

## Where Is Your Ultimate Allegiance?

### Persecution and Civil Disobedience

Martin G. Collins

Given 21-May-16; Sermon #1323

Persecution is aggressive and injurious behavior carried out in a hostile, antagonistic spirit, normally by a group. Persecutors are known especially for their fiery zeal in persecuting the church. It is a zeal that is described in Romans 10 as “not based on knowledge.”

**Romans 10:2-3** For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. [God here is the word *Theos*, and can mean any deity.] For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

Persecution and its spirit of animosity are based in Satan's great enmity against God, which relies heavily on ignorance and lack of true knowledge. So it is no surprise that it is blatantly expressed in the antagonism of the wicked toward the righteous.

The wicked are described as the children of the Devil in John 8:44. In contrast, the righteous are described as the offspring of God in Revelation 12:17. The result is clear: persecution falls upon God's people by virtue of our relationship with God.

This sense of union with Christ and His people is movingly described in Acts 9, where the risen Christ asks Saul:

**Acts 9:4** Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

In fact, persecution serves as a sign of the authenticity of our relationship to Jesus Christ and our response is a veritable litmus test to determine that authenticity.

**Matthew 13:20-21** “But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.”

That is one of our fears, that if something like that was to happen to any one of us or all of us, that we would stumble.

Disciples of Christ can count on persecution. Those who respond in faith will be counted as righteous; however many will turn away from the faith. So, it is our bound duty to mentally prepare ourselves, under God’s guidance, to withstand and resist the deceits of Satan and the charms of the world.

Now what does persecution sometimes make necessary? And how does persecution relate to civil disobedience? Is civil disobedience always wrong?

In such cases, God commends those who suffer consequences at the hands of the government for the sake of righteousness, and He promises to never leave us or forsake us. Nevertheless, He does not promise we will not have persecution. We remember well the persecution of the three godly men: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their miraculous salvation.

In the New Testament, the most significant challenge to God's commandments occurs in Acts 4, when the Jewish leaders command the disciples "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." However, having the command from Christ to proclaim the gospel to all nations, the apostles refuse.

In Acts 3, the healing of the lame man had taken place within a part of the Temple area which was continually thronged with people. The spotlight of publicity was inevitably focused upon the incident.

The many courts of the Temple area were crowded with people who had come to worship, to learn, and to sight-see. Into this crowded scene came the priests, the superintendent, or the captain of the Temple and the Sadducees.

The captain of the Temple was an official called the Sagan. He was the high priest's right-hand man. In particular he had the oversight of the good order of the Temple. When the crowd had gathered around Peter and John, it was inevitable that he and his Temple police would arrive on the scene. With him came the Sadducees who were the wealthy, aristocratic class. There were not many of them but they were rich and of great influence.

So this was the scene of the healing of the lame man and the claimed cause of the first persecution of the church. Now in Acts 4, we have a record of that first persecution.

**Acts 4:1-12** Now as they [Peter and John] spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem.

And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

It was quite a powerful message that Peter delivered to those religious leaders in Judah at that time. Now turn to Mark 13. Did Peter, on this occasion, remember what Jesus Christ had said about persecution? Or, did Peter recall, when He was dragged before the Sanhedrin, that Jesus had prophesied persecution for all who followed Him?

**Mark 13:9-11** “But watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

Christ promises a miracle and it will be performed on your behalf, so that you may glorify God and witness to your persecutors, if and when you are ever brought before those who persecute.

Peter was finding out in this first persecution, that everything Jesus foretold earlier was now beginning to be fulfilled. And it was going to be fulfilled in similar situations even more as the church expanded. Peter eventually replies to their command, “We must obey God rather than men.” From then on, the church is persecuted with flogging, imprisonment, and death for their refusal to comply with the government's decree.

Now turn back to Acts 4. Luke was the writer of the book of Acts, so as he thought about this first persecution he was probably impressed with the great power arrayed against the disciples. The church was not strong and there were very few disciples, perhaps 3,100 or 3,200 who had followed them this far. And now, in this situation 5,000 men, or heads of households, were there and now believed. So what an increase in just one day!

These were the early days and the gospel had not expanded far. There were few leaders and none of them had much experience as leaders. They were a small band when measured against the total numbers of the Jewish people. They were very weak, even powerless actually, when measured against the rulers of the day. Now notice the way Luke lists those who were of the opposition.

**Acts 4:1** Now as they [Peter and John] spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them.

**Acts 4:5-6** And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem.

So in the first six verses of chapter 4, Luke lists no fewer than eleven different individuals or categories of individuals who were opposed to the Way of God. Three of them are in verse 1: The priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and the Sadducees.

Priests could include the Levites scattered throughout the entire land, or the Levites actually in Jerusalem at that time to help with the Temple worship.

Levites served by rotation, and their turn to minister at the Temple would come maybe once or twice in a lifetime. They would serve for about three weeks. So there were some temporary Levites or priests there as well.

The men listed here were not like the Levites who lived in the villages and towns, and who only came up to Jerusalem once in a while. Luke is thinking of the established priestly caste. They were powerful and had a great deal of wealth backing them, and they were specifically opposed to the Christians.

Next he mentions the captain of the Temple guard. He is probably referring to the captain of the Temple guard along with the Temple guard itself. These were not Roman troops. The captain was not a Roman officer, but still this was a force to be reckoned with.

These were the soldiers who had arrested Jesus. The captain of the Temple guard was a very powerful person in Jerusalem. First, there were the Romans; second, there was the high priest; third, there was the captain of the guard. So Luke's mention of the captain of the guard is quite significant.

Luke also mentions the Sadducees. The Sadducees were not a terribly numerous party, but they were the upper class and a powerful, wealthy class at that. The Sadducees recognized early on, that if the Jews were going to survive the occupation, they would have to get along with the Romans. So Sadducees had established close ties with the Roman authorities.

Then we have the high priests and their families, the police force led by the captain of the guard, and the Sadducees, who because of their special relationship to the Romans, were the most influential people in the land. It was a formidable opposition.

So this was not just a ragtag group of people who just decided to persecute Peter, John, and the other disciples. They were a force to be reckoned with.

But it is not only these who were involved. In Acts 4:5 Luke lists three more categories: The rulers, the elders, and the teachers of the law.

The teachers of the law were probably those we would call scribes, those whose task it was to know and copy the Scriptures. Elders were the distinguished older men who lived in Jerusalem and had great influence. Rulers probably were people in various positions of authority and they were the heads of government departments and committees.

This gives us six categories altogether, but there are still more, because in verse 6, Luke also refers to individuals. There was Annas the high priest. He was the true high priest. The Romans had deposed him years before and they had installed Caiaphas, his son-in-law, in his place.

But in Israel the high priest was a high priest for life, so in the minds of the Jewish people Annas would still have been the true high priest, regardless of what the Romans had done. Then there was Caiaphas, the *acting* high priest. These two men had conspired in the trial of Christ, Jesus having appeared before each of them.

Finally, Luke says there were John, not John the apostle, but a John in the priestly family, Alexander, and other men of the high priest's family. These were all present, and all of them were organized against the two apostles.

All the forces of the land were getting together against the early Christians. Yet, obviously Peter and John were kept safe by God's power. We have that same promise that we will be protected, and nothing can happen to us unless God allows it.

Now why were these rulers so upset? We are told in Acts 4:2, that they were disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming about Jesus' resurrection from the dead. That they

were teaching the people was itself naturally disturbing to the priests, Sadducees, rulers, elders, and teachers of the law, because these men were teachers and teaching by others was a threat to their authority.

This was one thing that had bothered them about Jesus Christ. He had not gone to their rabbinic academies. Nevertheless, he had an intrinsic authority and knowledge that they recognized as greater than their knowledge.

People marveled at it and flocked to Him. When they sent the Temple guards to arrest Jesus, His teaching was so powerful that it stopped the guards cold. They went back to their leaders and explained their failure, saying in John 7,

**John 7:46** The officers answered, “No man ever spoke like this Man!”

So even they recognized that there was a major difference in the way that He was preaching.

These rulers had killed Jesus. But now they suddenly had this entirely new group of people to contend with, and they were like Him—Jesus. They had not been to the rabbinic schools either. They were just fishermen and tax collectors, simple, untaught people. But here they were teaching as Jesus had taught, with authority, and the people were listening to them.

A second matter disturbed them even more—that these men were teaching about Jesus, and the central point of their teaching was that God had raised Him from the dead. If the disciples had been teaching about the resurrection only, perhaps it would not have been so bad, because, after all, the Pharisees also believed in the resurrection.

It is interesting though that the Pharisees are not mentioned here. It appears for the history that we have that the Pharisees primarily persecuted Jesus, but you do not hear about them persecuting the church, which is interesting. The Sadducees seem to have taken over, and they were the secular Jews still connected with the religion though.

Now turn to Acts 23. Concerning belief in resurrection, the Sadducees did not, but the Pharisees did, and on a later occasion Paul used that doctrine to divide the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a combination of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and were usually at odds with one another anyway.

**Acts 23:6-9** But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!” And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees’ party arose and protested, saying, “We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.”

Acts 23 was written long after the first persecution of Peter and John. So the Pharisees were at least *slightly* favorable to them.

The disciples were not just teaching about the resurrection generally, that there is going to be a resurrection at the last day, they were teaching about the resurrection of Jesus. That is where the

Pharisees took issue, but the Sadducees especially had an issue with it. That changed everything. If it was true, it proved that Jesus was who He claimed to be, namely, the unique Son of God. It also proved the nature and value of what He came to do.

Now the authorities used the world's methods in their offensive against the disciples, and I think they are still using them today. That is, they used their power, because naked power is the only weapon the world really has.

Sometimes it is the power of wealth. People who have wealth will often use it to control, exclude, or oppress others. The government will use the courts, policemen, guns, and eventually the army, because in the last analysis this is the only power it has.

The first thing the Jerusalem authorities did was attempt to intimidate the disciples. In the Greek there is an emphasis that does not come across as strongly in English but indicates that when the priests, the captain of the guard, and the Sadducees came upon Peter and John, they came upon them suddenly.

They did not just meander up out of the back of the crowd and begin to talk to them. One moment, Peter and John were there teaching earnestly. The next moment, there were the soldiers. They were declaring: "We have the power! If you're allowed to preach as you have been preaching, it is because we've permitted you to do it. If we decide that you're no longer to be permitted to do that, well then, you can't do it anymore. Anytime we want, we can arrest you and carry you off to jail!"

Throwing them in jail was also intimidation. The leaders did not have to arrest the disciples at this point. They could have picked them up the next morning. Peter and John were not hiding, they were in plain sight. The leaders must have said something like, "Let's just throw them in jail overnight. That will dampen their spirits. Then we'll see how they function in the morning." Peter and John had courage in spite of this intimidation, and that impressed the authorities.

**Acts 4:13** Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.

Intimidating the disciples did not work, but nevertheless, that is what the authorities were trying to do. The world continues to operate this way, and that is one reason why the witness of Christians sometimes fails or is given in an ineffective way.

If Jesus and His apostles spoke the truth, it is the greatest message in the world, yet we are afraid to talk about it sometimes. The major reason for this is because of the world's intimidation. We are afraid to speak because we are afraid someone might laugh at us or harm us. The Jerusalem authorities also used threats. Verse 21 says so explicitly.

**Acts 4:21** So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done.

If there were further threats, there must have been earlier threats. This is what appears to be suggested in verse 18, where it says:

**Acts 4:18** So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.

They must have said something like, “If you speak about Jesus in public again, we’re going to beat you and put you in jail. It’ll be decades before you see the light of day again.” Who knows what nasty comments they were making. I am sure there are many that were not recorded in the gospels.

Luke seems to show a sense of irony at this point. Although the situation is hardly funny and perhaps it is only the irony of the situation itself that we notice, here these men were trying to intimidate the apostles by threatening them. Yet even before they give their witness, Luke records the large number of men who believed.

**Acts 4:4** However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

So here are five thousand people out there believing them and then here is this powerful group of men who had put them in jail and tried to intimidate them.

The last figure we had concerning the size of the church was from the days immediately following Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2:41 showing that there were about three thousand. At this point, not very long afterward, a couple of weeks or so at the most, there were five thousand. It was an increase of about sixty percent. Now I do not know if this five thousand was in addition to the three thousand they had at Pentecost, and I am sure there is some overlap, but still it was quite a few people.

The world thinks that it can stop a spiritual movement by threats, force, imprisonment, and death, but it cannot. A good idea, especially a true spiritual idea, will always continue to spread. You cannot stop any good idea, even a good secular idea, by threats.

A good idea will always thrive and eventually permeate a culture. Perhaps you can slow it for a time and maybe some good ideas have been stamped out temporarily by harsh rulers. But most have not been, and certainly you cannot stamp out the Word of God.

**Matthew 16:18** And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the true church of God continues on since it was established on that first Pentecost.

Now the rulers were trying to stamp it out, but we discover in Acts and also in later church history, that nothing can prevail against the work of God. It may seem to wane at times, but it never dies, and this is part of God’s plan. Sometimes God makes His groups smaller, it makes it harder to be persecute. It helps the church grow spiritually and it also helps for God’s plans to be carried out.

We have seen the forceful methods arrayed against these early teachers of the gospel, and now we are going to see the power of God and the methods the people of God use. The power on the side of God’s people is the Holy Spirit. Acts 4:8 says that when Peter began to speak he was “filled with the Holy Spirit.”

On every occasion, what follows specific mention of a person being filled with the Holy Spirit is strong verbal testimony to Jesus Christ. When people are filled with the Holy Spirit they always speak about the Father and/or Jesus Christ.

Peter gave a formal reply and he had been arrested because of events growing out of the miracle of the healing of the lame man in Acts 3. So he began by speaking about that issue.

**Acts 4:8-10** Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole [healed; delivered.]”

Peter was basically saying, “The only thing you can possibly have arrested us for is this miracle; for doing good to that poor lame man. Doing good isn’t a crime, but if you also want to know by what power or in what name we did it,” the question they asked in verse 7, “then you need to know that it was in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.”

In your Bible, you will find a comma after “Nazareth,” at least in most translations. It is a significant comma because so far as the accusation was concerned, Peter had by that point given a perfectly good answer, he did not need to go further; he could have stopped there, but he did not. They had said, “By what power or what name did you do this?” and Peter had replied, “By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.”

Peter could have answered the question succinctly and ended the defense right there, yet Peter was not merely trying to defend himself. He did what Paul later did in Rome. Keep in mind that this was the Holy Spirit speaking to Peter here in II Timothy 4, which says:

**II Timothy 4:17** But the Lord stood with me [Paul] and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.

Hopefully none of us have to face a lion that we have to be delivered from, but we certainly will be delivered from persecutors.

He used the opportunity to witness about Jesus Christ. Peter may have had in mind the prophecy in which Jesus said, “On account of Me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.”

Peter may have recalled those words and thought to himself, “Here’s a great opportunity to witness to governors about Christ.” Or maybe he was just under such great inspiration that he was just plowing ahead without any thought to it. I am sure that a lot of what Jesus taught and spoken was coming back to him, maybe in a flood of realization of what Jesus Christ meant.

If he had been intimidated he would have been trying to save his own skin. He would have said as little as possible and refused to incriminate himself. But he was *not* intimidated. He was a servant of the living God, and he had the greatest message in the world, so he was going to make the best of it and not hold back.

There were four main points to Peter's sermon to them. The first point is that they were guilty in crucifying Jesus. The Jesus about whom Peter was speaking was the Jesus they had put to death.

**Acts 4:10** let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole.

And it would not have done any good for the Jews to blame the Romans, and perhaps they tried to, however they were still guilty, even more so, because they were the ones who pursued it and forced it to happen.

It did not do Pilate any good to have washed his hands of the matter either. The washing did not excuse Pilate, and these words would not have excused the Jewish rulers either. They were guilty, along with all the others.

The first thing Peter did was remind them of that. No wonder verse 13 mentions the courage of Peter and John. They needed courage to remind this august body of leaders of the crime they had committed.

Now the second point that Peter's sermon makes to the leaders is that Jesus rose from the dead and the point that Peter was making here was a powerful one. In verse 10 Peter calls Jesus "Jesus of Nazareth, whom God raised from the dead."

The message of Jesus' resurrection proves everything that is essential about the Way of God. It proves that Jesus is God, that He is the Savior, that death is not the end for anyone, and that there is a resurrection. Furthermore, Peter says that God is the One who has done this, the very God they claimed to worship. They killed His Son, but God vindicated Jesus by raising Him from the dead.

The third point Peter was making in his sermon was that the purpose of God was established in spite of opposition. In verse 11 Peter quotes from Psalm 118:22.

**Acts 4:11** This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.'

When Luke quotes from the Old Testament, he almost invariably quotes from the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament used among Greek-speaking people. But in quoting from the Septuagint at this point, Luke varied the quotation slightly by adding the word "you," which is not in the Psalm 118.

The Septuagint says: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." But Luke changes it to say, "The stone you builders rejected." Why does he do that? Undoubtedly because that is the way Peter spoke it. Peter added the word "you" to reinforce what he had been teaching. He had spoken of the leaders' guilt. Then he took an impersonal Old Testament text and made it pointed, directly indicting them.

There are lots of things about the gospel that the world does not like. It does not like to hear about human guilt. It does not like to hear about the resurrection. But of all the things the world does not like, probably the greatest is that God always accomplishes what He wants in spite of the world's opposition.

But God does accomplish it. And, He is going to accomplish it with us. It will be His will rather than ours that will be done. We must pray that our will coincides with God's will, that we are doing God's will and not our own.

It is so easy, especially when we are busy with the cares of life to bring our own will and forgetting what God's will is. We are not our own masters; we are God's creatures; therefore it is always God's purposes and not ours that will be established.

The fourth point that Peter directs at the leaders and Sadducees is that Jesus is the one and only way of salvation. In verse 12 Luke records Peter as saying:

**Acts 4:12** Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

The world really hates such statements! If you want to be laughed at, scorned, hated, even persecuted, testify to the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Say that Jesus is the only Savior, and that only by believing in Him can one escape the judgment.

The world will fight you to the death, because nothing is as offensive to the natural man as teaching that we cannot save ourselves; that we cannot choose our own way of salvation; and that if we are going to be saved it must be by God in the way He has appointed.

Looking at America, we see that Americans think that they can do anything and that America is too big to fail. But we know that it can and will fail eventually. This is the same reason they will be persecuted even more, because they believe that they can rebuild everything on their own.

Why did Peter insist on this fact? He was an intelligent man. He knew he was saying these things at the risk of his life. Why would he take such a chance? He was saying it because he knew there is nobody else like Jesus Christ. That is why Peter could proclaim Him fearlessly. It was not his preference; it was his conviction. He had no doubt whatsoever that it was true and he was willing to die for it.

So the question I have is, are we willing to die for that belief? Is it a conviction or is it just a preference? Do we really believe it beyond a shadow of a doubt? It needs to be true conviction if we are going to survive what is coming. God will give us the power to survive what is coming, but we still have to do our part and prepare ourselves in that way.

One may say that it sounds so narrow, exclusive, and intolerant. And yes, it is, but it is also true. And any man or woman who turns his back on what is true is simply foolish.

When the authorities began to interrogate Peter and John, they said, "By what power or what name did you do this?" Peter and John answered, "Jesus." That was correct, but when Peter got to the end and summed it all up, he threw their question right back at them and said, in effect, "It is not only the lame man who was healed by the name of Jesus. That name is the only name by which anyone can be healed. What needs to happen to you is what happened to the lame man. You too must be saved by Jesus."

Salvation is found exclusively in Christ and no one else. This was the ultimate concern of the apostle Peter as seen in his first sermon to the church in Acts 2.

**Acts 2:40** And with many other words he [Peter] testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.”

In our sin we are as helpless in the sight of God as that lame man in Acts 3. We cannot save ourselves. Only Jesus can heal and save us. We must believe that and place all our faith in God that He will make it happen. The fact is, for the church, He is making it happen, it is happening right now. Our sanctification is a process that is going on now, and it will continue until we are complete in God's eyes.

Now God had used Peter and John to heal the lame beggar, and the leaders of Judah were unhappy with that miracle. So they arrested the disciples and brought them before the Sanhedrin. “By what power or what name did you do this?” they demanded. “Name” stands for authority. So they were actually asking, “By what authority did you accomplish this miracle?”

Paraphrased, the disciples answered, “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified.” This sentence is the theme of Acts 4, and it carries us into this new section beginning in verse 13.

**Acts 4:13-16** Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, “What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.

**Acts 4:17-22** But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name.” So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” So when they had further threatened them, 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 forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

There is a four-fold sequence here in Acts 4. The first is the question that we find this in verse 7: “By what power or what name did you do this?” Second is the answer, found in verse 10: “By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” Third is the application found that in verse 12: “There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Then fourth we have the response found in verse 17: “We must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

So the leaders knew that they could not deny that the lame man had been healed. They would be a laughingstock in Jerusalem if they tried to do that. But they thought they could contain the damage to their position by a naked exercise of authority.

So, turning to Peter and John, they said, “Whatever you do, do not preach or teach any longer in that name.” The issue was authority. On the one hand, there is the authority of the rulers, who frequently set themselves against Jesus. On the other hand, there is the authority of Jesus Christ, who

commanded the apostles to be His witnesses. 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.” Later, in Acts 5:29, Luke writes:

**Acts 5:29** But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men.”

So Peter and John maintained their boldness, with the help of the Holy Spirit given to them by Jesus Christ. They were not just given the Holy Spirit at that moment, the Holy Spirit was already in those two apostles. What Christ did on behalf of God, increased it multi-fold to give them the power then needed at that time. We have that same blessing and benefit that the apostles had, as far as the Holy Spirit is concerned.

If we are facing something that is incredibly tough on us, whether it be affliction, tribulation, or whatever, we can call upon God and ask Him for more of His Holy Spirit to help us make it through. We can rely on God to give us what we need to get through whatever we are going through at the time needed. We do not get the full measure of God’s Spirit of course, summoning lightning strikes and such, but we are given what is necessary to get us through our situation.

Not long before this, Jesus had created a problem, and now here were more preachers and workers of miracles just like Him. Verse 13 begins to express the Sanhedrin’s view of the problem.

**Acts 4:13** Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.

To call them uneducated did not mean that they were ignorant. There was a basic knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures that was imparted to most men in the synagogues, and Peter and John certainly had that fundamental Jewish education.

They both wrote letters to the churches, which we have in our Bibles, and they are letters of ability, impressive letters by any standard, exhibiting considerable knowledge. The Gospel of John especially is a great literary achievement, and Peter’s letters radiate a warm, winsome vitality.

Besides, the apostles had spent three years in the best seminary the world has ever seen. They had been traveling with the Master himself, and He had taught them, not only by precept as He unfolded the Scriptures to them, but also by example. He modeled the gospel for them.

They were slow learners in spiritual things at first, just as we would have been. But they were always learning, as we are. So when the passage says that they were uneducated it means only that they had not been to the rabbinic schools.

To have gone to the rabbinic schools was like having gone to an approved university today. It was a ticket to success in Jewish society. If you wanted to be someone other people looked up to, such as a judge or a political figure, this was the way to do it.

Here was the amazing thing. These two fishermen, these rather rough characters, stood before the Sanhedrin without fear and gave the testimony we read in Acts 4:8-12. And this was brilliantly done by God’s inspiration.

We are told that Peter was full of the Holy Spirit. So it is not surprising that the rulers were astonished when they saw both the rhetorical skill and boldness of the apostles. The authorities were ready to run over them like a stampede of horses, but these men were not the kind who were easy to run over. They were real men. There was something else that frustrated the Sanhedrin and the leaders. We will read verse 14 again.

**Acts 4:14** And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.

It is hard to miss seeing that Luke used this word “standing” intentionally, for emphasis, and perhaps for irony. He could have said merely, “They could see the man who had been healed with them.” But this was a man who previously could not stand.

The Greek word for resurrection is *anastasis*. And the basic part of this word, *stasis* is the word for standing.

To the Greek mind resurrected people were people who were standing up, as opposed to dead people, who were lying down. So there was a sense in which this resurrected man was a symbol of the very gospel Peter and the others were proclaiming.

The leaders were also a bit dismayed. The text does not use the word dismayed, but it seems that dismay was part of their response, because the text says that they took note that Peter and John had been with Jesus. They were preaching and acting the same way Jesus was acting and attracting the same kind of people that Jesus attracted.

Maybe they did not know this at first. One would think they would know it, but as we read the chapter, it sounds as if this dawned on them slowly, perhaps during the interrogation. They saw the similarities between them and Jesus. They had already eliminated Jesus, but His influence was still with them and spreading, so they felt that they had to eliminate these men as well.

The Sanhedrin did what the state always does, they resorted to naked authority. They simply insisted, “Don’t do it anymore.” The ultimate power was Rome’s, but they had worked out an arrangement. They would support Rome if Rome would support them. When they made a pronouncement that concerned local affairs, the kind of thing Rome was not really concerned about, Rome would back them up.

Therefore, when they told the disciples in essence: “If you do this again, you’re going to have to answer to us. We will arrest you and haul you in.” And that is exactly what they were able to do, they had that authority. The disciples responded by disobeying the state, and this raises the question of civil disobedience.

The need for civil disobedience, or rather religious obedience, arises when people have to disobey government injunctions that do not directly demand that they disobey God but that do involve their implied compliance in unrighteous practices.

For example, in the events leading up to the Exodus, the Hebrew midwives help the Hebrew women to deliver their children and hide them despite Pharaoh's decree to put all the newborn males to death. God commends these midwives for their fear of Him, blessing them with households of their own.

Moses himself participates in civil disobedience, leading the children of Israel out of Egypt against Pharaoh's will.

Rahab the Canaanite hides the Israelite spies from her city leaders. Rahab fears the God who has given her land to these people, and she desires to fight on the side of God. So she hides the spies who come to her. God commends her act, claiming that her faith and obedience saved her from death at the Israelites' hands.

Some of the prophets also disobey their kings at God's command or in response to God's condemnation of their rule. The New Testament also endorses stories of people protecting those who are persecuted by the government.

When the Jews and King Aretas attempted to capture and put the newly converted Paul to death, several of his disciples hide him and then help him escape by letting him down in a basket through one of the city wall's openings.

Even Jesus refuses to submit to the religious authorities of His time. Although He has no complaint against the Roman civil authority, He consistently challenges the authority of the Jewish leaders. He heals a man on the Sabbath and overturns the tables of the moneychangers and vendors in the Temple.

Although He commands submission to the governing authorities, Jesus demonstrates that His own authority is greater than that of the ruling priests because His authority comes from God.

So He shows that in cases in which God's authority conflicts with that of a government, civil disobedience may be necessary. Religious obedience supersedes anti-Christ laws of the civil government.

However this is an area in which we must be extremely careful, of course. We humans tend to rebel easily. We sometimes rebel when we should clearly submit, however, if you find yourself saying in compromising terms, "I must do whatever the state says I must do," then you are making the state your god, which is idolatry.

Unless the state is as wise and perfect as God, always expressing the perfect will of God, it is inevitable that in some situations the state is going to demand action that is contrary to God's laws, and if you are following and submitting to God, you are going to have to disobey the authorities at that point. So we have to start preparing now for these situations that will arise. We have to meditate on in what we might do long before these certain circumstances arise, and know which way we will choose.

When we speak about the relationship between "God and Caesar," to use Jesus' words, there really are only four choices: reclusive, secular, cowardly, or righteous. The first choice is God alone with the authority of Caesar totally denied.

Now this view sees the world and its governments as so corrupt that we can have nothing at all to do with them. It believes that the only thing we can do as Christians is totally retreat from the world and become reclusive. It tends to go to the extreme of moving as far from civilization as possible, like into the desert or mountain wilderness.

But if we are to be lights in the world we must function in the world and not be of the world. There is the difference! And so, we follow Jesus' example, and let me give three scriptures here:

**John 9:5** "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

**John 16:33** "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

You cannot overcome the world if you are not in it; if you have totally removed yourself from it.

**Philippians 2:14-15** Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

Christ shined as a light in the world and we must shine as a light in the world as well. We cannot totally remove ourselves from the world. How else do we learn to deal with the illnesses, sicknesses, and problems? How are we going to deal with the physiological problems if we have not been able to observe it?

When we talk about the state being a legitimate authority, we have the example of Jesus Christ to follow. When He was arrested and appeared before Pilate, not once in the entire trial did Jesus suggest that the authority of Pilate was illegitimate, even though Pilate was about to commit the great injustice of condemning an utterly innocent man.

Jesus did not say, "We cannot tolerate injustice like this in our world. We must rise up against it. That is what I am going to tell My followers, 'This is a bad world. You must fight it. Raise an army. Get people like Pilate out of here.'"

Is that not what we are sort of doing when we vote in this society? We are taking it out of God's hands and putting it into our own hands. What if you voted for someone other than who God puts in office? You would have voted against God's choice, because that is who God allowed and wanted in. These are the things that we need to think about.

In the course of the trial Pilate said to Jesus, "Do you not realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" The Greek word here for power is *exousia*; and it really means authority. How did Jesus reply? He did not say, "No, you do not!" Rather He said, "Yes, you do." But notice how he said it here in John 19.

**John 19:11** Jesus answered, "You could have no power [the ESV has it translated as "authority" here instead of "power"] at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

Pilate had authority and Jesus recognized that. But when he brought the matter of sin into the equation He added the matter of responsibility, indicating that although Pilate had authority, it was a delegated authority. His authority was given to him by God and therefore, he was responsible to God for how he used it.

Christians are not to deny the state's authority, still less assume civil authority themselves. The state is responsible to God for what it does. This accountability to God is what gives limits to the civil authorities. We see one of these limits in the story. When the state tells us that we cannot preach the gospel, that is an over-extension of its authority, an illegitimate use of its legitimate authority, and we must resist it.

When the state forbids the apostles from doing something God had told them to do, Peter and John disobeyed. They did not deny the state's authority. The state had the right to make whatever judgment it thought best but nevertheless, God is their judge.

In fact, Peter and John acknowledged that authority. They said, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God." That is, "If you think, in your wisdom, that we should obey you rather than obey what God has told us, then you must exercise your punitive authority. But as far as we are concerned, God has told us to do something and we are going to do it, regardless of what you say."

Now the second of the four possible choices is Caesar alone with the authority of God denied. This is the secular choice and pushes God, rather than the state, out of the picture. It is the prevailing choice of our day and it is the choice of secularism, socialism, evolutionism, and humanism.

Today's secularism does not prohibit us from practicing religion privately, but yet this society does not want any semblance of it out in the open. It is being eradicated from public view at every turn because it is Satan's world of enmity. As they push the merciful God out of the picture, they inevitably empower the merciless, evil governments of the world, and they will be sorry for it.

The third choice is the authority of both God and Caesar, but with Caesar in the dominant position. This is the choice of cowards. This is the position Pilate reflected in the trial of Jesus Christ. Pilate was no Jew, he did not know the God of Israel, and he was certainly no Christian. Yet when he saw Christ and recognized that he was dealing with an extraordinary man, he may have had a pagan superstitious sense that he was dealing with something supernatural.

He did not want to take a chance, so he did everything he could to try to get Jesus excused. Pilate's problem was that he was far more afraid of Caesar than he was of any spiritual reality. And so he did the wrong thing in the end.

Because persecution is inevitable for the truly righteous, the people of God are exhorted to respond positively. Negative reactions such as fear, compromise, cursing, desertion, retaliation, or apostasy deny the potential Christian witness. By fearing God rather than man we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to stand up to those who oppose and seek to destroy God, His truth, and His saints.

The fourth choice is God and Caesar but with God in the dominant position. This means that the state has a legitimate authority, as Paul writes in Romans 13. But this does not mean that the state is autonomous. This is what I call the righteous choice.

Human beings are given certain spheres of authority. Church elders have authority, parents have authority over their minor children, employers have certain authorities over their employees, and police have authority. There are many kinds of authority. But none is independent of God.

All authority that has been given to someone or some group of people is from God, hence, those who hold authority are responsible to God, who is the ultimate authority. That is why we have to obey God whenever the two come in conflict.

That is what Peter and John did. And because they obeyed God they were used by God in launching a movement that has extended throughout the entire world, and is still with us today, centuries after the Jewish Sanhedrin passed away.

We are part of something eternal. As far as governments are concerned, only the Kingdom of God will never pass away. Our physical citizenship may be of an earthly nation, but our spiritual citizenship is in the marvelous Kingdom of God. And, what does a citizen of heaven do? We commit ourselves to God and rejoice because of the great eternal reward awaiting us.

**I Peter 4:16-19** Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now “If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?” Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.

We can be sure that we are being called upon to suffer according to God's will if, having committed no crimes, we suffer solely because we bear Christ's name. Peter encouraged suffering saints to endure through the exercise of Christ-like faith.

Just as Christ trusted Himself to His Father who judges justly, so should we commit to our faithful Creator and continue to do good. In verse 19 the word “commit” is from a Greek accounting term meaning we must “deposit” or “entrust” ourselves to God by living God's way of life, and we do that for spiritual safe keeping.

We are also to demonstrate patience and perseverance, and pray for those who inflict persecution upon us.

**Hebrews 10:36-38** For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: “For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.”

It would be horrible state to be in if we draw back and God not be pleased with us. There is no doubt that God's people suffer, and in all trials we need patience because all of us tend to feel dissatisfied and complain because our human nature is likely to sink under sufferings and because our trials are often long and drawn-out.

All we can do in such cases is be patient as we search for possible reasons and needed changes in our life. Ultimately though, we place ourselves in the hands of our Creator, and submit to His will—hour by hour, day by day, month by month, and even year by year, if necessary.

It is implied here in Hebrews 10:36 that this promise will not be received unless we are patient in our trials, and the prospect of this mind-blowing reward should encourage us to endure them.

The gift of salvation and eternal life and the promised inheritance or reward we are in the process of receiving, brings us peace of mind and joy. We will end here in Philippians 4 which says:

**Philippians 4:6-7** Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

That piece of mind is far beyond what we can understand. There is such abundant blessings in just that piece of mind of God, that is beyond our comprehension. But it is certainly something we want because the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.