

January 10, 2021 by Steve Brandon



The First Wave of Persecution

Acts 4:13-22

1. Boldness (verse 13)
2. Hardness (verses 14-18)
3. Faithfulness (verses 19-22)

This past week has been quite a week as a nation as we have faced some riots on our nation's Capitol. Many have said that our democracy is "under siege." Five people are dead as a result of the riots. The arrests stemming from the incident are mounting up. Our president's Twitter account has been permanently deleted. Facebook and Instagram have also cut off his account. There is talk of impeachment. There is a crisis in our nation. Only time will tell of the magnitude of these events and what changes they will bring.

However, it is always helpful to put things in perspective. This past week, I read a book written by a dear friend of mine, Dr. Bob Provost, former president of the Slavic Gospel Association. I received the book in the mail about a month ago as a gift from him to me. He signed the front cover for me. When I received the book, I was eager to read it. I did so this week. I was hardly able to put it down. The book is entitled, "Tearing Down the Wall: Prayer and the Untold Story."^[1]

The book tells the story of Dr. Provost's first visit to the Soviet Union when it first opened up in 1989. This visit came after 70 years of communist oppression and religious persecution, when the Russian government tried to eliminate Christianity from their country. Dr. Provost was one of the earliest evangelical foreign visitors into the country. This book begins with some background to the history of the Slavic Gospel Association. But most of the book focuses upon what he experienced when he visited. Quite frankly, what he discovered was encouraging and amazing.

This book helps to put everything in perspective about what we are facing as our nation today. Things in America could be far worse than they are. I read a letter this past week from a Nepali friend who was educated in the United States, who has returned to his homeland a missionary to Nepal. He said, "In your country [the United States], you vote with ballots. In our country [Nepal], we vote with bullets."

So, even if our country gets as bad as it was in the former Soviet Union, it is helpful for us to see what Dr. Provost witnessed after 70 years of Christian persecution. Dr. Provost writes, ...

Through my visits to four local Kiev Baptist churches, I got acquainted with many church members. If you were a believer, you could not study at a university or ever be a supervisor. Because you didn't drink alcohol, however, you might get a job operating a construction crane or driving a train. So, nearly all Christians had low paying jobs, struggled to support their families, and all the wives were expected to work outside their homes.

And, as children, their churches and parents had taught them if they had Jesus they didn't need anything else. They were absolutely complete in Christ. They were the most faithful believers I had ever met, the materially poorest believers I had ever met, and the most joyful believers I had ever encountered.

So, if we think about things in America turning worse and worse, so that our environment is super bad for Christians (which I doubt will take place), this may well be the testimony of the churches in the United States. If our country goes as far as Communist Russia, then we can expect this to be true of Christians: we will be the poorest, but most faithful and joyful believers on the planet! Provost continues, ...

I learned that most churches had five services each week and that the members and their families attended every service.

Some of the reason why this is the case is that Christians were excluded from the social web of society. The only social outlet of Christians was the church.

To reach church they walked or rode on public transportation, as 98 percent of them did not have a car. The services lasted two and a half to three hours and everyone was thrilled to be able to attend. Through their warm greetings, their love and respect for one another was abundantly evident, and nowhere else were they welcome.

Many of them had served time in prison for their faith and most of their families had had someone killed for his or her faith. ...

We arrived 30 minutes early to find more than 100 people standing outside the house of prayer, which was already filled to capacity. Those standing outside in the falling snow were listening to the pre-service reading of God's Word on the dozens of small transistor radio speakers affixed to the exterior wall. ...

Inside the building all 800 seats were filled, and 600 more people were standing on every inch of the floor. People sitting near the aisles would periodically give up their seats to standing people so those people could sit down for a while. Little children filled the first three rows, sitting next to one another, and they never talked to their neighbors.

Bibles had all been confiscated, so no one had one except for the man reading in the pulpit. These people had all come early to listen to the reading of God's Word for an hour before the service. I learned later that many of the people who were standing in the back and outside were visiting seekers from the community. ...

Believers had no books, but all of them knew all the verses by heart. They sang in parts and filled the building with a more glorious sound than I had ever heard before. Then the choir sang a beautiful anthem and the first brother preached a short message from God's Word. During a season of corporate prayer the people kept competing for who would pray next, and there was never a time of waiting for the next person to pray.

The pattern of preaching, praying and singing was repeated over and over until three hours later [the church service ended]. ...

Throughout the 72 years of oppression, God's faithful people had rarely, if ever, encountered a false teacher. [\[2\]](#)

Things were so difficult and people were so oppressed that if you were going to come to church, you were going to be a genuine believer. The cost was too high to pay to be deceitful with your beliefs. That's what persecution does. It sifts the church, and refines it, and creates passion among the members.

So, I would say this, if our country goes bad, it is good for the church. In that we can rejoice. This is the end of persecution. It refines! Persecution may try to squash the church, but after 70 years of persecution in the Soviet Union, the church only flourished. This is what we are seeing in the book of Acts. Despite opposition to the gospel, the church flourishes.

This morning, as we turn to the book of Acts, we will see the beginning of persecution in the early church. My message is entitled, "The First Wave of Persecution." It comes from the book of Acts, chapter 4. So, I invite you to open your Bibles to Acts 4. As you are turning there, let me set the context.

In recent months, we have been in the book of Acts. We have seen Jesus, resurrected and instructing the apostles (chapter 1). We have seen the Holy Spirit come upon the church, empowering the apostles to preach and bringing many thousands into the church (chapter 2). We have seen the miracle of a lame man walking and leaping and praising God (chapter 3) and many more thousands believing in Jesus.

But with chapter 4 (that we began last week), we saw a turn. It's a turn toward persecution. We see the apostles imprisoned and questioned by the religious authorities. We see Peter boldly proclaiming Jesus, risen from the dead, as the only Savior. This morning, we will continue with the story.

But know this: this is only the beginning of persecution in the book of Acts. From chapter 4 and on, we will see the church persecuted in all but a few chapters of the book. What we read in the pages of divinely inspired history is this: Christian persecution is the norm.

When Paul planted churches, he told them this right up front. He told the churches, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Paul told Timothy, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). Persecution is in the future of all faithful Christians. That's why Peter said (in his first epistle), "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes to test you, as through something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

This morning, as we come to our text, we will see the first wave of persecution coming upon the early church. Indeed, this is why I have entitled my message, "The First Wave of Persecution." After this chapter, we will see wave upon wave upon wave of persecution coming upon the church. The good news is this: persecution, however severe, will never stop the advancement of the church. Let's begin by reading our text.

Acts 4:13-22

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

In verse 13, we see the counsel recognize the apostles' ...

1. Boldness (verse 13)

Look at verse 13, ...

Acts 4:13

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

This verse speaks of how amazed this group of gathered theologians was. They had before them two men, who spoke (and acted) with great

boldness, whom they described as being "uneducated" and "common" men. That is, these men had not gone through their seminaries, had not been educated by their rabbis, and had not received their graduation certificates. Yet, here they were, boldly proclaiming the truth about Jesus; that he was risen from the dead; that through his name, a lame man was healed; that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Scripture (Psalm 118:22); and that Jesus is the only Savior!

The apostles weren't intimidated in any way by these authorities, who had the power to turn them over to Pilate to be crucified as they did with Jesus a few months before. No, they stood their ground. They boldly expressed that their faith and hope was in Jesus.

There are all sorts of lessons here for us. First of all, you don't need a formal, theological degree to be used of the Lord. Case in point is Jesus, himself! Do you remember what is said of him in John 7? Jesus went into the temple in the middle of the feast and he "began teaching" those who were assembled (John 7:14). When the Jews witnessed this, they "marveled, saying 'How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?'" (John 7:15). That is, "How is it that this man can speak so well, having never gone to our schools."

There's the point: you don't need to go to the theological schools to be used of the Lord. The apostles didn't. And they changed the world. After Peter's preaching on Pentecost, there were 3,000 who repented and were added to the church (Acts 2:41). By chapter 4, this number is up to 5,000 men (Acts 4:4), when you include women and children, the number may well have been north of 10,000 people. They were changing the world. When we get to Acts 17, the reputation of the followers of Jesus is that they "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

How much education did these disciples possess? Peter and John were fisherman. They didn't have much school. Perhaps they had an equivalent of a G. E. D. Yet, here they were, standing before the most educated people in the world in those days, and putting them to shame. These apostles were arguing from the Scriptures how Jesus was the Christ as prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures.

How appropriate is it for me to preach this message on this morning. This past week, I received in the mail my diploma from the degree I earned from "The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary" in December. It reads at the top, ...

The Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
on the authority vested in it by the Board of Trustees hereby confers upon
Steven Dean Brandon
the degree of
Doctor of Ministry

Down below, it is signed by various men in positions of authority at the seminary, including the president of the seminary, "Albert Mohler."

I'm here this morning to say that you don't need to have a Doctor of Ministry degree to be effective in ministry. In fact, you don't need a seminary degree to be a witness for Christ. The theme of Acts is this: Be My Witnesses. The call of the book is open your mouth and speak up! Tell others about Jesus, regardless of your formal theological education.

I saw a great illustration of this during this past week. Yvonne and I took advantage of the low air fares between here and Arizona to travel and see my parents this past week. They have been pretty isolated since COVID, and our presence was a great ministry to them. We left on Monday morning and returned on Friday. In these days of COVID, I was able to work remotely this week, making calls and holding meetings via Zoom.

Anyway, we arrived on Monday afternoon and promptly took a walk in my parents' neighborhood. As we walked around, my father would tell us about who lives in various houses up and down the street. He would tell us the various spiritual states of the people living in the homes. He told us of spiritual conversations that he has had with his neighbors. He told us of the books that he has given to them in response to his talks with them, sometimes recommending a Christian movie to them or Christian sermon. With our video presence online, he has even persuaded some of his neighbors to watch his son preach on YouTube. The responses, of course are varied. Some are interested. Others are not. Most are polite.

But here's the point: my dad (who is certainly watching us this morning if he has figured out the technology this morning), has never been to seminary. But he is a constant witness of Christ to those around him. It's encouraging to see. That's the call of Jesus in our lives. That's the call of Acts. "Be My Witnesses" says Jesus. And you don't need to have a seminary degree to do so.

Do you remember the man who was born blind, who Jesus healed by spitting on the ground and rubbing the mud he made with his saliva into his eyes? The man could see instantly. Now, being born blind, he certainly didn't have an education. There was no Braille in those days. Yet, when he stood before the religious authorities. He stood his ground. The religious elite tried to argue against this man. The Pharisees said, ...

"This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath" (John 9:15).

"What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" (John 9:17).

The blind man said, "He is a prophet" (verse 17). They had no answer for him. A little while later, they called him in again and tried to argue with him. They tried to intimidate him! But he stood strong. Listen to the conversation:

John 9:24-34

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man

born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

This uneducated man was a witness for Jesus. He didn’t back down before those more educated than him. He wasn’t intimidated. He simply told them what he knew. This is what we need to do as well. Simply tell others of what you know of Jesus. That’s what these disciples are doing in Acts, chapter 4. They are confounding the religious leaders of the day with their boldness and faith.

Down through the ages, the Lord has used many preachers who had no formal theological education: Charles Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and John Bunyan stand out.

Let’s consider the case of John Bunyan. He was uneducated. He followed in his father’s ways, being a tinker, “who traveled around ... mending pots and pans.”^[3] But John Bunyan was a mighty preacher.

I love the story of John Bunyan’s preaching. One of the brightest and most eminent scholars of Bunyan’s day was John Owen. He was a pastor, theologian, teacher, and writer. If you would ever read his writings, you can see his great learning come through. His writings are difficult, because they are so densely packed with truth. Anyway, the custom of John Owen was to go and listen to Bunyan preach. One day, he was asked by King Charles, why he, a great scholar went to hear an uneducated tinker preach. Owen’s reply was this: “I would willingly exchange my learning for the tinker’s power of touching men’s hearts.”

So don’t ever think that, church family, you cannot be used of God without any formal theological education. But be careful here. There are many who don’t have a formal theological education and point to Peter and John and come to despise formal education, as unnecessary and unhelpful. Some have even gone so far as to call Seminary, “Cemetery,” where you go to die theologically. That’s a swing to the other side, that’s simply not right. For instance, Spurgeon started his own Bible college, for the training of men for the ministry. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones conducted ministerial meetings for pastors every Monday in an effort to help in the training of men. John Bunyan was prohibited from organizing and running a school, because he was in prison for preaching the gospel. So, he wrote books like Pilgrim’s Progress, which educated the world!

Formal theological education is very helpful. I speak as one who has had the privilege of much education. I’m thankful for all it. Most of all, I’m thankful for all of the reading it has forced me to do. Because, that’s what school is. It compels you to read and learn. And there is a way when you need to write a report on a book, or be tested on a book, that the book becomes much more interesting for you to read.

This is the blessing. Because in theological education, you are forced into reading books that cause you to wrestle with the Bible and all of its implications. Further, you are exposed to men who have read more than you could ever dream of reading yourself. They are there, ready to interact with you, as you learn the Scriptures.

So, fundamentally, the thing I’m thankful for in my education is the time I have been forced to spend learning. And that’s exactly what the Counsel saw in Peter and John. Look again at verse 13, ...

Acts 4:13

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

Much time with Jesus is what equips you to be a witness for him. These disciples spent three years with Jesus. It was their own seminary. This was by design. When Jesus called his disciples, his plan was to send them out to preach. But that was only after they spent much time with him. “[Jesus] appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14).

This was not lost on the counsel. They knew that “Jesus had no human credentials when He began His ministry. [They knew that] Jesus had no diplomas from the schools of religion, no letters from the high priest, neither was He licensed by the Sanhedrin. Yet, everyone was shocked at His learning, for no one could match His handling of the O. T. Now Peter and John are manifesting the same boldness and astute handling of the Scriptures. Then it dawned on them—‘These men [had been] with Jesus. They must have received their strange power from time spent with Him!’”^[4]

The secret to the success of John Bunyan (and Spurgeon and Lloyd-Jones), is that they spent much time with Jesus. Although they began their ministry with very little theological training, they were strong self-learners, who spent many, many untold hours in God’s word. As a result, they were used greatly of the Lord, because “they had been with Jesus.”

So, do you want to be bold like the apostles? Then spend much time with Jesus. Read his word. Pray to him. Meditate upon all you can.

God can use any of us! He can use Ph. D.’s. The apostle Paul fits this category. God can use G. E. D.’s. Peter and John fit into this category. God can use M. D.’s. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, fits into this category. God can use CPA’s. Matthew, the tax collector, fits into this category. God can use you. Simply spend much time with him! And open your mouth to speak whenever given opportunity.

And you young people, if you every have opportunity to get some formal Biblical training. Take it. Use it to your full advantage. Billy Graham was asked in his final years, “If you could, would you go back and do anything differently?” To which Billy Graham replied, “I’d study more and preach less.” So, study the Scriptures. Know them well. And boldly proclaim them to others.

Well, let’s move on. We have seen, the apostle’s boldness in verse 13. Let’s look now at the counsel’s ...

2. Hardness (verses 14-18)

We see this in verses 14-18. Let’s consider the first few verses:

Acts 4:14-16

But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.

Catch the picture. Here are Peter and John and the lame man who had recently been healed, standing before the entire Sanhedrin, that is, 70 men, along with the high priest and his powerful relatives. In all, some 75+ people in authority all are standing in judgment of Peter and John.

Peter had just delivered his defense, regarding the power behind the healing of this man. Regarding Peter and John, they saw their boldness. Regarding this lame man, they saw that a genuine miracle had taken place, one that they could not deny. They did not know what to do.

So, the counsel told these men to leave, so that they could figure out what they wanted to do. No law had been broken. The miracle was undeniable (verse 14). The preachers were becoming popular with the people, who were praising God on account of the miracle (verse 21). Nothing that they said could be refuted by the counsel.

This left them with few options. To release them would mean that they would lose face. "Why did you arrest them in the first place?" To punish them would risk the wrath of the people. The miracle was "evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (verse 14). They concluded that all that they could do was warn them.

Acts 4:17-18

But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Their fundamental problem is that they asked the wrong question. When confronted with the truth, they asked themselves, "What shall we do with these men?" (Acts 4:16). That's the wrong question. They should have asked what the crowds asked of Peter on the day of Pentecost. They should have asked, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter would have told them (as he did in Acts 2:38), "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. I love what Tony Merida says of this situation, ...

These leaders act out of fear for their own futures rather than out of fear of God. They do not want to lose their power and influence. So instead of asking, "What must we do to be saved?" they ask, "What must we do to keep our power?" They love the praise that comes from people more than the praise that comes from God. That's why they are more concerned with doing damage control than they are with taking seriously the message of repenting and believing.^[5]

It is right here that you see my second point: Hardness (verses 14-18). Because, at this moment in time, their hearts were hard. They weren't soft.

Do you remember what the hearts of the people were like on the Day of Pentecost? When Peter concluded his message on that day, saying, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). We read in Acts 2:37, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart." And this is what caused them to ask Peter, "What shall we do?"

But this religious counsel was not "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). No, they displayed their "hardness of heart," seeking damage control, rather than forgiveness. One commentator said it this way, "Even the miraculous is not self-authenticating apart from openness of heart and mind; and the Sadducees' preoccupation with protecting their vested interests shut them off from really seeing the miracle that occurred."^[6] John Stott says simply, "They could not deny it and they would not acknowledge it."^[7]

This observation should be very helpful to us as we seek to be witness for Christ (in application to the book of Acts). When talking with your neighbors and your friends and your co-workers and your family members about Jesus, you need to realize that fundamentally, they have the same sort of heart as these religious leaders. They are hard to the ways of truth.

Even if you would do a genuine miracle before them that could not be denied, they won't believe, apart from the sovereign hand of God softening their hearts. Even if you went over to the Walter Lawson Children's Home, just north of here, where there are a bunch of children, many of whom can neither walk nor speak. Even if you took one of them by the hand, and said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). And if the child gets up out of his wheelchair and walks out of the building, even then, your neighbor would not believe, apart from the Lord softening their hearts. I say this because it is practically identical to the situation of the healing of the lame man.

And dare I say, even if you went to the funeral home; approached a casket with a corpse inside; opened the lid; took the corpse by the hand and said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). Then, if, the flesh of the corpse begins to change color from ashen to pink; and blood begins to flow again; and the eyes open up; and the fingers begin to move; and the body, now alive, crawls out of the casket and walks out of the funeral home. Even then, your unsaved friend will not believe, unless the Lord softens the heart to believe.

You say, "No, Steve. That's not true. If you would raise someone from the dead, surely people would believe." Well, listen to the story of Jesus.

Luke 16:19-31

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and

Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

In other words, if people are unwilling to hear the good news of salvation, which comes from the Bible, that they need to repent and believe in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. If they don't believe that message, they won't believe the miracle, even if someone raises from the dead.

Personally, I find this super-encouraging in my own evangelism. It's encouraging that I can't change hearts. All I can do is tell others about Jesus, and pray to the Lord that he would work and soften the heart.

It also frees me up as a pastor and as a preacher, that I don't look at Peter with envy. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached such a powerful message that 3,000 repented and believed in Jesus! Because it was the Lord who "added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

I don't need to look and see what's wrong with me and my preaching, when I talk with scores of unbelievers, only to see a few repent of their sins. Because it's not me and my witnessing! It's the Lord and his working.

Further, we don't need to look at the explosive growth of the church throughout the book of Acts, and wonder why we, at Rock Valley Bible Church, hover at 140 people, rather than the thousands that were gathered in the early church. Because hearts are hard, apart from the Lord opening them to see the glories of Jesus.

Likewise, when you speak with others about Jesus, and they don't believe, be comforted, because, they are often just like the religious leaders, who were standing as judges over Peter and John, who saw the undeniable miracle, but refused to believe.

At any rate, these leaders commanded Peter and John "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (verse 18). Now, if you remember, this is the issue. It is the name of Jesus that is at stake. When the lame man was healed, Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). That is, the power of Jesus healed this man. Further, when Peter and John were preaching it was the name of Jesus they were proclaiming. They were "proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts 4:2). When the Sanhedrin brought these men in for trial, they asked about the name. "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (Acts 4:7). And Peter responded by speaking about the name. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). That's why the Sanhedrin charged them to "speak no more to anyone in this name" (verse 17), because the name represents the person.

So, I would encourage you in your witnessing for Jesus to speak his name. Don't be satisfied in speaking with others about the Bible or about God with generic terms or faith or what God requires of us or church or your Christian activities without mentioning the name of Jesus.

When talking with others about Christmas, bring up the name of Jesus. When talking with others about Easter, bring up the name of Jesus. When talking with others about faith, bring up the name of Jesus. It is his name that people must deal with. It is his name that the religious leaders hated. It's the name that the world hates to hear. But it's the name we must proclaim.

We see Peter and John refusing to submit to the order of the counsel.

Acts 4:18-20

So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

We have seen the boldness of the apostles (verse 13). We have seen the hardness of the religious leaders (verses 14-18). Now, we see the apostles' ...

3. Faithfulness (verses 19-22)

"If the Sanhedrin thought this ban on Jesus' name would work, they were quickly disillusioned. Peter fearlessly says they will not keep quiet." [8] They weren't going to be intimidated by the religious elite. They would remain faithful to the commandment of the Lord, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

I love how Peter and John communicates this. They don't merely tell them that they would disobey these orders. Rather, they appeal to their conscience by turning the tables on them. "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge" (Acts 4:19). In other words, Peter and John understood that there was a higher authority in their life, beyond these religious leaders. Ultimately, we all are accountable to the Lord, and not to men.

This is one of those instances, where we are commanded to resist our authorities, when they prohibit us from doing something that God clearly commands us to do. In this case, it was preaching. The Lord has commanded us to proclaim his name to others. This counsel was

prohibiting the apostles from doing this very thing. So, Peter and John put it before them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge" (Acts 4:19). Then he continues, "for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

This is "faithfulness." We won't stop preaching. Indeed, as Peter and John said, "we cannot stop preaching." This is faithfulness with a full heart! See, it is one thing to be faithful to the Lord in what you do, as a matter of duty. You know the right thing to do, and so you do it. This is good and commendable.

It's yet another thing to do so with a willing heart. "I love the Lord! I love to do his will." This is better yet. But what the apostles say here goes yet another step. "There is no way for us to stop preaching in the name of Jesus." Why? Because "we have seen and heard." The is the core of what it means to be a witness. It means that we speak forth of all that we have seen and heard.

We come back full circle. This is the importance of spending much time with Jesus. Because you speak out of what you have seen and heard. If what you have seen and heard is the sports page, then you will speak of the Bears game today. If what you have seen and heard are the news websites, then you will speak of the Capitol Riots last week. You will talk about how bad it is in our world today. If what you have seen and heard are the latest Netflix series, then you will speak of those shows you have seen. But if you spend time with Jesus, in his word and in prayer, then you will speak of him.

This is the path to Biblical faithfulness in witnessing. It's not some canned formulaic gospel presentation that you speak with others, as a salesman might do to persuade others to purchase his product. No, it's relational. It's what you have seen and heard. So share with people what you read in the Bible this morning. Persuade people to Jesus with your own witness of what you have experienced.

Let me ask you a hypothetical question: what if you spent a whole week in a media fast. You didn't listen to any news. You didn't read any papers. But you just spent your time in reading your Bibles and praying. What do you think you would talk about? You would talk about Jesus. That's what it means to be a witness.

In finishing our text, we see the first wave of persecution.

Acts 4:21-22

And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

The first wave of persecution here is just a rebuke. In chapter 5, we will find out that these very apostles are called before the Sanhedrin once again. They realized that the rebuke didn't work, so the persecution steps up. They are going to be flogged and beaten. "When they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go" (Acts 5:40). Here is the response of the apostles. "They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]" (Acts 5:41). None of this stopped them. "Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus" (Acts 5:42).

So, here in Acts 4, we see a verbal rebuke. As the persecution continues, we see physical punishment. Then, we will see in chapter 7, death. We will see Stephen stoned to death for preaching the gospel. Yet, the death of Stephen served to spread the gospel even further as people went out more emboldened in their faith than ever before.

So let's be a witness for Jesus. Let's realize that this is only the first wave of persecution. But let us also realize the end of persecution. In the end, like the church in Russia, it results in a church unlike any we have in America. It results in hours-long services, because this is the only place where we can find relief. Sure, we may be impoverished, but the spiritual blessings we receive from the Lord will be worth it all.

Do you know what happened when things got better in Russia? How well do you think the church did? The church that used to be vibrant and alive lost a bit of fervor. So, just know that this is the first wave of persecution. When things are hard, that's good. When you are being forced to give an answer for the reason for the hope in you, it's a good thing for your faith. So, let's embrace persecution when it comes. Let's embrace hardship when it comes.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 10, 2021 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] The book is self-published by the Slavic Gospel Association in Loves Park, Illinois. I was unable to locate it online. If you are interested in obtaining a copy, I am sure that writing/emailing Slavic Gospel Association will make a purchase possible.

[2] Bob Provost, *Tearing Down the Wall*, pp. 42-47.

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bunyan.

[4] C. S. Lovett, *Acts: Personal New Testament Commentary*, p. 80.

[5] Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Acts*, p. 63.

[6] Richard Longenecker, *Acts: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 306.

[7] John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 98.

[8] C. S. Lovett, p. 82.