

# THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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## CHAPTER TEN

### A SAFE RESORT IN TIME OF TROUBLE

(Acts 4:15-35)

#### OUTLINE

Key verse - 12

1. The impossibility of frightening Christ's disciples into silence.
  - a. Because they have their commission from the highest source of authority, God (19).
  - b. Because they have the assurance of the support of the Holy Spirit.
  - c. Because they feel impelled to declare to the world the only Saviour (20).
2. The extreme difficulty of winning those to Christ who are prejudiced.
  - a. The enemies were prejudiced, hardened and organized (16, 21-22).
3. The blessing of Christian fellowship and prayer in time of trouble.
  - a. They confided in one another (23).
  - b. They prayed to God (24-30).
    - (1) They ascribed all power and glory to God (24).
    - (2) They expressed trust in God because He had carried out His will in the past (25-28).
    - (3) They asked for boldness and power (29-30).
  - c. They received an immediate answer to their prayer (31).
4. The blessings to a praying church which arises out of adversity.
  - a. There is a unity of purpose (32).
  - b. There is a consecration of property (32, 34).
  - c. There is great power to witness to the living Christ (33).
  - d. They are given grace sufficient for every need (33).

Peter and John have been arrested and brought before the Sanhedrim. They had been called upon to confess in whose name they had performed the miracle of healing the man who had been a cripple. In answering they found an opportunity to tell of Jesus, and to warn their accusers of the danger of neglecting Him. The council decided that, as they had no real charge against them, they would threaten them and release them.

## **THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FRIGHTENING CHRIST'S DISCIPLES INTO SILENCE**

The Sanhedrim charged Peter and John to remain silent. In order that their message spread no further among the people they said: **“But that it spread no further among the people, let us straitly threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name. And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus”** (4:17-18). They could not, however, silence them.

1. Because they had their commission from the highest source of authority, God: **“But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard”** (4:19-20). Jesus had said, **“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15). He had told them that men would revile them and persecute them. They regarded the authority of God higher than that of the Sanhedrim, or of any other rulers.

Opposition to the prophets of God was not a new thing. Pharaoh had tried to silence Moses. Ahab had tried to silence Elijah and Micaiah. Some of the Pharisees had warned Jesus that He had better get out of that country or Herod would kill Him. Jesus replied to them: **“Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day and to morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk to day, and to morrow, and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem”** (Luke 13:32-33). Samuel Rutherford was summoned to appear before the parliament at Edinburgh. They intended to charge that godly man with treason. When he received the summons he was upon his death-bed. He replied: “Tell them that I have received a summons already to appear before a superior JUDGE and juricatory, and I behoove to answer my first summons: and ere your day arrive, I will be where few kings and great folks come (Hetherington’s *“History of the Church of Scotland*, p. 215).

It has ever been so: the world cannot understand the Christian. They call his earnestness fanaticism and his piety weakness. A devoted, courageous man has always been a puzzle to those about him. What may be said of our conduct? Are we sure that our commission is from Christ, and have we always been faithful to it? Do we fear the world, or God? Whose command stands first with us? Can we say, we will ever obey God rather than man?

2. Because they have the assurance of the support of the Holy Spirit. Peter and John knew that the Holy Spirit would be with them and that He would strengthen them and teach them what they should say. This did not mean that they felt like boasting, for they did not. At the earliest opportunity they would resort to God in prayer, and would ask for boldness to endure and testify.

Men who are filled with the Holy Spirit have nothing to fear from man. Man may injure the body but he cannot harm the soul. The Spirit will not leave us to suffer more than we can bear. He is ever-present and all-powerful.

3. Because they feel impelled to declare to the world the only Saviour: “**For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard**” (4:20). They had seen Jesus so often and loved Him so well that they could not refrain from telling others of Him. They had seen His love manifested in His death. They had seen and talked with Him after He arose from the dead. These were not ordinary facts, they were facts which meant eternal happiness to men who heard and believed. They are still the all-important message to men. The burden of Paul should be ours: “**woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!**” (I Corinthians 9:16).

### **THE EXTREME DIFFICULTY OF WINNING THOSE WHO ARE PREJUDICED AGAINST CHRIST**

The difficulty of winning these men to Christ is evident (16, 21-22). They admitted the evidence of miraculous power. They could find nothing against the men who preached. They were restrained from violence against the apostles by the sentiment of the public, but they were determined that they would not be convinced and would try to prevent them from convincing others.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were prejudiced. They would not give up their philosophy for the truth. They had rejected the offer before and they would reject it again. They had become hardened in heart. John Newton related the fact that the learned Dr. Taylor, one of the greatest Hebraists of his day, said: “Mr. Newton, I want to tell you something. I have collated the Hebrew Scriptures fifteen times, and I have never found the doctrine of the Atonement in the Hebrew Scriptures.” “Dr. Taylor,” replied Newton, “once upon a time I tried to light my candle with the extinguisher on, and I am not at all surprised that you have not found the doctrine of the Atonement in the Hebrew Scriptures; and not until you find yourself to be a filthy lost sinner, although you are a Hebraist, will you find the doctrine of the Atonement in the Hebrew Scriptures.”

Another reason why the Pharisees and Sadducees were hard to reach with the Gospel was because they were organized against it. Those who are organized in evil are harder to reach today. The Mohammedans, the Buddhists and the Roman Catholics are harder to win than the ignorant savage. The missionaries in the New Hebrides Islands met with opposition and superstition and prejudice, but the people were not organized against them. Men who are banded together in evil become hardened. They urge one another to continue to oppose the Gospel. They will persecute the man who takes a stand for Christ. Therefore the work of the missionary under such circumstances is slower and requires more patience. That which gives him encouragement is, the assurance that the Spirit of God can overcome every obstacle which man can place in the way of the success of the Gospel of Christ.

## THE BLESSING OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP AND PRAYER IN TIME OF TROUBLE

1. They confided in one another: “**And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them**” (4:23). They told the other members of the church what had taken place, not for the sake of gossip, but that they might have knowledge of the opposition which had been shown to them, and that they might pray intelligently together.

It is well when godly men seek help, advice, comfort and prayer from Christian friends. It is exceedingly sad when men try to find comfort in drugs, cards, intoxicating drink, or in evil company. “**Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night**” (Psalm 1:1-2). Jesus, in the hour of temptation, earnestly besought His disciples that they would watch and pray with Him. If human sympathy and support was of great value to Jesus how much more is it to us in the hour of testing!

2. They prayed to God (24-30).

They ascribed all power and glory to God: “**And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is**” (4:24). The word which they used for Lord, is of special significance. It is not the usual word, for this word speaks of Despot, Master, or Absolute Ruler. They recognized in the use of the word that they prayed to One who was absolute in power. They knew that the Sanhedrim were in His hand as the dust of the balance. They could not defeat His Absolute will.

What comfort and assurance there is in prayer at such an hour if we, like the apostles, have absolute confidence in the power of God. A prayerless heart, a prayerless home or a prayerless community is one of the saddest things in the world. We may count it as one of our greatest blessings that we have been taught to pray in our childhood, and that we have that love for God and confidence in Him that we desire to pray to Him every day.

(2) They expressed trust in God because He had carried out His will in the past: “**Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done**” (4:25-28). God had known many centuries before, as expressed in the second Psalm, that the nations would rage, that the kings and rulers would gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed. “**Both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together.**” They were gathered against Christ. They put Him to death. But that is not the point which these men emphasize in their prayer. They say that these rulers were gathered “**to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.**”

That was a remarkable fact, but it was true. The rulers did not defeat the plan of God, they carried it out. What the disciples asked at this time was that God would continue to execute His will, that He would control the men who plotted against them as He had controlled the men who had plotted against Christ.

(3) They asked for boldness and power. They prayed that signs and wonders might be done in the name of Christ: **“And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus”** (4:29-30). They did not ask that opposition to the Gospel might cease, but that they might be given boldness to continue to preach and work with power. They prayed that God would continue to heal, to work signs and wonders in the name of Jesus that His name might be honored. We might think that under such circumstances the burden of their prayer would be that God would stay the hand of the oppressor. They, however, sought first the honor of Christ.

Peter and the others knew that not long before they had not been able to stand true in the face of danger, that they had all forsaken Christ and fled. Peter knew that in fear he had denied his Saviour. The burden of their prayer was that they might be given such boldness that they would not yield to the temptation to deny Christ again. Peter, before the death of Christ, had declared that though all men should forsake Christ he would never so yield. This time he will not boast, he will pray and trust.

Why should Spirit-filled men need to pray for boldness? Spirit-filled men are not free from temptation. They are not certain that they will never fall. They need new infillings of the Spirit for new occasions and to face new temptations. But had not Peter shown boldness? Had he not defied the commands of the council already? Yes, he had shown boldness, and he was sincere. He had said that he would not allow his testimony to be silenced. But both he and John and the others could foresee other threatenings and perhaps violence in the future. They were determined to watch and pray lest they should be tempted more than they could bear. We see good men stand firmly for a time in the face of opposition and then yield to temptation. They have been too self-confident. They have thought that they had all the power of the Spirit which they needed. They have failed to continue to pray for boldness. It is well to foresee temptation and to fortify against it by beseeching God for a new infilling of the Spirit.

3. They received an immediate answer to their prayer: **“And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness”** (4:31). God gave them an immediate sign to show that He heard them when He shook the place where they were gathered. He granted their petitions further, in giving them a new infilling of the Holy Spirit and enabling them to speak the Word of God with boldness.

Oh for faith like that of the early disciples! Oh for boldness that will enable us to speak the word whether men will hear or whether they will forbear! We need a new realization of the necessity of dependence upon God. We need the Spirit of God ever within our hearts.

God can answer our prayers as surely as He did those of the early disciples. He can give us assurance of His presence as He did to them. He can heal the sick; He can heal the sin-sick; He can give endurance and courage to testify now as of old.

## **THE BLESSINGS TO A PRAYING CHURCH WHICH ARISE OUT OF ADVERSITY**

1. There is a unity of purpose: “**And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul**” (32a). When the church suffers persecution the members are more closely united. They are drawn together. The members of the church always dread persecution, that is natural, and yet there are blessings secured through it which are of incalculable value. The disciples at one time had disputed as to who would be the greatest. Now they had put such thoughts aside and loved their neighbors as themselves. May we pray for such a spirit without having to suffer severe chastisement.

2. There is a consecration of property: “**neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common . . . Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need**” (4:32b, 34-35). These disciples were ready to consecrate all of their property to Christ. They were not compelled to give, but they could not have been more liberal in giving. This was communism not brought about by force or legislation but by reason of a whole-hearted love for Christ and man. This history of the church is given us for an example, not as a basis for church law. Whenever in the future such a condition prevails in the church it will come about not by reason of legislation but by reason of entire consecration of the members to Christ. Such a condition cannot prevail unless the church is filled with the Holy Spirit. Not long since a prominent magazine issued bold headlines like this: “The Church Starving in Sight of Plenty.” The article which followed showed that the members of the church have plenty to give, they give to pamper themselves, to luxuries and frivolities, but they withhold their means from the Lord.

In his “*Quiet Talks on Service*,” S.D. Gordon tells of a minister who made a special appeal for money for a mission in the mountains. The congregation seemed unmoved at the pastor’s appeal. There was a poor cripple girl to whom some of the members had given a pair of crutches. The girl, whose name was Maggie, was deeply moved. She wondered what she could give. After a struggle in her own heart she decided to give the best that she had, and when the plate was passed she placed her crutches upon it. They were her life, she could not move without them. The sight of Maggie’s crutches was too much for the rich men who sat in the pews. The money began to pour into the plate. Someone paid fifty dollars for the crutches and sent them back to crippled Maggie. The pastor, with tears in his eyes, said, “Surely our little friend is giving us a wonderful example.” The members subscribed more than six hundred dollars. Maggie went out of the church exceedingly happy because the Lord’s people were consecrating their means to the Lord’s work.

3. There is great power to witness to the living Christ: “**And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all**” (4:33).

They were personal witnesses of the resurrection, but that was not what gave them power. They received great power to witness to the resurrection because they were filled with the Spirit and because they were consecrated in life. No one could and no one can gainsay the testimony of witnesses like that. Christ was manifestly living in them. They were living epistles. Men could not but see that they had been with Jesus and that they spoke for Jesus.

Dr. Chapman says: “There used to be a man in the city of Chicago who stood at one of our street corners. He was almost an imbecile. He stood there day after day, asking alms. One day it was bitterly cold and he slipped into one of our rescue missions. That night he found Jesus, and the man who was almost an imbecile was marvelously saved. He wore out three Bibles in three years. The editor of one of our papers made up his mind he would see that man. He climbed up to his garret, and he saw him with his Bible open on his knees. He said to the man, ‘Would you mind reading the Bible to me?’ Said my friend, ‘I thought I had heard the Bible read, and I thought I had read it myself, but as this man read it, with tears overflowing and his voice trembling, I stopped him and said, tell me if you will, what is the secret of your power?’ The man such up his Bible, hesitated a second, and then said, ‘I have seen Jesus.’” “The disciples of whom we read in this passage had been with Jesus and the Spirit of God had filled them with great power.

4. They are given grace sufficient for every need: “**And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all**” (4:33). The free and unmerited favor of God was upon them all. God favored them personally, socially, and spiritually. They were good men, they were surrounded by good men, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and the presence of the Spirit was manifest both to the church and to the world.

How often ministers try to work in their own power, without the Holy Spirit today! They work to no purpose. With the Holy Spirit it is possible to accomplish in a short time what one might strive to do for years without Him. Even in small meetings it is possible to do much by the power of the Spirit. The following passage is taken from the life of Hudson Taylor: “It made no difference whether meetings were large or small, influential or apparently otherwise; he gave the best he had to give, and so earnestly that other hearts could not but come to share his burden. At Birmingham, for example, the night was so stormy that it seemed as if there could be no meeting at all. Mr. Taylor was tired, and the fireside at Spark Hill looked especially attractive as the rain poured in torrents. No one could get to the Severn Street School-room, his kind hostess assured him, and it would be taken for granted that the meeting would not be held. ‘But was it not announced for to-night?’ asked Mr. Taylor quietly. ‘Then I must go, even if there is no one but the doorkeeper.’ And there, in that almost empty schoolroom, the presence of the Lord was so real that both speakers and hearers felt it to be one of the best meetings they ever attended. Half the little audience of eight or ten, as Mr. Taylor often mentioned, either became missionaries themselves or gave one or more of their children to the foreign field, while the remaining half were from that day earnest and prayerful supports of the China Inland Mission.” (“*The Growth of a Work of God,*” pp. 58-59).

John Bunyan, in *Pilgrim’s Progress* presents a vivid picture of how the grace of God works within the heart.

“Then I saw in my dream that the interpreter took Christian by the hand, and led him to a place where there was a fire burning against a wall, and one standing by it always casting much water upon it; yet did the fire burn higher and hotter. Then said Christian, ‘What means this?’ The Interpreter answered, ‘This fire is the work of grace in the heart. He that casts water upon it, to extinguish and put it out, is the Devil. But in that thou seest the fire notwithstanding burn higher and hotter, thou shalt also see the reason of that.’ So he had him about to the back side of the wall, where he saw a Man with a vessel of oil in his hand, which he did also continually cast (but secretly) into the fire. Then said Christian, ‘What means this?’ The Interpreter answered, ‘This is Christ, who continually with the oil of His grace maintains the work begun in the heart’.”

“**By the grace of God**” said Paul, “**I am what I am.**” (I Corinthians 15:10). By the grace of God all the early disciples were what they were. By the grace of God we are what we are. May the Lord grant that great grace shall be upon us all for spiritual growth and for Christian service.

## QUESTIONS

### (Acts 4:15-35)

1. What was the dilemma in which the opponents of the apostles found themselves?
2. What plan did they decide upon to silence the Gospel?
3. Whom did Peter and John fear most?
4. Whom did they love most?
5. What was their reply?
6. What gave them such boldness?
7. Who were the real victors, the officers or the prisoners?
8. Who did the people esteem most?
9. Why was the evidence of the healed man particularly strong?
10. Will the strongest evidence usually convince men who are prejudiced against the Gospel?
11. How did the apostles set us an example of finding consolation in time of trouble?
12. What may we learn from their prayers?
13. For what did they ask?
14. Do you think there is any connection between Peter’s former failure and his request for boldness at this time?
15. How did they desire that the truth of the Gospel might be proven?
16. How soon did they receive an answer to their prayer?
17. In what way did the answer come?
18. How is the spirit of consecration and unity in the church manifest with regard to property?
19. What effect does the consecration of heart and soul have upon the witness for Christ?
20. How nearly will the funds of the church meet the need of the hour if the property of the members is consecrated to Christ?

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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