

Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, <sup>2</sup> being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. <sup>3</sup> And they laid hands on them, and put *them* in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. <sup>4</sup> However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

<sup>5</sup> And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, “By what power or by what name have you done this?”

<sup>8</sup> Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: <sup>9</sup> If we this day are judged for a good deed *done* to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ <sup>12</sup> Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. <sup>15</sup> But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, <sup>16</sup> 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*. <sup>17</sup> 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.”

<sup>18</sup> So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

<sup>23</sup> And being let go, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup> So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: “Lord, You *are* God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, <sup>25</sup> who by the mouth of Your servant David have said:

‘Why did the nations rage,  
And the people plot vain things?

<sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth took their stand,  
And the rulers were gathered together  
Against the LORD and against His Christ.’

<sup>27</sup> “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together <sup>28</sup> to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. <sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, <sup>30</sup> by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.”

<sup>31</sup> And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

### Introduction

Today we are going to learn from two sets of Bible passages that are connected to each other.

The passages are both about persecution in the early Church.

Firstly we will look at **Acts 4: v. 1-31**, and then **Acts 5: v. 17-42**.

Although Luke interrupts these two incidents with the story of Ananias and Sapphira, I felt that it would be best to deal with persecution in the early Church in one message.

**On Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July we will study Acts 4: v. 32 – Acts 5: v. 11.**

On the night before the crucifixion of Jesus, He warned His disciples about future problems and troubles.

**John 16: v. 33 in N.L.T.**

<sup>33</sup> I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

The passages that I read to you today are the start of these troubles and persecutions.

One Christian writer said this: "**The world will tolerate the Church only when it is the type of Church that it finds tolerable.**"

In other words the writer is saying that the world will only put up with the Church if it behaves in a way that is **acceptable to worldly standards.**

If the Church is only involved in **social action helping the community**, feeding the poor, pouring money in projects that help people practically, **then the world is happy with that Church.**

However as soon as the Church takes the matter of the Great Commission in **Matthew Chapter 28: v. 18-20** seriously and takes a stand for Biblical truth, and goes out into the community to preach and teach the Gospel **then the Church ceases to become popular and persecution arises.**

**Today if a Church stands for Biblical truth, it should expect persecution in some way.**

In fact in Paul's letter to Timothy in 2 Timothy Chapter 3: v.12 it says these words;

**"Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."**

So we must not be surprised when there is opposition to the Gospel and a stand for Biblical truth in a Church, or in our individual lives.

The early Church teaches us that if we are doing things right then we will suffer some form of enemy activity to try and prevent the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of Biblical truth.

The **pattern in Acts will recur again and again** where the Gospel is advancing.

**In our narrative in Acts 4: v. 1-31 there are five situations.** We will deal with them separately.

### **1. Identifying the Opposition – 4: v. 1-7.**

Firstly we need to identify the opposition and discover why perhaps they were opposed to the message that Peter preached.

Luke introduces us to the ruling political structure of this day.

**There were the Priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and the Sadducees.**

The Priests were responsible for all of the activity in the Temple.

The Temple guards were responsible for the security and maintaining order in the Temple areas where many people gathered.

The Sadducees were the ruling class in Israel. They were particularly concerned with maintaining healthy relationships with the Roman authorities who ruled Israel.

**The concerns of the Sadducees were both theological and political.**

Theologically the Sadducees **didn't believe in an after-life**, and were disturbed by the proclamation of the **resurrection of the dead through Jesus**. We notice this in v.2.

These people were also **concerned politically because large numbers of people were joining those who proclaimed about Jesus, daily in the Temple.**

The Roman authorities might view this growing movement as a dangerous group that could stir up political unrest in the area.

At the present time Judaism was allowed to co-exist with no big restrictions towards the Jewish faith of Judaism.

The easiest way to deal with this apparent problem was to put the leaders in prison. **We notice this in v.3.**

We also notice that putting the leaders in prison did not stop the spread of the gospel.

(Acts 4: v.4 )

<sup>4</sup> However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

We are told that the next day the rulers gathered to question Peter.

Their main question was, "**By what power or by what name have you done this?**"

The thing that we must not miss in these verses is that the leaders of God's people simply had no idea what the God who they professed to worship was doing in this situation.

It is exactly the same today.

We have already learnt that the book of Acts teaches us what Jesus continued to do through the work of the Holy Spirit, through the Apostles. However this work was **not recognised by the religious leaders.**

Unless you have a spiritual relationship with Jesus, through His Holy Spirit then you will not be able to recognise God's work here in this world.

The religious leaders in the text professed to worship the God of the Bible, but they did not recognise Jesus as their Messiah. How did they miss it?

The simple answer is that they had an evil heart of unbelief. Their heart was not open to the work of the Holy Spirit.

I hope that our hearts will always be open to the work of the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is always working.

The Holy Spirit works to convict and convince men and women of sin and to grow Holiness in the life of every believer.

## **2. Peter replies to their question. – v. 8-12.**

Peter was let out of prison and faced a sort of tribunal.

We are told that Peter was **filled with the Holy Spirit** and began to preach a short three point sermon.

**Point One** - Peter said that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was responsible for healing the lame man. The man did not heal himself, and Peter did not heal the lame man.

Peter gave all the glory for this miracle to Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

**Point two** - Peter told the Jewish leaders that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is alive today and He is in the place of authority. Peter also told the leaders that they were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. However Peter pointed out that in spite of their actions, God raised Jesus from the dead. Then Peter quotes their own scriptures to them.

**Peter quotes Psalm 118: v. 22.**

**Point three** - Peter then proclaims Jesus as the "**Unique Saviour**". In other words he says that there is **no other possibility for Salvation in any other person.**

The N.L.T. puts it like this "**There is Salvation in no one else. God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.**"

What Peter was saying here is this.

There is only one way to God and that is through Jesus.

**To reject Jesus is to reject God.**

## **John Chapter 14: v.6 in N.K.J.**

<sup>6</sup> Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

Peter preached only a very short sermon but it made a very important point.

There are **not many ways to God, there is only one way,** and that is **through Jesus.**

Peter used the crippled man as evidence of the power of Jesus, through His Holy Spirit to heal the lame man.

This was a testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter didn't heal the lame man, and the lame man didn't heal himself, **so who healed the lame man?**

The answer is Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Now today, it is very unlikely that you will be in a position to be involved in the healing of a lame man of over 40 years, and get an opportunity to preach the gospel from that position like Peter did.

**However every Christian has an equal opportunity of proclaiming the Gospel message about the death and resurrection of Jesus.**

If your heart has been changed by God, through belief in the work of Jesus on the cross and by the power of His Holy Spirit, then you have the most wonderful opportunity for the Gospel Message. You can tell people that your heart has been changed, and you didn't change your heart. If you didn't change your heart, then who did?

Well, you can tell people that your heart was changed by God when you believed in the Christian Gospel about Jesus Christ.

Then you can tell people about Jesus easily because of your changed heart.

This is why it is so important to make sure that you have repented of your sin and asked God to forgive you and change your heart.

**Unless the Holy Spirit is living in your heart, then change will not take place.**

Therefore it is absolutely essential that you are born again by God's Holy Spirit.

**The most powerful witness that we have in the world is a changed heart and a changed life-style, that follows Jesus in discipleship.**

This will cost your life. Jesus was very clear about this.

**Mark 8: v. 34-38. In the N.L.T.**

<sup>34</sup> Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. <sup>35</sup> If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. <sup>36</sup> And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? <sup>37</sup> Is anything worth more than your soul? <sup>38</sup> If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

### **3. The response of the audience. – v.13-22.**

Initially Luke records a very positive response. The leaders recognised the boldness of Peter. They knew that they were uneducated men. They were only fishermen.

Therefore their conclusion was that they must have been with Jesus.

The leaders knew about Jesus, and about His miracles.

The name of Jesus was well known.

The leaders also realised that they could not deny the miracle of the lame man.

He had been lame for over 40 years. Everybody knew him, so there was no chance of denying this physical miracle.

What could the religious leaders do?

Well like all good religious people, they decided to have a Committee Meeting.

The decision that they made was to threaten Peter and the Apostles not to speak in the name of Jesus, or even to teach in the name of Jesus.

Basically the religious leaders tried to stop the spread of the Gospel Message.

The Apostles had not broken any law and a lame man was healed.

An act of mercy was clear to all. If they punished the Apostles it might react badly in the community against them.

Peter and John replied to their command in this way.

**v. 19-20 in the N.L.T.**

<sup>19</sup> But Peter and John replied, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? <sup>20</sup> We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard."

The religious leaders couldn't think of a way to punish them without the risk of an uproar within the community. Therefore, they let them go.

Could opposition happen in Japan if we went out to preach the Gospel around the Temples of Japan?

The answer is YES. In fact this year at Cherry Blossom time we were in Osaka Castle Park and we set up our space to share the Gospel message through literature, singing and talking to people about Jesus.

After a very short time a man from the U.K. who had a large group next to us, asked me to move to another part of the park because he found our message offensive. He said he didn't want our message to contaminate what he was doing. When I refused he got angry and went to the security guards to have us removed. Fortunately the security guard slightly restricted our activity but we continued sharing about Jesus. It is the first time that I have encountered somebody getting really angry about the Gospel message being proclaimed. I was not surprised that he was from the U.K.

#### 4. **The Response of the early Church to this incident. – v.22-30.**

The response of the early Church was to have a prayer meeting and praise God for helping the disciples to remain faithful to the Gospel.

In this prayer meeting they **quoted from Psalm 2**, and praised God for His sovereignty in the situation.

##### **Psalm 2 in the N.L.T.**

<sup>1</sup>Why are the nations so angry?

Why do they waste their time with futile plans?

<sup>2</sup>The kings of the earth prepare for battle;

the rulers plot together

against the LORD

and against his anointed one.

<sup>3</sup>"Let us break their chains," they cry,

"and free ourselves from slavery to God."

<sup>4</sup>But the one who rules in heaven laughs.

The Lord scoffs at them.

<sup>5</sup>Then in anger he rebukes them,

terrifying them with his fierce fury.

<sup>6</sup>For the Lord declares, "I have placed my chosen king on the throne

in Jerusalem, on my holy mountain."

<sup>7</sup>The king proclaims the LORD's decree:

"The LORD said to me, 'You are my son.

Today I have become your Father.

<sup>8</sup>Only ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,

the whole earth as your possession.

<sup>9</sup>You will break them with an iron rod

and smash them like clay pots."

<sup>10</sup>Now then, you kings, act wisely!

Be warned, you rulers of the earth!

<sup>11</sup>Serve the LORD with reverent fear,

and rejoice with trembling.

<sup>12</sup>Submit to God's royal son, or he will become angry,

and you will be destroyed in the midst of all your activities—

for his anger flares up in an instant.

But what joy for all who take refuge in him!

In prayer, the believers showed clearly that they understood the hostility in the light of the character of God and the evidence from scripture. ( v.28)

However bad things might seem or happen, **nothing happens for the people of God outside of God's sovereign will.**

That was the case with Joseph being sold as a slave by his brothers.

##### **Gen. 50: v.15- 21. In the N.K.J.**

<sup>15</sup>When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him." <sup>16</sup>So they sent *messengers* to Joseph, saying, "Before your father died he commanded, saying, <sup>17</sup>'Thus you shall say to Joseph: "I beg you,

please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.” ’ Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

<sup>18</sup> Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, “Behold, we *are* your servants.”

<sup>19</sup> Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for *am* I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. <sup>21</sup> Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

It was also the case in the death of Jesus.

### **Acts 2: v. 22-24 in the N.K.J.**

<sup>22</sup> “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—

<sup>23</sup> Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; <sup>24</sup> whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

The Church prayer meeting then asks for boldness to continue proclaiming the Gospel and also for miracles to provide accreditation for the Gospel message.

We still need to pray even though God’s Sovereignty will prevail in the end.

### **5. God answers prayer. - v.31.**

We are told in v. 31 that the place shook and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

**They needed the Holy Spirit to continue the work of Jesus, and so do we.**

The Holy Spirit equips His servants to proclaim the Gospel message about Jesus.

We need the Holy Spirit every day. We certainly need Him today.

### **Part two – read Acts 5: v. 17-42.**

<sup>17</sup> Then the high priest rose up, and all those who *were* with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, <sup>18</sup> and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. <sup>19</sup> But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, <sup>20</sup> “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.”

<sup>21</sup> And when they heard *that*, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

<sup>22</sup> But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, <sup>23</sup> saying, “Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!” <sup>24</sup> Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. <sup>25</sup> So one came and told them, saying, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”

<sup>26</sup> Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. <sup>27</sup> And when they had brought them, they set *them* before the council. And the high priest asked them, <sup>28</sup> saying, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!”

<sup>29</sup> But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. <sup>31</sup> Him God has exalted to His right hand *to be* Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are His witnesses to these things, and *so also is* the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

<sup>33</sup> When they heard *this*, they were furious and plotted to kill them. <sup>34</sup> Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to

put the apostles outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup> And he said to them: “Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. <sup>36</sup> For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. <sup>37</sup> After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. <sup>38</sup> And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; <sup>39</sup> but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.”

<sup>40</sup> And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. <sup>42</sup> And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ.

We are now moving on to the second part of our narrative about persecution in the early Church.

In the first account Peter and the Apostles only had to spend a night in custody and have lots of verbal abuse, however Peter had an opportunity of presenting the Gospel to the leaders.

Now things become a little more serious, but they were also exciting as God’s hand was clearly working in the situation.

We can divide this passage up into 5 sections in order to highlight the important things.

1. **The Jealousy of the leaders. – v. 17-18.**

Peter and the Apostles continued to preach the Gospel and teach people about Jesus. They honoured their conviction from Chapter 4: v.20 where they said,

**“For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”**

The leaders were **both angry and jealous**. They were angry that the Apostles had ignored their command not to preach and teach about Jesus, and they were clearly jealous because the Apostles were getting very popular with their teaching about Jesus.

We are told that they arrested all the Apostles and put them into the common prison.

2. **God working through His Angels. – v. 19-25.**

That night as the Apostles were in their prison cells, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out and said, **“Go and stand in the Temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.”**

The Apostles obeyed the words of the Angel and disobeyed the words of the leaders. **They were obeying God, rather than man.**

The next day the leaders discovered that somehow, the Apostles had escaped from the prison and were teaching in the Temple about Jesus.

3. **Peter’s short sermon and explanation. – v. 26-33**

The captain of the temple guard and his officers re-arrested the Apostles and made them appear before the rulers a second time for questioning.

Peter’s explanation about his charge was to say, **“We ought to obey God, rather than men.”**

Peter then went on to give a mini sermon explaining about Jesus and the resurrection and **called for repentance on the part of Israel.**

Peter said that repentance would result in the **forgiveness of sins** and also in the **receiving of the Holy Spirit to those who obey the call for repentance.**

The result of Peter’s sermon caused the leaders to get more angry and they plotted on how they might kill the Apostles.

4. **The advice of Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law. – v. 34-40.**

While the rest of the leaders were plotting to kill the Apostles, God was still working to protect the Apostles **by using a wise teacher of the law called Gamaliel. This man gave the leaders some good advice.**

He reminded them of two men who gathered followers to join them in a movement. Both of these men were eventually killed and their movements perished with them. Their names were Theudas and Judas of Galilee.

Gamaliel said a wise thing in v. 38-39. **“ If this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God.”**

The rest of the leaders had to agree with Gamaliel’s advice.

However they displaced their anger by having the Apostles beaten.

After their beating, the Apostles were let go.

5. **The reaction of the Apostles – v. 41-42.**

You would expect the Apostles to be upset with their beating and to be discouraged and maybe not to preach for a period of time. You might even expect them to leave town.

However we are told that **they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus.**

The Apostles carried on preaching and teaching in the Temple and from house to house.

**Application.**

1. When the Gospel message is preached or taught in the power of the Holy Spirit then there is always going to be opposition.

The Holy Spirit does not empower His people to silence.

**We are called as Christians to boldly proclaim the Gospel.**

It is not nice to be abused or told to stop talking about sin or Jesus, but we can’t stop telling people about Jesus, **if we know Him as our own personal Saviour.**

When we are abused or physically harmed, it is not nice, **but to suffer for the name of Jesus, has its rewards and God has a way of encouraging His servants who have to suffer.**

2. **We must not oppose the purposes of God.**

The wise man **Gamaliel** told the leaders that if God is at work in a movement or situation, then nobody could stop it. The God of the Bible, the creator of the whole world and everything in it is **totally invincible.**

**He cannot be stopped.**

2,000 years ago Peter started with one sermon. In the world today there are an estimated **2.18 Billion Christians.**

If God purposes to do something, nobody can stop Him.

It is a very dangerous thing to go against the purposes of God.

God reveals Himself in His word and we have no excuse about His purposes for us as His people. **They are revealed in the Bible.**

3. **Angels are real, and if necessary God will use His Angels to accomplish His purposes in the world.**

I will talk more extensively about Angels at a later date. However we need to be encouraged that God has His resources available 24 hours a day.

4. **There are thousands of religions in the world but NONE of them lead to God.**

There is only one way to Heaven and that is through Jesus.

Some people are very sincere about their religious beliefs.

However the Bible is very clear, and Jesus is very clear that there is only ONE WAY, and that is through JESUS.

**Q. Have you come that way yet?**