**Study Notes on Acts 4:1-12**

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NOTE: These notes are not intended to read as an article or well-rounded written work. Rather this is a collage of different research and resources that will assist in the preparation of a sermon.

**Working Title**: Sufficient Savior: Embracing Christ in my deepest need

**Summary of the Passage:** In this passage we see the Apostles tried by the Jews for their boldness in healing and proclaiming the name of Christ. Though they faced trial and persecution, the stood by their conviction that Christ was all they needed for life and salvation.

**Outline of the passage:**

1. The Apostles are arrested (1-3)
2. In spite of opposition, God is adding to His church (4)
3. The High Priest Family question the apostles about their authority (5-7)
4. Peter, Filled with the Spirit, gives an answer for their actions and assurance of faith (8-12)

**The Main Point of the Passage:**

**Exegetical Idea**: This is the first time the early church faced opposition since the crucifixion of Christ and how they handled it in the Spirit with assurance of faith.

**Theological Idea**: It is only by Christ we *must* be saved and in him that we can find our assurance in all of life’s trials.

**Applicational Idea**: Our assurance for Salvation and in the face of opposition is in Christ.

**Possible Preaching Outline**:

1. God fulfills his purposes no matter the hindrances (v.1-4)
2. When we stand firm, the world questions our foundation (5-7)
3. There is no other name by which we can find salvation or assurance (8-12)
   1. It is only by Jesus that God’s will is done (8-10)
   2. He was chosen by God but rejected by man (11)
   3. Reconciliation with God comes by no other means than Christ himself (12)

**Exegesis and Commentary:**

**Introduction and context of the passage:**

While the early Christian movement was popular among the common Jewish people, it aroused opposition from the Jewish leaders. This passage marks the first time that the early church ran afoul of the authorities.[[1]](#endnote-1) It shows how the church responded to its first persecution, and how God protected and provided for the church.

**Verse 1**

*And as they were speaking to the people*. *The people* (*ton laon*, from which we get our word ‘laity’) refers to the people of the land, typically in contrast to the leaders (cp. 3:17; see also below). These were ordinary Jews who had come to pray at the temple. **They were ‘laypeople,’ not professionally trained Bible scholars**.

*the priests*. Luke now mentions three groups that would have constituted the ruling class—at least within the temple precincts. The first is the *priests*. These were the descendants of Levi, responsible for offering the sacrifices and teaching the people the Word of God. **They were basically the “pastors” of that day (although they had drifted considerably from shepherding the flock and had gotten more involved in politics; cp. Matt 9:36; John 10:12)**. They would have been busy preparing for the evening sacrifice and prayers when the events of the previous chapter unfolded. So hearing a commotion in the temple courts, they went to investigate.

*and the captain of the temple*. **The captain of the temple was generally the priest who was second in rank after the high priest.[[2]](#endnote-2)** Though not himself a military leader, he was responsible for the temple guard. Since riots were always a concern in the Roman Empire, the sudden movement and gathering of the crowd in the temple (see 3:11) would have been a source of great interest and concern for him. So he also came to check out what was happening.

*and the Sadducees*. The **Sadducees were a political party in Israel, composed mostly of the priestly caste**. They were the theological liberals of the day. They only accepted the first five books of the OT as authoritative Scripture, and did not believe in angels or the resurrection from the dead (see Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). They were usually at odds with the Pharisees, who were the Fundamentalists of the day and generally more popular with laypeople. About the only time the Pharisees and Sadducees cooperated with each other was in their efforts to get rid of Jesus. Interestingly, in the book of Acts, the Sadducees emerge as the primary opponents of the early church, while the Pharisees end up on almost friendly terms (note v.23, which does not mention the scribes as persecutors of the church, only the chief priests and elders).[[3]](#endnote-3)

*came upon them*. The Greek word literally means ‘to stand over.’ There is an implied threat here. **The rulers are throwing their weight around.**  The same word is used in Luke 20:1, which parallels this verse, ‘*One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up*.’ **Luke is showing that the apostles are now doing the same things that Jesus had done, and it is producing the same kind of reaction among non-Messianic Jews.** Compare also 6:12, where the same word is used in connection with Stephen’s arrest.

**Verse 2**

*greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people*. NASB, NKJ, NIV, ‘disturbed.’ HCSB, ‘provoked.’ The word for *greatly annoyed* is used only twice in the NT. The other occurrence is found in Acts 16:18, where Paul is greatly annoyed at the demon-possessed girl who kept following him around and calling out, ‘*These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation*’ (v.17**). It refers to a kind of distress or irritability that comes from overwork or suffering**. **It is a person whose patience has been utterly exhausted.** So this is not just a flash of anger on the part of the rulers. Peter has proclaimed the Gospel in the temple on two separate occasions now, both backed up by outstanding miracles. And he and the other apostles have continued to teach there daily (Acts 2:42; cp. v.46). Thousands of Jews have embraced Jesus as the Messiah, with more doing so daily (2:41, 47). The rulers are getting mad as they feel their power base slipping away.

Imagine how you would feel if you were in the introduction to your sermon, and all of a sudden there was a commotion on the right side of the worship center—some guy jumping around and praising God. And then the entire congregation got up from their seats and ran over to see him, leaving you up on the platform with your mouth open and your Bible in your hand. That’s basically what is happening here.

*and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead*. The way this is worded suggests that they were not only talking about the resurrection of Christ, but also the future resurrection of believers because of what Christ has done. Remember: The Sadducees did not believe that resurrection was possible. For them, people just died, and that was that. So the idea of Jesus rising from the dead was preposterous to them—it contradicted their entire worldview.

**Verse 3**

*And they arrested them and put them in custody*. NASB, NKJ, ‘laid hands on.’ HCSB, NIV, ‘seized.’ The NASB and NKJ are more literal here. The Greek text focuses on the actual hands of the rulers (or perhaps the guards who carried out their orders). Compare Matt 26:50, where same wording is used for the arrest of Jesus. Jesus had predicted that the apostles would suffer for his sake: ‘*But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake*.’ **That prophecy was fulfilled rather quickly! Keep in mind that those who have imprisoned the apostles are the same ones who killed Jesus just a couple of months before.** The apostles must have been wondering if they were next.

*until the next day, for it was already evening*. Jewish custom forbade them from conducting trials at night. Although they had no trouble breaking this custom when it came to Jesus’ trials on the night before his crucifixion, the rulers decided to abide by it here, perhaps because there were so many witnesses. Interestingly, Jesus had told the soldiers who came to arrest him in the garden, ‘*When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me’* (Luke 22:53). So the Jewish leaders are doing something to the apostles that they had not dared to do with Jesus, because he was so popular with the people. Apparently, having killed Jesus, the rulers were now more willing to crack down on insubordination.

**Verse 4**

The chapter break at 4:1 is unfortunate, because this verse is really the conclusion of the events in chapter 3. **Luke includes the results of Peter’s sermon here no doubt to show that the Gospel was effective and bearing fruit, even while the apostles were in prison.[[4]](#endnote-4)** We will see this theme repeatedly throughout Acts.

*But many of those who had heard the word believed*. **The *word* here is Peter’s sermon in Acts 3:12-26.** We hear the word *believed* so often that sometimes we fail to hear it anymore. It means to be convinced about the rightness of something; to put one’s confidence in something; to entrust something precious to another. All of these are important aspects of NT faith:

1) we are convinced that the Christian message is true;

2) we are confident that God will do what he says; and

3) we entrust ourselves to him, surrendering our lives to his care. This is what it means to believe in Christ.

**It is not merely assenting to the truthfulness of the Gospel. If you know about Jesus, but have not yet entrusted your life into his care, then you do not yet have genuine, saving faith.**

*and the number of the men came to about five thousand***. We have already seen dramatic growth in Acts**: three thousand converts the first day (Acts 2:41), with more coming to faith on a daily basis (v.47). But **now the number of grown males is about 5,000**. Note that women and children are not included in this figure. Since the average Jewish family in the ancient world had between six and eight children, the total number of people in the Jerusalem church at this time could be as high as 50,000 people. What makes that number unlikely, however, is that the group was probably disproportionately male, because so many men had traveled to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. So a figure of 20,000 total would probably be closer to the mark. This figure likely includes all believers, whether in the city of Jerusalem or the surrounding region.

**Verse 5**

*On the next day their rulers*. Whereas v.1 gives the impression that practically the entire temple establishment rushed over to investigate Peter and the other apostles, this verse focuses more narrowly on the upper crust—those who would have been most prominent among the priests (their names are given in the following verse). **This was a meeting of the Sanhedrin (cp. v.15). The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish tribunal, composed of 71 members from both the Pharisee and Sadducee parties.** It had considerable authority and influence, even though Judea was under Roman control (the Romans wisely let nations have a certain amount of native leadership, and only stepped in when necessary). **It was the Supreme Court for Jews.**

*and elders*. **A body of older laymen who had money, power and influence, and were seen to be wise. They were the guardians of tradition (see Matt 15:2) and were often seen alongside (but distinct from) the ruling priests** (Matt 16:21; 21:23; 26:3; 27:1, etc.). This model was adopted by the early church, and soon we will see that the ‘apostles and elders’ are the ones making the tough decisions (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4).

*and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem*. **The scribes were basically the Bible scholars of the day, mostly Pharisees**. They had mastered the Hebrew Scriptures, along with the various rabbinic interpretations through the centuries. So with the highest Jewish authorities present, this hearing could rightly be called a “power meeting.” They brought out the “big guns.”

**Verse 6**

*with Annas the high priest*. We have heard this name before. According to John 18:13, Jesus was sent to Annas immediately following his arrest. **It was in Annas’ house that an illegal trial of sorts was held, and Jesus was struck on the cheek (John 18:22).**

*and Caiaphas*. **We have also heard the name of Caiaphas. He was the high priest when Jesus was crucified, and the son-in-law of Annas** (John 18:13). In fact, it was in Caiaphas’ house that the plot was hatched to arrest and kill Jesus (Matt 26:4). He was the one who tore his robes and declared that Jesus had uttered blasphemy (v.65). So needless to say, these men were not friendly to the apostles’ cause. They had already demonstrated a willingness to kill in order to stay in power.

* **Illustration**. Show picture of Caiaphas’ ossuary.
* **Exegetical Issue**. This verse poses a problem for those who uphold the historicity and accuracy of the Acts narrative. It says that Annas was high priest at the time, whereas the gospels say that Caiaphas was high priest (Matt 26:3, 57; John 11:49; 18:3, 24). How is this to be resolved? Actually, it’s not that hard. Josephus records that Annas was high priest from ad 6-14, until he was deposed by the Romans. Various members of his family followed, until his son-in-law Caiaphas rose to prominence in ad 18. Caiaphas held the position until ad 36. So even though Annas was no longer the high priest, he retained his title and still exerted considerable influence.[[5]](#endnote-5) No contradiction.

*and John*. This man is unknown to historians, unless this is a shortened form of the name Jonathan. **Annas had a son named Jonathan.**

*and Alexander*. This man is unknown to us. But apparently he was a high-ranking member of Annas’ family, and was known to the early church.

*and all who were of the high-priestly family*. Several less prominent members also attended. **Marshall points out that the control of the temple was “in the hands of a few powerful families.”[[6]](#endnote-6)**

**Verse 7**

*And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired*. The members of the Sanhedrin sat in a semicircle when they met, so that each member could see all the others. The crowd would gathered around the other half of the circle, and the apostles would have been right in the middle. Thus, Luke paints an intimidating picture: the apostles, forced to stand before the same men who had condemned Jesus to death not long before, surrounded on every side, all eyes upon them, as they are formally questioned. It was a tense situation.

*By what power or by what name did you do this*? **It was obvious that the miracle was supernatural in origin, but the rulers were not sure about the origin of such power**—perhaps it was sorcery of some kind. Peter had already told the people in 3:12 that it was not his own power or piety that accomplished the miracle of healing the crippled man. **Rather, it was done in the name of Jesus (3:6) for his glory (3:13). Apparently, the rulers had not heard that, or else they just wanted to hear Peter say it again.**

**Verse 8**

*Then Peter . . . said to them*. Who else would you expect to speak first? Keep in mind, however, that this same man cowered before a little servant girl in Caiaphas’ house just a couple of months before, and ended up denying Christ. Now he is on trial before not only Caiaphas himself, but practically the entire Jewish leadership. Yet we will see that Peter is bold and fearless (cp. v.13). What made the difference? The next clause says it all.

*filled with the Holy Spirit*. The last time the disciples were filled with the Spirit, they spoke in languages that they did not know (2:4). This time, however, the filling of the Spirit results in bold proclamation in the face of persecution. Jesus had promised his disciples that the Spirit would help them in such times: ‘*When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you’* (Matt 10:19-20).

*“Rulers of the people and elders*. Peter shows respect for their position. He recognizes that they are the official leaders of God’s people. He would later write, ‘*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. . . . Honor everyone’* (1 Pet 2:13-14, 17).

**Verse 9**

*if we are being examined today*. NASB, ‘on trial.’ NKJ, ‘judged.’ NIV, ‘called to account.’ The word is used in legal settings for ‘cross examination, interrogation.’

*concerning a good deed done to a crippled man*. NASB, ‘sick.’ NIV, ‘disabled’ Literally, ‘a weak man, a powerless man.’ **In other words, “Why are you giving us a hard time about this?”**

*by what means this man has been healed*. The Greek word is generally rendered ‘saved, delivered.’ This term is more ambiguous than the Greek word for ‘healed,’ for it is often used in the context of salvation. So does Peter have the healing of his physical body in view, or the salvation of his soul? Or both?

**Verse 10**

*let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel*. See once again the distinction between the rulers and the people. **Peter wants every Jew to know that Jesus is responsible for this miracle.**

*that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth*. About twenty times in the NT the name of Jesus is linked with the village of Nazareth, where he grew up. In fact, the superscription on the cross read ‘*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews’* (John 19:19). Such designations were common, especially with men who had popular names like ‘Joshua.’ Since Jews did not have last names like we do (except when they used their father’s name, such as ‘Simon bar-Jonah’), it helped to distinguish them from other men with the same name. What is ironic about the combination ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ is that Nazareth had a bad reputation (see John 1:46). Yet Peter and others continued to refer to Jesus that way.

*whom you crucified*. Peter has not been shy about laying the blame for the crucifixion at the feet of his hearers (cp. 2:22; 3:13-15). But never have his words been truer, for now he is speaking to the actual people who plotted to kill Jesus.

*whom God raised from the dead*. Again, Peter focuses on God’s vindication of Jesus in the resurrection. By contrasting the action of the rulers with that of God, it shows that they are the enemies of God.

*by him this man is standing before you well*. The word for *well* means ‘healthy, sound, whole.’

**Verse 11**

*This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders*. This is a quote from Psalm 118:22. Talk about looking like a bunch of idiots! The builders—who should have known better—rejected the very stone that the Master Builder decided to use. And not only did he decide to use it in the building, it gave it the place of greatest honor and importance! Note the similarity to 1 Pet 2:7-8. This verse is used as evidence for Petrine authorship.

* **Quote**. Bruce says, “The apostles are technically on the defensive, but actually they have gone over to the attack.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

*which has become the cornerstone*. NASB (cp. NKJ), ‘chief corner stone.’ NIV, ‘capstone.’ Literally, ‘head of the corner.’ There is a debate about whether this refers to the cornerstone, which was the first stone laid in construction of a building. It was crucial to get that stone perfectly level and parallel, because the rest of the building was built according to its lines. Or does this refer to the capstone, which was the last stone laid on the upper tier, above the doorway? The capstone held the other stones together and kept them from tumbling inward. Either image fits the role that Christ has in the church. I favor the former interpretation—especially with the literal rendering ‘head of the corner’—but would not go to the stake for it.

**Verse 12**

*And there is salvation in no one else*. **This is the key verse in the passage and one of the most significant in the Scriptures for the doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ and the exclusivity of salvation in him.** Peter uses the term swthria in v.9 and also later in this verse. Here he is clearly talking about spiritual salvation rather than physical healing. Jesus said, ‘*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*’ (John 14:6). Paul put it this way, ‘*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’* (1 Tim 2:5). The author of Hebrews asked, ‘*how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation*?’ (Heb 2:3). **Peter declared Jesus to be seated at God’s right hand (Acts 2:33). That is the place of highest honor, and there are no other seats. Jesus is God’s only provision for salvation!**

*for there is no other name under heaven given among men*. The rulers had asked, ‘By what power or by what name did you do this?’ (v.7). **Not only does Peter say that the healing took place in the name of Jesus, he also makes the astounding claim that there is no other name on earth that can bring about such salvation!** While we might jump quickly to names like Muhammad, Buddha or Rev. Moon (and this verse certainly applies to them), they would have meant nothing to the Jewish rulers sitting before Peter. Rather, the apostle is likely referring to names like Moses and Abraham, who were the heroes of the Jewish faith. The Pharisees said, ‘*we are disciples of Moses’* (John 9:28), which is clearly the background for Jesus’ statement, ‘*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life’* (John 5:39). In other words, they thought they would find salvation by following Moses. John the Baptist rebuked the Pharisees for thinking similarly about Abraham: ‘*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father,” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham’* (Matt 3:8-9). **Peter is saying that only Jesus is sufficient for salvation.**

*by which we must be saved*. **The word translated *must* here refers literally to something that is binding. It expresses a compulsion, a necessity or an inevitability.** It is the same word used in John 3:7, ‘*You must be born again,*’ Acts 5:29, ‘*We must obey God rather than men*,’ and 2 Cor 5:10, ‘*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ*.’ So Peter is not simply saying that we *can* be saved through Jesus, as though we had an option, but rather that we *must* be saved through Jesus (with an implied “Or else…”). This is similar to the thought in Acts 17:30, ‘*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent*.’ Salvation in Christ is not optional—it is required. Those who fail to obtain it will face God’s wrath.

* **Quote**. Marshall says, “Peter claims that only Jesus can offer salvation in the fullest sense; his is the only name which has received power from God to give salvation to men. Hence there is an implicit appeal to the audience to cease their rejection of Jesus.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

1. Marshall, 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Marshall, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Marshall, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Marshall, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Marshall, 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Marshall, 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Bruce, 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Marshall, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)