

THE FIRST PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH: LESSONS FOR CHRISTIAN SERVICE ACTS 04:01–22

Introduction

This is the first persecution of the church. There are several challenging lessons for Christian service clearly seen in the experience.

- I. Peter and John arrested and tried (v. 1).
- II. They suffered abuse because they preached the resurrection (vv. 2-4).
- III. They credited Christ with the power to heal and to change lives (vv. 5-10).
- IV. They proclaimed salvation in Christ alone (vv. 11-12).
- V. They gave evidence that they had been with Jesus (vv. 13-14).
- VI. They suffered threats (vv. 15-18).
- VII. They refused to compromise their message (vv. 19-20).
- VIII. The result: all people praised God (vv. 21-22).

I. Acts 04:01 *The Arrest of Peter and John*

Peter and John were arrested and tried. They were arrested “while they were speaking,” that is, while they were preaching. Remember that the cripple had walked through the temple leaping and praising God (Acts 3:8-11). A huge throng of thousands had rushed to see the cripple who had been healed and to hear the message being proclaimed by the two men who had such power. The temple was a massive building which could hold thousands (v. 5). (See *Temple*, Mt. 21:12-16.) The excitement and noise were bound to attract attention and bring the temple authorities to the scene. What they saw and heard disturbed them to no end. They thought they had eliminated the “Jesus movement” eight weeks earlier when they had crucified Jesus. They had heard about the preaching incident several days earlier and how excited the people had become (Acts 2:5f). Now these two men (Peter and John) were publicly preaching the rumour that God had raised Jesus from the dead. And they were preaching, of all places, in the temple precincts.

It was time to investigate the matter, to nip the movement in the bud before it could spread. Note those who came to arrest them. As mentioned above, they stopped Peter right in the middle of his message.

1. The priests were probably those who were officiating in the temple at that particular time.
 2. The guard or captain of the temple. (See *Temple Captain*, Acts 4:1.)
 3. The Sadducees. (See *Sadducees*, Acts 23:8.)
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ACTS 04:01 TEMPLE GUARD, TEMPLE CAPTAIN

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. Acts 04:01

This was the right-hand man, the chief executive officer or chief of staff to the High Priest. He was probably what Scripture calls the *chief officer* or “the ruler of the house of God” (Jer. 20:1; 1 Chr. 9:11; 2 Chr. 31:13; Neh. 11:11). He was responsible for the administration of the temple, which meant he was held accountable for the order and any disorder that took place within the temple precincts. His presence in arresting Peter and John is clearly understandable in light of the situation. □

ACTS 04:01 PRIESTS

All the male descendants of Aaron were priests. In the time of Christ there were over twenty thousand priests. Since there was only one temple (located in Jerusalem), the priests were divided into groups. There were twenty-four groups, and each group served in the temple for one week twice a year (1 Chr. 24:1-6; 2 Chr. 22:8). □

II. Acts 04:02–04 Persecution by the Religionists

Peter and John suffered abuse because they preached the resurrection. The officials were threatened by the preaching of Jesus being raised from the dead. They knew that it was the nature of people to respond to hope, especially to great hope. They also knew that great excitement existed within the people’s heart for the coming of the Messiah and that it would take only a small spark of hope to set the excitement aflame (see *Messiah*, Mt. 1:18). They just could not allow *Jesus* to be preached, not the hope of His resurrection, for the resurrection meant that all men who followed Him would arise. People ached and were ripe for such a message. Therefore, the authorities, knowing the nature of man and the situation, were threatened. If the people turned to the *new movement*, the authorities...

- feared the loss of the people — their loyalty, recognition and esteem.
- feared the loss of position, authority and livelihood. If they lost the loyalty of the people or allowed a disturbance, the Romans would replace them with other officials. The Romans were usually tolerant, but they were quick to stamp out disorder and disloyalty.
- feared the people might begin to think that *their doctrine* was wrong. If they allowed the preaching of the resurrection to continue, they would be admitting that God had bypassed them and revealed the truth to *others*. Their own *spiritual condition* and beliefs and teachings would be suspect. They were the secure *religionists* and the official religious leaders. Therefore, they would be jeopardizing their own

religion and leadership among the people. They would be undermining their own sense of security and their sense of being acceptable to God.

- feared acknowledging they were wrong in crucifying Jesus. If He were truly the risen Son of God, then they were sinners, chief sinners, guilty of denying and rejecting God's Son. (See *Religionists*, Mt. 12:10 for as to why the religionists feared and opposed Christ and Christianity.)

Mat 13:22 *"The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful."*

Mat 16:26 *"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"*

Luke 21:34 *"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap."*

James 4:4 *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*

1 John 2:14-15 *I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one. Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*

Thought 1. Note how the same fears strike so many today, causing them...

- not to support true men and movements of God.
- not to rock the boat.
- not to do what is right.

Thought 2. Too many seek after the things of the world and of religion instead of really serving God. They seek after...

- acceptance
- power
- esteem
- possessions
- recognition
- wealth
- position
- authority

The authorities arrested Peter and John. It was late afternoon, too late for a trial, so they jailed them for the night. But note a significant fact: before Peter was arrested, he had shared enough of the gospel for the crowd to respond. Five thousand men (not counting women and children) made decisions for Christ.

Persecution did not stop the Word and the Spirit of God from working. Souls (fruit) were saved despite the abuse and opposition. What a lesson for believers to *keep on* in their preaching and witnessing no matter the opposition.

Isa 55:11 So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

2 Tim 2:9 For which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.

III. Acts 04:05–10 The Power of Jesus Christ

Peter and John credited Christ with the power to heal and to change lives. Note three points.

1. The Sanhedrin court convened the next morning to put Peter and John on trial. The term “rulers, elders and teachers of the law” means the Sanhedrin. It was the ruling body, both the governing council and supreme court of the JEWS. (See *Sanhedrin*, Acts 4:5-6.)
 - a. The term “rulers, and elders and teachers of the law” is apparently just a term of synonyms, a term used by the people when referring to the Sanhedrin.

=> Rulers would refer to the whole body.

=> Elders would refer to the most esteemed of the nation. The whole Sanhedrin was sometimes simply referred to as the *Elders*.

=> The teachers of the law were a definite profession of men, the experts, the *doctors* of Jewish law and tradition.

Annas was apparently recognized as the High Priest by most Jews. He had actually been removed from power by the Romans, but he had been so influential among his peers that he was still recognized as the *power behind the throne*. (See note, pt. 6, Lk. 3:1; Jn. 18:12-14.)

=> Caiaphas was serving as High Priest in the eyes of the Romans (see note, Mt. 26:3-5; *High Priest*, Mt. 26:3).

=> John is unknown. All we know is what is mentioned here, that he belonged to the high priestly family.

=> Alexander is also unknown, except that he too belonged to the high priestly family.

- b. The question the court asked was straight to the point. “By what power, or what name did you do this [healed the man]?” The court was doing exactly what God had said to do. God had instructed Israel to try every man who claimed to be a prophet and worked signs and wonders among the people (Dut. 13:1-5). If the man was not a true prophet, he was to be executed.

But there is more to their questioning than this. They knew Peter was preaching the resurrection through Jesus Christ. They had to stop it or risk losing the loyalty of the people and their position and livelihood, so they were seeking opportunity to accuse and stop Peter and John. (See note, Acts 4:2-4.)

Their questioning may also involve something else. They were the religious leaders; therefore, they thought the power could not be of God. If God should choose to do some marvellous work, especially in the temple, they thought He would choose to reveal such to them, the traditional religious leaders. Therefore they felt the *name* and the *power* that healed the crippled must be diabolical (Lk. 11:15).

Thought 1. People in leadership, both state and religion, face some common sins, the seeking of...

- position
- influence
- recognition
- authority
- riches
- exclusiveness

The flesh — our sinful human nature — is the culprit. But bureaucratic, institutional, established positions lend themselves to the sins.

Thought 2. Every believer, minister and group must guard against thinking that God can work only through them. God is always bringing new faces and groups into the picture to do His work. He must, for the mission is so enormous and there is still so much to do — so many who have not yet heard and been helped.

2. God equipped Peter and John with the Holy Spirit. Note how quickly God came to the rescue: “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit.” Peter had not even had time to speak, and God was present, filling Peter with the Holy Spirit. God’s Spirit was ready to take over and give Peter the words to say.

Thought 1. The believer who is ready to proclaim Christ will never be left alone. The Holy Spirit will be present to speak through him.

Mat 10:18-20 “On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

Mark 13:11 “Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.”

Luke 21:12-15 “But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.”

3. Peter and John credited Christ with the power to make men whole. Peter declared three critical points.

- a. It was “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” that made the man whole. Note that Jesus is called the *Christ* (Messiah). Peter was declaring that men must know that Jesus is the true Messiah, and there must be no doubt which Jesus: it was the Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Messiah, the Saviour whom God promised to send to the world.

Note the word *healed* (see *Salvation*, Acts 4:9-10). The man was made whole in both body and soul. Who did it? Who could heal the man in both body and soul? Peter declared unequivocally:

=> not himself, not John, nor any other man.

=> Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Jesus from Nazareth; He alone had made this man whole.

- b. It was Jesus Christ (Messiah) whom you crucified. Remember Peter was speaking to the top leaders of the nation. He charged them with killing not only a man, but the Messiah. What an indictment! To be charged with killing the Son of God Himself!

Thought 1. The indictment is charged against all men. All men are guilty of the death of Jesus Christ. (See notes, Acts 3:13-15; *Death of Jesus Christ*, Acts 2:23; *Foreknowledge*, Acts 2:23.)

- c. It was Jesus whom God raised from the dead that made the man well. Peter was declaring that it was the power of the resurrected and ascended Messiah, the Lord of heaven and earth who had such power. (See *Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, Acts 2:24; notes, Acts 2:25-36. See Acts 1:22; 3:15.)

ACTS 04:09–10 SALVATION

The word *healed* (*sesotai*) means to be saved; to be made whole; to be safe and sound; to be healed. It means that a person is made whole and continues to be whole. It means that the man was made whole in both body and soul. □

ACTS 04:05–06 SANHEDRIN

The ruling body, both the governing council and supreme court of the Jews. It had seventy-one members and was presided over by the High Priest. Its membership was made up of Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes or lawyers and elders who were leaders from among the people. A quorum was twenty-three people. The legal power of the Sanhedrin to pass the death sentence was restricted about twenty some years before the trial of Jesus. However, they did retain the right of excommunication (see Jn. 9:22). The court met in the great “Hall of Hewn Stone.” Its members sat in a semi-circle with the High Priest (or president) sitting at the head. □

IV. Acts 04:11–12 Jesus Christ, the Source of Salvation

Peter and John proclaimed salvation. Peter had just shared the source of his power, the name of Jesus Christ. He now proclaimed the salvation that is in Jesus. And to strike the point home, he used the declaration of prophetic Scripture.

1. Jesus Christ is the Head, that is, the Chief Cornerstone of God's building (see Psa. 118:22).
 - a. God gave man the *Head Cornerstone* for His building, the life He wanted man to build. But men rejected the stone, counted it as no good, unacceptable, of no account, of no worth. Men rejected God's Head Stone and went about finding their own chief stone and building their lives as they wished.
 - b. But God took His Stone, despite man's rejection, and still made Him the Head of the corner. God has exalted Jesus Christ and made Him the Head of life. (See *Jesus Christ, Head Cornerstone*, Mt. 21:42; *Stumbling Stone*, Mt. 21:44; *Jesus Christ, Name, Title*, Mt. 21:44.)

Acts 4:11 *He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.'*

Mat 21:42 *Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;' the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes?"*

Eph 2:20 *Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*

1 Pet 2:6 *For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."*

2. Jesus Christ alone saves. There is no other Head, no other exalted Lord; therefore, no man can be saved...
 - By any other head or lord
 - By any other name *under heaven*

No teacher is capable enough, no prophet is noble enough, no minister is good enough to save himself, much less anyone else. Therefore, no matter the claim — no matter the indulgence and strength of the name — the man comes far, far short of being God's chosen Head. No man has the name by which God saves men. All men are mortal. No man can make another man immortal. Therefore God's Head, the name which God uses to save men, must be eternal. Only *One Man* is eternal: Jesus Christ the Son of Man Himself.

John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

John 6:68 *Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

John 8:24 *“I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.”*

Acts 4:12 *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”*

1 Cor 2:2 *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

1 Cor 3:11 *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

V. Acts 04:13–14 Fellowship with Jesus Christ

Peter and John gave evidence that they had been with Jesus. Note a striking fact: it was the courage and power of Peter and John that *caused* the rulers to recognize them. The rulers had witnessed the same courage and power in Jesus. And now it was courage and power that identified these two men as having been with Jesus.

Note another fact: the courage and power were not due to education and learning. It was due to their having “been with Jesus.” The clear evidence that a person has been with Jesus is *courage and power*. The man healed and made whole stood before the *Court of the World*. Therefore, the world was silenced. The enemies of Christ could not refute the claim, for the claim was not profession only. The claim was backed up by the evidence of a miracle, of a changed life: a man was healed and made whole.

Thought 1. What a challenge to believers! We must *be with Jesus*, we must spend time, much time with Him. He is the source of courage and power.

Thought 2. There is only one evidence that we belong to Jesus. Do we live in His courage and power? If we have *been with Jesus*, then His courage and power are present within us. We are living and witnessing in boldness and power.

Thought 3. What a change the world would know if believers spent enough time with Jesus to receive His courage and power.

Mat 18:20 *“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”*

Luke 1:37 *“For nothing is impossible with God.”*

Acts 4:13 *When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*

1 Cor 1:9 *God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*

Heb 4:16 *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

1 John 1:3 *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

Rev 3:20 *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*

Psa 5:3 *In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.*

Psa 55:17 *Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.*

Psa 77:12 *I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.*

VI. Acts 04:15–18 Peter and John Threatened

Peter and John suffered threats. The court had Peter and John escorted from the council chambers so they could discuss the matter and reach a verdict.

=> They acknowledged that an *outstanding* (clear, unmistakable) miracle had been done. The man was *healed and made whole*.

=> All the people knew the man had been transformed.

=> They could not deny the miracle. They would have; but the evidence (the power of Christ), the man made whole, stood before them. (See Mt. 28:11-15.)

Thought 1. The great need of the hour is for *lame* men to be made whole, transformed by the power of Christ. When a man is truly transformed, the world *cannot deny* it. The power of Christ stands *within* them as evidence that He is the risen and exalted Lord.

The rulers knew they must stop the *new movement*, suppress it from spreading any further among the people (v. 17). At this point, they did not dare take drastic steps lest the people cause a disturbance that would bring the Romans down upon them (see v. 21). Their decision was to threaten Peter and John, forbidding them to speak or teach in the name of Jesus.

Note this: the orders and decisions of the court were binding except in the death penalty (which had to be referred to the Romans). The court's orders had to be obeyed or else Peter and John would face severe consequences.

Mat 5:11 *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”*

Mat 10:22 *“All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”*

2 Tim 3:12 *In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

VII. Acts 04:19–20 Witnessing without Compromise

Peter and John refused to compromise their message. There are two all-important reasons.

1. God is to be obeyed before men. The highest authority must always be obeyed. This is the very basis of men and their laws. It is the word of the highest authority that men must carry out. Peter and John challenged the world: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (v. 19).

Christ had commanded them to preach time and again (Mt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15; Jn. 20:21). They had to obey Him. They could do no other, for the highest possible authority had spoken. They were commissioned by God to speak and teach the resurrection, even in the face of opposition and persecution.

Thought 1. How can believers keep silent about Christ and His glorious salvation? He has commanded us to *speak* and *teach*, to bear witness and testimony to the living Lord.

2. A man must testify to what he has seen and heard. Note that the two disciples were claiming to have seen and heard Jesus after His resurrection as well as during His ministry.

2 Cor 4:13 *It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak.*

2 Cor 5:11,14 *Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.*

1 Pet 3:15 *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*

1 John 1:3 *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

Psa 66:16 *Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.*

Isa 63:7 *I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us — yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses.*

Jer 20:9 *But if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.*

VIII. Acts 04:21–22 Conclusion

The result of such a dynamic witness was that men *praised God* (edoxazon ton theon); that is, they kept on praising Him. Why? Because the power of Christ had taken a man who had been *helpless* for forty years and made him *whole*, completely whole.

Mat 5:16 *“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

John 15:8 *“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”*

1 Cor 6:20 *You were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.*

Col 1:12 *Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.*

Heb 13:15 *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name.*

1 Pet 2:9 *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

Psa 9:11 *Sing praises to the LORD, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done.*

Psa 35:28 *My tongue will speak of your righteousness and of your praises all day long.*

Isa 42:12 *Let them give glory to the LORD and proclaim his praise in the islands. ■*