

"With Great Boldness"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a three-part series

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Acts 4:13–31 (NIV)

¹³ When they saw the **courage** of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ¹⁶ "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

¹⁸ Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

²¹ After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

²³ On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together against the Lord
and against his anointed one."

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word **with great boldness**. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and **spoke the word of God boldly**.

2 Thessalonians 2:13–17 (CEB)

¹³ But we always must thank God for you, brothers and sisters who are loved by God. This is because he chose you from the beginning to be the first crop of the harvest. This brought salvation, through your dedication to God by the Spirit and through your belief in the truth.

¹⁴ God called all of you through our good news so you could possess the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, **stand firm** and hold on to the traditions we taught you, whether we taught you in person or through our letter. ¹⁶ Our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and a good hope. ¹⁷ May he encourage your hearts and give you strength in every good thing you do or say.

Do we have the courage to act, to confront our own complacency, and to demonstrate to others the Good News of Jesus Christ? Can we be bold?

Spark Tank. A place where we can catch fire as we bring good news to those around us in all that we say and do. Love is a verb and the Spark Tank is all about living out that love in concrete ways. It really isn't all that different from the life of the first Christian fellowship in Jerusalem in the days and years after Jesus' death and resurrection. They prayed together and ate together. They shared the Lord's meal regularly and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. And, as we saw last week, they looked outward. Not only was their testimony about Jesus proclaimed to all who would listen, Peter and John led them as they built for God's kingdom, enacting God's kingdom for those who were hurting and in need. When Peter and John encounter a crippled man, they pray to God for his healing and the

man rises to take his first steps in many years. In all this, they were empowered by the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God, who dwelt in them.

Confrontation

I suppose it was inevitable that the work of these Jesus-followers would draw the ire of the Jewish authorities. There was a reason they had engineered Jesus' crucifixion. After healing the cripple, Peter rose to speak to a crowd who had gathered in amazement. As he had done on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit arrived, Peter proclaimed the Good News, that God had accomplished in the crucified Christ what he had promised long before.

The response to Peter's preaching was astounding. Thousands of gathered people heard Peter's message and believed even as guards came to confront Peter. They seized both John and Peter and threw them into jail.

The next morning, the authorities and chief priests and scribes met to consider what to do with John and Peter. They couldn't very well deny the man's miraculous healing – thousands had witnessed it and too many knew them was truly crippled. So, they asked Peter the sensible question: by what power did he do such a thing? Here's some of his response:

“It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. . . . Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

Whom you crucified . . . Luke tells us that when Peter was finished, all the gathered elites sat in stunned amazement – such courage and boldness from an uneducated fisherman from Galilee. They couldn't help but take note that both Peter and John had spent a lot of time with Jesus.

Next, the council had the men removed from the room and they discussed the best course of action. They knew they couldn't deny the truth about the crippled man and many had heard Peter's testimony. So, they decided that their best course was to tell Peter and John never to speak of Jesus again . . . yeah, right . . . then and there, Peter tells them that he is not going to stop.

Imagine that you are among the believers anxiously waiting to hear about your leaders, Peter and John. You know what happened. A man was healed by the power of Jesus and Peter had delivered another fiery message. But now two of your beloved friends had been held overnight and taken before the same council that had condemned Jesus. So the community prayed . . . and they prayed . . . and they prayed.

What would you pray for? I suppose that many of us would pray for safety and security, that we wouldn't be swept up by the authorities so we could go ahead with our kingdom work . . . or something like that.

But not those first disciples nearly 2000 years ago. Look at their prayer (verses 24-29 above, esp. v. 29). They didn't pray for their safety but for courage and boldness! They don't want to stop proclaiming the Good News or water it down. They want the boldness to go right on and as they had been, heedless of the council or the guards or even the waiting crosses. Try reading that prayer (verses 24-30 above) while imagining that you are a Christian in lands controlled by ISIS. Will Willimon writes:

If I, like Peter and John, had had a close and potentially disastrous brush with the authorities, my prayer would be for divine protection rather than boldness! Yet, the only thing the community asked of God is the power “to speak thy word with all boldness” (4:29). It is God's business to heal and to work signs and wonders in the name of Jesus (4:30). It is the community's business to speak the word with boldness in the midst of the mighty acts of God. The trembling and shaking of the place signify that the apostles' prayer has been answered, and once again they are given a bold tongue to utter the word of God. . . .

What do Christians do when persecution threatens to undo the community? They turn to God, the same God who created the world and all of its inhabitants, the God

who holds all things within his power. Even persecution, even persecution by powerful people, does not take us out of God's hand. The same power which brought the world into being, which enables the community to worship will also be with the community in its times of persecution.¹

Standing firm

We Christians have always been called to lives of courage and boldness, in word and action. The Christians in Thessalonica (and there couldn't have been many) are not so much discouraged as they are fearful. Someone has come into town proclaiming that Christ has already returned! "What could this mean? How could we have missed it?! The sky is falling!" I'm sure that all of us give into alarmism from time to time. What are we to do when we are alarmed? For them, as for us there was always something to fear – whether it was the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem or simply missing out. The question is how we cope with our fears. Paul urged the Thessalonians in three directions. I'm pretty sure he'd give the same advice to the disciples gathered after Peter's arrest.

First, Paul reminds them that they had been called to Christ by the proclaiming of the good news. They are God's chosen, his "fruit fruits" through whom God's saving work would go forward. They could trust God's choice, confident that they would "obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Second, Paul urged the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter" (2:15). The word "traditions" can mislead us a bit. Paul isn't talking about clergy, robes, décor, or the order of worship. Rather, Paul is urging the believers to stand firm upon the teaching of the apostles, whether oral or written. The problem of false teaching cuts through nearly all of the New Testament. Whether it was those who came to Thessalonica teaching that Christ had already come or those who went to Galatia teaching that believers had to keep Jewish law, in all cases, the apostles demanded that the Christian communities stand firm in the apostolic Christian faith.

Third, the Thessalonians could rest in the "eternal comfort and good hope" of God's love. Indeed, verses 16 and 17 are something of "wish-prayer." Paul encourages the Christians to hold to the comfort offered by Christ. It is not so much that Paul is praying that the Thessalonians will get something they lack; Paul prays that they will embrace what is already theirs. May we do the same.

2 Thessalonians

Two of the 27 New Testament books are letters from the apostle Paul to the house churches in Thessalonica, Greece, which was a large, prosperous city that had been granted special privileges by Caesar. It is located on the Aegean Sea in far northern Greece. You can visit Thessaloniki today, where ancient ruins have been excavated near the city center.

Paul's letters to the churches he founded were always pastoral and always written for a reason. In the case of this letter, it seems that Paul has learned that some persons have spoken in Paul's name and told the Thessalonian Christians that the "day of the Lord," Christ's second coming, had already happened! Also, Paul has been told that the free-loaders he admonished in an earlier letter (1 Thessalonians) had not mended their ways.

Thus, this letter not only encourages those who are suffering, but also urges the Thessalonians not to be misled regarding the second coming of Christ. Paul is notoriously difficult to interpret in places; e.g., who or what does he mean by the "lawless one" (2:3)? Nonetheless, Paul, like Peter and Jesus, urges the believers to be very cautious and modest in their beliefs about the timing of Christ's return.

Many Christians find it tempting to get caught up in expectations about Christ's return. Every generation can find signs pointing to Christ's imminent return. Christians have been finding such signs for 2,000 years. But as the author of 2 Peter wrote, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief" (2 Peter 3:10).

¹ Willimon, W. H. (1988). *Acts* (p. 50). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

What Sets Apart Good Deeds Done In the Name of Christ?

Those who do not know Christ do many wonderful, commendable, and important acts of generosity. But what sets apart the charitable work done in Christ's name? In his commentary on Galatians in the *Interpretation* series (available in our library), Charles Cousar suggests that these questions are better answered by negatives:

(a) The deeds done in Christian freedom are not coerced or done to satisfy a legal demand. They are not pre-formed by a commandment or moral prescription so that the doers are obliged to keep their attention glued on what it is they are to do and away from the recipients of the deeds. Christ frees persons *from* such a law and *for* needy neighbors. To act in freedom is to be guided by the ones whose real needs are to be served.

(b) Free people are not determined in their actions by what sort of response their actions may or may not evoke. They are not miffed when a "thank you" is not immediately received for a contribution made or an important bill passed. They are not deterred when the recipients of a kindly deed do not all rush to vote democrat (or republican) or do not promptly become capitalists (or socialists)—or even reject Christianity. Christian freedom means the demonstration of freedom. Recipients may be witnessed to, but never compelled to answer in a particular way as if they are forever in debt to those who helped them.

(c) Free people are not deceived by over-valuing their moral decisions and their contributions to others as if their freedom depended on what they do. They know that freedom is a gift given, that to act freely is a sign of grace received, and consequently they do not have to be caught up in continually taking stock to see if enough money has been pledged or enough service rendered. How much is "enough"? The characteristically Christian style of life emerges not so much in what is done as in the fact that what is done expresses the freedom given by God, whose call is to selfless, serving love. Such a vocation takes seriously the remarkable paradox expressed in Eph. 2:8–10 where the writer, after affirming that salvation comes by grace and not by works, adds: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (v. 10)."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The disciples building a community in Jerusalem face arrest and worse. And what do they pray for? Boldness and the courage to keep proclaiming the Good News. So here is the bottom line – why the heck is it so hard for us to shed worry and anxiety!? What makes us cling to our worries if they are precious possessions? Make a list of reasons. What can we do to learn (truly learn and apply!) what Peter and Paul learned about relying upon God's strength and care? How can we help each other in this? How do we truly become content and joyful in all circumstances, knowing that God's riches are all we really need (Philippians 4:8-13)? Do we even really believe that God's riches are all we need? This is the time for honesty.
2. Founding and growing St. Andrew took boldness. There were risks in the beginning and all along the way. What are some ways that you've experienced St. Andrew's boldness? Do you think we need to be more bold? Less? What are some things that you would like to see St. Andrew undertake? What are some of the keys to making such undertakings successful? What is God's part in all this? Does God accomplish his purposes through us? Despite us? How can we, as a community, become better at discerning God's will for our congregation? How can we make better decisions, remembering that better means more in line with God's will? What is the place of Scripture in this?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Esther 4:9-16 Esther must make a choice. Will she take the risky path to save her own people?</p>	<p>Tuesday, Haggai 2:1-5 “Be strong . . . for I am with you.”</p>
<p>Wednesday, Ephesians 6:10-20 Pray also for me . . . that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel . . . ”</p>	<p>Thursday, Philippians 4:8-13 Paul calls the Christians to a virtuous life, knowing it is God who gives them strength in all circumstances. Paul faces the very real possibility of execution when he writes this letter.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Peter 5:6-11 Cast all your anxiety on God and stand firm in the faith.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

