

BRING IT ON!!!
Acts 4.1-31

Today as we continue with our sermon series in Acts
I want to talk about persecution, the persecutors, and the persecuted.

Once upon a time I was a teacher.

I worked hard at it, tried to put the students interest first,
and always tried to do the right thing (of course I defined the right thing).
But I must confess, things didn't always go smooth.
I did have my share of troubles, especially with principal and superintendent.

I had little meetings in the principals office about once a week
and in the superintendents office about once a month.
I never asked for to many of those meetings.

Now as I think about it, when I headed down to the office,
there were times I'd think, "oh what now," or "here we go again"
or even "poor little me, why are they always picking on me."

But most of the time I didn't dread those meetings.
Would you believe I actually looked forward to them?

I had a mission. I was on a crusade.
I was excited. I was empowered.
I had had a definite purpose for what I had said or done,
whatever it was, and besides, I was right.

Being right or being on the right side brings on a boldness, right?
I remember even thinking, "Alright, whatever it is, bring it on!"

Now, I know it might surprise you to hear that I wasn't always right.
And I'd like to say I always had good and godly intentions,
but that might be a stretch, too.

I know my little "persecution" pales in comparison, actually it is pathetic
in comparison to the pain of persecution many people experience in our world today.

Today in our world many, many people are persecuted.
Christians around the world are persecuted.
Everyday on the Internet I receive a dozen stories of people
tortured, mutilated, or murdered because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

My grandfather saw his brother killed by Turks in the late 1800's.
He came to this country to escape religious persecution.

And yet in our country today Christianity itself is under attack.
The Bible has been removed from the schools.
The 10 commandments have been removed from the court rooms,
nativity sets have been removed from public lawns,
Christmas has been removed from Merry,
and I was just told yesterday that, some Christmas trees
are being removed from Christmas office parties.
And we know that prayer has been removed from public forums.

There is an ongoing attempt to remove “under God” from the pledge of allegiance
and “In God we trust” from our money.”

On “pray at the poles” a week or so ago,
there was a teacher in Arizona not allow to pray,
not allowed to even be with the students at the flag pole of their school.
But with a confidence in who she was and whose she was,
she walked by and gestured with thumbs up.

Some of our youth have been called vulgar names, put down, made fun of,
taunted, and teased because they have expressed their faith.

There is also a subtle self-inflicted persecution and purge of the faith.
We’re letting all of our busy-ness remove God from our calendars.

I think there will more and more persecution in the days ahead.
Some will continue to be subtle and more not so subtle.

And the interesting thing is-God’s not going to just deliver us from it.
At least not right away.

God’s going to use it.
God’s going to use it to make us stronger and for His glory.

We see that in our story today.
The disciples had a mission, a God-given mission with God-given motives.
They challenged the authority of the day
but they, unlike me, did it with God-given inspiration and instruction.

They acted not with self-righteous confidence and courage,
but with God-given confidence and courage.

They refused to be victims but in the name of Jesus Christ, they claimed victory.

Let’s check it out.

Luke ends and Acts begins with Jesus, preaching, teaching, and eating with his disciples. It is an experience to just be around Jesus, they could feel the power.

We read in the second chapter of Acts that not only did they feel that power, they were given that power, they were filled with that power.

On the day of Pentecost people said they were drunk. Peter said, no, just filled with the Holy Spirit, and then took the opportunity to preach.

In the third chapter filled with God's presence and power, they continued to use, actually God is using them, and there is a big difference. God uses them to heal a crippled beggar, and they use that opportunity to preach again.

Pastor Eldon told that story and brought us to the end of chapter three last week, so we pick up the story in chapter four, and guess what, Peter and John still preaching.

Have you ever been working, minding your own business, the authorities show up, and arrest you?

No of course you haven't, but that is what happened to Peter and John. Chapter 4, 1-2, *"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. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead."*

Now the Sadducees Party was pretty much in power. One of the planks of their platform basically said, "there was no such thing as a resurrection from the dead."

Well, the resurrection of the centurion's son, Lazarus, and Jesus himself pretty much kicks that leg out from under their proverbial seats.

But I don't think that was the real issue. Jesus had threatened them and in their fear they killed him.

This new movement called Christianity threatened them. We are told the movement had moved from 120 to over 5000.

So these religious leaders had Peter and John arrested and arraigned. And Peter and John, along with the cripple man, had to appear before the Sanhedrin, Israel's ruling body.

The Sanhedrin operated like the Jewish Mafia trying to control the economic, social, political, and religious lives of the people.

Interestingly enough, they were being tried in the very same place Jesus had been tried the night before his death, about two month before.

That night Peter stood outside in the courtyard and denied Jesus three times. This day he and John would stand inside and defend the name of Jesus. I can just see Peter and John thinking, "Bring it on, boys."

And the religious leaders do, they provide the perfect opportunity. The scripture mentions that the high priests, Annas, Caiaphas, and other members of their family in verse 7, ask, "*By what power or what name did you do this?*"

Peter steps up and says, "*It is in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth... "whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man before you healed."*

And then in verse 12 Peter adds about three exclamation points and a dozen periods, "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

Can you see the members of the Sanhedrin rolling their eyes? Bottom line for them, the crippled guy is healed, the people are praising God, if they punish these two country bumpkins, they might start a riot.

So, they're thinking, let's cut our losses, give them a slap on the wrist, tell them not to do it again, and send them on their way.

So they tell Peter and John, **they commanded** Peter and John not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Verse 19, "*But Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'*"

These disciples were persecuted but they were able to stay loyal.

They stayed loyal because they had a personal experience of the risen savior they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they loved God.

They heard the voice of God above all the clamor and clanking of the promises of convenience and comfort.

They were able to say no to the voices that try to seduce and manipulate, tempt and tell them who they were, what they were to do, who they were to be, and what they had to buy.

They listen but were able to speak from their heart to God's heart.

Let's eavesdrop on their prayer after Peter and John were released, (verse 24 and following),

"Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them."

You spoke by the Holy Spirit...

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?"

The kings of the earth take their stand

and the rulers gather together against the Lord

and against his anointed one..."

(verses 29-30), *"Now, Lord consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*

It's interesting-they didn't ask God to wave his magic wand.

They did pray for everything to just be ok.

They didn't pray for their struggles to be taken away.

And they didn't pray for themselves to be taken out of the situation.

They asked for boldness to speak God's words whenever and where ever they were.

When we seek God in prayer, the Holy Spirit will use us as well.

There is the story of a New York City church that installed a new, huge, and costly organ.

The power was somehow cut off early in the service.

An electrician was called, saw the problem, and said he would fix it, and the power would be turned on right after the prayer.

A note was passed to the organist, "after prayer, the power will be on."

That is how the church is run, on the power of prayer.

It undergirds everything we do.

It guides and supports our ministry, and good "stuff" happens.

Someone has said,

when we rely on organization, we get what organization can do.

When we rely on education, we get what education can do.

When we rely on talent, we get what talent can do.

And when we rely on prayer, we get what God can do.

DL Moody walked into a bar one day
and asked a bar tender if his two daughters could attend Sunday School.
The bartender said he didn't want to offend
a group of atheist who met on Thursday nights.

Moody and the bartender negotiated.
If Moody debated the atheists on Thursday night and won,
the bartender would let his two girls go to Sunday School.

I think Moody was thinking, "Bring it on."
Anyway he went out and found Tommy, a crippled newsboy who knew how to pray.
He and Tommy showed up for the meeting with the atheists.

There were the two of them surrounded by a number of men sitting on whiskey barrels,
beer kegs, chairs, bar stools, and even the bar.

Moody spoke first saying, "Gentlemen, it's our custom to open meetings with prayer.
So Tommy, jump up on that barrel and pray for us."

Tommy jumped up on the barrel and began to pray.
He prayed for each of these men that walked by him each day/
Soon tears began to roll down his cheeks as he asked God to save their souls.

The tenderhearted men soon beat a retreat and finally the hard hearted followed.

The bartender said, "All right you win, but that is a strange way to fight."
Moody responded, "It's the way I win many a battle."

In prayer, the power comes on.

If you're feeling persecuted for your faith,
for who you are as a child of God,
let me leave you with these encouraging words from God about
persecution, the persecuted, and the persecutors.

They are found in Matthew 5.10-12, (MSG), Jesus is saying "Bring it ON!
*"You are blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution.
The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.
Not only that-count yourselves blessed when people put you down
or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me.*

*What it means is the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable.
You can be glad when that happens-give a cheer even-for though they don't like it, I do!
And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company.
My prophets and witnesses have always gotten in this kind of trouble."*

