

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus' Faithful Witnesses... ...bearing witness to Jesus' life-changing message.

(Studies in the book of Acts)

Following Jesus in the Age of Distractions Study #6

(Acts 4:5-31)

Introduction: The thing about distractions...

We're all familiar with distractions. Distractions are the things that can derail us from our best intentions.

Like when...

...you start a weight loss program and then a friend gives you a donut in honor of National Donut Day. (June 2, if you're interested)
...you start a fitness routine and your schedule at work turns unmanageable, leaving you little time to work out.
...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.

Distractions can derail the best laid plans, even our plans to follow Jesus. Today, two apostles model what it looks like to follow Jesus, despite distractions.

Clear sailing, until...

To this point in our walk through 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 God used a message from Peter that led three thousand people to believe in Jesus.

With that, the church of Jesus was launched in Jerusalem. We read that all the believers were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, to prayer, to the breaking of bread, and to fellowship.¹

Then, after a miraculous healing of a lame man, Peter preached a second sermon. Thousands more were added to the church.

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 might have been thinking, *"At this rate, we'll have Jesus' Great Commission wrapped up in a matter of weeks!"*

That was when the church entered The Age of Distraction: **[3] And they** (the rulers in Jerusalem) ***laid hands on them*** (Peter and John) ***and put them in prison until the next day.***

Two thousand years later, you and I are still living in The Age of Distractions.

That arrest plugged up the free-flowing advance of the Gospel.

At the moment of their arrest, the *temptation* was to allow the distraction to derail them from their dream of spreading the message of Jesus. Their *challenge* was to fight through the distraction, pursue the dream.

Right now, you may be thinking of dreams you have laid aside because of distractions. Career dreams. Fitness and health dreams. Academic dreams. Parenting dreams.

You may be thinking about dreams you have, things you long to do, as a Jesus-follower. You dream of learning and obeying His Word, being genuine and generous, trusting and loving, of sharing Jesus.

¹ Koinonia = shared life.

These are your dreams and resolutions. Resolutions work just fine in mid-September. But distractions will come. Guaranteed.

So, the question is not, *“Will distractions come?”* The question is, *“How will we overcome the distractions that could 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 two apostles and the faith community (the church) combat distraction and find strength from God to stay “on mission” and to keep the main thing the main thing.

When we catch up with Peter and John we find them in jail, where they had spent the night. And the dawn of a new day didn’t bring any 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.

(Adversarial) Face to Face with the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:5-22)

Defendants on the Offensive (4:5-12)

The Council circles (vv. 5-7)

The Council’s make-up (vv. 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, John, and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent.²

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 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.

Some of those names may sound familiar because these were the men who handed Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion. Peter and John were placed in front of these same men.

The Sanhedrin 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, there had been a miracle. (See Acts 3) The “lame man” was not the “leaping man.” The question was, *“How did you do it?”³*

We wonder - what will Peter and John do with that question? It was a question with an edge and there wasn’t much of a safe answer.

As these two apostles stood in front of the Sanhedrin, they’ve got to be thinking of Jesus because He stood before this very court just a few weeks earlier. And as far as we know, Peter and John were the only two apostles who saw His trial before the Sanhedrin.⁴

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 remembered from the night of Jesus’ trials.

Peter - from speechless to spokesman

Peter had been in the courtyard that was connected to the hall where Jesus was being questioned on that night.

And at the same time that Jesus was on trial, Peter was facing his own “trial.” A servant girl asked, *“Aren’t you a Jesus follower?”*

⁴ See John 18:15ff... John was known to the household of the High Priest. He got permission for Peter to go with him into the place where they could observe and listen to the proceedings of the Sanhedrin as they tried Jesus.

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 shame.

I wonder. Did the members of the Sanhedrin watch as Peter ran away? If so, the last they saw of him was his backside.

But now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter was a new man with a fresh mission from Jesus.

He said, ***[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 as far as 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.

By the Spirit's power, Peter has 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)

Credit goes to Jesus (vv. 8-11)

[8] Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit,⁵ 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, making clear that salvation comes only through Jesus.

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 mankind by which we must be saved.”⁶

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

Prior to this moment, Acts has recorded two times when Peter spoke. Both times, there was a great turning to the Lord Jesus.

So, what will be the response of the Sanhedrin?

Apostles Released by [an Embarrassed] Council (4:13-22)

“These guys remind me of ol’ what’s His name...” (v. 13)

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

⁵ 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. I suspect that this “timing note” is to tell us that the Holy Spirit's provision of power is given at the moment of need, not a moment before.

⁶ Notice that there is no reference to a call to baptism here. Baptism was not and is not an element in an invitation to receive eternal life.

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 was it who had such confidence, even when standing before us, even though we had the power to put Him to death...?”

[13b]... 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.⁷

“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 another, [16] saying, “What are we to 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’s warn them not to speak any longer to any person 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.

⁷ 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). I wonder if Saul of Tarsus / later the Apostle Paul there?

They stalled. The stall tactic is often the last resort of powerful people on the verge of losing their power.

So, Peter and John were commanded to not speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. What will they do? We watch. We listen. We learn.

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 listen to you rather than to God, make your own judgment; [20] for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”⁸

They refused to allow the Council to define the terms of the discussion. They told them, *“We appreciate the command. But we’ll just go ahead and keep talking about Jesus, thank you very much.”*

The stall tactic didn’t work, so the Council resorted to bluster. They blustered even as they removed 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 happened; [22] for the man on whom this miracle of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

Let’s look at what has happened in a little more than twenty-four hours.

First, Peter and John were the instruments God used to perform an undeniable miracle.

⁸ 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 Scottish reformer, John Knox, it was said, *“He feared God so much that he never feared the face of any man.”*

The miracle (God's work) was then followed by a sermon (Peter spoke) that resulted in lots of people coming to faith in Jesus.

Then, there was an overnight jail sentence, a confrontation with the most powerful men in Israel, and a threat of punishment if Peter and John kept on talking about Jesus.

And the Holy Spirit sustained the apostles during this twenty-four-hour distraction. In fact, they blossomed. They flourished. They grew in strength to stand strong as the Sanhedrin turned up the heat.

It's all inspiring. But then, as if this wasn't enough, we come to the final scene, which is both inspiring and instructive.

The apostles have been through an exhilarating experience... and they would have been exhausted.

When we have dramatic and traumatic experiences like these, the kind that distract us from whatever "main thing" we have been doing, it'll drain our energy.

When we're drained of energy, we need to re-charge our internal batteries. So did the apostles.

So where did Peter and John go when they knew they needed energizing support?

(Supportive) Face to Face with Friends (Acts 4:23)

[23] When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported everything that the chief priests⁹ and the elders had said to them.

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 we share are easier to bear.

When the experiences Peter and John went through depleted their energies and emotions, they didn't stuff it. They told their friends about it.

Let's take a "share it" reality check this morning.

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

No matter who you are - man or woman, young person or adult - I hope you are discovering the power of a 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 and support them. Fellow disciples wouldn't just commiserate with them, and they wouldn't fuel the fires of resentment.

They would remind them, *"Yes, life is hard. Keep living for Jesus!"*

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

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

But, as beautiful as the story of the blessing of community is, this story doesn't end there.

⁹ "Chief priests" indicates a body of men who had jurisdiction over the priesthood and whose members had 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)

This band of Jesus followers didn't rejoice in the beauty of community and then retreat to a safer way to live.

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

(Worshipful) Face to Face with God (Acts 4:24-30)

To the God Who is in Control... (4:24-26)

[24] And when they heard this, they raised their voices to God with one accord and said, "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 WERE THE NATIONS INSOLENT, AND THE PEOPLES PLOTTING IN VAIN? [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? Yes. No question. The confrontation with the rulers surfaced huge needs and those needs would grow over time.

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 needs.

The first disciples FIRST remembered God. THEN they told God about what was going on in their lives.

...Regarding Recent Events... (4:27-28)

[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. We find that kind of prayer throughout 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, opening the letter that the Assyrian General, Rabshakeh, had written so that God could read it. (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 all of these prayers was not to inform God or to remind God of what was going on.

These pray-ers prayed these prayers 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. They needed God to do for them what only God could do.

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 TO DO SOMETHING.

That is where this prayer is heading. These disciples are about to ask God for something. We wonder what they will 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! (4:29-30)

Take note... (v. 29a)

[29a] “And now, Lord, look at their threats...”

And it looks like they are about to pray a “*Sic ‘em, God!*” prayer. They aren’t. They’re going to ask God for something else.

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 that they were suffering what Jesus suffered - and then made their request.

Open our mouths... (v. 29)

[29] “And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant it to Your bond-servants to speak Your word with all confidence...”

It seems that it never entered their minds to pay any attention to the Sanhedrin’s threats. 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.

They prayed THAT and then they prayed THIS.

Continue Your wonder-working ways (v. 30)

[30]...while You extend Your hand to heal,¹⁰ and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”¹¹

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, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit¹² and began to speak the word of God with boldness.¹³

So...

...they PRAYED for a work of God - for boldness, confidence.

...the place where they were was physically SHAKEN, confirmation 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.

of the Spirit is a ministry He performs in our lives over and over again to equip us for a particular service. Notice that this filling was not accompanied by any phenomenon other than the capacity for boldness. It is probably true to say that the purpose of the filling of the Spirit is, generally, to equip us to speak with boldness and clarity of the mighty works of God.

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.”

¹⁰ They assumed, not miracles of **vengeance** in light of the threats, but miracles of **mercy** in light of peoples’ needs.

¹¹ Note that the apostles didn’t pray for miracles and healings. They prayed for boldness, assuming that God would continue to do the things that only He could do - save souls, change lives, perform miracles.

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 believe in Jesus for salvation (see 1 Cor. 12:13). By contrast, the filling

Conclusion:

In every new venture, you'll face distractions.

It may be that tempting donut on your new diet, a wrinkle in your work schedule that gets in the way of your exercise regimen, a surprise diagnosis from your physician, or an unexpected expense that derails your new budget.

The point of the distractions is to distract us.

But the responses of Peter and John assure us that, despite distractions, we can keep on keeping the main thing the main thing.

And if that applies to weight loss and money, it applies even more to our dream of living for Jesus, because He is the main thing.

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 step into a deeper relationship could be just the next 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.