



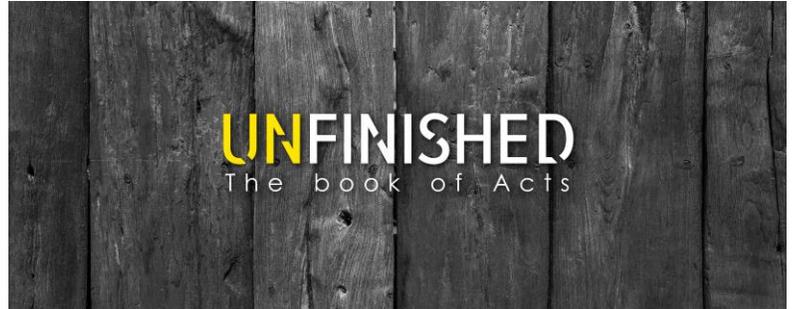
VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Unfinished

Part 8: Persecution—Acts 4:23–31

Steve Lombardo | October 29, 2017



In our series entitled “Unfinished,” we’re examining the book of Acts. It’s called by many “The Acts of the Apostles,” but it’s really the acts of the Holy Spirit. We see the beginning of the church, the events that surround it and take place in it.

In case this is your first Sunday here at Village Bible Church, I don’t want you to feel like you’re late to a movie. So let’s review this dramatic narrative a little first. Acts was written by Luke, who was Greek. He was born in Antioch, where he became an educated man and a physician. Later he was a companion to the Apostle Paul. We see in 2 Timothy that Luke is with Paul right at the end of Paul’s life.

History tells us that Luke was martyred at the age of 84 for his faith in Jesus Christ and his testimony to the resurrected Savior. Most scholars understand Luke to be in the tradition of Greek historiography. We see this quite clearly in the opening verses of Luke’s Gospel.

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Theophilus is the individual who commissioned Luke to write, not only the historical facts around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel according to Luke, but also to record in Acts how the church started and how it began to spread around the world.

In Acts 1, Jesus tells His disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit, and then He ascends into heaven.

In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes in power. The first recorded miracle in Acts comes when people speak in tongues, so others can hear the name of Jesus and the glorious gospel message of salvation, each in their own language. After Peter gets up and preaches a sermon, 3,000 people are added to the number of believers.

Then in Acts 3, Peter and John heal a man who was born crippled. The people are astonished and a crowd quickly gathers. So once again, Peter uses this opportunity to speak of the mighty and matchless name of Jesus, telling the crowd that this Man Who died because of their sins can also save them because of His resurrection. This message deeply disturbed the religious leaders, who taught a different means of salvation. So Peter and John were arrested, but were eventually let go with a warning not to speak of Jesus any further, a warning the disciples refused to heed.

This brings us to today’s text. The church is now over 5,000 men strong, so probably over 10–12,000 people, and Peter and John are now about to report what has happened. Things have gotten real really quickly.

Back in chapter two, things were more “rainbows and butterflies.” Remember that? They were all together, worshipping the Lord. They were filled with awe at the miracles and wonders they were witnessing. They were sharing everything they owned with each other, and God was adding to their number daily. What a glorious movement of God to witness!

But now it's gotten real. The persecution has begun and God is moving to bring conviction of sin. This persecution will eventually lead to the first Christian martyrdom in Acts 7—the stoning of Stephen.

So let's read now about this first report of persecution, beginning in Acts 4:23:

"When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them." Peter and John have been released and return to report to the other believers. They report that they have healed a man, that they've preached the gospel and that they have been persecuted for this, having been instructed to no longer speak the name of Jesus.

How should the church *not* respond to persecution?

Before we look at the actual reaction of the church, let me give you three other ways they could have responded to this news.

1. They could criticize their leaders.

Criticizing their leaders would have been easy to do. Some could have said, "Why did they have to speak? Couldn't Peter and John have kept quiet? We had a good thing going. Why did they have to stir up persecution?"

This wouldn't be the first time people of God responded to their leaders this way. Back in Exodus, the nation of Israel—God's people—often grumbled because of the leadership of Moses and Aaron. In Exodus 16 we read this:

They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³ and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

They're complaining. "You brought us out here—now we're going to die. It would be better to be back in Egypt, with all that meat and bread." They were hungry. They grumbled about the leadership.

When persecution comes, we should not criticize our leaders.

2. They could capitulate to their persecutors.

Capitulation means surrendering or giving up. The people in Acts could have said, "Well, we'd better do what they've demanded. We need to stop healing and speaking the name of Jesus."

If you think about it, they were in a scary position. Their livelihood was on the line—even their lives. Their families were at risk. It would have been very easy to criticize Peter and John, and then for the people themselves to do as the authorities had commanded. They could even have spiritualized it. "Aren't Christians supposed to be good citizens? Didn't Jesus say, 'Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's'? Why don't we just be quiet, go home, shut the doors and worship God in secret?" That's what surrendering could look like.

So often when we read a story like this, we read it like fiction. We don't think about what it actually would have been like to be there. These people, faced for the first time by persecution, quickly realized it wasn't all roses in Acts 2. They had to face the reality of heartache, pain and suffering—possibly even death—because they confessed the name of Jesus and sought to bring glory to Him. They realized the world would oppose them, even hate them.

By the way, this is another evidence for the truth of the Scripture—it's not a fairy tale. These people stood strong even in the face of death because they believed the message of Jesus Christ. He is risen—and that's not a fairy tale. Even Luke, who wrote this history, was later put to death for his faith in Jesus Christ.

When persecution comes, we too must never capitulate.

3. They could compromise their message.

This option is tempting. Maybe you won't criticize your leaders or completely surrender to their demands, but maybe you'd be tempted to compromise the message, taking out the offensive parts. That way people will like you and you'll avoid persecution.

Let's face it—many churches today have chosen that very route. They take out such offensive things as sin, judgment, death and all that messy, bloody stuff. They simply focus on loving and caring for people. They don't get in trouble for serving. But, we know

we could get in trouble for speaking. Serving doesn't bring controversy—it's the message that's controversial. If we feed the hungry, love the hurting, generously support single moms and kids who don't have a dad—no problem. Addiction counseling, giving coats to cold people—no problem. Many churches do these things, but they forget the gospel message.

When persecution comes, we must never compromise our message.

How should the church respond to persecution?

In Acts 4 the church could have kept the healing part and left off the Name that healed. They could have forgotten the truth that there is a call to repentance and that this life means embracing change. That sort of compromise would have been appealing to them. But they didn't do that. What did they do? Here's the rest of the story in Acts 4:

²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'—²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

That's an amazing response to the persecution that was coming against them.

1. When persecution comes, the church should pull together.

Verse 24 says, *"When they heard it, they lifted their voice together."* You can almost feel them, together as one group. They're stronger together. We as a church are stronger together than any solitary individual. The wisest man in the world, Solomon, said it like this in Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 (NLT):

Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.

I use that verse when I talk to young people who are getting married. The two are coming together to be one; they're going to be stronger and better off together. The strand of three cords that's not easily broken implies that the third person is God in relationship with the husband and wife.

This also applies across the church—we're stronger together. We can do things together that we can't do by ourselves. When we worship together, it's special. You can worship alone—you can sing in the shower—and God receives glory in that. But there's something special about being together. There's something special about praying together, casting our cares on God in corporate prayer. Jesus said, *"Wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in the midst of them"* (Matthew 18:20). And it was this sort of togetherness that we see in this group in Acts 4. You can almost feel their excitement in the face of great persecution.

I was thinking about why togetherness is so important and I remembered my high school basketball team. I don't know why my parents got me involved in basketball—I'm white, I'm 5' 10", I'm not good at basketball—but I played on a great team, considering we were in a small school. We had some tall guys. One of our starters was 6' 5"; others were 6' 4" and 6' 2"—and then me. We'd drive to other schools and as we got off the bus and walked into the gym, people would look at us. If it was just me walking in by myself, that would never intimidate anyone. But it wasn't just me. Surrounded by those big, strong guys on my team, I could carry myself with pride and hope, because I knew I was part of something greater than myself.

When I come to church and I'm struggling with something in my life, hearing Tim open the Word of God causes me to think, "I'm with him. He and I are on the same team." That fires me up. And when I arrive at church, I see Mike out in the parking lot—who's facing cancer yet still serving—and I think, "He's on my team. I'm on his team. We're together in this thing."

No matter where we are with all our different situations, we can come together as a church—and together, we're stronger than when we're alone. The church in Acts 4 was together in the face of real persecution. As they prayed together, they were fired up.

I could go on and on about how my faith is bolstered by others. We get together in small groups and there are people raising kids the same age as mine, so I'm reminded that the Lord is with me and that it's all about Him. When I'm alone I feel weaker. Together we're the church and the gates of hell will not prevail against us (Matthew 16:18). We can stand under persecution when the church pulls together.

2. When persecution comes, we shouldn't be surprised.

As the church pulls together, we should not be surprised—persecution will happen. Jesus told us it would in John 16:33: *"In this world you will have tribulation."* In Matthew 10:22 He said, *"You will be hated by all for my name's sake."* I don't know how He could have been any clearer. We're going to be persecuted.

Now, some people might say, "We don't face persecution. We're not losing our jobs. We're not losing our lives." But persecution is not just the extreme, violent kind. Jesus also said, *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account"* (Matthew 5:11). That is happening right here, today.

People are saying Christians are idiots, bigots, homophobes. They say we don't love people who don't agree with us. They say Christians are anti-science. We're intolerant. Christians supported slavery. There are many false accusations being made against us as Christians. I'm a pastor and many people think that's a colossal waste of time. They think I should I compromise, forget about the Jesus stuff and simply help people.

Many times we're surprised by persecution because we've been sold a package of goods that is really not the true gospel. We may have been told that we should come to Christ mainly so God would bless us, so He could give us "our best life now." We're told that health and prosperity can be had when we follow Jesus. But tell that to Luke, who was murdered for writing this book.

Turn with me to Hebrews 11. This is often called the "Hall of Faith." It begins, *"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation."* It continues by listing some of the great heroes of the faith: "By faith Abraham..." (verse 17). "By faith, Joseph..." (verse 22). "By faith, Moses..." (verse 23). You also see Gideon and David and Samuel. These are people...

...who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection.

What a glorious thing! Through faith, these people stood and saw these great victories. They saw God work in their midst. They sent armies fleeing because they were so powerfully used of God. They had people brought back from the dead. But then look further, beginning in verse 35b:

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

This is another huge group of people who didn't see any victory on this side of eternity. These people were persecuted and even put to death for their faith. Friends, when you stand for Jesus and speak the truth in love, when you take a stand for what is right, the sin-filled, evil world will come against you.

I pray when this happens that we would be experiencing the power of God described in the verses before Hebrews 11:35b. But we might be in the second group, where from our perspective there isn't victory until we see Christ face to face. So persecution may come and when it does, will we remain faithful?

3. When persecution comes, we should not go solo.

As we pull together, we should not be surprised by persecution, nor should we act as solitary believers. There are some people who think they can be Christians without the church. People leave the church all the time for a myriad of reasons.

I ran across a blog called "Why We Left the Church," and it included some stories of why people left their churches. Listen to a few examples:

- "The Bible and God were twisted into something ugly and frightening. Most of the time people just wanted to step on us, to grind their Christian truth into us with their heels. I was so disgusted by the hate radiating from Christians that it made me sick. If that's what being a Christian was, what God was, I wanted nothing—absolutely nothing—to do with it."

- “I left because the pressure to be perfect created an atmosphere of judgment. I don’t know if or when I’ll be able to go back. I miss the familiarity but not the nauseating atmosphere of lies.”
- “I left because my youth pastor lied to me. I shared things with him that he said would be between God and us. A week later, half the congregation knew what I had told him.”

Now, there are legitimate reasons to be upset and angry at the church, or at people in the church. But there are no legitimate reasons to leave the church. Why? You can’t call yourself a Christian and neglect the church. Why not? Christians don’t go to church—Christians are the church. So when you neglect the body, you’re neglecting who you claim to be at your very core. We are the bride of Christ. We have been called out to be the people of God—and none of us can do this alone.

Well, you ask, “Can’t God save people outside the church?” Sure. “Can’t you worship God anywhere?” Yep. But you are called the church and you were created to be part of it with other believers. Some of you are introverts, which can be daunting and scary. But there’s a place here for introverts and there’s a place for extroverts. There’s a place for each one of us.

Listen to the language of Hebrews 10 which talks about not forsaking gathering together. It talks about not doing away with church. Listen to all the plural pronouns like we and us, describing the plurality of who we are. We’re not alone.

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Us, we, one another. Meet together, hold fast. Church, we are not alone.

4. When persecution comes, we should encourage each other.

So don’t be surprised, don’t go it alone, but instead spur one another on to action. We don’t see this in the text in Acts 4, but that’s what they’re actually doing. As they’re praying together, something is happening. They are encouraging Peter and John to continue speaking the name of Jesus and they’re encouraging each other to continue to bring glory to His name. That’s what should be happening in our church as well. As it says in Hebrews 10:24, we should be stirring up one another *“to love and good works.”*

Have you heard of Cross-Fit? Cross-Fit not only meets the physical needs of its members, it also provides them with a spiritual community. Cross-Fitters are experiencing more than just a hard workout by being part of a gym. Gyms and other secular communities are starting to take the place of religious communities in our society and people are noticing. Casper ter Kuile, a Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School, wrote an article entitled “How We Gather.” Listen to what he writes, based on his study of different communities:

“These are not places where you go to run on a treadmill with your headphones blasting and making as little eye contact as possible with the people around you. They are inherently communal. With Cross-Fit, that community includes accountability for your actions—something religion also offers. The two most striking things about Cross-Fitters are their evangelical enthusiasm and the way they hold one another to account. Cross-Fit expects members to call each other out if they don’t appear at their usual time and to let each other know if they’re even out of town.”

People love it. Well, some people love it. I went to Cross-Fit some years ago when we were just completing our “WOD” (workout of the day). I was just getting done and a 20-something-year-old girl who was finished with the workout was yelling at me. She was just trying to be encouraging. “Come on—you can do it!” But I never went back.

The church should be setting the bar with these aspects of community. We should help each other grow in the faith and put it into practice. Yet far too often attending a worship service is seen as a waste of time. Being part of a small group is viewed as boring. Serving in the church is seen as a chore. We don’t realize what we have as a community of people.

I love small groups. That’s part of my job. It’s hard to go out on another night. It can be a chore to get the kids to come along. Maybe it is uncomfortable to get to know new people in the group. But I know we’re going to grow together and we’re going to help each other. We’re going to laugh together and cry together. We’re going to be together as the church. That’s my hope, anyway. That’s my prayer. The church is the greatest place for a person to experience love, acceptance and accountability.

5. When persecution comes, we should pray expectantly.

Not only are we to pull together when we face persecution, we're also to pray expectantly. That's what the people in Acts 4 did. We don't know exactly how this happened. As we read the narrative, it seems as though they lifted their voices together. Unless they printed the words of this prayer, I really can't say they were all speaking at the same time. Or maybe there was one person who was leading them all in prayer. But it says they *"lifted their voices together"* and then they prayed Scripture, quoting Psalm 2:1–2: *"Why did the Gentiles rage, and the people plot in vain?"* They see Psalm 2, written by David, as being fulfilled in the Messiah—the "Anointed One."

It's always a good thing to pray God's Word, especially if you're struggling with knowing how to pray. By the way, there aren't really any "wrong words" if we're speaking our hearts to the Lord. He's a Person and He hears you. He speaks to us through His Word and we can pray His Word back to Him. When we do this, we can have confidence that He will do what He said He will do.

"Lord, You said in Your Word to cast all our care on You because You care for us. So we're doing that together right now. God, You have said in Your Word not to be anxious for anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to let our requests be made known to You."

We talked about that verse in small group this past week. Persecution like this will definitely bring about anxiety and struggle, but we can pray, "I claim Your Word, Lord. As You said in Philippians 4, we are to cast our cares on You, so we pray that You will take away our anxiety, guarding our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Pray God's Word. Pray scripturally.

We can also pray securely. These people, who are our forefathers, were secure knowing they were in the plan of God. "Sovereign Lord, Who made all there is..." they prayed. Then they quoted this text (23–28), which is really talking about the power of God. It says people—even kings and rulers—will come together to plan certain things, but it is actually God Who is in control. God planned and predestined everything that happened to Jesus. Because they were secure in their position and in the sovereignty of God, they weren't afraid of persecution. They believed God was on His throne and He was in control. They realized nothing that happened to them was outside His authority. Nothing else brings a greater security than knowing this to be true.

When we pray, we must believe that God is not surprised by anything that is happening in our lives. In fact, God has ordained the events of our lives. "Even the bad times?" Yes. And in those bad times, He will show up and show you His goodness.

These people were calling out to God in the middle of a very hard place. Only three chapters later, one of them would be killed for his faith. But they prayed with a sense of security, knowing that at the end of the day—whether they lived or died—God was in complete control. They knew Jesus had died for them to save their souls. Along with them we too can rest content and secure in Him.

Thirdly, they prayed a simple prayer. Verse 29: *"And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."* They prayed for boldness and for miracles to accompany their testimony. They didn't pray for deliverance. They didn't ask God to take away the persecution. They didn't ask God to take away the threats. No, they said, "Lord, see the threats, give us boldness to speak in the name of Jesus and accompany our testimony with mighty displays of Your power." They actually prayed for the continuance of the very activity which produced the persecution. "Give us more miracles. Bring it on! Let us experience more of Your Spirit being poured out."

We too can pray this simple prayer. May God give us boldness to speak the name of Jesus, to live for Him in what we do, and that He would pour out His Spirit and do mighty works and miracles. It's good to pray that we would see the vindication of the name of Jesus—a name that is so often flippantly tossed around in our day. We can pray that God would show up in a mighty way and that His name would be given the glory it deserves.

Now, the cool thing about this text is that I don't know any other place where this prayer happens, and then we immediately see the answer to this prayer. It says in verse 31, *"When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness."* God answered their prayer.

There are more miracles to come in the book of Acts; the story is just beginning. There are more times to be bold. And the very fact that you and I are sitting in a church in 2017 in Sugar Grove, Illinois, in North America is that the church in Acts and beyond continued to speak with boldness.

So here are two application points: First, we should pray for boldness to speak the truth of Jesus, not only in the way we live, but in the words we use. We should also pray for miracles to accompany our testimony. Second—for those of you who are new to these thoughts—we desire that you come to repentance and faith in Christ. Repenting means to turn from your sins; faith means believing in the good news of Jesus, turning to Him. Just as so many people were turning to Him back in the beginning days of the church in Acts, we pray that God would add to our numbers day by day those who are being saved. Those are good prayers.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
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