

Acts 4:1-22, No. 9**“The Fact of Unbelief”****October 18, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

A great miracle had been performed in a most public place. The news was spreading through the city and great excitement had overcome the crowds of people in the temple. We now learn what happened next.

Text Comment

- v.2 The Sadducees were particularly annoyed by the apostles because they were proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and the Sadducees denied the possibility of resurrection. The apostles were striking at the core of their theological identity. The denial of the resurrection was one the chief planks in their theological platform. What is more, they thought of the temple as their special precinct and here the apostles were using it to proclaim a message that contradicted their own.
- v.4 The annoyance and worry of the religious leadership was increased by the widespread acceptance of the apostles’ message. We read in the Gospels, remember, that it was their jealousy of Jesus’ popularity with the people that provoked their hatred of him and their determination to be rid of him. Indeed, we read in Mark that their jealousy of Jesus was so obvious even Pilate realized that this was why they wanted him dead.

Now, don’t take that number 5,000 for granted. Here the term is the more specific term for male human beings, so we should add many more to reach the actual number of Christians: men, women, and children together. The standard estimate of the population of Jerusalem at this time – remember, Jerusalem was one of the great cities of the world in the 1st century – is somewhere between 25 and 30,000 souls. The population swelled to several times its usual size at the pilgrimage feasts, but we have no way of knowing how long after Pentecost this event took place and whether the number of people in the city was still unusually large. But whatever the case, for a city of that size, a group of say 10 to 15 thousand Christians changed the spiritual landscape of the city dramatically. The religious leadership could not have failed to notice how rapidly the Christian movement was growing. That must have been particularly galling to them, believing as they had a few weeks before that they had stamped out the movement for good with the crucifixion of its leader.

- v.6 The problem was grave enough to require a meeting of the Sanhedrin. We have another eyewitness touch: Annas was there, and regarded by them as the high priest. He had been deposed by the Romans and so, technically was no longer high priest, but he maintained his prestige and authority among the Jews, and so was still de facto their high priest. Caiaphas, who was officially the high-priest, was Annas’ son-in-law. Both men had been prominent in the trial and condemnation of Jesus. Interestingly - another eye-witness touch - Luke sees fit to mention John and Alexander, obviously prominent men at the time, but of whom we know nothing.

- v.7 Once again, as in the Gospels there is no question that a miracle had occurred. That the congenitally man had been healed everyone knew. But likewise, as before, their argument will presumably be that the disciples wielded the power of the Devil rather than the power of God.
- v.12 Not only does Peter deftly begin by reminding them that they arrested Peter and John for a work of compassion done for a needy man, but throws down the gauntlet at once. It was by the name of Jesus, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. That must have burned! The challenge could not have been more direct. This Jesus is the one of whom the prophets spoke, whom they said would be rejected, and *you* were the ones who rejected him. There is no “you” in Psalm 118:22; that is Peter contextualizing the prophecy. That prophecy had now been fulfilled, Peter said, and *you fulfilled it*, placing yourselves on the wrong side of history and making yourselves enemies of God’s Messiah. Not a speech designed to win friends and influence people among the Sadducees.

I’m going to return to v. 12 next Lord’s Day morning, God willing, because the statement in and of itself is so hugely important and has become so controversial in our day. But the implications of his statement could not have been lost on the Sanhedrin. They were interested in salvation. They had a theory of salvation, such as it was, and here they were being told if they wished to be saved they too would have to believe in Jesus. The effrontery!

- v.13 These men had been with Jesus, but they were not the same men they had been before. Before they were milquetoasts, easily frightened. At the first sign of danger at the arrest of Jesus, terrified, they had scattered in all directions like roaches in the light. But no longer. That is the difference the Holy Spirit made.

To say that these men were uneducated doesn’t mean they were illiterate. It means they were not rabbinically trained as interpreters of the law. They were laymen. Here was another cause of their annoyance. These amateurs were teaching the people and that was *their* job! [Peterson, 187, 194]

- v.17 How did Luke know what discussion had gone on behind closed doors? What we will read in 6:7 is a likely explanation. Some of these very priests and elders who made up the Sanhedrin later became Christians themselves. Remember too that there may already have been believers among them, men such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, believing members of the Sanhedrin mentioned in the Gospels. For all we know, Paul might have been there as well and been able to give Luke his own eyewitness description of that conversation.
- v.18 It wasn’t much of a plan, but given the circumstances, there was little else they could do as they themselves well knew.

v.21 The envious are always hostages to public opinion. If you want people to love you more than they love others, you can't afford to offend them! Every politician's problem.

Now, for the first time, we come face to face in Acts with a phenomenon which Christians and the Christian church had to face in those early days and have to face still today. I am speaking of the world's unbelief, an unbelief also often found within the church itself. The Sadducees after all were part of the church in those days. It's presented to us here in a particularly stark form, in fact in a highly ironic form, but that makes it easier for us to grasp the nature of this unbelief.

The religious leadership, the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin, could not and did not deny that a great miracle, what they called "a notable sign," had been performed. Perhaps some of them – surely it is likely that at least a few of them – the temple being their special precinct – were in the temple at the time the man was healed, a man who had been lame his entire life and was well known to those who regularly frequented the temple. They could not deny that he was now no longer lame, as they had themselves seen him walking and jumping and praising God. Throughout this narrative we are told that they admitted that they could not deny the fact of the miracle itself. Nor could they deny that it was these men who had performed it, these yokels from Galilee who had belonged to the entourage of Jesus of Nazareth, their hated enemy.

What is more they couldn't help but noticing the dramatic change that had come over these men. Cowards before they were now utterly unafraid. Not professionally trained, they suddenly sounded as if they had graduated *summa cum laude* from the very best seminary. Theirs was now a commanding presence and the people were hanging on their every word.

But, of course, there was more. They had known, as everyone else in Jerusalem knew, that it was being noised abroad by an ever-growing group of people that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead. Had that been untrue, it should have been comparatively easy for them to disprove the report. After all, they knew where he had been buried, had posted guards at the tomb where Jesus had been laid; surely they could produce the body. But they had known from the very beginning that there was no body and that the body hadn't been stolen, though that was the rumor they had spread.

Still more, the teaching of Jesus, his healing ministry, his own life had been so impossibly *good*. This was not a man who was seeking notoriety for himself, he often shunned the limelight. He was no political agitator, though that was the charge they had brought against him to Pilate. He was helping people in need, loving those who were living desolate lives, and bringing the sinful to God. And now his disciples were doing the same thing. The Sanhedrin was placed by all of this in the unenviable position of having to criticize people who were doing good and making very sad people very happy for the very best of reasons.

Didn't all of this begin to raise doubts in the minds of these men? Weren't some of them thinking, "How can we put ourselves on the other side of men who have such power and are doing such good?" Didn't it occur to them to realize that such a miracle as this absolutely required them to reconsider their position, that the proof that it provided of the resurrection of Jesus cast very serious doubt on their theological program?

After all, this wasn't the first time. No, the Lord's miracles, one after another, the frenzy they produced among the people, the number of folk who were talking about what Jesus had done for them, all of that was dredged up again by this miracle performed by Peter in the temple. They had accused Jesus of wielding Satan's power, not God's - a very unlikely explanation, supposing that Satan was going around doing such good for people. They had resented the kindness, the extraordinary blessing that Jesus had shown to so many of the most benighted people of the land. And his power and goodness to so many had only stoked their envy. When he had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead just a week or two before his crucifixion, rather than stopping to think what this meant, what this revealed about Jesus, they conspired to kill him knowing that they were losing their place in the affections of the people and that the people were preferring Jesus' teaching to theirs.

And now it was all happening again. Didn't some of them stop and think to themselves: "Well that is that. We can't resist this any longer. We've got to sit down with these men and hear them out. We cannot risk being enemies of God's work!" Well, no doubt some of these men thought such thoughts. We'll read later that a number of the priests became followers of Jesus (6:9). But many did not. They never bowed the knee. They never surrendered their cherish beliefs. They never were willing to admit what had actually happened, even to themselves perhaps. However unsettled they may have been in heart and mind from time to time, they buried their doubts and shouldered on as unrepentant Sadducees or Pharisees.

Why, for goodness sake? Why is human unbelief so often so invincible; so intractable; so determined to resist any argument or evidence? On the human level, we encounter this frequently enough in smaller ways. People are used to thinking a certain way - socially, politically, religiously - they are comfortable believing certain things, they find it quite easy actually to interpret the evidence according to their paradigm of understanding and are untroubled by apparent problems. They are sure there is some adequate explanation, so sure they rarely spend much time searching for it.

Before the Copernican revolution in astronomy, clever men spent a great deal of time and energy solving the problems created by the motion of the planets in what was supposed to be a geocentric system. When Copernicus came along and argued that the planets orbited the sun, not the earth, they thought the suggestion ludicrous. But once it was accepted that Copernicus was right and that the new paradigm made much better sense of the evidence, the old system was seen to be what it was, a gigantic mistake. But until that moment no amount of evidence was sufficient to convince very, very intelligent men, astronomers that the earth was not the center of the universe. They confidently spun out ever more complicated theories to justify the paradigm even as the paradigm sagged under the weight of the evidence. Even scientists nowadays borrow Christian vocabulary to describe this phenomenon of the replacement of one intellectual paradigm by another. They call it, "radical conversion." What changed was not that evidence was discovered that no one knew before. What changed was that they changed their view of what counted as evidence, or better, they were able to see the evidence in a new light.

The sports world has been treated this last week to another example of the same phenomenon on a more personal level. A prominent football coach, who had publicly denied that he was an alcoholic, lost his job when he showed up for practice inebriated. There had been similar

incidents previously, but he and others had shrugged them off, confident that they were not indications of a deeper problem. *They did not want to believe it true!* But finally he was mugged by the fact that he not only was a drunk but that people now knew he was a drunk. Now he's in rehab and we wonder – our experience being what it is – whether even now he really believes that he is an addict. Such is the human capacity for self-deception.

We wonder, do atheists lie in bed at night worried that they might be terribly wrong? How can they explain their own nature as personal, self-conscious beings with such extraordinary powers of sight and sense, of speech, and possessed of a moral conscience they cannot escape? Can anyone actually believe that all of this – that *we* – are biochemical accidents? But most of them sleep soundly, with nary a whisper of doubt troubling their self-assurance.

The reasons for this are no doubt many. Human beings are proud creatures and, to a greater extent that we are willing to admit, we hate to admit that we have been wrong or weak or foolish. We are conformists and we loath believing things that are unpopular with our friends or with the majority of people around us or with the particular group we belong to. But the Bible, of course, has a more profound explanation for this universal human phenomenon. In sin man is by nature a rebel against God and in his rebellion will not submit his mind or his life to God's rule. There is that within him that absolutely *will not believe!* Jonathan Edwards, the great Colonial preacher, has a powerful sermon entitled, "Men naturally God's Enemies." In that sermon he argues that men are enemies of God in what he calls "the natural relish of their souls." They have, in other words, an inbred distaste for God himself. They do not like, they do not admire the attributes of God's nature: his omnipotence, his omnipresence, his omniscience, his justice, his wisdom, or even his grace, love, and mercy.

The God of the Bible is simply not attractive to them. He is actually repellant to them. He is omniscient, but they don't want a holy God to know everything about them. He is omnipotent, but they resent the thought that they cannot escape his control. He is unchangeable, but to them that means that he will always be as holy as he is now, he will never tire of being offended by their sins. Even his grace offends them, because it suggests that they need help that only God can give them and that they don't deserve, and because the existence of such a great love unmask the pathetic character of their own love. And so it is with Jesus Christ. As Edwards puts it:

"They see nothing in Christ [that] they should desire him; nor beauty nor comeliness to draw their hearts to him. And they are not willing to take Christ as he is, and as he is offered to them in the gospel, and they are not willing to accept of Christ; for in doing so, they must of necessity part with all their sins; they must sell the world, and part with their own righteousness. But they had rather, for the present, run the venture of going to hell, than do that." [*Works*, ii, 139]

That is exactly what you see here. It isn't for lack of credible evidence that these men refused to believe what Peter told them; it wasn't because the case that Peter made was weak or lacked adequate demonstration – my goodness, there was the man still jumping up and down – it isn't that they thought some parlor trick had been performed. They knew nothing of the sort had been done. They did not want to submit themselves to their enemy, Jesus of Nazareth; they did not

want to admit that they had been wrong, galactically wrong, and they didn't want to live their lives the way Christ said they must. And they were so unwilling that their only interest here was to do what they could to stamp out the Christian movement, the facts be damned!

This has always been the case and is the case today. Very few people will ever admit this, of course, but sometimes they will. Here is Robert Shapiro, sometimes professor of chemistry at NYU and author of the book, *Origins: A Skeptic's Guide to the Creation of Life on Earth*. Shapiro, who interestingly doesn't hesitate in his book to skewer the evolutionary establishment for the faulty arguments they use to propose a chemical solution to the problem of the origin of life, nevertheless writes:

“Some future day may yet arrive when all reasonable chemical experiments run to discover a probable origin for life have failed unequivocally. [Actually, that day has probably already arrived!] Further, new geological evidence may indicate a sudden appearance of life on earth. [The Cambrian Explosion certainly proves the sudden appearance of most all animal phyla.] Finally, we may have explored the universe and found no trace of life, or process leading to life, elsewhere. [A very likely outcome given modern calculations.] In such a case, some scientists might choose to turn to religion for an answer. [Life must have come from God, in other words.] Others, however, myself included, would attempt to sort out the surviving less probable scientific explanations in hope of selecting one that was still more likely than the remainder.” [Cited in Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*, 234]

What he is saying is that he doesn't want to believe in God and isn't going to no matter what the evidence seems to require. He will not believe in a Creator come wind, come weather and no one can make him. In its theological account of human life and of human life in sin the Bible makes no bones about the intractable unwillingness of human beings to submit to God, to abandon their rebellion and to acknowledge that their lives have been built on a massive mistake. And here we see that same account of human life illustrated in flesh and blood. What the religious leadership did was what people always do: find some way to ignore the evidence and to comfort themselves in their illusions.

Daniel Dennett is a clever man, a widely read philosopher. In his books and lectures he compares religious believers (90% of the population and a high percentage of practicing scientists) to wild animals that need to be caged and suggests that parents should be prevented by law from misinforming their children about the origin of life, which, he thinks, we all should know by now was a biochemical accident. What is that but the Sadducees in Acts 4? “Shut these people up! I don't care about the miracle, I just want them to shut up!” In his masterpiece *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis explains this phenomenon of intransigent unbelief.

“From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and of itself as self, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the center is opened to it. This sin...is the fall in every individual life, and in each day of each individual life, the basic sin behind all particular sins: at this very moment you and I are either committing it, or about to commit it, or repenting it. We try, when we wake, to lay the new day at God's feet; before we have finished shaving, it becomes *our* day and God's share in it is felt as a

tribute which we must pay out of “our own” pocket, a deduction from the time we ought, we feel, to be “our own.”

In other words, no one should understand the power, the resilience, the determination of human unbelief better than a Christian because he or she *knows very well* that God is real, that Christ is real, that he rose from the dead, that he performed miracles through his apostles, that he is our Lord and our coming Judge – we *know* all such things – and yet we still struggle to live as if it were all true. We can see ourselves in these Sadducees, can we not?

On this side of the chasm that separates believers from unbelievers we recognize not only that the gospel of Jesus Christ is *true*, but that it *must be* true. However unlikely the incarnation of God the Son may once have appeared to us, how absurd the idea that our hope of heaven rests entirely on the death of an amateur Jewish rabbi outside the city of Jerusalem on a Roman gibbet 2000 years ago, however once strange the demand that we submit our lives, our wills to Christ in grateful obedience, now we see the truth and the necessity of all of this *so clearly* and, in fact, scratch our heads over the unwillingness of people to accept truth that seems so luminously obvious to us. What is more, we still find in ourselves the same stubborn resistance to this truth, a resistance that we know is utter foolishness and harmful to ourselves, but resistance we cannot entirely overcome no matter how certain we are that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and the King of Kings. We can see how our pride and our self-love so often defeat our faith in Christ and our submission to him. We can see how wrong we are to let them do so. But all of that, in its own way, is just more evidence that the behavior of the Sadducees and other religious leaders in Acts 4 illustrates the human condition with a profound, however discouraging accuracy.

They were devout men as they understood devotion to God. They were loyal to the Bible, as they understood the Bible. But the Son of God had stood before them, they had seen him perform works that partook of nothing less than the power of God, they had heard his teaching – so unlike the pettifogging hair-splitting stuff they were used to – and they couldn’t see what blind men saw or hear what the deaf could hear who came to Jesus for the help they knew he could give them. Evidence matters and evidence was not lacking; not by a long shot. But the human heart is hard and God alone can soften it. Such is the story of our world.

Jonathan Edwards concluded his sermon, characteristically, with a section entitled “Practical Improvement,” “improvement” being used there for what we would call “application” today. And he drew two applications from the fact that all men are enemies of God by nature, impervious to evidence for God and for the truth of his Word and are by nature unwilling to believe what God says and does.

First, said Edwards, “we may learn how wonderful is the love that is manifested to us giving Christ to die for us. For this is love to enemies.” When Christ died for us, in other words, he was dying for people who would have happily, determinedly, unrepentantly rejected him to their life’s end were it not for the intervention of God himself removing the scales from their eyes.

Second, “If we are naturally God’s enemies, hence we may learn what a spirit it becomes us as Christians to possess towards *our* enemies. Seeing we depend so much on God’s forgiving us, though enemies, we should exercise a spirit of forgiveness towards our enemies.”

The early Christians seemed to have learned by spiritual instinct very well those two lessons, and so they were always rejoicing in God's goodness to them, opening their minds to truth they otherwise would never have known, and doing all they could to bring others to the knowledge of that same truth, God helping them. Go and do likewise!