

Have you ever thought deeply about the passage of Scripture known as “the Beatitudes”...? Notice what it declares at its very crescendo...

**Matthew 5:10-12**

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Simply put... what these verses tell us... is that the reward for the Christian... is not fame or praise or adulation. What is the Believer’s reward...? ... **Persecution!**

Persecution is an inevitable element of genuine Christian faith. Consider what Jesus told His disciples at a different time.

**John 15:18-20**

*“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

When the Apostle Paul wanted to strengthen his protégé... (Timothy) for ministry... do you know what he told him?

**2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)**

*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,*

It is no wonder... then... why the martyr... Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his Flossenberg prison cell in 1937: *“Suffering is the badge of the true Christian.”*

But it is not all bad. As the late Bishop Sheen once said, "*One advantage of being thrown on your back is that you face heaven.*" When the Spirit reigns in our lives, there will be persecution and a heavenly focus!

*Eighteen hundred years or so of Hebrew history, capped by a full exposition in Jesus Christ, tell us that God's revelation of himself is rejected far more often than it is accepted, is dismissed by far more people than embrace it, and has been either attacked or ignored by every major culture or civilization in which it has given its witness: magnificent Egypt, fierce Assyria, beautiful Babylon, artistic Greece, political Rome, Enlightenment France, Nazi Germany, Renaissance Italy, Marxist Russia, Maoist China, and pursuit-of-happiness America. The community of God's people has survived in all of these cultures and civilizations but always as a minority, always marginal to the mainstream, never statistically significant.*

—Author and pastor, Eugene Peterson

Today we continue our Study in Acts... and we are in the passage where all the persecution of the believing church first *began*. The final verse of Acts chapter two described what had *originally* been true for the church:

**Acts 2:47 (ESV)**

*praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

But in such a short time period things had drastically changed. Great favor did not remain. The events that we studied last week in chapter three... transformed the status of the church from having favor with the people... to what we have experienced over the last 1900 years – rejection and persecution by mainstream society.

You see it as well as I do. Today... our rejection and persecution is on the increase. It is much worse today than it was 10 years ago.

*Facing the Giants* is an evangelistic movie made by Alex and Stephen Kendrick. The movie has no drugs, no sex, and no profanity. Consequently, the filmmakers believed it would receive a G rating once it was reviewed by the Motion Picture Association of America (Or more simply, the MPAA.)

However, the MPAA rated *Facing the Giants* PG, meaning that children need "parental guidance" to see it. The reason for the MPAA's decision? Too much Christianity. ... The movie is filled with miracles... prayer... and even a presentation of the gospel. ... Christianity may very well be on its way to become the next sex and violence warning in the film rating system. "Warning: the film you are about to see contains graphic scenes of a sexual, violent, and Christian nature..." ... The day may come when a movie will get an R for religion.

Because we realize that rejection and persecution is on the rise... along with violent false religion around the world... and we are aware of the warnings in Scripture from Christ... and from the Apostle Paul... we have a desperate need for passages like the one we come to this morning in Acts. It is going to show us what kinds of things we can expect to be persecuted for – and let me tell you – we can easily be caught off guard. Then we are going to see how we are to respond to persecution. And third... we will draw some insight for how we can prepare for this inevitable persecution. What is it that we might do... to make us less afraid... (to increase our boldness in the face of persecution)...? (If Jesus and Paul knew what they were talking about – persecution is inevitable. Our refusing to think about it... or discuss it... is the worst thing we can do.)

In our passage last week... we saw how Peter and John... in going to the Temple prayer service saw a man who had been lame all his life (of 40 years.) He thought that the two disciples might give him money. But instead... they gave him something far better – a total healing. Now... as a former cripple... he walked through the temple leaping and praising God.... A huge throng of thousands had rushed to see the man they had known for years as a cripple who had been healed... and the crowd heard the message being proclaimed by the two men who had such power. ... The excitement and noise were bound to attract the attention and bring the temple authorities to the scene. ... What they saw and heard disturbed them to the core. ... They *thought* they had eliminated the "Jesus movement" eight weeks earlier when they had crucified Jesus. ... Now these two men (Peter and John) were publicly preaching that God had raised Jesus from the dead. ... And they were preaching, of all places, in the temple precincts. It was time to investigate the matter... to nip the movement in the bud before it could spread.

### **Acts 4:1-22**

To me... there is hardly a thing I can think of... that would be more **unreasonable** than the conduct of the Jewish Rulers toward Peter and John in this passage. These leaders imprisoned the Apostles... tried them as criminals... disregarded all evidence that contradicted their lives and convictions – AND... once they perceived that they could not argue against what the Apostles had to say... the Jewish Rulers determined to suppress the teaching of these two fishermen... by using their superior national and religious authority.

How they handled Peter and John was basically... *“It cannot be denied that a miracle was indeed performed... but it will not be mentioned! The teaching you espouse – we cannot refute... but we cannot have you mention it ! ...”*

What does this sound like to you...? Doesn't it sound just like the nonsense the church receives today from modern society...? *“Christians must be silenced! They must be taken off platforms from which they can espouse their teaching.”* ... Ironically our silencers cry for tolerance... as they shout that Christians must **not** be tolerated... *“They must be muzzled in the public forums. Their proclamations will not be mentioned!”*

(Take careful notice): We should not expect to be treated with reasonableness. Don't be surprised when we are rejected and persecuted with unfairness... and without reason. We can dwell too much on the senselessness of our rejection and persecution.

Our response needs to be the same as the response of the disciples to their persecutors. ... We need to be respectful... but bold. We need to be forgiving... but bold. We need to speak the truth in love and with grace... but bold.

This kind of boldness will only be ours... if we grow in our Biblical convictions (even when they are not popular to our culture)... and from our being with Jesus. We learn this from our passage this morning... and we also see that an undeniable sign of the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit is what...? – BOLDNESS !

#### **Acts 4:1-4**

Peter and John had offended the priests at several different levels. They were a threat to the Rulers very way of life and the status they enjoyed in Jewish society. Peter and John had been teaching in the Temple... without being officially sanctioned by the priests as “teachers.” I guess we can say that “they were not Kosher.” ... But even more importantly it was what they were teaching and offering irrefutable proof for... that could cause the Jewish leadership’s whole social and financial empire to come crashing down - if they continued and convinced the entire nation. ... Verse two makes it clear that these Rulers were concerned about the teaching of the resurrection. (Some background would be helpful.)

The Sadducees controlled the wealth of the nation. ... They owned most of the land... and they wielded immense power. ... In order for them to maintain all of their material advantages over the people... they had to give large sums of money in pay-offs to their Roman oppressors... (their foreign conquerors who dominated the land.) The Romans demanded two things from Israel’s rulers – and then they could keep their wealth and possessions. They had to pay huge bribes... and they needed to keep the peace among the people for the Romans. (That is how Annas and his family held their positions authority as High Priest... and other superior positions over the people.)

At least one 1<sup>st</sup> Century historian (Josephus) describes Sadducees as rude... disagreeable... and argumentative. They were so unscrupulous... that they would sell their own mother to keep their wealth. They wanted no rebellions against Rome... and feared they could lose it all... if their fellow Jews angered the Romans.

They had such a desire to remain the nation's purse-string holders... to retain their wealthy aristocracy of Jewish society... that it effected the way they understood Scripture. It effected their theology. For example... they simply refused to believe in a life beyond the grave. When you die... that's it! There is no more.

When you stop and think about it... this was a rather convenient belief for this elite noble class. Live right now for all the immediate pleasures you can get. Don't worry about any judgements in an afterlife. There won't be any!

The Sadducees wouldn't even believe in a coming Messiah. Put that whole matter out of your mind... don't even think it to be possible. You see 1<sup>st</sup> Century thinking about a Messiah meant a new world order that would overtake the Roman Empire. Sadducees didn't want that... because the Roman Empire is what allowed them to remain in power over their countrymen. ... They constructed a religious system that was convenient to their desired lifestyle. These were the protectors of the convenient status quo.

Does the church today have its Sadducees...? ... Let me answer that by saying... A lot of persecution of believers today... comes from Sadducees who are inside our churches.

These are people who want the church to decide matters on the basis of "*This is the way we have always done it...*" If there are any proposed changes in ministry... without a thought given to how it might more effectively cause growth in other people's lives... or bring the gospel to others... it is almost a knee jerk reaction for them to say... "*But that isn't the*

*way we have always done it...*” They are the protectors of the status quo. They protect their own interests. They protect their own comforts. It does not matter what the Bible says... they will even formulate their belief system on the basis of what is more convenient to their lifestyle.

Whenever I hear someone respond to a change by saying “*I don't like this...*” and they have no consideration for how the change might help strengthen other believers or get the Gospel out... I know that we have a Sadducee. ... Then... if they should say... “*I'm leaving this church... because I don't like that...*” It doesn't bother me all that much. I feel sorry for the Sadducee... but I honestly believe that the fewer Sadducees there are in a given church... (and instead... the more people you have who focus on what Christ wants... rather than their own personal likes and dislikes)... the stronger that church will be. ... I am glad to say that I don't hear that very often around here. Every once and while I do... But I thank God that Sadducees do not rule Living Water.

### **Acts 4:5-8**

I would like for you to try to imagine the scene here. This is the kind of story that Hollywood craves. ... We have two fisherman... without any formal training or education... and they happen to come from a region of the country that was thought of as an insignificant... uncultured... backward... and uneducated wasteland. ... When I first moved to LaPine... that is how a lot of the people in Bend and Sunriver thought of us who lived here. ... But here these two fishermen stand face to face with Israel's most powerful authority figures... and these influential men are NOT happy... This was a situation with enough tension to freeze anyone with fear. ... This



array of scowling... seething... hostile leaders surrounded Peter, John, and the former cripple... seated in the semi-circle of their auspicious chamber... wearing their special garments of high dignity.

Try to empathize with what the three of them experienced... as they stood in the center with all eyes fixed scornfully on them... as though they could pierce like lasers. ... The two Apostles and the man they healed... were looking into the faces of the very men who had unfairly condemned Jesus to crucifixion just 8 weeks before.

But there is more to the story... and what I am about to tell you will intensify this drama even further. ... The plot thickens by knowing how Annas... who directed this council... amassed his vast fortune and held him in power. ... He made a great deal of his money by selling sacrificial animals in the Temple booths. He owned all the booths that were in the Temple where you could purchase one. ... Oh sure! Anyone could bring an animal that they did not purchase at a Temple booth that was owned by Annas. But before the sacrifice... every animal had to be inspected by a priest to make sure it had no flaws... and was an appropriate sacrificial animal. – But guess who appointed these special priests...? Annas did. And his inspectors somehow always managed to find a flaw in the animals that were not purchased at one of Annas' Temple booths. This gave Annas a monopoly ... and he charged exorbitant prices.

To buy an animal in the Temple... you could only use Temple currency. Money that was good all over Jerusalem for buying things in the market... could not be used in the Temple. Temple currency had to be bought with other currency. Now guess who owned the booths that was the only place

to buy Temple currency (which was the only money you could use to buy an animal to sacrifice)...? Annas. This was another monopoly and opportunity for him to make another insane profit. ... It was an unbelievably corrupt set up... which kept Annas enormously wealthy and in power.

So when Jesus walked into the Temple and overthrew all the money changers... their tables... and chased out all of Annas' animal sellers... who was Jesus attacking...? – It was Annas... who had turned God's House of Prayer into his own money-making scheme !

Now here is how all of this adds to the drama of this scene in our passage... Annas thought his system of corruption had been saved - eight weeks ago. He thought that he had rid himself of a viable threat when he killed Jesus.

But not so! Here stood these two fishermen... and a former lame man... which brought that entire threat back! (It just will not end.) ... They are claiming that Jesus did not stay dead... and they have a proof standing in front of the nation's high court that is convincing a lot of people. It must have been a hurricane force that was focused on Peter and John!

Understanding a little more about this scene... should help you appreciate what the Holy Spirit does through these ordinary fishermen from LaPine... (I mean Galilee.) Only the Holy Spirit can work like this under such conditions! Let's look at their boldness... and as we do... we will see several things that can make us every bit as courageous.

### **Acts 4:9-11**

Peter quoted Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16...

**Psalm 118:22 (ESV)**

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*

**Isaiah 28:16 (ESV)**

*therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.'*

The cornerstone unites two walls at the corner of a building and holds the building together. Peter said that the Jews rejected Christ, but now Christ had become the cornerstone of the church. Without him there would be no church because it wouldn't be able to stand.

The image of "the stone" was not new to these men who were experts in the Old Testament Scriptures. They knew that the "rock" was a symbol of God (five times in Deuteronomy 32... and also in 2 Samuel 22:2...) But also... the Prophet Daniel had used the rock to picture Messiah and the coming of His kingdom on earth.

Peter's knowledge and use of Scripture demonstrates how Scripture is the vital source for boldness for the believer. When we are founded on Scripture... more than our own subjective ideas... feelings... or personal experiences... we are able to speak with daring authority. If you want to increase your boldness as a witness for Christ... saturate yourself in God's Word. Read it... Study it... Commit it to memory... Meditate on it... Adjust your life to it...

I know this to be true in my own life. ... Whenever I have a passage of Scripture or a verse for a decision that needs to be made... or to give along

with advise or counsel... I do it with a far greater authority and boldness... than if I only have subjective feelings or experiences to back it up.

Get God's Word into your life and understanding. Don't neglect a regular (daily) study of it... Invest in a good study Bible... one that has notes that explain the verses on every page. (If you don't know of a good study Bible... see me after the service... I would be glad to recommend one to you.)

### **Acts 4:12**

Obviously... this teaching goes against the grain of our age. ... Theological pronouncements simply do not get narrower... or more restricted than Peter's does in this passage. ... Many would like to think that salvation might also be found in Krishna... or Buddha... or Muhammad... or simply in belief in God without specific Christian faith. ... This position... however popular it may be and however tolerant it may seem... both contradicts the teaching of this passage (and many others in the New Testament... such as John 14:6) and is logically problematic. ... If the scriptural claim that God sent Christ to die for us is in any way true... and provided God Himself was not confused... then none of the other existing ways is possible.

Furthermore... if God sent his Son to death when other ways of salvation already existed (such as through Buddha or Judaism)... or other ways would come into existence... (such as Islam)... then God is either a masochist (due to the pain it caused Jesus) or a sadist. ... In other words, the exclusivity of Christianity is rooted in the logic of the faith... as well as in the teaching of Scripture. ... It may be offensive to the modern mind... but... like the offensiveness of being carried in a fireman's dirty... smelly arms

from a burning building - It may be necessary! The cross has always been a scandal.

CHRISTIAN... LISTEN TO ME! (And if you have a pen or pencil with you... let me recommend that you white this down in your Bible... next to this verse Acts 4:12... (Are you ready...?) ... .. It is OK to be narrow minded if you have the truth!

That is the primary issue for many people who go to church regularly. They do not have a strong conviction that what Peter said... and is recorded for us in Acts 4:12 is true. (The only way to Heaven is through Jesus Christ – PERIOD. ... It is Christ or nothing! ... Christ or judgment! ...Christ or Hell !...)  
... Without an absolute conviction of this truth – you can never be bold. If you remain a part of the church... identified with believers... then you will face persecution... but you won't have boldness.

If you are still grappling with the truth that Jesus is THE way... THE truth... and THE life... that no man comes to the Father, but by Him... that there is no other name under heaven that has given among men by which we must be saved... Please – ask God to reveal this truth strongly to you. ... Admit to Him that you are having a struggle with it... and ask Him to develop this truth in you as a conviction.

#### **Acts 4:13-14**

Peter and John gave evidence that they had been with Jesus. Note a striking fact: it was the boldness and power of Peter and John that *caused* the rulers to recognize them. The rulers had witnessed the same boldness

and power in Jesus. And now it was boldness and power that identified these two men as having been with Jesus.

Note another fact: the boldness and power were not due to education and learning. It was due to their having "been with Jesus." The clear evidence that a person has been with Jesus is *boldness and power*.

What a challenge to believers! We must *be with Jesus*; we must spend time, much time with Him. He is the source of boldness and power. ... Here is the evidence that we belong to Jesus: Do we live in His boldness and power? ... If we have *been with Jesus*, then His boldness and power are present within us.

This presses us to a question that we should all be asking right now...

What are you attempting... which could not be accomplished without the Holy Spirit...? ... .. What is there about your life... that demands an explanation...?

Stop and consider – you and I can only be filled with the Holy Spirit's boldness and power... if we DARE to do what could never be accomplished in our own strength and insight...! ... .. The more we step out and trust the Holy Spirit to empower us in tasks that we sense He is leading us to do... tasks that we KNOW we could never accomplish on our own... our boldness will increase. ... .. This is why I LOVE to hear people say, "Pastor, I don't think I could ever be a Children's Church worker, but yet, I sense that He wants me to..." ... "I don't think that I could ever work with the youth, but I sense that God is calling me..." I don't think I can lead a home Bible Study group..."

LISTEN – I’ve said this before... but I think it is very appropriate to say it again: “A ship in harbor is safe indeed – but that isn’t what ships are built for!” ... A believer who never steps out in faith is safe indeed – but that isn’t what believers are made for... either!

What is it... that has blighted your boldness with the blandness of expecting LITTLE... and settling for it as “normal Christian living”...?

### **Acts 4:15-22**

The final thing that I want to point out for how to increase our boldness... is that opposition crystalizes boldness. ... Let me say it another way. ... Difficulties deepen our determination. ... Conflict forces us to clarify our convictions.

When the religious leaders prohibited the Apostles from ever speaking in Jesus’ name again... it forced them to decide what was more important.

If you know any bold people in your life... I can almost guarantee that they have had a time or two... where they had to make a pressured decision. Opposition crystalizes boldness.

Praise God for opposition! So many lives would never be changed without it! Churches find renewal through pain. You and I become disciples of character... when we decide for God’s way in the face of persecution.

Opposition forces us to decide “Will I be a man-pleaser or a God-pleaser...?” ... Who do I fear most...? If you like to be liked - too much... you will opt to please man... instead of God... and boldness will elude you.

As we wrap up this morning... let me summarize what we see in this text... for how we might be bold for Christ. Greater persecution is coming our way, Folks... Will you meet it with the Spirit-filled boldness it will call for...?

#1 – Do not rest on your laurels – because you prayed for the Holy Spirit’s filling a few years ago... or even a few months ago. In Acts chapter 2... when the Holy Spirit first came... the disciples and all the believers were all filled with the Holy Spirit. But here in chapter 4... verse 8... it says the Holy Spirit filled Peter (again!) ... Then again in verse 31... it says they were filled one more time. ... .. Constantly ask God to fill you – every day... all through the day.

#2 – Remain in the Word. Interact with Scripture every day. Saturate your life with it.

#3 – Develop the politically incorrect... narrow-minded sense of the truth that Jesus and ONLY Jesus saves! Ask God to help you with this... if you need help.

#4 – Stop settling for... and expecting LITTLE – as “normal Christian living.” It isn’t! ... Step out and accept challenges that cannot be accomplished without the Holy Spirit’s enablement.

#5 – Let opposition do its work in you. Let it hone you as a God-pleaser. Choose to be a God-pleaser when opposition is making your decision difficult.

*Certain it is that the reason there is so much shallow living—much talk but little obedience—is that so few are prepared to be, like the pine on the hilltop, alone in the wind for God. —Amy Carmichael, Irish missionary to India (1867–1951)*