the end. Death for the one who places their faith in Jesus means, like Jesus, they too will rise after we have died. If our hope is in ourselves we are hopeless because we can't save ourselves. Our good deeds won't cut it because we've all sinned, we all come short, we all like sheep have gone astray.

So these religious controllers get angry because their belief system is being shaken. Their integrity is at stake because now people are hearing a different message that opposes their message. They like to control people because the more people who believe your message the more confident you feel its' correct (even if deep down you actually don't know if tis right or wrong). So then you seek to intimidate the Jesus' people through numbers or political connections or physical threats.

Peter and John are then arrested. The next morning they are hauled into the council of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of (24) rulers, (24) elders and (22) scribes as well as the current high priest and any former high priests; so we have listed Annas (the former High priest), Caiaphas (the current high priest) and his brothers, John and Alexander (who would later become high priests). The Sanhedrin sat in a tiered semi circle looking ominously down on those being tried in the center of the room (v.7). It's supposed to be intimidating. But Peter and John are not afraid. Why not? Because they believe in the resurrection of Jesus. They saw Him alive, they've received the Spirit, they've witnessed miracles already and 3000 were already saved. Whoops. V.4 says 2000 more men – doesn't even include women and children! No wonder Jesus' opponents are getting angrier

The Sanhedrin thought they had the power and ruled everyone so they, in their self-righteousness demanded Peter and John (as Jesus had been asked too) "*By what power or what name have you*" healed this cripple? The question is arrogant and reveals that they believed they were the only ones who had the key to true religion. People react negatively to the gospel because they fear losing control of their life. They don't want to entertain the thought that maybe they are not right, that they are accountable to God. So it's helpful for us to understand that many people when hearing the gospel react negatively because we have shaken their belief system. They thought that part of their life was under control.

This helped me a lot in understanding my dad's initial anger towards my coming to Christ. Any early attempt at sharing the gospel with him was met with anger and an argumentative spirit. I had to learn to approach him differently because I realized his worldview had been shaken. Surely he now wondered were his parents wrong? He thought he had done us right. Now I was saying he was wrong? Were his religious teachers telling him the truth? Over time the conversations became less confrontational as he saw the difference Jesus made in our family's life.

Peter gives an excellent defense of the gospel in vv.8-12 but these religious leaders didn't budge. They are impressed by Peter's boldness. They admit that a miracle happened but they only want the message of Jesus stopped. Why didn't Peter's clear words convict them of their sin? We have to remember

They are blinded to the truth (vv.13-16)

The apostle Paul helps us understand this in 1 Cor. 2:9

⁹ However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”—

¹⁰ but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. ¹⁴ The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Paul also says in 2 Cor, 4:4

⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

They heard the truth. They had the evidence of Peter and John’s boldness. They saw the healed man but they refused to believe. Salvation is the gift of God by the Spirit of God who opens our hearts to the truth. That’s why none of us can boast because none of us figured it out for ourselves. God did it and so we must pray for God to do the work in people’s hearts.

Instead of repenting they ordered Peter and the others to stop preaching about Jesus and a resurrection. Why do they think they can order Peter around? Because sadly

The falsely believe they have God’s favour (vv.17-18)

The reason why they feel they have the right to tell Peter and John to stop what they are doing is because they blindly feel they have a corner on God. That rule keeping is the way. That God is impressed with ritual and tradition and not faith. We read they, commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

There’s was the false assumption that they knew God and God was pleased with them. Sadly, Jesus warned these religious leaders in Matt. 7:21 when He said,

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

Looking at why these people reacted so negatively now helps us better ...

Understand How God Wants Us to Respond **(4:8-13, 19-31)**

Peter already answered their question in ch. 3 about how the miracle happened. He said it wasn't by our power or piety but through the Name of Jesus whom your religious authorities had put to death.

But now that he's standing in the very place where Jesus Himself was tried and then crucified, how will he respond now? Can the same Jesus who gave physical strength to the crippled man's bones give spiritual strength to us His disciples when we need to communicate the gospel? Yes!

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, ⁹ if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. 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."

When we are confronted by doubters about the reality of the gospel and Jesus we need to

Trust Jesus will give us Spirit-led words (vv.8-12)

Peter is filled with the Spirit because he is trusting Jesus' words spoken earlier in Luke 12:11

And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, ¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

Peter is so confident – not in himself – but in the power of the Spirit that he actually turns the tables on them and accuses them as if they are on trial for killing Jesus. It is by Jesus' Name – that guy you killed but isn't dead anymore – that this man is healed and it is by Jesus' Name and Jesus' Name alone that people are saved. Peter quotes Ps. 118, the same verse Jesus quoted about Himself accusing the religious rulers of rejecting their Messiah like a stone mason looking for the perfect stone to finish his building, keeps stumbling over it because they don't want it. And it is the religious leaders who comment on the "confidence" of Peter and John.

If we believe in Jesus by faith for our salvation – He died for our sins and rose from the dead – we too receive his power of the Spirit. The Spirit gives us confidence to communicate the gospel. Every time we excuse our irresponsibility of sharing Christ by saying 'Oh I'm shy' or 'I don't know what to say' we make it about us and not about Jesus. So, let the Spirit help us speak truth and

Make Jesus the focus (vv.10-13)

Peter did not focus on his authority but where he got it from - Jesus. It's not about Peter or the healed man standing there (by the way he was arrested too!) but it's about Jesus who did this:

¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

It's easy to get sidetracked with questions meant to trip us up sometimes, or who gave us the right to say what we're saying. We need to focus on Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith. Because if it's only His Name alone people are saved then we must talk about His Name.

And its' not only Spirit led words. After Peter speaks the leaders dismiss them and confer amongst themselves, amazed by Peter and John's boldness. And they pay them the greatest complement when they say 'You can tell these guys have been hanging around Jesus – they act just like He did!' They can't deny the miracle nor can they deny the way Jesus has changed these men. So let's remember that we also ...

Witness through the power of a healed life (vv.19-22)

The healing I'm mostly talking about however, is the healing of our heart. Our confidence doesn't come from a good self-image but the knowledge of being forgiven, the confidence of being loved by God and secure in who we are because we are His child. Peter will command us in 2 Pet. 3:18 to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The more we grow, the more we show how Jesus has healed our hurts, our pain, our lack of personal respect and our cold indifferent heart. When we boldly yet lovingly share Jesus with others, we show them how Jesus has changed our hearts. Those who oppose Jesus can't deny these things.

Commanded to stop talking about Jesus, Peter and John refuse to do so and the religious leaders let them go because they are afraid of the people, who by the way are coming to know Christ left and right. Another 2000 men and that doesn't include women and children. And when the confrontation is over and you're reflecting on these things with fellow believers,

Thank God for witnessing opportunities (vv.23-28)

²⁴ And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, ²⁵ who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, 'WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? ²⁶ 'THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.' ²⁷ For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

God's Word says these things will happen. If they did it to Jesus they'll do it to us. Praise God we are worthy of suffering for Jesus. How else did they pray and so should we?

Pray that God's power would change lives so witness opportunities increase (vv.29-31)

²⁹ And now, Lord, take note of their threats, "and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, ³⁰ while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus." ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

It would be nice if Ch.3 were the whole story but its important to know that Ch.4's often follow Ch.3's. The enemy is not happy when God takes his turf, when we obey the command to make disciples and speak Spirit-led words of faith. It's important for us to understand why people get angry at Jesus and the gospel and how to respond graciously yet boldly, knowing God is with us and will never leave us nor forsake us. Let's also remember Jesus has risen from the dead. He will return. We do win but hell is very real. Let's continue to pray for boldness and Spirit-led words to share the love of Jesus to a lost, confused, misled and hurting world.

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If you have any comments or questions about tis message please contact us
at olviet@rideau.net