Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

How to Handle Persecution, Part 2
Scripture: Acts 4:13-32
Code: 1715

Let's bow in prayer as we come to our study. Father, we do thank You for the wonderful opportunity that is ours to look into Your book and to see what it is that the Spirit would teach us this morning. Make us to be open and help us to be teachable and not that we only learn it in our heads, but that we translate it into our lives. Bless our time, Father. May Jesus be lifted up. We pray in His name. Amen.

Take your Bible, if you will, and look at Acts Chapter 4, which will be our passage for this discussion this morning. And we are dealing with the subject how to handle persecution and this our second and concluding study of these verses in this particular section. In our continuing study of the early church, we have come in Chapter 4 to the first persecution. The book of Acts, as you well know if you've been with us at all in our study, records for us the life and times of the early church, from its birth through the early years of its growth and its spread to the world.

Now along with the birth of the church, we were to anticipate a reaction from the world. In John Chapter 15, Jesus Himself had warned by saying, "don't be surprised if the world hates you. They hated Me." And they will kill you eventually, Chapter 16 of John tells. So Jesus warned that there would be hostility to the church just as there was hostility to Him, that it is to be expected. That it is inevitable. And so it comes in Chapter 4 in the very early days of the church. The church has been born in Chapter 2 through Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. The great sermons of Peter, the church grew. And by the time we come to Chapter 4, verse 4, it is likely that there were probably at least 20,000 people involved in the early church.

The 5,000 of verse 4 has to do with men. In addition to that, women and children would be included or young people. And so the threat to the Jews is very serious. They had attempted to get rid of Jesus Christ by executing Him and now they are having to live with people going all over everywhere proclaiming that He rose from the dead. And it isn't a handful anymore, it's probably between 10,000 and 20,000 of them that are doing this in Jerusalem.

So they're scared. And opposition naturally comes politically and religiously. Now the event that teed off the persecution is recorded in Chapter 3. Now, you'll remember that Peter and John went for the afternoon prayer time down to the temple and coming through the gate called Beautiful, they came across a lame man who for 40 years had been lame and was probably a fixture at that particular gate where he would daily beg for alms. At that point, they healed the man. He jumped up and hopped all

over everywhere praising God. And such a thing drew the crowd into the courtyard, so startling was the miracle and so familiar was the man, that everybody gathered around and Peter and John jumped on Solomon's porch and with the man standing between them Peter preached a great sermon on Christ. Announced that their Messiah was Jesus of Nazareth that they had rejected their own Messiah and executed Him. And he indicted them for that. And then offered them salvation through the grace of God.

Now as a result of this, many believed and the number came to be about 5,000 men as we see it in verse 4. In response to this sermon and to the growth of this new faith in this Jesus, there came to be a tremendous antagonism on the part of the leaders of Israel. And in Chapter 4 that breaks out and it progresses to be more severe as we go through Acts even as it did in the case of Jesus.

Now at the persecution in Acts takes the form of physical abuse. Although there is some threatening in the beginning of this persecution, it finally finds it way to personal abuse. And in most cases, you might say well that really doesn't relate this text to me very well because we don't have that kind of persecution. Well, I'm not sure we wouldn't if we didn't...if we did confront the world in the same way that they did. But aside from that, I think Satan is subtle enough to know that as we said last time, the kind of persecution that gets to your ego may be more severe than that which gets to your body. The kind that hits you in the area of status or acceptance or pride or makes you fearful of losing your reputation or position in the community, may be the most subtle and devastating of all.

I think that Christians are want to depreciate their testimony and to back off from naming Christ as they ought to, because of the fear that somebody might not like them. Or the fear of being ostracized from their society. Or the fear of being fired from their job. Or the fear of being shut out of a community of people that they'd like to be a part of. Or the fear of being ignored as some kind of a strange commodity. I think we fall prey to the temptations and the persecutions in the area of ego and acceptance and pride more than anything else. And if I'm honest in examining my own heart, I think that's what gets to me.

Now there have been several occasions where physical abuse has been a reaction in terms of my preaching Christ and that didn't have a negative effect at all. It had a positive effect, but there are times when I feared to name the name of Christ because I'm afraid of being an outcast or looked down upon or spurned or being shut out or being thought to be some kind of a weird individual or a religious nut or a freak or whatever. But one way or another a Christian who really confronts the world is going to get some reaction from the world and we went into that a little bit last time. In 2 Timothy 3:12, we took a key from that, "Ye in all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." It's just a known fact revealed in the word of God repeatedly that if you live for Christ in the face of the world, you're going to get some flack. That has to happen, because you're running cross grain to the system. It can't be smooth.

The apostle Paul recognizes this and in Philippians 1:29 he says this, now listen, "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake." That's part of being a Christian. That's not a foreign element to the Christian life. That's a natural response to the Christian who really lives his Christianity in the world. And he says in verse 30, "you should have the same conflict which you see in me and hear to be in me." If you're doing what I'm doing, then suffering is a part of it. And so when you say to somebody you ought to suffer for Christ's sake, that doesn't mean run out and, you know, do something masochistic, beat on your head with a hammer or something so you can...it simply means if you confront the world as I do, Paul's saying, you're going to get what I got when I did it.

It's the measure of your commitment, you see. Now as we saw last time, the persecution begins in the first part of Chapter 4. But the great instruction that we want to look at is in verses 5-31, because this gives us principles for handling persecution. And that's what we began to study last time. But let me just preface it by giving you a kind of a little picture of persecution that maybe you've never seen before.

If handled right, now watch it, if handled right persecution is a blessed experience. It is a wonderful experience. It is a plus, not a minus. It is a positive, not a negative. I'll show you what I mean. Look at James Chapter 1 to begin with and we'll just kind of pick up a couple of points there. "My brethren count it all joy when you fall into various trials." When you have problems whether persecution or whatever, consider it a great joy. Why? Knowing this at the trying or the testing of your faith works patience. God has a plan. He wants to make you patient. "But let patience have her perfect work that you may be perfect and entire lacking nothing." Don't avoid the persecution. Don't get away from it, because in it God's going to bring you to maturity.

Let it have it's perfecting work you see. In your life God has a desire and His desire is to bring you to maturity. That's very clear. The plan of God is that you be perfected or made mature. And there are really two things that bring you to maturity. Number one is the Word of God.First Peter 2:2, this is what makes you grow. But number two, trials, and under the area of trials, persecution, suffering, problems, whatever, these two things are to bring you to maturity. And so you must allow for persecution it's part of the process of spiritual growth. So if you're going to grow, you're going to have to be confronting the world and getting persecuted.

That's part of growing. You don't run away from it, you accept, verse 12. "Blessed is the man that endures temptation or trial or testing for when he is tried he'll receive the crown of life which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him." So what do we learn from James? We learn that persecution number one brings maturity. Persecution number 2 brings reward. Maturity and reward. Now I want you to listen to Peter. Now Peter knew a lot about persecution. In 1 Peter 2:20 listen to this. Interesting. "For what glory is it if when you are buffeted for your faults you take it patiently." In other

words, you know, if you're being punished for your sins that's not persecution, that's punishment for your sins. No glory in that. "But if when you do well you serve God and you suffer for it, you take it patiently." This is acceptable with God. Verse 21, "For here unto were you called." You were called to suffer. Now some people have gotten all twisted around and there are some people who have become concerned with making themselves suffer.

There's a certain order of the Catholic Church for example. I met a man in that order, who desired a suffer. Therefore this man wears around his waist a belt that has inserted into it sharp pointed nails. He wears it all the time, because he does not understand what it means to suffer. He thinks that the suffer itself is redemptive. And there are other people in Europe and you've seen them on television at certain periods of time called flagelantes who go down the streets and with cords filled with bits of glass beat themselves until the blood runs out of them. And they do this in the name of Jesus Christ, because they are feeling that they must suffer. But you see they are suffering by a masochistic effort to suffer, not as a result of confronting the world with the truth of the gospel and getting the reaction that God has naturally promised will happen.

You see to suffer independent of proclaiming Christ is ridiculous. And some people would go around and say well, my husband is my suffering. You know. Well, I bear my cross, it's my son. That is not your cross. Now that may be one of the problems, but to suffer for Christ is to get the response of the world to an open proclamation of Jesus by your life and your lip. And that's the only kind of suffering that pleases God. The kind that comes as a result in terms of persecution that comes as a result of your active, aggressive, living godly in Christ Jesus in the face of the world. And that is exactly what Peter is saying.

This is what you were called to, but suffering apart from that kind of life has no significance in terms of persecution. Now look at Chapter 4 of 1 Peter, verse 13. Now here's his attitude in persecution. "But rejoice," isn't that terrific? In verse 12 he says "don't think it's some strange thing when fiery trial comes. Rejoice inasmuch as you're partakers of Christ sufferings. That when His glory shall be revealed, you may be glad also with exceeding joy for if you be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."

Isn't that wonderful, to get persecuted? The Spirit of Glory and the Spirit of God rests on you. Glory is connected with persecution. You want to really experience glory, persecution brings it. Back in Chapter 1, he said, the glory of man fades as a flower of the grass. If you put yourself in a culture and you try to accommodate yourself to the culture and accommodate yourself to the society, you may grab a little temporary glory, but it'll fade like the grass. But you accommodate yourself to Jesus Christ, you confront the world with your message, boldly proclaim Jesus Christ and you may get flack from the world, but you get glory from God.

And so he simply says if you suffer happy are you because glory is involved. In verse 16, "Ye yet if any man suffer as a Christian let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God." So what do we learn? Persecution is wonderful. It brings growth, it brings glory, it brings joy and it brings reward. Terrific. And I warn you by what I said earlier that that doesn't mean you run out and suffer and then say boy am I racking them up with God. I'm beating myself. No. Something else Peter says in 1 Peter 5:10, "That the God of all grace who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus." There's glory again connected with suffering. All through Peter he connects glory with suffering. Because first the suffering then the glory.

"Unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus after you have suffered a while make you perfect, established, strengthened, settle you." You want to be established, strong, settled, and perfect? How are you going to be it? Say it. Suffer. That's hard to say isn't it? That's part of growth. You see that's part of maturity. That's part of arriving where God wants you and as I say it's not masochistic, it's the proclamation of Christ by your life and your lip that sets up a reaction in the world by Satan and you get it. And yet there's nothing negative about it, you see?

There's nothing negative at all about suffering. It's entirely positive from beginning to end. You say well, I get scared out there. What happens if I get out there and the Lord leaves me? That'll never happen. I'll read you...you know this passage, Romans 8:35. It says this, "What shall separate us from the love of Christ, shall tribulation, or distress, or," what, "persecution?" No, and it says in the next verse, "As it is written for thy sake we are killed all day long." We're expendable. "We're counted as sheep for the slaughter, but in all these things we are more than," what, "conquerors." It's victory, you see. I mean to go through persecution is a fantastically wonderful experience. It's growth, it's glory. It's joy. It's reward. It's conquering. It's all those things.

Listen to Paul's attitude. Second Corinthians 12:9, and here he's kind of saying Lord, I've got a thorn in the flesh and Satan buffets me with it and it could be possible that I could rid of it if You'd like, Lord. But he says in verse 9, "My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." I like you weak, Paul, because then you lean on Me. And then he says this, "Most gladly therefore will I glory," there's that word again, "in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Now listen to this, this is a statement that is strange apart from what we have said. "Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmity in reproach, in necessities in persecutions."

You say, he really enjoys his persecutions. Why? "For when I am weak, then I am," what, "strong." You see when I'm being persecuted I lean on Jesus. God save us from a placid life where we never get persecuted, because then we can hack it on our own. But when the going really gets tough and we are weak and we are incapable and we can't make it, that's when we lean on Him. And so we pray that God would bring us trials and God would bring us persecutions that in our weakness His strength may be made perfect. And so you see, all the way through this thing persecution is a plus. It is never a minus. Paul said, and this is good--in Philippians 2:17--I'll give you two more things that he said and

then take it off from here.

But 2:17, "Ye," and he says, "if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy and rejoice with you all." That is terrific. Now Paul didn't suffer for his own sake. He was already saved. He could have grabbed his scrolls, tucked them under his arm, and taken off for the hills, you know. Sure. I mean, he could have said look people I don't need to do this. I mean, I don't need to go into town and get stoned, with rocks, of course you understand. He could have said, I...this...I don't need this. I'm saved. I mean, I know what the Spirit filled life is like. I don't have to do this. But he said look, if I can be offered for your joy I get a joy out of it. If my life is a sacrifice, if I have to die to reach you man, that's a great thing.

And Paul considered persecution a blessing, because he was getting persecuted in order that others might hear about Jesus. He'd go into town and he'd preach Jesus. People get saved and they'd throw him in jail. And he'd say, you know something, I got thrown in jail for preaching Jesus and people got saved. Boy I ought to do more of this. Because you see his life was expendable. This is the whole point. As a Christian, as we said last time, your life is expendable. You can spend your life on somebody else and if you die in doing it what a blessing if you've brought somebody to Christ. We're expendable. We have to look at persecution as an opportunity to suffer for the sake of somebody else.

You know, you might have an opportunity to preach Jesus or to talk about Jesus somewhere, and you'll clam up to protect your ego and because of that somebody won't hear the message of Jesus Christ. And therefore, you have considered your own pride and your own status and your own selfish comfort above the salvation of that individual. True? True? You see, it's only when you recognize that you are expendable and that you, like the apostle Paul, will say, I sacrifice myself for you. That is when you understand the blessing of persecution. It is not because you get some intrinsic joy in suffering, it is because you know that you're suffering, number one, so somebody else can know Jesus. That's a blessing.

Listen, there's a second reason that Paul suffered and this is beautiful. Colossians 1:24, this verse confuses a lot of people and they find it difficult to understand it. It isn't really that difficult. Let me see if I can open it up to you a little bit. Colossians 1:24, here's another way Paul looked at his suffering. This is beautiful. He says, "I Paul," verse 23, he's talking about himself, "am made a minister." Then he goes on. "Who now rejoices in my sufferings"...What are the next two words?..."for you." You see? But that's the first thing about it is, I'm not doing this for me, it's for you. I'm expendable and this is the whole point of Paul's life. If I live, I live under the Lord. If I die, I die under the Lord. So if I live or die, I'm the Lord's and it's for you.

But he says this, "I rejoice in my sufferings for you." And here's a second thing he loved about his sufferings. "I fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake the

church." Now there's two things he's saying here. Number one, I do it for you. I suffer for your sake, for your sake, for your sake. But secondly, I have the wonderful opportunity of filling up in my flesh the afflictions that are meant for Christ.

Now watch what he means by this. Beautiful thought. Since the time the world began to persecute Jesus they haven't stopped. Today the world is still hating Jesus. And you know what it is about you and me that the world hates? It is not us, it is Jesus. True? So that when we are persecuted, who is it that they are really persecuting? It's Jesus Christ. They don't even know us. I mean, I may go into some place and proclaim Jesus all over everywhere and they may attack me and they don't understand that just personally I am a nice guy. You know? I mean, I am not that bad. I mean, I'm not a warmonger. I'm not a murderer. I'm not there to assault anybody, but they'll get infuriated and they may pounce upon me and it has absolutely nothing to do with me at all. Who is it that they're after? It's Jesus.

And you see since the time the world began, they finally got so far that they killed Jesus, but that didn't stop it anyway. They're still trying to kill Him again and again and again. There are people in this world and there always have been who are after Christ constantly. All the false systems in the world are after Christ, persecuting Christ. And when any Christian standing really in the place of Jesus Christ gets persecuted, he is really getting that which is directed at Jesus, but Jesus isn't around any more to get it so we get it instead. True? That's exactly what he's saying. "I fill up that which is still left behind of the afflictions meant for Christ." You see?

In other words, in my body I bear, Galatians 6, the marks of whom? Of Jesus. These aren't meant for Paul. They're meant for who? You see, people are still trying to kill Jesus. They're still trying to get rid of Jesus. And because He's not around anymore, those who stand in His place are the ones who get it. And so Paul says, you know something folks, persecution is so wonderful, because after my Lord suffered so much for me can I do less than suffer some for Him? I mean, He bore all my reproach. Can I bear a little of His? I mean, He died and provided all that for me. Can I take a few of the darts meant for Him?

He endured because it was necessary to be a blessing to the church to endure and secondly, because he loved the fact that what he was suffering was meant for Jesus. You know, I think that there are some people in your life that you might suffer for. I've often thought that, and you have too probably, that if one of your children went through something extremely painful, you might have thought to yourself, you know, I'd have gone through that for them. I wish it had happened to me. Have you ever thought that?

Or some pain and anguish that somebody went through and you thought because you loved them so much, I wish it had happened to me and not them. You don't say that about too many people do you? But the ones you deeply, deeply love. Now that's how much Paul loved Jesus. He said, you know

what, I'll take it all for Jesus. If He can just be up there in glory getting what He deserves, I'll stick around down here and I'll take it. I'll fill up in my body the afflictions meant for Jesus.

So persecution is a good thing. It's good for the sake that Paul says that we are allowed the wonderful privilege of taking in the arrows of Satan meant for Jesus. So it is in this sense that all true believers who live godly stand in the place of Jesus Christ and get the afflictions that are meant for Him. That's what Mark 13:13 means when it says Jesus said, "You shall be hated of all men for My sake." See, not because they hate you, but because they hate Me and you.

SecondCorinthians 1:5, Paul said this, "The afflictions of Christ overflowed toward us." You see? "That which the world had meant for Him came to us." He says, I'm always bearing in my body the putting of Jesus to death. You see. The world is always trying to kill Jesus and they can't get to Him and they keep getting to me. I'm always bearing in my body the putting to death of Jesus. What a tremendous testimony. I'm out there confronting the world, constantly face to face with the world and I am so represented of Christ that I keep getting what they mean for Him. And he says, oh what a joy. And he even prayed further in Philippians 3:10, "Oh that I may know Him and the fellowship of His," what, "of His suffering." I get to share in what is His to suffer.

You see, that's great joy. So for the Christian persecution is a wonderful thing. It produces growth. It produces glory. It produces reward. It produces joy. It produces blessing. It produces salvation and encouragement to those whom we reach. And it produces the privilege of identification with Jesus Christ to fill up the sufferings that are meant for Him. Now maybe you don't love Jesus enough to want to do that, but Paul did and so did Peter and John. And so here as we look at Acts Chapter 4, we see this kind of spirit.

And here we're going to find...that's the introduction, now I'll get to the sermon. You say boy, MacArthur, I never thought of persecution like that. I know. That's the way to think about it though. That's the only way. And if you really live Godly in the world and confront the world, you're going to have the wonderful opportunity of getting persecuted and having all those blessings come to pass. But the beauty of this passage, now understanding that the persecution began, was how they handled it. And there are seven principles here for handling persecution.

Last week, we looked at the first three. And here we'll look at the remainder, reviewing briefly. Seven principles involving how to handle persecution. Now they got it, Peter and John and here's what they did. Number one principle, you have an outline in your bulletin which we've changed a little bit from last week, so you might want to follow along. Principle number one in handling persecution, be submissive to it. And remember that from the beginning of Chapter 4 clear through verse 7 to the time they got set down in the middle of the Hall of Hewn Stone where the Sanhedrin met together, they hadn't resisted at all. They had just willingly gone right along. And they weren't cowards and they weren't afraid--they were submissive. They said this in their minds, God brought us this far, He must

have some reason. Let's see what He's going to do.

And they didn't fight against it. They...when persecution came, they willingly submitted to it. You never hear Paul doing anything but that. In the Philippian jail when the jail started to fall apart at the earthquake, what did he do? Say at last we're free, *vroom*. And...no, he didn't. He just stayed in there. He submitted because he knew God had purpose. It's a good thing he stuck around too. God wasn't finished with what He wanted to do in that place. But you see, they were submissive. Whenever God brings you into a situation of persecution, stick around and see what God's going to do. Don't fight it, be submissive. That's principle number one.

And we went into that in detail and you remember that Paul and Silas stuck around in the Philippian jail and they could have gotten away. They could have gotten out of there fast and they stuck around and who got saved? The jailer and his whole family. Now do you know what the key to the salvation of that jailer, apart from the theology, the circumstantial key to the salvation of the jailer was persecution, right? They got persecuted. They got thrown in jail. They were having a great time singing songs in there. The place got all rattled. Everybody was panicky. The man was going to fall on his sword. Paul introduced he and his whole family to Jesus, and it all came about because of persecution. Again, a classic example of Satan doing his best and being overruled by God.

Second principle we saw last week, not only be submissive to persecution, but secondly, be filled with the Spirit. Verse 8, "Then Peter filled with the Holy Spirit." You get into a situation like that and you're going to have to lean on some power other than your own. And so he yielded to the Spirit of God, he and John. And that was victory in itself right there. They didn't try to handle it in their own strength and develop their own techniques and their own cunning. They yielded to the Spirit.

Third principle, boldly use it as an opportunity to present Christ. And this dynamic. They got into this situation and they saw an open door to present Christ right in the middle of a persecution. And it would have been so easy to say boy am I scared and we may never get out of this. See? And they didn't really have any historical precedence as a church either. This was brand new stuff. And they could have panicked at that point and just kind of faded away and just clammed up, but they didn't. They...then they could have watered down their message and as I told you last week, they could have come out with a few little religious platitudes that would have been innocuous and inoffensive to anybody and just kind of gently accommodated themselves, but not them.

They used it as an opportunity to present Christ. Jesus had told them "I want you to go into all the world to preach the gospel to," whom, "every creature." And here was some "every creature" sitting right there. They may have had a big sign on them *Sanhedrin*. Boy, that didn't make them not "every creature." And so Peter and John said, Hey boys we're here; we've got to do it. Off Peter went. Verses 8-13 he preaches Jesus. And he even indicts them for crucifying Him.

And then in verse 12 he says, you know "there's no salvation in any other for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." He lays it on the line. He says, guys this is the only hope, is Jesus. This man was made well by Jesus physically, and you will be made well by Him spiritually or you will not be made well at all. No other name but Jesus.

And so they are bold, unbelievable boldness in the face of persecution and to the Sanhedrin the highest court in Israel. That's how to handle persecution, be submissive, be Spirit filled, boldly use it as an opportunity. Now what was the effect of it? Look at verse 13 and we'll move into our study for this morning in terms of this test. "And when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant," which means that they were not educated in the rabbinical schools, not versed in prevalent Jewish theology. And the word ignorant means they were amateurs as opposed to pros. "They saw that they were unlearned amateurs, they marveled." They were shocked. I mean, how could you explain two unlearned amateurs handling a disputation with the Jewish high supreme court and coming out on top. "And they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus."

See only the PhD's were supposed to be able to handle these tougher matters, but these two guys had such poised assurance and bold confidence that they were shocked. And the boldness is unbelievable in the face of possible death. And it said in verse 13, I love this, "They took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus." Now, I'm not going to spiritualize that, because I don't think it needs to be spiritualized. It's not some foggy ethereal thing. It simply means this. They kept remembering that these guys had been associated with Jesus and what reminded them of it was the fact that they were doing what He did. Because it was exactly what Jesus did that they were doing. What do I mean? Just this. The thing that shocked the Jews about Jesus was this: He taught them as one having--What?--authority.

And He had never been to the rabbinical schools. He didn't go to the right school. In fact, He came in the cruddy place Nazareth. Did anything good come out of there? Not only that, He was an amateur. He wasn't one of the pros. He taught them as one having authority. What happened? Not only that, what else had Peter and John done here. They'd done a miracle hadn't they? And what did Jesus always do? Miracles. Another thing that Peter and John had done so well is in verse 11, handling the Old Testament and Jesus was the master at handling the Old Testament and applying it. And they had done the same thing just as masterfully as Jesus did it, because they did it directly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

They were like Jesus in the fact, number one, that they had authority; number two that they did miracles; and number three that they interpreted the Old Testament. They were just like Jesus. And they were saying, Wow it's obvious that these guys have been with Jesus. Here we go again. We've got this same problem all over again. None could equal Jesus in person, but they were the equal of

Jesus in the miracleness and the message, because it was Him speaking through them.

And so they took notice of them that they had been with Jesus, because they had the same pattern that He had. And they marveled. And then that brings us to the fourth feature in handling persecution. Be obedient to God at all costs. Verses 14-22, Be obedient at all costs. In this little simple narrative you'll see how obedient they are. Verse 14, "And beholding the man who was healed standing with them, they couldn't say anything against him." Well, what are you going to say. The guy's been 40 years a cripple. All of a sudden he's jumping around having a great time. And he's standing there and everything is in great order, you know. His legs are doing terrific. And if I read my Bible right, he's been standing for at least three hours. Now if you haven't stood in 40 years, standing for three hours is pretty good.

And he's still hanging on to Peter and John. They haven't gotten rid of him yet. Not that they wanted to, but he's hanging on. And so what happens is, it says in verse 14, "And beholding the man who was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it." I guess not. What are you going to say? They really didn't have any argument. It's a tough problem. What are you going to do? But it's interesting that though they couldn't argue about it and they couldn't deny it, they wouldn't accept it either. This is the blindness of sin. Here they were face to face with truth, with power, with all of these things and they blindly had their eyes shut. And John 3:19 tells us that it's simply that "light has come into the world, but men love darkness rather than light."

Why? Because their deeds are evil and they don't want to come to the light because if they come to the light their deeds will be reproved. So they know the truth, but they avoid the truth. And Jesus hit it right on the head in John 8 when He said this. "You are of your father," whom, "the devil. And from the beginning he was a liar. And so because I speak the truth you don't understand." Now, if I talked lies you'd read Me clear. And so they know the truth, but they reject it. Boy, that's the character of unbelief. In the face of absolute evidence, they reject. People say, Well, if...I'll believe if God will do a trick. Do a trick God and I'll believe. Do a miracle. Oh you hear that all the time.

If there's a God why doesn't He do a miracle? Listen, in the case of Lazarus, you remember and the rich man? The rich man said I want to go home and tell my brothers. And it was said to him, "if they believe not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe that one rose from the dead." And you know something, somebody did rise from the dead and they don't believe. It's not a miracle that brings people to belief. It's that brokenness of spirit and that conviction of sin. And the knowledge of the truth.

Now a miracle may have a part in it as a sign, but miracles alone don't do it. They have a very limited use, even in the life of Christ. And so they simply do not do anything positive about it all. They're going to figure out what to do negative. Verse 15, "When they had commanded them to go aside out of the counsel," they sent Peter, John, and the man outside, they had a committee meeting. They

conferred among themselves. "Saying, what shall we do to these men." Now that is a stupid question to begin with. What had they done to deserve you doing anything to them? "What shall we do to these men? For that indeed a notable miracle has been done by them is manifest to all those who dwell at Jerusalem and we cannot deny it." Now if that doesn't give you some insight into the terrible plight of the blackness of their unbelief, they had a miracle that was obvious, they could not deny it, there was no way they could set it aside, and yet they were intent on rejecting it and getting rid of these people. Now that is the character of unbelief in its hardest type.

And so they have to have a meeting as to what to do with these people. I mean, they didn't have any laws against doing miracles. And they didn't have any law against good deeds either. And Peter and John were now popular heroes, you see. I mean, they were...they had healed the guy and so they...everybody...it would have been disastrous to the public relations department of the Sanhedrin if they had pulled off some deal and punishment for Peter and John because they were heroes. So they had to find a compromise without starting a reaction among the people.

And here's their decision, verse 17, "But that it spread no further among the people, let us threaten them." They say we'll lay it on them with our authority. "And that they speak henceforth to no man in this name." And they all decided yeah, we'll do that. So they brought them in, verse 18, "and they called them and they commanded them not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus." That's it. Do not speak and do not teach in the name of Jesus. They command them never to mention Jesus again. And I'm sure they put all their authority behind it.

Isn't it an interesting thing? That the early church had to be commanded to be quiet and the modern church has to be commanded to speak. Boy we've come a long way. I'm not sure in what direction. So they desperately wanted to be rid of the name of Jesus. You know, they still can't get rid of the name of Jesus. You know, it's such a strange thing, but they had thought they might get rid of Him when they killed Him, but they didn't. Now there's 20,000 people running all over Jerusalem proclaiming Him. And it just got worse. And you know, even today as I was in Israel the thing that struck me the most, I think, the most...the clearest thing that I could see in terms of just kind of identifying certain factors, the thing that overwhelmed me every day was that right in the middle of Judaism which rejects Jesus are all of the things that relate to Jesus.

I mean, it's...just think how much easier it would have been if Jesus had been a Chinese individual. And it just clear away...of course, then it wouldn't have started the conflict, but just imagine having to live in Israel and one bus load after another of pilgrims coming to see the places where Jesus was. There goes another one. They're all over the place. And everybody's carrying around little olive wood New Testaments and little Jesus symbols, and everywhere you go in the midst of Israel there are churches with crosses and Jesuses everywhere. They cannot get rid of Jesus. No matter how they try. They can't.

And here they hope that they had gotten rid of Him when they killed Him and now they hope they can get rid of Him by shutting up Peter and John. Do you realize that if they had shut them up at this point, the church history would have been totally different. What a disaster. I mean, it all boiled down at this point to two guys who were really the ones. Boy am I glad they were faithful. So they said, we don't allow you to speak. And the word they used for speak there in verses 18, 17 and 18, is an unusual Greek word used only one other place in the New Testament. It means to speak publicly, to speak aloud, public speaking. So they put a ban on preaching. No more preaching about Jesus. And they put all their authority behind it. And they hoped this would shut them up and it didn't.

Peter and John recognized the higher authority. Jesus had said "Go into all the world and," do what, "preach the gospel to every creature." So, you know, if they had been like me and like most of us, they'd have probably said now, look let's not say anything. Let's just play it real cool and we'll get out of here and do what we want. You see? But no, they're so bold. Verse 19, "Peter and John answered and said unto them," now I don't know if they had this memorized so they could do it unison, but anyway, "Peter and John answered and said unto them, whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." Whoa what a bomb that is.

He says, you're the supreme court of Israel. You judge this. Here's the decision. Is it right to listen to you or God? Help. If they say listen to God, then they can't say anything to them. If they say listen to men, they reject their faith in God. They're stuck. They're not only on the horns of dilemma, but it has also been determined that they and God are at opposite ends of the world. And so with holy courage, they don't sneak away. They don't cower away. They simply say we have a higher authority. You say, but doesn't Romans 13 say, "Be subject to the powers that be for they are ordained of God." Sure, and I think in the general rule and the general principle, this is absolutely accurate. Peter, himself, in 1 Peter 2 even says that we're to be subject to the king and the governors and those that rule over us.

But when it comes into conflict with a higher command from God, then that's different. Do you remember Daniel? The king said you will not pray, that's a new edict. What did Daniel do? Prayed. Somebody may come along and say you will not read the Bible, but the Bible says it needs to be read. Somebody will come along and forbid you to proclaim Jesus, but Jesus said to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. Somebody may come along and command you to do something that is wrong and against the direct statement of God and the word of God. Don't do it.

You see there comes a point when you must be obedient to God. Peter and John knew that they were to be subject to authority. Christians should be the finest citizens possible. But at the same time when it comes to violating the command of Jesus Christ, that's when we obey Christ and disobey the government. And they don't argue and they don't hassle and they don't make a big deal out of it. They simply say in verse 20, "we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." We must do what God says.

Now here they are obedient at all costs. They realize they're expendable. They're putting their life on the line, but they want to be obedient. Over in Chapter 5, verse 29, they said the same thing, "we ought to obey God rather than men." And so they don't snivel around and they don't sneak out and they don't hide. They courageously state who they will obey. Somebody said the trouble with most Christians is that the voice of their neighbors is louder in their ears than the voice of God. But not in the case of Peter and John. They knew to whom their allegiance belonged. Do you know that historically there have been great times in the history of God's dealing with Israel that disobedience has been important. And I mean disobedience to governments.

In Exodus 1:17, you know, they want to get rid of the Hebrew babies in Egypt and so there was an edict sent out, but it says in verse 17 of Chapter 1, "the midwives feared God and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive." You know, it's a good thing they did that. It's a good thing they did that. It's a good thing they disobeyed the king and saved the children. For they are the progeny of the race.

Then there was an interesting command, "And Pharaoh," verse 22, "charged all his people saying every son that is born you shall cast into the river." Well, that's a pretty good...you say well, did they disobey that? Well, sort of, they threw Moses into the river, but they had a boat, you see. But they disobeyed and isn't a good thing that they disobeyed because Moses was God's chosen instrument.

You see, whenever conflict arises between the command of God and the command of men whom do we obey. We obey God. And this is all...you can trace this all the way through the Old Testament, suffice it to say at that point. So in the great tradition of men of God, they obeyed God, even though they knew it could mean their lives. And I love it in verse 20, "For we," what is the next word, "cannot." Remember what Paul said, "woe is unto me if I," what, "preach not the gospel." I can't do anything else but speak this.

We can't be silent. They said we have to speak this. And so the Sanhedrin lays a heavier threat on them. Such obedience. It would be so convenient, you know, to get into persecution and say well, I'm going to obey you and not preach Jesus because I'm going to subject myself to the powers that be. Romans 13:1, see, I'm all right. They knew who their higher command was. Verse 20...21, they had threatened them more. "So when they had further threatened them," they really laid it on now, "they then let them go finding nothing how they might punish them because of the people." You see, they were all involved in politics. All involved in prestige in keeping their position. For all men glorified God for that was done. Why? Because the man was 40 years old and whom the miracle of healing was shown.

So they were afraid of the people and so they just had to let them go after they'd really put the heavy threats on them. And so we see here complete obedience to God's will. Persecution breaks out, but it

doesn't break them. They remain obedient in the middle of it. You don't ever want to stop doing what you're doing just because you get persecuted. No bribes, no threats should ever tame our spirits, should ever steal our zeal. No claims, mental or physical against us; no chains that would bind us should ever make us violate the commands of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I love the statement of Chrysostom, the great Christian of the early years. He was summoned before the Roman emperor Arcadius, and he was threatened with banishment. And he didn't...he had preached Jesus and Arcadius said if you do not cease to preach Jesus you will be banished. And this is what he said, "You cannot banish me for the world is my Father's house." "Then I will slay you," exclaimed the angered emperor. "No, but you cannot for my life is hid with Christ in God." "Your treasures will be confiscated." "Sire that cannot be, my treasures are in heaven where none can break through and steal." "I will drive you from men and you will have no friends." "That you cannot do either, for I have a friend in heaven who has said, I will never leave you or forsake you."

Ultimately he was banished to Caucasus, which is on the edge of Armenia, but when he got there he was so greatly influential by the letters that he was writing all over the world that his enemies determined to banish him further away to a place called Pitiunt and he died on the journey getting there. Couldn't stop him. Couldn't stop him. No threat broke his spirit. No threat broke his obedience to God. He knew his priorities.

And so we are to be obedient, obedient. How do you handle persecution? Be submissive, be Spirit-filled, boldly use it as an opportunity and be obedient at all costs. Skip some thoughts here, time is gone. Number five, bind yourselves closer together. And this beautiful, look at verse 23. "And being let go, they went to their own company." They got together with their friends. They went...you know, persecution drives us together. We often talk about the unity of the body, but persecution is such an important ingredient. If we all confronted this world and if we all had to live in a hostile world and if the world was persecuting us it would drive us together.

You know, I think sometimes Christians get so tied up in picky little dumb things, you know, and we all sit around and our whole Christian life boils down as to what we wear to church or you know, well, look there's Mrs. So and So, she's had some terrible things to say about Mr. So and So. And you know, and we live in this little...really dumb little things that we get all involved in and we spin our wheels on piddlies, you know. When if we're really out there confronting the world, we'd be getting so much heat back that we wouldn't have time to mess with all that stuff.

And we'd be driven together for the common love and security of the body. If we really confronted the world, there's know. When if we're really out there confronting the world, we'd be getting so much heat back that we wouldn't have time to mess with all that stuff.

And we'd be driven together for the common love and security of the body. If we really confronted the world, there's community. It would drive us to each other. As it is now, we don't confront the world, so we live a kind of a placid innocuous existence and there's not enough trouble so that we need anybody else. We can buy our way out of our problems, you know, because everything is so nice. But they were persecuted and they bound themselves together. Over in 32-35 it talks about the fact that they had one heart and one soul and if anybody needed anything somebody else provided it.

The next thing, the sixth one--and this is what they did when they got together--is bless the Lord. This is the next reaction to persecution. Verse 24, "And when they had heard that, they reported to them all the chief priest and elders and said and when they heard that" it says, "they fell on their face and cried, and so,O God, save us. Is that what it said? No. It doesn't say that. It says "they raised their voice to the Lord in one accord and said, Lord our God." Isn't this terrific. "And you made the sea and the heavens and the earth and everything that's in it. They acknowledge God. God, You're in this. You made everything. You've allowed this to happen. They didn't come back in a state of mental depression. They came back rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus. I mean, they had just been filled with the Spirit. They had just preached to the Sanhedrin. What greater thing could have happened? And they all might have come back with the attitude, you know, better a live chicken than a dead lion. But they didn't. They were a whole gang of Joshuas and Calebs. You know, they believed it could be taken for the Lord.

Their reaction is PTLA, Praise The Lord Anyhow. And they're happy. And they address the Lord as Lord and the Greek word there is the word that...it's a very unusual word for Lord, it's a word that translates into English, *despot*. It's the most severe kind of dictatorship. They recognize their absolute bondage to Christ. Lord, You're running the show and if this is what You want, great, we're in it.

They praised God for His sovereign power. You're running it. You made the sea, You made the heaven, You made the earth. You made us, You made the situation, You know what's going on. It's Your deal and we're going to go right in with You. Praise the Lord. And then they quote the Old Testament, Psalm 2, verse 25, and I'll give you the translation of this. "Who by the Holy Spirit through the mouth, of thy servant David," that phrase should be in there, "has said why did the nations rage and the people imagine vain things. The kings of the earth stood up and the rulers are gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ." And here they say, Hey Lord, clear back in Psalm 2, You said the world would persecute Jesus. Clear back in Psalm 2, You said the world would kill Jesus. You said all the nations are going to get together against Him. We know that. So this whole persecution deal, You know all about that, don't You Lord?

For a truth, boy, it happened against Thy Holy servant Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed or made a Messiah. Herod, Pilate, the nations and Israel gathered together, Lord, just like you said--persecution. But when it was all over, look at verse 28, "They did whatever"--Whose hand?--Thy hand"--and whose counsel?--"Thy counsel"--determined before to be done." Isn't that something? The world gave

its best shots to Jesus and was all done. You know what they had accomplished? They'd accomplished salvation. Psalm 76:10 simply says and gives us the principle, "He maketh the wrath of men to do"--What?--"praise Him."

And you see, they're comforted in the fact that Jesus got persecuted but when His persecution was over through His death, salvation was provided for the world. And again Satan had overdone himself. And that's exactly the point right here. This is their comfort. The God who turned the persecution of Jesus to salvation can certainly turn their persecution into something wonderful. Now you see, that's what you need to recognize when you're getting persecuted. Hey Lord, what wonderful thing are you going to do out of this? Why when Jesus got persecuted You brought the redemption of all men. What are you going to do about this? So they're just praising God and having a wonderful time. That's trust.

I'm reminded of the story of Joseph. You remember Joseph got persecuted, first of all by his own brother. Genesis 37:8, he got persecuted by his own brothers, remember? Sold him to slavery. Then he got into Egypt and he went to work for some guy name Potiphar and he got persecuted by them. And they...his wife told all kinds of lies about Joseph and had his coat to supposedly prove it. And Joseph got persecuted by Potiphar. Next thing you knew he got into jail and he was in there and he got...he had done his best to help some people. You remember the butler and the baker situation? He got persecuted by them. He got nothing but persecuted, persecuted, persecuted, and when it was all over with he got exalted didn't he? The highest place next to the king in Egypt and he was able to supply everything for everybody that they needed even those who persecuted him.

And the book of Genesis wraps up with a fantastic statement in Chapter 50. And the statement is in verse 20, "But as for you, you thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good to bring to pass as it this day to save many people alive." You meant it for evil. God meant it for good. And this is the principle of these verses. They're praising God and saying bless the Lord because look at this evil coming that God can turn into good. That's the only way to look at persecution. So what's the principles then? To handle persecution, be submissive, Spirit-filled, boldly use it as an opportunity, be obedient, bind yourselves together, and bless the Lord, the last one.

Beseech God for greater boldness. You say are you kidding? You mean, they want to go back into the thick of it again? Sure. Verse 29. "And now Lord behold their threatenings and grant unto Thy servants, slaves" (connected with that same word *Lord)* "to Thy bond servants that with all boldness they may speak Thy word." With how much boldness? All boldness. We want to go right back and speak again. You say, Oh they told you not to do that. See? Well, we need power to do it. "And then, God, stretch forth Your hand to heal, and do some signs and wonders in the name of Jesus." Let's really give it to them, both barrels, God.

I mean, they're talking against You. Let's go. That's exciting. They prayed and they didn't pray for the Lord to smash their enemies. It was too good. Why eliminate the joy, right? Lord, don't...just let them do what they're doing, we love it. So they were looking not for an out, but an in. They were looking for not an escape, but a power. So they said God give us power. You think God will answer prayer like that? Yeah, He did in verse 31. "And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled." Some of you can relate to that. You know what the experience is like. You can imagine when that whole thing shaking, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the Word of God with boldness. There they go, He answered their prayer.

You know what persecution did? Did it have it's effect? You better believe it did, but it's effect wasn't the one Satan meant it to have. They flew out of that place and verse 32 says, "and the multitude of those that believed were of one heart and one mind." They went out of there and people got saved all over the place. It doesn't even tell how many. So many they didn't even count. They asked for more power and God gave it. This could be your experience beloved. If you live in godly in Jesus Christ.

Now some of you have never experienced this, because you'll never really live a godly life. You may be a Christian, but you'll never confront the world, so you'll never know this. Others of you will live godly and persecution will come and you'll crumble and that'll be it. A few of you will live godly, you'll suffer persecution, and in the midst of it, you'll be submissive, you'll be Spirit-filled, you boldly use it as an opportunity, you'll be obedient at all costs, you'll bless the Lord and you'll beseech God for great boldness and yours is the victory, and the growth and the glory and the reward and the joy. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You this morning for teaching us again how it is that we're to be responsible to confront the world with the claims of Christ. O God we pray that we might be bold for Jesus. And even as we go from this place, Father, we pray that we might put in to practice in our own hearts and lives those things that You've taught us by Your Spirit this morning. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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