

Facing Opposition

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[0 : 00] Well, do pick up your Bibles and turn to Acts chapter 4, and we're continuing on where Paul left off this morning, and looking at the rest of Acts chapter 4 today. I think it's page 912, if you have one of the blue visitor's Bibles.

This morning, Paul was leading us through chapter 3, and down to the first paragraph there of chapter 4. We'll begin taking it up again at verse 5 of chapter 4, down to the end of the section, which is at verse 31.

On the next day, that is the day after the events of chapter 3 and the apostles' preaching, on the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes gathered 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'd set them in the midst, that is the apostles, 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're 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.

[2 : 03] 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 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. 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's 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'd further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people.

[3 : 13] For all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than 40 years old. When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, Sovereign Lord, who made it heaven and 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 people's 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.

And when they 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.

[4 : 45] Amen. And may God bless us his word. Good.

Well, please do turn back to Acts chapter 4. And it's a warm evening, isn't it? But this is a 25-minuter, so stick with me.

It's warm, but keep going. So Acts chapter 4. Now, as Willie said as he was reading, we pick up the story that began in chapter 3 of the lame man who was healed.

And what we see here in chapter 4 is the response to that extraordinary restoration that we were listening to this morning and Peter's explanation of it. Some, we see there in chapter 4, verse 4, some heard the word and believed.

But that is only part of the story. In the first couple of verses of chapter 4, we see real hostility, real opposition to Peter and John. The religious authorities, the leaders, were greatly annoyed because Peter was proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

[6 : 04] And so we see there in chapter 4, verses 1, 2, and 3 that they arrested them. They put them in custody until the next day because it was already the evening. And this is where our passage picks up the story.

We see the hostility, the questioning, the attempts to silence. And we see the response from Peter and John and from the wider Christian community.

This is a passage all about the opposition that is inevitable when the gospel is proclaimed. And that opposition is inevitable. Opposition to hostility towards the gospel message and to those who proclaim it and to the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

That is inevitable. But why? Why is that so? Well, consider the message that the apostles proclaim, that we proclaim to this day.

It is a message that announces Jesus' lordship over the whole cosmos. It is a message that declares the defeat of Satan. It is a message that implicates all of us.

[7 : 14] All have fallen short of the glory of God. All of us by our nature are sinners deserving of God's wrath. It is a message that announces salvation only in Jesus' name.

We saw that this morning. We see it again in this passage. Only in Jesus' name. It is a message that anticipates a great, a full and final restoration of all things that will take place when Christ's return.

When he will be judge of all. And that is a message that is deeply controversial. It is offensive to many. It is a message that provokes deep hostility not least from Satan and all those under his influence.

And what we read about here in Acts, not just in chapter 4, but again and again through the accounts, what we know in church history, what still goes on today, it is inevitable, this opposition. opposition to the gospel message, opposition to those who proclaim it, that is inevitable, that's clear.

[8 : 26] And so Luke includes this chapter not just to establish the reality of hostility to the gospel, to real faith, but also to instruct us how to respond in the face of such opposition.

opposition. So then, two questions to which our passage provides answers. One, in the face of opposition, what do we profess?

And then secondly, in the face of opposition, what do we pray? So looking firstly at verses 5 to 22, in the face of opposition, what do we profess?

Look down there, verse 5, the council gather together. This is the same council that tried Jesus, it's the same council that later in Acts tries both Stephen, chapter 7, and Paul, in chapter 23.

And this council, they bring together Peter and John before them, and they put the key question to them. By what power, or by what name, did you do this?

[9 : 30] That is, the healing of the lame man. And Peter, filled with the Spirit, speaks. And he's clear. This lame man, he was healed by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

And everyone knew about Jesus, they knew who he was, but Peter spells out exactly who he is, and the implications of that. This is the same Jesus that you crucified.

He died, and you are responsible for that. but God raised him from the dead. He is now alive. He reigns at this very moment at the Father's right hand, and he is coming back one day to judge all.

And Peter quotes from their own scriptures, from Psalm 118, this Jesus is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.

Jesus, the man from Nazareth who they crucified, he was the Lord's anointed. He was the one they were waiting for. But when he came, they rejected him.

[10:40] They killed him. What a terrible mistake. The one they rejected, he is now the cornerstone, the very key in God's plans for all of history.

You see, this Jesus, he is the one in whom salvation is to be found. And because he is the cornerstone, because of who he is, he is the only place where salvation is to be found.

Peter's emphatic, isn't he? There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. He is the only one. It is only in Jesus, only in his name, is salvation to be found.

That is what Peter professes. And that is what you and I must profess today, only in Jesus. And that is a profession that will ruffle feathers.

It will provoke opposition, even outright hostility, and particularly in our age a so-called tolerance. And we've seen that so clearly, haven't we, in recent days and weeks Willie was praying about it.

[11:48] Tim Farron, hounded for his orthodox Christian views. Now sadly, he capitulated some weeks ago when questioned on human sexuality in particular, homosexuality in particular.

But wasn't it encouraging to see him this week testifying to the Lord Jesus Christ? Christ. But the fact is, Christianity is essentially an intolerant religion.

It stands alone. It will have no rivals. It makes absolute claims on men's loyalty, on men's soul. It is the only way, the only ground of salvation.

There is no other name under heaven under which men might be saved, only in Jesus. and that provokes hostility. Now the response of the council to what Peter says, to what they've witnessed with the healing of the lame man is extraordinary.

Cast your eyes from verse 13 to see how they respond. They were, middle of verse 13, astonished when they heard what Peter had to say. And they had, end of verse 14, nothing to say in opposition.

[13:02] They could not deny, verse 16, that a notable sign had been performed. It was evidence to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

We cannot deny it, they said. It's extraordinary. Despite all that evidence, despite their own conclusions, despite what all the people in Jerusalem knew, despite all that, they still oppose Peter and John.

they oppose their message, they oppose the Lord Jesus. Their response is a flat denial of reality, of what is plain and obvious, but it's been seen in front of their eyes.

They saw this man, Jesus, they saw his death. All that testimony to his resurrection, what they've just seen with this man being healed, what Peter has said. It's plain and obvious.

So why do they stick their heads in the sand? Why do they refuse to see what is obvious? Well, for them to accept what Peter said is true, that would turn their world upside down.

[14:13] They would lose power, prestige. They would lose control of the destiny of their own lives. They refuse what is plain and obvious.

But that is the nature of hostility to God, to his son, to his people, to those who proclaim that message. By nature, men will not have Jesus as Lord.

They will not have him as the only source of salvation, the only source of reality. Men will not have it. And don't you and I, by nature, want to walk away from that, to have him in charge?

It's man's nature. Well, we've asked the question, in the face of opposition, what do we profess?

And we've seen that what we profess by the help of the Spirit within us is the lordship of Jesus and salvation only in his name.

That was Peter's message. And that message is unchanged. We are to proclaim the very same. The lordship of Jesus over all. Salvation in him alone.

[15:32] Two particular applications. One, it's encouraging, isn't it, to see Peter's boldness in the face of such fierce, intimidating hostility. It's encouraging. It should encourage you and me as I read that.

And don't you find it encouraging when you hear a story about someone in difficult circumstances, when they take a stand, when they hold firm to the lord Jesus. It's encouraging.

Again, Tim Farron taking his stand this week. That greatly encouraged me and I know it encouraged many others as well. And if you didn't hear his speech, let me read to you the conclusion that most of the news outlets managed to cut out.

He said this, to be a political leader, especially of a progressive liberal party in 2017 and to live as a committed Christian to hold faithfully to the Bible's teaching has felt impossible for me.

I joined our party when I was 16. It is in my blood. I love our history, our people. I thoroughly love my party.

[16:36] Imagine how proud I am to lead this party. And then imagine what would lead me to voluntarily relinquish that honor. In the words of Isaac Watts, it would have to be something so amazing, so divine, it demands my heart, my life, my all.

That's encouraging, isn't it? And we ought to be encouraged, not just by folk like Tim Farron, who pledged their allegiance publicly, to the Lord Jesus.

But also that Peter here, enabled and equipped by the Spirit, should stand and speak as he does. That very same Spirit is within every true believer.

God's Spirit is within you, enabling you, equipping you to stand, to testify to the Lord Jesus. But not only is it an encouragement to see Peter doing that, it is also an example to follow.

And so when you and I are perhaps in that situation where we're being opposed, we feel the hostility, perhaps in a conversation, maybe in the office, maybe it's with the authorities of some sort.

[17:52] we are to follow Peter's example. We are to speak. And we are to speak about Jesus. We are to say the politically incorrect.

Because it is politically incorrect. You just have to read all the stuff that's been written in the last weeks. What we are saying is deeply politically incorrect. incorrect. We are to deny the many secular gods and affirm the lordship of Jesus over all.

He is the Lord over all. And so in the face of opposition, we keep professing and how we need God's help for that task, which takes us to our second point.

In the face of opposition, what do we pray? verses 23 to 31. Peter and John are given the verbal roughing up.

They're dismissed without punishment because the leaders, look at verse 21, they were fearful of the people. They were scared of what the people thought. And so Peter and John return to their friends and they report all that has happened.

[19:03] And what is the response to all that's happened from Peter, from John, and the other believers? Well, we see here that they pray. Now perhaps a better question to ask than what they pray, although we will ask that in a moment, a better question to ask is why they pray.

And they pray because of who God is. He is the sovereign Lord. That's how they begin their prayer, isn't it? With that confession of the Lord's sovereignty, verse 24.

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. Yes, what had happened to Peter and John was distressing.

They had been threatened by the powers of the world, but they knew as they gathered together that this was not unusual. This is not unexpected. They understand what has been reported to them through the lens of the scriptures.

That's the first element of their prayer. They acknowledge his sovereignty. He is the God who made everything. But also that he is the sovereign speaking God who has revealed things about the nature of the world.

[20:15] Straightaway, they refer to Psalm 2, middle of verse 25. And this is the lens through which they understand the events that have been reported to them. Look what they pray.

Why did the Gentiles rage and the people's 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 have predestined to take place.

That is what they pray. They recognize that this opposition to the Lord, to his anointed and by implication to his people, that opposition is to be expected.

And even in the midst of all that, God is in control. He has predestined this. And so they pray with confidence. They pray because he is sovereign.

[21:25] I think Willie makes this point in his book on prayer. Would there be much point in praying if God wasn't sovereign? He is the sovereign Lord. He's in total control.

And so he is a Lord worth praying to. And what they pray is firmly in line with the fact of God's sovereignty. Their prayer is not particularly concerned about themselves but about God's work, about his great purposes in the world.

Look at the content of their petition from verse 29. Look at what they pray for. 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.

Uppermost in their prayer is the work of witnessing. It's the great task the Lord Jesus set before them back in chapter 1, verse 8.

That task of being his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. And their prayer is for boldness in the face of opposition.

[22 : 41] Boldness to keep speaking, to keep witnessing, to keep proclaiming. And we might find that staggering that this is what they pray for in the light of the threat that they faced.

They might so easily have become consumed by their fears and worries if it wasn't for their focus on the Lord's sovereignty. In the light of his sovereignty, his control over all events, the threats that they faced are seen in their true light.

The Lord is sovereign. He's allowed it. It's part of his plan. And so they pray with their minds firmly fixed on the task at hand.

The task to which all of us, all who are his, are called to. And the Lord answers that prayer. Look at the last verse of our passage.

It reports that they were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. In the face of opposition, what do we pray?

[23 : 48] Well, we pray to the sovereign God who is in control of all things. And we pray that, even in the face of hostility, we would keep speaking about Jesus.

And we pray for boldness and the continued professing of Jesus. We pray that God would help us to keep speaking. And that is a prayer he will answer.

And that is a prayer that we must pray as we gather on Wednesday evening. No matter what else is going on in the lives of our mission partners around the world, no matter what is going on in church life here, this is the central thing, especially in the face of opposition.

That is what we must pray for. Now, that is not to say we don't pray for other things. It's not to say we don't pray for safety, we don't pray for material needs, but this, this is primary.

To keep speaking about Jesus, that is primary. And that is a prayer I need to pray for myself, I'm sure you do too. When faith of opposition is the last thing I want to do, but God will answer this prayer.

[25 : 07] facing opposition, Acts chapter 4 teaches us what we are to profess. Salvation only in Jesus.

It teaches us what we're to pray. Continued speaking about Jesus with all boldness. A concluding implication.

salvation. It's tempting for us, I think, as individuals and as the church to play the victim card when we feel oppressed and opposed, when we feel the hostility of the world around us.

We can easily cast ourselves as the innocent victims and those who are opposing us as fierce persecutors. Now, of course, there is an element of truth in that, but nowhere in this passage do we get the sense that the believers throw up their arms and cry foul play.

No, they know God is sovereign. They know that opposition is real and inevitable and they refuse to play the victim card because behind playing the victim card is the idea that we shouldn't suffer at all, ever.

[26 : 19] And that is not a biblical concept. Quite the opposite. the Christian life is cross-shaped. The Christian life is cross-shaped.

I need to hear that. I've grown up in comfort and ease. The Christian life is cross-shaped. We need to hear that today.

The Christian faith in this country is considered dangerous. It is dangerous. The Christian life is cross-shaped.

And there's also a danger that as we labor ourselves as victims and the world out there as our persecutors, we set up a sort of us-and-them mentality. And that will seriously and inevitably impact our love for them and our task of evangelism.

rather, we are to pray for those who oppose us. We are to share the hope of the gospel with them. So we're not to become introverted and fearful. We're not to pay the victim.

[27 : 30] Rather, we are to trust the Lord because he is sovereign. Because he is in control. So when the opposition inevitably comes, as we hold out the truth of the gospel revealed in the scriptures, we keep on with the priorities of Acts chapter 4.

We pray and we profess. And the example of Peter here encourages us in that task and also gives us the pattern to follow as you and I, by the power of the Spirit at work within us, keep on speaking the word with boldness.

So let us pray now and ask the Lord to help us in that task. Our Father in heaven, you are the only God in your Son alone is salvation found.

We know that is a message that will bring opposition. We know it's not popular. So please help us. Please strengthen us by your Spirit to keep professing.

Help us for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.