

I'M NOT THE ONE ON TRIAL HERE

ACTS 4:1-12 OCTOBER 2, 2019

On TheGuardian.com you can find an article titled *Don't try to defend yourself in court. But if you have to, here are some crucial tips*. Some of the advice given includes: "Remember your audience," "play the system," and "strike a deal." At the end of their list, though, they close with this plea to the reader: "*Don't do it. All this advice is easy to give, but...you probably don't have the time or resources to understand things as complex as the rules of evidence and procedure...It's near-idiotic to represent yourself in court, and if you can avoid it, you should.*"¹

In our passage this evening, Peter and John will be brought to trial before the supreme court of Israel. They'll have no human attorney there to represent them, but that's ok, because Peter isn't going to worry about defending himself. Instead, being filled by God the Holy Spirit, in just 1 sentence he will have turned the tables completely around and suddenly it is *he* who is putting the Jewish ruling establishment on trial, indicting them for the murder of Jesus Christ and for rejecting God's Messiah, the Cornerstone on which all life should be moored and measured.

In this regard, Peter's message is the same that it's been in chapters 2 and 3. However, in those cases, his preaching was to generic crowds of Jews. Today, he's speaking to a very specific, very particular group which comes onto the scene as a new character in the Acts story: The Sanhedrin, who become the first antagonists toward the Church. There were different factions of religious Jews. There were zealots and Essenes, of course the Pharisees are most prominent in the Gospels. But in the book of Acts, it is the faction of the *Sadducees* that takes center stage when it comes to opposition to the Gospel.

There is some debate concerning the Sadducees. None of their writings have survived for study and, ancient historians that *did* report on them, like Josephus, may have had reason to be biased against them. But, from what we know, they were aristocratic, probably pretty wealthy. They wanted to cultivate good relations with the Roman Empire and maintain the status quo, politically speaking. They only held the Pentateuch as authoritative - rejecting all oral traditions or rabbinical teachings. They did not believe in an afterlife or immortality. And, according to Josephus, they attributed all human activity to free will and none to the providence of God.²

I read these descriptions and find it easy, in my *own* mind, to immediately categorize them away as the bad guys. They've got nothing to do with me. But as these guys are introduced in the book, there's an interesting contrast being shown. So far, we've been seeing the wonderful example of the Jerusalem Church in her infancy. Their gathering and their unity and their behavior. How they sought the Lord and studied His word and devoted themselves to their Christianity. It's not all going to stay unblemished, but this far it's been remarkable. Now, in chapter 4, we suddenly have the gathering of a *different* group of religious people: The Sanhedrin. We know, from the Gospels, that there *were* true seekers among them: Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea for example. We know that they, too, spent a lot of time in the study of Scripture. That's what the Scribes were all about.

Yet, it becomes immediately clear that this group was tragically closed off from God. They become the first persecutors and primary opponents of the Church.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/26/dont-defend-yourself-in-court-tips-legal-system>

² HarperCollins Bible Dictionary

Now, we're saved and they were not. As a group they had rejected Jesus, despite the proofs of His Divinity. They held to a works-based righteousness, we know that we're saved by grace through faith. But *their* example can be significant to us because some of the spiritual mistakes they made are ones *we're* warned about, even in the Church. We see through the New Testament that even God's people can slide far out of proper relationship with the Lord. Think of Ananias and Sapphira. Think of the church at Corinth. Think of some of the letters Jesus wrote in Revelation 2 and 3 to the churches in Asia Minor. Think of warnings like, "Do not quench the Spirit."

When we come to a story like this one, we don't want to always, immediately think, "Well, *I'm* not the one on trial here." Rather, we want to have tender hearts, like David, who said, "Lord, *search* me, know me, *TRY* me and see what You find."

So, perhaps there is something for us to learn from the negative example of the Sanhedrin in chapter 4, if only using them as a litmus test for our own faith. Do I share any of the attitudes or behaviors of these Sadducees? Because *these* are the kinds of things that will cause us to drift terribly off course.

We begin at verse 1.

Acts 4:1 - Now as they were speaking to the people, the priests, the commander of the temple police, and the Sadducees confronted them

After the healing of this crippled man, thousands had come together there in the Temple courts. Peter was in the middle of a sermon when suddenly all the authority of Israel swoops down on them. The civil, religious and political powers are all represented and take Peter and John by force. They weren't inciting violence, they weren't causing a riot. But, their message of salvation in Jesus Christ, was enough to provoke retaliation.

They had to know that this would happen eventually. After all, they themselves had been hiding in fear of these religious rulers just a few weeks ago. Jesus had *promised* that they would be treated this way when they preached His message. And these were the same powerful leaders who had conspired to kill the Lord and then cover up His resurrection. And yet, Peter and John didn't *avoid* the Temple. They went there *every day* in faith and in fearlessness. But now, it's happened. The guards lay hands on them and drag them off.

As lovers of free speech, we get a little riled up at what we see here. We think, "They didn't do anything wrong!" However, on *one* level, the priests and the police were within their legal rights and duties, according to the Law of Moses. In Deuteronomy, God's people were instructed that if anyone works a miraculous sign, even if it's genuine, but then preaches some other god, that person was to be killed. Peter and John *had* worked a great sign, and were definitely preaching a new message, but that wasn't the primary motivating factor in *why* they were arrested. We're told more in verse 2.

Acts 4:2 - ²because they were provoked that they were teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection from the dead, using Jesus as the example.

There were 3 things that annoyed these leaders, especially the Sadducees. First, that they were teaching about the resurrection. Sadducees completely rejected that idea, even though others like the Pharisees accepted it. They also were agitated that Peter and John had the attention of the people. The Sadducees, particularly the chief priests, were enriched by people's patronage of the Temple. Any threat to that system was a threat to their wallets. And then third we're told they were

annoyed that they used Jesus as the example. Remember: These were the very men who conspired to have an innocent Man killed. A Man they couldn't outwit or outmaneuver. A Man who was changing everything. But *finally* they thought they had gotten rid of that Jesus. But now thousands were listening to His message once again.

What's clear from their reaction is that, the Sadducees in particular, had absolutely no interest in any *further* experience with God. They had their books. They had their wealth. They had a generally good political relationship with the world. Stop talking about Kingdom and heaven and transformation. We don't need any of this Holy Spirit stuff. We've got the comfort and richness that we want, so what could we possibly need from God?

It's a good moment for us to put ourselves on trial here and ask: Do we want anything more from God? Do we want Him to do dramatic things with our lives? Do we want Him to take us on new adventures? Or, would we feel happier about just living in the status quo until the day we die? "God, thanks for salvation, now I'll take it from here. I'll see You at the pearly gates!"

Acts 4:3 - ³ So they seized them and put them in custody until the next day, since it was already evening.

There's an interesting contrast between the group of the Sanhedrin and the group of Christians here. Think of what we've seen concerning the activity of the church so far in the book. They were always on call, always being interrupted. They're house-to-house, day by day. Night by night. That's only going to continue as the book unfolds.

By contrast, the Sanhedrin can't be bothered to investigate what's going on here, because, after all, it's the end of the work day! It's *inconvenient* to get into this right now. We know they weren't opposed to doing after hours proceedings if it was in their own interests. Just look at the night before the crucifixion for proof of that. But today? It'd be inconvenient to learn about *how a crippled man was miraculously healed!* Instead, throw those guys in jail, even though they hadn't done anything wrong. "We'll get to it when it's convenient for us."

We live in the most comfortable and convenient time in all of human history. We can serve up anything we want at any *time* we want. The problem is, we're able to do that with our spiritual lives, too. But, God doesn't always wait for *my* schedule to come out before deciding what He wants to do. Or, think about it this way: Let's say you have some musician or band you want to see perform. You don't call them and say, "Ok, here's when *I'm* ready for you to come to *this* venue." That would be absurd! But it's very easy for us to slip out of *following* after God's leading and into a pattern where we do what is *convenient*. "I'll gather with God's people when convenient. I'll serve when convenient. I'll listen when convenient." We want to be very careful about that.

Peter, we see, is ready to be *led* by God, no matter what and no matter when, even if he's being led into a jail cell. Quite a far cry from who he was just a few months ago, when the guards came for Jesus and he started swinging a sword at whoever he could hit. He was transformed by the Spirit.

Acts 4:4 - ⁴ But many of those who heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to about 5,000.

Thousands listened to a simple Gospel presentation and believed. But, I find this interesting, it says *many* who heard the message believed. Not all. That means that many others could see conclusive

proof of God - a crippled man who was supernaturally healed standing right in front of them - and *still* not believe. Because salvation isn't about seeing *proof*. It's a matter of the heart.

Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist whose ideas Richard Dawkins based some of his writings on, once said, "he might be convinced there was a God 'if [he] heard a voice from the sky predicting all that was going to happen to [him] during the next 24 hours.'"³ But a heart like that can look straight at an indisputable miracle and reject it like many in the crowd did that day. It's not a matter of proof. It's a matter of man's will.

Acts 4:5-6 - ⁵ The next day, their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem ⁶ with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and all the members of the high-priestly family.

If you're familiar with the Gospels you might think, "Wait a minute - I thought Caiaphas was the high priest?" He was. Annas had been the high priest, but was deposed by the Roman government. After him came a succession of his sons for relatively short periods of time. Caiaphas was Annas' son-in-law, and was the current office holder, as far as Rome was concerned, but for the Jews, Annas was the man in charge.

I don't know how many of you have ever been put on trial or interrogated in an official capacity. I was once briefly interrogated by some fine police officers who had caught me and my friends TP-ing a house one night in junior high. It was a nerve-racking experience. I can't imagine standing before the Supreme court, being put on trial for a potentially *capital* offense, knowing that they had every intention of getting rid of me as fast as they could. But Peter and John are at peace.

We note that there seemed to be a particular focus there in the group on certain "important" people. Caiaphas, John, Alexander. It's human nature to get drawn in to that sort of culture of celebrity, and it happens even in the Church, but we don't want to be the kind of people who go to a church or support a ministry because some "celebrity" preacher is there. We're to go where God leads us, not where we think the stars shine the brightest.

Acts 4:7 - ⁷ After they had Peter and John stand before them, they asked the question: "By what power or in what name have you done this?"

The apostles had probably been roughed up a bit, intimidated and threatened. Now they're being asked a question that could have deadly implications, depending on the answer. Yet, none of this had any noticeable affect on Peter and John.

Acts 4:8a - ⁸ Then Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit

Filled again. How could a person be filled full at pentecost, but now be filled again (They're going to be filled yet another time at the end of the chapter, by the way)? Donald Grey Barnhouse gives the answer in vivid language. He said, "They *leaked*. These men had to be filled and they were filled, and filled again. You must come to the Lord day-by-day for constant filling with the Holy Spirit."⁴ He then compares it to a car needing oil. My first car was a 1963 Corvair. Corvairs always leak oil. It's just part of the fun. So, you always keep oil with you and regularly check the level, top it off, so that you

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/books/review/Holt.t.html>

⁴ Donald Grey Barnhouse *Acts: An Expository Commentary*

keep the engine from blowing up. The principle is very similar when it comes to our relationship with the Holy Spirit. We need constant filling, because we *leak*.

Sadly, we probably all know Christians who have, effectively, *no* relationship with the Holy Spirit. No daily interaction with Him. What about us? When is the last time you were filled? I'm not asking when the last time you *felt* something that seemed unusual. But when was the last time you pulled out the dipstick from your heart and checked the level and received ministry from the Holy Spirit to fill you again? Peter was *filled* here and that means he was *furnished* for the task at hand. He was *generously supplied* and strengthened. That's what God wants for each of us today, as well. Verse 8 continues:

Acts 4:8b-10 - [He] said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders: ^{v 9} If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a disabled man—by what means he was healed— ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead—by Him this man is standing here before you healthy.

Within a single sentence Peter took over the proceedings. He's no longer the defendant, he's the prosecutor, indicting this Supreme Court for what they had done, not to him but to God. And, notice, we see that not only is John standing beside him, but so is the cripple. This healed man had not been arrested, but he showed up for the trial that day. What amazing courage! The man had only been a Christian for maybe 18 hours, and yet he's transformed inside and out, strong enough to stand alongside Peter and John.

His presence shows us a variety of things. First, it shines a light on the shocking hardheartedness of the Sanhedrin. They didn't care about this man. They had no wonder at his healing. To them, it would've been much preferred had he stayed lame all his life. They weren't praising God for His power or grace. They were too worried about their money and their convenience and their influence.

But the healed man's presence also shows us his incredible, tender courage. He didn't have a lot to offer, but what he *could* do, he *did* do. He stood to honor God and support the brethren, come what may. And he's a great encouragement to us that even the smallest act of faithfulness can be used mightily by God. God can use you *standing* somewhere to accomplish His work. He can use your countenance. He can use your silence. He can use the simplest things when we give our lives to Him. That morning, this man stood not just in solidarity, but as *proof* of the power of Jesus and His resurrection. Turning from exhibit A, Peter now focuses on Jesus as the promised Messiah by quoting Psalm 118.

Acts 4:11 - ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone.

Barnhouse, again, writes, [the cornerstone] “keeps everything from falling apart and by which God makes all His measurements...But man seems to prefer to have everything fall apart rather than accept Jesus as the cornerstone.”⁵ The Sanhedrin knew this verse, of course, but they had misapplied it, making it about *themselves* rather than the Messiah. This seems to be a trend right now, particularly in regard to Bible prophecy. Churches are taking passages meant to speak of our Lord and His certain plan for the world and instead saying, “That's about *my* life and how I *feel*.” It's

⁵ *ibid*.

the same mistake the Sanhedrin made. We want to be careful students of the Word, not self-absorbed ones.

Perhaps Peter had been thinking about Psalm 118, verse 6 the night before in the jail. It says: "The Lord is for me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Acts 4:12 - ¹² There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people, and we must be saved by it."

When Peter used the word "saved" it's the same word that he used earlier in verse 9: "Healed." We're all just as much in need of God's intervention as this man had been. And God has power over the body and over nature and over time and over death. He can save to the uttermost. And *all* of us are in need of His intervention to save us from our sins and then to transform and strengthen us. But, you see, the Sadducees were self-sufficient. "What do we need God for? We've got money. We've got promotions. We've got comfort and convenience. We're not the ones on trial here!" But they were wrong. But, yet again, God was reaching out to them, trying to get their attention. Trying to save them from themselves and do something truly meaningful with their lives. He has the same desire for each of us. The good news is that we desire Him. And so, tonight, we invite the Lord to try us and transform us. To fill us again and shake us free from those missteps that would draw us away from Him. Like David, we invite Him to search us, try us and lead us in His everlasting way.