

Up against it

Acts 4:1-22

Rev Dr Jos Strengholt

Introduction

Today I like us to think about the question how can we be obedient followers of our Lord Jesus Christ even when the conditions are not good, when people around us, or the authorities, hate our Christian faith. How can we make sure we are not intimidated by our circumstances? This question is significant for us, both for our life in Egypt and for our life in the countries many of us have come from.

What was the secret of the apostles, who even in the blazing oven of persecution bravely stood up for their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ?

1 Leaders of Israel

In Acts 4, we have read of the problems the apostles Peter and John faced. The Jewish priests and the Captain of the Temple Guard and the Sadducees had arrested them and put them in jail. The next day Peter and John appeared before the Jewish government.

Imagine you have to appear before the leadership of Egypt – the Military Council, or before your government because they are critical of your Christian faith!

The Jewish government, called the Sanhedrin, consisted of 70 men: a combination of politicians, old wise men, and teachers of the Jewish religious laws. We have seen that the High Priest was there,

Annas, and his son-in-law Caiaphas, and John and Alexander and other men of the family of the High Priest.

All these people had been involved, just a few months previously, in condemning Jesus to death. These were the men who had Jesus crucified. And now they were all back on the stage of this amazing unfolding drama.

The Jewish government was firmly in the grip of the philosophical movement of the Sadducees. They denied the existence of a spiritual world; they did not believe in angels or demons, they denied the possibility of any resurrection from the dead, and they rejected most of the Old Testament Scriptures. Through their wealth they had gained control of the religious apparatus of the Temple. The office of the High Priest was also filled from this group. Annas the high priest, and his family, were Sadducees.

This Sanhedrin had hoped that they could forever silence the claims of Jesus by killing him, a hope that was shattered by what had happened since the crucifixion of Jesus. First there were all these stories of people in Jerusalem seeing a resurrected Jesus, and now Peter and John had healed a crippled man in the name of this same Jesus. Peter had told that crippled man, in the midst of a great crowd of witnesses in the Temple:

Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. (Acts 3:6-8)

After that amazing healing, Peter preached in the Temple:

You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. [...] It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed [this crippled man], as you can all see. (Acts 3:13-16)

Peter preached this in the public space of the Temple, for all people to see and hear. So it was no wonder that the leaders of Israel who had been involved in the murder of Jesus immediately showed up.

Peter and John were put in jail for a night. According to the laws of Israel, this jailing of the apostles was illegal; no charge was placed against them; it was a clear abuse of authority. But in dictatorships, who holds the leaders accountable?

2 Apostles

Peter and John were brought before the Jewish council. A few weeks earlier Peter had trembled before a slave girl who recognized that he belonged to the group of followers of Jesus, in the palace of the High Priest in the night when Jesus was arrested.

But now he stands before the whole government and before the same High Priest, and he speaks to them with steadfastness and courage.

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an

act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. (Acts 4:8-10)

Even in the face of a Jewish council that was opposed to their message, Peter and John now boldly spoke of their faith. These were men with an inner security, a confidence that was clearly not natural. Just as God can give us an inner security and confidence in the midst of oppressive circumstances.

It is interesting to note the verbs that are used to describe the actions of the leaders of Israel. They were *disturbed...* they *met together...* they *brought the apostles before them ...* they *questioned* them. This is how they had also dealt with Jesus! The apostles were treated in accordance with how their Master had been treated. Jesus had told his apostles that this was to be expected. Servants are treated like their master. For those who belong to Jesus Christ, there is something deeply honorable in this.

I guess when this happened, Peter and John remembered those warning words of Jesus. There is comfort in the thought that whatever happens to us is not beyond the knowledge of our Lord. He predicted this. He knows us and also what happens to us. This is very comforting in hard times.

The mistreatment of Peter and John by their authorities must be condemned, but for Christians, there is also another side to this coin of mistreatment. John Wesley, in his New Testament Commentary, writes:

So wisely did God order that [these Jewish leaders] should first hear a full testimony to the truth in the temple, and then in the great council; to which [the apostles] could

have had no access, had they not been brought before it as criminals.

What these leaders intended for evil was used by God. The Church could speak of the Gospel even to the leaders of the nation. Remember the words of Joseph, here in Egypt, to his brothers who had sold him as a slave: 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good...'

Precisely this happened when the Jewish leaders crucified Jesus. They intended it for evil, but God used it for good. For the salvation of the world.

We may sometimes be in hard, very hard circumstances. We may never know how these are good for us or for others. But if we use even those moments of need to point other people to our Lord, we bend our problem into an opportunity. We only truly lose in our times of need if we only see them as problems and not as God-given opportunities as well.

This is not a way of saying: your circumstances are not so bad. Your and my problems can be very real. Churches are being burned in Egypt, people are being tortured, millions of people have no money to pay their bills. There is nothing great or glorious about that. But it does not mean God has left us. In the midst of our darkest moments, he is near. And he asks us to be faithful witnesses for him.

3 Secret in the message

How could the apostles suffer so many problems but continue their Christian life and ministry so vigorously and cheerfully? What was the difference? It seems do obvious: The apostles knew the facts of the Gospel.

You crucified [Jesus but] God raised him from the dead. [...] We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard. (Acts 4:10, 20)

The ancient church of the New Testament did not believe a fairy tale, or some beautifully written piece of mythology. They believed because of the facts. Weeks before, Jesus was crucified. All Jerusalem had seen it. And three days later he was alive again and he appeared to hundreds of people. And also to Peter and John.

How can we stop speaking about what we have seen and heard, the apostles argued. Many decades later, when the apostle John was really very old, he wrote this in a letter:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched— this we proclaim. [...] The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to [...] what we have seen and heard. (1 John 1:1-3)

The words of Peter and John in the very early sermon that we have read are not very different from the words of John written in his letter 50 years later. It is about Jesus Christ, the one they saw, and heard, and touched. The one who died and whom they had seen, heard, felt again after he rose from the dead.

The salvation preached by Peter and John was also unchanged. Peter explained to the Jewish government about Jesus:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved... (Acts 4:12)

50 years later, John wrote:

The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 John 1:2)

The apostles knew from the beginning to the end of their life: The facts are clear. Jesus died and rose again. And eternal life, salvation, is fully concentrated in Jesus

Christ who is stronger than our darkest enemy – death. This is the salvation that made the early church courageous to speak, to live, to change the world.

Knowledge of these facts was not only a matter of the brain. The Holy Spirit – God himself had come down to be in and around those who believed in Jesus. God himself was with them now.

This gives courage to us as well. The facts are clear. He died, he rose again, and he guarantees our eternal security. And God has even come down to us now – surrounds us always and everywhere by his Spirit.

If we are deeply convinced of this in our mind and heart, how can we ever deny this, whether we speak with our household help or when we are faced by unfriendly question is a society that rejects our Lord wholeheartedly and sometimes violently?

Of course the apostles did not stop talking about what they had seen and heard. They knew it was true, they knew it was the best message of all times! This is the first example of Christian civil disobedience in history. Yes, we obey our governments to the welfare of our nations. But we will not, not allow our governments to stop us talking about the Gospel, because it is true and it is the very best message for all people.

The religious leaders of Israel saw the courage of Peter and John and they were astonished; they could not accept the idea of the resurrection of Jesus but they could also not deny the facts. They did not come up with other explanations of the empty grave and they did not try to deny the miracle of the crippled man. Denying the facts was impossible.

They did not dare to punish Peter and John, because it was clear that they had become popular overnight among the Jews

in Jerusalem. ‘All the people were praising God for what had happened.’

‘Many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about 5.000.’ And thousands of women and children also joined this new mass movement. So the leaders threatened the apostles a bit more, and they then let them go.

If only those Jewish leaders would have had the bravery to join the new Jesus-movement. But they did not want it. Did it maybe undermine their lifestyle too much? Their positions of power? Their lifelong religious studies? Would it be too embarrassing for them?

Conclusion

But we should not worry too much about those Jewish leaders. Are there things in our life that make us reject being really obedient to God – even though we know the facts? That is possible and it is important to search our hearts because it is dangerous to live a life that is not aligned with the facts of God.

Are we prepared to not only accept the hard Gospel facts, but also to draw the right conclusions? If he indeed, after his death on the cross, rose again from the dead, then here we have the man who is stronger than death. Eternity is in his hands.

By uniting with him, we have access to this eternity. That is great comfort in hard circumstances. It gives us courage to bravely defy opposition to the Gospel, and to be witnesses to Jesus Christ in our daily circumstances.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.