

Acts 4:5-31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 October 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Acts chapter 4 verses 5 to 31. On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high priestly family.

And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, By what power, or by what name, did you do this? Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, 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.

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. 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.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated common men, they were astonished, and they recognized that they had been with Jesus. But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, 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.

[1 : 26] 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. So they called them, and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

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, 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. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, Sovereign Lord, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city they 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, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

[2 : 43] And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

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. After the healing of the lame man at the beautiful gate of the temple in chapter 3 of the book of Acts, in chapter 4, Peter and John, after being jailed overnight, are now placed before the Sanhedrin, who inquire of them what they are doing.

They are being questioned by a who's who of Jerusalem's elite, the rulers, the elders, the scribes, Annas, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and other members of the high priestly family.

And the key question that they want to have answered is the power or name by which they perform the notable miracle. The miracle itself is clearly evident, but as those who perform the miracle were known associates and disciples of the would-be Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, there is clearly a problem.

Of course, it's possible that the situation might be salvaged. Perhaps these Galileans can be dissuaded from speaking in the name of Jesus, and can attribute their miracle to the power of God more generally, in a way that would allow them to fit in with the orthodoxy of the elite.

[4 : 02] Perhaps these men have a few sectarian differences, but we should focus upon the commonalities. Jesus had promised his disciples that they would be brought before councils and kings and other rulers of the Gentiles, and that in the day that that happened, the Holy Spirit would give them the words to speak.

Here, Peter is filled by the Holy Spirit, and he addresses the Sanhedrin. In his answer, he exposes something of the surreal character of the situation. They are being examined concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, giving a lame man the power to walk again.

Of course, the real issue is the power or name by which the deed was performed, and on that front, Peter immediately torpedoed any hope that the Sanhedrin might have had, that the apostles would attribute the miracle to God's power apart from any reference to Christ.

No, the power of healing for this man came from the name of Jesus Christ, a man that God had raised from the dead, although they had crucified him. The Jewish leaders had a track record of persecuting and killing the prophets.

Each successive generation could rehabilitate the prophets that their fathers had killed, yet they were within the same line of those who killed the prophets, as Christ pointed out. Jesus, however, presents a problem.

[5 : 13] Jesus' disciples are still acting by his power and declaring the message of his unjust crucifixion in a way that seems to delegitimize the authority of the Sanhedrin. God had decisively overruled them.

In a death sentence, no less. It is very easy to water down and domesticate the teaching of dead leaders and prophets. Just about everyone believes that if they lived in the days of Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, they would have supported everything that he stood for.

The message of the dead is easily defanged, rendered safe and palatable to those in authority. However, the spirit of Christ is stubbornly active and alive in his disciples, and the leaders cannot simply suppress it.

This miracle, then, is a miracle that directly challenges and undermines their authority. As he does in the second chapter of his first epistle, Peter references Psalm 118, verses 22-23.

Christ is the stone that was rejected, and yet he has become the cornerstone. God is building a new temple, and the great builders and leaders of Israel have rejected the very stone that the entire edifice is going to be ordered around.

[6 : 20] Jesus made a similar point in his response to the authorities in Luke 20, verses 17-18. He looked directly at them and said, What then is this that is written?

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. As James Bajon notes, in the rabbinic discussion of this text, they noted the Jews' typical rejection of the chosen leaders that were sent to them.

This is similar to the message of Stephen in chapter 7 of this book. Jesus of Nazareth, then, is the promised Messiah, and the Jewish leaders' rejection of him made them profoundly culpable.

While the lame man may have been healed or saved from his crippled condition, Peter wants to make clear that the principle extends much further. Jesus is not just one power among many others, perhaps a patron saint-type figure that people can pray to in a tight spot.

No, there is no salvation in anyone else. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. This salvation is not just physical healing. It also includes deliverance from sin, reconciliation to God, forgiveness of our sins.

[7 : 31] Christ is not just the Saviour of Israel. He is appointed as the universal Saviour. There is no other name under heaven given among men. Wherever you are, whoever you are, Jesus is unique.

He is the only source of salvation. The boldness of Peter and John is absolutely astonishing. Only a couple of months ago or so, the same man that's speaking with such boldness here was denying

Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest to a servant girl.

Now he is boldly proclaiming the authority of Christ to all of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. It is also clear to the authorities that Peter and John are not trained members of the scribal class.

They are not philosophers, nor do they have extensive rhetorical training. While they may know the Hebrew scriptures, perhaps even being able to read them for themselves, they are not acquainted with all the different interpretations and readings of these things.

They are lay people, they don't have the formal education that the religious leaders themselves would have. It becomes apparent to the leaders that they have been with Jesus. When he had reasoned with them from the scriptures, Jesus had completely outwitted the leaders of the people.

[8 : 33] Obviously, these men had learned from their master. When we consider that the apostles had spent three years travelling with Christ, living with him, learning from him, and hearing him speak to many different crowds, we should not be surprised at the depth of knowledge and insight into the scriptures and God's truth that they exhibit.

And even after the resurrection, Jesus had spent much of the 40 days teaching them concerning the kingdom of God. While they may not have had a formal education, Peter and John had had extensive training, and even more intensive than the rest of the twelve.

The leaders now face a quandary, and they deliberate among themselves concerning what to do. It's very clear that a great sign has been performed. God's power has been manifested in the raising of this lame man.

But yet, this miracle had been performed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, a man whom they considered to be a false messiah and had put to death. Seeking to avoid the message spreading further among the people, they instruct Peter and John not to speak or teach any more in the name of Jesus.

But Peter and John cannot accept the condition of silence. Craig Keener notes the parallels between this and Plato's description of Socrates' response to the leaders of Athens.

[9 : 43] Socrates, threatened with death, yet given the possibility of release if he remained silent, responded in a respectful but firm way. If you should let me go on this condition which I have mentioned, I should say to you, Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the God rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up the philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth to any one of you whom I may meet.

It is quite likely that Luke wants us to see the parallel. If Socrates was the gadfly of Athens, then Peter and John and the rest of the apostles are the gadflies of Jerusalem. Peter and John's response invites the leaders to consider the situation from their perspective.

If God has charged them with this message, to whose words should they give priority? The leaders of the people or God himself? The New Testament puts a strong emphasis upon submission to and honouring of authorities, even authorities that are unjust.

The apostles do not go out of their way to provoke confrontation. Confrontations follow them wherever they go, but the confrontations are caused by other people's violence and injustice, not by their own behaviour.

They will speak truthfully to rulers, in a prophetic way, but they do not willfully undermine or reject them. Even here, in the case of the council that sent their master to his death, this general posture of honour, submission and respect gives their resistance on these particular points so much more force.

[11 : 12] These are not the words of rebellious men, but men who are seeking to be obedient and are respectfully speaking to the council in a way that encourages them to look at the situation differently. James Bajon notes that in Peter and John's response to the questioning, we see expressions that are typical of both Peter and John, doing what is right in the sight of God or the description of Jesus as a living stone.

These are Petrine statements that we find in the first epistle of Peter. On the other hand, the expression what we have seen and heard has a Johannine signature to it. All of this seems to give some weight to the authenticity of these words.

All of this leaves the council in a bit of a bind. The crowd is praising God for this incredible miracle and they do not seem to have strong grounds on which to punish Peter and John. So strictly warning them, they send them away.

Peter and John return to the other disciples and they join together in prayer to God. This prayer is of great importance in this chapter. The whole mission of the apostles is driven by prayer.

They are acting in the name of Christ as those who are continually seeking God's face. The ministry of the church begins with constant prayer in the temple, awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit and then the response to the gift of the Holy Spirit is constant prayer in the temple again.

[12 : 28] Peter and John had been going to the temple to pray in chapter 3 and now again in chapter 4 they are returning to prayer. Prayer is the engine of the church's mission. Verses 24 to 28 with which the prayer begins is a glorious statement of God's power in creation and providence.

God created all things and he rules over all things. He is truly the sovereign Lord. They quote Psalm 2. The nations of the world are being gathered together against the Davidic king and against God. The Gentiles are raging, the people are plotting, the kings and the rulers are gathering and scheming. Indeed, this is precisely what had happened in that very city. They had gathered together against God's holy servant, Jesus, the servant, the one that was promised in the prophets.

Although he was the anointed one, the leaders of the Gentiles and the leaders of God's people thought that they could withstand him and the glorious irony of the whole situation was that they assembled together precisely in order to do what God had intended that they should do.

Even as they sought to resist the Lord, they were merely performing his will and intent. The king's heart is in the hands of the Lord. He can move it whatever way he wants. They might have meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

[13 : 39] Peter, of course, had made similar statements on the day of Pentecost. Jesus of Nazareth, the man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know.

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. The juxtaposition of human action and divine purpose has never been so stark.

The apostles call upon the Lord not for relief from opposition and persecution, but for boldness to face it. Their task is to speak with this confidence, this faith in the power of the Lord, and the Lord will act, stretching out his hand to heal and bringing about signs and wonders through the name of Jesus Christ.

There is an immediate response to their prayer. It is a sort of aftershock of Pentecost itself. The place they're gathered in is shaken and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Going forth, they continue to speak the word of God and they do so with boldness.

A question to consider. There is a very strong presentation of God's power and sovereignty in human affairs in this chapter, even over the actions of his enemies, even over those most wicked actions involved in the crucifixion of his son.

[14 : 55] How can an understanding of divine providence and sovereignty in events in history help us to act with the sort of confidence that the apostles show here?■■■■■■■■■■