

Place: Lurgan Baptist 5:12:2006

Reading: Acts 4:1-22

## THE CHURCH ABLAZE

### 8. THE SECRET OF HOLY BOLDNESS

In the second century, the pastor of the church in Smyrna was a man by the name of Polycarp. History tells us that Polycarp knew the Apostle John and had heard from his very lips the words, “ *remain faithful unto death.*” In AD 155, at the age of 86, Polycarp was summoned before the Roman proconsul at Smyrna. The proconsul demanded that Polycarp take an oath renouncing Christ and claim allegiance to Caesar. Polycarp refused. He said, “ *Eighty-six years, have I served the Lord Jesus. He has been faithful unto me. How can I be faithless to Him and blaspheme the name of my Saviour ?*” “ **Swear by the name of Caesar,**” the proconsul insisted, “ *or I will have you torn and fed to the animals.*” “ *Then hand me over to the beasts,*” said Polycarp. “ *You will not change my heart. I tell you plainly that I am a Christian even until death.*”

Enraged, the authorities sent a messenger out into the city to proclaim that Polycarp had committed high treason against Rome by admitting to being a Christian.

The messenger gathered a blood-thirsty mob together in the arena of Smyrna. There, the enraged crowd, built a pyre of boards and planks. Polycarp was delivered to

the mob, which had brought hammers and nails to nail his hands and feet to the stakes that were being set afire.

Polycarp then uttered those famous words, “ *Put away those nails and let them be. The One who gives me strength to endure the flames will give me strength not to flinch at the stake. You threaten me with a fire that burns for a short time and is quickly quenched. For you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked and the judgement to come and an everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting ? Come do what you will to me.*”

So they burned him at the stake and Polycarp was faithful until death. He feared not the world for he feared God. Throughout its history the church of Jesus Christ has faced persecution. During the Roman persecutions of the first three centuries, for example, Christians were thrown to wild animals, crucified, turned into human torches, and tortured in all the cruel ways evil men could devise. But far from destroying the church, persecution served to purify and strengthen it. After surviving three centuries of violent attacks the church emerged as the dominant force in the Roman empire. In the words of the church Father Tertullian, “ ***The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.***”

In modern times, the church ( at least in the West ) has rarely faced physical persecution. We’ve never had to stare down the barrel of a gun, feel the keen edge of a knife, thrust into our bodies, or endure isolation or imprisonment for the sake of the gospel. Perhaps, with us Satan’s attacks have become more subtle. Instead of threatening the body, Satan’s persecutions aim at the

ego. They threaten our selfish pride, our need for acceptance, our status. My .... Satan has largely destroyed the spiritual effectiveness of the church without having to kill the individual believers ! How has he done it ? By encouraging believers to live self-centred, complacent, indolent, worldly lives. He has discovered that this is effective in keeping people from being attracted to the Christian faith. Martyrs are respected for the strength of their character, but compromisers are despised.

Now the first opposition to the early church did not take long to arise, and it came from the same Jewish leaders who had executed the Lord Jesus ( 4:10 ) Acts ( Ch's 4, 5, 7, 8, and 12 ) record those persecutions. That the church should face persecution came as no surprise since the Lord Jesus warned His followers to expect it. In ( Jn 15:18-20 ) He said, “ *If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.* ” Paul wrote to Timothy, “ *All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.* ” ( 2 Tim 3:12 1 Pet 2:21 ) My .... if we live godly, Christ-centred lives we will inevitably come into conflict with the satanic world system. Indeed the day may soon come when believers in the Western World will be physically persecuted, tortured, or even martyred, as the world escalates its hatred of the gospel. But all this is not bad, for as someone once said, “ ***One advantage of being thrown on your back is that you face heaven.*** ”

Now here were these early believers facing the first wave of persecution. How did they respond ? How did they get on ? Some years ago there was a programme on U. S. A. radio called “ ***The low pressure salesman.*** ” He had to go and make sales but he was intimidated by people and he would knock on the door and say,

“ *Nobody home, I hope, I hope, I hope.* ” My .... a lot of us are like that. I'm sure we want to share our faith but we've been intimidated and have become cowardly Christians. ***What is the secret of holy boldness ?*** Well, look with me at ( Acts 4 ) and as we think of the apostles notice,

### (1) THE STRATEGY OF THEIR ENEMY

Its interesting to observe that the opposition of the Pharisees is paramount in the Gospels. In the Acts it is the Sadducees who oppose the Christians. You see,

#### (a) ***THEY WERE ATTACKED:***

Look at,

#### (1) *The PERPETRATORS of this Attack:*

The priests were the ordinary priests conducting the evening sacrifice. The “ *captain of the temple,* ” was the chief of the temple force, which was composed of Levites. And the Sadducees were the dominant religious and political force in Israel. Little good can be said about this bunch. The Pharisees opposed the Lord Jesus for religious reasons. The Sadducees

however, opposed the apostles largely because of political motivations. That is why the Sadducees were not as involved in the early persecutions against Christ. The Sadducees were mostly aristocratic, wealthy landowners and to protect their political position and wealth they firmly opposed any overt opposition to Rome. Look at ( Jn 11:47-48 ) The chief priests were the Sadducees. The high priest a Sadducee provided a solution. ( Jn 11:49-50 ) Now in the Book of Acts persecution was largely from the Sadducees. (1) Look at,

(2) The REASON for this Attack:

You see the authorities were greatly disturbed with the apostles because “ *they taught the people and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead.*” ( 4:2 ) Now remember the Sadducees were the theological liberals of their day .... denying the supernatural, denying evil spirits, denying angels and above all denying the resurrection. ( 23:8 Mk 12:18 ) These Jewish leaders had executed the Lord Jesus as a blasphemer, and now the apostles were boldly proclaiming Him as the resurrected Messiah. The resurrection of Christ had disproved their liberal theology, but instead of confessing themselves wrong, they spearheaded this second and fatal national rejection of Christ. My .... they hated Christ, they hated His very name, they hated Him for His resurrection. I wonder like the apostles do we focus on the resurrection of Christ ? We’re great at getting people to the Cross, my .... do we get them to the tomb ? (1) (2) Look at,

(3) The NATURE of this Attack:

( 4:3 ) The Devil always fights the church when the church is on the move. Charles Spurgeon used to say that Satan never kicks a dead horse. Satan knew that the church was on the move so he attacked it. Now in ( Ch 2 ) we read that 3,000 people were saved. Here in ( 4:4 ) we discover that number had grown to 5,000. “ *And the number of the men was about five thousand.*” The word used for men ( andros ) is in the masculine sense as opposed to a woman. These were 5,000 men, and it is likely their families were also saved. Some believe as many as 15,000 to 20,000 were saved by the time of this account in ( Ch 4 ) So its very possible that the church numbered around 25,000 members. Then what happened ? Well, Satan came a **Lion** and had the apostles threatened. In ( Ch 5 ) Satan came like a **Serpent**, influencing Ananias and Sapphira to infect the church with their lying and hypocrisy. My .... if Satan cannot win by persecution from the outside, he will try pollution on the inside. Then Satan came as the **Accuser** in ( Acts Ch 6 ) One group of widows accused the other group of widows taking over. “ *We are being neglected,*” they said. Do you know something ? Satan always likes to get the saints to accuse one another. Then according to ( Acts Ch 12 ) Satan came as a **Murderer**. James was killed and Peter was put into prison to be kept for execution. Are you underestimating the power of Satan ?

Do you realise that the Devil uses people ? But if you fight people, you are wasting your time for “ *we*

*wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers.*” ( Eph 6:12 ) Satan uses all kinds of people to attack the church. No wonder Peter wrote, “ *Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary, the devil, like a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.*” ( 1 Pet 5:8 ) (a)

**(b) *THEY WERE ADVANCING:***

Look at ( 4:4 ) Do you see what persecution does ? It leads to the expansion of the church. It was three o'clock in the afternoon when all this began. But what eventful hours ! Don't you wish that the church would have more hours like this ? Three thousand were saved at Pentecost .... thousands more were now added. Luke, counting only the men ( the word he uses excludes women and children ) gives us a total of 5,000. This was the total number of men in the Jerusalem congregation at this time. Indeed this is the last mention of a specific number in Acts, from this time on the church grew too fast to keep an accurate account. ( 5:14 6:7 9:31 16:5 19:20 28:31 ) My .... what a stir there must have been in Jerusalem at this time. The church on the one hand being *attacked*, and on the other hand making great *advances* ! (a) (b)

**(c) *THEY WERE ACCUSED:***

Jewish law did not permit trials at night ( though that law was ignored in the case of Christ ) but now that it was day, Peter and John were made to stand before the Jewish Sanhedrin. Now the Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the nation ( under the ultimate authority of the

Romans ) it was also its supreme court. And at the time of this incident it was dominated by the Sadducees. I wonder can you get this picture in your mind ? The Sanhedrin comprised of 71 men. There were 22 lawyers, 22 elders, and 26 priests with the High Priest presiding. From what I gather they were arranged in a semi-circular fashion and the accused was made to stand in the centre of the circle. Do you get the picture ?

Peter, John and the healed beggar, standing before the most influential and wealthy court in the land ?

“ *By what power, or by what name have ye done this ?*” ( 4:7 ) Now that was a subtle, deadly trap, because if the apostles' accusers could get them to attribute this healing to any power other than Jehovah, they could sentence them to death. ( Deut 13:1-5 ) My .... this was the same mob that tried and condemned Christ. Most of us would be absolutely paralysed. But what did Peter do ? One thing is for sure .... he did not run. Look at,

**(2) *THE SUCCESS OF THEIR MINISTRY***

Here is the Early Church facing the first wave of opposition. How did they handle it ? How did they react to this initial outbreak of persecution ? When you and I face *Intolerance*, ( 4:2 ) *Intimidation*, ( 4:3 ) and *Scorn*,

( 4:7 ) how are we to respond ? Well, look at this section and notice from the response of the apostles that we are to,

**(a) *BE SUBMISSIVE:***

Look at ( 4:5-8 ) Incidentally, Annas is called the “*high priest*,” here but at this point in time this was more of an honorary title for him. Caiaphas, his son-in-law, was the actual high priest, but Annas was the ecclesiastical boss of Palestine. Now do you see how the apostles behave as they stand before the most influential court in the land ? Peter and John did not offer any resistance during their arrest ( 4:3 ) nor do they resist now when arraigned before the Sanhedrin. Indeed Peter begins with a courteous recognition of the Sanhedrin and then proceeds to present his defence with clarity and conviction. ( 4:8 ) How did the apostles behave ? They quietly submitted. Why did the apostles behave like this ? Because they knew that God controlled their circumstances. I wonder did Peter have this event in mind when he penned ( 1 Pet 2:18-24 ) My ... we need desperately need to put courteousness back into Christianity. (a)

***(b) BE AGGRESSIVE:***

You see instead of being frightened into silence or compromise, Peter displayed great courage and went on the offensive. Submission is not cowardice. I think we can learn a lot from Peter here as he seized this opportunity to witness for Christ. Do you see,

**(1) Peters BOLDNESS:**

Look at ( 4:13 ) The Sanhedrin were amazed that these “*unlearned*,” ( in the rabbinical schools ) and ignorant

( untrained, not professional theologians ) could argue so effectively from the Scriptures. Christ’s men responded to their persecutors with boldness and aggressiveness. Isn’t this amazing ? My .... this is the same Peter who a couple of months before had trembled before a slip of a girl and denied His Lord with oaths and curses, fearful, lest he, too be arrested and crucified. What made the difference ? The resurrection of Christ and the filling of the Holy Spirit ? Are we bold ( not rude ) in our ministry for Christ ?

**(2) Peters BRAVERY:**

Look if you will at, ( 4:10 ) It was because he had been preaching the resurrection that he had been arrested, but he wasn’t backing down now. Can you imagine the Sanhedrin squirming in their seats as Peter's presents a Risen Christ ? Peter Cartwright was a great circuit-riding Methodist preacher in Illinois. An uncompromising man he had come north from Tennessee because of his opposition to slavery. One Sunday morning when he was about to preach, his deacons told him that President Andrew Jackson was in the congregation. Knowing Cartwright was outspoken, they warned him not to say anything that might offend the President. He stood up to preach and said, “ *I understand President Andrew Jackson is here. I have been requested to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson will go to hell if he does not repent.*”

The audience was shocked. They wondered how the President would respond to this, but after the service

he told Cartwright, “ *Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, I could whip the world.*” My .... this is how the Early Church responded to opposition. With beautiful bravery ! (1) (2)

### (3) Peters BIBLE KNOWLEDGE:

For he says, “ *This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner.*” ( 4:11 ) They knew the quote well. It was from ( Ps 118:22 ) a recognised Messianic prophecy. Can you imagine how they must have writhed at this apt quotation ? As Peter says, “ *This is **the** stone, the stone that Isaiah spoke of ( Is 8:14 ) the stone that Daniel visualised, ( Dan 2:35 ) the stone which was set at nought of you builders, or spiritual leaders of the nation.*” Like Peter, do you know how to shoot down the enemy with the Word of God ? Talk about being aggressive. There was (1) (2) (3) But look again for there was,

### (4) Peters BELIEF:

For he cries, “ *Neither is there salvation .....*,” ( 4:12 ) What's Peter saying ? Simply this. Not only was Christ the source of physical healing, ( 4:9 ) but He also is the only source of spiritual healing ( 4:12 ) It is Christ or nothing ! Christ or judgment ! Christ or Hell ! My .... do you see that Peter's message and witness was entirely Christ-centred ? Is yours ? Is mine ? In ( 4:10 ) Peter says, Christ is **Alive**. In ( 4:11 ) Peter says, Christ is **Exalted**. In ( 4:12 ) Peter says, Christ is **Omnipotent**,

for He can not only heal *Physically* but he can heal *Spiritually* ! For the gospel is what ? “ *The power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.*” ( Rom 1:16 ) My .... when we place our witness beside Peter's how do we fare ? Are you bold without being rude ? Are you brave in that hostile environment in work ? Do you shoot down the enemy with the Word of God ? Are you presenting an exclusive Christ in an inclusive age ? (a) (b)

### **(c) BE DECISIVE:**

What was the Sanhedrin's reaction to all of this ? Well, look at ( 4:13-14 ) Incredible ! They could think of nothing to say. So what did they do ? They dismissed the offending apostles of Christ and began to confer with one another. They decided to try and intimidate Peter and John into silence by warning them “ *not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.*” ( 4:18 ) You could have probably have heard a pin drop in that Hall of Hewn Stone as the apostles responded with courage. Look at ( 4:19-20 ) My .... Peter did not make his decision on the basis of “ *Is it safe ?*” “ *Is it popular ?*” He made his decision on the basis of “ ***Is it right ?***” Now the interesting thing is this. This is the first instance in the New Testament of civil disobedience. Are believers to obey their government ? Yes ! The Lord Jesus taught, “ *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.*” ( Matt 22:21 ) Paul says, “ *The powers that be are ordained of God.*” ( Rom 13:1 ) Peter himself taught such obedience. ( 1 Pet 2:13 ) But the reaction of Peter and John marks the **limit of that**

**obedience !** They would gladly obey the Sanhedrin if they could do so without disobeying God. But my .... when God's commands conflict with those of the government,  
( 1:8 ) the government must be disobeyed. Is this not what the Jewish midwives did ? ( Exod 1:17 ) Is this not what Daniel did ? ( Dan 1:6 ) What the three Hebrew children did ? ( Dan 3:17 ) They were *obedient to God at all costs !* How do you respond to opposition ? Like the apostles are you submissive: aggressive and decisive ? Why did Peter and John respond as they did ? Well, look,

### **(3) THE SECRET OF THEIR ABILITY**

For there is a threefold secret here that will enable us to be bold and fruitful in our service for Christ !  
Notice,

#### ***(a) For TESTIMONY: We need FULLNESS:***

Look if you will at ( 4:8 ) My .... this was one essential requirement for Peter's powerful defence. He faced persecution triumphantly because he was filled with the Holy Spirit. ( 2:4 13:9 ) Now in the New Testament this word "*filled*," was mainly used to get across the idea of total control. It simply indicates Peter's yielded-ness to the Spirit's control. Now he did not become filled by lengthy prayer or by an emotional experience. The filling of the Holy Spirit occurs when the believer walks in obedience to the Word !  
( Eph 5:18 Col 3:16 ) and in fellowship with the Lord !  
My .... to be filled with the Holy Spirit is simply living

one moment at a time under His complete control ! Do you want to bear an effective testimony for God ? Do you be fruitful in your ministry ? There's only one answer, "*be filled with the Spirit.*" ( Eph 5:18 ) (a)

#### ***(b) For CHARACTER: We need FELLOWSHIP:***

Look that lovely phrase in ( 4:13 ) "*And they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.*" No doubt the Sanhedrin would like to have forgot about that final interrogation of the Lord Jesus on the eve of His crucifixion but they could not. And now as the two apostles talked with them, they could not help but be reminded of Jesus. My .... the apostles were "*unlearned and ignorant men*," but they talked as Jesus had talked, they walked as Jesus had walked and what the Sanhedrin did not know was this. The apostles were still companions of Jesus. They were indwelt with the Spirit of Christ. ( Rom 8:9-10 ) The Lord Jesus was saturating their emotions, compelling their wills, energising their bodies, so that the Sanhedrin was seeing not only them, but Christ. A. Maclaren said, "*A soul habitually in contact with Jesus will imbibe sweetness from Him.*" In terms of your character how like Christ are you ? Do you talk as He talked ? Do you walk as He walked ? What does the outside world see of Christ in you ? (a) (b)

#### ***(c) For WORK: We need FEARLESSNESS:***

And we'll have it, if we have do everything "*in the name*," ( 4:12 ) that is by the authority of Christ.

**THE SECRET OF HOLY BOLDNESS !** My .... all hell could not stop these men from speaking. “ *We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.*” ( 4:20 ) The apostles responded daringly and aggressively and with integrity. No compromise ! Frederick the Great once called all his generals together. One of them Hans Von Zieten, had duties to perform at his church that night, and a Communion to participate in, so he refused to come. Later he was again invited to dine with all the generals and Frederick the Great. On that occasion they all made light of him and joked about his religious duties and about the Lord’s Supper. Von Zieten stood and said to his intimidating ruler. “ *My lord there is a greater king than you, a king to whom I have sworn allegiance, even unto death. I am a Christian man, and I cannot sit quietly as the Lord’s name is dishonoured, His character belittled, and His cause subjected to ridicule. With your permission I shall withdraw.*” There was silence because the generals knew that such a daring act could mean death. But Frederick the Great was so struck by Von Zieten’s courage that he begged him to stay and promised him that he would never again demean those sacred things. Long live the tribe of Hans Von Zieten ! “ *For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.*” ( 4:20 )

Is this not what New Testament evangelism is all about ? My .... they were witnesses. They were all at it and they were always at it. They had no radio, no television, no buses, no literature, no church buildings, no amplification, no computers, no internet, no

broadband, no camera’s, and yet they turned the world upside down and inside out for the Lord Jesus. “ *We cannot .... heard.*” Do you feel like that ? Or has Satan persuaded you to become a silent saint ? Do you remember Polycarp ? Do you know what he did ? He stood by the stake asking not to be tied to it and he prayed, “ *O Lord, I thank Thee that Thou hast thought me worthy of this hour.*” He bowed his head and said, “ *Amen,*” as the fires consumed him. Polycarp was faithful unto death. My .... **when persecution hit’s the church let us not fear the world, but God, and God alone, no matter what the cost !**