

Let us learn from this what the church is. It is God's chosen dwelling place. It is inhabited by his Holy Spirit. To lie to the church, is to lie to the Spirit and therefore to God. The church is not like a club. It is not a social gathering, for our pleasure. It is a sacred body, devoted to the Lord. Let us learn the lesson of Ananias and Sapphira. When the people heard what had happened, "great fear" came upon them (v5, v11). They trembled at the thought of the holiness of God. We must do so too.

Let us also take great comfort from these verses. When Satan seeks to ruin the church, God will not let him succeed. The Spirit revealed to Peter what was going on. Christ cares far too much for his bride to let her be defiled. God will ensure that Satan's plans do not succeed. His honour is at stake. He will intervene. If a church is over-run by wickedness, then the Lord must have departed from it long ago. He will not allow such to happen to those who are truly his own. Let us be glad that we belong to a body which is so special in God's eyes. Let us not only fear, but let us rejoice as well.

## ***Expository thoughts on*** **The Acts Of The Apostles**

***Daily Bible Reading Notes***

***Week 3 (Chapter 4:1-5:11)***

**Grace Church Belper**

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## Acts 4:1-12

*1 Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, 2 being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4 However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.*

These words record a very significant event. They tell us about the first persecution of the Christian church. They are words which God has recorded for a reason. They are intended to be useful for all Christians since. Persecution is something that the Christian church must face in all eras. What can we learn about it? This chapter has a good deal to tell us. Let us take careful note.

Let us notice first of all that the preaching of the gospel meets with opposition. This, in itself, is something that makes no sense. The gospel is God's good news for man! It tells perishing sinners where they may find life. It tells us what great things God has done for us. It tells us of a dying and risen Saviour. It tells us of a free pardon. It tells us of divine grace. It explains that there is a rescue from death and damnation. It announces the defeat of Satan, sin and hell. The gospel is the most wonderful message there could ever be. But men oppose it. And here we see a very considerable opposition. It was opposed by the ordinary priests. It was opposed by the temple captain. It was opposed by many other Sadducees. They were "greatly disturbed". They did not merely argue with them. They were so incensed that they "laid hands" on Peter and John. They cast them into prison, for a trial the next day.

The gospel will always be opposed, because it will always irritate the pride and sin of fallen man. It cuts across our pleasant views of ourselves. It tells us of our fallenness, our sin, and our guilt. It tells us that man is depraved, and exposed to the justice of God. It tells us that we can never do anything of our own to atone for our sins. It tells us that we are so vile, and our case so bad, that only a work of God can rescue us from hell.

It cuts too across many cherished but empty religious ideas. The priests themselves were mostly Sadducees. Their teaching had no place for life after death. They had no belief in the soul. They believed in no resurrection. They believed in no judgment of God. What a comfortable belief theirs was! This life is all there is - and there are no consequences for it to be faced. Theirs has been the belief of many before and since. What they could not see with their own eyes, they refused to believe.

There are many in our own day who are the perfect successors of the Sadducees. They refuse to hear the gospel, because it cuts across their own favourite beliefs. It speaks of another, as yet unseen, world. It speaks of judgment, and an end for the present world. It brings a challenge, and an urgency, which many have no taste or desire for. They reject the gospel, but not because they have carefully heard and considered it. They reject the gospel, because it cuts across the cherished but false beliefs of their own

to Christ. They had run to him, disowning all their sins. But now look to what they had come. They had become the very tools of the devil, to corrupt the church. They fell prey to pride. They wanted to be like Barnabas! How he was admired. What a reputation he had amongst the church! It wasn't his graces they so much admired. It was the praise which he had received. They fell prey to envy. They no longer saw the church as a brotherhood of equals. They saw that there was a name to be made, by doing good works. They now wanted to serve not only for Christ, but also for themselves.

Such dangers are very subtle. We can do a great deal in serving ourselves, whilst pretending it is for Christ. We may even be unaware of what our own motives are. We may speak in the right spiritual words. We may fool every man. But God knows our hearts, and reads our very thoughts.

If true believers may fall so low, then we must take heed. It can happen to us too. We ought to be very greatly grieved when such things happen. But we cannot be surprised. They happened even in the very first days. When there were still apostles in the church, believers were falling into great sin. Let us not put too much trust in man. Let us not lose heart if we see others falling away. Let us make sure that we are holding fast to the Lord.

Let us trace out secondly the steps which took this couple to ruin. The steps were subtle - but in each there was a definite advance. Let us look at our own hearts, and ask the Lord to show us what is really going on. Their sin did not spring out suddenly in a moment. There were stages by which it advanced.

First of all it was "conceived" in their hearts. The idea was floated across their minds. Its beginnings were small - a mere thought that was not instantly dismissed. And because it was not instantly dismissed, it grew. It was indulged. It was rolled around in their minds, and the more they looked at it the more attractive it seemed. Then their hearts were filled, and Satan came in like a flood. We must learn from this to say "No" to sin the first time it appears to us. To do otherwise is to open the door to our own doom. It is the act of a fool. Ananias and Sapphira colluded together, and agreed to deceive the church. What an insane idea this was! But it came about because they did not straight away say "No". Let us learn that we must put our sins to death, otherwise they shall be the death of us. Either we shall make spiritual advance, or we shall spiritually die. There is no safe resting place. The fight with our sins must go on, until one of us dies.

Let us see finally in these verses the great importance and holiness of the church. It is God's temple. It is the body which he indwells. The gathering of believers is a sacred and special place. To bring sin into it is to defile the dwelling place of God. Under the Old Covenant, the first to transgress within the tabernacle were struck down with death (Leviticus 10:1-3). And so under the New Covenant, the first to bring sin into God's holy church also died. God is no less holy at one time than another. The New Covenant exalts mercy and grace. But it also exalts the righteousness of God.

Jesus the best we can as we can today.

## Acts 5:1-11

*1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 2 And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? 4 While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. 6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. 7 Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." 9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. 11 So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.*

These words record another first. This is the first attempt of Satan to corrupt the church from inside. He had tried to attack it from outside. That had failed. Now he turns to his other great tactic. One strategy is obvious, and frightening. The other is subtle, and devious. Both have one aim - to ruin Christ's church. These are words which deserve our careful attention.

Let us notice then just what Satan attempted to do. His attack on the apostles had not split the church. It had brought even closer together. It had driven it to its Lord. The church is never safer than when caused to flee to its Lord! Now Satan tries something else. He tries to spoil the church from the inside. He cannot openly defeat them by force. He will try instead to poison them by deceit.

We must be aware that not all of Satan's assaults will be obvious. Some will be very sly indeed. Because of this, they are all the more dangerous. We must keep a close watch on ourselves. Often our peace is not because Satan is not at work. It is because he is very much at work, but wishes us to look elsewhere.

How low we see two believers brought here. Let this be a warning to us. When had Ananias and Sapphira first believed? We do not know. Was it on that great day of Pentecost? We cannot be sure. But whenever it was, they had heard the gospel preached. They had been exposed to their own great sin and guilt. They had heard of the great salvation which God had provided. They had been urged to repent, and to flee

religion or sect. We must never underestimate the power of tradition, and of the large group. It leads many to obstinately take up and cling to ideas that otherwise they would never have believed. And it leads many to fiercely oppose the gospel of Christ.

As long as man is still man, the gospel will be opposed. As long as the gospel brings down human pride, it will often be unwelcome. As long as the gospel declares itself to be unrivalled truth, it will often be despised. Yet for all this, we must not shrink back from believing it. If others do not like it, yet we must cling on. If our fellow men do not see their need of a Saviour, yet we must. If others have no concern over their souls or their sin, we cannot follow them. If being faithful to Jesus brings us trouble, and difficulty, and the hatred of all men, yet we must press on. There is no other who died for our sins. There is no other who can wash us and bring us into the presence of God. There is no other through whom we can be safe at the last day. Persecution or no persecution, we must hold on to Jesus Christ.

This persecution came from the very highest places. It was from the priests, the clergy of the day. It was from those specially entrusted with the things of God. It was not a low-ranking official who moved to act. It was the temple captain himself. How challenging this must have been to the first believers! They were not opposed by a few non-entities. They were opposed by those who ought to have embraced the gospel first. What a trial this must have been for their faith. But let us not think that this was for them only. There are many seeming religious experts of our own day who know nothing of Christ. There are many who have the titles and ranks of those who ought to be the very nearest to God - and yet are full of scorn for our faith. Let us not be surprised at this, and let it not shake us. It was so in the very earliest days. Until our Lord returns, it will always be.

This opposition brought suffering for the apostles. They must lose their liberty. They must be treated like criminals. They must face a humiliating trial. They must give account for their very lives. They must answer to the highest court in the land. The opposition was not trivial, and easily brushed away. We must take note of this too, and be ready. If the Lord is alive, then we must not give up when the heat is turned up too high. If the Lord is alive, then we must be ready to hold firm, whatever it costs.

Let us notice too, though, that the gospel made a very great advance despite the opposition. Here is a word from God. He is not dependent upon man. His power is greater than all the opposition that the greatest men can raise. Here is a great word of encouragement! On that day, "many" saw that the rulers of Israel were opposed to the gospel. But nevertheless, on that day "many" believed. At Pentecost, the church had been three thousand. Now it was five thousand, counting men alone. The sign had been noted. The preaching had been heard. The witness had been taken to heart. The Holy Spirit had greatly blessed. Many believed, and were added to the church. The opposition did not prevent them at all.

Let us be quite certain that when God chooses to bless, his will will stand. Man cannot prevent him. The gospel shall advance. Let us seek to bear our own witness to Jesus, confident that all depends upon God. Whatever hatred may come our way, it will not stop the blessing from coming. God will honour his word. He did then, and he will

today.

## Acts 4:5-12

*5 And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, 6 as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. 7 And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: 9 If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, 10 let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man stands here before you whole. 11 This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' 12 Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."*

What a scene this is. On the one side, the Jewish hierarchy. The ruling body of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, sits. On the other side, the apostle of Christ. Here is a clash between the old and the new. Israel according to the flesh against Israel after the Spirit. A community under God's displeasure against his true chosen race. Let us read these words with deep interest.

We see in these verses a striking example of how Christ keeps his promise. In earlier times he had told his apostles that they would be brought before higher powers. They should appear before magistrates for his name. And he told them that they would not need to be anxious about what they should say. He promised that in that "same hour", the Holy Spirit would teach them what to say. And what do we see hear? We see Peter and John before the highest authority of the Jews. And we read that Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke. It was just as Christ had said.

Every word of our Lord is faithful, and true. His words were not guesses. He spoke as one who knew. He perfectly revealed the mind of God - and God cannot make a mistake. If he has told us that trouble will come, then it will come. If he has given us a precious promise to aid us, then we may rely upon it. Heaven and earth may pass away - but Christ's words never shall (Matthew 24:35).

Let us make sure that we believe this. It will save us a great deal of trouble and pain. It will bring us great comfort and strength. Our Lord knows what shall befall us. And he knows what promises and helps we need to come through. We must find out what he has pledged to us. And then we must hold it fast. Let us hold on, most of all, to his promises to keep us to the end. Has he promised to prevent any from plucking us out of his hand (John 10:28-20)? Has he promised to raise us up at the last day (John 6:39-40)? Has he promised to never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5)? Has he told us to "hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought to us at [his] revelation" (1 Peter

Giving happened when a brother had real need.

What a beautiful picture this is. But it is not a picture only meant to be admired, whilst we go our own way. It is a something to aim for ourselves.

There is a great deal of confusion about Christian unity today. Some think that Christian unity can only happen when we have a single denomination. There must be one outward church, with a single headquarters, and every church must be part of it. The Bible knows nothing at all about this idea. The unity was that of like-minded brothers, not of a mere outward pretence. Others think that Christian unity is helped by Christians censoring their own beliefs. If we are too clear, or too detailed, in stating our doctrines then we may drive away those who believe otherwise! Again, the Bible knows nothing about this. It is a book full of plain speaking and of great depth.

True Christian unity must begin with agreement of heart and soul. It exists wherever those who truly believe on the Lord Jesus come together as brethren. It exists wherever one believer says to another, "because you love Christ, I love you". It does not need organisations and committees to bring it about. It does not need us to be vague about precious things. It exists when we make the gospel of Christ the main thing - when we make it what it already is. It exists when our words and our deeds flow from that.

Such unity is a thing which the Holy Spirit delights to bless. We read that there was great power in the apostolic preaching at that time. We read that "great grace was upon them all". Let us make it something which we strive for, and spare no expense to gain.

Let us notice secondly what is said about Barnabas. Here we are introduced to him for the first time. His name was Joses, but the apostles gave him another name. He was a man who loved to encourage. His words and his deeds brought great comfort to the church. He was clearly a wealthy man, because he had land which he could afford to completely forego. And he did forego it - for the good of the church.

Barnabas will be a great man in future years. He will be specially trusted by the church in Jerusalem. He will be the man they send out to oversee the work amongst the Gentiles. He will be the man who accompanies Paul on his missionary trips. He will be a giant in the things of the Lord. But first he started in things that were small. When we first meet him, he is not preaching, or overseeing new churches. He is not taking the gospel to unevangelised fields. He is simply doing what he can, to support the poor. Out of such a man, God will make something great.

Let us not think that because we cannot take the gospel into the jungles, therefore we are of little use. God recognises all kinds of acts of service. The mere giving of relief to the poor is a thing which he counts very precious. If we would grow spiritually, then let us see what we can do here and now. Let us not dream about grand schemes fit for supermen. Let us ask what opportunities of service God has given us this week and today. Let us do the things which he gives us with all our might and strength. God will see that we then have larger fields for our gifts, if he wills. God will raise up great men and women of faith. But he will not do it by sudden miracles. He will do it by giving them an opportunity here and there, testing them, seeing if they are faithful with little before trusting them with much. Let us not then stare at the sky. Let us serve the Lord

If we have been praying for something, then let us go on praying until we have our answer. If we are praying for anything, let us pray as those who believe that Jesus reigns, and our Father hears. If we are praying, let us do so as those who expect God to intervene. We must seek to be quite convinced that empty, formal prayers are a disgrace. They deny every fundamental truth of God's word. When the early church prayed, it did not do so as a mere matter of routine. It prayed because it believed that its Saviour was alive. Let us make sure that we do the same!

## Acts 4:32-37

*32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. 33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. 36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated 'son of encouragement'), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

These verses are another of Luke's pauses. A great event has been reported. Now he pauses, steps back, and gives us the big picture. The leaders of Israel have attacked the church. But God has preserved his witnesses. The persecution has driven the church to prayer. What was the outcome of it all? Has the church been divided and destroyed? Quite the opposite. Let us savour these words. When Satan attacks the church, if God is with it then it need not fear.

Let us notice the main thing emphasised in these verses. It is the great unity and love of the church. This is something which the Holy Spirit wishes us to take special notice of. It is a subject to which he has devoted a great deal of space in Scripture. It is a concern very near to the Lord's heart. It is one which we cannot neglect without causing him great grief.

True unity begins in the heart. This is the first thing which Luke notes. "Those who believed were of one heart and one soul". There was a great "multitude" of them. But they had only one heart. Their aim was the same. Their goals were identical. They were united in the gospel of Christ.

True unity cannot stop in the heart. If it does stop there, then it is doubtful that there is anything there to begin with. Love always results in action. In the Jerusalem church, each looked upon the whole church as his brethren. When a brother needed something, he gave it to him. He did not say "this is mine, it is not yours"; he said "this is mine, and therefore it is yours". There were none who lacked; when any had need, another one gave. This was not like living in a commune. It does not say that everybody put everything into a single pot. There was no redistribution merely for the sake of it.

1:13)? Then it is all true. Let us not let any of it go.

Let us note for a second thing that there is a definite Christian gospel. Each time Peter has stood up to preach, his words have varied. But his message has been the same. He preached Jesus Christ. He declared Jesus of Nazareth, the real historical man. He proclaimed his identity as the Christ, and the Son of God. He preached his death, his resurrection, and his ascension to the throne of all the world. It was Jesus of Nazareth who was now doing these great deeds amongst them! Whatever they had made of him, he was now Lord. Salvation was to be found in him, and no other. This is the message which Peter declared. He declared it to the Pentecostal crowds. He declared it in the synagogue to the worshippers. He now declared it to the council. Whether preaching to the high or to the low, Peter preached the gospel of Christ.

The gospel can be preached in many ways. There is wonderful variety. There variety has its limits. There may be many species of English rose. But the oak tree is not one of them. There are messages preached, which are not the gospel of Christ. There are many sermons delivered each Sunday, which have little to do with the word which the Son of God first sent out into the world. The Christian gospel is not infinitely elastic. It has essentials, without which nobody can be saved. It is not charitable to neglect this fact. We are doing no good to anyone's soul if we pretend that it makes no difference what they believe, or what they hear. There is a true, historic Christ, and there is an authentic gospel. There are also false christs (Mark 13:22) and other, perverted gospels (Galatians 1:6-8). Let us make sure that we know the difference, embracing the one, and utterly rejecting the other.

Let us note thirdly how faithfully Peter dealt with his hearers. There was every temptation for him to do otherwise. Who was he by trade? A mere fisherman! Who were they? The leaders of his nation! What formal education had he received? None. And they were the best educated men in the land. Moreover, he was on trial. The least said, the less harm might be done. Now might seem the hour to speak quietly, and to avoid any trouble. But Peter knew nothing of any such ideas. He had spoken straightly to the crowds, and now he would do so to the rulers. They had crucified their own Messiah. They were indeed the God-ordained builders for the house. But they had rejected the chief cornerstone. They had fulfilled Scripture by being spiritually blind, but God had utterly overturned their wrong verdict. And though they had spurned the Lord Jesus, yet if they would be saved it could only be by him. Peter minced no words in spelling this out.

Let us make sure that we always deal faithfully with those to whom we speak. Let us not tone down the truth. We must not make sin seem less than it is. This would insult the sufferings of Christ. We must not make the gospel seem like a mere option. This would deny that the Jesus is in fact Lord. We must not imply that there is any other way. This would be to slight God's only Son. It may be hard for us to speak the truth, when we know it may not be welcome. But speak it, we must, for the good of precious souls.

Let us notice finally that Peter says very plainly that there is no other Saviour. Try as we might, there is no way around these words. God has made it quite clear. He has

given a name through which we can be saved. But he has given only one. Why should he give another? There is no defect in the one he gave. Why should we need another? The Lord Jesus has all that we require. How could there be any other? None other could live the life of purity which God requires of us; none other could bear the sins of the world. There is only one Saviour - and that is Jesus Christ.

We must be quite clear about this. Other religions are not ways to God. They are ways away from God. God has not given them - they are the inventions of men. They cannot save us. They tell us stories about how we might save ourselves. We must remember that a person is not saved by being sincere. The devil is sincere. A person is not saved by living a good life. There is none good by the standards of God. A person is not saved by a little religion. Judas had that. A person is saved by trusting in the name of God's only Son. There is one Saviour, to the ends of the earth. Let us hold on to him. We will always find him to be all that we need.

### **Acts 4:13-22**

*13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marvelled. And they realised that they had been with Jesus. 14 And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. 15 But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, 16 saying, "What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name." 18 So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. 20 For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." 21 So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. 22 For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.*

The Jewish council had probably never heard a speech like the one they had just heard. They thought that Peter and John were on trial. But now it seemed that they were! They wanted to punish these men for preaching the resurrection. But now they were accused of murdering their own Messiah! The words before us now tell us what happened next. Let us mark them well.

We see from these verses that Jesus was glorified through his servants. The council took note of Peter and John. They saw that they were very bold. They noticed that they spoke clearly, and directly. They noticed that they spoke as men as if they knew. They noticed that they were not ashamed. But how could these things be? These men were Galileans. They were fishermen! They had no formal education, and they had not studied rhetoric. How could it be explained? There was only one explanation. They

Let us see that we do not treat the Bible as if it were only a collection of interesting thoughts. Let us not look at it as a work of mere history, or stirring poems, or the like. Let us make sure that every time we come to it, we come with a sense of reverence and awe. Let us see that when we open its pages, it is with worship in our hearts. Here is no ordinary book. Here are the very words of God! Whatever it says is true. Whatever it predicts shall come to pass. Here is a solid rock on which to ground our faith.

Let us notice secondly how the church saw Jesus Christ at the centre and heart of all things. As they prayed, they prayed about Christ. As they looked into the Scriptures, they found that they spoke of Christ. As they unburdened their hearts to God, it all concerned his purposes in Christ. They did not pray for their own glory. They did not even pray for their own safety. They prayed for the honour of the Son of God.

Here is an attitude which we must seek to copy. It would be well for the church if it had always been of this mind! When it thinks this way, it is healthy. When it declines from this, it is ill. The church is named after Christ. It exists only because of him. As long as it seeks his fame, it shall do well. When it forgets its first love, its ruin is nigh (Revelation 2:4-5).

Our thinking must all be brought into obedience to Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:5). Here is the one by whom all things were made. He is the one who sustains the whole world. He is the one for whom all things are. God's purpose is that every knee should bow to him. The story of history is the story of him. Nations rise, and nations fall. But Jesus Christ shall be worshipped for evermore.

How petty many of our concerns are! How trivial are the things we often worry about. How empty and vain are many of the things we spend time upon! They are all destined to be burnt up in the general fire. But Jesus Christ, and that which is done for him, shall abide. The early church prayed for the advance of his kingdom. They did not pray to be spared imprisonment, or trials, or the threats of their rulers. They prayed that they might have courage, and still preach the word. They prayed that Jesus might be testified to with power. They prayed for the glory of God.

Let us use this as a yardstick for our prayers and desires. Do we pray, as the church first prayed? Is Christ, and his kingdom, and his glory, at the heart of all things? If our prayers were written down, would they read like this? Let us strive, every time that we pray, to bring our thoughts and words into conformity to this.

Let us notice finally that this prayer was answered. They prayed that the word might be preached. And they preached the word of God. They asked that they might receive boldness. And the Lord sent the Holy Spirit to them. They asked that their might be power in their witness. And the Lord testified with a miraculous sign.

The Lord has not commanded us to pray in vain. Prayer is not a mere ritual, relevant only to ourselves. It is not something just to be done so that we might gain some comfort. It is not merely private, just for our own souls. It is something that effects the real world. Time and space are to be shaken again and again as the Lord sends answers to prayer. Prayer is the means by which the church makes real advance, and souls are won for Christ.

and of Pilate, have been appointed by him? God has no responsibility for sin. He can never conceive sin, nor encourage it to be carried out. But the most wicked act that ever was, the murder of his Son, was yet pre-determined by him. We may not know how all these things can be so. Yet the Scriptures assure us that they are. The early believers did not deny these things, or refuse to acknowledge them until they had worked them all out. They affirmed that they were so, and they bowed before God. It should be no surprise that the ways of God are often beyond our feeble minds! Yet this is all the more reason to fall down before him. Let us not seek to quibble or to agitate because we cannot yet fully understand these things. Let us accept them, and worship him.

## Acts 4:27-31

*27 For truly against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together 28 to do whatever your hand and your purpose determined before to be done. 29 Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word, 30 by stretching out your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." 31 And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.*

These words continue the early church's prayer. It is the only prayer of the early church whose contents are recorded in Scripture. Let us take special care as we read it!

Let us notice firstly how perfectly God's word must be fulfilled. A thousand years before, he had spoken of the things which had now come to pass. He had said that the nations would rage. He had announced that kings and rulers would gather together, to oppose the Christ. He had said that all their opposition would be in vain. And so it was! Jew and Gentile had been gathered together. Israelite and Roman had both played their part in crucifying Christ. Herod and Pilate, enemies before, had become friends through their ill-treatment of Jesus (Luke 23:12).

The fulfillment of prophecy is one of the great proofs that the Bible is God's word. Few of us can predict what will happen in the next year. The Bible has foretold events at a distance of centuries and millennia. The further away events are from us, the less and less certain we can be. But the prophets were equally confident, and have been proven equally correct, whatever distance away the events were of which they spoke. Whether they said that an empire would fall next year, or whether they announced the birth-place of the Messiah at a distance of five-hundred years, it made no difference: what they spake, came true.

There is only one explanation for these facts. The Bible is not the word merely of men. It is the word of the living God. There is only one being who can describe the future with the same accuracy as the past. It is the one to whom all history is an open book. It is the one to whom the past and future are alike, because he has pre-ordained them both just the same.

they remembered - and "realised that they had been with Jesus".

They were now in a familiar situation! An uneducated Galilean had confounded them before. He had exposed their unbelief and their sin. He had overturned their questions. He had shown that it was they, not he, who needed to answer for themselves (Matthew 22:29-33). They had put him on trial - and his words had indicted them (Matthew 26:64). They had hated him without a cause; yet they had not been able to defeat him. How familiar it was! The men in front of them had not come from nowhere. They were the disciples of Jesus.

Let us, in all that we do, seek to bring the aroma of Christ with us. Our Lord is not here. But he may be glorified in his servants. As we become more like him, the honour is his. Let us remember that our great goal in Christianity is not to become clever. It is not to become rich, or powerful. It is to become like Jesus. It is to show others what he is like. It is to bring glory to him.

We must see, secondly, in these verses the darkness and depravity of man's heart. No other teaching can account for such behaviour as we see here. Only the Bible truth of man's fall, and original sin, can give a sufficient explanation. Here were educated and learned men. Here were the leaders of a nation. And before them was evidence that could not be mistaken. The lame man stood in front of them, healed. A "notable miracle" was evident to every person in the city. There was no way of denying it. All the people were giving praise to God for what was done.

And yet what was their response? It was not to glorify God. It was not to enquire as to what the miracle meant. It was not to concede that Peter must be right. It was not to change their ways, or to change their beliefs. They had no intention of doing any of these things. They just wanted to be free of these men, and their preaching. Whether it was true or not, they did not care.

Is there a more striking proof of the pride and ignorance of man's heart? The most remarkable miracles will have no effect on it. The most undeniable facts will be stubbornly resisted by it. There are no limits to the blindness and perversity of man in his desire to be free from the claims of God.

There is only one hope for the human heart. It is for a miracle to be done within. It is for the Holy Spirit to "take away the heart of stone, and give a heart of flesh". It is to be "born again". It is to become a "new creation" in Christ. If the Lord has melted our hearts, and drawn us to be his Son, then let us give thanks. It is something we could never have done. All the praise belongs to him.

Let us notice thirdly what Peter and John said very clearly. When a conflict of loyalties arises, God must be obeyed. They had seen and heard the Lord. God had commanded them to preach his Son. And whatever else happened, this command must be obeyed. Even if the very rulers of Israel came together to forbid it, yet God must be obeyed.

We must never think that anything can release us from our obligations to God. He must be the first one whom we serve. He is our creator. He is our sustainer. He is our Saviour. He is our judge. All of these roles belong to him alone. It is true that we must give honour to our rulers. We must honour governments and give them their due

(Romans 13:1-8). But they cannot take the place of God.

Finally, notice that God kept his servants. They were before the most powerful men in the land. Those men were completely opposed to them and their teaching. Those men had, weeks earlier, crucified their Lord. They were seeking, any way they could, to punish the apostles. But they could not. They were restrained from doing what they would. The healed man was standing before them. The people of the city were all praising God. There was nothing they could do to punish them, without risking a riot. The apostles could only be threatened. And then they must be allowed to go free.

God can keep his own servants, even in the lions' den. He does not need to intervene by an angel. He has his ways and means. When he sees that it suits his purposes best, he can keep them by any way he pleases. Let us hold on to God. Let us hold on to his power. Unless he sees some good reason in it, our enemies can not lift a finger to hurt us. Let us not fear man; let us fear only him.

## Acts 4:23-28

*23 And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. 24 So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said, "Lord, you are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, 25 who by the mouth of your servant David have said, 'Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? 26 The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together, against the LORD and against his Christ.' 27 For truly against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together 28 to do whatever your hand and your purpose determined before to be done.*

These are very remarkable words. They are full of great riches. There is scarcely anything like them in all of Scripture. These are special words. Scripture tells us to pray. It tells us what to pray for. Sometimes, it even tells us the very words which men used to pray. It contains prayers of Christ himself. It contains the prayer he gave to the church. It tells us that believers prayed. But this passage is unique. Nowhere in the whole Bible, except here, are the very words of the church's prayer recorded. If we want to know what was said in the first prayer meetings, we must look here.

Let us notice first of all that the church responded to persecution with prayer. The early church was a praying church. They "continued steadfastly" in prayer (Acts 2:42). When Peter and John were released, they went to the brethren. And when they had told the brethren what had happened, they all went to God. Of course they did! What else could they do? The rulers of Israel had come out against the church. So the church looked to the ruler who was higher than them, and higher than all. They went to God in prayer.

What a precious thing prayer is. We might never have an audience with the queen. We might never be able to ask something from our rulers. Those rulers might be opposed to the Lord, and care nothing for his church. But we can always go to God in prayer. We

may always have an audience with him. He never sleeps nor rests. His ears are always open to his children's cries. The perfect Father is always moved by their pleas and their tears. His Son is at his right hand, whose blood has taken away their sins. His promises are ever before his eyes, to do us good, and not evil. What greater reasons could there be, for prayer?

Let us, every year that we are alive, seek to pray more. Let us seek to have more of a sense of our great privilege. Let us seek to have more of a sense of our great need. Let us seek to meditate more on our heavenly Father, and his love. Let us seek to rely less upon ourselves, and more upon him. Prayer should not be our last port of call. It was the early church's first. Prayer should not be one strategy among many. With the early church, it was their all. We live in a day of great lack in prayer. Let us ask ourselves how we measure up to these things.

Let us notice secondly how the church prayed. Luke notes that they prayed "with one accord". Prayer was not the work of just a few. It was the work of all. The church and the gospel ought to be precious to every believer. And so therefore every believer ought to pray. We cannot give this work away to others. We must look to ourselves. Do you pray?

When the church prayed, it bowed before God. Their voices said, "Lord, you are God." They did not begin with their needs. They did not list many complaints. They did not rush into his presence. They bowed before the king. In prayer, we may become familiar with God. The Almighty calls us his friend! But we must not become familiar as with a peer. He is a friend, but not a "chum". He is a friend, yet remains our God and king. Familiarity must always remain with awe, respect and loving fear.

Let us see thirdly in these verses the awesome sovereignty of God.

The church sought to get a right view of God. He is Lord, ruler over all. He is the maker of everything that can be touched, or seen. He spoke in past times, to reveal what he would do. All things are from him. All things are by him. All things are for his own glory. This is why we pray to him! He is Lord - and none other is. How good it is to get a proper sight of God in prayer! What an encouragement to pray, when we know that he rules! What a help to the right kind of requests to him, when we know what sort of God he is. Let us seek, whenever we pray, to think deeply about what it is that we do.

The rebellion of the Jews was not news to God. Their joining with the Roman rulers to oppose the Christ was not a surprise. God had spoken about it many years before. The Scriptures were spoken by the mouths of men. But their voice was also that of the everlasting God. As the Jews, and Herod, and Pilate had gathered together, they could only fulfil what God had long before said. They did exactly as they pleased; and they did exactly what God had willed.

We must never think that God can be taken by surprise. We should not think that he is like one of us. He sees all, and knows all - and has determined all. He rules, and he reigns.

No doubt there are many things here which are hard to understand. How could the wicked acts of the Jews be determined by the Holy God? How could the sin of Herod,