

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 5

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTERS 4

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 relates the first opposition to the preaching and teaching of God's Holy Word. The preceding chapter recorded a miracle that happened in the Name of Jesus Christ. Peter seized the opportunity to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people. He proved to them that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah or the Christ. Jesus came to die for the sins of the world and God raised Him from the dead. Peter's preaching was a great success. Many people were turning to Peter and John. This aroused the envy and jealousy of the religious leaders who threatened the apostles.

This chapter also records the first imprisonment in Acts. Peter and John were taken prisoners by the religious authorities, who were actually members of the powerful Sanhedrin Council. An insight into the attitude and behaviour of the prominent members of the Sanhedrin describes the kind of resistance and opposition that was faced by the early disciples. The response of the leaders of the church at that time towards their persecution is most instructive and beneficial to today's Christians who face similar situations. Peter's reply to the religious authorities

gives important guidelines for Christians on how to face their adversaries. The reaction of the Christian community serves as a good example for Christians in times of difficulties and hardships. Moreover, Luke mentioned again the communal life of the early disciples for our instruction.

Chapter 4 consists three major sections: (1) the arrest of Peter and John by the Sanhedrin Council (vv. 1-4); (2) the encounter of Peter and John with the Sanhedrin (vv.5-22); and (3) the response of the Christian community to persecution and the effects from persecution (vv.23-36).

COMMENTARY

The Arrest of the Disciples

As Peter was still preaching to the people in Solomon's Porch (3:11), "the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees" seized Peter and John. These men who seized the Apostles belonged to the powerful Sanhedrin Council, the highest religious court of the Jews. The Sanhedrin Council comprised the Sadducees, scribes, elders, high priests and the Pharisees, who were the "separatists". The Sadducees actually dominated the Court because of their wealth. They were the compromisers who had no qualms fraternising with the Greeks and the Romans. They adopted their culture for monetary gain. They are the rich and influential. The high priest who served only one-year term usually sought the advice of the former high priest so plural is used, and laymen (or elders) were aristocrats of the Jewish community. The "captain of the temple" was not a priest but he was probably the head of the temple guard, a powerful

person who commanded the temple police force.

These religious leaders were not pleased with Peter's preaching and teaching. Peter was preaching a doctrine, which was in direct contradiction to their theology. Peter was proclaiming the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection (Luke 20:27-33). Therefore, they also do not believe that there is life after death. Peter preached that Jesus Christ rose again from the dead. Peter was filling the minds of the masses with prophecy and eschatology (the last things) and the hope of a coming messianic kingdom. All these were based on the reality of the resurrection. So they were offended and troubled at Peter's preaching. The priests were deeply concerned that Peter's preaching challenged their lifestyle, their worldview and their vested interest. Many people heard Peter's preaching and believed. The number of believers was about five thousand men, not counting the women and children. [NOTE: On the other hand, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection and life after death.]

The Stone which became the Head Stone

The Sadducees arrested Peter and John in the evening. They locked them up for the night. The next day, the whole entourage of rulers, elders, scribes and Annas, the High Priest, and Caiaphas, and John and Alexander, and many others, who were related to the High Priest, came together in Jerusalem. Caiaphas had participated in the trial of Jesus of Nazareth some weeks ago. At that time, he was the reigning High Priest.

Peter and John were obviously brought out from prison to stand before the Sanhedrin. They demanded to know the authority and power by which Peter and John had preached and performed the miracle. They knew that Peter and John were uneducated and ordinary in contrast to them, who were educated, polished and sophisticated. But Peter was once again filled with the Holy Spirit. This was another instance that Peter was anointed with the Holy Spirit in order to face the special challenge posed by the Sanhedrin Council. God gave them the words as He promised in Mark 13:11, *"But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost."*

Peter boldly answered them that it was in the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom they had crucified and whom God had raised from the dead, that the lame man, who was also present in court, was completely healed. Peter carried on and expounded by citing Psalm 118:22 that "the stone which was set at nought of you builders" had become the head corner-stone (v.11). Peter was replying to them that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was "the stone" that they had rejected but who had been exalted. The Name of Jesus Christ had been given pre-eminence in that there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby men can be saved. By salvation in the Name of Jesus Christ, Peter was not just referring to the healing of the lame man, but to salvation in a spiritual sense (v.12). Peter was talking about a change of status from being a sinner

and condemned before God to being a saint, cleansed and accepted by God.

The Sentence against The Apostles

The members of the Sanhedrin Council marvelled at the boldness of Peter and John. They knew that the apostles were professionally unqualified and yet they were able to speak in their own defence with such eloquence, confidence, power and authority. Indeed this came from the Holy Spirit. The members of the Sanhedrin Council were in a dilemma as to what action they could take against Peter and John. They also observed that the crippled man, who was healed, was standing with Peter and John, and they could say nothing against the apostles. The members of the Sanhedrin Council then met in private while Peter and John waited for their decision outside the court.

The members of the Sanhedrin Council conferred among themselves that they could do nothing against the apostles. The people in Jerusalem had witnessed the miracle of the healing of the lame man, which they could not dismiss. They knew that they must guard and maintain their authority and enforce explicit obedience. They decided that the best thing they could do was to threaten the apostles. They commanded the apostles to stop preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them by posing a case for them to judge: Is it right in the sight of God to obey God or man? (v.19). Peter and John had to make a choice. They could not obey God without defying the Sanhedrin Council and be denounced by them. On the other hand, they could not obey the Sanhedrin Council without disobeying God. Peter and John

decided without hesitation that they could not but speak “the things which we have seen and heard” (v.20). The things which they had seen and heard were the works and words of the Lord Jesus Christ! So they chose to obey God and disobey the Sanhedrin Council. Their loyalty and faithfulness to God and the message of salvation were the two compelling reasons for them to make the right choice even though it could result in dire consequences. On that note, the members of the Sanhedrin Council were completely outwitted and helpless before all the people, who were glorifying God for the miracle that happened before their eyes. The Sanhedrin Council could only threaten the apostles like a toothless tiger. The apostles were then released.

The Effect on the Christian Community

Peter and John went to their own Christian company. Their Christian company did not necessarily mean that they went to all the Christians in Jerusalem. It is most likely a smaller group of people who were gathered together in a house. Peter and John reported and shared their experiences with the believers. Christians should always share their experiences with their fellow believers. When the Christians heard their report, the immediate response was a spontaneous lifting up of their voice “with one accord” to God. It did not matter whether one prayed audibly and the rest interspersed with “hallelujahs and amens”, or they all prayed together. The form was not the focus. The important thing is that they prayed and praised God with one mind. This is one of the salient points of their prayer. They were united in their praises and requests. They were sharing and in partnership in all things –

koinonia. This fellowship of believers was one of the key themes in the book of Acts. In time of crisis, this bond that bound them together became a comforting and soothing balm. Togetherness is the keynote and this is especially significant in today's society, which emphasises individualism. The Fellowship of the saints could be weakened by the emphasis on individualism.

In their prayer together to God, they acknowledged the sovereignty of God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all that are therein! This was in praise of God's Almighty power and authority. In their prayer, they cited Psalm 2:1-2: *"Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed"*. They acknowledged God's sovereignty over the affairs of men. They declared that Jesus Christ's death in the hands of Herod and Pilate was determined by God. While believing these truths and obeying God, there was nothing for them to fear. This was the truth that gave them hope and courage in the midst of any crisis.

Then they spoke about the opposition, which they were facing. They only made a passing reference to it – "behold their threatenings" (v.29). When they gazed at the greatness and glory of God, their problems of life seemed so insignificant. Hence, they prayed and petitioned God to grant them the courage to speak His Word and that "signs and wonders" might be done in the Name of Jesus Christ, the Holy One. And the place where they were praying was shaken. They were together and were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were anointed again with the Spirit and

they had a consuming passion to speak the Word of God with boldness.

Christian Attitudes & Actions

There was a radical transformation of the Christian community after learning of the crisis that they were in, and worshipping and praying to God, and after they were anointed anew with the Holy Spirit. They were of "one heart and one soul". This was not sentimentalism. It was based upon oneness in doctrine, faith and God. This was a comprehensive expression of the unity of the community. Their loves, their passions and their hopes were joined together. Their unity was not just being a member of the local church. It was more than that; it was a spiritual unity, and a unity of passionate commitment to their fellow believers and to the witnessing of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. They loved and cared for one another. They loved to witness Jesus Christ to others (vv. 32, 33).

Luke mentioned the common sharing of their material possessions twice (cf. Acts 2:44). It means that the church must consider this practice seriously. Their attitude towards their possessions is the point that is being emphasised. They actually voluntarily renounced their wealth. They did not have to sell all their houses or lands or possessions and give all the proceeds to the church. Those who sold their houses and lands were those who were landlords (v.34). They still owned their houses and lands for they met at each other's house for meetings and meals (see 2:46). It was their attitude towards one another and toward the need of their fellow believers that were lacking. Those that sold their possessions brought their proceeds to the apostles,

who then distributed to everyone according to his need. This was a continuing practice of the believers in the early church. An example of such donors was Barnabas whose name means "The son of consolation (or encouragement)" (v.36). He was a Levite who lived in Cyprus. He was not living in Jerusalem. How generous and kind Barnabas was!

PRACTICAL VALUE

Peter preached and five thousand believed. Since his first and second sermon, no less than eight thousand people believed and trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise the Lord! However, we must beware of the temptation of using wrong means to win people over with the motive of simply increasing the number of believers in the church to give a good picture. There must not be a lowering of the standard and requirements of the gospel message. Sin, repentance and genuine trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ according to the Scripture must never be compromised if there is going to be true conversion. There is a balance in the emphasis on quality and quantity.

Those, who are determined to obey and serve the Lord Jesus Christ according to His Word, would face opposition from without and even from within the church. We can understand the opposition from outside the church. But the opposition from within the church is more potent and very painful. The reality is that enemies will infiltrate the church that honours God and defend God's Truth. There is no escaping of the attacks of the evil one. It is a spiritual warfare where absolute dependence on God is the only way to victory.

Peter seized every opportunity to preach the gospel message to the people. Every Christian should emulate him. The gospel of Jesus Christ is so urgent that we must find every chance to share it with others. Find ways and means to share the gospel message with others.

One of the most important principles of life in which we should do well to learn is Peter's words in Acts 4:19. The way Peter put the question compels one to think seriously and soberly: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God; judge ye?" The answer is to obey God and not man. This is the first step, which a person must take to understand about God and himself, and the knowledge of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

From the united prayer of the disciples, we learn how to pray according to the knowledge of God and His will. Our praise and prayer must always be guided by the truths revealed in the nature and character of God's Holy and perfect Word. Our petitions will be appropriate when made in the light of these truths. AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 4:1-4; 1 Peter 4:12-16.

Tuesday: Acts 4:5-12; Luke 22:12-15; 2 Timothy 1:7.

Wednesday: Acts 4:13-22; 1 Corinthians 1:26-27.

Thursday: Acts 4:23-30; Hebrews 10:24-25.

Friday: Acts 4:31-37; James 2:14-16; Ephesians 4:3.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the people respond to Peter’s preaching? What is the biblical way of emphasising numbers?

2. What caused the beginning of the persecution of the apostles? What form did it take?

3. Contrast the position, influence and training of the religious leaders with that of the two apostles. Who “performed” better and why?

4. How did Peter respond to the questioning by members of the Sanhedrin? Could he have reacted differently?

5. What facts did the apostles base their prayer on? And what three petitions did they make?

6. What were the essentials of the Christian fellowship described in verses 32-35?

7. How can our church, care groups, and fellowship groups develop a practical ministry of kindness?

8. What have I learned from the prayer of the apostles and the believers?

9. What can you learn from Peter's answer to help you to respond to those who oppose you regarding your faith in Christ Jesus?