

Fearless and Fearful Witnesses

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Preacher: Pasquale Tedeschi

[0 : 0 0] ...might come, no matter what persecution they may face. We see this same resolve in our passage this morning as the Apostles Peter and John are arrested for proclaiming salvation in the name of Jesus.

In the book of Acts, what's happening is we're seeing the early church being established by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the witness of those first Christians.

And there's some great things happening, right? The gospel is being preached. People are being saved. New believers are growing strong in their faith. There is unity of heart among the believers.

People's needs were being met. And more and more people were coming into the church day by day. Things were going pretty good. In chapter 3, the disciples healed a lame beggar and then took that opportunity to proclaim salvation in Jesus to the gathering of crowds.

There was an overwhelming response of faith to their preaching. And the number of those who believed grew to 5,000. That was one response, right?

[1 : 1 4] But there was another. There was a persecution by the religious authorities. So this is the first instance of persecution we see in the early church.

And with it, we see the disciples' bold response. Because they feared God instead of what people might do to them. We may never end up in jail like those disciples.

We may never face death threats like J. Smith. But oftentimes, or at least sometimes, we can be fearful, intimidated by how people might react to us if we proclaim a clear gospel message to them.

Perhaps, as you've done that, speaking of your faith, speaking of Jesus, perhaps you've experienced rejection or some ridicule. Indifference.

Maybe even some antagonism as you have witnessed for Christ. And that can influence us to become hesitant in sharing our faith. Now, while this passage gives us a clear picture of how Jesus is continuing to build his church in the face of persecution, it also gives us strong and fresh confidence, encouragement, that we might become fearless and fearful witnesses for Christ.

[2 : 4 0] Fearless in the sense that we would not be afraid to stand and speak for Jesus. And then fearful, or maybe I should say fear-filled, in that we have a reverent fear and awe of God.

Trusting his word, trusting the power of his spirit to enable us to be his witnesses no matter what response we might get. So how does this passage do that for us?

How does it give us that encouragement to be resolved in Jesus' command to be his witnesses? So I would say the first point is this. Fearless witness will result in persecution.

Fearless witness will at some time result in persecution. Now, I know that doesn't sound like the most heartwarming first point of a sermon.

But we need to understand it because Jesus wants us to be prepared when opposition to our witness comes.

- [3 : 47] So what's happening, right? John and Peter are preaching the gospel. The Jewish authorities, political leaders, are in an uproar over their teaching, so they arrest them. Now, it's too late to give them a court hearing, so they let them sit in jail overnight. Now, I can imagine what might be going on in my mind if I was in their shoes.
- I might be tempted to say something like this to my cellmate. Okay, you know what? Maybe we went just a little overboard with the whole Jesus and the gospel thing. So when they bring us out in the morning for the hearing, maybe we should just smooth things over a bit.
- Let's just apologize for making such a scene and let's not make such a big deal about all this. Because I don't think Jesus really wants us in here. I think he wants us out of here so that we can tell more people about him.
- I think we just need to be a little bit more discreet. I think I might think something like that. But maybe, maybe I would also remember what I'm sure Peter and John remembered that night when they were in prison.
- [4 : 58] Something that Jesus had warned them over and over again. And it is this, friends. This would happen. Persecution would come.
- He wanted them, Jesus wanted them to be prepared that persecution would not maybe happen, but that it would definitely happen at some point.
- So I can imagine now the interchange between John and Peter. I can hear John saying, hey Peter, remember when Jesus preached on the mountain and he said, blessed are you when you're persecuted for my sake.
- Remember when he said that they hated me, they're going to hate you too. Oh, what about when he told us that they would lay hands on us and deliver us to prison and be brought before the rulers for his namesake.
- Remember that, John? Remember that, Peter? And Peter might say, oh, that's right, John. And what did he say after that? Oh, yeah. That would be our opportunity to witness for him.
- [6 : 08] Maybe they were afraid when they were first thrown in there. But God's spirit would bring these things to their minds. In fact, Jesus said that he would do that for them.
- That he would bring these things to their minds. The words of Christ would begin to fill their hearts. And so they remember that he also said this, let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid.
- Believe in God. Believe also in me. In this world, you will have tribulation. But take heart. I have overcome the world.
- Friends, we don't like suffering, do we? We don't like to be uncomfortable. We don't want to offend people and get them mad at us. We want people to like us, right?
- We don't want to be rejected and so on and so on. And so in the name of social politeness or political correctness, there are times that perhaps we don't really stand for the gospel of our Savior.
- [7 : 12] I'm guilty of this and I'm ashamed to say it. In fact, being in Cambridge actually reminds me of that.
- Five years ago, I was here for my cousin's wedding. And her mother, my aunt, had been very sick with cancer. And so they drove up to New Jersey for the wedding.
- And the day before, actually the moment they arrived, there was an ambulance waiting at the hospital, waiting at the hotel to take her to the hospital. She never made it to the wedding. And she died three days later.

She knew that what I believed. But I don't know if I ever really took the opportunity to speak the gospel clearly to her. And that opportunity was gone.

And this place reminds me of that. So there are times when we don't stand for the gospel.

[8 : 18] But we have to realize it's because we fear being ridiculed or being labeled a religious wacko. But Jesus says it's going to come.

So we need to be prepared because it's part of what it means to be his disciples. Right? Jesus says you cannot be my disciple if you don't take up your cross daily and follow me.

But what does that mean? It's suffering for Jesus. So he wants us to be prepared, but he wants us to take heart also. Because along with the persecution or rejection, there is blessing for us.

Now if anything ever sounded like an oxymoron, that's it, right? Persecution equals blessing? Really? Really? It's a bit of a hard one to swallow.

What's the blessing? I'm just going to mention two. There's numerous ones. I'm just going to mention two with regard to persecution. How about the blessing of being associated compared to the prophets who spoke for God?

[9 : 32] Yet they were persecuted when they did. Right? What does it say in Matthew 5.11? Blessed are you, you disciples, you believers in Jesus. Blessed are you when others persecute you on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so, listen, for so they persecute the prophets who were before you.

I have a men's discipleship group at our church. And there's one guy in the group. He's pretty straightforward and down to earth. And in talking about this verse one day, I said, So what do you think God's thoughts are and feelings were toward the prophets?

And my friend said, well, I guess you'd like them enough to talk to them. That's right. God spoke to them. They spoke for him.

They were persecuted. Many of them died. And now they speak to God face to face. They are forever in the joy and the reward of living in the presence of God for all eternity.

[10 : 45] That's one blessing. What about this blessing? The blessing of sharing in the joy, not just of the prophets, but of Jesus himself. Right? Listen to what it says in Hebrews 12, verse 2.

It says that we look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was before him endured the cross, endured suffering.

Right? For the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and was seated at the right hand of God. So what was Jesus' joy?

It was the joy of fulfilling the Father's will, of coming to earth as a man, dying to take the sins of all who would believe in him, rising from the dead and giving everlasting life to all who would repent and believe, fulfilling that will of the Father, and then bringing in those who would believe into the presence of God to worship the one who is worthy of our praise.

We get to share in the joy of Jesus. That's another blessing. Jesus wants us to understand that suffering will come when we are faithful and witness to him.

[12 : 06] But friends, remember, there is deep blessing. There is great reward. And it's not just later. It's in our hearts and experience now as well.

Jesus wants us to be prepared, but at the same time to be encouraged by what we will gain from it. The second way we can be encouraged in our witness from this passage is this, that the same Holy Spirit who empowered the disciples is available to us today.

The same, I should say, the same filling of the Holy Spirit that was available to the disciples is available to us today. So, perhaps, you have been afraid of what others may think of you when you talk about Jesus today.

Maybe you've tried to share the gospel, and you've failed miserably, or at least you feel that way. You know, I'm going to tell you a quick story. I don't even know how much time I have.

Am I on the timer or something? Am I good? Am I good to go? Okay. So, I'm in Portugal. We had a missionary in Portugal. And one day, I'm walking along the beachhead.

[13 : 20] It's kind of like a boardwalk, but it's concrete. So, it's a concrete walk. And I see this guy. It's very early in the morning. I see this guy sitting on the bulkhead, just kind of looking out to the ocean.

And I'm walking by, and it's like the Spirit of God is pressing on me. Go talk to him. And I'm like, I don't want to talk to him. So, this is what I do. I keep walking by. And then I go past, and I walk by again, asking God for help to talk to him.

So, finally, I go up, and I introduce myself. My real name is Pasquale. You know, people call me Pat. I said, hi, my name is Pasquale. Do you speak English? Yes. I said, oh, well, I saw you sitting here, you know, kind of looking.

I just want to make sure you were okay. He said, yes, I'm just thinking about my life. Now, please go away. So, I'm a little flustered now, because he's telling me to get lost.

And I'm like, oh, okay. Well, I believe in Jesus, and I just wanted to talk to you. And he said, yes, yes, now go away. Right? That felt like the worst failed attempt at trying to witness for Jesus.

[14 : 28] But you know what? After I left, I thought, that guy probably never even thought that Jesus would have anything to do with his life. And God can use even a failed attempt, or at least what feels like a failed attempt, to glorify his own name and even give that person understanding to think, maybe I need to think about Jesus.

So, maybe you felt that way. You felt that you failed miserably. Maybe you just kind of feel inadequate to talk to the reader. You don't know what to say. You don't know where to begin.

So, maybe past attempts to witness failures, feeling worn down, I'm not any good at this, nobody's listening anyway, what's the use?

All of those things can be an influence to keep us from sharing the gospel. Friends, the power of the Holy Spirit can change all of us.

And we see that in the life and preaching of Peter, right? And Peter was not always so bold in his witness, was he? In fact, the night before Jesus was crucified, as many of you know, he denied even knowing Jesus three times.

[15 : 43] And the scripture tells us that after that third denial, and he hears the rooster crow, he turned and Jesus looked at him. And he knew that he had let his friend down.

And he wept bitterly. Maybe you feel that you've disappointed God in your witness. Maybe you've even wept over opportunities that you've missed.

God doesn't want us to be motivated by guilt. Instead, he wants to strengthen us by his grace and his power. What happened after Jesus resurrected?

And in the 40 days, he's spending time with the disciples. He talks to Peter one day, right? And he's asking Peter about Peter's love for him. He asks him three times if he loves Jesus.

Now, I don't think, you know, so three denials, three times asking about love. Is Jesus kind of trying to throw up the denials in his face? I don't think so. Peter was grieved over what happened.

[16 : 50] And so perhaps he felt he was even qualified to speak for Jesus anymore. But in that scene, Jesus is actually reaffirming Peter's call as an apostle to be his witness and to strengthen his people.

You may have denied me three times, Peter. I'm affirming you three times. I've called you and I will be with you as you go forth in my name.

So you may struggle to be his witness. You may have even failed to stand for Christ. But you know what? He's not done with you. It wasn't done with Peter.

He didn't cast Peter aside. He affirmed Peter's call. Everything that Jesus had provided for Peter to be his witness, Christ provides to us today through the filling of his Holy Spirit.

Now, you might think to yourself, okay, well, that sounds good. But what do you mean by the filling of the Holy Spirit? I think that's a good question. In Ephesians 5, verse 18, the apostle Paul says, Don't get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.

[18 : 12] So whenever I think about or I pray about being filled with the Spirit, I think about people who get drunk. Really.

What do drunk people do? They fill themselves up with a good amount of alcohol so that they then come under the influence of the drink. And it influences their thoughts, their words, and their actions.

So Paul says, instead of loading yourself up with the influencing effects of alcohol, instead, fill up, fill yourself up with the influencing power of the Holy Spirit.

Okay, so again, that sounds good. What does that mean? What does that look like? Romans 8, 5. Those who live according to the Spirit, Paul says, set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

To set your mind on something means what? We give our attention, our energy, our devotion to that, right? If a guy sets his mind on a girl that he wants, he's going to put energy into that.

[19 : 17] Paul is saying, do that with the things of the Spirit. All right, so what are the things of the Spirit we're to give our attention and energy to? Again, Paul, 1 Corinthians 2, 14. He writes, the natural person, the person who is without Christ, the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit.

Paul is referring to, or Pastor John Piper says this, Paul is referring to Paul's Spirit-inspired teachings. That is, or I should say, therefore, the things of the Spirit are the teachings about God and the Gospel from the Word of God.

And so an essential element in being filled with the Holy Spirit is to read, it is to hear, to meditate on, and to listen carefully to the truth of God's Word.

To listen carefully to it. My boys grew up, I have three teenage sons, they grew up knowing that they were to be reading their own Bibles as they got older to discipline themselves for daily Bible reading.

But I would always say to them, don't just read it because you know you have to. Don't let it just become some kind of duty or thing that you check off.

[20 : 40] Don't let it become a drudgery. Read it, understanding that this is a person speaking to you. A real, glorious, and ultimately satisfying person.

Thank Jesus. He wants you, God wants you to understand things about how to live the Christian life, but he doesn't want you to just know stuff, friends. Most fundamentally, he wants you to know him.

Not to stuff about him. To know him. To experience a deep, what am I mean by deep? Beneath the surface, hitting the heart level, a deep, vibrant relationship with him that affects how you live.

He wants you to taste, that is to experience him through the word, and see that the Lord is really good.

How do you do that? This is what I've been thinking about a lot lately. So as I read the word, I ask God, show me what you want me to understand about you. Help me to see truths about you that will help me to love you, to treasure you, and to live for you.

[21 : 57] So just for example, looking at this passage, in Acts 4, what are just a couple things we learn about Jesus? That he's all-knowing, right? Didn't he tell the disciples that they were going to be persecuted, and that they were going to be arrested?

So Jesus is all-knowing, and so I can rest in the fact that he knows what's going to happen to me. Right? What else do we learn? That he is a helper to his people.

Because he said, when these things happen, don't worry about what you're going to say. I'm going to give you what you need to say. So I say, God, you're my helper.

I'm weak. I don't always know what to do. But you're a helper for those who are in you. Those are just two things we learn. And so as I'm reading it, as I'm considering it, I'm listening carefully to it.

I'm saying, Jesus, this is what I've learned about you. Help me to love it. Help me to believe it. So he's speaking to me, and in prayer, I'm speaking back to him what he's been saying to me.

[23 : 01] That's part of how we begin to fill ourselves with the things of the Spirit through the Word. A second essential element in being filled with the Holy Spirit, the first one is filling ourselves with the things of the Spirit through the Word.

Secondly, is prayer. Pretty simple and straightforward. In verse 8 in our passage, it says, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, and then he goes on to preach the gospel, right?

Now there's no mention of prayer there at all. So why am I bringing this up? Because in chapter 2, verse 42, it says that the believers devoted themselves, kind of like setting your mind on, devoted themselves to what?

The apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and the prayers. They were devoting themselves to prayer.

Now what do you think Peter and John were doing in that prison cell? It doesn't say, but if I were a betting man, I bet that they were devoting themselves to prayer.

[24 : 09] A couple years ago, me and four guys from our church were on a short-term team to missions partners that we have in the Middle East.

It's a church planning team among the Muslim people group. And we would go out every day to go and meet people, whether in shops or on the streets or other public places, and ask God for opportunities to speak the gospel to them and have them get to know our partners there.

So one night we go, and we are in a big public park, and there is a big festival, a city-sponsored festival happening in that park.

We got to talk to all kinds of people about Jesus. It was great. So we had a good night, we're wrapping up, we're making our way out, and we're right near the exit, about 50 feet away.

And two policemen joined forces, they approached us and they put their hands up and they said, turn around, walk this way. And they took us to the police station.

[25 : 19] And for just about four hours, they were interrogating us about who we were, who we were there with, what we were doing, and what we were talking to people about.

What do you think we were doing during those four hours? We were really, really praying that God would do something to get us out.

Peter and John were praying. The disciples were praying for them. We even read earlier, and that's when they're in the upper room and they're praying, and then the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they're filled with the Spirit and they begin to speak boldly.

And then, later in our passage, in verse 24, the disciples are released, Peter and John are released, they go back to their brothers and sisters, they report what's happened, and it says there, in verse 24, as soon as they heard the report of what God had done, they lifted up their voices to pray.

And then in verses 25 to 30, it says that they prayed to the sovereign Lord, and they were remembering what He said and what He would do, and they were talking to Him in prayer.

[26 : 32] And then in verse 29, it says, and grant your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness. And then it says they were filled with the Spirit, and they kept speaking the word of God.

Knowing their own weaknesses, knowing their past failures, these disciples knew that they needed ongoing dependence on the Holy Spirit in prayer for their witness.

So they asked for it. They simply asked for it. If you're weak in your witness, maybe you're not even doing it.

You're ignoring God's call that you would be His witnesses. And this passage is strong help to come to the Father in prayer that He might fill you with His Spirit to be bold witnesses.

Look what happens as a result. It says in verse 31, when they had prayed, it says that the place where they had gathered was shaken. I don't know what that feels like, but I'm sure.

[27 : 42] Like, I was in an earthquake once, and it was weird. Anybody in an earthquake before? You're like, okay, why is the floor moving, right? So maybe it was like that, only worse. It was shaken, and they were all filled with the Spirit and continued to speak the Word of God with boldness.

One commentator I read said this, the place was shaken so that they would not be. They would not be shaken in their resolve to continue to witness the Christ.

God wants us to have fresh courage as we seek His help to be fearless and fearful, fear-filled in our witness for the Gospel.

As we begin to wrap things up, I want to look at a really kind of amazing statement that was made about the Apostles after they were filled with the Spirit and spoke for Christ.

You see it in verse 13. It says, Now when they, the religious leaders, saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated and common men, they were astonished and they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

[29 : 02] When we read that old phrase, that they had been with Jesus, we have to understand that they had not only been learning His teachings, they were spending time with Him.

They were experiencing Him. They were communing, having a common union with Jesus. And being with Him, through the power of the Spirit, they came to love and cherish Jesus.

And so, when they were brought before those men, they valued Him. They valued Jesus and what He thought. more than what anybody else would think about them.

So the question for all of us today is, how are things with you and Jesus? How are things with you and Jesus? Maybe you're here today and you have not personally put your faith in Christ to rescue you from your sin.

Listen again to what Peter says. there is salvation in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved.

[30 : 17] You know what happens oftentimes? Before I was a believer, I thought I was a good guy. And I thought my goodness would kind of get me in God's graces.

I didn't really need Jesus to be my Savior. I was kind of being my own Savior. And I really didn't think that sin was a big deal. I just kind of made some mistakes here and there and God would know that He's okay.

Friends, my sin and rebellion had separated me from God. I needed to know that. I needed to know that only Jesus could save me.

Only Jesus could forgive me. Only Jesus could give me the righteousness I needed to be justified and saved in the sight of God. So maybe that's you this morning. Maybe you're here and you've not yet trusted in that name.

And so Jesus calls you now to confess, acknowledge your sin and trust Him for the salvation that only He can give. He will give you forgiveness, joy, and everlasting life.

[31 : 28] And for every true believer today that's here, are you seeking to be with Jesus? Are you being with Him?

Are you struggling maybe to speak of Christ to people? Maybe the struggle is just pursuing and being with Jesus. If so, perhaps your love has cooled or did some.

And if you haven't been with Jesus, as you know, you should. Revelation chapter 2, Jesus tells the church in Ephesus that they have abandoned the love that they had at first.

So He tells them to repent of that lack of love and to do, check this out, to do the things they did before when their love for Christ was at the center.

What would some of those things be? How about rehearsing the truth of the gospel to yourself? Reminding yourself of all that God has done to rescue you from your sin and what that means and how you love your family, your church, your friends that is heard without Christ.

[32 : 47] What other things do we do at the beginning? Listening to the voice of Jesus in the word and then caring deeply about what He says. So that means when I come to the word, Jesus, I need you to show me what you want me to know today and help me to hear it, to believe it and change me where you need me to be changed.

How about worshiping together? Praise God for this Saturday, this morning. Worshiping together, coming alongside other believers who may be worn out or discouraged. Being in a small group where you can pray for each other, support one another and keep each other accountable.

How about seeking God, asking God to fill you with the Spirit so that you might have encouragement to tell others about the gospel that rescued you.

If we know that we're called to be witnesses, then God wants to take steps in reaching out to others with the gospel, but at the base of it, we need to be with Him.

we need to be with Jesus, delighting in Him, treasuring Him. You know what John Piper says? You always honor the one you delight in.

[33 : 59] Isn't that true? Whoever you love, whoever you delight in, don't you love talking to other people about that person? God says, you're going to be out of Jesus.

So get to know Him. Be with you. Ask God to help you see more of Him, to treasure Him. I'm going to end with an illustration, another story. Years ago, after Bible college, I was working as a security officer in an AT&T facility.

Yes, I was known as Officer Pat. And I'm working at this place, and I became friends with two guys. One was named Mark, and one was named Matt.

Mark was kind of this hip guy, ponytail, very funny. He got along pretty well, and after some time, I thought, you know what? Mark's my friend. I didn't even tell him about Jesus.

So I'm going through my rounds one night, and I go past his cubicle, and I said, hey Mark, you know what? I just really appreciate our friendship, and I wanted to share something with you.

[35 : 04] And so I began to tell him about Jesus. And when I was done, he just looked up at me and said, man, what did you have to do that for?

I really can't be your friend anymore. I lost a friend because of the gospel. I experienced some measure of persecution because of Jesus.

But then there was Matt, young guy, pretty intellectual, kind of going through a rough time in his life. I began telling him about the gospel.

And eventually, he came to church with me, told me that he really believed in it, he wanted to repent and put his trust in Christ. Told his girlfriend she became a believer.

They joined our church. They began serving the body of Christ. They had kids, those kids grew up in the church. And they are still serving Christ today.

[36 : 14] I'm not saying this to pat myself on the back. That was the power of God. Right? In one case, it would mark rejection and some measure of persecution.

Not a lot, but some. On the other hand, there was Matt. Repentance, faith, and life for him, his wife, his family, and others.

The gospel may result in persecution, but it is mighty to save, friends. It is mighty to save. If you turn from your sin and you turn to faith in Christ, then it is mighty to save you and he'll use you to see others come to faith as well.

Jesus said this, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not stand against them. How will he do that?

How will he build his church? We see the answer in Matthew 28, 18 to 20. He says, All authority in heaven and earth is given to me. So you disciples, you go and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[37 : 27] teaching them to observe all I have commanded you and behold, I am with you always. Christ will build his church through his faithful witnesses as they seek to declare the gospel and to disciple those who come to faith.

He's going to do it through his people. For the last two years, Jesus has been building this church through you. through your leaders, through your members here at Trinity Church Cambridge.

And he will continue to do that as you corporately and individually set your mind on the things of the Spirit, the Word of God, praying in humble dependence for him to fill you and empower you to be his witnesses.

and as you do, God will help you to continue to grow as fearless and fear-filled gospel witnesses.

Amen? Amen. Let's pray. Father in heaven, oh, we need you. we see your Word, we see the example of your own life, the life of your called men and women, and we want to grow in our witness for you.

[38 : 57] But you see our weaknesses and our failures and how I thank you that you are powerful to help. and you say, come and ask and I will help.

And you say, even in the midst of our struggles and failures, that the work you began, you will complete in the day that your Son returns. So, Father, help us to be freshly encouraged that your Spirit is with us and that we have all the help we need to be your witnesses for the glory of your Son, Jesus.

and in His name we pray. Amen.