

# POWER, PRAYER, AND PERSECUTION

*Acts 4:5–31*

The Christians of the early church knew how to pray so that God's hand could work in mighty power.

When asked to explain the secret of his remarkable ministry, the noted British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon replied, **"My people pray for me."**

**"Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as though everything depended on you."** – St. Augustine

Prayer is not an escape from responsibility; it is our *response* to God's *ability*. True prayer energizes us for service and battle.

\*\* The focus of attention is on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 4:7, 10, 12, 17–18).

**Today we see what three groups of people do with His name.**

## **1. The Apostles: Defending His Name (Acts 4:5–14)**

### *A. The court (vv. 5–7)*

Who was the High Priest.

The court was essentially composed of the high priest's family.

1. The Jewish religious system had become so corrupt that the offices were passed from one relative to another without regard for the Word of God.
2. When Annas was deposed from the priesthood, Caiaphas his son-in-law was appointed. In fact, five of Annas' sons held the office at one time or another. Annas certainly qualified.

This was an official meeting of the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:15), the same council that a few months before had condemned Jesus to die. In fact, these officials recognized Peter and John as the associates of Jesus (Acts 4:13).

*The Sanhedrin was charged with the responsibility of protecting the Jewish faith, and this meant that they had to examine every new teacher and teaching that appeared in the land (see Deut. 13). They certainly had the right to investigate what the church was doing, but they did not have the right to arrest innocent men and then refuse to honestly examine the evidence.*

The question was legal, but they did everything they could to avoid admitting that a miracle had taken place (Acts 4:14).

They were evasive and merely referred to the miracle as “this.” They were probably scornful as well, so that their question might be paraphrased,

1. “Where did common people like you get the power and authority to do a thing like this?”
2. “By whose name?”

After all, the Apostles might be in league with the devil! Even Satan can perform miracles!

### ***B. The case (vv. 8–14)***

Peter spoke in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. Note that Peter was again filled with the Spirit (see Acts 2:4) and would experience another filling before the day ended (Acts 4:31).

*And now recall what Christ said, “When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourself or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at the very hour what you ought to say.”*

*– Homilies on the acts of the Apostles, Chrysostom.*

*<sup>12</sup> “But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. <sup>13</sup> This will result in your being witnesses to them. <sup>14</sup> But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. <sup>15</sup> For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. <sup>16</sup> You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup> All men will hate you because of me. <sup>18</sup> But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup> By standing firm you will gain life. -- Luke 21:12–19 (NIV)*

Peter respectfully began with an explanation of how the miracle occurred.

Certainly the members of the Sanhedrin had seen the crippled beggar many times, and perhaps they had even given alms to him and piously prayed for him. How was this well-known man healed? **“By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth!”**

Those words must have pierced the hearts of the members of the council. They thought they had finished with the Prophet from Nazareth, and now His followers were telling everybody that Jesus was alive! Since the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, Peter’s statement was almost a declaration of war.

But the Spirit was telling Peter what to say (Luke 21:12–15), and the apostle quoted Psalm 118:22, definitely a messianic reference.

*The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.* Psalms 118:22 (NLT)

Matthew 21:42 –

<sup>42</sup> *Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures.*

*“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?”*

1 Peter 2:4–8 –

<sup>4</sup> *As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—<sup>5</sup> you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” <sup>7</sup> Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, <sup>8</sup> and, “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.*

He made it clear that the members of the council were “the builders” and that they had rejected God’s Stone, Jesus, the Son of God.

The image of “the stone” was not new to these men who were experts in the Old Testament Scriptures. They knew that the “rock” was a symbol of God

Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18, 31

2 Samuel 22:2

Psalms 18:2

Isaiah 28:16

The Prophet Daniel had used the rock to picture the Messiah and the coming of His kingdom on earth (Dan. 2:31–45).

The Jews stumbled over the Rock (Rom. 9:32; 1 Cor. 1:23) and rejected Him, just as Psalm 118:22 had predicted.

***Romans 9.32-33--***

***<sup>32</sup> Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the “stumbling stone.”<sup>33</sup> As it is written:***

***“See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”<sup>a</sup>***

However, to those who have trusted Him, Jesus Christ is the precious Cornerstone and the chief Cornerstone.

1 Peter 2:4–8

Ephesians 2:20

Peter went on to explain that Jesus is not only the Stone, but He is also the Savior (Acts 4:12).

NOTE: Peter saw in the healing of the beggar a picture of the spiritual healing that comes in salvation. “Made whole” in Acts 4:9 is a translation of the same Greek word that is translated “saved” in Acts 4:12, for salvation means wholeness and spiritual health.

–Jesus Christ is the Great Physician who alone can heal mankind’s greatest malady, the sickness of sin (Mark 2:14–17). Of course, Peter also had “all the people of Israel” in mind as he spoke (see Acts 4:10) because the message was still going out exclusively to the Jews. Even Psalm 118, from which Peter quoted, speaks of a future national salvation for Israel.

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<sup>a</sup> Isaiah 8:14; 28:16

## 2. The Council: Opposing His Name (Acts 4:15–22)

### *A. Their problem (vv. 13–14).*

They could not deny the miracle, because the man was standing before them; and yet they could not explain how “uneducated and untrained men” (NASB) could perform such a mighty deed. Peter and John were ordinary fishermen, not professional scribes or authorized ministers of the Jewish religion. They were disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, but—He was dead! The council took notice of the courage and confidence of Peter and John, as well as the power of Peter’s words; and it all added up to perplexity.

NOTE: The miracle was not proof of the resurrection of Christ or even of the truth of Peter’s message. Satan can perform miracles (2 Thes. 2:9–10) and false prophets can do wonders (Deut. 13:1–5). The miracle and the message, *in the context of all that had been going on since Pentecost*, was one more evidence that Jesus Christ was alive and at work in the church by His Holy Spirit.

In both sermons, Peter used the Old Testament to support and explain his claims, and this is one evidence of a true prophet of God (Deut. 13:1–5; Isa. 8:20). Miracles are not a substitute for the Word of God (Luke 16:27–31).

### *B. Their deliberation (vv. 15–18).*

The council did not seek for truth, but rather sought for some way to avoid the truth!

Had they honestly considered the evidence and meekly listened to the message, they might have been saved, but their pride and hardness of heart stood in the way.

Their response is proof that miracles alone can never convict or convert the lost sinner. Only the Word of God can do that.

John 11:45–53 –

Acts 14:1–20 –

### *C. Their conclusion.*

They wanted to “let the thing die a natural death.” This meant threatening the Apostles and forbidding them to teach and preach in the name of Jesus. This official sentence shows how much the enemy fears the witness of the church.

*Satan has been trying to silence God’s people from the very beginning.* Sad to say, he has succeeded with far too many Christians, the “silent witnesses” of the church.

The existential philosopher Albert Camus said:

**“What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear... in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could arise in the heart of the simplest man.”**

The council did not want the Gospel message to spread, and yet that is exactly what happened. From 120 praying men and women in Acts 1, the church increased to more than 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost; and now there were more than 5,000 disciples in the fellowship. In the days that followed.

***“Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.”*** - Acts 5:14; and 6:1, 7

Satan’s attempts to silence the church only led to a stronger witness for the Lord.

### *D. The failure of the council (vv. 19–22).*

The failure of the council was evident when Peter refused to be intimidated by their threats.

All of us need to follow Peter’s example and make our decisions on the basis of “Is it right?” and not “Is it popular?” or “Is it safe?”

Peter knew what the Lord had commanded the believers to do (Acts 1:8), and he was going to obey Him at any cost.

## Civil Disobedience -- “dedicated conscientious objectors”

1. Objectors had a message from God that could not be questioned.

Peter and John knew that they were under orders from their Master to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and that it would be wrong to obey the Sanhedrin. They were faithfully obeying a clear word from God and not just following some selfish personal whim of their own.

2. Their convictions touched every area of their lives.

In other words, they did everything “with conscience toward God” (1 Peter 2:19) because they belonged to God. When a person’s *total life* is under the direction of a godly conscience, then I find it easier to have confidence in his unpopular decisions.

It is possible for Christians to respect authority and at the same time disobey the authorities (Rom. 13; Titus 3:1–2; 1 Peter 2:13–25).

The greatest example of unjust suffering is that of Jesus Christ, and we must imitate Him (1 Peter 2:13–25). Jesus teaches us that righteous protest against injustice always involves sacrifice and suffering, and must be motivated by love. God’s people must be careful not to clothe their prejudice in the garments of “righteous indignation” and pass themselves off as courageous soldiers of conscience. We must examine our own hearts honestly to make certain we are not conducting a “holy war” just to satisfy inner frustrations.

Because they had no real case to offer, the council could only threaten the men and let them go. After all, when you have a living miracle before you, as well as an approving public around you, you must be careful what you do!

### **3. The Church: Calling on His Name (Acts 4:23–31)**

This is one of the truly great prayers recorded in the Bible, and it is a good example for us to follow.

**1. It was a prayer that was born out of witness and service for the Lord.**

Peter and John had just come in “from the trenches,” and the church met to pray in order to defeat the enemy. Today there is little sense of urgency and danger because most of us are comfortable in our Christian walk. If more of God’s people were witnessing for Christ in daily life, there would be more urgency and blessing when the church meets for prayer.

**2. It was a united prayer meeting as they “lifted up their voice to God with one accord” (Acts 4:24; see 1:14).**

The people were of one heart and mind, and God was pleased to answer their requests. Division in the church always hinders prayer and robs the church of spiritual power.

**3. Their praying was based solidly on the Word of God**

Psalm 2 –

- a. The Word of God and prayer must always go together (John 15:7).
- b. God speaks to us and tells us what He wants to do.
- c. We speak to Him and make ourselves available to accomplish His will.
- d. True prayer is not telling God what to do, but asking God to do His will in us and through us (1 John 5:14–15).
- e. It means getting God’s will done on earth, not man’s will done in heaven.

**They did not pray to have their circumstances changed or their enemies put out of office.** They asked God to empower them to make the best use of their circumstances and to accomplish what He had already determined (Acts 4:28).

“Do not pray for easy lives ... Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.” -- Phillips Brooks

**They addressed God as “Sovereign Lord,” the God who is in control of all things.** The Greek word gives us our English word *despot*, a ruler who exercises absolute power, either benevolently or abusively.

**They approached Him as the Creator, for, after all, if your Father is “Lord of heaven and earth,”** what have you to fear? (see Matt. 11:25–30)

Nehemiah approached God on this same basis (Neh. 9:6),

and so did the psalmist (see Ps. 145)

and the Prophet Isaiah (Isa. 42).

Years later, when he wrote his first epistle, Peter encouraged suffering saints to yield themselves to the faithful Creator (1 Peter 4:19).

The early church strongly believed in God’s sovereignty and His perfect plan for His people.

NOTE: They did not permit their faith in divine sovereignty to destroy human responsibility, for they were faithful to witness and pray. It is when God’s people get out of balance and overemphasize either sovereignty or responsibility that the church loses power.

**“Pray as though everything depends on God, and work as though everything depended on you.”**

– Augustine

- They did not ask for protection; they asked for power.
- They did not ask for fire from heaven to destroy the enemy (see Luke 9:51–56),  
but for power from heaven to preach the Word and heal the sick (see Matt. 5:10–12, 43–48).
- Their great desire was for boldness in the face of opposition (see Acts 4:17). The emphasis is on the hand of God at work in the life of the church (Acts 4:28, 30), not the hand of man at work for God. Believing prayer releases God’s power and enables God’s hand to move (Isa. 50:2; 64:1–8).

**Finally, note that they wanted to glorify God & Jesus Christ** (Acts 4:27, 30).

It was His name that gave them power to minister the Word and to perform miracles, and His name alone deserved the glory. The glory of God, not the needs of men, is the highest purpose of answered prayer.

God’s answer was to shake the place where they were meeting and to fill the people once again with the Spirit of God (Acts 4:31). This gave them the boldness that they needed to continue to serve God in spite of official opposition.

This was not a “second Pentecost” because there cannot be another Pentecost any more than there can be another Calvary. It was a new filling of the Spirit to equip.

**“Pray for great things, expect great things, work for great things, but above all—pray.”**

- Dr. R.A. Torrey

The early church prayed, and God answered in mighty power.

## Home Work

1. The Sanhedrin did not doubt that a healing had occurred; they only demanded to know by what authority the apostles were preaching and healing. Peter responded that his authority came from Jesus. Specifically what did Peter claim about Jesus? (4.8-12)
2. How did Peter respond to the command and warning that was issued? (4.19-20)
3. How do the believers respond to the Sanhedrin's threats?
4. What do they confess about God? What do they ask God to do?
5. What attitudes, priorities, and feelings does the prayer in 4.24-30 reflect?
6. Can you add anything to Page 24-25 of your notes?