

I. Introduction

Good morning! Jesus came to give us abundant life. In **John 10:10b-11**, He said, **"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."** Jesus told us in advance that He would die for us, so that we might have abundant life. But when Jesus said this, Jesus was not talking about material things. Some people teach that Christians should always have health and wealth, but that is a distortion of the gospel. The abundant life Jesus spoke of is not a life full of worldly treasures. Instead, it is a life full of purpose and meaning, a life marked by peace, joy, and hope.



Jesus did not teach a gospel of health and wealth. Jesus taught obedience and self-sacrifice as the appropriate response to the gospel of love and grace. Take a look at **Luke 9:23**, **"Then he said to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'"** The abundant life Jesus came to give us is a life of obedience and self-sacrifice - a life that produces spiritual fruit and that brings heavenly rewards. In **Luke 12:33**, Jesus said, **"Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys."** A treasure in heaven is far better and more certain than earthly riches and rewards.



It is important to understand these things, so that we are not baffled and troubled by the storms of this life. If we focus on earthly blessings, we will be dismayed when trouble comes. But if our focus is on eternal things and our heart is set on heaven, then we will have peace. In **Matthew 5:11-12**, Jesus said, **"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."** As we continue our study in Acts, we will see that the early disciples understood these things. They rejoiced even in times of persecution and hardship, because their hearts were set on the resurrection and eternal life.

In today's Scripture, we will see how this focus gave them the freedom to boldly proclaim the Good News of Jesus in the face of threats and persecution. As we pick up the story, Peter and John are still being questioned by the Jewish leaders about the miraculous healing that God did through them at the temple. They have just proclaimed Jesus to the Jewish leaders, saying in **Acts 4:12**, **"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."** How will the Jewish leaders react? Let's continue reading with Acts 4:13-22.

II. Scripture Acts 4:13-22 (NIV 1984)

13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. 14 But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. 15 So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. 16 "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. 17 But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name." 18 Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. 20 For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." 21 After

further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. 22 For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

III. Teaching

The first reaction of the Sanhedrin, the council of 70 Jewish leaders, was astonishment. They wondered, “How can these ordinary men be so bold?” But then they took note that these men had been with Jesus. What about us, do we have the courage to proclaim the Good News? A first step toward becoming a bold Christian is to spend time with Jesus. Spend time talking to Him in prayer. Spend time reading His Word and listening for His voice. The more time we spend with Jesus, the more confident and bold we will become.

In **Acts 4:14**, we read, **“But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.”** It was impossible for the Jewish leaders to deny the miracle, because the man who had been healed was standing right there. His presence was irrefutable evidence that made it impossible for them to deny the miracle.

There is another and far greater miracle that is also supported by overwhelming evidence. Last week, in **Acts 4:10**, we read how Peter declared the resurrection to these same Jewish leaders, **“then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.”** The miracle of the resurrection of Jesus is far greater than the miracle of healing. But, if you read Acts 4 carefully, you will notice that the Sanhedrin never attempted to refute Peter’s declaration that Jesus had risen from the dead. Why? Because they knew that the evidence for the resurrection was overwhelming.

So what did the Jewish leaders do with the apostles? **Acts 4:21** tells us, **“After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened.”** All the people were praising God, but the leaders were threatening the apostles and trying to decide how to punish them. Why? I think it must have been because the leaders were afraid.

Take a look at what this same group of leaders said right after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. **John 11:47-48**, **“Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. ‘What are we accomplishing?’ they asked. ‘Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’”**

Those Jewish leaders loved their place of leadership. They loved their high status and the wealth that went with it. They knew very well that Jesus was performing many miraculous signs, signs that proved that He was the Messiah. But they were not interested in the truth about Jesus. They only wanted to get rid of anyone and anything that threatened their comfortable lifestyle and social position.

It is easy to criticize them. But it is harder to ask, “What about us?” You see, we are not as different from those leaders as we sometimes like to think. We are also tempted to protect our comfortable lifestyles and social status. The human desire for comfort and status causes one person to deny Jesus and it also causes another person to ignore the hard sayings of Jesus and to distort the gospel to fit their own preferences. We need to examine ourselves daily to make sure that we are not compromising our faith in order to protect our social place or comfort.

Many of the first Christians were martyred for their faith. And, according to church tradition, Peter was crucified upside down in Rome in 64 AD. The apostles and the early Christians boldly preached Jesus without any regard for their own comfort or reputation in society. We would do well to study and follow their example. Their obedience and self-sacrifice won heavenly treasures for them and helped to spread the gospel to the nations, bring salvation to millions.



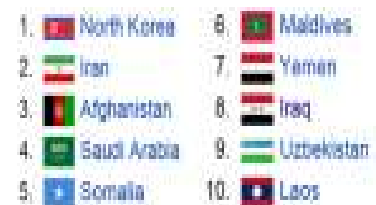
The same patterns that we see in Acts 4 continue to this day. Many people oppose Jesus. Some do so out of ignorance, but many do so out of a desire to protect their own social status and comfortable lifestyle. But wherever Christians stand firm for the truth and boldly proclaim the Good News of Jesus, they are winning heavenly treasure of eternal value. Where persecution abounds, the contrast between the truth and the lie are made more obvious and even more people come to faith and are saved.

Today, I would like to encourage you to pray for the Christians around the world who are suffering from persecution. Many people are unaware that persecution of Christians is wide-spread and severe in many nations in our time. There is an organization called Open Doors that works to raise awareness of persecution and to mobilize prayer for this need. Today would like to invite you to join in praying for the nations where persecution is severe.

Open Doors provides a World Watch List which shows the 50 nations where persecution of Christians is most severe. This map shows those nations. Living a faithful Christian life is hard in Japan, or in almost any place. But it is far more difficult in these nations where Christians are often imprisoned or even killed for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. Just like those Jewish leaders 2,000 years ago, there are still many places where people fear the truth and seek to punish Christians who preach the resurrection and do good deeds.



If you want to see the complete list, plus read news reports and prayer requests related to persecution, please visit the website at www.worldwatchlist.us. But for the moment, I want to share this list of the ten worst countries for persecution of Christians: North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Maldives, Yemen, Iraq, Uzbekistan, and Laos. In these countries Christians are severely persecuted and need our prayers. We should also remember that, in addition to Christians, many other groups suffer from persecution and it is good to pray for protection for them also.



It is good to pray for God's protection for those who are suffering under persecution and, obviously, we want to pray for an end to persecution. But it is interesting that Christians who are being persecuted often feel that it is more important to pray for spiritual fruit to come from persecution rather than praying for persecution to end. For an example of this, let's take a look at how the apostles pray in Acts 4:23-31.

IV. Scripture Acts 4:23-31 (NIV 1984)

23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. 25 You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' 27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. 30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." 31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

V. Teaching

We do not have time to study this prayer in depth today, but it is an amazing prayer and I recommend it to you for careful study. In this prayer, God is glorified as Creator and Lord and the facts of things that had happened are reviewed. But then, instead of asking for an end to the threats and persecution, the apostles acknowledge that all that has happened has been according to God's plan, and they ask only for boldness to

preach God's word and for miracles to prove that Jesus is Lord. In other words, rather than praying for persecution to end, the apostles and disciples prayed only for God to be glorified and for spiritual fruit to come from the persecution. At this point in Acts, the persecution is still quite mild. But, a short time after this, the persecution got far worse. But even then, their prayers were focused on how God could be glorified in the situation, not on their own personal comfort.

VI. Conclusion

What about us? When we suffer, do we pray only for an end to our suffering? Or do we pray for God to be glorified in the midst of our suffering? Do we pray only for our own personal comfort? Or do we pray for boldness to proclaim the Name of Jesus so that many might be saved?











It is my prayer that in the days to come we might all become more bold in our witness for Christ through spending more time in His presence, through powerful prayers that focus on His glory, and through a new filling of His Holy Spirit. Let's pray.

VII. Prayer

Dear heavenly Father,

You are Creator and Lord over all. We praise Your Holy Name and give thanks for the wonders of Your love and grace. Sovereign Lord, we confess that we are often more concerned about our personal comfort than we are about following Jesus. We confess that we are often more interested in our own plans than we are in Your perfect will for us. We confess that we often forget our brothers and sisters who are suffering from persecution. Lord, in the Name of Jesus and by His finished work on the cross, we ask You to forgive us our sins and restore us once again to right relationship with You. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that we might learn to boldly proclaim Your love and grace. Lord, be glorified in our lives, our homes, our church and throughout this land. In Jesus' precious Name I pray, amen.

At this time, let's go back to the slide that shows the ten countries where persecution of Christians is most severe and take a minute for silent prayer for our brothers and sisters. Let's pray, not only for an end to persecution, but also for courage and boldness for Christians to testify to the love of our Lord Jesus and for Him to be glorified in the midst of persecution. Let's pray (silent prayer time). Amen.

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| 1.  North Korea | 6.  Maldives |
| 2.  Iran | 7.  Yemen |
| 3.  Afghanistan | 8.  Iraq |
| 4.  Saudi Arabia | 9.  Uzbekistan |
| 5.  Somalia | 10.  Laos |