

# Acts

## Acts 4:23-31 - Dealing with opposition the Holy Spirit way

In **Acts Chapter 4** Peter and John were in deep trouble with the Jewish temple administrators and religious leaders for “proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead” (verse 2). But why should they be in trouble, when the amazing healing of a 40 year old cripple to new life had provided clear and wonderful evidence that God had raised Jesus from the dead - and given him the power to raise others from their dead lives as well (verses 7-10)?

And the religious leaders admitted the evidence was undeniable too (verse 16), but what else **could** they do when the healed cripple was “standing there” in person with Peter and John (verse 14)? And being Jews, whose entire history was sprinkled with God doing remarkable miracles for important reasons, this healing was clearly **another sign** that God was up to something miraculous again, and it was their job as God’s representatives to get the nation on board in support of it. But they did the exact opposite; they “commanded Peter and John **not** to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (verse 18).

This was awful, because as God’s legally certified representatives in Israel they had refused to accept an obvious miracle as having anything to do with God’s will and purpose. And that now faced Peter and John with a dilemma as well, because they weren’t certified in Israel as God’s chosen priesthood or religious leaders, so would **they** now be opposing God’s will and purpose by **refusing** to obey the command to not speak or teach in Jesus’ name?

It’s at this point the Holy Spirit gives us vital clues as to how to deal with people who oppose us, or cannot accept what we believe, or suddenly turn on us, which could include members of our own family too (as Jesus mentioned in Luke 21:16). We need these clues, therefore, because - as we covered last time - there will be opposition, and here it is happening in Acts 4 only days after the church began, so clearly the Holy Spirit wants us to know how to handle it.

Do we come out fighting, for instance, like the church pastors who refused to obey the government regulations during the pandemic? Or are there times when **civil disobedience by Christians is justified** and it’s **not** wrong refusing to obey those in authority, including one’s parents, or those in authority in the church? Peter in Acts 4, for instance, was up against the religious authorities that God himself had chosen for Israel, so how did he deal with them?

In short, Peter did not back down from facts, but nor was he aggressive or condemning in his attitude either. And in answer to the question, “Is civil disobedience justified at times for Christians?” - the answer is a resounding “Yes.” Yes, we can refuse to obey a command by a constituted God-chosen authority, because that’s exactly what Peter and John did in Acts 4.

But **WHY** and **HOW** Peter and John did it is what the Holy Spirit is also pointing out here. The “WHY” was simple, because as Peter says in **verse 20**, “we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

And if I’d just been inspired to say to a cripple, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk,” and up he stood and started jumping around, I imagine I couldn’t stop speaking about it too - because here was living proof of Jesus being alive, and **what he was alive for**: He’d raised a broken man from a dead, hopeless existence to a new life.

And there we have a great definition of the gospel and why we Christians can’t stop preaching it. It’s because **the gospel is a life-changer**. Read or talk about what God sent Jesus to us for, which in both his early ministry and now here in Acts as well, is all about healing hopelessly broken lives, and it’s going to create a response. In **verse 4**, for example, 5,000 Jews suddenly realized what Jesus was all about, and they were thrilled.

One has to wonder, therefore, what’s going on in the heads of those who resist the gospel and the clear evidence proving it, and especially in the heads of religious people who resist it too. Because what’s their religion and all its rules and rituals all about instead? What’s the point of any religion, including Christianity - and throw in why we Christians go to church too - if it isn’t all about healing broken lives, including our own?

And when there’s clear evidence of broken lives being healed, it makes our answer very simple to those who oppose us as Christians. To us the Christian message is like nothing else on this planet, because it gets right inside human beings where all that hurt and brokenness, bitterness and rage, fear and guilt, shame and selfishness, and the awful feeling of emptiness that can never be satisfied, reside. But read or hear the gospel and the healing begins. And we Christians know that from personal experience, so why on earth would we stop preaching what God sent Jesus for, or stop wanting others to be healed too?

So, “No, we’re not going to stop preaching the gospel,” no matter what the authorities in this world tell us to do. But notice **HOW** Peter replies to those in authority who tried to stop him....

In **Acts 3:17** he says, “Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance (in having Jesus killed), as did your leaders.” Peter calls them “**brothers**,” which in reality they were, because Peter himself had “acted in ignorance” too when he’d denied knowing Jesus three times. Ignorance was no excuse for those Jewish religious leaders, of course, because they should have known better, but Peter is not acting all superior now that HE knows better. He acknowledges he was in the same boat of ignorance they were in. And that’s how he begins his defence. He’s saying, “Well, at one time I didn’t understand this either.”

And then Peter’s reply in **Acts 4:9** too, when he says, “If we’re being called to account today for an **act of kindness** shown to a cripple...” And isn’t that a great definition of what Christianity is all about? It’s about being kind to people, because that’s what motivates God’s actions too. It’s the “riches of his kindness” that “leads us to repentance,” **Romans 2:4**. It’s not threats, or fear of hell and punishment; it’s recognizing - in what God sent Jesus to us for - that he deeply loves us and wants all of us to be with him for eternity, and he’s doing whatever it takes to get us there. So this was Peter’s second line of defence to those who opposed him. He’s asking them, “Please tell me what is so wrong about what we preach, when all we want is people being healed.”

It’s interesting, then, that the Holy Spirit focuses Peter’s mind on what’s really behind the healing of this cripple. At heart and core it was a visible witness to **God’s kindness**. It sets the tone of Jesus’ ministry for all Christian activity in the future. So, big things are being taught here in Acts, that focus our minds on what Christianity is really all about. As Christians all we want is to see people’s lives raised from the dead to new life.

And if people still oppose us, despite clear evidence in our lives that we only want the best for people, as does God, we have Peter’s example, again, in **Acts 4:19**. He doesn’t stamp his feet, yell, or threaten those who oppose him with hell. Instead, he calmly and respectfully puts the ball right back in their court by saying, “Whether it’s right in God’s eyes to listen to you rather than to God, you decide,” and then, “No disrespect meant, but for us obeying God comes first.” Or as a question Peter’s asking, “What would you do if you were us, and you were faced with obeying God or people?”

This was Peter’s third line of defence, and it’s a clear cut case of civil disobedience all right - BUT, note - **he was being thoroughly CIVIL about it too**. He called them ignorant, yes, but he didn’t act all self-righteous and superior. He expressed his dismay too, that they were calling him on the carpet for “an act of kindness,” and for resisting obvious evidence of Jesus being raised from the dead, but at no point did he condemn them.

And when it became obvious that all the authorities saw was their power being threatened, and they weren't the least bit interested in evidence or reason in their obsession to crush the Christian message, Peter did not threaten an insurrection or a massive protest march. He, along with John, simply turned to their fourth line of defence in **verse 23**: "They went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them."

And the response of the church was an amazing prayer, harking back to what the Holy Spirit inspired King David to write in **Psalms 2:1-2**, when David was being opposed by unreasonable people too. So instead of the church members venting their anger and frustration, they prayed David's question from the Psalm in **Acts 4:25**: "Why is it that nations get so upset and angry, and waste so much time with their futile, pointless plots and plans?" And what a question that is when we see the same thing happening today, with whole nations obsessed with crushing Christianity by open violence or by more devious means, like making same sex marriage legal, or requiring acceptance of genders and non-genders beyond male and female, which are clearly anti-Christian.

The church then prayed David's **answer** to his "Why?" question too, in **verse 26**: it's because the powers of this world are spoiling for a fight against everything God stands for and sent Jesus for, because if Jesus truly was raised from the dead, then he is the greatest threat to their power. The powers of this world, therefore, are scared, and the church members knew it. They knew, for instance, that "Herod and Pontius Pilate met with both Gentiles and Israelites to conspire against God's anointed servant Jesus," **verse 27**. And they also knew, **verse 28**, it was only by God's "will and power deciding beforehand that it would happen that way," meaning God hadn't been under any threat at all. All that clever conspiring against Jesus, then, was an exercise in total futility.

And so, therefore, was all this resistance to the church in Acts 4, and the church members knew that too, which is why they prayed in confidence in **verse 29**: "They're at it again, Lord, so take a good look at their threats today as well and power up your servants to continue speaking your word with great boldness" - because as that word goes out people will be "healed" by it, **verse 30**, and "miraculous signs and wonders are (and will be) performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

And there you have it, the purpose of Christianity in a nutshell; it's the miraculous healing of broken lives continuing, that, in turn, provides clear evidence that Jesus is alive and this is what he's alive for. And because the church believes that and won't stop preaching it, even under threat of jail or death, Jesus then responds, **verse 32** - in their case by shaking the building, and in our case, well, who knows....?