

## O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

### Unbelievable Boldness (Acts 3-4)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on April 26, 2015

#### Introduction

- ❖ If there's one message the American Church needs to hear in our day is this: **We might be living in the Land of the Free but this is not and never has been the Land of the Redeemed.** Yes, our nation was founded on principles rooted in the Christian moral tradition. Yes, the founders (though not all evangelical in their faith) did respect biblical authority. Yes, Christians have for the longest time enjoyed the status of a privileged majority in this country. All of this arguably true, but in the end, we must remember that America is *not* the kingdom of God nor the vehicle by which God will usher it in.
  - ▶ The sooner we come to grips with this reality, the sooner we can sit down and read the news without feeling so infuriated or so hopelessness. Headline after headline we learn about new and troubling trends. Everyday it look like our culture is declining from bad to worse. Everyday it grows more hostile to Christianity.
  
- ❖ **But that just means everyday the American Church find herself in a more similar position to the first-century church.** Everyday we can read the New Testament and better identify with the early Christians. They weren't a privileged majority. They were a prophetic minority. They operated from the margins and boldly spoke God's truth into the culture.
  - ▶ That's where we're headed. The American Church is being marginalized and pushed out of the cultural center. **We're losing privilege, losing influence, losing respect. But we haven't lost our voice.** We have a unique calling like prophets to speak into our culture a unique message centered on Christ. And like with prophets, there's a high chance of greatly annoying people in the process.
  
- ❖ But again that just better identifies us with the early church. As we've been going through the book of Acts, we've seen many first for the nascent church. In our passage, we come across the first miracle performed in the name of the Risen Christ as well as the first response of unbelief and the first instance of opposition to the Christian faith and message.
  - ▶ As we do a flyover of chapters 3-4, I want to point out four things. **1)** An unbelievable miracle in chapter 3. **2)** An unbelievable reaction to that miracle in chapter 4:1-18. **3)** An unbelievable boldness in the apostles in chapter 4:19-31. **4)** An unbelievable communal life among the early church in chapter 4:32-37.

#### An Unbelievable Miracle

- ❖ Let's begin by considering this unbelievable miracle in chapter 3. The previous chapter ended by saying that "*many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.*" (Acts 2:43) And here's the first example. It involves a man who was lame from birth. We learn in chapter 4:22 that he was 40-years-old.
  - ▶ Every day he had to be carried by others to be laid at the foot of one of the temple gates so he could beg. Peter and John come passing by, and in the name of Jesus, Peter tells his man to rise up and walk. And immediately his feet and ankles were strengthened. Forty years of muscular atrophy were overcome, and his legs bore his weight for the first time in his life. This was not a gradual or partial healing. There was no stumbling about. The man was leaping about (3:8). This was a genuine miracle.

- ❖ Notice with me how this man was initially asking Peter and John for money, but they gave him something far better. Look what Peter says in v6, “*I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!*”
  - ▶ In other words, you only want *this* but you really need *this*. Now the mistake we make is to read this as saying, “You want wealth but Jesus wants to give you health.” **No, this is not about valuing one physical need over another. It's not saying health is more important than wealth.** The irony is that this passage really isn't about healing. We tend to focus on the healing and on questions of whether it really happened and if it still happens today. But we end up missing the bigger point.
  
- ❖ **The point is that Christianity offers a salvation that's deeper than you initially realize.** Perhaps you initially reached out to Jesus because you has a material need. Maybe it *was* a money issue or sickness or relational/marital problems or frustration over school/work. Regardless, sooner or later you'll come to realize that Christianity offers so much more. The Gospel is not just about meeting immediate felt needs. It's about transforming you and giving you a completely new life.
  
- ❖ **The emphasis here in chapter 3 is not on healed feet and ankles but on a transformed life.** For forty years this man lived on the ground, was utterly dependent on others, was barred from the temple because of his ceremonially unclean condition (cf. 2 Sam. 5:8), and was a regular fixture outside this gate – but now his life is entirely different.
  - ▶ For the first time, he was able to step foot into the temple. *Did you notice that in v8? He entered the temple with them!* **He was once considered unclean and unfit to stand before the presence of God in worship, but now he's a new man (a new creation!) and welcomed into the temple.**
  
- ❖ Notice also the choice of words describing him as “leaping up”. It's a rare word in the Bible. One of the few instances is in Isaiah 35:6 in the Greek OT (which Luke would've used). There Isaiah points to a future, promised age when, “*the lame man will leap like a deer.*”
  - ▶ So by describing this man as a leaping deer, Luke is suggesting this miracle is more than a miracle. **It's a foretaste of the promised restoration of all things that Jesus will bring.** There's a reference to that later in v21 where Peter speaks of Jesus remaining in heaven until, “*the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.*” Prophets like Isaiah.
  
- ❖ That's why this healing is specifically called a “sign” (*semeion*; 4:16, 22). It's not just a miracle. It's a sign pointing to something else. **Miraculous healings are pointers to the fullness of salvation found in Christ alone. They're windows into the future, giving us a small glimpse of what resurrected life in a New Heavens and New Earth will look like.** If God miraculously heals it's not just to offer present comfort but to stir up and excite future hope of a restoration of all things, including resurrected bodies free of sin's curse.

- ❖ That's why I reject these modern faith healers who either draw attention to themselves (and unlike Peter and John have lots of silver and gold and love to profit off their supposed healing ministries) or they focus your attention on yourself and your body.
  - ▶ How different is that from the apostles and the way they handled miraculous healings! Look in v11. Just like in chapter 2, a demonstration of the Spirit's power leads to a crowd wondering what all this means. Shunning the spotlight, Peter and John ask, "*Why are you staring at us as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?*"
    - They immediately shift attention away from themselves, away from the healed man, and onto Jesus. Just like with Pentecost, Peter uses a miracle as a platform to preach a sermon exalting Christ in the gospel. He says that it's by the name of Jesus – whom you denied and delivered up – by this name this man has been healed.
  
- ❖ Look at v14, "*<sup>14</sup>But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, <sup>15</sup>and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. <sup>16</sup>And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. <sup>17</sup>And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. <sup>18</sup>But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. <sup>19</sup>Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out*".
  
- ❖ The only reason such treachery against the Author of Life is forgivable – the reason repentance is possible – is because, as Peter acknowledges in v17, they acted in ignorance. **That harkens back to the distinction in the Mosaic Law between high-handed sins intentionally committed versus unintentional sins committed in ignorance** (Num. 15:27-31).
  - ▶ So let's say you accidentally killed someone. Unintentional manslaughter. There was a provision in the Law where you could flee to a **city of refuge** (Num. 35:11) and be protected from punishment as long as you remained within the city borders.
    - Peter is saying that you're guilty of killing Jesus. But because of your ignorance, God has provided a refuge to which you can flee. But this time it's not a city of refuge. **It's a person of refuge.** It's the risen Christ (3:26). You must hide yourself in him. That very man you denied is the very man who offers refuge and protection from the punishment your sins deserve.
  
- ❖ Friends, you and I weren't there on the day Jesus was delivered up, but we are equally guilty of putting him on that cross. It's because of our sins that he was crucified. But though no one realized it at the time, the death of Christ was God's sovereign plan foretold by all the prophets. **It was his way of punishing your sins while at the same time giving you refuge from that very punishment.** By having Christ bear that punishment in his body.
  - ▶ And now if you repent, if you turn away from sin and turn back to God, if you take refuge in Christ, living your life within the borders of his – then the same transformation, the new kind of life this man received, can be yours as well.

## An Unbelievable Reaction

- ❖ You'd think everyone who witnessed such things and heard such news would respond with faith and joy. And clearly many did. We're told in chapter 4:4 that five thousand men (not including women and children) believed God's Word and repented.
  - ▶ But at the same time, here we encounter this first response of unbelief and opposition to the Christian faith and message. There's a rather unbelievable reaction on the part of the religious leadership of Jerusalem.
  
- ❖ It starts with the **Sadducees**. They were a small but elite group of wealthy priests. They were power brokers in Jerusalem. They were in charge of the temple and held the majority of seats on the Sanhedrin, the high council Peter and John are brought before. They interrogate the apostles and charge them to no longer speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus (4:18).
  - ▶ I think it's rather unbelievable the religious leaders would react this way. They readily admit that a miracle took place. Look at v14, "*But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them (Peter and John), they (the leaders) had nothing to say in opposition.*" (cf. 4:16)
  
- ❖ Yet they still stood in opposition. In v2 it says they were great annoyed. And notice why. "*Because [the apostles] were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.*"
  - ▶ Think about it. **No one really gets mad at you for doing good. They only get mad at you when you go on to explain why you do good and how it's possible to be good.** People only get annoyed if you do what Peter did and use your good deeds as a platform to proclaim and exalt Christ in the gospel.
  
- ❖ I think if Peter and John allowed the crowds to wonder and gawk at them or at this healed man, they wouldn't have been arrested. It's only because they were bold enough to claim that Jesus and his resurrection alone can explain these things. It's because they were so intent on shifting the focus to Christ that opposition arose.
  - ▶ Which makes me wonder: If the good deeds we're doing individually or as a church are receiving universal praise from our neighbors, our city, our society-at-large, then could it be that we've neglected to focus the attention on Christ? Have we simply done our good deeds and left them at that? **Have we failed to go on and explain why we do good and how it's possible for us to be good?** Have we allowed people to praise our good deeds without intentionally turning the spotlight to Jesus? Because if you do, you can expect people to react with unbelief and hostility.
  
- ❖ **Now notice how unbelief in Christianity also goes deeper than you initially realize.** We often assume that non-Christians don't believe because they have too many unanswered questions. But what we see in the reaction of these religious leaders is that unbelief is not attributable to unanswered questions over gospel facts. These guys had the facts. They didn't question the facts. Look at v16, "*For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all . . . we cannot deny it.*"

- ❖ **This is not about questioning gospel facts. This is about being emotionally disturbed by gospel implications.** They were “greatly annoyed”. It’s not just believers who act out of emotions while unbelievers act out of calm, collected rationality. Both believers and unbelievers react emotionally to the gospel.
- ❖ Now why were they so annoyed, you might ask. **First, the religious leaders were “greatly annoyed” because the apostles posed a threat to their influence over people.** When they call Peter and John “*uneducated, common men*” in v13, that simply means they weren’t trained in the rabbinic schools. They didn’t have formal education under a rabbi. You get a hint of their disdain in v7 when they ask, “*By what power or by what name (what authority) did you do this?*” In other words, who do you think you are?
- ❖ **So the apostles posed a threat to their influence, but Jesus posed an even greater threat to their very life and identity.** Peter and John were teaching that all the prophets of old were right when they predicted a future day of reckoning where destruction awaits us (3:21-23), and the only hope of surviving this storm is to seek refuge in this Jesus whom God raised up.
  - ▶ Remember, many on this Sanhedrin council were present that day Jesus was tried and delivered over to the Romans. Annas and Caiaphas were specifically named here and in John’s Gospel (Jn. 18:13, 24).
    - That fact wasn’t lost on Peter. Look at v11. He makes reference to Psalm 118:22. This psalm is was pointing to Jesus. Read v11, “*This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.*”
- ❖ The cornerstone was the one stone that was perfectly shaped to fit at the corner of a building’s foundation between two intersecting walls. The entire building would be erected around the cornerstone. So it was the most important part. Everything else was built on it.
  - ▶ **Now in a figurative sense, every person has a cornerstone for their life.** Everyone has a foundation upon which they're building their life and identity.
    - For the Sadducees, their cornerstone was their position of religious authority. They placed their identity in their reputation as morally righteous, spiritual guides for the common folk. It’s no wonder they reacted with unbelief. Their precious cornerstone was being threatened by the apostles and their preaching!
- ❖ **If Jesus really is the Author of Life who died for sins and rose again to everlasting life, and is coming back to judge us, then he's also a threat to your cornerstone and mine.** He shakes the very foundation that we’ve been building our life and identity on.
  - ▶ For some of you, that’s been your **academics**, your identity as a good student. For others, that cornerstone is your **work and career**. You’re building a life upon your accomplishments – a life that resembles your resume. For others, it’s your **family**. Your identity is built on having the perfect marriage or the perfect kids. Some of you have building your life and identity upon your **appearance or reputation**. Your self-worth is wrapped up in how others see you. And for many, our cornerstone is our **religiosity**. Our identity is built on following all the rules, on being a good, moral person.

- ❖ **But if we examine our lives in light of Jesus (God's chosen cornerstone) then we realize how inadequate our precious cornerstones really are.** That's why the gospel can be so offensive. It points to your cornerstone and exposes how weak and fragile it is.
  - ▶ There's no person on earth, no object, no accomplishment, no dream or pursuit that will be able to support the weight if you try to build your life upon it. You're trying to build a house on a cornerstone of sand instead of solid rock (Mt. 7:24-27).
    - One day your cornerstone will fail you and shatter your identity. You'll be confused, bitter, and empty. Or you'll fail your cornerstone, leaving you riddled with guilt and shame. Either way your cornerstone is only sand.
- ❖ Jesus is the only cornerstone upon we can confidently and securely build our life and identity. That's why v12 says, "*there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" **Salvation is found in Christ alone because there's no other foundation under heaven given to men and women by which we're to build our lives.** All others will fail you like shifting sand.

### **An Unbelievable Boldness**

- ❖ Friends, if you begin to build your life on the unshakeable foundation of Christ, you're equipped with an unshakeable boldness that really gets the attention of others. To the world such boldness is simply unbelievable.
  - ▶ Look back at v13 again. "*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished.*" The religious leaders couldn't believe it. What's gotten into these common folk? **Where did they get such boldness to speak with such authority and such conviction?**
- ❖ Now the council couldn't do much else but tell Peter and John to stop preaching. Read v18, "*<sup>18</sup>So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup>But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, <sup>20</sup>for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."*"
  - ▶ **The apostles were taught by their Lord to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's (Lk. 20:25). But our consciences belong to God.** We can't violate them even if Caesar demands, even if he threatens our life. We must speak of what we've seen and heard in the gospel.
- ❖ Trust me, this kind of boldness doesn't come naturally. You have to pray for it. We see the early disciples doing just that in v29. "*<sup>29</sup>And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness . . . <sup>31</sup>And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*"
  - ▶ **Being filled with the Spirit and speaking boldly is a pattern throughout the rest of the book.** Read on in Acts and you see Stephen the first martyr, full of the Holy Spirit (7:55), making a bold defense of Christ in the face of an enraged audience grinding their teeth at him.

- ❖ Then there's Paul, newly converted and filled with the Spirit (9:17). He immediately enters the synagogue in Damascus boldly preaching Jesus as the Son of God (9:20, 27). There's a plot to kill him but he escapes and makes it back to Jerusalem. Where he continues to boldly preach in the name of Jesus. This guy is unshakable. Where did he get such boldness? He wasn't full of himself. No, he was full of the Spirit.
- ❖ **Church, we need boldness to speak the word of God into a culture that has little time or patience for Christian truth claims.** This is something that only comes from the Spirit of God. He's going to have to fill you. To fill us. So we need to pray for this. To pray for the Spirit to fill us and emboldened us to speak truth.
  - ▶ Think about your good friends and close family who are still in unbelief. What they really need from you is not cordiality. It's not kindness. It's not neighborliness. It's boldness. It's the courage to say in love that there's salvation in no other name but Jesus. The boldness to speak of Christ crucified, to warn of coming judgment, to call out their cornerstones and to expose their inadequacies. "They're just sand."
    - I have no doubt that this will greatly annoy people. *So I ask: Who among us has the boldness to speak the very truth people hate to hear but so desperately need to hear?* Do you have this boldness? You won't find it in yourself. It only comes from the Spirit when he fills you.
- ❖ **Now once you're filled with the Spirit, what also makes a difference is having a high view of God's sovereignty especially over gospel rejection and opposition.** Just look at what the believers say in vv27-28. They recognize that Herod, Pilate, the Romans, and the peoples of Israel were all gathered together in opposition against Jesus, but in the end they were just doing, "*whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*"
  - ▶ **If God is sovereign over the opposition mounted against Christ, then you can be sure he's sovereign over the opposition that Christ's followers will face.** Church, be sure that the opposition and hostility that we're experiencing, the marginalization we're facing, is all part of God's predestined plan and all comes from his providential hand. If you want boldness, you need that kind of faith in that kind of God.

### **An Unbelievable Communal Life**

- ❖ Now at the end of chapter 4 there's an interesting shift from the church in prayer, in a room shaken by the power of the Spirit, who's filling them and empowering them to speak the word of God with boldness (v31) – to suddenly this beautiful picture of an unbelievable communal life being lived out among the first Christians.
  - ▶ Let me read starting in v32. "<sup>32</sup>*Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.* <sup>33</sup>*And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.* <sup>34</sup>*There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold* <sup>35</sup>*and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*"

- ❖ This kind of communal life is only possible for those who are building their lives and identity on the cornerstone of Christ. **This kind of life together is an indictment against the materialism and individualism of our culture but at the same time an inspiration.**
  - ▶ If we the Church do our part to boldly speak like the apostles and boldly live like the early church, we will draw both the ire and the interest of the watching world.
  
- ❖ We know as the church grew beyond the book of Acts, their communal life continued to baffle and inspire even their opponents. The second-century Greek historian **Lucian of Samosata** despised Christians. He was an enemy to the church but he had to admit that there was something to their communal life. He wrote, *“It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator Jesus has put it into their head that they are brethren”*
  - ▶ “It is incredible”, he said. It’s unbelievable. **He didn't believe a word of the gospel but he couldn't deny its effects.** Isn't that what you want of our critics as they look upon us, even as they oppose us and marginalize us? **Don't you want those who disagree with our convictions to still respect our community?**
  
- ❖ Let's let the example of the early church first indict us. Are we treating each other like brethren, like family? **Before we go out and boldly proclaim God's truth, perhaps we need to first ask if we're boldly loving God's people.** Are we loving and serving one another ensuring there's not a needy person among us?
  - ▶ I think I can deal with unbelievers being turned off by our message. **But I cannot and will not accept anyone being turned off by our lack of love and sacrifice for each other.** May the Lord fill us with his Spirit and make us a bold people – bold in speech, bold in deed, bold in love for one another.