

Acts Series Part 9

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[0 : 00] Well, as we continue our journey through Acts, we will be considering this evening part of the passage that we read there in Acts chapter 4, and particularly from verses 13 through to verse 22, though we won't limit ourselves to that part of the chapter.

One of the, I think, advantages, I hope, of preaching through the book of Acts is that we can have a better idea of the flow of events, and rather finding and trying to discover what we are being taught by events in isolation, we are able to have a better feeling of how the events fit in and what follows on from what has gone before.

And as we consider this chapter, I think it's particularly helpful to have that context. We know what has gone before. We know of the tremendous things that have been going on and following on from the day of Pentecost, and how on that day so many were challenged by and responded to the invitation of the gospel, and so thousands were brought to faith.

We have read and discovered how in those happy early days the believers enjoyed the favor of all the people. And we have considered in the past few weeks this incident of the healing of the crippled beggar and how having healed this crippled beggar, this opened up a new opportunity for the word to be preached.

And as it has been preached, so again the impact has been a very powerful one. The miracle itself, we're told, we've read in this chapter that even the rulers and leaders recognize that everybody living in Jerusalem knew of this outstanding miracle that had been performed.

[2 : 10] Nobody was ignorant of what was happening. All were impressed in one way or another. And all who knew of it, many were brought to saving faith.

The number of believers continues to grow as we read in this chapter that many heard the message, believed, and the number of men grew to about 5,000.

So this is what has been going on. And of course, this does not go unnoticed among the religious leaders who perceive, rightly so, a real threat to their position.

This new sect, as they would consider it, has at the heart of its message the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. The very same Jesus they had opposed and crucified.

And Peter, as we've been noticing, constantly reminds them of this, constantly reminds them of their guilt in this respect. And so it's not surprising that as they see this group growing and mushrooming and having an impact, they feel threatened by it.

[3 : 24] And so it is for that reason that the nascent church confronts for the first time persecution and opposition in this chapter, or described in this chapter.

The rulers and leaders are wondering what to do in the face of this threat, how to keep the believers quiet, how to retain their power.

And the less than original, but often effective recipe of violence and persecution is the route that they decide to go down. And human history confirms that this usually does the trick.

If we want to quieten people or shut people up, a little bit of violence and persecution tends to be very effective. Well, perhaps usually, but not this time.

At the close of this first attempt by the enemies of the church to shut Peter and John up, we find rather the religious leaders frustrated, bemused, and impotent.

[4 : 34] And their frustration is described at the close of verse 21, or rather at the close of this section of the chapter that we've read in verse 21, where they conclude 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. They didn't know what to do. They were frustrated. Their inability to keep them quiet and to achieve their objective of putting a break on the advance of this message and of this gospel.

Now, the question I want to consider this evening is, how is it that Peter and John were so successful in leaving their enemies, much more powerful than they were in many ways, how were they successful in frustrating them in this way?

How is it that at the close, at least of this incident, they continue to have the freedom and the liberty to preach and to minister, and their enemies are left, as we have noticed, bemused and frustrated? How is it that Peter and John won this first battle with their opponents? What strategy or tactics did they employ? What was the secret of their success? And these questions are not simply of historic interest for us.

[6 : 02] We live in days of increasing hostility and opposition to Christianity in our own country, in our own society.

Persecution of Christians in our own land, perhaps an inconceivable prospect just a few years ago, becomes a very real possibility.

It's not my intention to scaremonger or to exaggerate the day in which we live. We are very conscious that the liberties we enjoy are far greater than many of our brothers and sisters in other lands.

And that is very clear. But the direction in which our society is going is in the direction of greater hostility, to the gospel of greater intolerance, to those who would stand firm on what the Bible says. That is undeniable. Nor do we preclude the very real possibility that God could graciously intervene and put a brake to this trend and turn things around.

[7 : 07] And we pray that it would be so. But as we look at things as they are, that is the direction clearly in which we are going. And given that is so, these are very practical questions for us to consider.

What can we learn from Peter and John when they faced opposition? What lessons are there for us as we would face hostility and opposition also as we take a stand for the gospel, as we make known the good news concerning Jesus Christ?

And I think we find the answer to this question concerning how to respond to opposition and hostility.

We find the answer to this question in an unlikely source from the lips of the enemies of Peter and John, the rulers and elders, in crucial words that we discover or find in verse 13 of chapter 4, where there we read, when they saw the courage of Peter and John, they realized that they were unschooled ordinary men.

They were astonished. And then we read, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. They took note that these men had been with Jesus.

[8 : 25] And as we consider this matter of how is it that Peter and John were able to confront and to defend themselves and to emerge victorious as it were in the face of opposition and what lessons there are for us today, these are the words that will lie at the heart of what we want to say.

Their enemies took note that these men had been with Jesus. Now, if these words are going to be central to what we say, it's important that we understand what it is that they mean.

What is being said by this? As we discover what is meant by these words, I believe that we will have an answer to our question.

How should we respond to and confront those who would oppose us and the gospel we proclaim? Well, this phrase, they took note that these men had been with Jesus, is a wonderfully suggestive one.

But what is meant by it? I don't think that it's what is being said, that the disciples exhibited some pious Jesus glow that mystically led their enemies to conclude that, well, these men had been with Jesus.

[9 : 42] Rather, the context in which we find these words before us lead us to what I think is a reasonable conclusion concerning what is meant by this.

What is meant by saying that the rulers and elders and leaders took note that these men had been with Jesus? Well, in the verse, in that verse 13 in which we find these words, Luke has been particularly highlighting what it is that astonishes the rulers and elders.

And what is it that astonished them? Well, what astonished them was the boldness and authority in word and discourse of Peter and John. And this was all the more astonishing because, as we're told, they were unschooled, ordinary men.

This is what most impressed them. This is what most challenged them. Even more, it would seem, than the very miracle that had generated this whole situation.

The manner in which Peter had addressed them, his composure and confidence before such an audience, the adept and skilled manner in which he had employed the Scriptures to present his arguments concerning the identity of Jesus.

[10:59] All of these things reminded them of but one person with whom they had battled and who they thought was now out of the picture.

All of these things reminded them, of course, of Jesus. And what they say about Peter and John is uncannily like what they had previously said about Jesus.

We remember what is said in John chapter 7 or what is recorded in John chapter 7 and verse 15 concerning Jesus. Let's just notice what we find there.

John chapter 7 and verse 15. The Jews were amazed and asked and they're speaking concerning Jesus. How did this man get such learning without having studied?

You see, what is said of Peter and John is exactly the same as what had been said previously of Jesus. And so when the rulers and elders express themselves in this way, they took note that these men had been with Jesus, they do so because they say, well, these men are just like Jesus.

[12:07] They teach like Jesus. They have authority like Jesus. They have boldness and courage just like Jesus. This Jesus we had got out of the picture. This Jesus we had removed from being such a difficulty for us.

And here we find more just like Him. Peter and John spoke like Jesus. They had authority like Jesus. They interpreted and applied the Scriptures like Jesus.

They healed the sick like Jesus. And so the Jews or the Jewish religious authorities they had got rid of one Jesus and now they had two to contend with and of course more than two.

And you almost, almost feel sorry for them. Here they are thinking that they had achieved their objective of shutting up Jesus and more of the same come to disturb their peace and to threaten their power.

So in summary these words they took note that they had been with Jesus simply mean that Peter and John were like Jesus to the point that even the enemies could see the likeness and could recognize the likeness in them.

[13:19] So let's return to the question that we pose concerning opposition and hostility. How should we respond to and confront those who would oppose us and the gospel we proclaim?

Well the example of Peter and John provides a revealing and disarmingly simple answer. We must be like Jesus. This is the answer that we have before us.

We must be like Jesus. Now this of course is the challenge and invitation before us at all times in good times and bad when there is opposition and when there is very little opposition.

the challenge is the same. There is no special formula for times of opposition that doesn't apply in other times. We are to be like Jesus and that is at heart God's purpose for every Christian for each and every one of us who are followers of Jesus.

That is what God is doing in us. We are being transformed. We are being conformed into the likeness of His Son. This is an ongoing work of God in our lives that will come to its fruition and consummation and we will become just like Jesus.

[14:34] But that is something that we are challenged to be even now to be like Jesus. So let's spend the remaining time that we have exploring in what ways Peter and John show themselves to be like Jesus as they respond to the opposition of their enemies.

And we are not going to limit ourselves simply to those ways that the rulers and elders particularly identify that we have noted but more broadly as we consider the passage before us.

And as we do identify the ways in which Peter and John were like Jesus let's use this as a mirror as it were to look at ourselves and look at our own lives and see in what measure we are like Jesus as we too are called to be like Him.

Well what things can we find in this passage that show Peter and John to be like Jesus? Well there's a few things that we want to mention four I think that I'm highlighting four things.

The first thing that we can notice that made them very much like Jesus is the miracle that they performed. The miracle that they performed. We read there in verse 9 of how Peter responds to the challenge of the elders concerning this miracle.

[15 : 55] And in performing the miracle they were indeed like Jesus. That is what Jesus did. We know that Jesus went about Galilee performing miracles and healing the sick. Well here Peter and John are doing the same.

Now I've already just noted just a moment ago that as we consider these things that it would serve as a challenge for us to examine ourselves and say well am I like Jesus? And at this first step we might say well here we have a problem.

What is there here by way of application? Now while we don't preclude God's sovereign prerogative to act indeed through us in miraculous ways even today we do recognize that that is not what He ordinarily does.

And we certainly are not going to lament not being like Jesus because we don't perform miracles. And yet even in the miracle performed as we consider a little more carefully what is involved we find that there is an immediate and beautiful application.

And we find it as we consider the manner in which Peter described what they had done in favor of the cripple. How does Peter describe what they had done? He doesn't describe it in the first instance as a wonderful miracle as a great marvelous act.

[17 : 12] How does Peter describe what they had done for the cripple? Well we have it there in his own words in verse 9. What does Peter say? If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple.

It's a beautiful way that Peter describes what has happened. You know here he is faced with the opposition he is faced with those who are opposing him and you would say that the strategic thing to do would be to say look you guys you're opposing me but look at the miracle we've done.

See if you can do that you oppose us and let's see you do a miracle like we've performed a miracle. But no. Peter says if we are being called to account for an act of kindness shown to a cripple.

See this was their motivation as they came face to face with this man they were driven to help him because of a desire to show kindness to him. It was human compassion.

It was a Jesus like compassion for this man that led them to heal him in the name of Jesus. It was an act of kindness that they had performed.

[18 : 20] All of this scene that is before us begins with an act of kindness. The astonished crowds the church growing as it is described here. All of this begins with an act of kindness.

Not in the first instance a great miracle though it was. it begins with an act of kindness. And there is great power in an act of kindness.

An act of kindness can soften a heart in a way that perhaps a thousand sermons may fail to do. Or a thousand arguments that we might have to persuade people concerning the truth of the gospel may have no impact and yet an act of kindness may be used by God to do great things.

And Jesus was constantly performing acts of kindness. And Peter and John are like Jesus in this way that here were men who in the midst of their many duties and privileges as servants of God had time for simple acts of kindness to those in need.

Let us then also be like Jesus in this regard. So how are Peter and John like Jesus? Well, the miracle that they performed. But for us and as we apply it to ourselves particularly focusing on the manner which Peter describes it simply as an act of kindness.

[19 : 44] But Peter and John were like Jesus in other ways. And it was in this second way that the rulers and elders particularly noticed the similarity.

And that is in the message that they proclaimed. The message that they proclaimed. Peter and John were like Jesus in this regard.

Now this is something we've noted already. This message that they proclaim and the characteristics of it and we can only comment on them just in the passing. A message grounded in the Scriptures.

A message of salvation. A message that declared the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. And a message delivered with authority. These are some of the features of the message that they bring. And in this they are like Jesus. These are the features and characteristics of the preaching of Jesus and of the teaching of Jesus also. But what of us?

[20 : 43] If we are to be like Jesus there is a message that we must declare. We may begin and perhaps we ought to begin with an act of kindness but we continue and we must continue with a verbal message with gospel content.

We cannot remain and think that our job is concluded with an act of kindness. Important though that is. But that with Peter and John and with Jesus we must bring a message with content.

The truth of the gospel must be announced and proclaimed in the manner that we find Peter and John doing so. And as we declare the message of God to a skeptical and hostile society and generation we must do so with authority and conviction just like Jesus.

So Peter and John are like Jesus in the miracle that they performed in the kindness that they showed in the message that they proclaimed but also and this flows on really from what we've been saying in the courage that they displayed.

and this is something that the enemies recognize and are astonished by there in verse 13 when they saw the courage of Peter and John they were astonished.

[22 : 06] Peter and John were like Jesus in the courage that they displayed. This is what particularly impressed the rulers and elders. Peter and John knew the danger that they faced as they spoke to the crowd and as they spoke particularly to the leaders who were challenging them and threatening them.

They knew that they were in danger. They knew that there were consequences that could flow from the stand that they were taking. But Peter and John were men of courage just like Jesus.

We know that Jesus was not one to shy away from danger or to be reluctant to confront his enemies. No. He was a man of courage and Peter and John were like him men of courage.

And this is not the courage of the daredevil or of the strong man who courts danger for the thrill of it. No, rather it's the courage of those who are simply prepared to do whatever they have to do regardless of the danger that there might be.

The courage to do the right thing. It is this courage. It is not as I say a courage that wants to proclaim to the world how brave they are.

[23 : 22] No. They have a job to do. They have a message to proclaim and they have the courage to do what they have to do. To do the right thing. It is that courage. The courage to do the right thing without measuring the consequences.

And that is a courage that we have great need of today. The courage to do the right thing. When we are placed with challenges perhaps in our work or in other circumstances where we are and where we have to do the right thing and we have to say the right thing and we have to take a stand for what is true and what is right.

And we know that there can be consequences. We know that we might be marginalized or mocked or rejected or perhaps even have opportunities of advancement in work affected by it.

but we must display this courage. The courage to do the right thing. The courage to do what we have to do and not holding back for fear of the consequences.

How we need that courage today. Now perhaps some if we are honest might say well that is not me that is not the kind of courage that I have. Well I suspect that Peter and John may have had similar thoughts.

[24 : 38] I don't think Peter and John were men who with gay abandon sought courage or were excited by the thrill of danger. Rather we find them in the rest of this chapter we haven't read we find them asking God to grant them boldness.

And if they are asking God to grant them boldness the implication is that they themselves were conscious that they lacked courage and lacked boldness. This boldness was not something that came naturally to them.

And so we read there in verse 29 of chapter 4 Now Lord consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. You see if they took a thrill from the danger then they wouldn't have had any need to ask God for boldness.

But no they were men of like passions as ourselves as Elijah is described. They were men who knew what it was to be afraid. They knew were men who knew what it was to tremble in the face of danger.

And yet the courage is a courage that even though they were afraid even though they may have trembled they did what they had to do. They did the right thing. And so they were like Jesus in this regard in the courage that they displayed.

[25 : 49] But one other characteristic that we find as we consider this passage and this incident that shows Peter and John to be like Jesus. And it is this in the loyalty that they demonstrated.

The miracle that they performed and at the heart this act of kindness. The message that they proclaimed. The courage that they displayed. But then fourthly and with this we well I won't say we draw to a close because we have one other thing to say but draw to a close this part.

The loyalty that they demonstrated in verses 19 and 20 and they're very well known words that we find as they are challenged by the leaders and told to no longer speak and their response is a very famous one.

But Peter and John replied in the face of these threats 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.

The loyalty demonstrated loyalty to God and loyalty to the fulfilling of the mission that God had commended to them. In this they were like Jesus faced with a choice between obeying man or God for Peter and John it's a no brainer.

[27 : 07] It is so clear to them what they have to do it is it is blindingly obvious to them that if they have to choose between God and man well clearly they will choose God. Clearly their highest loyalty is to God their highest loyalty is to Him not to worldly authorities that would threaten them and would challenge them no their loyalty was to God and to doing that which God had asked them to do to proclaiming the message that they could not help but proclaim as they express it there in verse 20.

Peter and John are men under authority men under authority just like Jesus just like Jesus yes even Jesus the eternal Son of God in His work and mission here on earth He was a man under authority permanently clear and focused as to His mission to do the will of the Father He was a man under authority and He was persuaded and committed to fulfilling the mission that His Father had given Him to perform and so Jesus demonstrated His profound loyalty to the Father in the work that He performed so too Peter and John like Jesus men under authority demonstrating their loyalty to God over and above all others and what about us in times of opposition and hostility it is our loyalty to God that will be most severely tested when the situation gets difficult and dangerous who will we be loyal to?

To whom will we grant our allegiance? Will we be like Peter and John who in turn were like Jesus? judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God so in these ways Peter and John are like Jesus and so it is not surprising that even their enemies as we have noted took note that these men had been with Jesus they were like Jesus but there is one further element that the rulers and elders could never have understood unless they too had been brought to faith and perhaps some of them were in due course but while they remained outside of God's family while they remained strangers to grace there is one element that they could never have understood but it lies at the heart of how Peter and John were like Jesus in all the ways described there is one thing that is if you wish the common theme that would explain how Peter and John were like Jesus in all of the ways described and we find this key and fundamental element in verse 8 as Peter begins his address to those who oppose him we read that in verse 8 then Peter filled with the Holy Spirit said to them this is the fundamental element that explains to us how it is that these men Peter and John unschooled men ordinary men how it is that these men were like Jesus like Jesus to such an extent that even their enemies recognized the likeness this is the fundamental element they were filled with the Holy Spirit this is what makes the difference Peter and John were not like Jesus just because they had walked with him through the villages and towns of Galilee they were not like Jesus just because they had received and been molded by his teaching though that was so they were not like Jesus just because they were trying to follow his example and they said well we're we're Christians we're followers of Jesus so we're going to try and be like him though no doubt that was something that they aspired to they were like Jesus because they were filled with the same spirit of God that Jesus was indwelt by and this is why Pentecost had been so crucial and that is why Jesus had said to them that it was better for them that he depart that he be able to send another to be with them and to live in them filled with the Holy Spirit this is the the fundamental explanation to defining these men

Peter and John like Jesus and this is wonderfully encouraging news for us it's for you and for me perhaps I don't know as we have been noting the ways Peter and John were like Jesus maybe you have been struck by how unlike Jesus you are and you genuinely wonder you sincerely and honestly wonder if you could ever come even close to being like him well you can you can because you too can be filled by the self same spirit of God and as you are filled by the spirit of God you will be like Jesus you will step by step perhaps small step by small step be transformed into his likeness this is not some unreachable aspiration for us as Christians no as we are filled by the spirit of God we will be like Jesus and you will be like Jesus as Peter and

[32 : 32] John filled with the spirit of God were like Jesus filled with the spirit of God well how does that work well we have to ask how is it that Peter and John enjoy being filled with the spirit of God as described in this chapter and there is perhaps much that we could say but I would say one thing and it is this they were filled with the spirit of God because they asked God to fill them with his spirit they asked God that they might be filled in this way and this is something we can notice towards the end of the chapter we haven't read this part of the chapter but in chapter 29 we have already noted it in connection with their asking God for boldness and the people of God are gathered the community of faith are gathered and they're praying to God and they're asking God that he would grant to them boldness and what is the result of this petition what is the result of this prayer meeting where God's people ask God for this boldness that they need but we're told what is the result in the verse that follows in verse 31 after they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the

Holy Spirit why because they had asked God they had gathered together conscious of their need and they spoke the word of God boldly they had asked for boldness and they were granted boldness how were they granted boldness well they were granted boldness as they were filled with the Holy Spirit of God and so this is for our encouragement to be like Jesus is not something that is beyond us as Christians it is not for some very special Christians who maybe as a result of great effort could possibly reach that likeness no this is for ordinary unschooled men this is for ordinary Christians like you and me and we have described ways in which Peter and John were like Jesus but fundamentally at heart the crucial element is this one that we have just noted that they were filled with the Holy Spirit of God and so filled so they had to be they could do no other than display likeness to Jesus well may it be true of us as Christians as the Christ ones in this city in Aberdeen that friend and foe might take note that we have been with Jesus let us pray have a love to find a tú we can