

Courage Under Fire

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[0:00] As we start this morning, I want you to imagine yourself in a room filled with influential people who hold your future in their hands. As a matter of fact, they hold over you life and death.

And they give you a choice to stay quiet about your faith in Jesus or face severe consequences. What would you do?

Would you keep quiet in order to keep the peace? Or would you stand tall and proclaim your faith in Jesus Christ, come what may?

Well, welcome to the reality of Peter and John in Acts chapter number 4. That's exactly where we find these two men standing before the religious rulers of their day.

And they have the option of remaining quiet, keeping the peace, and being able to go about their daily lives.

[1:06] Or stand tall, stand for the truth, and do what they know is right. Now, this same Peter, who is the one that is proclaiming his faith in Christ, is the same one who just a few weeks ago denied the Lord Jesus three separate times.

And in front of the Sanhedrin, this very same group that put Jesus Christ to death is where we see Peter and John today. So today we dive into an unbelievable story of courage.

A story that challenges us. An account that confronts us with the reality of living in a world today that is against God. And is more so against Jesus Christ.

Today's message, courage under fire, will take us into the very heart of this conflict. And I believe force us to come face to face with the choices that you and I have every single day of our life.

Do we be vocal about the reality and the truth of Jesus Christ? Or do we remain silent? Maybe out of fear, fear of what people might think.

[2:25] Fear out of what people may choose to do to us. Or just simply because it's easier not to open up our mouths. Are we choosing what is easy and popular over what is right and over what is true?

Now in a world that we're living in that increasingly pressures us to conform to its mold, will we stand for our faith?

Will we stand for the Lord Jesus Christ when we are under pressure? So let's journey together and see what God has to reveal to us today through Acts chapter 4 in the account of Peter and John as they stand before the Sanhedrin.

And these religious rulers who are going to recognize their boldness. They're going to identify them with Jesus. They're going to try to silence them.

And then we're going to have the bold proclamation that Peter and John, as they tell them, should we obey God or should we obey you?

[3:32] So let's take a look. First of all, we see that when they stood before these religious leaders, that they were recognized for something. When you and I speak up, we are going to be noticed.

And the world is going to notice our boldness. Let's take a look. Starting with Acts chapter 4, we read together verse number 13. Now when they saw, this is the religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, the group that were there, the same group that had sentenced Jesus to death.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled.

Who are these guys? And they realized that they had been with Jesus. Verse 13 shows us that the Sanhedrin was astounded by Peter and John's boldness.

After all, Peter and John were ordinary fishermen. They were not professional scribes. They weren't authorized ministers of the Jewish religion.

[4:42] They hadn't been ordained. None of the religious leaders had laid hands on these men and say, you know, go forth and teach. These were just ordinary guys.

And the Sanhedrin were astounded that they were able to speak the way they did. They were disciples. They were followers of this man, Jesus, who they knew came from Nazareth. And in their minds, he was dead. So what more could he do? He wasn't even around. And so they figured we need to silence these guys.

So the council took notice of the courage of Peter and John, just like they take note of you and they take note of me when we talk about Jesus and when we are sure of our faith and say that this is what God did in my life and this is what God can do in your life.

And so they took account. They took note of their boldness. They took note of their words and it all added up to a tough decision for these religious leaders.

[5:56] It reminds me of the boldness of Malala Yousafzaj, a young girl who stood against the cultural norms of her society and stood to fight for the rights of women in their Taliban-ruled country of Pakistan.

And because of her standing up for the rights of young girls just to simply get an education, the Pakistani Taliban shot her.

Actually, she was shot in the head, but she survived. She was only 15 at the time when this happened. When she was 17, she became the youngest ever Nobel Prize laureate in history. And she continued to be vocal about the rights of these women in Taliban-led countries. And she was bold enough to stand up for something that was just simply right.

And so do we have that kind of boldness? Do we have that kind of passion when we know something is right, that we're willing to go to the ends of the earth and we are willing to stake everything on what is true and on what is right?

[7:20] So like Peter and John and Malala, are we prepared to stand boldly for Jesus Christ in a world that doesn't like to hear Jesus, in a world that would like to hush us, in a world where social media or the powers that be try to silence those who talk about Jesus and say that we are spewing hate speech because we talk about the exclusivity of Jesus Christ and we talk about what the Bible teaches that is right and what the Bible teaches that is wrong.

So they recognize the boldness of these disciples. And then they identified Peter and John with Jesus. It's like you guys are followers of Jesus.

When you and I are vocal about Jesus, people will know who we stand for. Don't be unequivocal. We stand for Jesus and we stand for God's Word.

Take a look at verses 14 through 16 in Acts chapter 4 and seeing the man who had been healed standing by them. So here's proof.

Proof positive that in the name of Jesus, this man was healed. What was the response of these religious leaders? They were silenced.

[8:44] They couldn't refute the miracle that took place. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council.

So give us an aside. So they led them out and then they started conferring together, conferred among themselves. Verse 15.

Here's what they said. What shall we do to these guys? Because we know that a notable miracle has taken place.

And it has been done through them. It is evident for everyone who dwells in Jerusalem. Everybody knew the guy that stood at the beautiful gate every day.

And he asked for money as people walked through the gate and were going into the courtyard. We can't refute it. This guy was crippled. Now he walks.

[9:39] They said they did it in the name of Jesus. So they were in a pickle. If we beat them, then the crowd is going to turn against us.

We can't refute what happened, but we can't let this, we can't just let them keep on because we will lose our popularity. So the Sanhedrin finds themselves in a tough spot.

They couldn't deny the miracle that Peter and John had done in the name of Jesus. So they were trapped. The crowd saw the lame man walk. As a matter of fact, the guy was standing right beside them as they stood before the council.

And it's like today when skeptics cannot deny the power of God that's working in your life. They can't deny your transformed life.

And I've heard people's testimony where they said, yeah, I knew you before you came to know Jesus. And, man, you weren't much then. Or, man, you were pretty bad.

[10:41] Because, yeah, we used to run around together. What changed? You know, it can't just be that you went to church because, you know, it's been a while and we just figured it wouldn't last. It wouldn't take.

I've heard a lot of people say that. You know what? We just figured it wouldn't take. And given a few weeks, you'd be right back with us. What is it that made such a difference?

So the skeptics will see that there's a difference in your life. They can't refute it. They will try to maybe whisk it away. They'll try to reject it.

Or maybe they'll try to rationalize it away like these religious leaders are doing. Don't get discouraged. Don't be discouraged. Let's continue to faithfully witness, continue to faithfully stand up for Jesus Christ, God's transformative work in us and around us.

Don't give up. Then what do we see next? They try to silence them. They said, we can't do anything to these guys because then the crowd's going to turn against us.

[11:49] We want to retain our popularity. We don't want to lose any points in the polls. We want to stay popular. And so they couldn't beat them.

They couldn't kill them. They couldn't do any of the things that they really wanted to do. And so here is what they did. Verse number 17 and 18. Here's what they said.

But so that it spreads no further among the people. We don't want this to gain any traction. And so here's what we're going to do.

Let us severely threaten them. Let us threaten them within an inch of their life that if you keep on spouting out this Jesus stuff, then it's not going to be pretty.

So they threatened them. And from now on that they speak to no man in this name. So they called them back in. Hey, bring them back in. They called them and commanded them not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus.

[12:58] This is probably what they said. You can probably still have your meetings. You guys can probably still meet together. Just don't talk about Jesus. What kind of Christianity is that?

You know, you can have fun together. Just don't talk about Jesus. So the council, feeling threatened, decided to command Peter and John to stop speaking about Jesus.

Here's the thing. The council wasn't looking for the truth. Their hearts weren't open to learning, is this something from God or not?

Instead, they looked for some way to avoid the truth. They figured, if we can shut these men up, if we can keep them, if we can silence them, if we can keep them from talking about Jesus, maybe this thing will die on its own.

It will die a natural death, is probably what they're thinking. So this meant threatening the apostles, forbidding them to talk about Jesus.

[14:01] So this official sentence shows how much the enemy fears the gospel. Think about it. Satan is afraid of when you and I speak the truth of God's word.

Because he knows the power that the truth holds. He knows that God's word is living and it's powerful and it's even sharper than a two-edged sword.

And when you read all of the historical documents about back when they were still fighting with swords and shields, what the men did, there was a lot of nerves that were involved before the men would go into a shield wall and just literally hack at one another.

And a lot of times what they would do is they would, those nerves were taken care of, they would sharpen their swords. And they spent, you know, they would spend sometimes hours sharpening their swords.

You can imagine how sharp those things were when they went into battle. God's word is living. It's powerful. And it's even sharper than the sharpest sword that a person would use in battle.

[15:19] That's God's word. And that's why Satan is afraid of it. But sad to say, Satan has succeeded in silencing so many followers of Jesus. And so we've become the silent witness.

What does show them by your life? Well, what does the Bible say about how people will come to know the Lord? By hearing the word. That's how people come to know Jesus, by hearing the word of God.

And when we speak the word of God, that's when things happen. Even the existential philosopher Albert Camus, here's what he said about Christianity. What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out loud and clear in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could arise in the heart of the simplest man.

So what's expected of us? If we believe something so strongly, we're going to talk about it. Because if you're not passionate about something, you might be, well, you know, I don't know.

But if you believe something so strongly, you're going to be the one that is going to speak out. So the question is, will we allow the voices of the world to mute out our witness for Jesus?

[16:38] Are we going to be like Peter and John and say, we're not going to let you silence us because God says we are to speak about Jesus?

See, the council didn't want the gospel to spread. And yet, what happened? It spread anyway. From 120, praying in that upper room with the men and the women in Acts chapter 1, the church increased to more than 3,000 on the day of Pentecost.

And then we have what happened next, at least 2,000 more trust Christ. So we now have over 5,000 people who've trusted Christ and on and on and on.

This week, I got an email from Voice of the Martyrs. I was telling Catherine this week they were offering a free book. I will not pass up a free book. And so I ordered the book.

And what we hear so often with ministries like Voice of the Martyrs who are followers of Jesus in countries where it's illegal to be a Christian, and very often people lose their lives because of their faith in Jesus Christ, instead of silencing their witness, what happens in so many of these countries?

[18:02] When someone is martyred for their faith, it literally, the gospel begins to spread like fire. You ever started a, I lit a fire in the backyard.

We have a little burn pile. And it, I wasn't really that careful and I hadn't gotten my hose out like I normally do. And so I lit the fire and all of a sudden, it started spreading.

So I had to get the hose out and fortunately it didn't get out more than about a foot around the place. But that's the way the gospel works. If you try to put it out, it may spread even faster.

And that's exactly what happens so often. So these religious leaders try to stamp out the gospels, try to stamp out the followers of the way, but instead more and more people came to know Jesus Christ as their Savior.

So in the days that followed, Acts chapter 5, verse 14, chapter 6, verse 1, verse 7, believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes of men and women, the Bible says.

[19:07] So, did it work? Nope, it didn't work. Can't silence followers of Jesus when they're passionate about the word. So what was Peter and John's response?

So here they are, they're standing before these influential men, they have the power over life and death, and they said, don't talk about Jesus.

Don't let us ever hear you again talking about Jesus. What was their response? Verses 19 and 20. But Peter and John answered, here is what he said to them.

This is the men who were, here's for the man that wasn't there at the cross.

We know John was. Peter probably was not. Peter, the one who denied Jesus three times. But Peter and John answered them, they were in one accord.

[20:09] Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than God, you judge. You decide. Consider the tactfulness that they, the tact that they used.

You men believe in God. So we want you to use your big Old Testament brain, and we want you to decide, should we listen to you, or should we listen to God?

You're a religious leader who stands for God. How do you answer that question? You cannot unless you trap yourself. Imagine what they'd have said, no, you need to listen to us instead of God.

That wouldn't have flown very far. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. Peter and John's response was a profound one.

They refused to be silent, choosing rather to obey God than man. So today, we stand up for our faith, come what may.

[21:25] We stand up for Him, and it may come with challenges. It might mean facing ridicule. It might mean facing exclusion. It might mean even facing persecution.

If you post something up on social media, it might get taken down. Well, that's okay. We can still be vocal on other channels. We can still be vocal face-to-face. We can still be vocal wherever we meet someone.

But we have to be careful. You know, it's popular today. It's been popular for a few years to promote various causes. By defying the government.

We have seen many who will picket abortion clinics, many who will picket certain other places of ill repute.

They will do what they can, or they will defy the government in certain ways, and defending their actions based on their conscience.

[22:25] But I want us to understand this. We don't have the luxury of defying the government just because it goes against our conscience. We don't have the luxury of defying the government just because it goes against our conscience.

Because what can our conscience do to us? Our conscience sometimes can lead us astray. So we don't base decisions on conscience.

We base them on what? We base them on the Word of God. Because we have so many other examples of conscientious objectors in Scripture.

They would include, among others, the Jewish midwives in Exodus chapter 1, Moses' parents, Hebrews chapter 11, Daniel in Daniel chapter 1, verse 6, and also the three Hebrew young men along with him in Daniel chapter number 3.

When you examine the records, when you look, you see these objectors had a clear message from God that couldn't be questioned. They knew what was right from God's Word.

[23:40] So, if you want to defy the authorities, you better have a clear word from God. If you want to defy the authorities, it better be more than just, I don't think this is right.

I don't think that's right. What does the New Testament say about authorities? Obey them. Unless it causes you to do something that is directly in defiance to the prescribed Word of God.

And so, unless you have something to show that this is what God says, be careful. And what we notice in all of these conscientious objectors in Scripture, you know, they didn't do it defiantly, shaking their fist in their face.

What did Daniel do? Do you remember? Put us to the test. He didn't just say, no, you can't force me. He just said, okay, let's test God.

Let's see how this will work. And you see the others. They defied their government of their day in certain ways that was, I believe, what honored God.

[24:48] They did what was right in a way that still honored God. They acted with respect. They acted with courtesy. Even when they defied the law of their day. So, we're called to have courageous faith, standing up for what is right, for what God says.

And we know that, we know whom we serve, and we prioritize God's Word over our ever-changing society. Because what society, what happened in the Old Testament, what happened in Sodom and Gomorrah, what happened in all of these other countries that God chose to judge?

They did what they thought was right in their own eyes. They called right wrong, and they called wrong right. And that's what's happening in our country today. We have to be careful. And we have to be sure that we stand up for what is right, no matter what everyone around us is saying.

Be bold. There's only one way to God, and it's Jesus Christ. There are many who are saying there are many ways to God. God's Word said, Jesus said, I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life. No man comes to the Father except through me. Then we have the release, and we have the threat. So, when they had further threatened them, so they couldn't refute what they said.

[26:11] Do we follow God, or do we obey you? What do they do? They just threaten them more. They threaten them further. They let them go, finding no way of punishing them because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done.

For the man was over 40 years old whom this miracle of healing had been performed. So, despite the threats, Peter and John were released because the people were praising God, because this man was healed in the name of Jesus.

And they were excited about what had happened, because they had no real case to offer. They were released. The council could only threaten them, and they let them go.

I mean, after all, after you see a miracle take place before you, as well as the approving public around you, you've got to be careful what you do. You've got to tread carefully. And that's exactly what these religious leaders did.

So, by standing firm in our faith, we may face some repercussions. By standing strong in our faith, talking about Jesus, saying, the Bible says this, or thus says the Lord, there may be some repercussions in our lives.

[27:28] We need to be asking God, just as the early believers did, God, give us the strength to stand firm. Give us boldness to go back out and talk about Jesus.

Give us boldness to go back out and name the name of Jesus. God is with us. What did Jesus say at the end of His great commission? And lo, I'm with you, even to the end of the age.

I'll be with you. When you stand before kings and magistrates and rulers, and you're not sure what you're going to say, don't worry. I'll give you the words. I'll be with you.

I'll stand right there with you. And we have the luxury, we have the power of the Holy Spirit residing within us. So, as we've journeyed through this snapshot of Peter and John, then their courageous faith of them standing up for what's right, standing up for what they knew was right, rather than what was popular, our challenge today is each one of us to live a life of courage.

each one of us to stand up for what God's Word specifically says to be a voice of truth in a world that prefers to believe a lie. Stand up for truth in a world that prefers to do what they feel is right, rather than what is right, and in opposition to what is wrong, and to stand up for what God's Word says.

[28:55] So, our next steps this week. Number one, have some courageous conversations. Maybe you are talking to someone who maybe does not agree with you.

Now, our job is not to win the argument. It's never our job to win an argument, because you might win the argument and lose the person. And so, rather, share your faith with them.

Share why you believe what you believe. Just simply quote, or just simply read God's Word to them. Express Christ's love. Show grace to them.

It might be uncomfortable, but it's an exercise in courage, and I think it's an exercise in authenticity. Secondly, choose right over easy. Choose right. Choose right over easy.

Identify an area in your life. It might be an area in your personal life. It might be an area in your public life where, or at work, maybe in your relationships, where you've just simply taken the easy road.

[30:02] You've taken the easy path. Ask God to give you the strength to do, to choose right over easy. And then number three, celebrate God's work.

This morning, in my reading through God's Word, and reading through Psalms, and he was talking about really shouting out the goodness of God to the world.

Shout out His goodness to the world so the world knows who God is and what God can do in our life. This could be a, this could be just simply sharing what God's done in your life, sharing when maybe God answered a prayer in your life.

By celebrating and by proclaiming the work of God in your life, you're choosing to voice your faith and stand against the attempts to mute God's Word today.

So let's stand strong. Let's have courage under fire. Let's pray. Father, this morning, we are so, so very thankful for who You are.

[31:09] We thank You that You've given us the example of Peter and John who were willing to stand up and defy these men who held their life in their hands and asked a very bold question.

Who should we obey? You or God? To which the Sanhedrin couldn't answer. So Father, we ask today that You would give the boldness to live out our faith, give us the boldness and the courage to proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ even when it's not popular, even when we may see persecution from it.

So we thank You, dear God, today. Help us to live out a life that honors and pleases You in every area of our life. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.