

“The Heat Is On”

Acts 4:1-31

Dr. Jarrett Stephens | September 19, 2021

Intro. Acts 4:1-31

The title of the message today is: **The Heat Is On**

This is a little of what the early church – specifically Peter and John was feeling here in the text we are looking at today. Let me remind you of where we are...catch you up a bit if you missed last week.

Peter and John were heading to the Temple to pray and God had set up for them a “divine appointment”. You can read all about this in Acts chapter three.

There was a man lame since birth, and he was laying outside the Temple begging for money...looking for someone to have some mercy on him and maybe throw some loose change his way.

Peter and John lock eyes with him and they don't give him money, but instead by the power of God, under the name and authority of Jesus, they heal this man and miraculously this man who had been lame for 40+ years gets up and starts (Acts 3:8) “walking and leaping and praising God.”

And as a result of this, a crowd starts gathering. No one can really wrap their mind around what's going on...what they are seeing with their own eyes.

And Peter seeing this opportunity to preach the gospel and tell people about Jesus he takes it and...well, the heat is on! Let's pick up in Acts 4 and here is what I want you to notice first.

What I'm calling: **The Reality of Persecution**

Acts 4:1-3 – “And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.”

Here in Acts 4 we are getting our first glimpse of persecution that is directed toward the early church. And we will see persecution coming in waves over and over again throughout the book of Acts.

It QUICKLY becomes a way of life for the early followers of Christ. To follow Jesus was to be persecuted...to live for him and to love him meant opposition. You could almost say they go hand in hand.

Now, just an interesting point I want to highlight at the outset here. These believers...Peter, John and others we will see in Acts are doing EXACTLY what they are supposed to be doing – they are living out Acts 2:42-46:

- They are praying together...
- They are listening to God's Word as the apostles teach it via the law, the prophets, the psalms and teachings of Jesus...
- They are serving one another...
- They are giving to one another...
- They are meeting needs in and around them...
- They are pointing people to Jesus...

These early Christians are doing EVERYTHING they are supposed to be doing and look at this: They are in trouble! Here:

- In Acts 4, they are arrested in put in custody.
- In Acts 5, they will be beaten.
- In Acts 6, they will be stoned.
- In Acts 8, they will be persecuted to the extent they have to uproot their lives and move somewhere else.

These men and women are doing exactly what Jesus told them to do and they are being persecuted and opposed in ways that threaten their livelihood and lives!

I highlight this just to make the point...sometimes we hear from people, "Follow Jesus and all will be made right. Follow Jesus and your problems will go away. Give your life to Jesus and you will have health, wealth and prosperity and blessing."

NOT TRUE! That kind of teaching is foreign to the teaching of the Bible and the examples we have in the Bible. Following Jesus as we see here and throughout the book of Acts won't get you out of trouble, sometimes it will get you in trouble!

Persecution was a reality for the early church and listen, it's a reality for the Church today...especially our brothers and sisters overseas.

Sure, we may experience it from time to time here where we live and probably will more and more as Christ-followers because of the:

- The stances we take...
- The doctrine we believe...
- The choices we make...

We'll experience persecution more and more in the future as our culture continues to slide into more and more darkness and decay. But our brothers and sisters overseas in places that are closed off to the gospel...where Christianity is in the mass minority you better believe that persecution is a reality for them! (We need to pray!)

Illus. Missions Weekend – About a month from now, we will be hosting our Missions Weekend and Pastor Andrew Brunson will be in the services with us. He'll be speaking that night at our Missions Banquet.

Pastor Andrew Brunson served as a missionary church planter for years in Turkey and was arrested and put into prison for nearly two years. I've had the opportunity to be with him on a number of occasions including the week AFTER he was released from prison and he is a remarkable man although he doesn't seem himself as such. He's going to be here with us and that day we will be talking about our mission partnerships around the world and specifically about the Persecuted Church.

Persecution is a reality for many around the world. Consider these statistics. This is from the ministry Open Doors which is a ministry that supports the Persecuted Church around the world.

This is for their reporting period 2020-2021 – as current as it gets:

- Over 340 million Christians living in places where they experience high levels of persecution and discrimination (world-watch list)...
- 4,761 Christians killed for their faith...
- 4,488 churches and other Christian buildings attacked...
- 4,277 believers detained without trial, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned...

This is just in the last year...and just the ones that are reported and that we know about! Persecution is a reality. It was then and it is today.

Peter and John are arrested and brought in and notice what they were “greatly annoyed” by in (Acts 4:2). Some of your Bibles may use the word “disturbed” or “agitated”. Why are they so irritated?

It's not the miracle they performed for this man that hadn't walking in 40 years...that wasn't what annoyed them. What disturbed them was the message they were preaching.

The scripture says: **Acts 4:2** – “**greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.**”

Now, THIS is the crux of Christianity. If you are here today and you:

- don't know Jesus...
- not familiar with church...
- wondering why people like us gather all over the world and worship and give and serve God...

THIS is the reason! It's the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection proves that Jesus is God and that he could do exactly what he said he could do – namely forgive our sins and restore us to a

right relationship with God, the Father. This is what the death of Jesus and resurrection of Jesus solidifies and secures.

THIS is why we worship him instead of any other god – BECAUSE he raised from the dead!

And the religious leaders don't like this kind of message – especially the Sadducees who didn't believe in a physical resurrection or anything supernatural and they liked the power and influence that the Roman officials helped them maintain!

So, they along with the captain of the temple (who was responsible for keeping the peace) and this was for sure getting out of hand...they along with some of the priests bring Peter and John into custody and keep them overnight.

Now, I want to say this about the reality of persecution. Typically, you will see persecution taking place where three other influences are at play as well.

BTW – There is a difference between persecution and consequences of bad choices or behavior!

- If you get fired from your job because your lazy and don't do your work, that's not persecution! That's just!
- If you are avoided because your brash or you light up a room when you leave it, that's not persecution, that's just no one likes being around you.
- If you get docked a late fee for not paying your bills on time, that's not you being persecuted, that's you not taking care of responsibility.

There's a difference between persecution and consequences of bad behavior or choices and we need to know the difference!

You'll see three influences at play wherever there is persecution. You FOR SURE see two of those other three influences at play in our passage and I assure you the third is present.

1. Spiritual Ignorance

Look with me at **Acts 4:5-7** – “**On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem,** ⁶ **with**

Annas the high priest and Caiaphas (both of these men were present on the night Jesus was arrested, brought in and charged with blasphemy. Peter and John would have certainly known that and remembered that...and you remembered the fate of Jesus for blasphemy – death by crucifixion.) **and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.** ⁷ **And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”**

So, get the picture here. You have the chief priests. You have the Sadducees...you had the elders and scribes. Peter and John are standing before the Sanhedrin!

The Sanhedrin has been referred to...or compared to a combination of Parliament and the Supreme Court. It was made up of 71 members – all Jewish leaders (rulers, elders, scribes) PLUS the High Priest and they are the ones that set national and religious policy for Israel.

They ruled in civil cases, criminal cases...they are important people and this is a BIG deal.

But, guess what? As smart as they are, they are still spiritually blind and therefore spiritually ignorant. And wherever you see spiritual ignorance, you'll usually also find persecution.

Spiritual ignorant people can't comprehend spiritual matters. They are what Paul would call "spiritually discerned".

1 Cor. 2:14 – “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

A natural reaction from a natural person when confronted with the things of the Spirit is to oppose it...and that is exactly what is taking place here.

A second influence that is usually at play where there is persecution, and you certainly see it here is when there is:

2. Self-Preservation

Listen, these same people put Jesus to death because he was a threat to their power, influence, and way of life.

- For the Sadducees...these men were aristocrats. All wealthy and worked with the powers of Rome to stay that way.
- Annas and Caiaphas – the best way to think about them is to think about the Godfather movies! They'd do whatever they could to stay in power...about as corrupt as corrupt could be, but they had control!
- The elders and scribes...the Pharisees? They had the respect of the people in the sense that they knew God's law, lived by God's law and upheld God's law.

You look at the Sanhedrin and the power structure that existed there and it was self-preservation at all costs! Do you remember what these people in power did after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead?

John 11:45-50, 53 – “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, ⁴⁶ but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (self-preservation!) ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that

year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish...So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.”

Where power and security...where identity and popularity is threatened (John 12 Passover– “the whole world has gone after him”), self-preservation kicks in and persecution will inevitably follow.

This is particularly why Christianity is so highly persecuted in some countries overseas especially in areas with authoritarian governments– it’s because of a perceived threat of losing power and control.

In areas where Christianity is the minority religion, it’s a threat to people’s core identity as Christ changes people from the inside and they leave what they have known and followed and been taught their entire life– and the only answer most false religions have to it is to try and put it out...put an end to it!

But we know that’s impossible. It was the early church leader **Tertullian** (apologist and author from Tunisia)– “**The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.**”

A third influence that is ALWAYS at play where there is persecution...you may not see it with your eyes, but it’s always there. You read this passage in Acts 4 and it’s not talked about, but I guarantee you it’s there! It’s:

3. Satanic Activity

We are in a spiritual battle. And while the Enemy will not have the final victory, he will do whatever he can in the “here and now” to thwart the advance of God’s Kingdom. He is out to (John 14:6) kill, steal and destroy and so anytime you see someone living for Jesus...anytime you see a church on the move...you better believe the Enemy is going to try and stop it.

Now, that shouldn’t scare us! “Greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world (cf 1 John 4:4). We need to always remember that Satan is on a leash. Nothing happens to the child of God without first being filtered through the hands of God.

Just know though, if we are going to move FORWARD, there will be opposition and one of the best tricks in Satan’s bag to throw toward believers is to discourage them through persecution.

Satan is at work here and it’s his work that is blinding those that questioned and arrested Peter and John that day...peel back the invisible and this is what you would see!

2 Cor. 4:4 – “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

And as a result of their spiritual blindness, they persecute...they oppose...because they can't see! Satan has blinded their minds! Don't ever think that spiritual warfare is NOT real. It's real!

What did Paul write in **Eph. 6:10-12** – **“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”**

This is the reality of persecution. And we see it play out right here in Acts 4. Now, let's transition and see: **The Response to Persecution**

Peter and John are arrested and then interrogated. We read the questioning right there in **Acts 4:7** – **“And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”**

Here we go! They are asking about the name again! If you want to know more about this, please go back listen to last week's message. We talked a lot about what it means to do something or say something in the “name of Jesus”. You'll want to go back and listen...it's so good!

And listen to how Peter responds here. This is the third preaching opportunity that Peter has been given since we have started our study in Acts. By now, you ought to know what the content of his message is going to be. It's been the same every time. Remember:

- It's Scripture-saturated...
- It's Christ-centered...
- It's Holy Spirit-filled...

He's three for three here when it comes to preaching when he has the opportunity and preaching straight fire! Look at it.

Acts 4:8-12 – **“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit (Holy Spirit-filled), said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. (Christ-centered – it's about him! And now he fills it with scripture quoting Psalm 118:22) ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. (The capstone or the cornerstone holds the whole building together. And this “stone” which in the Hebrew sounds like the word “son” – thank you, Mark Lanier in your video thought for the day this week! The stone...the son that the builders rejected...that you spiritual leaders are rejecting – this Jesus he is the cornerstone for the Kingdom of God!) ¹² 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.”**

Let's look at Peter's response to his questioning and to this interrogation...let's look at his response to this persecution and learn some things. First:

1. Be ready

There is NO shake voice in Peter as he responds to these questions! And remember, he is in front of some pretty powerful and influential people.

He seems not to be surprised that he's been called in! And I've got to imagine as the disciples met and prayed together and fellowshiped together in those early days, they KNEW and were mentally preparing themselves for the persecution that was inevitably coming their way!

After-all Jesus warned them of this over and over again. Surely his words were a topic of conversation that helped prepare their hearts for what they were facing. Jesus reminded them of this over and over again:

Matt. 5:10-12 – “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

John 15:18-21 – “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.”

John 16:2-4 – “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.³ And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.⁴ But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.”

Don't you know the Holy Spirit is bringing this to Peter's mind in the moments of his arrest...has to be. And this had to bring him comfort. Maybe he recalled this teaching from Jesus:

Matt. 10:16-20 – “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before the governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

Peter and the early followers of Jesus had been warned on more than one occasion by Jesus that persecution was coming their way and when they saw the way people treated Jesus, they knew and expected not to be treated any better!

Peter was ready for the persecution, but he didn't have to think about or plan what he was going to say because Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit would be there to help him out!

And what came out of his mouth...it had to amaze Peter himself! It certainly amazed the people listening to him!

Acts 4:13-20 – “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. (These were some hillbillies from Galilee and they “astonished” the most brilliant and sophisticated of Israel) And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. (I could go off on this one! Do people recognize by how you handle adversity and trials...questioning and temptation that you have been with Jesus?)¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, ¹⁶ saying, “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard. And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.”

Here is a second response we see from Peter and John as it relates to persecution that we can learn from. And that is:

2. Be Faithful

Peter and John were faithful to testify of Christ. It was Jesus that healed this man. They were faithful to preach the gospel when given the opportunity. They didn't back away. They preached Christ crucified and risen...that there is salvation in no one else!

And then...when charged NOT to preach anymore in his name, they were faithful to Jesus and said, “We can't do that. We've got to obey God and not man.”

They were faithful to God even when it meant disobeying authority. We could probably, especially in the times in which we live preach an entire message on this verse right here and speak to civil disobedience and what it means to obey God and not man in our culture today.

I'll just say it here now. As Christians, the whole of scripture teaches (Romans 13, 1 Peter 2) that wherever possible we should obey the authority we are put under whether:

- at our jobs...
- in our homes...
- at our schools...
- or within our government...

Whether we like the authority or the decisions they make or not. As Christians this is part of being salt and light – we are to live quiet and peaceful lives.

HOWEVER...whenever ANY authority asks or tries to make us do something that is in opposition to God's Word...that would be considered disobedience to Jesus, that's a line in the sand for us. Our first allegiance is always to Jesus and the priority of his Kingdom.

And so, when persecuted...if it means being faithful to man or being faithful to God, we ALWAYS choose faithfulness to God.

This is what Peter and John chose and the authorities don't know what to do with them. Even in disagreeing and not obeying, they were kind and respectful.

Talk about being ready and faithful in persecution...and kind and respectful toward authority at the same time. It was Peter who wrote in the letter that bears his name:

1 Peter 3:14-15 – “But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

Peter exemplifies this here and he and John are let go, and look at what they do next. This is the third response to persecution we see and it's an example to follow. And that is:

3. Be Bold

Three times in the 31 verses in this passage, the word “bold” or “boldness” is used to describe these disciples. It's so interesting to me, they get released and get back together with the other disciples to give a report and they begin praying...NOT for God to protect them from persecution (that's what I would have been praying!).

They don't pray for their own safety or that God would judge the Sanhedrin and give them what they deserve. They don't even pray for a “hedge or protection” around them and their families or that Satan would be held back and that his plans would be prevented. Instead, look at what they pray!

Acts 4:29-31 – “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness,³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”

Illus. Timothy/Barnabas Conference – Incredible. They pray for boldness. Told the conference about Curtis Elementary motto. Let me pose it like this though: If every church member was just like me, what kind of church would Champion Forest be?

It’s a fact. We will be persecuted. **2 Tim. 3:12 – “Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**

The question is, when persecution comes, will we be ready? Will we be faithful? Will we be bold?

When the heat is on! If every church member handled adversity and opposition and persecution like me, what kind of church would Champion Forest be? It’s a good question to consider as we close today.

Would you pray with me?

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.