

=THE BOOK OF ACTS=
Lesson 4
The First Persecution - Acts 4

AIM: to teach my pupils concerning the first persecution of the early church.

POINT OF CONTACT: This chapter revolves around a meeting of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the ruling religious body of the day. Though the Hebrew people were under the control of the Roman Empire, Rome still permitted them to visit with death any who violated the sanctity of the temple. Consequently, the Sanhedrin met to judge Peter and John, who were supposed to have violated the sanctity of the temple. A good point of contact would be to draw on the chalkboard the arrangement of the Sanhedrin. Better still, have the class sit as a Sanhedrin meeting. The Sanhedrin consisted of 71 members, 23 of whom could form a quorum, and before whom such cases as violating the sanctity of the temple might be brought.

Notice the picture: The Tribunal, in all the glory of their robes and dignity, were seated in a semicircle. The president of the Tribunal was in the center of this semicircle, and around them would be law students listening to the case to become acquainted with the process of law. Before all of these people were Peter and John.

You could have the class sit in a semicircle and let someone represent Peter and John on trial before them, or the teacher could be in the place of Peter and John and have the class in a semicircle. If this is not possible, then you could draw on the chalkboard the semicircle, the crowd behind, and the location of Peter and John, seated before them all. This would give the class the idea of the meeting of the Sanhedrin.

I. THE PERSECUTION.

1. The persecution was brought about because of the man healed in Acts 3. Following this, a crowd had come, and Peter had preached to them on Solomon's Porch. Suddenly Peter and John were arrested and kept in a ward overnight. It is interesting that the persecution arose because of what they did, not what they believed. The Devil will not persecute anyone for what he believes, but rather for what he does about his beliefs. Being fundamental will not draw persecution; believing the Bible will not draw persecution; but when the Gospel is preached, 3,000 are saved, a man is healed, and progress is made, then comes the persecution! A person who is not criticized is not doing anything for God.
2. The basic opposition came from the Sadducees. The Sanhedrin was composed of others besides the Sadducees, but no doubt it was packed with Sadducees that morning for this purpose. The high priest also was a Sadducee. The Sadducees were a sect which:
 - 1) Denied the supernatural. Because of this, they were fighting Peter and John's miracle.
 - 2) Were religious rationalists. This means that they denied every story that pertained to the miraculous. Once again, you can see why they would attack this miracle.
 - 3) Believed neither in angels, spirits, nor the resurrection from the dead. The Resurrection they denied, the existence of angels they laughed at, and the idea of the Holy Spirit they had abandoned. You readily can see why they were opposed to this miracle.

It is interesting that this opposition came from the Sadducees and not the Pharisees. In the life of Christ, the opposition was basically from the Pharisees; and the Sadducees caused Him very little trouble. Of course, this was before His resurrection. The Apostles stressed the resurrection so much that the Sadducees became the greatest enemies to the Gospel in place of the Pharisees. Actually, the Pharisees caused very little trouble in the Book of Acts. Ironically enough, at least twice a Pharisee raised his voice to defend the Christians later on in the Book of Acts. The Sadducees were the liberals of their day—they were the modernists. They did not believe in the supernatural.

3. The persecution came because the Sadducees were grieved that Peter and John taught the people and preached the resurrection from the dead. (Acts 4:2) Teaching the Bible and preaching to the

unsaved will always stir some opposition. (Pause here and have the class name something for which they have been criticized. By this, we mean something that they did for God and for which they were criticized. Then also there might be some things suggested that would draw criticism if we did them. These might also be listed by the class.)

4. There were many conversions. (Acts 4:4) Especially let those who say that there can be only one Pentecost read this. Here we have 5,000 men converted, besides women and children! There could have been as many as 15,000 or more converts because of this. Let there be the right condition in the church, proper preaching of the Gospel, miraculous working of the Holy Spirit, and persecution by opposition, and the church becomes fruitful again.
5. Three men were in the center of the court. (Acts 4:13, 14) We have already noticed that Peter and John were two of them, and there was certainly a close comradeship existing between them. Someone has said Peter was the practical one, and John was the poet. John was the dreamer, and Peter was the doer; John was the speaker, and Peter was the thinker. There was, however, another man in the center. This was the man healed in chapter 3. This is their evidence. He is their proof. Humanly speaking, he is actually what saved them from death. As long as we can have a few trophies with us, there is very little the world can do and very little persecution can accomplish.

II. THE MESSAGE. See Acts 4:8-12.

1. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit before he spoke. (Acts 4:8)
2. He pricked them with their own sin. Actually, he accused the accusers. What a splendid way he turned the tables on them! They were there to accuse him; then he turned and accused them. See Acts 4:10, 11.
3. He presented salvation. (Acts 4:12) He reminded them that there is salvation in none other but Jesus Christ. He took this as an opportunity to witness. May we take advantage of every opportunity we have to witness for Jesus Christ.

III. THE WARNING.

1. They noticed that Peter and John were bold. (Acts 4:13) “Boldness” does not mean “cocky.” It simply means “confident” and “plain.”
2. They noticed that Peter and John were common men. The word “ignorant” here actually means “plebeian,” which means, “the common class of people.” In spite of the fact that they were of this class, they were absolutely confounding the educated Sanhedrin.
3. “...they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13c) They could tell! Even our critics can tell if we have been with Jesus. (A good thing for the teacher to do here would be to stick his finger in some dirt, sand or water and show how the substance clings after the finger is pulled away. Our environment does affect us. When a person abides in Christ, even though he is away from the place of prayer, it is still obvious that he has been with Christ. You might ask the class here to tell you where you have been by each of the following clues:
 - 1) Your hair is all messed up and windblown.
 - 2) You are sopping wet.
 - 3) You have sleep in your eyes.

It was obvious to these men that Peter and John had been with Jesus. What they did not realize is that He was still with them. He was giving them the strength with which to speak and the power with which to serve even then.

4. God provided protection for Peter and John. (Acts 4:14) Once again, the protection was because of the man who was healed. He kept the opposition from saying anything. In verse 16, we find they said, “...we cannot deny it.” Verses 21 and 22 say about the same thing. All they could do was to give Peter and John a warning.
5. They told them not to preach any more in Jesus’ name. (Acts 4:18)
6. “For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” See Acts 4:19, 20. Peter and John had to speak. They couldn’t help it. It was in them; it had to come out. They had a commission they had to carry through.

- IV. THE REASON. Why did all of this happen? How could they be protected through all of this persecution? The Sadducees certainly would want to kill them, and in a sense, they could have twisted the law and had them killed. In Deuteronomy, there are instructions carefully given to the rulers concerning possible manifestations of a prophet, a dreamer of dreams, etc. In other words, these men could have called this witchcraft. Yet, there is a Power which keeps the church progressing and moving forward. Let us notice the things that cause this success:
1. A converted man is proof.
 2. They "...were of one heart and of one soul...." Read Acts 4:32. What does it mean here? It means that they loved each other. There was no criticism in the group. There was oneness of purpose, oneness of desire and oneness of work.
 3. They witnessed. (Acts 4:33)
 4. They shared. (Acts 4:34, 35)

CONCLUSION: When the church is right on the inside, all Hell cannot defeat it on the outside. The only way any church has ever been defeated is from within. Opposition from without is used only to spread the Word of God. It is so interesting, that after the first persecution, there were more converts than before, and the very persecution itself drew attention to the man who had been healed and to the power of God.

MEMORY VERSE: "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard," Acts 4:20.