

ACTS 3-4—THE EARLY CHURCH AND US

INTRO: We have been discussing how to have a dynamic relationship and life with Jesus, both as individuals and as a congregation. We began by talking about Jesus' Great Commission to us and some ways we might carry it out in our lives. We then looked at Jesus' own example in **John 5** and how that relates to us. Today I want to look at the early church in the book of **Acts, chs. 3-4**. The reason is that the early church had received Jesus' Great Commission. Some of the people in the early church had known Jesus personally in the flesh.

Acts 3-4 recount an event and its aftermath very similar to the event in John 5. Consequently, it reveals that what Jesus did in **John 5** and the response he received were not unique. **Acts 4** also records the first prayer of the church. That shows us the mindset of the early church. **Chapter 4** ends by recounting the nature of the church, particularly the church's attitude toward money and possessions and the effect that was having in society. These chapters show us that having a dynamic relationship with Jesus is possible; they show us *how* to have such a relationship; and they show us what can happen when Christ's church has such a dynamic relationship with him.

O/S: We will look at four things: (1) What Peter and John did in **ch. 3**; (2) What happened to Peter and John in **4:1-22**; (3) The prayer of the church in **4:23-31**; and (4) The nature of the church in **4:32-37**.

I. What Peter and John did: Acts 3

The events of **chs. 3-4** took place just about 2 months after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. This is important, because those events were still fresh in people's minds, and many of the people would have been eyewitnesses to them.

At the beginning of ch. 3, Peter and John were going into the temple to pray. A lame man, who was a beggar, was there. **Verses 3-9** then tell us what happened [**READ 3:3-9**]

The people crowded around Peter in amazement. So Peter took advantage of the situation and preached to them. Peter made a number of points that are instructive for us. In **vv. 12-13** he made the point that it was not their own power or piety that healed the man, but it was God through Jesus Christ who healed the man. In **vv. 13-14** he was not afraid to go on to say, **"It was you who disowned Jesus and demanded that he be put to death."** But then in **v. 15** Peter goes to the big fact—probably the most important event in history—namely, that Jesus is [**READ v. 15**]

The resurrection is the bottom-line fact of Christianity. It separates Christianity from every other religion and belief system in the world. When he was on earth, Jesus basically had said, **"I am a man, but I am more than just a man; I am God come to earth as a man—and I will prove it by doing something that no one who is merely a man could do. Namely, they will kill me (I will be really dead); they will bury me; but on the third day I will bodily rise from the grave, alive forevermore."** Either he did or he did not. If he didn't, believe anything you want. Paul makes that point explicitly in **1 Cor 15** where he says [**READ 1 Cor 15:14, 17**]

But if Jesus did rise from the dead—and he did—that validates who Jesus is and everything he said. In our ECLEA book on *Christianity & Islam*, we have a section that summarizes the historical evidence for the resurrection and, I think, demonstrates that the truth of the resurrection is beyond a reasonable doubt.

Christianity—unlike any other religion in the world—is based on an historical fact. Peter is pointing out that he and John were eyewitnesses to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. At the beginning of **1 Cor 15** Paul describes the many different bodily appearances Jesus made after his resurrection. He says that, on one occasion [**READ 1 Cor 15:6**]. What he is saying is, **"If you doubt me, then go ask them—they were there, they saw him; this is a matter of fact, not opinion."** That is why, whenever you have doubts, go back to the resurrection. Because of that, Peter says in **Acts 3:16** [**READ**].

Then, in the rest of ch. 3, Peter tells the people that the coming of Jesus, his suffering, death, resurrection, and his coming again had all been prophesied in the OT. In **vv. 22-25** Peter quoted from what Moses said in **Deut 18:15**, quoted from the Abrahamic Covenant in **Genesis 22**, and said in **Acts 3:24** [**READ**]. Therefore, he told the people in **v. 19** [**READ**].

Notice three things about Peter's sermon. First, he knows the gospel and emphasizes the most important aspects of the gospel. What is the gospel? The word "gospel" is a Greek word which means "good news." The word "gospel" was not just a "church" word but was used in Greek and Roman society for news of any great historical event that profoundly affects us, such as a victory in war or a new king assuming the throne. Such momentous events changed conditions and required a response from the people.

When the writers of the NT took over the word “gospel,” they were using it for the most important historical event in the entire history of the world, namely, the gospel is the good news of what God has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ. He lived the life we should have lived; he died the death we should have died and paid the price for our sin that otherwise we would have to pay but never could. Then he rose from the dead, which validates who he is—God come to earth as a man. By not leaving Jesus in the grave, the resurrection also demonstrates that the Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf. All we have to do is understand and believe that—believe who Jesus is and what he has done.

Second, Peter knew his Bible and therefore was able to talk about the prophecies of Jesus from the OT. It is not only the resurrection that separates Christianity from every other religion in the world. It is also the existence of fulfilled prophecy. The OT contains scores of prophecies about the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. These prophecies were made hundreds of years before Jesus came into the world. No other belief system has anything like this.

The existence of these prophecies makes the claims that Jesus is the Messiah verifiable or falsifiable. Jesus had no control over many of the prophecies (such as his manner and place of birth, his lineage, his betrayal, the actions of his disciples and of his executioners, and the manner of his death and burial). Consequently, he could not have manipulated events to contrive to fulfill the prophecies.

Several years ago, mathematics and astronomy professor Peter W. Stoner took just eight of the prophecies concerning Jesus. A class at Pasadena City College ran a probability analysis. The question was: What is the chance that any person might have lived from the day of those prophecies to the present time and fulfilled all eight prophecies? The result, as Stoner concluded, is that **“the chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled all eight prophecies is 1 in 10¹⁷”**

What does that mean? Stoner wrote that if you took 10¹⁷ silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas, **“they will cover the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and [it must be] the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, provided they wrote using their own wisdom. This means that the fulfillment of those eight prophecies alone proves that God inspired the writing of those prophecies to a definiteness which lacks only one chance in 10¹⁷ of being absolute.”**

Stoner then looked at 48 prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. Using the same principles of probability, the human chance of fulfilling 48 of the prophecies relating to Jesus would be 1 in 10¹⁵⁷. That is equivalent to the number of electrons that make up 500 solid balls of electrons, each ball having a diameter of 6 billion light-years! The implications of these data are astounding. Stoner says, **“This is not merely evidence. It is proof of the Bible’s inspiration by God—proof so definite that the universe is not large enough to hold the evidence.”** Stoner’s book is entitled *Science Speaks*. It details the methodology he used, and it is available online if you are interested.

There is nothing like this in any other religion or worldview. Christianity is not just a “religion,” it is a dynamic relationship with the living Lord. It is demonstrably true beyond a reasonable doubt. The gospel—and only the gospel—is the most wonderful and transformative thing in the world. So why are we living our lives in fear, timidity, and complacency?

The third thing about Peter’s sermon we need to take note of is, Peter tried to close the deal and bring the people to repentance and faith by explicitly telling them what they need to do about all this. Remember, in **3:19** he said [READ]. All of these things are a model for us. This is where discipleship is so important. Peter said in **1 Pet 3:15**, **“Always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you.”** Peter was a fisherman, not a scholar. But he knew his Bible and he knew the gospel. He knew that the basis of Christianity is *not* the *teachings* of Jesus, but an event.

Christianity is based on who Jesus is and what he did—all of which is verified by the fact of the resurrection and the fulfillment of prophecy. We need to know these things. We need to be able to relate these things to people. We need to be able to tell them why this is so important. And we need to tell them what they need to do about it. And we need to do this, as Peter said in **1 Peter 3**, **“with gentleness and reverence.”** Or, as Paul puts it in **Eph 4:15**, we are to **“speak the truth in love.”** That leads us to:

II. What happened to Peter and John

Just as what happened with Jesus when he healed the lame man in **John 5**, so here: Peter and John got in trouble with the authorities. Indeed, they got thrown in jail. Why? **Acts 4:1-2** tells us [READ].

So the next day, they are brought before the Jewish leaders who demand an explanation. In v. 10 Peter again, without hesitation, says [READ v. 10]. Then in v. 11 he quotes from Ps 118:22 and says *that also* is a prophecy which is fulfilled in Christ. He concludes in v. 12 the same way he concluded when he addressed the people in the temple the day before [READ v. 12]. He again was focusing on the resurrection, fulfilled prophecy, and what that means for us.

The leaders were amazed at the confidence of Peter and John, since they were uneducated men. But they recognized the crucial fact, as v. 13 says, that they had **“been with Jesus.”** And the man who had been healed was standing right there with them, so v. 14 says that **“they had nothing to say in reply.”** They couldn’t deny the miracle, and they had no basis to imprison them or otherwise punish them. So all they could do was threaten them and **“command them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”** Yet even in the face of that, in vv. 19-20 Peter and John replied [READ vv. 19-20].

Notice something here that is as true today as it was then. There is something about **“the name of Jesus”** that is different. In our society today, it is still OK to talk about “God,” or “religion,” or “faith,” or “spirituality.” Those are all just general terms that most people do not find too offensive. But mention the name of “Jesus”—that is something else again. Yet Peter repeatedly kept naming the name of Jesus. 3:16: **“it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man”**; 4:10: **“by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—by this name this man stands here before you in good health”**; 4:12, **“there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved”**; so the leaders commanded them in 4:18 **“not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”**

Are we hesitant to speak the name of Jesus? The early church was not. And they faced real persecution. What do we face? I don’t know. I’ll name the name of Jesus when I am in the safety of my church and with other Christians. But I’ll be a “secret Christian” with others, because maybe someone won’t like me. I don’t want to offend people! This is more important than we may think. Jesus said in Matt 10:32-33 [READ].

Look at Peter. To both the people in the temple and to the Jewish leaders he said: **“You crucified Jesus—but God raised him from the dead!”** Yes, Peter was confident. He knew who Jesus was. He knew the Scriptures and the prophecies. He knew that Jesus had been resurrected and was alive and active. And Peter had the Holy Spirit. All of those same things are true today. Christ gives everyone of us the same HS Peter had and the same ability to be just as forthright as Peter was. Let us draw on the presence and power of the Spirit that Christ has given us! That leads us to:

III. The prayer of the church—Acts 4:23-31

v. 23 tells us that Peter and John then went to the other believers and reported all that had happened to them. Then vv. 24-30 give us the first recorded prayer of the church. Let’s go through this. V. 24 says [READ v. 24]. They knew who they were praying to: the “Sovereign Lord” who made the universe and everything in it. We need to know and remember that God is real; he is sovereign; he has all power; and we are not alone.

Then vv. 25-28 continue the prayer [READ vv. 25-28]. In this prayer they quote Ps 2:1-2. The church is doing the same thing Peter did when he preached in the temple and when he answered the Jewish leaders. The church is quoting OT prophecies that relate to Jesus. They are pointing out—from the Scripture—that God had predestined and ordained even the crucifixion of Christ. This is important, particularly when we go through hard times or face hard or dangerous situations. If God ordained that the only righteous person who has ever lived would be persecuted, betrayed, arrested, beaten, and put to death as a common criminal, why do we think that bad things won’t happen to us?

Jesus said that bad things *will* happen to us. Yet God is just as present in the bad things of our lives as he is in the good things. But look at how *we* tend to pray: **“God, how could you let this happen?”** We always wonder, **“How can God let bad things happen to good people?”** Our prayers typically are for protection, safety, and relief from tough situations. That’s not the way the early church prayed! Even when Peter and John were under arrest and being threatened by the Jewish leaders, they didn’t say, **“OK, we’re sorry, we won’t speak the name of Jesus again.”** They said, **“You do what you have to do, and we’ll do what we have to do, because we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”** The HS is in you and me just as he was in Peter and John. Let us draw on him, not grieve or quench him.

Then, in vv. 29-30 the believers make their requests of God. What do they ask him for? Is it for safety or protection? Let’s see. V. 29 says [READ v. 29]. The ESV says **“look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.”** How many of us pray for boldness? When is the last time you prayed for boldness? It seems to me that they already were pretty bold. It was Peter’s and John’s boldness that got them arrested. Yet, the church was saying, in essence, **“Lord, ramp up our boldness, because now we are facing explicit threats. The natural inclination when we are threatened is to go into**

defensive mode. *Don't let that happen! Please, you grant us boldness in the face of these threats.*

They were recognizing that God was there, he was active, and he would work in them **“both to will and to do”** as **Phil 2:13** says. The same thing is true of us. We often pray for someone we know, **“God, please cause such-and-such a person to become a Christian.”** Instead, why not pray, **“God, please grant that I would be bold and would be your instrument to lead that person to Christ”** and **“God, please start showing me opportunities where I can talk to people about you and model you to others.”**

If we start praying that way, we will start seeing opportunities to talk to people about Jesus. We will start seeing opportunities to model Jesus to others. And we will begin taking advantage of those opportunities. More than that, we will begin *making* opportunities to talk to people and model Jesus. Our relationship with Jesus will become much more dynamic. None of this means that we are praying to become obnoxious for Jesus. It means that we will now have confidence in Jesus and boldness to speak and act in his name.

Remember, when I read v. 29 a few minutes ago, the NASB (which I am using) said **“grant that your bondservants may speak your word with all confidence,”** whereas the ESV translated the word as **“with all boldness.”** The Greek word here (*parrēsia*) means both, and can be translated either way. I think this is important. We should pray for **boldness**—IOW, that we go out and not have a spirit of timidity. But know that Jesus is with us and is actually speaking through us, so we don't have to worry about what people may say or think.

But we also should go out with confidence—IOW, we should know that God has certain people already in his mind whom he wants to reach through us. Think of the Philippian jailer in **Acts 16**. Paul and Silas had been imprisoned. There was an earthquake and their chains fell off them and the other prisoners. The jailer thought they all had escaped and was about to kill himself. But Paul said, **“Don't do that, we're all still here.”** So the jailer fell down with fear before Paul and Silas and said, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** God had prepared that man in advance.

Paul and Silas didn't know that when they were put in jail. But they were God's instruments to lead that man to the Lord. The same will be true with us. We can have confidence that God already has been at work in the lives of people. All we need do is open our mouths—and do it with confidence. And when we speak with someone about the Lord and they do not, at that time, repent and turn to him, we can have confidence that God is using what we say to plant seeds as part of his preparation process for their future conversion. We can't lose! So be bold and have confidence.

In addition to praying for boldness, look at the other thing the believers asked for in v. 30 [READ]. How often do we pray for God to do signs and wonders? They were not praying for miracles of healing or other miracles to take place in the church. They are talking about going out into the community among non-Christians. That is why miracles in the NT are typically called “signs.” They are “signs” *not* for *believers*, but for *nonbelievers*. They are praying that God would use them and perform amazing acts through them so that unbelievers would see that there is a God, that they would see who that God is, and that they would see that our God is alive and active.

God is in fact performing signs and wonders all over the world today. Multiple studies have shown that anywhere from 25-60% of Muslims who turn to Christ do so because they have seen or experienced a miraculous healing, or deliverance, or some other answer to the prayers of Christians. Since God is doing this all over the world today, do you think that things will be any different in North Carolina? God has always wanted his people to have a dynamic, personal, intimate relationship with him. The early church demonstrated that kind of relationship. God wants the same thing for us.

Notice how God answered the prayer of those early believers in v. 31 [READ v. 31]. The Holy Spirit was dynamically leading them, and God granted their request to speak his word **“with boldness.”** They knew God's will, so God granted their request. He will do the same thing for us if we will but ask and then step out in faith. This leads us to consider:

IV. The nature of the church—Acts 4:32-37 [READ 4:32-37]

The early church demonstrated astounding generosity to people in need. When **v. 32** says [READ] you need to understand: these people were not members of a commune. They all owned their own property, just like we do. We know that because **v. 32** tells us things belonged to the people, and **v. 34** says that when they saw needs, the “owners” of property would “sell” *their property*—even their land and houses—and give the proceeds to the poor.

What was happening was a complete change of attitude about their property. They no longer considered their property as being exclusively for their own benefit. They realized that God had given them what they had for the benefit of others as well as themselves. They had this new attitude about property because they had a new attitude about people. They had this new attitude because they had a new heart. Because they had a new heart, they started loving their neighbors as they loved themselves. And that translated into what they did with their money and possessions.

Notice the results of the church living out this new life in Christ. One result, as v. 34 tells us, is **“there was not a needy person among them.”** That is remarkable because most of the early Christians themselves were poor. Many of them were slaves. But when people take care of each other, there is no more “need.” The church is frequently described as a “family” in the NT. One thing about families is that families take care of their own.

In fact, our earthly families are just a type or a shadow of the real family—the family of God. Our earthly families will end when we die. If some of the members of our earthly families are not Christians, after they die we will never see them again. But our brothers and sisters in Christ will continue to be family forever, in heaven and then on the new earth. We need to take this seriously, and start treating our brothers and sisters in Christ as the beloved members of a loving family, because that is who they are.

And notice the second result of living out this new life in Christ, v. 33 says the apostles were testifying with great power, and God was blessing the entire church. Why? v. 34 says the apostles were able to preach with **“great power,”** and **“abundant grace was upon them all,”** for (or because) **“there was not a needy person among them.”** The reason why there was not a needy person among the believers was for (or because) all those who owned property sold it, and the proceeds were **“distributed to each as any had need.”** IOW, the believers took care of the physical needs of each other.

This was as great a sign to unbelievers as a miraculous healing. It means that nonbelievers could see that, in the church, Christians had a different way of living—a better way of life. When Christians and the church act as they should, it makes a difference that everyone can see. The reason the astounding generosity of the early church was such a sign to unbelievers was that it was so counter-cultural. Everyone else took notice.

Naturally, we all hold onto our money and things tightly. The early church was not like that. They held onto their money and things loosely, and they had an open hand to anyone who had needs. The church was doing what God has always wanted the church to do, and the church was living the way He has always wanted us to live. I am convinced that one reason the apostles were testifying with such power is that the people—by their very generosity—were confirming the message the apostles were preaching. As a result, everyone in the community could see—by word and deed—that what the apostles were proclaiming was true.

God took care of the early church. He poured out his grace on them. He blessed them, and the church grew—from 3000 people on day one to 5000 men alone as of the time Peter and John were arrested. Their lives were a powerful testimony to others that Jesus is alive and he changes lives from the inside-out. The same thing will happen today if only we have the faith and will to act like the early church did. So what can we do? Let me make two suggestions.

First, with respect to our money, how much do we give? The key to knowing this is: Do you keep records and have a budget? How much do you budget for giving: giving to the church, giving to missions, giving to the charities and ministries you believe in, giving to people in need? My guess is, if you do not keep records and have a budget, you are probably wildly overestimating the amount you actually give away. The key is budgeted, percentage giving—right off the top. Doing that breaks the hold that money and our consumer culture have on us and frees us to see that our money, like our very life, is a ministry for Christ.

How do we do this? I heard this from a well-known pastor in the US. Every year he teaches about money-management, because he knows how important this is. [**Dx. how to budget + Suppose you worked for me**]. If you start seeing your money as a ministry, and if you start taking the steps to get your finances in line with the gospel, you will be amazed at what God will begin doing through you.

Second, we know we are to “love our neighbors as we love ourselves.” Love is relational. How well do you know your neighbors? Do you know their needs? God has put certain people in your life—friends, neighbors, co-workers—that he has not put in mine (and vice versa). As a member of the body of Christ, you can do things to help those people that most non-believers simply will not do, if only you are attuned to their needs. That will take time and effort, but it is worth it to show them the love of Christ.

Love is intentional. It seems to me that we need to seriously think about the people God has put in proximity to us and start acting to develop deeper relationships with them. You might be thinking of a particular person right now. That is not by accident—it is God putting that person in your mind. Follow-up with them. God might have an amazing plan to use you in their life.

These things are not simply a charge to us as individuals; they also apply to the church as a corporate body. Learning what is on God's heart for your church will probably result in a number of changes in your values, your priorities, and how you operate. The church may have to reassess and redefine what it means to be a "successful" church. Specifically, it will mean that the church will move from an internal focus to an others-centered, external focus. Mission and engagement with the community will not be a second-tier activity but will be the first-tier activity.

One writer on missions has said, "Since people are generally motivated by doing what gets rewarded, the development of a missional scorecard is critical. This scorecard will, by its existence, educate people to new possibilities, resulting in new behaviors."

Discipleship is a key. As that happens, you will talk about the resources you have, the needs and opportunities that exist, and how to meet those needs and deal with those opportunities. God will begin speaking to you. He will show you things you do not see now, and lead you in ways he may not have done before.

There are a number of things the church might do. The church could develop and publish a list of community needs and opportunities for service in the community. Many people would like to become involved in helping others, but they simply are unaware of the needs and how they can help. You might develop relationships with other local churches and work together where you can. You might consider involving non-church members in the outreach ministries of the church. Such people have skills that might be important for the ministry, and their involvement would expose them to, and involve them with, the church in a non-threatening atmosphere. They would first be exposed to the gospel in action, which would prime them for receiving Jesus as their Savior and Lord when presented with the gospel itself.

Like Antioch Presbyterian Church in S. Korea which we talked about 2 days ago, the church—like we as individuals—will reflect what it really values in its budget and what it does with its money. After all, what we do with our money indicates more clearly than almost any other area of life what our true priorities are, what we value, and what we consider most important. Our ECLEA book on *The Church: Its Nature, Mission, and Purpose* has a number of other suggestions for how the church can develop a good discipleship program and become more missional.

PROP: In short, as was true of the early church in **Acts 3-4**, we are called, both as individuals and as a church, to: **know the Word, proclaim the Word, and live the Word in confidence and boldness.**

CONCL: The early believers in **Acts 3-4** were ordinary people like us. But God used them to do extraordinary things. Those people knew that Jesus had risen from the dead and was the fulfillment of multiple OT prophecies. They did extraordinary things because they had the faith to step out and proclaim the gospel in word and deed. They knew that having and knowing Jesus is the greatest, most important thing in the world. Therefore, they were not bound by their own money and possessions, but could be radically generous in their giving. Threats and persecution did not cause them to go into a shell, but they prayed for boldness and that God would work extraordinary signs through them—and he did.

We can have that same confidence. Jesus Christ is the same "**yesterday, today, and forever.**" That means that we can confidently expect him to work in and through us the same way he worked in and through Peter, John, and the early church. Let us assess why we are doing what we are doing and make any changes we need to make to get ourselves in line with Christ and the gospel. As we do that, our relationship with the Lord will become far more intimate and dynamic. Your life, as a church and individually, will be a tremendous adventure. There is no limit on what God will do through you. May God bless you as you show the world how wonderful life in Christ can be.