

Acts 4

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon on Acts 4 emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit in the face of opposition and the importance of obedience to God over human authority.

Scripture: Acts 4:1

Topics: "Courage in Faith", "The Power of the Holy Spirit"

Description

John Nelson Darby reflects on Acts 4, highlighting the stark contrast between the ecclesiastical authority of Israel, which opposes the truth and the power of God, and the courage and faith of the apostles filled with the Holy Spirit. He emphasizes the audacity of the priests who, despite witnessing miracles, resist the Holy Ghost, showcasing the hardness of the human heart when abandoned by God. The apostles, undeterred by threats, remain obedient to God, demonstrating the power of faith and the necessity of divine authority over human opinion. Darby concludes by illustrating the early church's unity and love, empowered by the Holy Spirit, as a model for Christians today, regardless of circumstances.

Transcript

What we read in this chapter is very sad, but full of instruction. The state of Israel is frightful, and the contrast to the apostles, and to all the believers marvellous. There is ecclesiastical authority and hatred of the truth and of the Lord on one side, and the presence and power of God on the other. Authority, depending on public opinion, is timorous at this juncture, and for a moment by this means held in check by the hand of God; and the courage of faith, given by God, is sustained by the powerful presence of the Holy Ghost.

334 The priests deliberately resist the action of the Holy Ghost though admitting that the power of God had been manifested. Is it not frightful? Oh what audacity, of what malice, is the heart of man capable when abandoned by God and left to its own hatred against Him! "The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquities be found to be hateful," Psalm 36:1, 2. And for what follows see also Luke 12:1-12. Horrible and vain opposition, for the word of God will be fulfilled in spite of men. If we suffer, it is our glory. Our portion is to be found in Psalm 27; and then in Psalm 37: "Fret not thyself - trust in Jehovah - delight thyself also in Jehovah - commit thy way unto Jehovah - rest in Jehovah, and wait patiently for Him - cease from anger and forsake wrath; fret not thyself in any wise to do evil."

We shall see the path of the apostles; what courage, what tranquility, what clearness of judgment, doing exactly what became servants of God - those who, in the testimony of God, represented Him on the earth! Doubtless an extraordinary power was displayed in them, but the principle is just the same for us all. Moreover the word did not remain without effect, the number of men who had believed became about five thousand.

We have seen that the chief priests had put the apostles in prison. The morning came, they meet at Jerusalem, and make the apostles appear before them. They demand by what power and in what name they had done the miracle. The old story is again repeated - official authority opposed to the power of God. Thus the high priests and the rulers of the people demanded of the Lord by what authority He worked. But what madness, what hardness of heart, what lack of conscience! A miracle had evidently been performed by the apostles: it was known by the people, and they could not deny it. It is God Himself who works, but they will not allow the knowledge of it to spread among the people. It was not convenient that the power of God should be manifested outside their office; for if divine power operated outside their office, they could no longer secure authority to themselves. But it was not for them to command God: and not only this, but they were directly opposed to that power which was of God.

335 In such cases absence of all conscience is always found, as when the Lord did not reply to their questions, but, in His divine wisdom, asked them what the baptism of John was. And they, fearing the people, dared not say that it was not of God, because public opinion was against them. They were forced to acknowledge their incapacity; evidently, then, the Lord was not bound to account to them for what He had just before done.

Here something more is found. What the apostles had done was an act of power and not of authority, and the priests place themselves in open opposition to God. They would have suppressed His power if they had been able; otherwise they were humiliated. This was necessary, for the miracle had been performed in the name of Him whom they had crucified. They were adversaries of God, and adversaries consciously and willingly, for they had acknowledged that it was impossible to deny the miracle. This was indeed the power of Satan, but also of an office destitute of the power of God. Whenever man finds himself in such a position, he is unwilling that God should work. But what a state of soul, what a frightful condition!

Let us contemplate the spectacle of an unlettered and ignorant man, but believing in Jesus and full of the Holy Ghost. He announces openly, and with frank candour, not only that it was by the name of Jesus that the man had been cured, but that He was the stone set at nought by the builders, now become the head of the corner, and that there was no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. The position of the rulers is clearly established, such as we have seen it. The man there present had been cured by the name of Him whom they had crucified, and whom God had raised from among the dead.

But alas! the will of men was not moved, though they had nothing to say against the facts. The power of God was there; the testimony could not be refuted; but they would not have divine testimony. And, having conferred together, they dismissed them, "straitly threatening them that they should speak henceforth to no man in this name."

Their part was taken against God and against His Anointed. They commanded the apostles, therefore, when they had brought them in again, never to speak again in this name. Peter does not boast, does not insist on his rights or on his liberty, does not threaten the priests and council, does not shew on his part

any of his own will; he remains tranquil in obedience, but in obedience to God rather than to man. God was with them; the others were only men. They must obey God. He appeals to the priests and themselves, if it was not right to do so. Again they threaten them and let them go; witnesses were before them who glorified God for what had been done.

336 It is well to remark that the apostles do not assail the Jews - they do their duty; and when these oppose themselves, conscious of doing the will of God sent by Him, they declare that necessarily they were doing His will - that, when God willed and sent, they had to obey. It is the calm, the tranquility, of him who does not think of himself, either through fear or through human ardour. It is full of the Holy Ghost; what is said, what is done, comes from Him. Such a man works perfectly on God's side, because the man is put aside, and God by His Spirit works in him. Though it may be the man who presents himself perfectly in the position in which he finds himself, yet it is that Spirit who produces the perfection in him. "It is not ye," said the Lord, "that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you," Matt. 10:20. If man works, then there is imperfection. God works in man, and then man is what he ought to be. Is it always thus?

But the miserable position of the Jews unfolds itself only too clearly. God was no longer to be found among the chosen people who had rejected their Messiah, the Son of God, in whom are all the promises of God; and now they were abandoned. God dwelt by His Spirit among the Christians. God will fulfil His promises to the nation in the last times, but then it will be in pure grace. He is faithful, whatever may be the iniquity of His people. What Peter proposed to Israel in chapter 3, repentance, will be accomplished in their hearts by grace, when the assembly of God shall have been taken up into heaven. Then they shall see Him whom they have pierced, and shall be blessed; but meanwhile they are put aside, kept apart however, till the fulness of the Gentiles be brought in. Then Israel as a whole shall be saved. But now they are displayed as resisting the Holy Ghost, as having rejected the Messiah. Now we see the power of the Spirit and His presence manifesting itself in the midst of the assembly.

337 The apostles returned to "their own"; for now there existed a company, a society, the house of God; composed, it is true, of Jews, but apart, outside the national pale. There they recount what has happened. Then, moved by the Holy Ghost, with one heart they raise the voice to God, acknowledging the accomplishing of Psalm 2, where the rejection of the Messiah, the Son of God is announced, and the absolute power of God, whatever might be the wickedness of men who did nothing but fulfil the counsels of God. Nevertheless they do not ask that the kingdom should be established, according to what is said in that Psalm, of which kingdom the Father has put the times into His own power (chap I: 7); but the manifestation of the power of the Holy Ghost is pronounced in the same place, whether in the full courage to announce the word, or in the works of power done in the name of the holy servant of God, Jesus, His Son.

After they have prayed, the presence of God is manifested in their midst, and the place where they are assembled shakes. Here too, is seen, in an exterior way, the difference between the new birth and the presence of God by the Spirit. Many more important proofs of it are to be found; but I speak of it, because here it is an outward sign, impossible to confound with the work of grace in the soul. Their prayer is heard. They are all filled with the Holy Ghost, and speak the word of God with great boldness. But it is not only in the gifts of speech; it is the faith which does it all, that shews the effect and the power of being filled with the Holy Ghost. We find a work of the same character in the description given in chapter 2: there was but one heart.

No one retained his own property, but distributed to those who were in need. With great power the apostles bore testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on them all. None among the disciples lacked anything. Those who possessed lands or houses sold them, and laid the prices of the things that were sold at the apostles' feet, who distributed to every one according to his need. Beautiful testimony of the power of love, the love of God shed abroad by the Holy Ghost in the hearts of those who were filled with it! Among the others we find Barnabas, especially noticed here, because we shall find him soon occupied in the work of God, the companion of Paul; so that he is called an apostle. But God has not forgotten the others.

338 Such is the scene which passes before our eyes when the church was established in the beginning - when the Spirit, ungrieved, displayed all the effect of His presence. Most blessed scene, giving us to understand what it is to be filled with the Holy Ghost! He dwells in every true Christian; but it is another thing to be so filled with Him that He may be the source of all that is thought, of all that is done, and that all that the heart, which is His vessel, produces may be the fruit of His presence; that there may be no doubting, no shutting up in the career of love, that Jesus may be faithfully confessed before men. The heart is set free from its own love, and loves according to the love of Christ. Liberty, true liberty, is found, and the practical life, and its fruits are the fruits of the Spirit.

What a blessed state! And whatever may be the ruin of the church, in principle this state belongs to-day to every Christian; circumstances may hinder the form that existed in the days of the apostles; but the Spirit of God, at the bottom, is more powerful than circumstances.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/acts-4/>

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