

A Question of Authority Acts 4:1-31

Introduction

When we left off last week, Peter had just given his second recorded sermon

He and John were going into the temple for the afternoon prayers when they were asked for alms by a man who had been born lame

Having no money to give him Peter instead gave him much more as he commanded him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!"

And the man who had never taken a step in his entire life immediately rose and began to walk about

He was completely healed and he went into the temple for the first time ever leaping and giving praise to God

Of course, this caught the attention of the crowd at the temple and they followed the trio to Solomon's Portico where Peter spoke to the people

Peter was bold as he presented Jesus as the Messiah and told his audience of their guilt for having denied him and for turning him over for crucifixion

Then he clearly showed them how they could be forgiven if only they would repent

Peter has always been brash, loud, and somewhat impetuous but in his sermons he is exhibiting a new level of boldness and insight as he addresses large crowds with messages that hit their target

He is speaking with a level of authority that comes from the filling of the Holy Spirit and the assurance that he is speaking with the authority of Jesus

This morning we are going to pick up the account in Acts 4 as we look at verses 1-31

First, we will see the results of Peter's sermon both among the Jewish leaders and the people at large

Then, we will see that Peter and John are put on trial and **then** how the church responded to all of this

And we will see that authority plays a large role in the events that follow Peter's second sermon

I. The Results of Peter's Sermon

First we will see the results of Peter's sermon on the Jewish leaders and then how it affected the people in his audience

A. The Jewish Leaders

In **verses 1-3** we see how the Jewish leaders reacted to Peter's message

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

Apparently Peter and John remained talking with the crowd for some time after Peter's sermon because it appears to have been quite brief - at least as Luke recorded it

We know that they went to the temple for the 3pm prayers and in **verse 3** we are told that it was already evening so it would seem that at least an hour or two had passed

A "day" to the Jews was considered to be the hours between 6am and 6pm so they must have been at least nearing the 6pm hour at which time all official work was supposed to cease according to law

So Peter and John are talking with the people when suddenly the leaders come rushing toward them in a dramatic fashion because they were ticked off

Our text says they were “greatly annoyed” which means they were thoroughly irked and worked up
It wasn't a casual or friendly approach but a swooping down on them with intention

And we see that the reason for their annoyance was “because [Peter and John] were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead”

Knowing who these leaders were should help us understand why the teaching of the apostles bothered them so

In the list we see they were rushed by “the **priests** and the **captain of the temple** and the **Sadducees**”

The **priests** would have been the temple priests who were serving in the temple on that day

They had been going about their duties when many of the people suddenly flocked out to Solomon's Portico to listen to Peter and John –

The priestly duties were assigned by lot and it was a really big day when a priest finally got the opportunity to serve so it's kind of understandable that they would be bothered by the distraction

The **captain of the temple** was the man in charge of the temple guard responsible for keeping order in the temple

He would have been one of the priests and was second in command to the High Priest

It's perfectly understandable why he would have been involved with this scenario which would have been viewed as at least a disturbance if not an outright insurrection

The **Sadducees** though are the most interesting of the leaders and they play a very large part in this account

The Sadducees were predominantly laymen from the wealthy, aristocratic families of the day

Many of the priests and even the high priests were from among the Sadducees

The Sadducees were the political, ruling class within Judaism and they ingratiated themselves to Rome
As landowners they certainly didn't want anything to cause the ire of their Roman masters so they did all that they could to suppress any form of uprising or subversive teaching

We see this clearly in **John 11:47-48** when they were plotting against Jesus

So the chief priests (which were Sadducees) and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 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.”

The Sadducees were more interested in power and position than they were about religious purity

They also only followed the written Torah which are the first five books written by Moses

They would have likely considered themselves to be very traditional in their doctrinal stance

As such, they denied the resurrection of the dead and any idea of spiritual beings such as angels because those things are not found in the Torah

Since they were the elite and powerful they thought they had the natural right to decide who was qualified to teach and what was proper to be taught

So they viewed the apostles as upstarts as they were unauthorized by them to teach

And they viewed them as heretics because they dared to teach about the resurrection

It's really no wonder that they rushed up to the apostles with great annoyance as they did. Since it was nearing evening and it was against Jewish law to have a trial at night, they had the captain of the temple guard arrest Peter and John and put them in jail until the following day.

B. The People

That was the reaction of the Jewish leaders.

But notice how the people in the crowd reacted in **verse 4**.

But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

The resistance of the leaders didn't stop the gospel.

Those who heard the gospel message were convicted of their sins and they responded with repentance and recognition of Jesus as Messiah to the point of acceptance of him not only as Savior but as Lord.

And we're told that the numbers of those who accepted the message of repentance continued to grow. Previously we saw the numbers of believers to be around 3,000 in total and now the number of men alone was "about five thousand" meaning that the total number was likely double when the women and children were added in.

Peter's sermons and the teaching of the apostles were having the desired effect and the Holy Spirit was working in a mighty way through them in the hearts of the people.

But the religious leaders were a different matter as they resisted the message.

II. The Trial of Peter and John

I can only imagine what Peter and John must have been thinking and feeling as they sat in jail
It had to have been a very long night for them as they waited for morning to come
When morning came they were brought from the jail to stand trial

A. The Inquisitors

In **verses 5-6** we are introduced to their inquisitors

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.

What is described in these verses is a meeting of the **Sanhedrin** which was the highest legislative and judicial body in Israel

The fact that such an esteemed body was convened to adjudicate this matter shows just how seriously the Jewish leaders were taking it

The Sanhedrin was made up of 71 members and as our list in verse 5 says it consisted of:

- **Rulers** – who would have been the temple officials many of whom were Sadducees
- **Elders** – the family heads of the various tribes again many of these would have been Sadducees
- **Scribes** – who were the copiers, scholars, and professional teachers of the law
- Then there were the four named members of the high-priestly family (also Sadducees)

Annas is here described by Luke as the high priest which shows that he was the de facto leader of the group even though he had actually been deposed from the position of high priest by the Romans
Caiaphas was his son and in reality the high priest at this time - although he apparently was controlled by his father - and we don't know anything at all about **John** or **Alexander**

So as you can see the court was stacked with Sadducees and most, if not all, of these men would have also been the ones who sat in judgment of Jesus not so many weeks earlier - it was a rigged court

It would have been a very intimidating scene as these 71 men sat in concentric semi-circles and put Peter and John in front of them

The memory of how Jesus had stood before this same body must have been in the forefront of the apostles' minds and I would imagine they had to be wondering if their fate was going to be the same as his

B. Their Question

Then the Sanhedrin asked the question:

“By what power or by what name did you do this?”

Of course the “this” they asked about was the healing of the lame beggar and in the question we see the issue of authority rear its ugly head

Jesus was asked the same question when he was teaching and preaching in the temple in **Luke 20:1-2**

One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.”

The question asked of Peter and John was really the same question asked of Jesus and we see the real issue that concerned the Sanhedrin was the issue of authority

But we miss an element of the question in our English translation that is present in the Greek. The question asked of the apostles dripped with contempt as the word “you” is the last word of the Greek sentence showing that the Sanhedrin was also asking, “Who do you think you are?”

Remember, these were the aristocrats of Jewish society and they were facing down a couple of lowly fishermen who had no formal training in the law and who they held in contempt.

The attitude of the Sanhedrin was wrong but we need to acknowledge that they were right in seeking to determine the source of the apostles' power.

In **Deuteronomy 13:1-5** we see that the Israelites were to judge miracles such as Peter and John had done.

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

This was one of the tests of a false prophet because Satan can work miracles too.

So the question of the Sanhedrin was a litmus test.

Had the apostles answered wrongly they could have found themselves on the wrong end of a death sentence.

The question was also an attempt to try to find something to discredit the apostles.

The Sanhedrin had no clear case against them so they were probing to see if the apostles would slip up and give them a reason to punish them.

C. Peter’s Response

Then in **verses 8-12** we see Peter’s response.

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.”

Notice first off that Peter answered by the Holy Spirit.

He had to be intimidated and more than a little fearful but the Holy Spirit filled him and gave him power and the words with which to answer.

Just as Jesus had said would happen in **Luke 12:11-12**

“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, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

Now, standing before the Sanhedrin, the Holy Spirit put the right words in Peter’s mouth in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise

And Peter begins with a subtle dig at the Sanhedrin by proposing that he and John were actually on trial here for doing a good deed

The Sanhedrin had referred to the matter as “this” without actually saying what “this” was

So Peter took advantage of that vagueness and said it was “concerning a good deed”

And he further expanded upon that theme to say that the crippled man had “been healed”

We could easily miss the fact that Peter is using a bit of double speak in using the word “healed”

Because the word he uses here can mean the removal of a physical infirmity that had obviously been realized or it can also mean the removal of the penalty of spiritual death – or salvation

Both meanings are present in the Greek word and it is used both ways in various places in the New Testament and Peter likely intends to imply both meanings as we’ll see here in just a few minutes

Peter goes on to say that if this good deed of healing is the concern of the question then it was done “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth”

This had to have been like a slap in the face to the members of the Sanhedrin

They had just gotten rid of Jesus and now here this upstart is saying that they were doing miracles in his name

Then, just as he had with his previous audiences, Peter hit them with the fact of their guilt in killing Jesus and contrasted their treatment of him with that of God who raised him from the dead

And he supports his contention once more with Scripture as he goes back to **Psalms 118:22** to show that the actions of the leaders had been a fulfillment of prophecy – that their rejection of Jesus and God’s resurrection of him had authenticated his Messiahship and authority

Peter then brings his argument full circle back to the healing of the crippled man

In **verse 12** he says

“There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”

The word translated as “saved” here is the same word translated “healed” in verse 9

That’s why I think Peter meant both physical healing and spiritual healing – both are clearly in view in this passage

Peter’s use of the double negative terms “no one else” and “no other name” serves to emphasize the exclusive nature of salvation

Spiritual healing comes from no other source and one must call upon the name of Jesus to be saved

This is an extremely unpopular position to take in our pluralistic culture but it is nonetheless true

And it’s the fact of Jesus’ resurrection that makes both the healing and the salvation possible

D. The Dilemma

The Sanhedrin opened the door with their question and Peter strode through it like a boss
To say that he rocked them back on their heels would be an understatement

Look with me at **verses 13-14**

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.

Two things combined to leave the Sanhedrin speechless

First, Peter and John should have been intimidated but they stood before them boldly

Not only that, but Peter had turned the tables on them

An uneducated fisherman from Galilee had stood toe-to-toe with them and delivered a body blow
By the power of the Holy Spirit Peter had proven the resurrection of Jesus and showed how it was God's eternal plan and now the Sanhedrin found themselves on the defensive instead of the attack

As they sat there stunned it began to dawn on the religious leaders that Peter and John had been followers of Jesus

They likely remembered how Jesus had handled the Scriptures with uncanny mastery despite having no formal training and how he had authenticated his teaching with miracles

And now here were his followers doing exactly the same things

Second, there was the formerly crippled man who was standing before them completely healed

What could they possibly say about that bit of evidence?

It was public and it was undeniable - everyone could see the evidence with their own eyes

The Sanhedrin found themselves facing a serious dilemma

E. The Deliberation

So they ordered Peter and John to leave the council and they deliberated their options

Look with me at **verse 16** –

“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.”

The miracle of healing couldn't be denied or covered up – too many people knew about it

They couldn't punish the apostles for a good deed – they were heroes in the eyes of the public

They couldn't allow them to continue unabated – that would mean agreeing with them

They had no evidence to counter the claim of the resurrection – it's notable that they didn't even try

The political climate was against them and they feared the people

One would have to figure Rome would also be against them

After all, Pilate had already wanted to free Jesus finding no fault in him

No way were they going to tolerate the religious leaders coming back to them seeking to punish his followers

Scripture was also against them even as they convinced themselves otherwise

Remember, they would not have given credence to the Psalms as they weren't part of the Torah but the people at large would have and the obvious fulfillment of prophecy was problematic

F. The Decision

There was only one option that they could see and so they called the apostles back and rendered their decision

Verses 17- 18 read –

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.

The Sanhedrin was powerless to do anything to the apostles

All they could do was to try to silence them so they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus

We see the same thing in many countries today which have laws against proselytizing
And we see it more and more here in the United States as various groups are trying to silence the gospel in different places

It was a weak response by the Sanhedrin and it’s a weak tactic today

Silencing one’s opponents is an act of desperation resorted to when argument and reason fail to convince and is a tactic we see employed more and more often today

G. Peter and John’s Response

If the Sanhedrin had any idea that they could silence the church they were mistaken

The apostles’ response blew away any idea that they might actually comply with the order

Look at **verses 19-20** –

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.”

Peter and John phrased their response in such a way that even the Sanhedrin would be forced to admit that they were correct – that it is better to listen to God than to man

Nothing is going to change and the apostles don’t even pretend otherwise

They are dedicated to their cause even in the face of strong opposition and when principle meets an opportunity to compromise this should be the result

The Sanhedrin really had no recourse because they were more interested in politics than religion and they could see that the people were against them

So, finding themselves at a judicial and political disadvantage they threatened Peter and John some more and sent them on their way

III. The Response of the Church

Upon being released Peter and John returned immediately to their friends and reported to them what had transpired

A. They Prayed

In **verses 24-30** we see that the first thing the church did was lift their voices in corporate prayer. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven 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 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, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 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."

They Addressed God as Sovereign

Notice how they addressed God in their prayer

They addressed him as "Sovereign Lord" meaning that he had all things in his control

They addressed him as God of creation – who made all things

They addressed him as God of revelation as he caused the prophets to foretell the future

They addressed him as God of history as he saw to it that his purposes were fulfilled

All of these attributes of God speak to his ultimate authority and power

They Asked God to Acknowledge Threats

Then in **verse 29** they asked God to acknowledge the threats against them

But notice that they didn't ask God to intervene to protect them

They didn't ask God to remove the threats

They simply asked God to notice that they had been threatened

They Asked for Increased Boldness to Speak

Instead of asking God to remove the threats they asked for increased boldness to speak in spite of the threats

Actually, they asked for "all" boldness to speak God's Word

They Asked for Validating Miracles

And they asked for God's stamp of approval on their message through validating miracles

In reality they expressed this not so much as a request but as an assured expectation that as long as they were faithful to speak forth God's Word he would validate their words by doing miracles in the name of Jesus through them

So in their prayer they were recognizing God's authority and asking him to exercise that authority in the world through them as his willing instruments

B. They Persevered

Lastly, we read in verse 31 that they persevered

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.

And God responded in a dramatic way

Much as he had when he sent the Holy Spirit to the believers he now shook the place where they were gathered and all were filled with the Holy Spirit

This was not another baptism of the Holy Spirit for that only happens once

All believers are indwelt with the baptism of the Holy Spirit at the moment of their salvation

But the filling of the Holy Spirit is an empowerment for a purpose and all the early believers were given the power to speak boldly as Peter and John had

The Sanhedrin hoped to stop the spread of the gospel

But now the mission had clearly gained momentum not just in spite of but actually as a result of their opposition

The Sanhedrin had shown their lack of effective authority to stop the spread of the gospel

And the church would continue to grow from this point forward at such a rate that the number of people being saved is not mentioned again in the book of Acts - there were too many to count!

The Sanhedrin was the highest civil authority so the command to silence coming as it did from the Sanhedrin had the force of law

Yet their command to cease to speak in the name of Jesus was ungodly and improper so the response of the church is instructive to us as we are faced with similar circumstances

The early church were realists and they clearly recognized that obedience to Christ would be costly They knew that from this point on to speak and preach in the name of Jesus would be to violate the law and would likely result in punishment at some point

And yet there was no appeal for vengeance – they submitted to the authority of the Sanhedrin even as they stated that they would not obey

Neither was there a request for safety because their concern was for their mission and not their protection –

Neither did they say they would go along and then do otherwise - they were direct and honest in their dealings and left the consequences to God

So they prayed for boldness in the face of opposition and determined to keep on with the mission

They knew that God was sovereign even over the Sanhedrin and his will could not be thwarted

And they were content to rely on that truth

As we continue through the book of Acts we will see that even as submission to authority often includes obedience to that authority obedience and submission are really different concepts and one need not *necessarily* obey in order to show submission

Conclusion

The early church faced trials and opposition with boldness

The church needs this kind of attitude today

Believers today must be more about boldness in proclaiming God's truth than our own comfort and protection

And we can look to the example of the early church to guide us

How were they able to be bold?

First, they were filled with the Holy Spirit

We need to be seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit

The natural question would be to ask How? How is one filled with the Holy Spirit?

Turn in your Bibles with me to **Ephesians 5:18**

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit

I don't believe it's an accident that Paul used this analogy in this way so let's consider it together

First, "How does a person get drunk with wine?"

By drinking it, Right?

When you drink enough wine you become full of wine which means the wine takes over control of you
Anyone who has been around a person who is drunk knows just how fully the alcohol takes control of them

Their speech becomes slurred, their thinking becomes blurred, they often wobble and fall down, etc.

So, if a person becomes susceptible to being drunk, or filled, with wine by consuming it wouldn't it follow that one becomes susceptible to being filled with the Spirit by consuming the Spirit and allowing him to take control of our lives

We allow the Holy Spirit to take control of our lives by being in and under God's Word and thinking God's thoughts

Through prayer and from being amongst God's people

And by turning away from self, from pride and self-sufficiency

In doing these things we empty ourselves and open ourselves up to being filled with the Holy Spirit

And then we find that this is a continual process where we must seek the filling of the Holy Spirit again and again because we are permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit but he fills us and gives us power for ministry over and over again

Second, the early church recognized God's sovereignty in past events and how he fulfilled prophecy through even the evil deeds of men

They recognized that they could trust God to do the things he said he would do through them because of his past faithfulness

We too need to look to the Scriptures and remind ourselves of God's past faithfulness as we seek to be bold in carrying out Christ's mission today

Lastly, they relied on Jesus' authority

In Matthew 28:18 Jesus had told them that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him

And he gave them what we know as the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all people

So when they continued on with the mission that Jesus began on the earth they did so in his name and with his power because his name carried all authority

And based on God's sovereignty, his demonstrated faithfulness, and his authority they could be bold in carrying out the work that Jesus had given them to do

And the same is true for us today

Nothing has changed as far as God is concerned

We can experience the same boldness as the early church as we carry on with the mission

We need to continually be praying for boldness and the filling of the Holy Spirit as we rely on the truths we see from Scripture and the imputed authority of Jesus Christ

Next week our passage will be Acts 4:32-5:11 and how, having failed to hinder the church from without, Satan tries to attack the church from within

Let's pray