

## **SPEAKING BOLDLY FOR JESUS**

**Acts 4**

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How old do you have to be to talk about Jesus? 50, 30, 18, 11, years old? How smart do you have to be to witness about Jesus? Do you need to be educated as a minister before you can tell people about Jesus? No! A brilliant theologian, whose books I still struggle to read, was once asked by a journalist to sum up all his writings in one pearl of wisdom. He replied: 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' The most important thing about Jesus even our children know. I was once asked to assist the elders of a neighbouring church interview a 13-year-old girl who wanted to profess her faith. She was answering my questions very well so I thought I would throw in a trick question. It was a question with a wrong premise. Like asking if a rooster laid an egg on the top of a pitched roof, and the wind was blowing from the south, which way would the egg roll? The elders didn't see the trick, but girl did. She looked me straight in the eye and as bold as you like, she said 'Mr. Douma, you know that's not a good question.' The elders were amazed at her faith and her articulation. That's the sort of thing we see here in our text. (Acts 4:13). Note the reaction after Peter spoke to the Sanhedrin *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."*

Let me set the context for this response. In chapter 3 we have the start to the story. There we read that a lame beggar was on the temple steps. He saw the apostles Peter and John coming along and asked for money. They said 'We have no money. But we will give what we have. In the name of Jesus stand up and walk'. And the cripple did! In fact, he was leaping around and praising God. That drew a huge crowd of people who were already on the way to the temple for prayers. They all wanted to know what happened. So, Peter used that God given opportunity to tell the people about Jesus. He told them that Jesus, whom they had crucified had risen from the dead. The miracle of the now healed cripple was proof God was at work, just like he had been in raising Jesus from the dead.

Now it is at this point that chapter 4 begins and we see *"...the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees..."* stepped in and arrested Peter and John. They did that because, Luke tells us, they were *"greatly disturbed"*. They were terribly threatened

and furious. The Sadducees were the wealthy ruling class. They were collaborators with the Romans. They feared anything that could make trouble for their cushy relationship with the Roman Empire. They were also part of the priestly elite. They were the theological liberals as opposed to the conservative Pharisees. The Sadducees denied the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, even at the end of time. So here were these apostles, as one commentator put it, 'giving unauthorised teaching by unprofessional preachers.' Here were these crude fishermen talking about that trouble-maker Jesus they had crucified. And even worse, claiming he had risen from the dead. From their perspective, that would only cause more trouble. If the Romans got involved, the Sadducees would be blamed for not keeping their people under control. These very powerful people wanted to keep their privileged position. So *"They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in gaol till the next day"*.

But I want you to notice how Luke keeps making clear the power of the Spirit. The opposition did not hinder the Word of God. The Sadducees could arrest the apostles but not the spreading of the gospel. Luke tells us *"But many who heard believed; so, the number of men who believed grew to about 5000."* That's how they counted in those days. Counting the men. So, you can assume at least double that number when we include the women and children. The impact of Peter's preaching was huge. The power of the Spirit in his witnessing was dramatic. No wonder the Sadducees were 'greatly disturbed'.

The next day we see Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, to be interrogated. When we note the list of those mentioned being there, we see people who figured prominently in the trial of Jesus, like Annas and Caiaphas. So, memories of the trial of Jesus must have flooded through the minds of the two disciples. Was history about to repeat itself? These were the people who had listened to false witnesses and unjustly condemned Jesus. Would Peter and John suffer the same fate? The court began their interrogation with the straight-out question *"By what power or what name did you do this?"*

Now, how will Peter respond to this threatening group? There was 70 of them that made up that ruling council. Will he deny knowing Jesus under this pressure? Remember how Peter denied Jesus three times when that servant girl approached him. That was the night Jesus was interrogated by these same men. (Acts 4:8-11) *"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being 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. Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'*" Talk about boldly standing up for Jesus.

Now, where has this come from? The clue is there in verse 8 *"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them..."* Remember what Jesus said in Acts 1 *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses..."* It was the Spirit, the power of God himself, that gave the courage and the insight to say what needed to be said. What a change from the Peter in the gospels to Peter here in Acts. It wasn't a self-help course that changed him. It was his working with the power of the Spirit to witness. Remember that the next time God gives you an opportunity to tell your story. It doesn't need to be complex. We do as Peter did. We talk about Jesus, about how he died and rose again. About the joy in our own lives that we are forgiven and right with God. When you are asked why you go to church or why you are a Christian, remember the power of the Spirit is with you. Speak clearly about how Jesus has impacted your life. Don't argue theology or philosophy. Tell your own story. People can argue about ideas. They can shoot down your theology. But they can't argue your own experience of Jesus.

Now Peter said something here that is quite awesome. (Acts 4:12) *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved"*. That's why we have such joy when someone acknowledges Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. Jesus is the only one who actually brings forgiveness and hope. Some will say that's being arrogant. Aren't there other religions? Don't they also speak of the way to God, to Allah or the gods? Aren't there other religious leaders who have taught wise things? Yes, but note carefully what Peter said, *"There is no other name...by which we must be saved"*. Jesus wasn't just a teacher with great wisdom. Jesus was God himself living with us. He died to bring justice for our failure towards God. And he rose again to show he had brought forgiveness and the way of eternal life. That is the heart of the gospel message. That's all Peter preached about and focused on. Through Jesus there is salvation. We are 'saved'. When we have faith in Jesus all is forgiven. We are saved from judgment and eternal suffering. We are right with God. We have a deep living relationship with God. Jesus has done all that for us. It's ours by grace. No other religious teacher, leader, guru, or founder has done that. All other religions require you to strive by good works to achieve a relationship with the gods or achieve a state of peace or nirvana. But Christianity says we are 'saved' by God through Jesus. In that sense, Jesus is unique. He is the only saviour. He is truly God's son and the master of this world.

Now I want you to notice the response of the Jewish leaders. (Acts 4:13) *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished, and they noted that these men had been with Jesus."* Peter and John were not clever people who had been to university. They weren't taught how to think philosophically or learn debating skills. They barely had any education. The Sadducees saw Peter and John as fishermen, peasant types. Hard working people perhaps, but not very bright. They were supposed to just follow the orders of their superiors, like the Sadducees. They couldn't conceive Peter and John could speak so clearly and boldly to them. But the truths about Jesus are so simple. Our Reformed churches in Australia and the associated Christian school movement might not have come into existence were it not for a peasant woman. In the 19th century this Dutch farmhand's wife spoke to her minister, Dr Abraham Kuyper, a liberal theologian at the time. She set him straight about the gospel when he came to visit. His influence in forming the Reformed churches, Christian education, Christian philosophy has been enormous.

The rulers were astonished at the clarity of the way Peter and John spoke. And then they realized something: *"...these men had been with Jesus."* Something in the way they acted and spoke, their calm and poise, their trust in God, showed they had been with Jesus. That's striking isn't it? Can people see in our lives that we have been with Jesus? Someone once asked, 'If we were on trial for being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?' We see in our text that the rulers had nothing on Peter and John. So, they huffed and puffed and simply told them to stop talking about Jesus. To which Peter and John replied (Acts 4:19) *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."* We live in a time when less and less people want to hear about Jesus. They would prefer we kept quiet. But we cannot stop witnessing. It would be extremely selfish and callous to do that. Because we know *"There is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved."*

Now let's see what Peter and John did after they were released from the Sanhedrin. When they got back to the church, they reported what the chief priests had said to them. Then the first thing they did was pray! Look at the prayer (Acts 4:24-28) *"Sovereign Lord, you who made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them."* The Greek word for 'Sovereign Lord' is 'despotes'. It was a term used of a slave owner and it referred to a ruler of unchallengeable power. So, they started off by recognising the power of God. The Sanhedrin might try to silence the church. But the disciples recognised a higher authority. Whatever happens, no one can overturn the decrees of God! Remember who has ultimate rule in this world. In their prayer they quoted Psalm 2 where David foretold the world's opposition to Jesus. But standing up

against God is like 'plotting in vain'. In fact, Herod and Pilate, the Gentiles and Jews were united in a conspiracy against Jesus. But in God's will and power that was what God had decided beforehand should happen. So, in prayer they recognise the awesome God of all who made, who spoke, who decided. In other words, remember the God who we are praying to! Remember who we are witnessing for.

After recognising the wonder of God, they *pray* "Now Lord consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." Isn't it interesting? They didn't ask God to remove the threats or for protection. They didn't ask that he deal with the Sadducees. They only asked that God help them to speak 'with great boldness'. They prayed that they would be undeterred and unafraid of the threats. They knew there would always be some form of threat wherever the gospel was preached. So, they didn't ask for another role or for a life of peace. They knew their calling was to be Christ's witness to the world. And so, they prayed for the boldness necessary to fit their circumstances. In our situation we might pray: 'Lord you know how clever this person is. Give what I need to be a good witness'. Or: 'Lord you know this woman's situation. Give me what I need to answer her well. Please give me the resources to meet the challenge. Above all give me boldness to speak'. In other words, we pray for God to work in our hearts to speak well for Jesus, while we also pray that God speaks to the heart of the person we are talking with. So where does witnessing for Jesus begin? On our knees in prayer. 'Holy Spirit please make us bold! Holy Spirit please make them alive to your gospel!'

Look at how God answered their prayer. (Acts 4:31) "*After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly*". What a reassurance! Witnessing for Jesus is not a matter of how old, or the qualifications you hold, but about being 'bold'. You can do that because you are witnessing by the power of the Spirit.