

Part 8: The Center of it All

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We've been studying the book of Acts in the Bible which outlines the birth of the church after Jesus' work to establish his people on the cross. So far—things have gone well for the church—lots of people have been saved, there's been a couple miracles, and the community is caring for each other in an evangelistically beautiful way.

The sails were up, and the water was smooth. But as John Stott said of our passage today: "The good ship Christ-church was ready to catch the wind of the Spirit and to set sail on her voyage of spiritual conquest. But almost immediately a perilous storm blew up, a storm of such ferocity that the church's very existence was threatened."

Perhaps only weeks into their new journey together, the leaders of this small Christian church seem to have struck a reef. Today records the first organized persecution of the Christian church—a phenomenon grows throughout church history as the church itself grows.

In the 1600s, the Baptist writer and preacher John Bunyan was imprisoned by the British government. The charge? It wasn't that he claimed to be a pastor, it wasn't that he was preaching heresy, or that he was a threat to peace. It was that he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ "without a license."

Despite how silly that sounds—the consequence was serious. Bunyan spent 12 years in prison for the offense. But notice how the cause of Peter and John's imprisonment seems even sillier! They are not arrested for stirring up hostility, not for disrupting the temple, and not for any sort of civil disobedience. Instead, Luke tells us in **Acts 4:3**, they were arrested for, "teaching people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead." Whereas Bunyan was arrested for preaching Christ without a license, the first affliction of the church came from preaching Christ at all.

It's no surprise that the city which crucified Jesus in order to have a Christ-less world would now attempt to impose a Christ-less church. And the same tension extends beyond the early church's Jerusalem and Bunyan's jail: our sinful heart, our annoyed world, and our enemy the devil speak in varied tones the same message: "Give up this Jesus business—and we will be happy with you."

But despite the efforts of the popular and powerful court to convict the disciples into submission—they only furthered the disciples conviction that Jesus—and only Jesus—is essential for the church and her ministry. The church cannot be rightly centered on God, rightly centered in mission, or even rightly centered in their own understanding of life unless Jesus is at the center.

This is what Acts 4 will help us see this morning and empower us in our own journey to stand with such boldness. Our main point this morning: **Being the center of God's plan, Jesus is the center of the church's life and ministry.** Our text helps us love that truth and navigate that tension by showing us three things: **The Power of Jesus, The Problem of Jesus and The Peace of Jesus.**

We begin this morning with the passage we concluded with last week. In **Acts 4:1-4**, the Jewish officials arrest Peter and John because of their Jesus-centered preaching. And you can imagine how frustrating it was that even after they were arrested thousands of people came to saving faith by believing in Jesus.

Their trial begins the next morning in verses **5-6**, where all of the power brokers who put Jesus to death gathered together again to brainstorm what to do now about Jesus' followers.

They open up their court case discussing the healing which started this whole thing. But notice how carefully they choose their words: **Acts 4:7**, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" They refuse to define what "this" is! Why? Because if they heard themselves say that they were arresting people who went around healing men of incurable diseases they might realize how silly they sound. They didn't want to acknowledge the power of what happened because it weakens their own case.

But Peter is going to make crystal clear what their words dance around. This is our first point this morning: **The Power of Jesus**.

Peter responds in **Acts 4:8-12**, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead--by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

The power of Jesus is demonstrated in this in two ways. In a moment we will look at the content of Peter's answer and how Jesus is the power of God. But first we can see the power of Jesus that Peter answered at all! Luke is continuing to show us in story form the wonderful reality of conversion.

This is not the first time Peter was around this same gathering of priests and powerful people. In Luke 22, Peter was at the high priest's house, with the temple guard and the elders of the people. But if you remember it was not Peter who was questioned by the people of power that night was it? It was Jesus and his own trial. Peter was questioned outside the house, by a small lowly servant girl. She asked if he was a follower of Jesus and he was so shaken, so fearful, so concerned for his own life that he denied Jesus three times and then fled the scene.

It's not unreasonable that this story had made it's way to the high priest. He was probably licking his chops—if Peter couldn't stand up to the suggestion of a slave—wait till he feels the prosecution of the high priest.

But now—things are different. Peter has already answered to another high priest—a better one. Jesus the true high priest who took Peter's shameful guilt and bore it on the cross so that Peter might be comforted by a greater power. But more than that—Peter stood last time in his own power. Because the great high priest had not finished his work on the cross, he had not yet sent the Holy Spirit of which Jesus encourage his disciples saying: **Luke 12:11-12**, "And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

Did you notice how Peter's defense opened? **Acts 4:8**, "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit said to them..."

Peter didn't become less like Peter. Peter became more like Christ. The same is true of us when we are thrust into similar situations of tension. We don't live in the courtyard of a questioned savior but instead we are called to stand in light of an unquestioned king. Even the best lawyers stand apart from their client—but through faith in Jesus we are filled with the Holy Spirit himself who speaks with us in our weakness.

And while Peter portrays the power of Jesus in his own conversion—he goes on to preach of the power of Jesus as the means by which this man was healed. When questioned about the healing the day before Peter answered in **Acts 3:16**, "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. "

This answer, that Jesus was powerful to heal—got Peter arrested! But the consequence didn't cause Peter any second guessing of his answer. He doubles down when asked again and says, responds by saying in verse 10: Let it be known to all of you and all the people of Israel...Jesus did it.

Now Peter says more words than that doesn't he? He says you crucified this Jesus, and then he says God raised him up. He then goes on to quote Psalm 118:22 where he calls Jesus "the cornerstone" of God—the cornerstone that these religious men rejected but whom God had established.

You see it's not that these men don't know Jesus—it's that they don't know Jesus as the center of God's plan. Jesus is the powerful means in God's plan to redeem his people. He is the power of God for salvation.

These men thought they knew the scriptures so well. They were steeped in church going lineage. But they missed it. But what they missed, Peter makes clear.

He shows them the work of God in Jesus Christ. Here we see the centrality of Jesus on display in the second part of verse **12**, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Why is there salvation in no one else? Because God will give no one else. Peter makes two bold assumptions here. The first is that if you want salvation, it must come from God. The second is that the salvation that comes from God has been placed by God in Jesus.

The Pulitzer Prize winning author Ernest Becker says that at the heart of our desire for love, "We want redemption—nothing less. We want to be rid of our faults, of our feeling of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know that our creation has not been in vain. We turn to the love partner for the experience of the heroic, for perfect validation; we expect them to 'make us good.'"

What Becker describes in our search for love is what the Bible presents as the fruit of divine love and divine love alone. The Bible often talks of healing, of restoration, and of deliverance—but it is salvation that is most often spoken of. We must be saved. And if you want it, it must be in Jesus.

The gospel is only for those who are religiously inclined or intellectually curious. The gospel comes like a fire alarm to all who are in the building that you must run, or you must die.

That's the play on words Peter uses here. The word used for "healed" in verse 9 is the same word translated as "saved" in verse 12. Jesus healed this man so that you might see that he can save all men. Save them not from our physical lameness but from our spiritual, and ultimately eternal death.

If you don't think Jesus can help you, then you don't see your problem clearly. He has risen from the dead. Never trust a skinny chef—and never trust a dead savior. He is able to save you from your sins—because he is the only person God has appointed to do that by bearing your sin on the cross so you might have life in his name.

But as simple as it is to affirm, there are challenges that come with that, and to that. We see these challenges in what follows which is our second point: **The Problem of Jesus**.

I've been sharing the gospel with a friend of mine and I told him the other day that the whole of humanity is split up in two ways—those who believe in Jesus and those who do not. And the problem of such a hard line is two-fold. For those on the side of belief—we won't be able to make sense of our hardships unless we understand them in light of Jesus. For those on the side of unbelief—we won't be able to find the answers we want apart from Jesus. Nothing—to the serious mind will make sense.

We see this problem with these bright and otherwise sincere Jews. They can't make sense of Jesus' disciples and they can't make sense of Jesus' work despite what they see!

Regarding the disciples, we see this: **Acts 4:13**, "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

Here's the wonderful promise and the genuine problem of Christian ministry. It doesn't make sense. It says they saw Peter and John's "boldness." That word was a political word which would have communicated their capacity to fearlessly handle the complexity of debates on the senate floor.

Yet, it also says that they came to the conclusion that they were "uneducated and common men." Whatever boldness, whatever professionalism, they had didn't come from man. They were ordinary in that regard. In fact, it's fun to note that the second word in Greek is "idiotes." They were idiots and yet they were bold idiots why? Because they had been with Jesus.

You want to know how to confuse people with a powerful ministry—walk in intimate nearness with Jesus and boldness in the Spirit. Those are the qualifications. Our pastoral residency program is built around this. We aim to impress a humble view of self, a humble view of theology, and a humble view of ministry. Why? Because we come into any situation and know we have nothing of worldly power except that which is ours in Jesus. And such a ministry in the home, on the playground, or in the pulpit won't make sense to the world.

They saw the disciples boldness and it didn't make sense to them, but they also saw the man healed and that didn't make sense to them: **Acts 4:14**, "But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition."

Why were Peter and John visibly bold? Because of Jesus. Why was the man physically healed before their eyes? Because of Jesus. And yet unwilling to believe in what their eyes saw, and their ears heard—they were at a loss.

So they took counsel in **Acts 4:15-16**, "But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another saying, 'What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and we can't deny it.'"

I'm currently reading a book written by a secular scholar trying to figure out how the Christian church has made it as far as it has in history. Other churches have crumbled, other nations have risen and fallen, yet the church keeps on going like the energizer bunny.

And here we see that this curiosity isn't particularly modern. It's not a quest for knowledge, it's actually a denial of it. In science when a hypothesis is proven, you accept it. But here, a man was healed as proof of a claim—but they refuse it. History has shown that the church is unkillable and as it's been said, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

It would be reasonable to look at all these things and say, "Having seen all the evidence, I need to repent and believe in this Jesus" Yet why is it that we miss it? Because of the sin in our hearts. Coming to that realization demands a humility which slays our pride—it's that pride that often keeps us from doing just that.

Without humility and repentance, you'll never find a solution.

That's the difference between what we see here and what we saw at Pentecost. At Pentecost the crowds saw a miracle, they then heard the miracle explained, and believed it and Luke says in **Acts 2:37**, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

But today these men see a miracle, they hear the explanation of it, they refuse to believe it and we see their response in **Acts 4:16**, they ask, "What shall we do with these men?" When people see and hear the message of Jesus—the believers are a source of comfort to be ran towards. But when people see, hear and refuse the message of Jesus—believers are often seen as a problem. They compound what they can't make sense of.

So it fix that they say this **Acts 4:17-18**, "'But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.' So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."

As we let the book of Acts correct and guide our church notice how central the preaching of Jesus was to their ministry. They weren't asked to stop preaching about God. They weren't asked to stop performing miracles. They weren't asked to stop gathering crowds. They were asked to stop doing anything in the name of Jesus. It was like nails on a chalkboard to them.

John Piper says it well this way, "**Many people are willing to be God-centered as long as they feel God is man-centered.**" Vague ideas of God can be twisted by blind men into a God of their own pleasing. But Jesus breaks the barrier. Jesus shows that the infinite and invisible God is the real and speaking God.

No one is opposed to finding “fullness of life,” people aren’t generally offended at the idea of an afterlife of a deity in the world. But when that deity demands to be defined by his own voice—we are pressed. Remember it’s not resurrection life in general that these people were offended at, but it was all of that in Jesus.

We want life, we’d rather just be the center of it. But where sin makes us man-centered—the gospel makes us God centered. We find our life in him—and lay down anything that competes with it.

It is so easy to accept a version of Christ-less Christianity! Christ-less Christianity talks often of Jesus when the desires and teaching of Jesus match up with our own wants—but silences him when it’s at odds with our deeper wants and goals.

Christ-less Christianity is comfortable Christianity—it is able to navigate the annoyance of the world by knowing how and when to strategically take-up and take-down our cross depending on the social situation. You’d be invited to all the parties and probably have the broadest group of friends.

Christ-less Christianity is comfortable Christianity. It satisfies the world around you and tries to find satisfaction in the world.

And the world wants you to live this way—these religious officials were begging the disciples to take credit for themselves. “Be treated as God! Don’t try and say God did it through Jesus, just say you did it!” There is the promise of worldly power given on a platter! How easy would many of us run to that offering?

This is not a new problem. John, who is here speaking with Peter, discipled a young man named Ignatius. He wrote one of the earliest letters of encouragement to Christians outside of the Bible. Writing to the church feeling this squeeze in Ephesus he said, “Apart from Jesus, let nothing dazzle you.”

What a great sentiment! But this dazzle is costly! Yet he goes on to say that his own affliction he faces on account of Jesus are his “spiritual pearls.” And this is because if we have Christ, we have his comfort always.

This is our final point this morning: **The Peace of Jesus.**

How did the disciples respond: **Acts 4:17-22**, “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, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.’ And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.”

If our hope in life and death is in any of the people, places and powers of the world we will change as quickly as those things change. But if our hope is in the single, eternal, and unchanging person of Jesus Christ we are able to find peace in him because he never changes.

The men who gathered against Jesus had all the worldly ingredients for peace. They were powerful, popular, wealthy, influential, and respected. Yet because they couldn’t make sense of Jesus—the deepness of their discontent constantly annoyed them.

But here, powerless, penniless and imprisoned the disciples had deep peace.

They had peace first and foremost because Jesus made sense to them. And because Jesus made sense with them we know they had peace with God!

They didn't need to fear the authorities because they feared eternal judgment more! They were once sentenced to hell by the just God of the universe but by his love and Jesus' work they were delivered—what could man do to them? What could man do to them? They had a holy fear of God which for any believer is the constant presence of peace.

When John Bunyan was on trial he described how those who once seemed so friendly to him in court turned as he made it clear he would not give up preaching. They offered him an easy life of working and living with his family and he said he would work and live with his family and preach Christ—so they had him arrested.

Bunyan said "As soon as I was going through the door, I wanted to say to them that I carried the peace of God along with me, but I held my tongue, blessed the Lord, went away to prison, with God's comfort in my poor soul." That's a peace founded on Christ.

That peace in Christ pushes us forward for peace in preaching!

There's very few things which seem to prick our anxiety and fear like sharing the gospel. But notice how the disciples respond by saying, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

What a great reminder for all of us that while further study of theology and the Bible are always helpful—the baseline of gospel preaching is what you yourselves have seen and heard! It is seeing and hearing the gospel which saves us—so anyone who is saved can bear witness to the gospel by sharing what you have seen and what you have heard in Jesus.

John Owen, a brilliant theologian, was a contemporary of Bunyan. In many ways he was the opposite. He was trained in multiple languages, studied at the finest colleges, was the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, and where Bunyan is best known for a children's book, Owen is best known as the greatest English speaking theologian.

Being more privileged by the political elite, King Charles II once asked Owen, who had so much learning, could desire to hear a "tinker" like John Bunyan preach. Owen is quoted to have responded saying, "May it please your majesty, had I the tinker's ability for preaching, I would most gladly relinquish all my learning."

What our passage shows us today is that the world might see miracles—but seeing miracles mean nothing unless they hear the miracle of Jesus. They must be told—and Jesus has given us our own conversion and the power of the Holy Spirit so that we might always be able to do just that.

A great template for relational evangelism is learning to share with others what you saw, what you heard, and how you live. What did you see in your own life or in the world which caused you to think that maybe there's something wrong, what did you see in the preaching of the gospel and the reading of the Bible that made sense of that for you, and now how do you live with Jesus in light of all of that.

The fruit of such a life is a life of praise! That's how this passage ends. Despite how weak we might feel in ourselves, despite how weak the world might make us feel—Jesus is doing a work through our efforts. Let us praise God that we get to be part of such a plan and let us live and serve with Jesus at the center.