

By What Power? By WHat Name? • Acts 4:1-12

Jesus is hot in our society. All you need to do is look around; check it out. His name is in the middle of fish symbols on cars and on bumper stickers. Jesus is the subject of best selling books, TV specials, blockbuster movies and news magazine cover stories. Everybody is talking about Jesus. And, that's the way it was back in Jerusalem. Everyone was talking about Jesus.

All this Jesus talk led to a confrontation between the religious establishment and the followers of Jesus. Those who had once been called disciples were soon called apostles. Not that they weren't disciples anymore; they were. But their role was expanding. A disciple is a student; an apostle is a missionary. Now the responsibility was increased; they were both. They were hot. So hot, in fact, that whenever and wherever they talked about Jesus a crowd gathered.

Picture the scene. Peter and John are out on Solomon's Colonnade of the temple and have a large crowd listening to their teaching of the good news that Jesus came back from the dead. Word quickly goes to the religious leaders who grab the chief of the temple police and rush to put a stop to what is happening. In Acts 4:1-2 we learn:

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.

You can tell a lot about people by what disturbs them. Those who were disturbed by the teaching of Peter and John were priests, police and Sadducees. Priests were the Jewish clergy who officiated at the temple. Basically, no one chose to be a priest. You had to be born into the family of priests who were descended from the first high priest and brother of Moses, Aaron. Most priests were Sadducees. (We'll come back to the Sadducees in

a minute.) The police in the temple were different from the Roman authorities. They were Jews that were responsible for maintaining temple law and order. The captain of the police reported directly to the high priest and was second in command of the temple. So, the high priest was first in charge and the chief of police was second in charge.

The third group that is mentioned as confronting Peter and John were the Sadducees. They were a small but powerful religious and political party made up mostly (if not exclusively) of priests. They were the conservatives of the day, politically and religiously. They believed only in the Torah, sometimes called the Pentateuch. That is the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They were the strict "constitutionalists" who objected to the additions, traditions and explanations given by the liberal Pharisees. They denied belief in the resurrection, heaven, hell, the existence of the soul, angels and demons because they are not included in the first five books of the Bible.

The Sadducees were rich and powerful and were generally unpopular with the majority of the Jews. They were collaborators with the Romans.

The Romans occupied the land of Palestine and the Sadducees had a lot to lose if the Romans ever left.

If you put all of that together you begin to see why they were disturbed

by the teaching of Peter and John. They were teaching what the Sadducees denied and their privileged status was at risk. They were afraid that if the apostles roused the crowds the Romans might crack down on what was happening and the Sadducees could lose their privileges. So they called the cops and had Peter and John arrested and thrown into jail. Because Jewish trials could take place only during daylight hours they waited until the next day to take them to court.

Luke the historian is writing this report. He brings his perspective of what is happening in Acts 4:4 as he

Jesus is the only one who can save guilty sinners for eternity.

makes a powerful and ironic statement: “. . . *many who heard the message believed and the number of men grew to about five thousand.*” The Sadducees thought they could stop the gospel by throwing two men into jail, but they totally underestimated what God was doing.

It may seem a little strange to us that the number of men is specified but that was the cultural way of counting. “Five thousand men” probably means that the number of believers was 10,000 to 15,000 by the time you add women and children. It is a stunning number when you realize that the total resident population of Jerusalem was somewhere between 35,000 and 70,000 people. That means that as many as one-fourth to one-half of the entire population of the capital city of Jerusalem had decided to follow Jesus of Nazareth; and all of this in a period of less than two months. No wonder they were disturbed. They could arrest the apostles but they couldn’t stop the gospel! They could stop the messengers by putting them in prison, but they could never stop Jesus Christ.

Acts 4:5-7 says:

The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest’s family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: “By what power or what name did you do this?”

The next day the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the temple, met. The Sanhedrin was comprised of 71 men, always men, and was presided over by the high priest. Most, but not all, of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees. The Sanhedrin was made up of rulers who were the temple officials, elders who were the respected leaders from prominent families, people who owned land, teachers of the law who were the professional Torah scholars who studied and argued Old Testament law and the high priest who was the religious leader of the Jews in the temple.

The high priest presided over the Sanhedrin, but it gets a little complicated. Back in the Old Testament the first high priest was Aaron. The rule was that all future high priests were to be direct descendants of Aaron. The position of high priest was

hereditary with a life-term like that of a king; however, the Romans had conquered the land of Israel and they didn’t like that system so they put a stop to it. They decided who would be the high priest and who wouldn’t. By the first century the whole system was a mess. It was politics at its worst with corruption, bribery, intrigue and collaboration between the religious leaders and the Roman authorities. In the period of one hundred years, from 37 B.C. to A.D. 67, there were 28 high priests.

But it gets even more complicated. Annas was the high priest from A.D. 6 until he was deposed by the Romans in A.D. 15. However, many Jews still thought of him as the high priest and called him “High Priest” even after he was fired.

Caiaphas succeeded Annas from A.D. 17 to A.D. 36; he was Annas’ son-in-law. From A.D. 36 to A. D. 37 Jonathan succeeded Caiaphas; he was Annas’ son. Of the 28 high priests from 37 B.C. until A.D. 67 all but six came from four families.

Try to imagine the thoughts running through the minds of Peter and John. They were arrested at night, just like Jesus. They were brought before the Sanhedrin, just like Jesus. Annas and Caiaphas were running the trial, just like Jesus. The members of the Sanhedrin were seated in a semi-circle with Peter and John up front, just like Jesus. What must they have thought? They must have thought they were going to be crucified, just like Jesus.

The trial began. The opening question was asked: “By what power or by what name did you do this?” The meaning here was really not very subtle. The whole idea was that all the power and authority was vested in these 71 prominent men who were backed by the Roman Empire. The men of the Sanhedrin were everything. Peter and John were nothing. Just who did they think they were and what possible right did they have to teach anything other than the politically and religiously correct party line?

Now Peter had been known to crumble under pressure. He had already denied Jesus under far easier circumstances. He was no match for the educated, experienced and articulate elite of the Sanhedrin. He was a fisherman. He was nobody. He was in way over his head. But something supernatural happened. As Peter stood there before this intimidating group, he was filled with the Holy

Spirit. Jesus had predicted exactly what would happen. Let's look at Luke 21:12-15:

"They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."

No doubt echoing in Peter's mind were Jesus' words: *"I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."* So, contrary to everyone's expectations, probably including Peter's own expectations, he stood there and was brave and courageous and articulate. Even though his life was under threat and even though he could well have expected to be crucified within hours Peter drew attention away from himself and pointed his listeners to Jesus. In Acts 4:8-11 we read what Peter said:

"Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is

"the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone."

The Spirit-filled words of Peter were brilliant. He started with respect ("Rulers and elders of the people!").

There are some people who, when they disagree, become disrespectful, but not Peter. He addressed them as rulers and elders of the people. He explained his motive as an "act of kindness" (the members of the Sanhedrin had simply referred to the healing of the beggar born a paraplegic as "this", but Peter explained that his motivation was compassion and kindness to the poor and disabled). Then Peter recast the question. The Sanhedrin had

asked how they had done "this", but Peter rephrased the question to "how" this man was healed.

Peter does something really interesting here that does not show up well in our English translation—and Luke is very careful in the way he records it. Our English translation says that the man was healed, but actually the original text says the man was saved—saying that the man was saved from his disability. Peter was setting up the terminology for something he would say later. Peter was saying, "So, you want to know how this man was saved?" And then he answers the question: *"It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth."* There could be no doubt where the authority came from. This man was healed and saved by Jesus Christ!

Then Peter, showing his courage and audacity—declares the guilt of the Sanhedrin. He says, *"... whom you crucified. ..."* Understand, this is the supreme court of the nation. Peter is there as a defendant. He is the accused and he turns the table completely so that he is the accuser and the members of the Sanhedrin are the collective defendants. They knew exactly what he meant because not that much time had passed since Jesus had stood in that exact same spot and they had made accusations and had crucified him. Peter told them they had crucified the Messiah who had and still has the power to perform divine miracles.

Peter goes on to add, *"God raised (Jesus) from the dead."* He proclaimed the resurrection. The power of God that reversed what the Sanhedrin had done and raised Jesus from the dead also raised

this paraplegic from his disability.

Peter then quoted from Psalm 118:22 about the stone that was rejected by the builders that became the cornerstone of the whole building. He was obviously saying that the Sanhedrin had rejected Jesus and Jesus was the basis of everything spectacular that God was doing.

Finally, Peter concludes his defense with one of the Bible's most stunning statements. Follow-

There is no other name that can do what Jesus can do. He is the key to the lock of life. Jesus is uniquely qualified to meet our human needs.

ing up on Jesus' power to save the beggar from his disability Peter declares that Jesus is the only one who can save guilty sinners for eternity. Peter says in Acts 4:12, "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*" In other words, Jesus is THE Savior. He is the one who can make a man walk who has never walked. He is the one who can give strength to those who are weak. He is the one who can give words to those who are inarticulate. He is the one who can give hope to those who are desperate. He is the one who can give peace to those who are frightened. Jesus is the one who can give eternal life to sinners. Jesus is the one, the only one. There is on one else. There is no other name that can do what Jesus can do. He is the key to the lock of life. Jesus is uniquely qualified to meet our human needs.

There was a cheer at sports events when I was in high school. The cheerleaders would introduce each of the players on the team by shouting, "Smith, Smith, he's our man. If he can't do it . . . Black, Black, he's our man. If can't do it . . . Miller, Miller, he's our man . . ." The cheerleaders would jump and yell as every player came out onto the floor or field until they came to the last one. "Jones, Jones, he's our man. If he can't do it, nobody can!"

Inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, Peter had become a cheerleader for Jesus. Whatever your need, from physical disability to spiritual destiny, Peter's cheer is, "Jesus, Jesus, he's our Savior. If he can't do it, nobody can!"

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

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