

4 - THE EMPIRE STRIKES OUT

Acts 3 & 4

(Play Video)

EPISODE IV: THE EMPIRE STRIKES OUT

The Followers of THE WAY are making an incredible impact in the city of Jerusalem. God is blessing them and the church continues to grow. More and more people become followers as amazing signs and wonders continue to take place!

However, the local authorities feel threatened. So many people are following they are concerned they will lose their power.

The time has come to send a message to followers of THE WAY...

Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back is in my opinion the best of the original Star Wars movies. I'm sure there's room for debate, but hopefully everyone can agree that as far as sequels go, The Empires Strikes Back is one of the best in any genre of movie.

When I was a kid, however, I didn't like the way *TESB* ended. It didn't end with the Rebel Alliance in the best of positions. Han Solo has been captured and is being handed over to Jabba the Hut. Luke has handed over his hand after losing it to Darth Vader in a light saber duel. Plus, our world has been rocked learning that Darth Vader is Luke's father. Things aren't looking the best. We aren't quite sure what is happening.

But that's the way life is so often isn't it? Things don't look good and we aren't sure what is happening. We want to find a new normal, but it doesn't always go according to plan.

As we continue looking at the launch of the church in the book of Acts, we are going to see today that after an incredible beginning, things didn't continue going smoothly for the church.

As we've been working our way through Acts, seeking to understand the why and how of church, last week we finished the end of Acts 2 by seeing God using devoted people to build His church. They were devoted to the Word, fellowship, worship and prayer. This week we move into chapters 3 and 4.

We pick back up at chapter 3 verse 1:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. **2** Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. **3** When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. **4** Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" **5** So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

Now, for those of you who are under the age of forty, lame doesn't mean he was boring, dull and dead! No! That's a lame guy, that's a lame movie! What it means is he couldn't walk. So being unable to work, he would beg for money. Since Peter told him to give them his attention, he's expecting a handout. Of course, God specializes in the unexpected.

6 Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." 7 Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. 8 He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

When a lame man has been begging for 40 years in the same spot, to see him jumping around is going to create a reaction among the people.

9 When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Just a side point here... God's timing is always perfect. If this man had been begging by the Temple gate for 40 years, that means Jesus would have walked by this lame beggar. Yet, Jesus didn't heal him. Why not? Because it wasn't time... it wasn't until one day when Peter and John went to pray that this man was given the ability to walk.

Since the crowd is wondering what happened, Peter takes the opportunity to address them.

11 While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. 12 When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

From this point on, Peter tells the crowd it was only because of Jesus these amazing miracles are taking place. Of course, God uses Peter to tell the crowd the truth about themselves.

15 You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.

You murderers! No, this would not be a popular message to preach. This would not be a message the church consultants would recommend sharing in order to build up a crowd. To preach this message required boldness. But we can preach this message because while there is bad news our sin has put Jesus to death on the cross, the good news is God has raised Him back to life! And that changes everything.

We have a group of disciples who before Jesus went to the cross acted like a bunch of cowards. They didn't want to face any opposition. They wanted to hide. Peter denied Jesus to a teenage girl. That's how much he was wanting to avoid being recognized.

But now, after the resurrection, Peter and the other disciples are bold. They are standing up and speaking out. This doesn't sit well with the local authorities in Jerusalem.

Acts 4:1 says -

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. 2 They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.

Sadducees were basically a political party built around beliefs of what God's Law taught. There were 2 major groups back then, the Pharisees and Sadducees. One of the main differences between them was the belief in resurrection. Sadducees did not think it was possible. That's why they were "sad-you-see." No life after death.

3 They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. 4 But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

Peter and John get thrown in jail, but the church keeps on growing! In fact, the number we are given is 5,000 men. That's just the men. There could easily have been 10 - 15,000 if you counted women and children. Maybe even 20,000. This is a huge movement taking place in Jerusalem. No wonder the Jewish leaders feel threatened.

So they've arrested Peter and John and bring them in for a "trial." They want to know by what power or what name they've done these things.

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 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, 10 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. 11 Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' 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."

Boom! Peter just tells it like it is. And I love the reaction from the leaders.

13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

I've talked about the word in Greek for "unschooled, ordinary men" before, but it's worth repeating. "Idiotas." How in the world can these idiots do these things??? Yet, what was their conclusion? These men had been with Jesus.

What an amazing difference Jesus makes!

Unfortunately, this doesn't persuade the leaders. They threaten Peter and John to stop preaching in Jesus' name and let them go.

What's key for us this morning is to see how the church responded to these threats.

How did the Church respond to Persecution?

This is important because it instructs us how to respond when we face persecution. So the first thing we see them doing is...

The disciples expected persecution.

The disciples were not caught off guard by being opposed. They fully expected to face persecution. Why? Because Jesus had told them it would happen.

Mark 13:13, “Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

Peter would later write to other Christians in the book we call 1 Peter and say this: “**12** Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13** But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:12-13)

Don't be surprised when persecution comes, you need to expect it. This is basic discipleship 101 material. If the world hated Jesus, they are going to hate you. Don't take it personal. It's about Jesus. He's a threat to people's sense of control and power. So anyone who follows Jesus needs to expect push back. There will be opposition. There will be persecution.

It is estimated there are 100 million Christians in the world today living under the threat of persecution. Not the kind of persecution we face in the USA, but the actual threat of death.

In North Korea it is estimated there are between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians are being held in detention camps.

In Iraq, the number of Christians have shrunk from 1.5 million to 300,000. They are being massacred.

One report I read stated: “*More Christians have been martyred in the 20th and 21st centuries than during the previous 19 combined.*”

It is a violent world we live in... but when we follow Jesus, we aren't surprised by persecution. We expect it.

Not only that, we use it for an opportunity...

The disciples used persecution as an opportunity.

When Peter and John are brought before the authorities, they took the opportunity to boldly share the good news of Jesus!

It doesn't get much better than the closing statement Peter made back in Acts 4:12!

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.

Peter took the opportunity and used it to share Jesus. Of course that was the last thing we would have expected from Peter!

How in the world could Peter stand in the face of possible death and declare what he did?

He knew Jesus, he could be bold because he had been with Jesus. Here's the key, you have to remember this:

Boldness is not the goal, knowing Jesus is the goal.

Boldness is always a byproduct of knowing Jesus.

When I am devoted to God's Word, when I'm praying and asking God to direct me, you're going to have opportunity after opportunity because you've spent time with Jesus!

In fact, on your notes, there's a little chart there. I want you to do this, by number one, put in **TIME**. Time with Jesus, when you spend time with Jesus it leads to number two, which is **FAITH**. As your faith in Jesus grows, it leads to **BOLDNESS**. Write down boldness. As your boldness grows, it leads to **RESULTS**. When you see spiritual results, guess what? You spend more time with Jesus, and when you spend more time with Jesus, guess what? You get more faith and you start praying bigger prayers and you see God work, which leads to boldness, which then leads to the Acts type of results, which leads to more time with Jesus. And it goes on and on and on and on.

The problem is, the opposite is true as well. When you don't spend time with Jesus you don't have much faith, you're not bold. You don't see results and you don't want to spend much time with Jesus and then, guess what? You end up living for the lower things of this world, wondering why you're empty the whole time.

But I'm telling you, you can make a difference like that if you'll spend time with Jesus! He'll grow your faith, He'll give you boldness and you'll see great results.

What I want to say is this: I am tired of church being half-hearted and lukewarm. Let's just be the real deal. Let's get so close to Jesus that we are overflowing with faith and boldness and love and compassion to help people who do not know the joy of life with Christ.

God loves to take ordinary people and give them extraordinary boldness. He loves to take people that others overlook and give them boldness, because a lot of you are going to say, "Well I'm a Christian but I'm just not naturally bold. I'm kind of a quiet person, I'm not a seminary guy, I'm not a teacher of the Bible. You know, I'm just a stay at home mom, or I'm just a student, or I'm just a dude..."

No! There are so many different ways to be bold for Jesus.

You may be in your work place and everybody is gossiping, Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah! And you just say, You know what? Because of my faith, I'm not going to be a part of this! And you walk off! And guess what you just were? You were bold! That was bold!

You may be a girl and you love God and all of your friends, let's be honest, they dress like hookers. They're going out and they look like...I don't mean to be rude, but let's just be honest about the styles. You know, basically half naked. Here's the deal, I'm going to be modest to

honor God! And they're like, But the styles, the fashion trends... No, I'm not going to dress that way! I'm going to honor God!

Guess what you just were? Guess what you are? You are bold!

You may be a guy and all of your buddies are chasing women and trying to go on conquest after conquest... But you say: You know what, I'm not going to treat them like they're objects, I'm actually going to treat women like they are created in the image of God. And I'm going to honor my future wife that I have not yet met and honor my God who calls me to different standards. And I'm not going to do that!

Guess what you just were? Bold!

You may be in a business deal and you could make a lot of money on it, but you're looking at it going, You know what? I don't feel right about this, I don't think it's quite ethical. And you walk away from a very profitable business deal because of your faith. What were you? You were bold!

God can take ordinary people and give them extraordinary boldness.

And this usually happens because we are in a situation where there can be persecution. Where we can be challenged as to whether or not we are going to live what we say we believe. But because we expect the persecution, we flip it upside down and use it for an opportunity to honor Jesus. That's what disciples do. They use persecution as an opportunity.

Peter wrote: [Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.](#) (1 Peter 3:15)

We don't need any more jerks for Jesus running around. We need people who are bold and willing to share why they have hope in a world so jacked up by sin.

Very quickly, let's look at a few more ways the church responded to persecution.

The disciples were obedient to God no matter what the cost.

In Acts 4, the disciples are threatened by the authorities.

[18 Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! 20 As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."](#)

[21 After further threats they let them go.](#)

They may have been fisherman, but they were pretty sharp. When commanded to listen to the government authority, they replied we are accountable to a higher authority.

The Bible does speak of being subject to the governing authorities. Basically, we are to be the best citizens you'd ever find in this world. God has set up government and we are to honor that authority.

But it does have limits. When you are told to disobey God, then you defer to God's side.

One of the biggest obstacles we face in being bold and sharing the message of Jesus is we think we have to win. I know I do... and maybe because I'm too competitive. But we want to win the argument. We want to win the debate. But that's not what we are called to do.

Peter didn't stand there and go back and forth with those leaders in Jerusalem. All Peter says is: "We must speak what we have seen and heard." Peter is a witness.

Yes, there are some gifted by God to debate and defend the faith in a public event, but the point here is much simpler. Don't worry if everyone doesn't agree with you. Your job is not to win. Your job is not to control society. Your job is to say what God wants said.

We are not called to win; we are called to witness.

Last Friday, January 22nd, was the 43rd anniversary of the Roe vs. Wade decision by the US Supreme Court legalizing abortion on demand in the US.

I know abortion is a dividing issue. It divides political parties. It has divided families. I'm sure it has divided churches as well.

But when I talk about abortion, please understand I'm not talking politics, I am talking about what God's Word says. Being a Christian is not about being a conservative or liberal, Democrat or Republican, it's about following the way of Jesus. It's about having a biblical perspective on life.

In following Christ, I believe God created us and cares about His creation. I believe God has a purpose for His creation. This causes me to be pro-life and stand for human dignity.

I am to care about the defense of those who cannot defend themselves, not only in the womb, but beyond throughout all stages of life. I am to care about poverty. I am to care about people who are sick. I am to care about the environment and be a good steward of God's creation. I care about violence.

All of these are life issues. They're about honoring God and His creation. But unfortunately, if you have a biblical perspective on all of these issues, you aren't going to be in full agreement with either political party.

So can I encourage you, especially in this election year... be humble enough to acknowledge the issues, be respectful enough to disagree on the issues while remaining friends, and ultimately be so bold as to say, "Who is it better to listen to? God or the authorities? But as for me, I can't help but speak about what I've seen and heard!"

When Peter and John were threatened and released, you know what they did next?

The disciples united together.

Acts 4:23 - On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

Their response? Prayer.

They cried out to God, but it wasn't a "woe is us" prayer... I love their request in verse 29.

29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

And that's a prayer God answers.

You see, as followers of Jesus we expect persecution to come our way.
But we use persecution as an opportunity to share Jesus.
We are obedient to God no matter what the cost.
And we unite together to pray for boldness.

That is how we honor God together.

COMMUNION

(Video after prayer)