

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 4

In chapter 3, Peter gave a witnessing sermon to the people who had seen the formerly lame man now walking and praising God after Peter had healed him. That story now continues in chapter 4.

4:1-6

Peter and John were still talking to the crowd when some priests, the captain of the temple guard, and some Sadducees showed up. So, these were people who were directly involved in the operation of temple worship. Verse 2 shows that they were opposed to Yeshua being the Messiah and the reality of His resurrection from the dead. The opposition of the Sadducees to the concept of resurrection was well established at that time, but it is also helpful to understand why they rejected the concept.

The Sadducees were the religious party that was founded by the priests who returned from Babylonian captivity. As priests, their emphasis was on the Torah and temple worship, and as such, their beliefs were limited to what was established in Torah, not in the Prophets or other Writings of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) where the concept of the resurrection was primarily developed. And since the Torah did not explicitly affirm the resurrection and the immortality of the soul or life after death, they did not accept those concepts as being valid. Their focus was on the here and now, primarily on temple worship. And when you died, according to their way of thinking, you ceased to exist.

By the late second temple period, the Sadducees had become more politically oriented instead of being directly associated with temple worship. The Pharisees were similar in that regard. But because their origin is traced to Jews who stayed behind in Persia after it conquered Babylon, they were less focused on Temple practices, and they believed that the writings of the prophets were inspired by God, and thus they accepted the concepts of the resurrection and the immortality of the soul. So, when they eventually made their way to Jerusalem, they brought their beliefs with them, and they became the dominant political party.

But even though these two groups had major disagreements, they managed to tolerate each other's existence, similar to the way that American political parties can more or less coexist. But the Sadducees had no tolerance for less politically influential groups like the Messianic community. And that is evident in Acts 4:2 when they were disturbed by advocates of the resurrection from the Galilee who lacked political power.

So, in verse 3, the Sadducees had Peter and John arrested, apparently by the captain of the temple guard. Nevertheless, according to verse 4, a large number of people who heard Peter's message became believers in Yeshua. Earlier, in 2:41, we are told that 3,000 people became believers on Shavuot/Pentecost. Afterward, according to 2:47, other people were becoming believers daily. Now, in 4:4, the best understanding of the text is that another group of people believed, which brought the total to 5,000 altogether.

4:5-12

The next day, the highest level of leaders showed up. Annas is identified here as high priest, but that is a term of respect just as former presidents of the U.S. are recognized with the same title after leaving office. Annas was the high priest 15 years earlier, but he continued to have

unofficial influence for the rest of his life, most notably when Yeshua was brought before him first before he was sent to the actual high priest, Caiaphas (Jn 18:19-23). At that time Caiaphas charged Yeshua with blasphemy and then sent Him to Pilate, which led to Yeshua's death. Since this was only a few months later, Caiaphas was still the official high priest and would continue in that role for another five years. They were both Sadducees, so they were aggressive in punishing anyone who promoted the resurrection of the dead and life in the World to Come. It is uncertain who the other two men were in verse 6, but they were related somehow to the two high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. Together, these 4 individuals had considerable influence in the community.

Based on their approach in verse 7, it does not appear that these leaders realized there was a connection between the commotion over the healing of the beggar and Yeshua whose death they had facilitated a short time earlier. Perhaps they just thought that they had some different troublemakers to deal with. In any event, their question in verse 7 and Peter's answer beginning in verse 9 teaches us about witnessing that whenever someone opens the door by directly asking a question, we need to respond boldly and in a spirit-filled manner.

Remember, this is Peter who denied Yeshua three times during the night before the crucifixion. But 50 days later the Holy Spirit came upon Peter along with the other believers, and now he was capable of acting in a spirit-filled way that brings about boldness and a clear recall of God's Word. That is evident in his two sermons that are much more comprehensible and insightful than you would expect from a Galilean fisherman.

Peter's answer in verses 9-12 to the question in verse 7 regarding the name and power behind the healing miracle, has three elements that serve as a model for witnessing:

- Yeshua is the one who changes lives and the healed man is evidence of that fact (v. 10).
- Yeshua is the one who was foretold by the prophets. Specifically, a few months earlier, Psalm 118:22 was fulfilled when the builders (leaders of Israel) rejected the Messiah as the cornerstone.
- Yeshua is the only way of salvation, and His name, which means "salvation," is evidence of that fact because biblical names communicate character and calling (v. 12). This verse disproves the idea held by some people who claim to be Christians that you can believe in another religion and go to heaven.

In the verses that follow, it is obvious that the leaders did not respond enthusiastically to what Peter had to say. But it did not stop Peter from being a witness and doing it in a godly, strategic way. The same is true for us. We need to be faithful, just as Peter was faithful in speaking the truth about Yeshua and then leaving the rest in God's hands and in His timing.

4:13-22

The leaders then faced a quandary. They finally recognized Peter and John as disciples of Yeshua. And the leaders did not like what they were doing and would probably preferred punishing them. But the problem was that the beggar was obviously healed, so it would not look good publicly to do so. They decided to avoid such controversy, and they just attempted to bully Peter and John into no longer speaking about Yeshua. To sum up their actions, they ignored the facts, acted in a politically correct manner, and applied social pressure to conform to the dominant point of view.

Verse 20 is one of the greatest declarations in all of Scripture. It supports the validity of the Bible because these men saw and heard things directly with their own eyes and ears. It was not

second-hand news. So they knew it was not a lie or a legend, which would not move you to risk it all by defending it. Instead, when you have experienced something like that, your motivation to testify regarding the truthfulness of the matter is enhanced exponentially, even to the point of being willing to die for the truth.

That was indeed the case with Peter, who made it clear in his second epistle that he would die for his faith in Yeshua (2 Pet 1:14,15; Jn 21:18,19). He wrote that letter while in prison about 35 years after this account in Acts 4, and a short time later, he was martyred for his faith. We also know that according to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down because he believed he was unworthy to die in the same manner as Yeshua.

The other disciples met similar fates—some were crucified, others were stoned or speared or decapitated. Only John died a natural death, and that was while being an exiled prisoner on the barren island of Patmos where God inspired him with the message of the book of Revelation. The point is that these men were all willing to live their lives and to give them up because they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that everything they were saying about Yeshua was true.

In spite of the considerable evidence of the validity of the miracle, and the testimony of prophecy, and the personal conviction held by eyewitnesses to the reality of the resurrection, the authorities did not agree with the message of Peter and John. And that is really no different than the response of many people today. But, compelled to exercise their power, the authorities gave the disciples some more threats and then sent on their way.

4:23-37

When Peter and John returned to their fellow believers, it was a time for rejoicing and prayer. In their prayer in verses 25-26, they quoted from Psalm 2:1-2, a passage that was agreed to be Messianic in nature by the ancient rabbis. So you have a depiction in advance of rulers coming against the Messiah, as was clearly the case with Yeshua. But that was not the full story because other people were involved. The list of guilty parties in verse 27 shows that it was not just Jews who were responsible for the death of Yeshua, it was Gentiles as well, which therefore represents the people of the world in the way that God identifies them in Scripture. That renders untrue the anti-Semitic argument that Jews alone deserve punishment for killing Jesus.

And not only that, according to v. 28, ultimately it was God's plan, not man's error. That is consistent with Yeshua's declaration in John 10:18 about his life and death: "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative."

The end of chapter 4 is similar to the end of chapter 2 but also with one difference. In the previous passage, the baptism with the Holy Spirit, accompanied by speaking in other languages, was a one-time historical event that created a unity of believers (as indicated by the grammar and context of the passage). Here in 4:31, they were *filled* with the Spirit, resulting in their ability to speak the word of God with boldness. That is exactly what Peter did earlier in verse 8. And it will be repeated a number of times with various believers (Acts 5:3; 9:17; 13:9,52; Eph 5:18).

So, unlike the one-time historical event of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, the filling of the Spirit is an on-going occurrence that enables believers to be witnesses through boldness and with recall of the Word of God. All this to say that it is important to use biblical terms correctly, to understand their place in history, and to apply them properly to our lives when relevant, which are elements of "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

Then, once again, we see how the believing community functioned cooperatively, even sacrificially, as people sold their property for the Apostles to use in ministering to the body.