



DISCIPLES EMBOLDENED (May 29)

(ACTS 4:1-31)

INTRO

In this passage we continue with the story of the cripple who was healed by Peter and John in the previous chapter. In this chapter, chapter 4, Peter and John are subsequently arrested for healing the man, and after spending a night in prison, they are brought to stand trial in front of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the nation of Israel. And in this passage, I want to point out 4 things:

Firstly, the ...



1. HARDNESS OF HEART OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

- It's extraordinary, isn't it, that even when confronted with an obvious miracle, these religious leaders refuse to believe in Jesus and in the truth of the gospel.

- Notice that they don't try to deny the miracle. Because they couldn't. We were told in the previous chapter that the man who was healed had been crippled from birth and that he spent every day begging at the entrance to the temple courts. So these religious leaders probably walked past him every day on their way in and out of the temple. They knew him, they recognised him, and they couldn't deny that this man had been crippled all his life was now dancing around like a joyous fool!



- So, in verse 14, we read, *"Since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say."*

- But despite their inability to deny an **obvious** miracle, they closed their hearts to it. They refused to be moved by it. Instead, they throw the two Apostles into prison overnight, they refuse to believe in Jesus, and they begin to plot how they can squash this new movement that is beginning to take hold in Jerusalem.

- It's an extraordinary example of hard-heartedness, isn't it? But it shouldn't surprise us. This incident is indicative of the state of the human heart.

- You see, the reason most people DON'T believe in Jesus, is that they don't WANT to believe. They don't WANT their comfortable lives turned upside down. They don't WANT to consider that the risen Jesus might actually be the Lord of the Universe who has a claim on our lives and before whom we need to kneel in faith and repentance.


- No! Anything but that, please! People will believe ANYTHING in preference to that! And so mankind, today, continues to turn a blind eye to God. Refusing to see the obvious signs of his presence in creation. Refusing to acknowledge claims of Christ and the evidence of his resurrection, and the testimony of his people. They don't believe, because they don't WANT to believe.

- The battle for belief in our world, is ultimately a battle against the hardness of the human heart. And only God can break through that. And there's more to say about that at the end of this passage. But let's move on.

The second thing to point out is the ...



2. BOLDNESS OF THE APOSTLES

- Peter and John are brought before Sanhedrin. Now, the Sanhedrin consisted of a court of 71 judges, and they met in a section of Temple precincts known as  the Chamber of Hewn Stone – a large, vaulted side chamber of the Temple. The high priest was seated at the head of the chamber and 35 Sanhedrin members were seated along one side facing in, and 35 were seated along the other side facing in – a bit like the chambers in our State and Federal Parliaments. And the two Apostles would have been made to stand in the middle, facing the high priest.



- The high priest then asked them, **“By what power or what name did you do this?”** (referring to the healing of the crippled man). The question was designed to self-incriminate, because Deuteronomy 13:1-5 states that anyone who does a miraculous sign designed to lead people into worshipping another god should be put to death.

- So, Peter and John’s lives are very much at stake here. They are in grave danger.

- And remember, Peter has previously failed to testify for Jesus, at Jesus’ own trial. On that occasion, Peter denied Jesus 3 times, and ran away in fear. But this is a very different Peter now. Peter has been filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He is born again now – transformed by the power of God. And here again, in this situation, we are told that Peter is once again, filled with the Holy Spirit as he begins to speak. Not that he receives more of the Holy Spirit, but simply to mean that the Holy Spirit now grips him, and emboldens him, and inspires his words.

- And his words are incredibly bold. Because you see, while it is the intention of the Sanhedrin to put Peter and John on trial here, Peter, in an act of incredible bravery, now puts them on trial! He turns it around and points the finger at them!

- **Firstly**, he points out how ridiculous it is that he and John are being put on trial for an act of kindness and mercy shown to a poor crippled man (that’s in verses 8-9).

- **Secondly**, he moves on very quickly to talk about Jesus: the Son of God - the Saviour of the world who died for sin, rose again, is at work in the world today and who alone can offer salvation (verses 10-12). There’s a great summary of our Gospel message, folks – it’s all about Jesus! Let’s make sure we always get that right.

- **And then thirdly**, and incredibly boldly, in verse 10 Peter points the finger at these religious leaders and tells them that they are guilty of putting Jesus to death – of murdering the Messiah, God’s Son, the Saviour of the world. He confronts them with their hard-hearted rebellion against God and effectively points out their need to repent.

- We need to take a lesson from Peter here. The Gospel message has always got to include pointing out mankind’s sinfulness – our rebellion against God – and our need to repent. Because until people become convicted that they are NOT right with God, they will never understand their need of a Saviour.

- The reason why many people in society are apathetic about God (if they believe in him at all) is that they think they are living good enough lives to be accepted into heaven. They think they’re probably safe. **“I’m OK. No problem here. I don’t need any kind of saviour.”**

- Oh yes you do! You have a huge problem! You break God's commands every day of your life! And unless something is done about it, when your life is over you will stand before God's judgment seat with literally thousands of transgressions against your name and be found guilty of rebelling against your creator!

- You see, the Gospel, the message of salvation through Jesus, of complete forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our sins, only becomes meaningful if we understand how desperately in need of forgiveness we all are in the first place! People won't accept a Saviour until they understand they need to be saved!

- And so, Peter points his proverbial finger at these self-righteous, self-justified religious dudes and says – ***“You guys are in big trouble! You have rebelled against God Almighty, and you'd better do something about it! It's you guys who are really on trial here, not me and my buddy!”***

- It's an incredibly brave thing to do. And we all need to be similarly brave as we testify for Jesus today. To a world that maintains, ***“Nothing to see here! We're all good, thanks,”*** the Gospel message is, ***“No, you're not. You're in desperate trouble and you need to turn to the Saviour.”*** And folks, you and I need to be brave in saying that.

- Going back to Peter and John, they are eventually released with a dire warning to stop preaching in Jesus' name (verse 18). But even as they are released, with this dire warning hanging over their heads, listen to these remarkable words by Peter and John in reply in verse 19 and 20,:



“Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Does that inspire you? It inspires me. They effectively say to the supreme court which has just ordered them to stop preaching,, ***“Nope! Not gonna happen. We're not gonna stop preaching. We've got to obey God, not you. Whatever the cost.”***

- Once again, it's incredibly brave. And it's incredibly inspiring. May God give us the same courage and faithfulness in the face of whatever forces might be pitted against us now and in the future. May he help us to be faithful to the truth even though the whole world turns against us.



3. PRAYERS OF THE DISCIPLES

- After their release Peter and John report back to the believers and relay the very serious threats now mounting against them and the whole church. And so the believers gather together for a prayer meeting (verse 23 and following).


- Notice, please, that prayer is their **FIRST** response. They don't form a committee. They don't start planning action steps and strategies. They go straight to God and pray for his miraculous intervention.

- Notice also the content of their prayer. They start with praise and adoration of God, including an acknowledgment of God's complete sovereignty. That goes for some time - (that's in verses 23-28).



And then, in verse 29 they pray, ***“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your Word with great boldness”***. And this is very significant! I want you to notice what they DON'T pray for.

They **DON'T** ask for God's protection. They don't pray, ***"Please Lord, keep us safe. Protect us from harm."*** No. They pray, ***"Lord, make us bold! Give us courage! Help us to KEEP proclaiming your Word courageously!"***

- Then in the next breath, in verse 30, they dare to pray for God's miraculous power to work in and through them.  ***"Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus."***

- Wow! That's a bit forthright, isn't it? A bit presumptuous? Apparently not. Because God answered their prayer – both immediately and in an ongoing way.

- Immediately, the place where they were praying was shaken by the power of God, and they all experienced a fresh filling or upwelling of the Holy Spirit within them (verse 31). Wow! I would love to have been in that prayer meeting!

- And then God continued to answer that prayer in an ongoing way, as we'll see in subsequent weeks, as God worked amazing miracles in and through them to bring more and more people to faith in Jesus.

- Let me ask you: Do you want to see revival in your community? In your church? Do you want to see a steady stream of people who turn back to the living all-powerful God and place their faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord? Then we must pray! We must ask for the miraculous outpouring of God's Holy Spirit upon our communities. Because conversion is a miracle that only God can do. And so prayer must be our first and our highest priority. More important than all our outreach strategies and plans, we must call upon the power of the living God to open hearts and transform minds and lead people to faith in the Saviour.

- How are your church prayer meetings going? Let's rally the troops! Let's turn up! Let's get serious about this! Let's join our voices together! Let's take up Jesus' offer to ask and seek and knock on the very doors of heaven. Let's do our part, that we might see God do his!



4. THE UNSTOPPABLE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL

1. These early disciples refused to stop preaching about Jesus, despite the most dire threats upon their lives. And throughout the book of Acts, the church continues to grow, despite more arrests, despite more threats, despite eventual terrible persecution and the martyrdom of many Christians. In fact, in the not too distant future from this point in Acts, hundreds and even thousands of Cns end up being put to death. But through it all, the church continued to grow. It became an unstoppable force that continues to this very day.

- You see, here's the thing. You can arrest people, but you can't arrest the Gospel. It is the very ***power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes***. It is God's unstoppable force for growing his kingdom and rescuing people for eternity.

- And throughout history, the gospel has always prevailed, through persecution, political parties, wars, chaos, book burnings, imprisonment and martyrdom. The Gospel, once unleashed in the world, is God's unstoppable force.



- Jesus said, ***"I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it"*** (Matt 16:18). That has proven to be true throughout history and it will continue to be true until he returns in glory to take us home.

- So be confident in that. Even though the forces of secularism sometimes seem to be winning, they are not! And they won't! So be strong and courageous in your faith in Jesus and in your determination to speak his words of truth and life to a world that desperately needs to hear them!

CONCLUSION

So those are the four things that stand out in this passage:

- 1. The hardness of the human heart**, and the necessity for God to break through that hardness in order for people to come to salvation.
- 2. The boldness of the Apostles**, and our need to be like them. To be bold and courageous in our proclamation of the good news about Jesus.
- 3. The prayers of the disciples**, and our need to be committed to prayer ourselves if we are to see revival.
- 4. The unstoppable nature of the Gospel**, and the great confidence we can have that whatever happens in the future, however tough things may get, Jesus will indeed build his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!

Amen!