

Acts 4:1-22

The Clash of Powers: The Worldly System Vs. The Kingdom of God

September 15, 2024

Main Point The main theme of Acts from this point on is the persecution that the early Christians endured at the hands of the 'worldly' powers. How did the early Christians respond? How should we?

SI: new chapter – from here on we see Luke record for us the clash – the opposition of the worldly powers against the followers of Christ.

Continuing the story from chapter 3 – a lame beggar who had basically lived at the gate of the temple for decades has been healed by Peter and John's faith in Jesus. Peter gives a sermon telling the crowds how this has happened, and now, chapter 4:

Read 4:1-22

Intro:

A clash of powers

The worldly system vs. the Kingdom of God

What is the worldly system? It is the way of living that depends on itself and uses others to maintain its power. Here it is on display.

A mighty miracle has taken place – no one could deny it – but the kingdom of God is threatening the worldly powers.

Few of you here have been arrested for your faith in Jesus. But think of when you have been excluded or denied something good or made fun of b/c you took your faith in Jesus seriously. This is how we can apply this to us in the here and now.

So let's look and see – the war, the path of victory, and the stone that was rejected that is now the chief and head – the Cornerstone.

1The War Against Perceived Weakness – (vs. 1-7)

Peter and John are arrested by the Sanhedrin, kept overnight, a hearing the next morning, a warning.

The Sadducees represented the privileged aristocracy

Didn't believe in resurrection

Peter's preaching had a politically inflammatory edge to it – if this is the beginning of a general resurrection with the arrival of the Messiah of the Jews, then the Sanhedrin knows that the Romans will interpret that as a threat to their power over the Jews.

They did this because they could. They had the power, so they thought, to squelch this. And this is always the mistake of worldly powers from ancient Egypt against Moses and the Hebrews to ancient Rome here and to those persecuting the Church today.

Right at the beginning of this shift in Luke's account, it's good for us to see this b/c a lot more persecution is coming: Persecution is not what you think it is. It is not to be ashamed of. It is not to be avoided at all costs. Persecution is not a squelch on the church or the witness of the church. Persecution doesn't kill the church – here in v. 21 – and then look back at the first 3 centuries of the NT church - the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. In God's upside-down from the world way of His kingdom, persecution actually strengthens God's people.

Two stories – one from China, one from Bham

Two weeks ago, on Sept 1st, about 50 people from Early Rain were meeting for worship in a rented conference facility in Chengdu, China, the 4th largest city in China.

Authorities came and arrested 2 of their leaders, an elder and a pastor.

Then they cut off the power to the building and dispersed the congregation.

Early Rain is a house church – a Protestant church movement.

In June of this year, the Communist Party summoned the leaders of the state's recognized faiths—Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and Taoism—to a seminar in Beijing on the “Chinese-ization” “Sinicization” of religion. They were reportedly told that “Sinicization . . . is the only way to actively guide religions to adapt to socialist society.”

That is a plan to secularize religion under the guise of making it authentically Chinese. Religious practice and belief are expected to conform to government dogma and party authority. Xi Jinping and his party see organizations that acknowledge a higher power as threats to the state.

Early Rain is a prime target because of the church's affiliation with Wang Yi, its former pastor. Authorities arrested Mr. Wang during a similar raid in December 2018 and convicted him a year later of “incitement to subversion of state power.” He is serving a nine-year sentence in Jintang prison in Sichuan province.

16th Street Baptist Church – Today, September 15th, is the 61st anniversary of the bombing that killed 4 young girls who had just finished a Sunday School class. 16th Street has led a movement called “Uniting Birmingham” to spread the word that on that day, the lesson was called “A Love that Forgives.” There are some 40 churches in Bham and the surrounding suburbs partnering with 16th Street to glory in the love of Jesus that enables forgiveness of even the most horrific acts.

The story of God's people is facing evil with our backs against the wall and the wall turns out to be not a wall.

This happens again and again in the Bible, over and over. From Adam and Eve being given the good news after they fell into rebellion and shame to baby Moses rescued from Pharaoh to young forgotten David being chosen to be king... Why? B/c God's gracious deliverance is so hard to believe! God's way of rescue is His work alone, and this is so hard to receive. Which is why He gives it to us again and again and again.

All of these stories are designed to show us the incomparable greatness of God's deliverance from the curse of sin, death, and hell through the Resurrected Christ, raised for us, the Giver of Life for all who will receive Him. This really is life and death. Which way will you go? This is the implicit invitation that Peter and John are giving to the rulers and authorities, and that we must apply to ourselves.

The upside down nature of the ways of God –

These were the leaders, they had the ears of the people, they had the power, they were the teachers in the temple and the synagogues

They were dead wrong

But look back at 3:17-18 – they acted in ignorance – they missed (and so did the apostles!) it that the Christ would suffer!

Peter and John were weak, uneducated, common men

In the Sanhedrin we see how evil works – through seducing people into power, human power, being captivated by control over others, being masters, lords, controllers, manipulators, power-brokers.

How do we overcome this? By being captivated by human fragility, weakness, vulnerability and surrendering to the power of the Resurrection - - without Jesus, human fragility leads to death. Human weakness leads to death. Vulnerability leads to pain, suffering, and death. But with Jesus, human weakness leads to victorious living. Human weakness with Jesus leads to experiencing daily resurrection.

But without Jesus humans fall for the survivor mentality – doing whatever it takes to make it on your own, including using the Church. Don't let that be you. Vulnerability leads to humble receiving of His strength. Haven't you experienced this, don't you want this? Everyone wants this... it's written into the human conscience to want the underdog to win.

The war against perceived weakness,

2The Path of Victory Over Persecution – (vs. 13-20) the path

What do we do with persecution? How do we respond, react?

We go deeper into the heart level foundational motivations so that our behavior flows from our heart beliefs -

Internal – heart level based on what you have seen and heard – heart level confidence, heart level transformation. What does this mean? Look again at Peter and John – the worldly powers are astonished!! Ha! Why?

B/c they doubled down on their weakness, they appealed to their enemies' consciences, and they did normal stuff.

They doubled down on their weakness

Got arrested

We often are tempted to do what the Sanhedrin does – double down on perceived power in order to avoid persecution...

But P&J – they have a heart level bedrock foundational confidence that cannot be shaken – they have been transformed by what they have seen and heard

Aren't these the stories that thrill our souls? The underdog – there's no way he could possibly win against that – that power, that threat, he's gonna get destroyed – but then David really does defeat Goliath, and the American colonists really do defeat the greatest empire in the world, and Frodo and Sam little Hobbits really do defeat Sauron and Mordor, and Sleeping Beauty gets awakened by a simple kiss from the Prince.

This stuff shouldn't happen – but it does, b/c God writes grace through weakness into the fabric of the human conscience – every human longs for grace to be true and irrevocable. And b/c of the Resurrection of Jesus, it is. He purchased grace for us.

They appealed to their enemies' consciences – v. 19

They are greatly annoyed and troubled

But they are astonished – v. 13

So Peter and John appeal to their consciences by asking them a question – v. 19-20 – in the matter of religious persecution – don't you want to be on God's side here?

Don't you want this, Sanhedrin?

They did normal stuff – v. 20

As a fruit of being with Jesus

The power of being with Jesus – this was the highest court, the Supreme Court filled with men who had gone through the highest levels of the rabbinic schools. And these were unlearned, common Jewish men – being with Jesus gave them more learning than these highest judges.

“The power of God is that much more astonishing when working through regular people.” (Justin Holcomb, GTSB notes) -- Victory over persecution is internal. Not about your education level, your ability to answer apologetics questions, to debate well. It's heart level, hearts that have been transformed by the power of Jesus' resurrection. It's miraculous, supernatural, sounds too good to be true – sounds like a fairy tale– that everything will lead to happily ever after.

What did Peter and John do – spoke of what they had seen and heard

*Regular people doing regular, normal things

Isn't this freeing!?

No need to be a superstar, indeed that will inhibit the work of the kingdom – mustard seeds, yeast, quiet people, stars in the universe, salt, light – seemingly small things – a small church – these are what have big impact in the upside-down kingdom of God.

Principles – we love our enemies enough to tell them the truth. We are only messengers, ambassadors, vessels. If they reject you, so what? If they hear you, rejoice. If they reject you, rejoice – you have been counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. I am willing to suffer for that which I love.

Love requires it – why? Why does love require suffering? It's a test of devotion, allegiance, belief. This is the test of love – if you love something, you will willingly suffer for it in order to give yourself to it, to give your treasure to it.

And how do you fall in love? Something captivates you. Makes you its captive.

What is captivating to you?

If Jesus is not captivating to you, if He is not your everything, you won't suffer for Him. You won't. You'll avoid suffering.

And so He will bring persecution as both a gift and a test.

Gift – to validate and cement your love for the one you love. We've endured this together. I have proven my love for her/him/it. Like in marriage, or your favorite football team

Test – what will you love? What will you trust? What has truly captivated you?

Go to Jesus, go to the cornerstone on which everything else depends -

What has / is captivating you? Trans to 3

The war, the path to victory, and

3The Cornerstone: The only Name of Power (vs. 11-12)

Brings us back to the beginning – the war against perceived weakness. This human weakness is actually strength b/c when you are weak you are open to depending on the power of God instead of your own.

Psalm 118 – the songbook of Israel – “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”

How could they miss this?

Because it was so upside-down to what had captivated them. B/c God was doing something that they couldn't allow in. Their hearts were hardened by their own power and position that they couldn't give up.

If Jesus has captivated you by His power, grace, and love, then nothing will move you. Following Jesus means dying to anything and everything that is not of Him.

“Look, if someone wrote a play just to glorify what's stronger than hate, would they not arrange the stage, to look as if the hero came too late? He's almost in defeat, it's looking like the evil side will win, so on the edge of every seat from the moment that the whole thing begins. It is love that makes the mortar and it's love who stacked these stones, and it's love who made the stage here though it looks like we're alone. In this scene set in shadows, like the night is here to stay, though there's evil cast around us it's love that wrote the play. In this darkness love can show the way.” - David Wilcox, Show the Way

Conc: Are you captivated by the cornerstone? If you are, persecution will come, but you will not be capsized by it. In fact, just like for Peter and John and the early NT church, it will make you stronger in your faith in the Cornerstone.

Bene: Rev 1

https://www.wsj.com/opinion/china-expands-its-religious-repression-b00db83e?mod=Searchresults_pos1&page=1

By Collin Levy, WSJ:

Police showed up at Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, China, in the early morning on Sept. 1. Some 50 people had gathered to worship in a rented conference room, but by around 9 authorities had detained church elder Li Yingqiang and pastor Wu Wuqing.

The rest tried to carry on, singing hymns and praying together. Within hours the police returned and took away Yan Hong and Zeng Qintao, a pastor and deacon, respectively. The power was cut off and the congregation was told to leave the building. The leaders remain in custody and could be moved to longer-term criminal detention in the coming days.

This is the price of religious worship in China, and it's rising. The Communist Party in June summoned the leaders of the state's recognized faiths—Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and Taoism—to a seminar in Beijing on the “Sinicization” of religion. Shi Taifeng, a member of the Political Bureau Committee, reportedly told the assembly that “Sinicization . . . is the only way to actively guide religions to adapt to socialist society.”

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authority. Xi Jinping and his party see organizations that acknowledge a higher power as threats to the state.

Early Rain is a prime target because of the church's affiliation with Wang Yi, its former pastor. Authorities arrested Mr. Wang during a similar raid in December 2018 and convicted him a year later of "incitement to subversion of state power." He is serving a nine-year sentence in Jintang prison in Sichuan province.

Before the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Mr. Wang was among 37 academics, lawyers, journalists and others who signed a letter calling on the international community to insist that China live up to its human-rights commitments. The signatories noted that they felt "disappointment and doubt" in witnessing "the continuing systematic denial of the human rights of our fellow citizens." They cited "press censorship" and "persecution of human rights defenders."

Later that year Mr. Wang became a pastor, and his focus shifted toward creating a "house church," a category of Protestant congregations that operate outside the party's state-sanctioned churches. The church grew over several years and began offering religious education for children. In September 2017, China's State Council passed the "Regulations on Religious Affairs," which increased the party's control over religious education and worship. Religions were to "practice the core socialist values" and Beijing expected religious communities to adapt their content in deference to the party. Mr. Wang didn't.

In September 2018, Early Rain posted a "joint statement by Pastors" on [Facebook](#) that Jesus is the "everlasting Ruler and supreme Judge of the universe." The church added its belief that "all men, from national leaders to beggars and prisoners, have sinned." At least 116 church leaders signed it. Three months later, Chinese government authorities arrested Mr. Wang.

The party is now moving against the Early Rain congregation, deploying the same technique it has used against human-rights leaders and Muslims. In 2015 the Communist Party began a crackdown on human-rights activists and lawyers that questioned or detained more than 200 people. The Sept. 1 arrests targeted church leaders and those who continued to lead prayers in their absence.

The goal is to hollow out such communities until they no longer profess beliefs outside the party's dogma. China's campaign against the Uyghur Muslims, in the northwestern region of Xinjiang, began with detaining clerics and religious leaders on the pretense that they were targeting religious extremism. The government in 2018 began a campaign to remove domes and minarets from mosques to Sinicize the buildings. The party went on to expand surveillance cameras in Xinjiang, limit free movement within the region, sterilize Muslim women or force them on contraception, and detain Uyghurs in internment camps.

The repression increased gradually, provoking only minor consequences. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared China's actions in Xinjiang a "genocide," which his

successor, Antony Blinken, has said continues. Congress passed a law to prevent imports created by forced labor. Those symbolic steps had little effect.

Beijing's crackdown this month is thus a test of how much repression the world will tolerate. In addition to the arrests, state police are pressuring landlords to kick out Christian tenants and employers to fire them. The state says religious leaders must follow Mr. Xi's "Two Establishes" and "Two Safeguards," which require party members to acknowledge the general secretary as the "core" of the party and protect its total authority.

Those who don't are at risk, as Early Rain well knows. For now it stands as a witness against the state's repression. Beijing is counting on its critics to blink, thanks to the compliance of a frightened population and the complacency of a distracted West. Will the U.S. prove it wrong?

Ms. Levy is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

Small Group Questions: (Leaders – if you would like to read the article about the persecution against Christians in Chengdu, China, it is attached to the end of the sermon manuscript. This should be posted online on avpc.org under sermons.)

1. Think of a time when you were persecuted because of your faith in Jesus. It doesn't have to be something like being arrested... were you excluded, passed by, slighted, made fun of. What did that feel like? What were your temptations?
2. How do you resonate with so many stories in the Bible of God rescuing what seems like a hopeless situation? See 2 Kings 6:32-7:20 where God rescued Israel with a rumor, a whisper. What purpose do these stories serve in our lives?
3. How were Peter and John captivated by Jesus? What gave them such confidence so that they could endure persecution without hating their enemies?
4. What keeps us (or you) from doubling down on our weakness and embracing human vulnerability and the Christian's perceived weakness before the world?
5. How can you and your group grow in being regular people through whom God works to communicate the truths of the gospel and the transforming power of the Resurrection of Christ?
6. What is something that Jesus might be calling you to put to death that might keep you from going all in in your love for Jesus?

Just one from the OT:

**ILLUS of 2 Kings 6:32-7:20*

King of Syria and his army set a siege against Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Great famine – so severe that mothers were eating their children.

Elisha, the leader of the prophets, prophesies that the very next day there will be an abundance of food available for everyone.

God intervened and did what Israel could not do for itself.

How?

By causing the Syrian army to hear what they thought was the sound of a great army of chariots and horses. They were convinced that Israel had hired the Hittites and Egyptians to wage war against them.

So they fled and left everything, and 4 desperate lepers found it and told the gatekeeper and the gatekeeper told the king.

God accomplished the deliverance of His people through a rumor, a whisper – through perceived weakness!

“The incalculable nature of God’s power is demonstrated by His ability to deliver us from the greatest of terrors with almost no effort at all; indeed, with what might appear to be weakness.” - Miles Van Pelt, GTSB notes.