

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(May 23, 2010)

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

Staying on Mission

(Acts 4:5-31)

Study #5

Introduction: When you're up to your ears in alligators...

Since it's been a couple of weeks since we have looked together into the book of Acts, I'm going to review, very briefly, what we have seen thus far in our study of Luke's history of the early church. It's been quite a ride.

He's shown us the physical ascension of Jesus into Heaven, the selection of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot as the twelfth apostle, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the conversion of three thousand Jews to Christ at Peter's first sermon, the establishment of a vibrant faith community in Jerusalem, the miraculous healing of a lame man in the Name of Jesus on the Temple steps, and the conversion of thousands more when Peter preached his second sermon.

Wow! To this point there has been nothing but forward progress. No obstacles, interruptions, hiccups, throat-clearings, or disruptions of any kind.

If we had been among those first Christians we probably would have thought, "*Man, at the rate things are going, the Great Commission will be fulfilled in a matter of weeks!*" Smooth sailing.

And then we come to Acts 4:4 - "***And they*** (the rulers in Jerusalem) ***laid hands on them*** (Peter and John) ***and put them in jail until the next day...***"

This arrest interrupted what had been the unobstructed, free-flowing advance of the Gospel.

And with the apostles' arrest and jail time, the church of Jesus Christ entered the second phase of its life - The Age of Distractions. Today, May 23, 2010, we are still living in The Age of Distractions.

If your experience is similar to mine, you are familiar with distractions.

- Just as you start a weight loss program, a well-meaning friend lays a tempting calorie-laden distraction in front of you.
- Days after you start a fitness routine, your schedule at work becomes unmanageable.
- You resolve to become more neighborly with your neighbors and one of them immediately does something to really tick you off.
- You decide to get your finances under control - right before the home air conditioning unit acts up and the car dies.
- You commit to pursue professional enhancement to be a better employee, a better manager, or a better applicant, but then fires spring up demanding your attention in the here and now.

At moments like these the *temptation* is to allow the distractions to derail us from our dreams. It's hard to remember that the original goal was to drain the swamp when you're up to your neck in alligators.

The *challenge* is to fight through the distractions and continue to pursue the dream.

Right now some of you may be thinking of dreams you have laid aside because of distractions. Right now you may be considering picking them back up again. New Year's resolutions can work just fine in late May.

Some of these dreams and visions and goals revolve around what is at the core of who you are - a follower of Jesus Christ.

I make certain assumptions about you who are here this morning. I assume that if you have placed your faith in Christ for salvation:

- You want to live for Him.
- You intend to pray regularly.
- You desire to be a bold witness.

- You long to know and obey the Bible.
- You aim to live generously and hospitably.
- You want nothing more than to love and serve well.

But, distractions come along. They are unavoidable. And the question is, “*How will we overcome the distractions that would derail us from the life before God that we desperately want to live?*”

If this, or something like it, is the question that is on your mind right now we could not be looking at a more helpful section of the Bible than the one before us today. Today, we watch as the first Christians combat the powerful force of disruption and find strength from God to stay “on mission.”

For Peter and John, who have been cooling their heels in jail overnight, the coming of dawn didn’t bring relief, but more pressure.

Jumping from the frying pan of jail directly into the fire of an inquisition, they found themselves facing the first century equivalent of the United States Supreme Court and Congress all rolled into one in the powerful Jewish Sanhedrin.¹

(Adversarially) Face to Face With the Sanhedrin (vv. 5-22)

The Defendants on Offensive! (vv. 5-12)

The Council circles (vv. 5-7)

The Council’s make-up (5-6)

[5] On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; [6] and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent.²

¹ Clearly the formerly lame man was standing with Peter and John as they addressed the Council (v. 14). We don’t know whether he was a witness, an interested observer, or one of the accused. Had he been in lock-up overnight?

² Annas (the father) and Caiaphas were the rulers during the Sanhedrin’s trial of Jesus.

If some of those names sound familiar to you, it is because we meet a few of these men in the Gospels. These were the guys who tried and convicted Jesus before handing Him over to the Romans for crucifixion.

Peter and John would have been placed in the center of a semicircle consisting of about seventy men. The spotlight’s glare would have been shining right in their eyes.

The Council’s inquisition (v. 7)

If you listen carefully, you can hear a note of scorn in the Court’s question to them, [7]...***“By what power, or in what name, have YOU (men like you, of all people!) done this?”***

There was no question but that a miracle had occurred. The question was how, by what power, it had been accomplished.³

The question just hangs there. What will Peter and John do with it? It is a question with an edge. It’s stated like a dare.

I’ve got to believe that as they stood before the Sanhedrin, Peter and John were thinking of Jesus, who had stood before this very court only a few weeks earlier.

As far as we know they were the only two apostles who had actually seen the trial of Jesus. Now, here they are, face to face with the same group that had sentenced their Lord to death.

Peter - from speechless to spokesman

From a picture of cowardice...

Now, think about the last time Peter had been near the Sanhedrin. We are told that Peter was in the courtyard that connected with the hall where Jesus was being unjustly tried in the middle of the night.

³ There might have been an unstated accusation of satanic involvement. Jesus was certainly accused of performing His miracles by the power of the devil. That the same charge should be leveled against His followers would not be surprising.

At one point during the trial, right after Peter's third denial and the crowing of the rooster, Jesus looked at Peter. Peter looked back.

And it was at that point - when their eyes met - that Peter ran off, alone, into the night. I've always wondered if the members of the Sanhedrin had seen Peter run away.

If so, what was their last memory of him? It was of his backside.

But my how things have changed.

...to a profile in courage!

Before Jesus ascended into Heaven He had promised the apostles power.

[Acts 1:8]...“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

The Holy Spirit's power has already enabled Peter to preach an amazing sermon on the Day of Pentecost that saw three thousand souls added to the church. The Spirit's power has enabled him and John to heal a lame man in the Name of Jesus and to bring another message that saw the conversion of thousands more.

And that POWER is now going to provide Peter with everything he needs to bring a strong message to the Sanhedrin.

Officially, Peter and John are the defendants at this trial. But at this trial the defendants take the offensive! And Peter's answer to the Court's question shows, not his backside, but his backbone.

Knowing full well that he was taking his life in his own hands, he didn't plead for mercy. He didn't hesitate. He didn't stutter.

No, he spoke with the same measure of conviction and the same authority he had used a day earlier when he had preached to thousands.

Peter's “hold nothing back” response (vv. 8-12)

All credit goes to Jesus (vv. 8-11)

[8] Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit,⁴ said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, [9] if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, [10] let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead⁵—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. [11] He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone.”

Peter put all the credit for the healing right where it belonged: Jesus did it all!

And listen to the way in which he wrapped up his message. Peter evangelizes the Sanhedrin - the SANHEDRIN!! - with one of the most concise invitations to find salvation in Jesus we find anywhere in the New Testament.

All salvation comes through Jesus (v. 12)

[12] “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”⁶

He was inviting the members of the highest court in the land of Israel to place their faith in the Jesus they had sentenced to death on Passover Friday.

⁴ Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had promised he would be. (see Mark 13:11; Luke 21:14-15). Significantly, he was filled as he spoke. The Holy Spirit's provision of power is given at the moment of need, not a moment before.

⁵ Notice that neither here nor at Pentecost did Peter make reference to the empty tomb. An empty tomb could have been explained in a number of ways. What mattered was the living Jesus, which he did proclaim. As well, note that the Sanhedrin did not deny the central theme of Peter's message - the resurrection.

⁶ Notice that there is no reference to a call to baptism in this formula.

Now, when Peter had spoken similar words to the multitudes on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the crowds responded with, ***“What shall we do?”*** and there was a great turning to the Lord.

When he spoke to the crowd after having healed the lame man, many of those who had heard believed, so that the number of the men came to be about 5,000.

What will the Sanhedrin do with this invitation?

Well, rather than responding, they first reflected on the marked difference between these two men who were standing before them and the Peter and John they had known before the Day of Pentecost.

Apostles Released by an Embarrassed Council (vv. 13-22)

“These guys remind me of ol’ what’sHisname...” (vv. 13-14)

[13] Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed...

Here are a couple of country bumpkins from Galilee - speaking with confidence to the high and mighty Sanhedrin. Here was Simon Peter, an uneducated fisherman, not at all schooled in rabbinic ways, handling Scripture very adeptly.

And as if a light bulb went off in their minds, a thought began running through their minds -

“Let’s see, who else have we known who had no formal theological training but was very skillful in the use of Scripture? Who else did we know who had such confidence, even when standing before us, even though we had the power to do with Him whatever we wished....?”

[13]... and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

There was a definite family likeness between Peter & John AND Jesus!

And the Sanhedrin began to realize that whereas they thought they had removed the thorn from their side by killing Jesus, He was only reproducing Himself in His disciples. Their “Jesus problem” hadn’t gone away - it was multiplying!

So, they first reflected. Then, they retreated!

They escorted Peter and John out of the meeting room so that they could confer in private about what to do. We get to listen in on their conversation.

“Stop talking about Jesus - or else!”

[14] And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. [15] But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one another, [16] saying, “What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. [17] “But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name.” [18] And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

In a word, the Sanhedrin decides to follow a policy of blustering.

When people in power are in danger of losing their power, a common response is to bluster and posture, use threats, try to intimidate.

The ruling court sounds like a father who has lost his cool as they blurt out, *“No more talking about Jesus! And we mean it - or else!”*

Those are some strong words from some very powerful people. So, what will the apostles do?

Showing what a difference the Holy Spirit’s presence makes, together Peter and John stared these guys down with the equivalent of, *“We don’t think so. Thanks, but no thanks.”*

⁷ How did Luke come to find out what the Sanhedrin did behind closed doors? Perhaps Paul was there. Or Gamaliel may have told Paul.

Peter and John push back (vv. 19-20)

[19] But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; [20] for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

And the Council continued to bluster, even as they took off the handcuffs and released Peter and John.

Released on their own recognizance

[21] When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; [22] for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

Great drama. Fantastic stuff.

In a little more than twenty four hours, just look at what has happened.

Peter and John have been the instruments God used to perform an undeniable miracle. The miracle was followed by a sermon by Peter that resulted in the conversion of many people (hundreds? thousands?), an overnight jail sentence, a confrontation with the most powerful men in Jerusalem, and a threat of further punishment if they spoke about Jesus again!

The power of the Holy Spirit had sustained the apostles during this twenty-four hour turbulence. It is beautiful to see the strength of their witness. It is inspiring to see their determination to “hang in there” even when the Council turned up the heat.⁸

⁸ H.G. Wells, “*The trouble with so many people is that the voice of their neighbors sounds louder in their ears than the voice of God.*” Of the great Scottish reformer, John Knox, it was said, “*He feared God so much that he never feared the face of any man.*”

And as if this wasn’t already good stuff, here is where it REALLY starts to get good.

As exhilarating as an experience like this can be, such an experience can also drain anybody of energy. If you act like the apostles acted, you’ll eventually need to re-charge your internal batteries.

Luke tells us what the apostles did and where they went to recharge.

(Supportively) Face to Face With Friends (v. 23)

[23] When they had been released, they went to their own companions⁹ and reported all that the chief priests¹⁰ and the elders had said to them.

God has so designed us that there is therapy in the very sharing of life’s challenges. You know that from your own experience. Burdens shared are easier to bear.

Once, on the opening spot of the old TV sitcom *Cheers*, Dr. Frasier Crane and Woody were talking about some stresses in Woody’s life. As we know, Dr. Crane was a therapist and he was encouraging Woody to express his anxieties and worries, to talk about them, to open up about them.

That was a new thought for Woody. He responded by explaining how he dealt with his inner anxieties and the pressures he felt.

“Back where I come from, the way we deal with problems is we keep them all inside.

⁹ The new policy adopted by the Sanhedrin would have affected these leaders in a special way. They would have been under close observation. So, it seems likely that the group in view in verse 23 is a smaller group of the 12, with the possible addition of a few more leaders.

¹⁰ The older view that the term “chief priests” here referred to members of the high-priestly families, is no longer widely accepted. Instead, “chief priests” indicates a body of men who had jurisdiction over the priesthood and whose members had seats and votes on the Council. The group included the current high priest, the captain of the Temple Guard, the Temple overseer, and several treasurers. (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias)

“See, there is this little place inside each one of us where we can stuff our problems, and we just keep on stuffing them all inside. And when that little place is all filled up we just keep stuffing our problems and worries in there.”

After this little speech, Woody turns away and Dr. Crane looks at Norm and says, *“Tick, tick, tick, tick.”*

Life’s challenges and pressures are meant to be shared, not stuffed. For the Christian, the context in which they are to be shared is the Body of Christ, the church.

When their experiences had depleted their energies and emotions, Peter and John didn’t stuff-it. They told their friends all that had happened.

So, let’s take a “share-it-don’t-stuff-it” reality check this morning.

- Who knows about your deepest struggles? Are you opening up to anyone? Do you have a friend (or two or three) who knows what you are dealing with on the inside?
- Do a few other people know not only the joys but also the difficulties you are experiencing? Are you being real with a few friends? Do you have people in your life who can see right through you?
- Are you collecting friends of the deeper-than-surface-level variety? Everybody has acquaintances. Are you going out of your way to cultivate soul-mates?

When Peter and John were faced with problems that were bigger than they were, they ran to their brothers and sisters in Christ. They knew that other followers of Jesus would listen well, would support them and would remind them that no matter how hard life might be, living for Jesus is the most important things there is.

Whether you are a male or female, a young person or an adult, I hope that you are discovering the power of a supportive Christ-centered network of friends.

Peter and John instinctively ran to their companions after they had faced the pressure of an opposing distraction, and their batteries were re-charged. You will find the same spiritual refreshment when you regularly engage with friends who put Jesus at the center of everything.

But the story doesn’t end with us thinking warm thoughts about the help we find in community. After Peter and John told everyone else what the situation was, they did not revel in the cathartic experience of problem dumping and retreat to a safer approach to life.

NO! The report of Peter and John led to something even more powerful. It led to PRAYER. They allowed their cares to turn to prayers.

(Worshipfully) Face to Face With God (vv. 24-30)

To the God WHO is in Control... (vv. 24-26)

In this model prayer, they first focused on God. That is always the place to begin.

[24] And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, [25] who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said,

‘Why did the Gentiles rage,

And the peoples devise futile things?

[26] ‘The kings of the earth took their stand,

And the rulers were gathered together

Against the Lord and against His Christ.’”

Did they have needs? You bet they did!

But they knew better than to begin in prayer by focusing on their needs. Jesus had taught them to pray by beginning with God. ***“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.....”***

They needed to remind themselves of Who was in control of their lives as they gathered in prayer.

So do we. No matter what our most urgent need, our greatest need is always to see God. He is sufficient. He is all-powerful. He is gracious and mighty to deliver.

Then, having reminded themselves of the God they were serving they recalled recent events in the city as they prayed.

...Regarding Recent Events... (vv. 27-28)

[27] “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [28] to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”

Why would they have spoken these words to God when God knew full well all about the events they mentioned.

Well, it sure wasn't to INFORM God of anything. They knew that He knew what was going on in their lives just as surely as we know that He knows what is going on in our lives.

Yet this kind of prayer is not unusual in the Bible. The prayers in Scripture are filled with this kind of recounting of the events that people were experiencing.

- Abraham told God of his childlessness and of his desire for an heir. (God already knew Abraham was childless.)
- King Hezekiah prayed for the safety of Jerusalem, rolling out the scroll of the letter that the Assyrian General, Rabshakeh, had written before the Lord. (God already knew what the letter said.)
- Nehemiah prayed about the bad situation Jerusalem was in, giving details about the burned down walls (God knew that the walls were in ruins.)

Why do the prayer warriors of the Bible do this? Well, if it is not to inform God, it must be to remind themselves.

They recount how desperate things are to deny themselves the possibility of living in denial. They speak of their situation to God to remind themselves that they are helpless and hopeless - unless He intervenes.

God is not bored when you tell Him what is going on in your life. He likes to hear us tell Him what is happening. He even likes it when we tell Him how challenging things are in our lives.

But the reason it is so positive to lay out our situations to God is that it paves the way for us to ASK GOD FOR SOMETHING.

And that is where this prayer is heading. These Christians intend to ask God for something. What do you think they are going to ask Him?

They have just been imprisoned, publicly humiliated and threatened with bodily harm. If that had just happened to you, what would you have asked of God? Let's listen to their prayer.

...Please HELP! (vv. 29-30)

[29] “And now, Lord, take note of their threats...”

We can hardly fault them for asking that God would take note of the threats against them.

But, it is important to note that they neither sought their own revenge nor asked God to “GET” those who opposed them. They simply asked that God would take note.

As the continue to pray, though, their prayer fascinates me for its total lack of self-concern. They didn't pray for protection. They didn't pray for safety.

They understood that if Jesus was threatened and reviled and attacked, they would be, too. So, the fact that they were being distracted by opposition neither SURPRISED nor DERAILED them.

What did they ask? In the face of opposition, and with the likelihood of more opposition to come, they asked for one thing: the ability to confidently keep proclaiming the Gospel.

[29] “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence...”

It never seemed to have entered their heads that they might obey the Sanhedrin and stop talking about Jesus. No way were they going to do that. But, if they were going to ignore the court's order, they knew they would need equipping from God to stay on mission.

They would also need for God to continue to go before them and perform His life-changing, healing, miraculous works of power - but they assumed that God would keep on doing those things!

[30]...while You extend Your hand to heal,¹¹ and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”¹²

And the answer to their prayer followed immediately.

(Lovingly) Face to Face With the World (v. 31)

[31] And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit¹³ and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

- They PRAYED for an internal work of God - power to be bold.
- The place where they were was physically SHAKEN, proof that their assumption of His continued miraculous working was well placed.
- The Holy Spirit FILLED those who had prayed, which was God’s answer to their request for an internal work.
- Those who were filled began to SPEAK the word of God boldly, which is the result of the internal work of God.

Conclusion:

Remember - it’s hard to remember that your objective was to drain the swamp when you are up to your neck in alligators.

It is also tempting to forget that life is all about Jesus when things like persecution, health crisis, job loss, relational fractures and other distractions occur.

Well, the believers in Acts 4 were persecuted AND continued living for Jesus. They stayed on mission, fixed on Jesus by drawing strength from their companions and by praying to God for boldness.

If we would be possessed by that same fiery spirit that possessed them, there can be no better plan than to do what they did.

First, make sure that we are engaging regularly in meaty, Christ-centered fellowship.

Second, we must pray to God for boldness to speak.

Would you love to see the power of God on display? Who wouldn’t! Would you love to be filled with boldness in your witness? Of course!

Are you willing to become a part of an incendiary fellowship where you and your friends are committed to keeping the fires of passion to God alive? What steps can you take this afternoon to pursue those kinds of friendships?

Are you willing to pray exactly what that group of believers in the first century prayed? Surely God is willing to give. Are you, are we, prepared to ask?

¹¹ They especially mention the miracle of healing. Isn’t it fascinating that they prayed, not for miracles of **vengeance** in light of the threats, but for miracles of **mercy** in light of peoples’ needs?

¹² It should be noted that technically, the apostles didn’t pray for miracles and healings. They prayed for boldness while God continued to perform miracles.

¹³ What happened at verse 31 was not a fresh baptism, but a fresh filling. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was a one-time event that occurred at Pentecost. For believers today, the baptism of the Spirit is a one-time event that happens at the moment we place our trust in Jesus for salvation (see 1 Cor. 12:13). By contrast, the filling of the Spirit is a ministry He performs in our lives over and over again to equip us for ministry. Notice that this filling is not accompanied by any phenomenon other than the capacity for boldness. Predominantly, the purpose of the filling of the Spirit is to equip us to speak with boldness and clarity of the mighty works of God.