

The Reaction: Persecution, and unity - Acts 4

Peter and John have been involved in the healing of a lame man, not only healing him but also preaching the gospel.

Many who heard the message believed; so, the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand. What an amazing reaction to the gospel being preached through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The actions and proclamation by Peter and John upset the rulers and elders of the people, so much so that they had them arrested and put in jail to stop them speaking to others. Instead of being upset you would have thought they would have been pleased that there was one less beggar on the streets. Instead of praise and gratitude came persecution and imprisonment. Here we see the clashing of a number of opposed forces: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the teachers and the disciples.

The Pharisees taught and practiced the oral traditions. They were the chief instigators of the crucifixion of Jesus. His constant violating of their traditions that caused them to decide that He must be put to death.

The Sadducees denied the supernatural, they affirmed the freedom of human will, and they held in contempt the teaching of the Pharisees. They did not believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection. They were the modernists of the day, the rationalists. They had a natural explanation for every miracle of the Old Testament

The disciples, in this case Peter and John, believed in the reality of unseen things, they proclaimed that Jesus is alive and with them, though now unseen by the world.

The focus of their aggravation was the fact that these two men, Peter and John were preaching a message different to the accepted beliefs of the Jews.

The Jews taught a works salvation; the Disciples were preaching salvation by grace. These are such polar opposites, that for someone who believes that salvation comes through works, to even think there is salvation through free grace in Christ is extremely offensive.

Not only were they teaching that salvation is only through Jesus but they were also teaching about the resurrection, something the Sadducees adamantly opposed.

If that difference was not bad enough, they considered that Peter and John were unlearned and ignorant men.

They were far from unlearned and ignorant. They had spent three years of personal mentoring by the creator of heaven and earth and the author of the scriptures.

Their knowledge of the scriptures would have been far above any of the Scribes or Pharisees of that day. They had not only spent time with Jesus but they know he is with them now.

Matthew 28 v 18 to 20

Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

Peter and John were carrying out the commission that they had been given by Jesus before he ascended into heaven. The same one that is given to us today.

Even when faced by all this opposition, resistance and persecution they had a boldness to proclaim the gospel to their accusers.

This boldness, as is mentioned in this passage, came from being filled with the Holy Spirit. If someone is walking in the power of the Spirit, they will be bold proclaimers of the Gospel. The boldness also came from them being with the risen Lord. They saw Him die and were with Him for forty days after the resurrection, teaching them everything they would need to know.

When faced with the boldness of Peter and John and the acceptance and praise from the people for the healing of the lame man, they decide to let them go with a warning.

They may have thought that they had the last word but I find Peter and John's response amazing.

Acts 4 v 19 to 20

But Peter and John replied, 'Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to Him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'

After their release they went back to the fellow believers, who I am sure had been praying for Peter and John after they were arrested, as they were now on trial before the same court that sent Jesus to Pilate for crucifixion.

On seeing their brothers back amongst them, there could be no other response than to praise God for their release and for the opportunity they had to share the gospel with their accusers. They prayed in unity. There was no conflict amongst them on what they should pray. There wasn't one group saying, "We should pray for this" and another saying, "we should pray for that." They had the same mind when they prayed.

Not only do they pray in unity but they pray truth from the scriptures, not only the truth of God's promises, but also for more boldness to proclaim the gospel.

How often do we quote scripture when we pray? For me quite often, a scripture I often use is Paul's prayer to the Ephesians in Chapter 3. Especially the end part:

Ephesians 3 v 20

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us

There is a danger when we pray that God will answer and do as we ask. They prayed in unity for boldness and God answered by sending the Spirit to fill them again, to enable them to speak for him with boldness.

Their unity was also shown in the possessions they had. They recognised that everything they had belonged to God; it all belonged to Him and His people. Because God had touched their lives so deeply, they found it easy to share all things in common.

What is the application for us today? We live in a world where secular values are not our values, there are of course some that the world would agree with but an awful lot that they do not.

Wherever there is a conflict of opinion there will always be some form of persecution. Over the last few years there have been a number in the news:

A Christian BA cabin crew member who was disciplined for wearing a cross, nurses who were dismissed for praying for patients, although interestingly doctors and nurses are praying before their shifts during this crisis.

Wherever Christians stand up for and speak about their beliefs there will be some form of persecution. When persecution comes, we need ensure that we are filled with the Spirit, it is he that will help us through it and stand firm.

We should not underestimate the power of support and unity that is in our fellowships. Their prayers, encouragement and support will see us through a crisis. We need to continually give thanks to God for one another.

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