

Explore the Bible: Courageous

March 16, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 3 focuses on Acts 4:1-13*

Power struggle

Consider the titles used to describe the participants in the trial recorded in Acts 4. On the one hand, there are priests, Sadducees, rulers, elders and teachers of the law, including the high priest and the high priest's family. This grouping was the highest Jewish authority in Israel.

When the Roman governor of Judea needed to deal with issues of tax collection or other such details, he dealt with the family of Herod. Their puppet government held authority over Judea and Galilee. But when the representative of the power of Rome wanted to speak to someone with *influence* over the Jewish people, he spoke with the high priest. The temple not only was the center of Jewish religious life, but also of economic life. Jewish pilgrims came from around the world and brought their offerings to the temple. The Sadducees, and especially the high priest's family, were the aristocracy of first-century Israel. They ran the temple, they taught the law, and they enforced the law. While Roman power and Herod's family's power as puppets of Rome always were there in the background as a foreign occupying force, the Sadducees embodied specifically *Jewish* power.

On the other hand, there are Peter and John. No titles are used for them except "the apostles," because they *have* no other titles. Fishermen by trade, uneducated in the law, Galileans by birth and so not part of the cosmopolitan crowd of Jerusalem, anyone who looked in on the trial would have seen a massive imbalance of power when looking at the people in that room. They are "unschooled and ordinary" (Acts 4:13). On that view, those

in power would judge, and those without power would obey or suffer the consequences.

Except there is the matter of a man healed, and resurrection proclaimed. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection—not only of Jesus, but of anyone. Resurrection implies there is a greater judgment coming. The Sadducees preferred to be the judges themselves.

“By what power or what name did you do this?” (Acts 4:7) The implication behind the question is “Because we certainly didn’t authorize this sort of thing!”

Speaking truth to power

Indeed, Peter and John’s authorization comes from Someone else entirely. These unschooled and ordinary men have “been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). “Filled with the Holy Spirit,” that is, empowered by the Spirit to speak, Peter names another title of power and influence in a room full of aristocrats, lawyers, law professors, judges, priests and, yes, politicians. The title is “Messiah”—“Christ” in Greek.

This title was given by God to Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Sadducees had crucified but whom God raised from the dead. In his name, Peter says, a crippled man has been healed. And if it is power the Sadducees are concerned about, then they should know Jesus’ name not only has the power to heal, but also the power to bring salvation. Behind Peter’s speech is the affirmation there is a judgment coming, and in Jesus, there is rescue from that judgment.

Peter (echoing his Lord) quotes Psalm 118:22. The leaders of Israel have rejected Jesus, but God is building something new with him as the cornerstone. What is God building with Jesus as the cornerstone? Psalm 118:26 speaks of the “house of the Lord.” It is not a far-fetched guess to imagine that Peter, like Jesus before him, is talking about *a new temple*

(and therefore another threat to the power of the Sadducees). This temple, though, will not be of mortar and stone but will be made of the very people of God. “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

Although their role was to teach the law, administer the temple and judge the people, the Sadducees had settled for earthly power. Earthly power only has one trick— death, or the threat of death. “Do what we say or suffer the consequences.” What use is that against the power of God which can raise the dead? Earthly power depends on fear to control people. Instead, the power at work in Peter and John was—and is—a power that grants courage, that brings healing and empowers Jesus’ witnesses to speak the truth, no matter the circumstances.

The phrase that begins this section, “speaking truth to power,” first appeared in a Quaker pamphlet in 1955. In that pamphlet, its authors’ state “Our *truth* is an ancient one: that love endures and overcomes; that hatred destroys; that what is obtained by love is retained, but what is obtained by hatred proves a burden.” The ultimate truth of that statement stands on the reality that God exercised his power by raising Jesus from the dead, providing the way of salvation and proving that there is a power stronger than sin and death.

Courage worthy of the name

Acts 4:13 highlights that the gathered power-brokers who heard Peter (1) see their courage, (2) realize they are unschooled and ordinary, and (3) take note that they have been with Jesus. There is much wisdom here in those simple phrases for those who would seek to be witnesses as these men were that day.

Courage, like many virtues, has had its meaning watered-down in the

modern world. It is easy to be deceived and think simply voicing an unpopular opinion, or even a popular opinion to which some will disagree, is the same thing as courage. Courage for the Christian, like all true virtues, points beyond itself to God who is the source of virtue, and looks to Christ as the ultimate example of that virtue. Peter's courage was Holy Spirit-inspired and his speech Jesus-focused. It also is worth noting Peter and John's opportunity to show courage came about because of an act of kindness, not an act of aggression. Courage itself, The Holy Spirit and the healed man all point beyond Peter to Someone greater.

So, too, does Peter's and John's lack of credentials. It is not their expertise that gives them courage; it is their experience. They had been with Jesus. They have seen the risen Lord. They are "with" Jesus, proclaiming his name, witnessing in word and in action as the Spirit leads them. His example and the truth of his resurrection set their agenda.