

Ripples 9
God Equips the Church to Speak Despite Opposition
Acts 4.1-31

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This spring and summer we're doing a sermon series on a short book about the history of the early church that is included in the New Testament. It's called the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, or the Book of Acts for short.

The passage we're look at this morning is actually part two of the story that Rob looked at with us last week. As you may remember, just weeks after Jesus died and rose again, Peter and John, two of the first followers of Jesus, were in Jerusalem, in the temple grounds, to meet with their fellow Christian believers, and they ran into a man who had been crippled his whole life, who was waiting at one of the temple gates.

And through them this man was healed! Crowds began to gather around when they realized that a miracle had taken place, and Peter used the opportunity to speak with them, explaining whose power was behind this healing, and inviting them to put their trust in him.

In Acts chapter 3 we read:

¹² Peter said to them: "Fellow Israelites . . . why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

¹⁶ "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

¹⁹ Repent then – which means, abandon your self-reliance, cease your mutiny, turn back to your rightful king - turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

Then as we come into chapter four we come to an amazing hinge moment in the history of the early church. Chapter four could have been the last chapter in the history of the church, instead of one of its first chapters.

It's the first collision between the growing Christian movement, and a growing resistance movement bent on stopping it, to stamp out the church through pressure and intimidation. As we'll see, the highest leaders in the land will say to them, "You can't say another word to another person about Jesus."

So how will the followers of Jesus respond? Let's walk through this story and see, starting in verse one of chapter 4:

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. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

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. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together.

"What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." 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. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:
[quoting from Psalm 2]

“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.”

“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

That word “bold” that shows up twice at the end of this story, means with a confident frankness; with a freedom to speak openly and without fear; with a cheerful courage.

We’re told they pray for it. In verse 29 they ask that they would be enabled to speak with great boldness. And they are granted the gift they pray for. In verse 31 we’re told that they are filled with the Spirit and they continue to speak boldly.

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I don’t know about you, but for me this passage raises lots of questions about the pushback that the church experiences, questions that I think are important for us to stop and wrestle with.

I think this is relevant for us to talk about because just in my own lifetime I've seen the church in the US go from being seen in a largely positive light, to being seen in relatively neutral terms as a decent but fairly irrelevant part of our culture, to the place where we are now, where the church is increasingly seen in a negative light. I think what that trend suggests is that we can expect to experience more ill-treatment and hostility from the world around us in the years ahead, which makes this whole topic pretty relevant.

So what I'd like to do with the rest of our time is to step back and consider this whole issue of persecution. If persecution could be defined as "hostility or ill-treatment on the basis of a person's religious beliefs," what did Jesus teach his disciples about the hostility and ill treatment they could expect to experience, and how they should respond to it?

New Testament Principles Related to Persecution

1. The Expectation of Persecution

The first thing to notice is that persecution doesn't come as a surprise to the early church. Not at all. They full expect it. Why? Because Jesus taught them to expect it. In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5.11-12, it says:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The early church leaders also taught their fellow Christ followers to expect it.

In Acts 14.22, we're told that Paul says to the new believers in Galatia,

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

And in his first letter to the Thessalonians (I Thessalonians 3.2-4) he writes

No one should be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.

We *will* face opposition as followers of Jesus. He did, and we belong to him and bear his name, so we will.

2. The Cause of Persecution:

So what's the root cause of persecution? What lies behind it?

According to Scripture, it has to do with which realm we ultimately belong to.

When Jesus began his ministry, he said to the crowds who gathered to listen to him (John 8.32):

You are from below, I am from above.
You are of this world; I am not of this world.

Those who are “of this world” are all swimming in the same direction and they all look and act pretty much the same.

But then, at the end of his ministry, Jesus prays for those who have become his disciples, and now, he says,

John 17.14

They are *not* of the world any more than I am of the world.

Jesus took us out of the world and made us his; we now belong to the kingdom above.

He has turned our lives around, just like the beautiful graphic at the beginning of the Chosen series, where the fish turn around and begin to swim upstream, and they no longer blend in.

Two things are different now. We see them both in Acts 4.

First, we’re foreigners now. This isn’t our home anymore; we’re from another world, and we no longer fit into this one. There is a strangeness to us as we follow the ways and customs of our new homeland. Because we are walking in step with Jesus our ways are more and more out of the step with the ways of this world.

Acts 4.13 says: They saw that they were just ordinary men, but they were astonished and took note that “they had been with Jesus.” They spent time with Jesus and he had rubbed off on them. As I John 2.6 says:

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

So we belong to a different kingdom, and we act different as a result. Plus, and here’s the second thing, we’ve given our allegiance to another king – we recognize another authority. Romans 10.9 says followers of Jesus will “Openly declare that Jesus is Lord.”

He is the final authority in my life. He has the last word.

You see that reflected in Acts 4.19:

Peter says to the religious authorities: I recognize a different higher authority than you. So which is right in God’s eyes, to listen to you, or to him?

Salvation is found in no one else. And authority resides in no one else. In our lives Jesus has the last word.

So . . . as followers of Jesus, we're from another land, and we honor another king. And that doesn't always go over so well.

Look at Acts 17.5-8 when the disciples are in Thessalonica. We're told:

A mob formed and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.

3. The Essence of Persecution.

What is essence of persecution? The word for persecution that's used throughout the New Testament literally means to press or to squeeze.

Romans 12.2 JBP

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.

A thought experiment: What do you notice about the students in the Paint Crew at Purdue basketball games? They all dress the same, act the same, dance the same, chant the same.

Imagine if you were part of the Paint Crew, and for some reason in the off-season you had a change of heart, and you showed up at the opening game of the next season and sat in your regular seat wearing red and white, and singing "Indiana, our Indiana, Indiana, we're all for you." What do you think would happen next?

Well, I'm not thinking that your change of allegiance would go unnoticed. And I'm not thinking it would go unaddressed.

I would imagine two things would happen next. First, *an effort to squeeze you back in*, to pressure you into conformity, to re-attire you in Black and Old Gold.

And second, if that failed, *an effort to squeeze you out*. You would likely receive some version of an invitation to kindly relinquish your seat to someone who did fit in, thank you very much.

4. The Expression of Persecution – how will we experience it?

So how will the world around us try to squeeze us back in, or if it can't, squeeze us out, as followers of Jesus? What will that look like?

It seems to me that there are three stages of persecution, and each one becomes more costly.

a. At the beginning we might experience **interpersonal pressure** from individuals – one person communicating dissatisfaction with another in a whole variety of ways from simply ignoring/dismissing to actively excluding/ostracizing to openly expressing scorn/hostility

I can think of a number of times when I've experienced that sort of response, and I'm sure you can too.

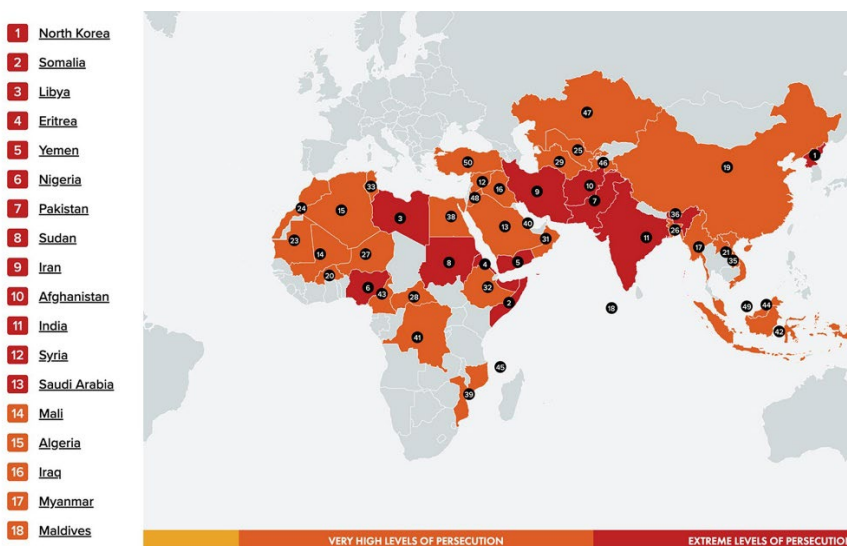
b. Then after interpersonal pressure we might begin to experience **communal marginalization**. That's what happens when that pressure to conform begins to find expression in whole groups or communities that we are part of: our family, neighborhood, school, team, workplace, community, and we might find ourselves beginning to be excluded from a friend group, singled out in a classroom, ostracized at work, or have difficulty getting a job, getting in a school, getting a position on the team,

As an example, Jaelene Hinkle was asked to step down from the US Women's National Soccer Team a few years ago – she was told it was because her soccer skills were lacking but it seems pretty clear that it was directly related to her Christian faith and her biblical moral views

c. Then after communal marginalization is **governmental persecution** – this is what happens with the pressure to conform becomes formalized by the state and written into the laws of the land, making some aspect of the Christian faith illegal, such as worshiping together, or displaying a cross, or publishing Christian materials, or sharing your faith, and the consequence is a fine or imprisonment or torture or even death

We've been blessed to get to know a number of men and women who have experienced governmental persecution, in some cases quite severe. Two examples: Doru, our friend from Romania, was arrested as a student and held by the police when he was a Christian under communist rule. Behnan, our friend from Turkey, was jailed numerous times and beaten severely because of his faith.

According to the organization Open Doors, one out of seven Christians are persecuted for their faith worldwide.



On their World Watch List there are fifty countries around the world where persecution levels are high, and of those, persecution levels are considered extremely high in thirteen countries, including most countries in the Middle East and a number of countries in North Africa.

There are a number of people who are part of our church family who are from countries where communal marginalization and governmental persecution are real, and they know churches that have been shut down and believers who have been imprisoned.

As an aside here, you know this, but just to remind you, some of our richest assets as a church are the men and women who are part of our church family who are from other nations and other cultures. What they add to our life as a church through the richness of their cultures and the variety of their life experiences and the depth of their faith and their faithfulness is such an incredible gift for the rest of us. If you are one of those, let me express our delight that you are part of us.

I hope we will go out of your way to welcome and pursue those whose cultures are different from our own, including those who are part of our wonderful World Welcome community. Don't let yourself be put off by language challenges. Move toward them, introduce yourself to them, open your heart to them, and make room for them in your life.

5. The Puzzle of Persecution

So now we come to a particular conundrum. Have you noticed that some Christians never seem to experience the squeeze of society and some seem to experience it all the time?

A pair of observations.

First, **there are times we don't face persecution when perhaps we should.**

Remember the reason that persecution happens in the first place is if I belong to another Kingdom, and I give my allegiance to another king. Well, if I'm a foreigner to this world, and I don't recognize its authority as my final authority, I am going to stand out.

But what happens if I'm *not* open about my allegiance to my new King, and what if in my speech and my actions I *don't* follow the customs of my new country? When that happens, I won't stand out. I'll blend in. Paul cautions us.

Romans 12.2 (Message)

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.

I suppose this is a flight response to the possibility of persecution. I don't want to get dragged in front of the Sanhedrin. I don't want to be ostracized. I don't want to lose my friend group, or my job.

So when I am squeezed and pressured to comply to a certain party platform, or to bend the rules because everyone else in my company does, or to obey the dictates of the culture police, or to accept without question what my secular teachers are telling me, or to drink or do drugs or have sex because the rest of the team or the rest of my friends are, then I go along. I fit right in.

To those who blend in and go along, Jesus is clear – our lives are to be distinctive, and our allegiance to him is to be spoken of openly. He says in Luke 14.34-35:

Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.

We should be able to tell immediately if there's salt on our food. I remember when I was in summer camp and took a sugar shaker and filled it with salt and then one of my friends dumped a bunch on his oatmeal.

One bite, and he wasn't the least bit confused about what he had just poured onto his bowl of oatmeal. Salt tastes salty. Is that how people experience you? Can they taste the presence of Jesus in your life?

Think about your own life for a moment. Where might you be tempted to avoid revealing your true identity as a citizen of the Kingdom or skirt around declaring openly your allegiance to Jesus as King?

And why is that? What are you hoping to avoid? What are you hoping to gain by hiding your real identity and your true allegiance?

Is there anything you need to repent of? Is there a place of stepping out from under the loving rule of Jesus and into a posture of independence that you need to turn away from? What is God's invitation to you this morning?

And there are other times when perhaps we shouldn't be experiencing persecution but we do.

The problem here is that while we are open about our allegiance to Jesus as king, we don't live in the distinctive way we are called to live as citizens of the Kingdom.

The times when we experience persecution and we shouldn't are the times when we fail to display those Christlike qualities of love and grace, and instead, we judge, we take offense, when we come under attack we retaliate, we strike back, we lash out, we get even, unkind word for unkind word. And the echo chamber of social media just multiplies and amplifies our offensiveness.

I suppose you could say this is the fight response to the possibility of persecution. We give the world what the world gives us. The mob pulled out its swords to arrest Jesus in the garden. Well, fine. If that's the way you want it. Peter pulls out his sword too.

No! Jesus says. Put your sword away!

I'm convinced that much of what the Christian church experiences today as persecution isn't persecution at all. It is simply our culture responding in kind to our own unkindness.

I Peter 2.19-21

It is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

I Peter 3.13-18

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." But in your hearts revere 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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Peter says if we are experiencing negative consequences because we have been doing wrong, retaliating, making threats, perpetuating evil, instead of responding as Jesus did, with gentleness, and showing respect, and doing good - that's on us. By acting in that way we incur the ill will of the culture instead of its goodwill.

Again, Jesus is clear about what he expects of us. Don't give the world what *it* gives you. Give the world what *I* give you. Look at Luke 6.27-36:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love [only] those who love you, what credit is that to you? [It literally says, "What sort of grace is that?"] Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good [only] to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Think again about your own life for a moment. Where might you be tempted to give the world what it gives you – to judge when it offends you or to retaliate when it hurts you instead of saying with Jesus, "Forgive them, Lord, for they don't know what they are doing"?

And why is that? What is it in that moment that has unkindness or retaliation make sense as a response? What are you hoping to accomplish?

Is there anything you need to repent of? Is there a place of stepping out from under the loving rule of Jesus and into a posture of independence that you need to turn away from? What is God's invitation to you this morning?

6. The Power to Overcome Persecution

When we do experience persecution, when come under fire from the world around us, then what? Jesus says our lives should reflect his loving rule over us.

So what gives us the power to do that? To respond in that kind and gracious way?

Because frankly, it is a natural reflex in all of us to judge when we feel offended, and to lash out when we feel threatened, and to strike back when we feel hurt.

What gives us the power to respond with cheerful freedom and confidence, and with gracious gentleness and respect? The same thing that gave the disciples that grace and freedom.

First, they spent time with Jesus, who rubs off on them.

And second, recognizing that they are called to honor Jesus by responding in a Jesus-like way, and realizing that the power to respond that way is not something they have, they ask God to give them what they lack.

Acts 4.29

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Lord, grant us this thing that we lack and we need, that we might honor you and put your presence in our lives on display.

And God answers that prayer.

Acts 4.31

After they prayed . . . they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly – with cheerful confidence and freedom.

This takes us back to the promise that Jesus speaks not just to his disciples but to all his followers, us included.

Matthew 10.19-20

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.

Prayer

Lord, we no longer belong to this world, but we still live in it, and you have sent us to it. Equip us for our life in this world.

Lord, regardless of how we are received by this world, give us the gift of cheerful freedom to live in keeping with your Kingdom, and to reflect in our lives your loving rule over us as King. You have transformed our lives with your hope. Set us free to declare our living hope with gentleness and respect.