

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, On the GO!

(Studies of the book of Acts)

Staying “On Mission” in the Age of Distractions

Study #6

(Acts 3:1--4:4)

Introduction: The thing about distractions...

The first two days of our backpacking trip had gone well. It was June of 2005, and the six of us on this trek were making good time on our hike to the Continental Divide in the Weminuche Wilderness of southwest Colorado, when we hit a major distraction.

It being June, the winter snow pack was gone. However, a late season avalanche had destroyed a quarter-mile wide stretch of our trail, and the Forest Service Rangers had not yet cleared the trail.

When the avalanche had barreled down the mountain, the snow had tossed trees like matchsticks. Those trees now covered our trail in piles up to six feet deep - and we had to cross this field.

Our forward progress was reduced to a snail’s pace. It took us nearly two exhausting hours to navigate the quarter of a mile that had been blown up by the avalanche. We lost two hundred feet in elevation just trying to get across the field. It was a major distraction.

It was such a mess that when we first saw the wreckage we had to cross, we were tempted to turn around and head back to the car.

Distractions will tempt you to have thoughts like that. They can derail the best laid plans - as the early church discovered.

Clear sailing, until...

To this point in our studies in the book of Acts, Luke has shown us the uninterrupted forward progress of the Gospel.

The Holy Spirit arrived on the Day of Pentecost and Peter preached a sermon that led three thousand to faith in Jesus. A vibrant faith community was established in Jerusalem. Everyone was devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to prayer, to the breaking of bread, and to fellowship.

Then, after a miraculous healing of a lame man, Peter preached a second sermon where thousands more were added to the church. And to this point there have been no obstacles, hiccups, or disruptions of any kind. No distractions.

If you had been among those first Christians in Jerusalem, you would have been thinking, *“At this rate, we’ll have Jesus’ Great Commission finished in a matter of weeks!”*

And then we come to the avalanche field of Acts 4. **[3] And they (the rulers in Jerusalem) laid hands on them (Peter and John) and put them in jail until the next day.**

This arrest arrested what had been the free-flowing advance of the Gospel.

And with the apostles’ jail time, the church of Jesus entered The Age of Distractions. We are still living in The Age of Distractions.

We’re all familiar with distractions.

- You start a weight loss program and a friend lays a donut in front of you in honor of National Donut Day (June 2 - did you miss it?).
- You start a fitness routine and your schedule at work turns unmanageable; you have trouble finding time to exercise.
- You resolve to become more neighborly, and then one of your neighbors does something that really ticks you off.
- You decide to get your finances under control - and the car dies.

At moments like these the *temptation* is to allow the distractions to derail us from our dreams. The *challenge* is to fight through the distractions and keep pursuing the dream.

You may be thinking at this moment of dreams you have laid aside because of distractions. Career dreams. Fitness and health dreams. Academic dreams. Parenting dreams.

You're thinking, *"It's time to plough through the avalanche field and 'get 'er done'."*

Some of these dreams may involve what you long to do as a Jesus-follower.

You dream of learning and obeying His Word, being genuine and generous, trusting and loving, sharing Jesus - and that's great!

Luke wants you to know that New Year's resolutions work just fine in mid-June. But distractions will come. They are unavoidable. So, the question is, *"How will we overcome the distractions that might derail us from the life we want to live for God?"*

If that, or something like it, is the question on your mind right now, we could not be looking at a more helpful passage in the Bible than the one before us today.

Today, we watch as the first Christians combat the powerful force of distraction and find strength from God to stay "on mission."

So, in Acts chapter 4, the apostles, Peter and John, have been cooling their heels in jail overnight. The breaking of the new day didn't bring much relief.

In fact, they jumped from the frying pan of jail right into the fire of an inquisition as they were brought before the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of ancient Israel.¹

(Adversarial) Face to Face with the Sanhedrin (vv. 5-22)

¹ Clearly the formerly lame man was standing with Peter and John as they addressed the Council (v. 14). We don't know whether he was a witness, an interested observer, or one of the accused. Had he also been in lock-up overnight?

Defendants on the Offensive (vv. 5-12)

The Council circles (vv. 5-7)

The Council's make-up (5-6)

[5] On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; [6] and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent.²

If some of those names sound familiar to you, it's probably because these were the men who handed Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion. Peter and John were set in front of these men.

The Sanhedrin, a group of seventy very powerful men, began the interrogation with an accusing question.

The Council's inquisition (v. 7)

[7]... "By what power, or in what name, have YOU (read "Men like you, of all people!") done this?"

Clearly, a miracle had occurred. The formerly lame man walks and leaps. The question is, *"How did you do it?"*³

We wonder - what will Peter and John do with that question? It is a question with an edge and there's not much of a safe answer.

As these two apostles stood in front of the Sanhedrin, they've got to be thinking of Jesus.

After all, He stood before this very court only a few weeks earlier. And as far as we know, Peter and John were the only two

² Annas (the father) and Caiaphas were in charge Jesus' trials before the Council.

³ There might have been an unstated accusation of satanic involvement. Jesus was certainly accused of performing His miracles by the power of the devil. That the same charge should be leveled against His followers would not be surprising.

apostles who saw His trial before the Sanhedrin. Now, they are face to face with the same group that had sentenced their Lord to death.

And just think of what Peter would have personally remembered of the night of Jesus' trials.

Peter - from speechless to spokesman

From a picture of cowardice...

Peter had been in the courtyard that was connected to the hall where Jesus was being questioned on that night. Peter was himself being questioned by a servant girl, "Aren't you a Jesus follower?"

At one point during that night, right after he had denied knowing Jesus for the third time, Jesus looked at Peter. Peter looked back. It was at that point - when their eyes met - that Peter ran off, alone, into the night, overcome with fear and shame.

I wonder if the members of the Sanhedrin had seen Peter run away? If so, their last sight of him was of his backside.

My how things have changed here in Acts!

...to a profile in courage!

Do you remember Jesus' last words to His followers?

[Acts 1:8]... "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

To this point, the Holy Spirit's power had enabled Peter to speak powerfully on the Day of Pentecost, heal a lame man in the Name of Jesus, and then bring another message that convinced many others that Jesus was Savior and Lord.

The Spirit's power is now going to give Peter everything he needs to speak to the Sanhedrin. After what was surely an awful night in jail, Peter now shows, not his backside, but his backbone.

Peter's "hold nothing back" response (vv. 8-12)

All credit goes to Jesus (vv. 8-11)

[8] Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit,⁴ said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, [9] if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, [10] let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. [11] He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone."

He put all the credit for the healing right where it belonged: Jesus did it. And then, Peter wrapped up. He *evangelized* the Sanhedrin, giving about the most concise invitation to salvation in Jesus we find anywhere in the New Testament.

All salvation comes through Jesus (v. 12)

[12] "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."⁵

He invited the members of the Supreme Court of Israel to place their faith in the Jesus they had sentenced to death on Passover Friday.

Thus far in Acts, we have listened to Peter speak two times. Both times have resulted in a great turning to the Lord.

So, what will the Sanhedrin will do with his invitation? Watch.

Apostles Released by [an Embarrassed] Council (vv. 13-22)

⁴ Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had promised he would be. (see Mark 13:11; Luke 21:14-15). Significantly, he was filled as he spoke. The Holy Spirit's provision of power is given at the moment of need, not a moment before.

⁵ Notice that there is no reference to a call to baptism here, proving that baptism is not a normative element in an invitation to receive eternal life.

"These guys remind me of ol' what'sHisname..." (v. 13)

[13] Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed...

Peter and John were just a couple of country bumpkins from Galilee, fishermen, not schooled in rabbinic ways. And yet, they were speaking with confidence to the mighty Sanhedrin.

The light bulb went on.

"Let's see, who else have we known who had no formal training but handled Scripture with great skill? Who had such confidence, even when standing before us, even though we had the power to put Him to death...?"

[13]... and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

The Council saw a family resemblance between the apostles and Jesus. And they began to realize that they hadn't gotten rid of the Jesus problem. Jesus was reproducing Himself in His disciples.

So, they first reflected. Then, they retreated.

They escorted Peter and John out of the meeting room so that they could confer in private about what their next move should be.⁶

"Stop talking about Jesus - or else!" (vv. 14-18)

[14] And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. [15] But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one

⁶ We get to listen in on their conversation (which must mean that there was someone on the Council who later told Luke about this behind-closed-doors session). Was Paul there?

another, [16] saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. [17] "But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name." [18] And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

In short, they blustered. Bluster is the last resort of people in power who are in danger of losing their power.

So, again, what will Peter and John do with this command to not speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus? Again. Watch. Listen.

Peter and John push back (vv. 19-20)

[19] But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; [20] for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."⁷

They refused to allow the Council to define the terms of the discussion. They told them, *"Thanks, but no thanks. We'll just go ahead and keep talking about Jesus."*

But the Council continued to bluster, even as they took off the handcuffs and released Peter and John.

Released! (vv. 21-22)

[21] When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had

⁷ H.G. Wells, *"The trouble with so many people is that the voice of their neighbors sounds louder in their ears than the voice of God."* Of the great Scottish reformer, John Knox, it was said, *"He feared God so much that he never feared the face of any man."*

happened; [22] for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

This is great stuff! In a little more than twenty-four hours, just look at what has happened.

Peter and John have been the instruments God used to perform an undeniable miracle.

The miracle (God's work) was followed by a sermon (God's people speak) that resulted in lots of people coming to faith in Jesus, an overnight jail sentence, a confrontation with the most powerful men in Israel, and a threat of punishment if they kept on talking about Jesus.

The Holy Spirit sustained the two apostles during this twenty-four hour turbulence, and it's inspiring to see their determination to stand strong even when the Council turned up the heat and distractions ruled the day.

But then, as if this wasn't already enough drama, here is where it REALLY starts to get good.

The apostles have been through an exhilarating and exhausting experience. These distracting experiences would have drained anyone of energy. When you're drained of energy, you need to re-charge your internal batteries. So did they.

Well, Peter and John knew where to go to recharge. They went straight to their family of brothers and sisters in Jesus.

(Supportive) Face to Face with Friends (v. 23)

[23] When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests⁸ and the elders had said to them.

⁸ The older view that the term "chief priests" here referred to members of the high-priestly families, is no longer widely accepted. Instead, "chief priests" indicates a body of men who had jurisdiction over the priesthood and whose members had

God has so designed us that we find real help when we share life's challenges with people who care. You know that from your own experience. Burdens shared are easier to bear.

Once, during the opening of the old TV sitcom *Cheers*, Dr. Frasier Crane, a therapist, told Woody about a couple he was counseling.

Woody wasn't familiar with the therapeutic model of mental health, so he explained to Dr. Crane how he had been taught to deal with inner anxieties and pressures.

"I don't know, Dr. Crane. Haven't you ever thought that it's kind of tough on them - doing all that counseling stuff? I mean I was raised to believe that if you have a problem, you lock it away in a secret place. You keep it bottled up good and tight. And if it gets full in there, you just keep forcing the pain down and clamping it in."

Dr. Crane replied, "Good advice, Woody." Then, he turned to his friend, Norm, and said, "Tick... tick... tick."

Life's challenges are to be shared, not stuffed. When the experiences Peter and John went through depleted their energies and emotions, they didn't stuff it. They told their friends all about it.

Let's take a share it/don't-stuff-it reality check this morning.

- Who in your life knows about your current struggle? Are you opening up to anyone? Do you have a friend (or two or three) who knows the challenges you are facing?
- Are you being real with a few people about temptations, disappointments, pain?
- Are you collecting deeper-than-surface-level friends?

seats and votes on the Council. The group included the current high priest, the captain of the Temple Guard, the Temple overseer, and several treasurers. (Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, Joachim Jeremias)

No matter who you are - man or woman, young person or adult - I hope you are discovering the power of a supportive, Jesus-centered network of friends.

When Peter and John faced bigger-than-life challenges, they turned to their friends in Jesus. They knew their friends would listen well and support them. Fellow disciples would remind them, *“Yes, life is hard - but keep living for Jesus!”*

They went to their friends after they had faced the pressure of opposing distraction - and their batteries were re-charged.

You will find the same refreshment when you genuinely, authentically engage with friends and put Jesus in the middle.

But this story doesn't end with the blessings of community. And after Peter and John told their friends about the situation, they didn't retreat to a safer approach to life.

NO! The burden-sharing led to something even more powerful. Their cares turned into prayers.

(Worshipful) Face to Face with God (vv. 24-30)

To the God Who is in Control... (vv. 24-26)

[24] And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, [25] who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said,

‘Why did the Gentiles rage,

And the peoples devise futile things?

[26] ‘The kings of the earth took their stand,

And the rulers were gathered together

Against the Lord and against His Christ.”

Did they have needs? You bet they did!

But they knew that their biggest need wasn't their need. Their biggest need was to remember that they served a sovereign God who was both in control and who was for them.

Same for us. We will always have urgent needs. But our greatest need is always to remember God. Our greatest move is to say, **“GOD”** to our problems

And they remembered God. Then they told God about what was going on in their lives.

...Regarding Recent Events... (vv. 27-28)

[27] “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [28] to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”

In prayer, they recounted their troubles. This kind of prayer is not unusual in the Bible.

- Abraham told God of his childlessness and of his desire for an heir. (God already knew this.) (Genesis 15, 18, 21)
- King Hezekiah prayed for the safety of Jerusalem, showing God the letter that the Assyrian General, Rabshakeh, had written. (God already knew what the letter said.) (2 Kings 19)
- Nehemiah prayed about the bad situation Jerusalem was in, giving details about the burned down walls (God knew that the walls were in ruins.) (Nehemiah 1)

The point of these prayers was not to inform or to remind God of what was going on. No.

These prayers expressed to God what the problem was, what the need was, to deny themselves the possibility of living in denial.

They recounted their situation to God to remind themselves that they were totally dependent on Him to intervene. It was a great thing for them to pray this way. It's a great way for us to pray, today.

And the reason it is such a healthy thing to tell God what we are facing is that it paves the way for us to ASK GOD FOR SOMETHING.

That is where this prayer is heading. These disciples are about to ask God for something. What do you think they are going to ask Him?

They have just been imprisoned, publicly humiliated, and threatened with bodily harm. What do people who have been opposed and then run through the ringer by their enemies pray? Listen.

...Please HELP! (vv. 29-30)

Take note... (v. 29a)

[29a] “And now, Lord, take note of their threats...”

It looks like they are about to pray a, “*Sic ‘em, God!*” prayer. But they don’t. They understood that if Jesus was threatened and reviled and attacked, they would be, too. The fact that they were being distracted by opposition neither SURPRISED nor DERAILED them.

They neither sought their own revenge nor asked God to “GET” those who opposed them.

They simply asked that God would take note - and then made their request.

Open our mouths... (v. 29)

[29] “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence...”

It seems to have never entered their minds to heed the Sanhedrin’s threats and stop talking about Jesus. No way were they going to do that!

But, if they were going to ignore the Court’s order, they would need for God to do for them what only He could do for them. They

would need Him to give them grace to speak with confidence. And they needed Him to continue to perform His mighty works of power.

Continue Your wonder-working ways (v. 30)

[30]...while You extend Your hand to heal,⁹ and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.¹⁰

So, the pattern we have already seen in Acts holds.

New Testament evangelism is *responsive* speech. God works, we speak. We speak of what He has done through the cross of Christ and the empty tomb; we speak of what He is doing in our lives today.

The answer to their prayer followed immediately.

(Loving) Face to Face with the World God Loves (v. 31)

[31] And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken,¹¹ and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit¹² and began to speak the word of God with boldness.¹³

⁹ They assumed, not miracles of **vengeance** in light of the threats, but miracles of **mercy** in light of peoples’ needs.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the apostles didn’t pray for miracles and healings. They prayed for boldness, assuming that God would continue to perform miracles.

¹¹ Jim Cymbala, pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York, a church famous for its ministry of prayer, tells of the time when he was praying with a visiting pastor when the foundation of the church began to shake. The visitor opened his eyes in wonder and asked Pastor Cymbala if this was the “**shaking**” that occurred in Acts 4. Pastor Cymbala replied, “*No. That’s the subway.*” ☺ I once visited the Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York on a Tuesday evening, the night of their prayer meeting. It was an awe-inspiring time of worship.

¹² What happened at verse 31 was not a fresh baptism, but a fresh filling. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was a one-time event that occurred at Pentecost. For believers today, the baptism of the Spirit is a one-time event that happens at the moment we place our trust in Jesus for salvation (see 1 Cor. 12:13). By contrast, the filling of the Spirit is a ministry He performs in our lives over and over again to equip us for ministry. Notice that this filling is not accompanied by any phenomenon other than the capacity for boldness. Predominantly, the purpose of the filling of the Spirit is to equip us to speak with boldness and clarity of the mighty works of God.

So...

- ...they PRAYED for a work of God - for boldness, confidence.
- ...the place where they were was physically SHAKEN, proof that God would continue His wonder-working ways.
- ...the Holy Spirit FILLED those who had prayed, which was God's answer to their request for an internal work.
- ...those who were filled began to SPEAK the word of God boldly, which is the result of the internal work of God.

Conclusion:

In most every venture, distractions will arise. It may be a tempting donut on your new diet, a schedule that challenges your exercise regimen, or an avalanche field that requires a delay and a detour.

We're tempted to allow distractions to get the best of us. But we don't have to let them derail us from our goal! We can keep pressing on. And if that applies to weight loss and hiking, it applies infinitely more to our dreams and hopes for living for Jesus.

Financial setbacks, health challenges, and relationship fractures can distract us from faithfulness to God. But they all can be navigated and we can stay "on mission."

The first Christians stayed "on mission" by drawing strength *from each other* as they shared life and *from God* as they prayed.

We've already seen how important it is to have friends with Jesus in the middle.

What are you going to do in the twenty-four to forty-eight hours to go deeper with a friend? What next step will you take today - or by Tuesday at the latest - to move toward a friend who will encourage you to stand strong in Jesus when distractions hit?

It just takes a word in the hallway after church to get the ball rolling - or a phone call this afternoon, or an email or a text. Your next step into deeper relationship could be just the step you need to take.

And they prayed. So, what better way to respond to God's Word today than to pray for a Jesus-centered life of obedience and service despite whatever distractions may come.

Church, let's pray. As a response to God's Word, I am going to be praying a simple, two-part prayer every day for the remainder of June. I'm inviting you to join me in praying this prayer.

**LORD, PLEASE LEAD ME INTO THE "NEXT STEPS" YOU WANT ME TO TAKE IN MY WALK WITH JESUS.
LORD, PLEASE USE ME TO HELP SOMEONE I KNOW TAKE A "NEXT STEP" IN THEIR WALK WITH JESUS.**

I'm eager to see what the Lord will do in us and through us as we pray this "next step" prayer, together.

¹³ Same word as was used in verses 13 and 29, but was translated "confidence." I believe it would have been far better to have translated the word similarly in all places, either "confidence" or "boldness."