

TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

The Church Under Duress

Acts 4.1–31

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Introduction

1. Acts 4.1–31 continues the episode that commenced in 3.1; Peter's sermon following the healing of the lame man (whom 4.22 tells us was "over forty years old") was interrupted by the Jewish rulers who proceeded to examine and warn them not to continue to speak or teach in the name of Jesus.

2. We will note some key ideas in verses 1–22, and then examine the church's prayer in verses 23–31.

Peter and John Arrested and Examined (vv. 1–22).

3. "The Sadducees confronted them" (v. 1).[1]
   a. "The captain (στρατηγὸς, *stratēgos*) of the temple" (ESV) ("temple police" CSB; "temple guard" NIV) was a priest who was second in authority to the chief priest, charged with supervising the day-to-day activities of the temple and in charge of keeping order (Arnold 2002, 245).
      1) The police aspect of his duties involved taking charge of a local police force permitted by the Romans and made up of Levites; cf. Neh 13.22 (Keener 2014, 328).
   b. The Sadducees[2] were a wealthy group of politically influential Jews, many of whom were priests, who were the majority members of the Sanhedrin (cf. v. 15) (Arnold 2002, 246).
      1) As members of the privileged aristocracy, they "worked closely with the Romans to protect their own political and economic interests" (Polhill 2008, 2087).
      2) They were stricter on law and order issues, accepting only the Pentateuch as Scripture.
      3) They also denied the resurrection (cf. Acts 23.8; Josephus *Ant.* 18.16–17).[3]
   c. Their complaint: "because they were annoyed that they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 4.2).
      1) This calls attention to what Peter and John were emphasizing (see Acts 2.24–35).
      2) It was especially troubling to the Sadducees, who likely saw the Christians as a bigger threat than the Pharisees, "for the Pharisaic doctrine was only a theoretical hope for the future" whereas the

[1] Unless otherwise noted, Scripture translations are from the CSB; any emphasis added is mine.

[2] For a useful introduction to the Sadducees and other groups in the period, see DelHousaye 2008, 1799–1800.

[3] Josephus writes: "But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins them; for they think it an instance of virtue to dispute with those teachers of philosophy whom they frequent; but this doctrine is received but by a few, yet by those still of the greatest dignity; but they are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates, as they are unwillingly and by force sometimes obliged to be, they addict themselves to the notions of the Pharisees, because the multitude would not otherwise bear them" (*Ant.* 18.16–17).

apostles were declaring "that one person had already been raised" and thus "the resurrection had been inaugurated" (Keener 2014, 328).

4. The Sanhedrin was the highest legal, legislative, and judicial body among the Jews.
   a. The Sanhedrin was composed of seventy people ("rulers, elders and scribes") plus the high priest who presided over the council (Arnold 2002, 248).
   b. Much like U. S. presidents, high priests seemed to have retained their title for life.
      1) Annas had served in the role from 6–15 AD, and remained the controlling figure.
      2) His son-in-law Caiaphas was the official high priest at this time (serving 18–36 AD).
      3) Annas's son John would fill the role later (36–37 AD).
      4) "No Alexander of the high-priestly family is otherwise known" (Bruce 1988, 101 n. 16).

5. "The name of Jesus" – a recurring theme (vv. 7, 10, 12, 17–18, 30).
   a. The Sanhedrin raise the issue in verse 7: "This question, meaning 'by whose authority,' surfaces an old dispute (see Luke 20:1–8). Who speaks for God about the ancient faith?" (Harris 2019, Acts 4.7 sn 21).
   b. Peter responds in a pointed way in verse 10: "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom *you* crucified and whom *God* raised from the dead."
   c. He notes the name's exclusivity in verse 12 (cf. Matt 11.27; John 3.18; 14.6; 1 John 5.12).
   d. In verses 17–18, the rulers demand that they not speak or teach in Jesus' name again.
      1) Notice Peter and John's emphatic answer in verse 20; the Greek uses a double negative, which cancels out in English, but is forceful in Greek, literally: "for we are not able to not speak of what we saw and heard."
   e. Finally, in verse 30, in their prayer after the examination, the church petitions God for help in continuing to preach and perform signs and wonders "through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

6. Notice what motivated the rulers' actions.
   a. They are confronted with "an obvious sign" they cannot deny (v. 16) (signs are important for confirming the message [Heb 2.3–4] and pointing to belief, but are not sufficient to produce belief [cf. John 11.45–53, where Caiaphas is again involved; 12.9–11]).
   b. They were concerned for their political position and ability to control the people (and thus keep the Romans at bay) (v. 17).
   c. There is also a cultural element at work.
      1) "In a society emphasizing honor and shame, the elite would lose face if they allowed the apostles the final word. Authorities in the Roman Empire might be satisfied to execute a movement's ringleader if the group did not threaten further instability. The apostles so far pose no clear serious threat, so that a warning is deemed sufficient" (Keener 2014, 329).
      2) Honor and shame are also in play in verses 21–22: "Although the municipal authorities back down, they do not admit wrongdoing, which would be a matter of shame. Pharisees were more popular with the people, but the politically dominant Sadducees were less in touch with the people. Elites usually despised populist speakers, whom they considered demagogues, who had exceptional influence with the people" (Keener 2014, 329).

7. Finally, notice the apostles' conviction over both politics and personal comfort (vv. 19–20), a good segue to their prayer.

A Prayer for Boldness, not Deliverance (vv. 23–31)

8. We can learn much about what prayer should be—and perhaps what should receive less emphasis—from

reading the recorded prayers in Scripture. This prayer is especially instructive.

9. Verse 23 – a full accounting on what had occurred.

10. Verse 24 – A response of praise and submission.
    a. "Master" (Δέσποτα, *Despota*) was used for deities in Greek sources, elsewhere in the NT (e.g., Luke 2.29; Rev 6.10), and in the Greek OT (Gen 15.2, 8; Josh 5.14; Jer 1.6–8).
    b. It's used here to acknowledge God's sovereignty; it echoes Psalm 146.6, a context praising God's faithfulness to vindicate the oppressed; he is greater than the opponents (Keener 2014, 329).

11. Verses 25–28 recall and apply Psalm 2.1–2 which refers to the royal descendant of David and was later applied to the Messiah, the anointed one.
    a. The word "rage" (φρυάσσω, *phryassō*), refers to "insolent anger," but combines anger with "a considerable measure of opposition, both verbal and nonverbal" (Louw & Nida 1989, 762).
    b. The Gentiles had opposed and kings of the earth had assembled against the Lord's anointed king.
    c. The application in verse 27 is made to Herod (Antipas) and Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles (Romans), and "the people of Israel."
    d. "The surprise of the application is that Jews are now found among the enemies of God's plan" (Harris 2019, Acts 4.27 sn 66).
    e. The plan ("will," βουλή, *boulē*), however, had been "decided beforehand" (NIV) (προορίζω, *proorizō*).[4]

12. Verses 29–30 will surprise some.
    a. The church does not pray for the rulers, that they will stop persecuting, or that God will avenge the disciples; nor do they pray for better leaders (cf. 1 Tim 2.1–2).
    b. Instead, they pray for "boldness" (παρρησία, *parrēsia*, "a state of boldness and confidence"; Louw & Nida 1989, 307).…
    c. … while God continues to work through them "for healing, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (v. 30).

13. They received immediate conformation their prayer had been heard, were filled with the Spirit, and "began to speak the word of God boldly" (v. 31).

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Works Cited

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[4] Louw & Nida (1989, 360): "προορίζω; προαιρέομαι: to come to a decision beforehand – 'to decide beforehand, to determine ahead of time, to decide upon ahead of time.'"