

# “How To Respond When Under Attack”

Acts 4:1-31

Book of Acts [#4]

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Theme: **God Provides Power To Defeat Opposition.**

## Introduction

Conflict is all too common in our world. Our newspapers and broadcast news regularly lead off with accounts of conflict, violence and warfare. Right here in Knox on Friday there was a funeral for a 17 year-old who was murdered in Calgary. The flowers at the front of the church today are from that funeral.

The political arena also has a generous portion of conflict, and we will be seeing more of it here in Alberta with the provincial election campaign under way. Religious and ethnic intolerance and conflict flourish. And, of course, families are not free from conflict.

Belonging to Jesus Christ brings peace, joy *and* conflict. Yes, conflict. Every believer faces ongoing spiritual warfare— whether we realize it or not. Satan *is* our “adversary.” He *does* “prowl about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We *are* in an ongoing “...struggle...against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” Sometimes this warfare is evidenced in very direct, tangible personal conflict and opposition.

This morning we are going to learn or review about “*How To Respond When Under Attack.*” Acts 4 brings us another first in this book of firsts, as we see the first persecution of the church. The events underscore the positive reality that God provides the power His people need to defeat opposition.

## The Reality Of Opposition.

As you look at the chapter you cannot escape the reality of the opposition. We see it first in the inevitable collision that takes place here. Some collisions are inevitable. When you are driving along at 100 km/hr and a deer jumps out in front of your car, a collision *is* inevitable, as I learned back in November.

Look at the opening verses,

“As they [Peter and John] were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” (1-2)

This inevitable collision was instigated by the *Sadducees*. We can identify them more clearly when we think of them in relation to their counterparts, the *Pharisees*, who were the other dominant religious force in those days.

The Pharisees were traditionalists. Their motto could have been, “What has been is, and always will be.” Most of them came from the middle class. Their overriding concern was to prevent people from straying from the faith, from adopting elements of contemporary culture, from diluting and being unfaithful to the true faith. So, they were concerned about intricate details of what you could and could not do, what you should and should not do. They tended to be legalists. They controlled the synagogues where people would come to pray and hear the Scripture read and taught.

Now, let’s look at the Sadducees. Most of them came from wealthy, aristocratic families. Some suggest that the wealthy can afford to have liberal views. Whether their wealth was a cause or not, the Sadducees certainly did have liberal views. They were the modern, up-to-date group. They did not see the need for all those intricate old traditions the Pharisees had. They wanted to break new ground. In line with this, they accepted only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament as Scripture, rejecting the wisdom literature and prophets. They rejected the miraculous. They did not believe in the physical resurrection, or in angels. They were the rationalists of their day. While the Pharisees controlled the synagogues, the Sadducees controlled the priesthood and temple.

Now, why was this collision *inevitable*? First, there were major theological conflicts. Peter and John, the church, proclaimed that Jesus is the actual, literal Messiah. And, they claimed He proved He is the Messiah by his *physical resurrection* from the dead. The foundation or basic premise of the church was Jesus Christ as the raised-from-the-dead Messiah. The Sadducees could never accept this, or let it go unchallenged.

Second, they saw a major conflict of popularity and power. The church had gone from 120 (no major threat), to 3,000 being added in one day (certainly a cause for concern), now, just a few days later, up to perhaps 10,000 (definitely a cause for concern, not only with the numbers but the rate of growth).

These factors, with the spiritual conflict, made the collision inevitable.

The principles behind this have not changed. Hopefully we learn from this. We have our modern rationalists, who give freedom and tolerance to almost anything belief as long as it does not assert to be “*the way, the truth, the life*”—as long as it does not claim exclusivity.

As well, remember the old saying that *Satan doesn’t take holidays* is true. His forces press the battle 24–7.

Flowing from this collision there also was the inevitable persecution, focused on Peter and John. Look at verse 3, “And they [the Sadducees and captain of the temple guard] laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening.” Their stay in prison was just overnight and involved being detained for trial, not being punished. Yet that did not mean it was a picnic. Prisoner’s rights and humane treatment were not even issues in those times.

We should be thankful we don’t face jail time, beatings and death because of our faith. We know that today many people around the world do. Each fall we observe a Sunday when

we are called to pray especially for *The Persecuted Church* around the world. While it is mild in comparison to what many face, when we take a stand for Christ we risk facing ridicule, being snubbed or considered weird fanatics.

We need to be ready for what comes our way *each day*. D. L. Moody once preached in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for a few days. A man there asked him if he had enough grace to go through being burned at the stake for his faith. Moody answered, “No.” Surprised, the man asked, “Don’t you wish you had?” Moody again answered, “No.” But this time went on, “I don’t need that. What I need right now is enough grace to live in Milwaukee for the next three days.”

Now let’s move from the reality of this opposition to Peter and John’s response.

### **The Response To Opposition.**

One of the clear traits we see in their response is that they boldly defended the faith. We find Peter and John in front of the *Who’s Who of Israel*. Verses 5 & 6,

“On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent.”

Luke is describing a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the 71-member top ruling body of the Jews. It included the *rulers*: priests and officials; the *elders*: heads of the main families of Israel; and the *scribes*: those who copied, studied, interpreted and taught the law.

The Sanhedrin had final authority over religious matters and the temple, and were also the highest Jewish court. They even tried capital cases, although they could only recommend the death penalty to the Romans.

Verses 5-7 point out a typical setting, where the Sanhedrin sat in a semi-circle. Peter and John were “placed ... in the center.” This normal practice was practical to ensure that all could see and hear. It was also a tactic to intimidate the accused.

In the hearing no one tried to dispute the fact that the lame man had been healed. Their opening question was on *authority*. Go to verse 7, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” In other words, “Who gave *you* the authority to say, to preach what you were preaching? *We* didn’t! And *we* are the authority here!”

Beyond a case of proper authorization, some could have had legitimate concerns that these two men may have been performing sorcery empowered by demons.

Because they were the experts in the law, it is sometimes suggested they were trying to find grounds to condemn Peter and John to death based on statements in the law, such as Deuteronomy 13:1-5,

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you

a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you.”

Peter and John made a bold defense. Verses 8-12 summarize Peter’s statement. He began with showing respect to the Sanhedrin. He then explained they healed the lame man through the power of Jesus Christ whom they, these leaders, had crucified, and whom God raised from the dead. In verse 11 he cited Psalm 118, which Jesus also cited in response to the same question of authority in His trial.

Peter didn’t stop there. He used this as an opportunity to witness, to *boldly declare* there was salvation in no one else other than Jesus. It was a bold statement, especially in light of everyone, including Peter and John, knowing the position of these leaders on Jesus and physical resurrection.

So, Peter and John responded to the opposition by “boldly defending the faith.” As well, they boldly relied on God. Their excellent response was not due just to knowing the Scriptures and facts, nor in being skilled orators, nor yet being self-assured. It was due to their reliance on God.

Look at the first seven words of verse 8, “Then Peter, being filled with the Holy Spirit...” We don’t know the details of their night in jail, of how they spent that time and prepared. This description does not refer to a miraculous or mysterious experience. Rather, as Peter submitted to and relied on God, the Holy Spirit *filled* or *controlled* and *directed* what he said and did not say.

Jesus had talked to them about times like this, Luke 12:11-12,

“When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

Both Jesus’ warning and promise extend to us today.

So we have seen the Reality of Opposition and Peter and John’s Response. Now, we move to the outcome or result of this opposition.

## The Result Of Opposition.

Simply put, Peter and John baffled their opponents. Note the Sanhedrin's initial reaction in verses 13-14,

“Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply.”

The Sanhedrin knew these men were common, ordinary men with just basic instruction in the law—not years of detailed study such as they themselves had taken. And so they were astonished. They marvelled at this. They also recognized the teaching and way of Jesus.

To top it all off, there was the man who had been born lame now completely well *standing* right there in front of them! It is one thing to have a theology which denies miracles, or even to deny a reported miracle, but it is quite another when the result is standing in front of you. As they admitted to each other, “We cannot deny this.” Luke tells us, “they had nothing to say in reply.” They were *baffled*.

So, they dismissed Peter, John and the healed man and moved into a private conference, an *in camera* session, where they could openly and frankly discuss this. It gave them an opportunity to discuss their dilemma and explore their options. They now realized they could not contrive some basis for punishing Peter and John. Besides, they knew the people would be very upset if they did (*cf.* 21).

They recognized that a great miracle had been performed. And yet they were so rigid in their beliefs, so committed to maintaining their position and power, that they could not accept what God was doing here. So they decided to issue a cease and desist order to Peter and John: stop preaching in the name of Jesus (18).

By relying on God, Peter and John *baffled* their opponents. The Sanhedrin did not have any real viable options, and their action was illogical in that it did not reflect the evidence.

Then Peter and John prayed for their opponents. When they were released, they went straight to the church to report what had happened. When they finished their report, they prayed. As Peter began his prayer in verse 24, he grounded it in God's sovereignty, and then continued with recognizing the fulfillment of prophecy.

He prayed for their opponents (29a), not that they could get even or pay them back, but that God would intervene, working in them according to His sovereign plan. Then he concluded with prayer for ongoing boldness.

Peter's example of positive and forward looking prayer is a good one for us to follow. When under attack it is easy to become negative. I know a man who has been a faithful pastor for a long time. But in a particularly difficult situation, he began to focus on the faults

of those who were causing the trouble. He became, and still is, discouraged and even a bit bitter about some aspects of ministry.

Note one more outcome or result. They received God's power for service. Drop down to the last verse in this section, verse 31,

“And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.”

Now some of us may be thinking, “*Great!* If only we would see *this* building shaken ... but not too seriously or violently! After all it is over 100 years old!”

In His grace, God gave this tangible sign to this group of mostly brand new believers to confirm He was with them, that even though persecuted, they could move forward. The principle has not changed. When we turn to God and rely on Him, when we step out in faith to be obedient to Him and His Word, sometimes the persecution will be strong. But God will give us the grace we need, the confirmation we need to keep moving forward. The Holy Spirit will give us boldness for whatever we face.

## **Conclusion.**

Yes, *God Provides Power To Defeat Opposition*. Go back to D. L. Moody's statement, “What I need right now is enough grace to live in Milwaukee for the next three days.” What D. L. Moody needed in Milwaukee in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we need here in Edmonton in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Indeed, what God told the apostle Paul in the first century, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9), is just as true for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As you reflect on this with God now, recognize that *God provides you power to defeat the Opposition you face*. Thank God for His gracious provision. Think about times where you were challenged to speak out or stand up to opposition and you kept your seat in silence. Confess that to God. Determine to rely on Jesus and His truth as your firm foundation to not only stand firm, but to move forward.

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