

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 17

Overcoming Intimidation

Acts 4:1-31 *“The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.*

The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest’s family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: ‘By what power or what name did you do this?’

Then 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. Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ‘What are we going to do with these men?’ they asked. ‘Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.’

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, ‘Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.’

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one. Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”

Lots of us like to be temporarily frightened. There is a certain thrill at being shocked by a scene in a scary movie. A little scare may be fun, but real fear can take over the human psyche. It is such a powerful force that it can control a human being. Taken to the extreme, it can even kill. The expression, 'scared to death' might become a reality in certain circumstances for some people. Some are totally immobilised by fear. To them, fear becomes a bondage, a prison from which they find no escape.

Of course, our society likes to categorise the fears we have. We want to make every human malady and problem a sickness of some kind, so we define it in 'scientific' terms. In this case a fear becomes a phobia. The word phobia is in vogue today to describe all sorts of fears which afflict people. There are literally hundreds, if not thousands of phobias. One phobia was made familiar to us all by Steven Spielberg in his movie by the same name - Arachnophobia, the fear of spiders.

Can you guess what some of the other phobias are? I have a brief list here just to bore you or edify you.

Claustrophobia: the fear of enclosed places

Acrophobia: the fear of high places

Agoraphobia: the fear of open places

Anthropophobia: the fear of people.

There are all kinds of obscure phobias:

Bacteriophobia, the fear of bacteria

Zoophobia: the fear of animals

Eisopetrophobia: the fear of mirrors

Aurophobia: the fear of gold

Metophobia: the fear of money

Telephonophobia: the fear of the telephone

Blennophobia: the fear of slime

Musophobia: the fear of mice

Microphobia: fear of small things

Neophobia: the fear of new things

Monophobia: the fear of one thing

Pantophobia: the fear of everything

There are still more ...

Scotophobia: the fear of darkness

Carcinophobia: the fear of cancer

Hydrophobophobia: the fear of rabies

Algophobia: the fear of pain

Kinetophobia: the fear of motion

Tachophobia: the fear of speed

Autophobia: the fear of being alone

Hypegiaphobia: the fear of responsibility

Kakorrhaphiaphobia: the fear of failure

Gametophobia: the fear of marriage ... and even

Phobophobia: the fear of fear

But wait, we're not through ...

Triskaidekaphobia: the fear of the number thirteen
Oikophobia: the fear of home
Thanatophobia: the fear of death
Ouranophobia: the fear of heaven
Stygiophobia: the fear of hell
Peccatiphobia: the fear of sin ... and of course ...
Ecclesiophobia: the fear of Church.

There are hundreds of fears and the list grows each day. The mere existence of such a list reminds us that we live in a fearful society, and many people are in bondage to it. We all have a tendency to fear. It is a weakness in the human race. And it can be a real problem for us as we seek to serve Jesus Christ.

You see, the enemy of God and the Christian faith is Satan, and he uses fear against us and to keep us from fully following Jesus. This process is known as intimidation. To intimidate is defined as *'to make timid or fearful.'* Intimidation is a strategy of Satan by which he seeks to control people. People in the world who do not know Christ often seek to control Christians through intimidation. As we attempt to live biblical Christianity in a secular society, we will come face to face with intimidation. The real question is what will we do when we face intimidation? Will we yield to fear, or will we find a way to overcome intimidation?

The Apostles wrestled with the same question because they faced intimidation every day in their ministry. As they sought to share the Gospel of Christ and win the world to Jesus, they had to come to grips with the intimidation of the world. In our text today, we see such a situation. And we will also find valuable lessons in how to conquer the intimidation which we face.

In Acts chapter 1, the promise is given by Jesus that the disciples would receive power. In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, they received that power. It was the power to become mighty witnesses for Jesus Christ. Thousands of people were saved that day and the power of God was unleashed. In Acts 3, we see the power of God used to help people. The man by the Temple gate called Beautiful was healed. Now, in Acts 4, we see the fallout of that healing among the religious leaders of the day. What we see here is a confused interrogation. The religious leaders didn't know what to do. They had never encountered this kind of situation. The power of God had come down, and now they had to deal with these people who were the obvious channels of that power. The believers had been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and were now proceeding to live as Jesus' disciples in their secular society. Whenever that kind of radical transformation takes place, it always causes a stir.

People living in the power of God stand out in the crowd, and the world doesn't quite know what to do with them. Hence the confused query of the religious leaders in verse 16, *"What are we going to do with these men?"* They didn't know how to respond. God's power had manifested and God's people were on the move. Things were happening! Things these religious leaders had not counted on. The disciples were preaching boldly in the name of Jesus. A notable healing had taken place right under their noses and they couldn't deny it. What would they do with these men now? They didn't have the answer. They were in a state of confusion.

The question they asked is the same question the world asks today. Just as the religious leaders did not know how to respond, so the world does not know how to respond. When a Christian attempts to live as God intended, he or she stands out. When a believer attempts to live with high moral standards in honesty and integrity, in purity and holiness, refusing to engage in any activity or conversation which would violate the principles of God's Word or hamper their testimony, this kind of person cuts across the grain of broken, secular society.

What does the world do in response? I believe the tactics of the world are quite predictable. The first thing they do is try and ignore us. They simply act like we're not there. If they can't ignore us, their next strategy is to belittle us, or at least belittle our faith. If belittling doesn't work, they seek to intimidate and threaten. They try to use their power or position to control and manipulate us into giving our Christianity a little lower profile. This is how they attempt to answer the question, "*What shall we do with these Christians?*"

In our text today, we find the religious leaders deciding on a plan of intimidation. They concluded that the proper course of action would be to warn Peter and John to quit preaching about Jesus - and that's what they proceeded to do. Little did they know what kind of men they were now dealing with. These were no longer the timid men who had fled in fear when Jesus was arrested. They were a whole new breed altogether now. The religious leaders were about to encounter men who now had courage. Peter and John would no longer be intimidated. They knew in Whom they believed and were persuaded that He was able to keep them in the centre of His will. Lives that had been marked by cowardice and fear were now marked by confidence and boldness.

The religious leaders noticed this confidence. In verse 13 it says, "*When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*" But while they recognised the confidence of Peter and John, they still thought they could intimidate them.

So, they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "*Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*" After further threats they let them go. Their tactic was simple, and it is still the tactic the world uses today: If you can't ignore the Christians, intimidate them. The goal, of course, is to get these Christians to cool it when it comes to living out their faith in the world around them.

Notice that the religious leaders were willing to let these men believe anything they chose. What they were not willing to let them do was to *act* on what they believed. That is precisely what the world tells us today. "*We respect your right to your religious belief, just don't impose that belief on anyone else.*" The fact of the matter is that we can't impose anything on anyone. But that's not what they mean. What they mean is that they do not want us *acting* on what we believe. They don't want us talking about what we believe. They certainly don't want us trying to influence other people to believe what we believe. And when we live out what we believe and stand up for what we believe, they feel threatened, so they seek to threaten us. They just want us to calm down, to lay low, and to blend in.

Peter and John would have nothing to do with such attempts to stifle or control the Spirit within them. They said that they could not stop speaking what they had seen and heard. In essence, they told the religious leaders that they had to obey God rather than men. They didn't say they *would* not stop speaking, they said they *could* not stop. You see, it wasn't their choice. They saw it as obedience to God's command. It was not God's *suggestion* that they be witnesses, they saw it as God's *command*. They had no choice but to obey. "*For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*"

We see here evidence of the confidence and courage which now filled these disciples. But we must not miss the truth that this was a tense situation. They were speaking to the highest religious authorities of the day. It was a fearful thing to be dragged before the great Sanhedrin court. These were the same leaders who decided to put Jesus to death and set in motion the events for His crucifixion. Who was to say the same wouldn't happen to the disciples of Jesus? This was a fearful situation which they faced. But face it they did - in the power of God.

We face situations like this in our lives as we seek to live out our Christian faith in a secular society. We have to face our family, our friends, our neighbours, our co-workers, our employers. We have to face the people with whom we do business - our clients, our customers, the mechanic who works on our car, the shopkeepers who sell us our clothes and our food, and the list goes on. We must relate to people in the society in which we live, and sometimes we are intimidated by them because we are afraid of how they may respond to our faith.

The problem is, when we do that, we come away from the situation feeling like we have somehow failed the Lord. We don't feel good about ourselves, and we vow to do better next time. But the good news is we don't have to feel that way. We can face our fears and overcome them. We can live in the boldness of the power of God. We can make a difference in the lives of others. We can turn our community upside down for Jesus Christ. We can have the same confidence and boldness that Peter and John had in the face of fears which could have immobilised them. We have the same resource which was available to them and I believe we have the same desire to be bold witnesses which was theirs. The desire for boldness and bold witness was a quest of the whole Church. If we desire boldness as they did, we must go to the same source to receive it.

The confidence of Peter and John was as a result of them having been with Jesus. So, when they needed more boldness and more confidence, they came to Jesus again to receive it.

"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

How do you face intimidation and overcome it? You do so by drawing on the same resource by which you live the Christian life. Jesus is that resource. He is the power by which we live. He is the power by which we witness. He is the power by which we become confident and bold. He is the power by which we face intimidation victoriously. When the first disciples of Jesus Christ needed power, they understood they needed prayer - and so they prayed.

In their prayer, we see several important elements. Firstly, they did not assume that they should have to bear these threats alone. They asked God to take note of the threats. You see, the threatening situation was God's problem, not theirs, and so they laid that problem at God's feet. The implication is that God would do something about it. Secondly, they prayed that they would be given confidence to speak God's word. The quest of the early Church was to be able to confidently spread the Good News about Jesus Christ. That should still be the quest of the Church today. Thirdly, they prayed that God would act in a way that only God could, to touch the lives of people.

Now you had better be careful when you pray this kind of prayer. This is the kind of prayer that God loves to answer! He certainly answered them that day. The Scripture says that after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. Here the evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is that they were now emboldened to speak the Word of God. They faced intimidation, they turned to the Lord, and intimidation turned into boldness. It happened then, and it can happen today.

Intimidation comes from many sources, but one of the greatest sources of intimidation for the Christian is the fear of facing people s we share the Gospel message of Christ. It's a fear the Devil seeks to feed, but it's a fear we do not have to endure. God has called us to into boldness. We can face intimidation in the power of Jesus Christ and overcome it.

We, too, can become confident and bold, as we share the life-changing Gospel of Christ. But we must go to the only resource which counts. We must go to Jesus and draw upon our relationship with Him for strength. Then we must act. We must speak in His name and watch Him work.

You do not receive courage, confidence, and boldness by listening to a six-part series on the subject. The answer is not found in a seminar. In the final analysis, this kind of boldness comes as a by-product of our relationship with Jesus. It sounds so simple, almost too simple. But the paradox of the Christian life is that it *is* simple. The Christian life is both impossible and easy at the same time. It is complex and simple. It is impossible to live the Christians life in our own power, but it's easy to live in His power. It is complex and beyond our comprehension but simple in that all you must do is surrender to Jesus and let Him figure it out.

Whatever intimidation you face, you can face it with faith and boldness in Jesus Christ. You can rise above intimidation and overcome it through the power that comes from knowing the Lord. Flee to Jesus. You will always find refuge and strength in Him.