

The Spirit-Empowered Boldness of the Church
Read Acts 4.1-37

INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT / CONNECTIONS

1/ **Ch 4** is a continuation of **ch 3**. In fact, **ch 4** is a rude and abrupt interruption to the sermon Peter was delivering in **ch 3** to explain the meaning and significance of the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. Peter was **boldly** proclaiming that this lame man's healing had come from Jesus Himself – the very same **Jesus of Nazareth [ch 3.6]** whom they had denied, rejected, delivered over to Pilate, and crucified just a couple of months before. (NOTE: Peter repeatedly refers to Jesus as '**Jesus of Nazareth**' because that was the way He was known during the days of His flesh. And it was the name by which the religious establishment identified Him when they condemned Him to be worthy of death [**John 19.19**]. This identification was meant to be a term of denigration to Jesus, as in "**Can anything good come out of Nazareth**" [**John 1.46**]. And it does show Jesus' willingness to humble Himself, identify with the lowliest of His people, bear the reproach of being despised, and do all He did in the power of God and the Holy Spirit [see **ch 2.22-24**]. However, in the plan of God, that same name was used to demonstrate how God takes the lowly and despised ones of the earth – who are rejected by the 'wise and powerful of the world' – to fulfill His sovereign Kingdom plans of salvation – like Peter and John.)

2/ That is also the message that Luke will point out and develop here in the **boldness of Peter and John** in **ch 4 [follow this key word/theme: vv 13, 29, 31]**. We also want to point out, keeping to the continuity of Luke's inspired themes throughout Acts, that this **boldness** was the direct result of the empowerment they had received on the Day of Pentecost. I know I'm getting ahead of the story a bit, but remember that, just 90 days or so before this threatening encounter with the religious establishment of that day, this same **bold** apostle Peter had cowered, withered, and denied that he even knew who Jesus of Nazareth was when he was questioned by the servant girl in the courtyard while Jesus was being tried before His crucifixion [**Matthew 26.69-75**]. And now, he is **boldly** proclaiming the Gospel message of salvation through the death, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of this same **Jesus of Nazareth** before the very same religious leaders who had condemned Jesus to death – and right here in the very same courtroom in which they had conspired, plotted, and passed that sentence against Him!

3/ We'll divide this part of the narrative in **vv 1-31** into these five movements I have outlined here [credit to Tony Merida in Christ-centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Acts] – and then end the lesson with another summary description of the church's inner workings and conduct of the Spirit-filled church in **vv 32-37**.

I / vv 1-4 | Peter and John: Interrupted by the Religious Establishment

1/ **And as they were speaking to the people...** This is the sermon Peter was delivering following the healing of the lame man in **ch 3.11-26**. Peter was explaining that this miracle of healing had come from Jesus Himself – and he was **boldly** proclaiming how they had denied and rejected the very Christ / Messiah God had sent to them to inaugurate the Kingdom they had professed they were waiting for. The theme of Peter's message was **the resurrection** of Jesus to fulfill the Old Testament prophets [**ch 3.15, 26**].

2/ This message of **proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead** is what so infuriated the religious establishment. And so, again – as they had tried to do before with Jesus [**John 7.30, 32, 45-46**] – they sent **the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees** to stop the sermon, arrest them, and bring them into custody. There is a frantic power struggle and damage control at play here. The priestly cabal were the ones who held control over the religious and social activities of the Jewish community. Jesus had threatened their control over the people during His ministry. They thought they had successfully ridded themselves of Him – but God had raised Him from the dead. Like, "He's back!" now through His working through the apostles and their continued proclamation of His **resurrection**. And what makes their **greatly annoyed** chagrin and charges more pronounced is that the **Sadducees** don't even believe in

anything supernatural! [**“For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit” (Acts 23.8).**] And here are Peter and John, who have just performed this miracle of healing on this lame man who is standing among them, whom the populace is celebrating [vv 9-10, 16, 21] – and what can they say or do to squelch it? So they did the only thing they could do: they incarcerated them overnight while they spent the same overnight hours in a frantic emergency session of damage control deliberations.

3/ In the meantime, Luke gives us another one of his commentaries on the numerical growth of the church: **But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.** Luke uses the gender-specific word for ‘men,’ not the generic word for ‘people/persons’ that includes both men and women. However, we have to believe that many of these same ‘men’ had believing wives and children also. The actual numbers of the disciples who had joined this first church was probably closer to 10,000+. And this was the result of the Spirit-empowered preaching of the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ – and that under the oppressive opposition of the religious establishment!

II / vv 5-12 | Peter and John: Bold before the Religious Establishment

1/ When they brought them in for interrogation the next morning, they had assembled a veritable ‘Who’s Who’ of the ruling religious establishment. Look at their names! Annas and Caiaphas especially were key figures and players in the ‘trials’ and hearings that had led to Jesus’ condemnation to death and eventual crucifixion at the hands of Pilate and the Romans.

2/ **And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”** Listen into that question: what they are asking is: ‘Who gave you permission to do what you did yesterday? We didn’t give you leave or license to do this! We are the ruling authorities over this nation, community, and all its religious activities. What are your credentials? Who are you speaking and acting for?’ All of that is implied in their question. I’ll just reiterate here how Peter keeps invoking **‘the Name of Jesus’** signifying what all **‘name’** means: not just the authority that Jesus had conferred upon them to speak and act by His authority and in His stead, but ‘name’ means ‘Jesus Himself – all of who and what He is’ [chs 3.6, 16; 4.7, 10, 12, 17, 18, 30; 5.28, 40, 41].

3/ Once again, Peter is **filled with the Holy Spirit** – this was the Spirit-empowerment which Jesus ‘poured out on them’ on Pentecost. And again, Peter preaches Christ and His resurrection. We also need to remind ourselves – as we can be sure Peter is remembering – that Jesus had told them they would encounter this opposition when they proclaimed Him – **Luke 21.12-15: But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.**¹³ **This will be your opportunity to bear witness.**¹⁴ **Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer,**¹⁵ **for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.** And, that wisdom would come from the Holy Spirit – **Luke 12.11-12: And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say,**¹² **for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.**

4/ Peter is well aware that he was slinking around outside this very venue, fearing for his own life and well-being, just a couple months or so ago while Jesus was being ‘tried’ before this very court of officials. They had condemned Jesus to death. They could do the same to him and John. BUT, there was no hesitation or reservation on his part today! He addresses them **boldly: Rulers of the people and elders, if we are examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the Name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by Him this man is standing before you well!** Then he goes on to declare that what they had done to Jesus – and what God had done for Jesus to counteract what they had done – was all in fulfillment of **Psalm 118.22.** Jesus of Nazareth didn’t fit into their kingdom they were ‘building’ for themselves – but He was God’s Cornerstone of His Kingdom. And He is the only Name by whom we may and must be saved.

III / vv 13-18 | The Religious Establishment: Paralyzed before Peter and John

1/ Luke sums up the utter frustration and consternation of the religious establishment: **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.** Peter and John were Galileans and former fisherman. They had not been formally schooled and trained in their schools, nor had they been degreed, commissioned, or even recognized by the establishment. Yet here they are – boldly, courageously, and confidently – confessing and proclaiming the Name of Jesus of Nazareth and His resurrection. And as we say when we produce proofs and evidences to back up what we are saying, ‘they had the receipts’! Here is the living, healthy proof of the power of the Name of Jesus standing right before their eyes!

2/ So the council had to send them out of the room while they conferred more among themselves. They’re in hyperventilation mode right now. They have to stop this movement! But ‘the horse is already out of the barn ... the train has already left the station.’ This miracle of healing has already been performed. The people have already seen it. Peter and John are not backing down. They are boldly preaching Christ and His resurrection again to their faces and presenting the testimony of their rejection of Christ yet again. The only recourse left to them is to intimidate and threaten Peter and John to cease and desist – and hope they can cower them into compliance: **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.** Surely...this close call will put them on notice!

IV / vv 19-22 | Peter and John: Bold before Threats

1/ Peter and John will not be intimidated, and they will not be silenced! Peter and John turn the threats and arguments back on them: ‘You claim to speak and teach for God yourselves. You claim to be defending the honor of God – both by crucifying Jesus for ‘blasphemy against God’ and now for forbidding us to speak in His Name. So you claim to be doing, in your judgment at least, what is **right in the sight of God.** So let us ask you: **Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge.** But as for us, we have heard from God what we are committed to proclaim! We have been with Jesus, who is God! And everything we have heard and are obeying from Jesus came from God! So as for us, **for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard** – and that goes for when we have **been with Jesus** and also what He is saying and doing through us now!

2/ The religious establishment was flummoxed – they had come this crossroads, and there was no way out. They could only threaten them more and let them go. Everybody out there knew they were in here and were waiting to see what they would do. For now, at least, they were ‘dead in the water,’ dead-ended. **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.**

V / vv 23-31 | The Church: Bold in Response

1/ Peter and John go back to their people, their friends, the church. The church assembly and community is Christ’s appointed and authorized ‘agent’ of His Kingdom work. The church receives them and listens to their report of the morning’s proceedings. They fully recognize that they are all in this Kingdom work together. They are in unity in their response:

[1] They prayed to God together. “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them...’” They address God as the Sovereign Yahweh who created and controls all the physical creation, the people who inhabit it, and all the events that go on in it. They recognize that nothing that happens in the world is beyond or out of the control of God – who is our God! The Sovereign God is our Protector, Savior, and Redeemer! All the confidence and peace we will ever enjoy and experience must come from this same unshakable conviction and commitment in the invincible sovereignty of God in every present, human event that comes into our lives!

[2] They quote the Scripture together. Here again we see what we have been calling *the confluence of Scripture*. What they are witnessing before their very eyes in that very moment is what God had prophesied **through the mouth of our father David, your servant**, and what David had said was **by the Holy Spirit** – that very same Holy Spirit who was ‘poured out’ on them on Pentecost and who was working mightily and miraculously right there in that very moment and event. They quote from **Psalm 2.1-2**, and point by point, they recognize that every word of **Psalm 2.1-2** was fulfilled in **Jesus of Nazareth**, their Messiah – and they had just appeared before and been threatened by the very enemies of Christ who had been prophesied in the Scriptures over a thousand years before!

[3] They entrust themselves into the Sovereign Providence of God in their present trials. “**And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the Name of your Holy Servant Jesus.**” What was being preached with their mouths and voices was being voiced with the Voice of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit sent from Him. What was being done through the hands of the apostles was being done by the ‘stretched-out’ hand of God, of Jesus, who was stretching out His hand from the right hand of God!

[4] They experienced – spiritually and even physically – the affirming Presence of the power of God and His confirming authority to preach His Word, witness to His Gospel, and effectively fulfill His Kingdom mission. “**And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the Word of God with boldness.**” While we may not experience the physical shaking of the building and room in which this church assembly was gathered, we do experience the same movement of Christ in the Person of the Holy Spirit every time the Word does its Spirit-empowered work in our hearts, lives, and ministries. Every time someone is saved through faith in Christ; is convicted of their sins, repents, and turns to Christ for forgiveness; a life is transformed; a heart is revived and encouraged – or like these Jerusalem church members, they commit themselves to continue to speak the Word of God with boldness ... ALL of these spiritual Kingdom activities are the works of the Holy Spirit. He is ‘shaking’ us to sluff off everything that is earthly only so we can be ‘refreshed’ with the resurrected life and power of Jesus Christ. He is equipping with the promised power to carry out Christ’s commanded mission for the church.

VI / vv 32-37 | The Inner Workings and Conduct of the Spirit-filled Church

1/ This closing paragraph of **ch 4** begins a new strain of the Acts narrative with the word ‘**Now.**’ Luke will take a sort-of commentator’s role here to give us another summary description of some of the common, customary inner workings and conduct of the Spirit-filled church. This paragraph serves at least three purposes – and all have to do with *unity*: “**...those who believed were of one heart and soul...**”

[1] It is similar to **ch 2.42-47** in that it gives us an ‘insider’s’ view into how the church was functioning in those days. These descriptions serve as a pattern, model, and example for us to conduct our own unified church activities – especially the *unity* they enjoyed in everything they did.

[2] Luke also takes this opportunity to introduce us to one of his favorite brothers, Joseph – except Luke will call him by his nickname, Barnabas [Son of Encouragement], throughout the rest of Acts. In fact, Luke will name Barnabas twenty-three times throughout Acts.

[3] This paragraph will serve as an example of the church’s extraordinary, selfless generosity toward each other – and also as a contrast to the opening scene of **ch 5**, the lying deceit of Ananias and Sapphira.

2/ But the prevailing theme that is marked here in this paragraph is the *unity* of the church in everything they did. And it was all an expression and outworking of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in which they every one commonly believed, and out of which they every one lived their everyday lives in community with one another. God continued to express His pleasure in them by His sovereign, supernatural working through them: “**And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all!**” We pray it will be so also with us!

“...and great Grace was upon them all...”