

Invincible Christians

Our second Scripture reading is Acts 4:5-12. Chapter 3 records the healing of a lame man when Peter and John met him on the way to prayer meeting. A great crowd of people gathered to see the evidence of this miracle, as they saw and heard the man walking and leaping and praising God. When the crowd had gathered, Peter seized the opportunity to preach the gospel of Jesus, much as he did earlier on the Day of Pentecost following the also attractive miracle of languages (Acts 2:1ff). The 40-year-old, congenitally, formerly crippled man, now completely healed, became exhibit A, showing the power of the risen Christ.

We note, not the positive reaction of the crowd, but the very negative and hostile response of the religious leadership of the day, primarily the party of the Sadducees. Also, they were fearful that these followers of Jesus through their fast-growing movement, would disturb the peace they enjoyed under the Romans. We see that the priests and the captain of the temple guard interrupted Peter and John's witness and dragged them into jail and the next morning these two found themselves being accused in the "war room" of the Sanhedrin, the council of ruling Jewish leadership. How Peter and John reacted to this arrest and attempt at intimidation shows us in a graphic way what it means to be an invincible Christian, a follower of Jesus who is "incapable of being conquered, overcome or subdued."

Follow in your Bible as I read **Acts 4:5-12**.

⁵ The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are being asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' ¹² "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Whenever I read The Acts of the Apostles and I read the accounts of those in the persecuted church of today standing firm I cannot help but ask myself, what would I do in similar circumstances? Suppose I was the pastor of a church in areas of the world where witnesses and preaching and leading people to faith in Christ is a capital offense, how would I act? At the threat of something horrible happening to me or worse, to my family, would I stand firm in my witness for Christ? After all, the word "martyr" is a transliteration of the Greek word for witness. This means that suffering and even dying for one's faith became so commonplace for those who gave witness to Jesus that the word for witness soon became associated with suffering and death.

Because suffering for the sake of my witness is so foreign to my experience I must examine the quality of my faith and ask, "Would I be, should my circumstances change, be an indomitable witness for Jesus Christ?" Or am I instead, quite capable of being conquered, overcome or subdued by threats and opposition from the world? Our text portrays for us the essence of the character of

invincible followers of Jesus Christ. Our prayer should be that we can and will take on these characteristics that will enable us to stand up for Jesus whatever the cost. Even if our circumstances and opposition from the world should never become as severe as what we see in our text, we would do well to take on these characteristics that would make our witness for Jesus effectively authentic. In fact, I am so bold as to say that without these characteristics of these apostles of the first church we cannot be effective witnesses, even in the best of circumstances.

Those like Peter and John, who are invincible people, are people who have **convictions** and not just beliefs. Someone has said that a belief is something we hold; whereas a conviction is something that holds us. We may argue for a belief, but we will die for a conviction. Beliefs may come and go, but convictions are what define us and give our lives meaning. These disciples, who before the resurrection of Jesus, were defeated and fearful men, now, after seeing and being with their risen Lord and filled with his Spirit, are people of conviction for which they now were ready to suffer and die. What was so troubling to the leaders of the Jews was the message that Peter and John and other followers were proclaiming about Jesus being risen and alive and active among them. These leaders had thought they had done away with Jesus of Nazareth! They had taken every possible measure to ensure that none of the followers of the crucified Jesus would steal his body and perpetrate a myth that he had risen from the dead. And yet, despite these efforts, the followers of Jesus were saying exactly that—their Master, Jesus, was alive! (Mat. 27:62-66).

This news and message that their Lord had been raised was threatening. But also they were disturbed that the apostles were claiming that those who believe in Jesus will also experience resurrection from death. First, for the Sadducees, naturalists, the idea of a resurrection went against their entire worldview. If the one they claimed was alive then indeed people would assume he was divine and many others would believe in him, as indeed had already some 5,000 men, not including the women who were not traditionally included in the count.

The religious high court called Peter and John before them, after holding them in jail overnight. They began the interrogation by asking by what power or in whose authority they performed the miracle in the lame man's life. Then Peter gladly seized the opportunity to attribute the healing to the power of the Holy Spirit (vv. 5-8).

Note how that the conviction of Peter was, in the hearing of Jesus' enemies, quite dogmatic (v.12). Peter dared to say Jesus was the only way to salvation and that there is "no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." "Dogmatic" is a pejorative word, meaning one who is characterized by "positiveness in assertion of opinion especially when unwarranted or arrogant." The unbelieving world thinks that people who say that Jesus is the only Savior and the only way to salvation are arrogantly or narrowly dogmatic. Indeed, in a world of religious pluralism when everything goes (except biblical truth), to say one religion is better than another is politically incorrect and terribly unsophisticated.

These disciples and apostles like Peter, John and all the rest were not willing to witness, suffer and die for a pretender or for an ideal devoid of reality. They had heard the claims of Jesus for himself, had seen his resurrection promise fulfilled and had now been filled with the Spirit of Jesus himself. Members of the Sanhedrin who had experienced encounters with Jesus saw the similarity of his followers, in terms of their inspired wisdom that seemed to come from a source beyond them. Members of the Sanhedrin "saw the courage of Peter and John" (v.13). This courage is also translated "boldness" (ESV, etc.). This is a word that was used to describe the characteristic of free citizens to speak out without fear of reprisal. These high ranking officials, who sought to intimidate

the apostles, were astonished to see how freely these apostles spoke out in behalf of the one who had been crucified just weeks before.

Peter and John realized that the high priest and his father-in-law who had orchestrated the arrest, condemnation and execution of Jesus was the one before whom they were standing in this court room. If Jesus had been condemned and crucified, then why not them? In fact, Jesus had told them they could expect similar treatment from their enemies (Jn. 15:18ff). So these same enemies were astounded that Peter and John were willing to risk the same fate.

Obviously, Peter and John didn't fear death, but had a higher, reverent fear of God, whom they absolutely trusted. They didn't fear death because they had already died to self and to fear itself, being willing to lose their lives to find real life, as Jesus promised (Matt. 10:39, etc). And what a contrast this bold witnessing Simon Peter was to the earlier timid Simon Peter, who had denied his Lord three times before the accusations of a young girl (Jn. 18:15ff)!

Acts 4 also tells us that when the Sanhedrin "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" (v. 13). The words that are translated "unschooled" and "ordinary," do not mean that they thought Peter and John were illiterate or stupid. The Sanhedrin, who prided themselves with their rabbinic training and pedigree, were amazed that Peter could wield Scripture and speak with such power without formal training in religion and rhetoric. I think they again were reminded of their Lord Jesus, who during his earthly ministry also elicited a similar response of amazement: "The Jews were amazed and asked, 'How did this man get such learning without having studied?'" (Jn. 7:15).

In the words of the Apostle Paul, God tends to use people in his kingdom service that the world doesn't highly regard for natural ability or human prominence, worldly power or wealth. Paul says that "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise" and to show that kingdom power belongs to God alone. God tends to choose instruments that the world considers weak or unimportant so that he gets the glory by showing his power (1 Cor. 1:20-31).

God uses weak and broken people. Jesus could have dismissed Peter as a failure and written him off for future kingdom service; but instead, Jesus restores Simon and transforms him from a weak-willed failure to a bold, indomitable leader of the first church. And of course John had his problems. Along with his brother, he revealed his political ambition to be given a place of honor and prestige at Jesus' side in his consummated kingdom (Mk. 10:35-45). Now John is willing to be an almost silent "sidekick" to Peter, who obviously has the leadership role. He's learned to seek greatness through lowly service.

Invincible Christians, such as Peter and John demonstrate the authenticity of their faith. "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*" (v. 13). The connection with Jesus seems unmistakable. Yes, they had spent three perhaps three and a half years with Jesus, who taught them many things that were to make a lasting impression. Yet it was not enough that they had been with him in his earthly ministry. The real connection with Jesus happened after the resurrection, when they saw the risen Lord, became convinced of his victory over death and then received his promised gift of the Holy Spirit. In fact it was on the Day of Pentecost, when they received the fullness of the Holy Spirit, that they began to be much more like Jesus. Since Pentecost,

Peter became an indomitable leader of the church. John became the humble pastor who later wrote his gospel, his letters about love and then received the *Revelation* while exiled on the Isle of Patmos.

In addition to the undeniable evidence that Jesus lives and that his word is true, we can and must offer to those around us the undeniable evidence of our lives. No one can deny what has happened to you and sometimes the best evidence we can offer is our story—what Jesus did for you and me and how he has changed and is changing your life and what he did in your life today. No one else can deny your story and you alone can discredit your witness of what Jesus has done and what he is doing and can do through your life.

Like Peter and John, people of compulsion are those of uncompromising obedience. I love the picture here of an ostensibly powerful and austere body of authority, totally frustrated by these two nobody-apostles, Peter and John! They commanded them to keep quiet about this Jesus and healings in his name, that is, by this authority, just have to stop! And notice the reply of Peter and John is polite and respectful as always. In essence they say, *“We’re so sorry gentlemen. We wish we could comply with your demands on us. But it’s just not possible for us to do. And you’ll simply have to decide whether God would want us to obey you or to obey him. Now what do you think, gentlemen? Which do you honestly think God would want us to do? Obey him or obey you? While you’re pondering this, we’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to keep on obeying God. You see, there’s this irresistible urge we have to tell others, as many as possible in fact, about the risen Lord Jesus.”*

And this is what faithful witnesses in the persecuted church are doing right now, possibly many at this very moment, facing suffering, threats and even imminent death. They have already decided that they will obey Jesus at whatever cost he asks of them. And in uncompromising obedience to Jesus we find the only true freedom there is. We need never fear what anyone can do to us when we have a holy fear of a loving God (Lk. 12:4f).

And this is the point at which I must give myself pause for serious reflection, asking myself how faithful would I be in the face of threats for real suffering and death? Almost daily I read about severe suffering endured by faithful believers the world over. Our arena of suffering today in our nation is not likely to be political or even overt. Most Christian suffering in America will come at the hands of unbelieving neighbors, or even associates who wear the label of Christian yet who exhibit darkness and are not only resistant to our witness but antagonistic. And Jesus warned us that even family members, our own children can turn against us, which likely would be the worst suffering of all (Mat. 10:34-39).

Are we willing and ready to be indomitable, invincible Christians, whatever the cost may be?” Are you and I also ready to become invincible followers of Jesus, by being people of solid and unbreakable conviction, of being those of genuine conversion and people who witness for Jesus by a compulsion that will prompt us to speak a good word for him?