

Apostles on Trial

Acts 4:1-22, Acts 1:8, Luke 12:11-12
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Like many people, I enjoy a good mystery. Even more compelling than works of fiction are the real-life stories of crime, where justice and closure for victims and their families hang in the balance. From time to time, I will tune into television shows such as *The First 48* on A&E, or *48 Hours Mystery* on CBS, where police detectives and prosecutors work against the clock to gather the information necessary to determine exactly what happened, and ultimately to prove their case against a defendant in court.

The success or failure of nearly every case boils down to the authorities' ability to two things: testimony and evidence. First, they often seek out someone who was at the scene of the crime and can share the details of what happened. These are the people who actually saw the murder take place, or heard a suspect in the case make threats, and will testify to what they saw or heard. Testimony is incredibly important because it provides a description of what took place, the person or people involved, and can sometimes speak to the "why" behind a crime. The more people who can be found who can attest to a similar rendition of events, the more likely those events did indeed take place, and the guilty person or group of people can be identified and prosecuted.

But authorities rarely like to rely on testimony alone. They also want hard evidence: a murder weapon with fingerprints on it, clothing with DNA, or the suspect being in possession of some of the victim's belongings. These things also help tell the story of what happened and confirm who was involved. Testimony and evidence together make the most powerful argument for what is true, and the authorities like to have as much of both as they can to make their case.

This passage from Acts reminds me of the real-life crime shows I like to watch. As we find out, there is a trial going on, and as we move through it I'd like for you to be looking for the testimony and evidence being given. And we need to remember that Acts is not only the story of the beginnings of the church, but of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. Pay attention to how the Spirit and the church are active as two apostles go on trial in this passage.

As we move through the passage, we'll stop at several points to explain and provide insights to the story. The Holy Spirit guided Luke to write it this way for a reason, and I believe there is power in hearing it that way as well. But there are gaps between us and Luke's original audience, so I will try to fill in those gaps related to language and culture. Once we've finished the passage, I'll talk a little bit about how this applies to us today.

Here's the back-story to our passage: Peter and John are going up to the temple for afternoon prayer. On their way into the temple, they were asked for money by a beggar sitting outside the gate who had been born unable to walk. The man, who was about 40 years old, had apparently been a regular fixture outside this particular gate. Peter and John look at the man, and after making eye contact with him, Peter reaches out and takes the beggar by the hand and heals him in the name of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. The man's feet and ankles are instantly made whole as Peter helps him to his feet, and the man cannot contain his excitement and joy, jumping and walking around, and clutching Peter and John. He goes with them into the temple loudly praising God, while still jumping and walking.

This causes a great stir among the people there, who recognize him from all of his years sitting at the gate begging, and a great crowd surrounds him, Peter and John. Peter then takes the opportunity to begin to share with the people about Jesus, and the atmosphere is electric.

And now, we arrive at chapter 4, where Peter and John quickly learn the truth of the saying that “No good deed goes unpunished.” Look with me beginning with verse 1.

4 The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ²They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.

Note the reason why this group of temple officials is upset with Peter and John. It’s not because they are teaching about Jesus, but that they are teaching in Jesus “the resurrection of the dead.” In particular, the Sadducees—who are mentioned in v. 1—would have been very disturbed by this because they did not believe in a resurrection of the dead. For them, there was no afterlife. But even more important was that such talk threatened the status quo. You see, the Sadducees tended to be wealthy and have significant land holdings. They were also very cooperative with the ruling Roman government. They worked very hard to make sure things stayed very calm and even-keeled in and around Jerusalem.

Talk of resurrection was anything but calm, though. For the common Jewish people, it brought to mind ideas of the Messiah—the one who was coming to save them—and of overthrowing the Romans. This often led to rioting and even revolt, and meant that the Romans would send in its armies to put down the rebellion, which meant monetary and political losses for the Sadducees. Any talk of resurrection was dangerous and needed to be squelched immediately, as far as the Sadducees were concerned.

³ They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.

The temple officials arrest Peter and John and rough them up—the words being translated as “seized” here mean to lay hands on, and believe me, they weren’t laying hands on them in prayer—and they throw them into a jail somewhere on or near the temple grounds. If we were reading this for the first time, this might make no sense to us because it falls out of pattern. If you’ll remember the last time there was a miraculous sign—that would be in chapter 2, when tongues of flame appeared to fall on each of the disciples and they spoke in many foreign languages to the Jews assembled in Jerusalem for Pentecost—Peter preached, a whole bunch of people believed in Jesus, and everyone was happy. But now the process is being interrupted. Peter isn’t even done preaching, and I can’t imagine that either he or John was too happy about getting the stuffing knocked out of them and being thrown in jail. We should be asking ourselves, as readers, “What’s going on here?”

⁴ But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

In spite of the Jewish leaders’ best efforts to put a halt to what was happening at the Temple, they cannot stop God. The Holy Spirit is able to use even an interrupted message to draw people to faith in

Jesus. And the number of people who come to faith isn't just 2,000. (Five thousand is the total of the 3,000 from Pentecost plus those from this interaction.) One commentator reminded me that the count of men included their families as well. So as incredible as having 2,000 individuals come to faith sounds, the reality is that it could have been 2,000 *families*.

⁵ The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶ Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. ⁷ They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Peter and John are forced to appear before the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish ruling body. It was made up of 70 leaders plus the High Priest. In many ways, it was the Supreme Court of the land for the Jews. The Sanhedrin met in a semi-circle, and Peter and John have been asked to face them. Imagine being surrounded by that many people—people you recognize and know have power and status—who have come together in opposition to you. Note especially some of the names listed. Do they sound familiar to you? Both Annas and Caiaphas played major roles in the conviction and crucifixion of Jesus. If they were willing to kill the Son of God, what is going to stop them from having two trouble-making Galileans murdered as well?

Note the question as well. Again, these men are not concerned at all with the healing, which makes you wonder just how unfeeling and unobservant these men were. Their concern was with the apostles' preaching about resurrection. They don't care what God has done as long as it doesn't interfere with their interests. The text is inviting us to contrast these "religious" leaders with Peter and John.

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ He is

" 'the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the capstone.'

¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Wow! Peter gave an answer we don't necessarily expect from him. In the Gospels, we read about a Peter who has great zeal, but also has a tendency to stick his foot in his mouth. Not here, though. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he provided a response that is thorough and moving. Let's look closer at it.

First, Peter did not actually answer the question he was asked. The Jewish leaders want to know by what authority he and John were preaching resurrection in the temple. Peter focuses on their desire for a name, and uses the opportunity to direct his audience to Jesus.

Second, Peter uses a play on words that we cannot see in English. At the end of v. 9, the Greek word that is translated as "healed" is "sozo." It just so happens that "sozo" is the same word being used at the end of v. 12, which is translated as "saved." In doing this, Peter uses the healing of the beggar—the

beggar was “saved” from his condition in the name of Jesus—to point to the far greater salvation that comes to all who call upon Jesus’ name in faith. Even more, though the Sanhedrin is worried about upheaval, rioting and destruction, we learn through Peter’s mini-sermon that Jesus brings quite the opposite. It is only through Jesus that one can truly have healing, wholeness and salvation.

Third, somehow the tables have been turned. Even though it was Peter and John who were on trial, Peter’s sermon actually puts the Sanhedrin on trial. It is the Jewish leaders who are guilty—guilty of crucifying Jesus—and their guilt is foretold in Ps. 118. Look how Peter personalizes the Scripture to his audience: Jesus is “the stone *you* builders rejected, which has become the capstone.” The Sanhedrin, the leaders and “builders” of the Jewish nation, was the very group who had Jesus crucified.

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ¹⁶ “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

In short, the Jewish leaders are stunned. Ordinary, everyday men who had been with Jesus and had no special training had spoken boldly, with eloquence and authority. And the Sanhedrin, the collection of supposedly the very best and smartest Jewish leaders, had no response. They could not deny what they had heard or seen. All they had left were threats.

¹⁸ Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. ²⁰ For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

²¹ After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

The Jewish leaders threaten Peter and John but the apostles are not swayed. Instead, they provide one more opportunity for “judgment.” In response to the threats, they essentially say, “Based on everything you’ve heard and seen this morning, which do you think is the better course of action for us: To obey you, or to obey God?” The Jewish leaders are forced to let Peter and John go with a warning because they cannot overcome the power and truth of what has been presented to them.

This is a great story, isn’t it? Unfortunately, like with all the great stories the Bible has for us, we can be tempted into a “that was then, this is now” mindset which keeps us from believing it has any real application for us. But God did not have these stories recorded just so that we can wonder over them in print. These stories are here to give us an indication of how God wants to work through us, today. Does that mean that all of us will heal someone, or that all of us will be dragged into court for talking

about Jesus? No. It does mean that God wants to work in and through us in the particular situations and circumstances he has placed us.

I believe there are three things in particular we can take away from this story this morning. First, this story reiterates the importance of us being willing instruments of the Holy Spirit. As we already know, Peter and John were not thought of as particularly smart or courageous people, and what we read of them in the Gospels confirms that picture of them. Yet, in the power of the Holy Spirit, they were party to a miraculous work of God in the name of Jesus, and they spoke mightily in the face of great opposition. The Holy Spirit can work through us in similar ways, but we need to be willing to let him. Many of you can relate to being in situations where you had the strong urge to say or do something out of your comfort zone, and instead of following through, you bailed. You said no to the Spirit. Unfortunately, we can say no to the Spirit, but when we do, we miss out on opportunities to be used by God in powerful ways to bless those around us and bring glory to him.

Second, this story shows us that when we allow the Spirit to work through us, he will aid us in providing the testimony and evidence necessary so that others can “judge for themselves.” This experience, in particular, demonstrated the truth of Jesus’ words to the apostles concerning the Spirit. In Luke 12:11-12, Jesus told them “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” In Acts 1:8, Jesus said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...” Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were able to provide testimony concerning their own experiences with the Savior, and provide evidence in the healing of the beggar and in God’s Word. Again, if we are willing, the Holy Spirit can do similar things through us. As I said before, this doesn’t necessarily mean that we are party to a healing, or that we make eloquent speeches. The Holy Spirit could work through us by bringing an important question to mind that we ask our friend or neighbor which moves that person closer to faith. The Spirit could inspire us to serve someone in a way that both blesses that person and demonstrates our faith. The Spirit could remind us of a verse or passage of Scripture that we share with another which encourages or touches that person. However the Spirit chooses to work in us, he will give us what we need for that moment.

Third, this story shows Peter and John, as representatives of the church, pointing others to the truth of Jesus. When called on the carpet before the Sanhedrin, Peter does not make the response about himself. The beggar isn’t healed because Peter is holy, or because of the special Bible study that Peter has been leading and participating in, or because of Peter’s advanced theological training in the art of “healing touch.” No, the beggar is healed in the name of Jesus for the purpose of pointing the temple crowd and the Jewish leaders to the far greater salvation that comes through faith in Jesus. Simply put, it is all about Jesus. Bethel and other churches have many programs designed to serve ourselves, others and help us grow in the knowledge and understanding of our faith. But if these efforts do not ultimately point us and others to Jesus, then we are not doing our job. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be his witnesses. Orienting ourselves toward him and pointing others to him should be the hallmark of everything we do individually and corporately.

Finally, I would be terribly remiss if I did not take Peter’s very well-preached sermon as an opportunity to make an invitation. In v. 12, Peter, referring to Jesus, tells the Sanhedrin, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Our world offers us many things to trust in to save us, from money to belongings to personal pleasure. But

none of those things last. They are spent, or turn to dust, or are fleeting, and all of them leave us longing for something more. That something more is Jesus. He called himself the Bread of Life and Living Water, and he promises to satisfy us in a way that nothing and no one else can. More than that, as we remembered through communion today, Jesus gave himself up for us, so that our sins might be forgiven, and we can be in relationship with God through him. If you have not placed your trust in Jesus, can I invite you to “judge for yourself” right now? You’ve heard some of the testimony about Jesus through the sermon and God’s Word this morning. The gathering of all those seated around you is the evidence: lives touched and changed through faith in Christ. He is ready and willing to bring wholeness and salvation to you even now.