

Facing Opposition

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[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon. Sorry to break into your conversations. It's good to see you all. And a warm welcome to the lunchtime service here at the Tron Church.

We are in the midst of a series in the start of the book of Acts, so we're going to read our passage for today. So we're in Acts chapter 4, and you'll find that, I think, on page 912.

And we're focusing on verses 5 to 31. We're picking up the story where we left it off last time. So chapter 3, you have that remarkable healing of the lame man.

And then you have Peter's explanation of that incredible restoration. And we saw the beginning last time of the responses to the healing and to Peter's words at the start of chapter 4.

So I'm going to pick it up from verse 1, and we'll read through to verse 31. And we're seeing here the response from those who heard and saw all that happened. So Acts chapter 4, and I'll read from verse 1.

[1 : 07] And as they, that is Peter and John, 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. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about 5,000. 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 their 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, 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.

[2 : 56] 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. 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 threatened them further, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened.

[4 : 12] 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 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 was gathered together against your holy servant, Jesus, whom you appointed, 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 are 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.

[5 : 46] Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Before we think about this together, let's pray for a moment. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Our Father, you are the sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

And you, the sovereign Lord, have spoken to us, revealed to us your promises and plans that we would know you, trust you, and love you.

So help us now to listen to what you say, to trust you, and to live lives of faithful obedience, even in the face of hostility, so that we would continue in your work that you've called us to, the work that you've called us to partner together in.

Help us to press on with that, for we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Well, we pick up the story here in Acts chapter 4, a story that began, as I said, in chapter 3 with the lame man who was healed.

[7 : 06] And what we see here in chapter 4 is the response to that extraordinary restoration and Peter's explanation of it. Some, look at 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 there, 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 of the dead. And so we read there that they were arrested, they were put in custody, until the next day because it was already evening.

And verse 5 picks up the story, our passage today. We see the hostility and the questioning, the attempts to silence. And we see also 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 opposition is inevitable.

[8 : 18] Opposition to, hostility toward the gospel message, to those who proclaim it, and to the Lord Jesus himself, is inevitable. Why is that?

Why is it inevitable? Well, consider the gospel message that these men are proclaiming, 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 us. For all have fallen short of the glory of God.

All of us are by nature sinners and deserving of God's wrath. It is a message that announces salvation only, only in Jesus' name.

It is a message that anticipates a great, full and final restoration of all things that will only take place when Jesus returns, when he will be judge of all.

[9 : 23] That is their gospel message and that is deeply controversial. It's offensive. It is a message that provokes deep hostility and not least from Satan and all those under his influence.

And so what we read about here in Acts, not just here in chapter 4 but again and again through the accounts of Acts, what we know about church history and what still goes on today, the opposition we read about and know about, it's inevitable.

Opposition to the gospel message and those who proclaim it is inevitable. That is clear. And so Luke includes this chapter not just to establish the reality of opposition, of hostility, that hostility to real faith but also to instruct us in how to respond to that opposition.

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

So firstly, we're looking at verses 5 to 22. In the face of opposition what do we profess? What do we proclaim? Well we see there in verse 5 that the council gathered together.

[10:55] This is the same council that tried Jesus. It's the same council that later tries both Stephen in chapter 7 and Paul in chapter 23. And they bring Peter and John before them and they put the key question to them.

By what power or by what name did you do this? That is their question verse 7. And Peter filled with the Spirit speaks and he's clear.

This lame man the one you see before you he was healed by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Now everyone knew who Jesus was but Peter spells out exactly who he is and the implications of that.

This is the same Jesus you crucified. He died. 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 then quotes there from their own scriptures from Psalm 118.

[12:13] This Jesus is the stone rejected by you the builders and that stone has now become the cornerstone. Jesus the man the one they crucified he was the Lord's anointed.

He was the one who God's people were waiting for. But when he came Peter says clearly doesn't he that they rejected him.

They killed him. What a terrible mistake. The one they rejected is the cornerstone the very key in God's plans for all of history.

You see says Peter this Jesus he is the one in whom salvation is found. Because he's the cornerstone because of who he is he is the only place where salvation is to be found.

Peter's emphatic isn't it? Look at the end there. There is no other name. No other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. That's his final line there.

[13:21] Verse 12. It is only in Jesus only in his name is salvation to be found. That is what Peter professes and that is what we must profess to.

And it is a profession that will ruffle feathers. It will provoke hostility even outright hostility particularly in our day of tolerance. But the fact is Christianity Christianity is essentially an intolerant religion.

It stands alone. It will not have any rivals. Its claims on a man's soul are absolute. It is the only way, the only ground of salvation.

There is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. It is only in Jesus. And the response of the council to what Peter says, to what they have witnessed with the healing of the lame man, well it is extraordinary isn't it?

Cast your eyes over their response on verse 13. They were in the middle of verse 13 astonished. They had nothing to say in opposition end of 14.

[14:38] They could not deny verse 16 that a notable sign had been performed. It was evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. We cannot deny it. It's extraordinary isn't it?

Despite all the evidence, despite their own conclusions, despite what all the people in Jerusalem know, despite all that they still oppose Peter and John.

They oppose their message. They oppose the Lord Jesus. And their response here is a flat denial of reality. It was plain and obvious.

They'd seen it. Everyone else in the whole city had seen it. Peter had been clear. But still, they deny reality. And the reason for their rejection, well, to accept what Peter said is true, that would turn their world upside down.

They would lose all their power, all their prestige. If what Peter was saying was true, they stood to lose all that. But that is the nature of hostility to God, to his son, to his people, and the message they hold out.

[15:56] By nature, man will not have Jesus as Lord. They will not have him as the only source of salvation, the only source of reality. They will not have it.

So we've asked the question, in the face of opposition, what do we profess? And we've seen here what Peter professes. By the help of the Spirit, we are to profess the Lordship of Jesus and salvation only in his name.

Now, two applications before we move on. Firstly, it's encouraging. It's encouraging, isn't it, to see Peter's boldness in the face of such fierce, intimidating hostility. All the great and the good were there, lined up in the council. And they were telling them to shut up, to close their mouths. Hugely intimidating. And it should be encouraging. It should encourage you and I, as we read this account, to see what Peter does. Don't you find it encouraging when you hear a story about somebody in difficult circumstances, maybe similar to what you're facing, and they keep going, they take a stand, they survive.

[17:15] That is encouraging, to see somebody else doing it. And we ought to be encouraged that Peter, enabled and equipped by the Spirit, should stand and speak. because that same Spirit is within every true believer.

That Spirit that enabled Peter to stand and speak is within you, if you trust and love the Lord. But not only is Peter an encouragement to you and I, he's also, secondly, an example. He's an example to follow. And so, when you and I perhaps find ourselves in a similar situation where we're being opposed, we feel the hostility. Maybe it's a conversation, maybe it's somebody in the office, maybe it's against the authorities of various kinds.

We are to follow Peter's example. We're to speak. We're to speak about Jesus. We are to say the politically incorrect.

We're to deny the many secular gods and affirm the lordship of Jesus only over everything. So, in the face of opposition, we profess.

[18:28] That's the first half of the chapter. Secondly, from verse 23, in the face of opposition, what do we pray? Peter and John, they're given a verbal roughing up.

They're dismissed without punishment because, ironically, look at verse 21, the leaders were fearful of the people. All the people of Israel, all the people in Jerusalem had seen this.

They were praising God because of it. And so, they felt their hands were tied in what they could do in terms of punishing Peter and John. So, they let them go with a verbal warning.

And Peter and John, they return to their friends and they report all that's happened to them. Now, what is the response to all that happened from Peter, from John, and the other believers?

Jesus, 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.

[19:33] And they pray because of who God is. He is the sovereign Lord. That's how they begin their prayer. Look at verse 24, sovereign Lord.

That's how they begin their prayer, with that confession that he is sovereign. Now, what had happened to Peter and John, that was distressing. They had been threatened by the powers of the world, but they knew as they gathered together that this was not unusual or unexpected.

They understood what had been reported to them through the lens of the scriptures. That's the first element of their prayer. They acknowledge God's sovereignty. He is the God who made everything, but he's also the sovereign speaking God who has revealed things about the nature of the world.

They refer to Psalm 2, down there in verse 25, and this is the lens through which they understand the events that have been reported to them. I'll read that from verse 25.

They're quoting Psalm 2. 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.

[20:50] And they pray on, verse 27, 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 people of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

They recognize that the opposition to the Lord and to his anointed and by implication to his people is to be expected. That's just what they've witnessed.

And that 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. Would there be much point in praying if he wasn't?

God is sovereign. He's in control. That is why they pray. 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. Note the content of their petition. From verse 29.

[22 : 07] Here's what they're asking God to do. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness. You see, uppermost in their prayer is the work of witnessing.

It's the great task the Lord Jesus set them before his ascension back in Acts 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, boldness to keep speaking, to keep witnessing, to keep proclaiming. Now, we might find it staggering that this is what they pray for. In the light of the threat they face, this is astonishing. They might easily become consumed by their fears and worries if it wasn't for their focus on the sovereignty of God. In the light of his sovereignty, his control over all events, the threats they face are seen in their true light. The Lord is sovereign.

[23 : 20] He's allowed this. 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 are called.

And the Lord answers that prayer. The last verse of our passage reports that they were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

So in the face of opposition, what do we pray? Well, we pray to the God who is sovereign over all, who is in control of all things, even the hostility we might face for speaking about Jesus.

And we pray for boldness and the continued professing of Jesus. We pray that God would keep us speaking. I don't know about you, but that's probably the one thing I want to stop doing.

If I'm facing hostility, if I'm facing difficulty, I want to close my mouth, sneak into the shadows. But we're to pray for boldness to speak.

[24 : 32] And that is a prayer God will answer. A couple of concluding observations as we close. It is tempting for us as individuals, as a church, to play the victim card when we feel oppressed, when we feel the hostility of the world around us.

We can easily cast ourselves in that sort of role. We're the victims. We're the innocent victims and we're being opposed out there by the fierce persecutors. Now, of course, there is an element of truth in that.

There is genuine persecution. But nowhere in this passage do we get the sense that the believers throw up their arms and cry foul play.

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

And that is not a biblical concept in the world we live in. Suffering and difficulty is inevitable. So let's not get drawn into that way of thinking.

[25 : 53] And there's also a danger that as we label ourselves as victims and the world out there as our persecutors, we set up an us and them mentality.

And that, if we do that, will seriously and inevitably impact our love for the world and by implication our evangelism.

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

We're not to play the victim. Rather we're to trust the Lord because he is sovereign. Because he is in control. And so when opposition inevitably comes, as we hold out the truth of the gospel as revealed in the scriptures, as we keep on with the priorities here in Acts chapter 4, we pray and we profess.

The example of Peter 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 in us, keep on speaking the words with boldness.

[27 : 09] Let me pray. our Father, we thank you that you are the sovereign Lord.

All things are in your hands. Even the difficult, the hard, seemingly impossible to get over. and we pray that as we inevitably face opposition and hostility for proclaiming the truth, help us to trust you, to lean upon you so that we might keep speaking.

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