

“Overcoming Fear”

Acts 4:1-22

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Introduction:

I think we might agree that from time to time most of us probably appreciate being at least a little bit scared. We can look to the movie industry, and we find that people sometimes enjoy being shocked by a scary scene in a scary movie. Some people like it, some people do not, and yet the movies continue to be made. When I was in Junior High School, I remember going over to a friend's house, and we watched the movie Poltergeist. There is a scene in that movie where a slab of meat is possessed and it is crawling across the kitchen counter. I am sitting on the couch with my hand hanging over the side, and just as the demon-possessed, maggot-invested meat is crawling across the counter, this person's dog sneaks up from behind the couch and licks my hand! I remember being so scared by that! And so we appreciate being frightened from time to time—there is a certain thrill to it.

And yet on the other hand, we also know that fear can be quite serious. Fear is a powerful force that has a way of changing our behavior—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. In our society, the study of fear has become quite scientific, and so (as scientists often do), they have developed many different names for all of the various fears that we might encounter. Fear itself is sometimes referred to as a phobia. We encountered one of the most famous phobias at our house yesterday as we were cleaning. Our little one came down the stairs and said that she would not be scrubbing the floor behind the toilet because she was afraid that there might be a spider back there. In my opinion, a spider would be the last thing I would be afraid of in that situation, but for many, a fear of spiders is very real. We refer to it as arachnophobia—made very famous by the Stephen Spielberg movie several years ago.

Sometimes we refer to claustrophobia, the fear of enclosed spaces. One of my personal nightmares is of being in a sleeping bag—and the bag suddenly extends for eternity in both directions and there is no way to get out. Perhaps we could refer to that as "sleepingbagophobia." Perhaps others are more familiar with agoraphobia, or the fear of wide open spaces, or acrophobia, the fear of heights. Perhaps some might be aware of something known as triskaidekaphobia, the fear of the number thirteen. Others might be aware of something known as gamophobia, the fear of marriage. There are literally hundreds if not thousands of other phobias, and the list gets longer almost every day. We live in a fearful society.

And sometimes fear is very good. When I put my kids to bed, I am afraid of stepping on something in the dark with my bare feet, and that fear makes me walk slowly and carefully through their bedrooms. That fear is well-grounded!

Unfortunately, though, Satan knows that we have a tendency to be afraid, and so Satan tries to use our fear against us to keep us from doing some of those things that we know we should be doing. The process is known as intimidation—the process of making someone afraid. As we face the challenge of telling the world about our faith in God, Satan will try to make sure that we are intimidated, that we are scared of speaking up when we should. And so the question for us is: **Will we give in to fear, or will we find a way to overcome that fear?**

This morning, I would like for us to conclude our series of three lessons surrounding the healing of the lame man in **Acts 3**, because as we wrap it up we are about to find that the apostles used this healing as an opportunity to overcome some serious intimidation.

Several weeks ago, you might remember that we looked at the healing itself. **»PPT»** We studied the question: What made the early church so effective at reaching out to those who were lost? We found, first of all, **»PPT»** that they saw a need and were open to being interrupted. Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray, but they took the time to notice the man who was calling out for their help. Secondly, we also learned that they addressed the situation head on **»PPT»**—they did not just pass by, but they paid careful attention. And then finally, they were willing to act on their concern **»PPT»** as they gave the man not what he wanted but what he really needed. The man was looking for money, but Peter and John went even further and healed him in the name of Jesus Christ.

And then last week, we looked at Peter's sermon, focused on the death of Jesus Christ. **»PPT»** When the man is healed, he starts leaping around and praising God, a crowd gathers, and then the man just latches on to Peter with all of his might. And at that point, Peter starts preaching to the crowd. He very clearly identified the sin that the people had committed. **»PPT»** He pointed out that they were personally responsible for murdering the Son of God on the cross. And by extension, Peter was addressing our sin as well. The Bible teaches that Jesus died for us, and so we are also personally responsible. Secondly, Peter very clearly communicated God's answer for our sin. **»PPT»** God's answer is that all of the prophecies about Jesus from the Old Testament are fulfilled in the cross. And then finally, Peter very clearly called for a response to the good news. **»PPT»** And as Peter points out, our response is that we are to turn away from our sins—we are to repent, we are to obey the gospel.

If you will, please turn with me to **Acts 4**. **»PPT»** In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1704**. And again, the account we are about to consider picks up just as the apostle Peter accuses the people of having murdered the Son of God. With that, we come to **Acts 4**, as we notice the reaction of the crowd to Peter's sermon. If you will, please look with me at **Acts 4:1-22**...

- 1 As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them,**
- 2 being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.**
- 3 And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening.**
- 4 But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.**
- 5 On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem;**
- 6 and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent**
- 7 When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?"**
- 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people,**
- 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well,**
- 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health.**
- 11 "He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone.**
- 12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."**
- 13 Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.**
- 14 And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply.**
- 15 But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one another,**
- 16 saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.**
- 17 "But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name."**
- 18 And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.**
- 19 But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge;**

²⁰ ***for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."***

²¹ ***When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened;***

²² ***for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.***

This morning, we may not know a lot about persecution in this nation yet, but we do face resistance. Satan would love for us to be afraid. He wants us to be intimidated. He wants us to be too scared to speak up. And so as we look back over these 22 verses, I would like for us to consider two ideas of encouragement that will help us to overcome fear when it comes to telling others about the word of God.

I. First of all, one of the most basic lessons we can learn from this chapter is that PERSECUTION WILL COME. »PPT»

And again, maybe we will never be beaten, maybe we will never be killed, and yet the Bible reassures us over and over again that if we are living faithfully as Christians that we will face resistance. The world will try to intimidate us into changing the way we believe. The world will try to keep us quiet.

As Christians, we know from experience that there are many things we can do for the Lord that do not bring on persecution. We can partake of the Lord's Supper. We can give a part of our income to support the Lord's work. We can attend a Sunday morning Bible class. We can come together to worship God. We can bring food to a sick neighbor. We can visit someone in the hospital.

And yet even in this nation, the minute we open our mouths and start telling people about the Lord, we often bring it on. When we start talking about the distinctive nature of the Lord's church, when we start talking about Jesus being the only way to salvation, our "enlightened" culture will turn on us in a heartbeat. And so even here in the United States of America, we should start by expecting resistance to the gospel message.

As we think back to **Acts 4** and the situation with Peter and John, I would have to assume that as these things are happening, they immediately think back to the words of Jesus in **Luke 21:12-15**, where Jesus said, ***"But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute."***

This does not give us an excuse to be rude when telling people about the Lord (since they are going to reject us anyway), but it does tell us to be prepared. Jesus never promised wealth or fame or power, but He guaranteed that His followers would face persecution.

And in the case of Peter and John, the resistance was truly intimidating. The Sanhedrin could be compared to our own Supreme Court. They were a group of seventy men—seventy of the most wealthy, most powerful, and most highly-educated men in all of Israel. Peter and John were not wealthy. They were not powerful. They were not highly-educated. The Bible tells us that they were commercial fishermen. They were regular, ordinary, common—they were basically ignorant in the eyes of the world. In **verse 13**, the Jewish leaders recognized that they were **"uneducated and untrained."** Literally, **"uneducated"** refers to being **"without letters."** It referred to those who had not been trained in reading and writing. The word **"untrained"** goes back to the Greek word for **"idiot."** These people were idiots! And so it would have been very easy for Peter and John to feel intimidated.

Peter and John were in deep trouble here. The same Jewish leaders who had killed the Lord were now asking Peter and John the same question they had asked of Jesus, **"Who gave you the authority to do these things" (Matthew 21:23)?** And when Peter and John came back with the name of Jesus, they were directly challenging the Sanhedrin's decision to crucify the Lord. These uneducated and untrained men were reminding the Jewish leaders, once again, that they had killed the Son of God.

And so in many ways Peter and John were basically asking for it. They did not defend themselves, but they walked right in and essentially gave the Sanhedrin all of the evidence they needed to crucify them just like they had done to Jesus just a few weeks earlier. And what a change had taken place with these two men. Just a few weeks earlier, Peter was outside this same Sanhedrin denying and swearing that he ever knew the Lord, but now he is a changed man! Now he is the one presenting the evidence.

And the evidence cannot be refuted! Did you notice that there is no discussion here about the healing? No one debates it! Notice in **verse 14**, when they saw the lame man who had been healed **"standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply."** They could not answer that! As the ruling body of Israel, they would have had all kinds of investigative tools at their disposal. They could have called in witnesses. They could have called in detectives. And yet even when they pull aside and talk among themselves, we find what they said in **verse 16**, **"What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it."** They knew it but they would not admit it! Several years earlier, one of their own, a man by the name of Nicodemus, came to Jesus by night and said, **"Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."** They knew the power was from God, but they could not deal with it, and so the only answer was to intimidate.

I find it especially interesting that they did not even argue with the resurrection. In **verse 10**, Peter referred to Christ as having been raised from the dead. And again, the Sanhedrin could not argue! They were the ones who had convinced the Romans to put guards at the tomb. They were the ones who had paid off the officials to say that the disciples had come and had secretly stolen the body. They knew that there was not an answer to the tomb being empty.

And so in response to their frustration with the truth, did you notice they were not upset with Peter and John for believing the way they did? They just wanted them to keep it quiet! And isn't that the pressure that we face today! The world does not care what we believe, as long as we keep it to ourselves! They want us to calm down. They want us to keep quiet. They want us to blend in. I would suggest, then, that the situation today is very similar to the way it was back then. Many people have decided that they will not believe, and in response to our faith they will do the best that they can to simply keep us quiet. First of all, then, we should expect some kind of persecution. When it comes to overcoming fear, we should almost look forward to it. As Jesus said in **Matthew 5:10-12**, ***"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."***

II. As we look back to our text for this morning, and as we continue to think about overcoming fear, we see a second word of encouragement as we are taught by example to PREACH JESUS WITH COURAGE.

»PPT»

If we had been there, we might have said to Peter and John, **"You know, now might be a good time to be afraid! Now would be a good time to come down with a good case of Sanhedrophobia. This is a dangerous situation. You need to update your will. You need to kiss your wives goodbye."** And yet fear is not what we see here. We see courage and boldness. Peter refuses to deny Jesus this time, but he speaks out instead. He goes on the offensive. He puts it right back to them, **"Now tell me again why you put us in jail—was it for healing this lame man who is standing right here? Shouldn't you be out there looking for real bad guys? Should we make him lame again—would that fix this problem? Have we killed someone (like you did)? Have we bribed anyone (like you did)? Have we committed a crime (like you did)? No! We healed a lame man! We did it in the name of Jesus. You killed Him, but He is back! Jesus is still doing what He always did—healing the sick, raising the dead, going around and doing good deeds. Jesus is back!"**

In **verse 11**, Peter does something that all of us can do—he takes his argument to the word of God! Peter quotes **Psalm 118:2**, and he applies it to Jesus. He makes it personal. And so the response to persecution is to keep on preaching the good news

that got him into trouble in the first place! The response to pressure or persecution is to bring out the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Later on, the apostle Paul would do the same thing. In **Philippians 1:12-13**, writing from prison, Paul said, **"Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else."** Can you imagine being a guard chained to the apostle Paul for an 8-hour shift! Paul could not keep quiet about it!

In the same way, Peter and John kept on preaching about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They rejected the temptation to compromise the gospel message. They did not tone it down. According to **verse 12**, **"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."** There is no other name. This is an absolute. Our culture finds it offensive, but there is no need to apologize for it.

In fact, we are told in **verse 13** that Peter spoke with **"confidence."** This word has an interesting background. Literally, it means that Peter was speaking with **"freedom of speech."** Peter was speaking freely. Peter was not holding back, but he was speaking with courage.

And even when the Sanhedrin came back with a command to never teach it again, they put it right back out there! The Bible says that Peter and John answered and said to them, **"Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."** Peter and John knew that the power was in the gospel message. If you flip ahead to the end of the next chapter, we find that the Sanhedrin has the apostles thrown in jail again, and starting partway through **verse 40**, the Bible says, **"...and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."**

Many years later, perhaps Peter was thinking of this when he wrote **1 Peter 4:16**, **"...if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name."**

Conclusion & Invitation:

Thankfully, even though this chapter includes the first real persecution against the church, it is rather positive overall. Did you notice in **verse 4** that even as Peter and John are in jail, the number of men in the church increases to 5,000? Remember, at the end of the previous chapter, the number was 3,000 total. So including women, in

the space of just a few weeks, the church has grown from 3,000 to probably close to 10,000. Someone has said that the key to church growth is to throw the preachers in jail.

And then at the end of our section (in **verse 21**), did you notice that all the people were glorifying God for what had happened? Several years ago, we studied what happens next—after Peter and John are released, they go back to the others and the entire congregation goes to God in prayer. And in that prayer, they ask God for more courage!

As we think about what we have been looking at over the past few weeks, we need to challenge ourselves not to leave here this morning without being changed and challenged by the word of God. The early Christians paid attention to the needs of outsiders. The early Christians told the world that they were lost in sin. They told the world what they needed to do to be saved. The world pushed back, but the early Christians kept on preaching and teaching the word of God without compromise. Over this next week, let us find a way to follow their example. Let's do what they did. Let us think of a friend, or a relative, or a neighbor, and let us say something about Jesus. And if we are afraid, let's pray about that.

As it is, **"...there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."** The good news is that Jesus died for our sins, He was buried, and He was raised up on the third day. We obey the good news when we turn away from sin and when we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you are ready to obey the gospel, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

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