

And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 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, 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? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—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, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 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.” 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. Acts 4:1-31

Hugh Latimer, the Bishop of Worcester, once preached before King Henry VIII. Henry was greatly displeased by the boldness of Latimer’s sermon and ordered him to preach the sermon again on the following Sunday, but this time do so in a such way that would not offend the king. The next Sunday, after reading his text, Latimer began his sermon by saying: "Hugh Latimer, do you know before whom you are this day speaking? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away your life, if you offend him. Therefore, take heed that you speak not a word that may displease him. But then consider well, Hugh Latimer, that you have been sent to preach this message by the Great and Almighty God Himself, Who is all-present and Who beholds all your ways and Who is able to cast your soul into hell forever. Therefore, take care that you deliver this message faithfully." Latimer then went on to preach the exact same sermon with even greater boldness.

History tells us that Henry VIII allowed Hugh Latimer to live, but some years later when the king's daughter Mary came to the throne, he was arrested, tried, and burned at the stake with his friend Nicholas Ridley, speaking the famous words: "Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle in England as I trust by God' grace shall never be put out." Hugh Latimer's death for his bold witness for Christ in preaching the gospel through the Word of God is a reflection and fulfillment of Jesus' promise that, *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. . . . I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you"* (John 15:18, 20); *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Matthew 5:11-12); *"Be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them"* (Mark 13:9). The "witness" Jesus speaks of here is the bold Holy Spirit empowered "witness" he called his disciples to in Acts 1:8: *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* This is the same bold Spirit empowered witness that Jesus' followers are called to today.

This is the same bold Spirit empowered witness we have seen throughout the first three chapters in the book of Acts – except, up to this point, while we've read of some resistance to the gospel, we have not yet seen the aggressive, hostile resistance we begin to see in our text for today – which will continue to get much more antagonistic and violent in the days ahead. Jesus told us that the boldness of a Spirit empowered witness for him will create internal and external conflict in the hearts of humanity: *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"* (Matthew 10:34-39). Jesus died on a cross and rose from the dead and ascended to heaven so that we might be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for him.

Last week we saw that boldness in the apostle Peter and in a man who had been crippled from birth and healed by the power of the risen Christ. They would not, they could not keep quiet the good news, the gospel of the all-satisfying joy of knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior that burned within their hearts. Acts 3:6-8 tells us Peter said: *"I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk"* and he took the lame man *"by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God."* And we saw that Peter used this opportunity to point people to God as he boldly preached to the crowd a call to repentance and a challenge to put their faith in Jesus Christ. What we see again this morning in that, just like Hugh Latimer before King Henry VIII, Peter's bold message ticked off the religious leaders of the day. Acts 4:2 tells us they were *"greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead."* And as a result Peter and John were arrested and put in jail, and verse 4 tells us by the power of their bold witness, *"many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand."* Jesus' "sword" is the bold witness of the gospel – it causes resistance and rebirth, anger and adoration, survival and surrender, provocation and praise.

The next day we read Peter and John were brought out and interrogated by what amounted to be the Supreme Court, and Peter stuns them by once again boldly proclaiming the good news of the gospel: *"Let it be known to all of you . . . that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead . . . has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:10-12).

And we next read that when *"the rulers and elders and scribes"* who were gathered around them *"saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished . . . and they recognized that they had been with Jesus"* (Acts 4:13). There are a number of opinions as to what people saw in Peter and John at that moment that caused them to know *"they had been with Jesus."* But God gives us His opinion here this morning, right here in His Word, when it tells us that those who were present were *"astonished"* and *"recognized that"* Peter and John *"had been with Jesus"* because of their *"boldness."* Now that word, the concept of *"boldness"* is highly significant because we see that word, that concept, two more times in our text for this morning. In verse 29 we read that they prayed God would empower them *"to continue to speak"* His *"word with all boldness"* and verse 31 tells us *"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."*

The Greek word here for *"boldness"* is *parrhesia*. While the root of the word means "to speak" the prefix connected to it carries the idea of holding nothing back, and so the full meaning here for *"boldness"* (*parrhesia*) is more like an overflowing of joyful courage and an outpouring of fearless confidence. We see that kind of overflowing of joyful courage and outpouring of fearless confidence in the response of Peter and John to the courts command in verse 18 to not *"speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."* Acts 4:19-20 tells us Peter and John said: *"Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."* That statement is a clear reflection of what a bold Spirit empowered witness sounds like and looks like: *"Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."* Once you have truly met and come know and have been changed by the crucified and risen Jesus Christ you cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.

Brothers and sisters, if Jesus is truly, in the words of Pastor S. M. Lockridge, the King of the Jews, the King of Israel, the King of righteousness, the King of the ages, the King of Heaven, the King of glory, the King of kings, the Lord of lords; the sovereign King who is enduringly strong, entirely sincere, eternally steadfast, immortally graceful, imperially powerful, impartially merciful, the sinner's savior, the centerpiece of civilization; who is unparalleled, unprecedented, supreme, pre-eminent; who is the wellspring of wisdom, the doorway of deliverance, the pathway of peace, the roadway of righteousness, the highway of holiness, the gateway of glory; whose grace is sufficient and whose reign is righteous; who is incomprehensible, invincible, irresistible and indescribable – *why then* can we not be just as bold in our witness regarding our faith in Jesus as Hugh Latimer and the apostles Peter and John?

In a time and in a culture where many argue that it is harder than ever to live out our faith in Christ with boldness, our text for this morning reveals that we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, live just as boldly for Jesus as they did in the very first church. And we must do so, because our culture and the world we live in is *in desperate need of God*. An overflowing of joyful courage and outpouring of fearless confidence that comes from putting one's faith and trust in Jesus Christ – should cause us to be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ, which is not exclusive to the first century church or to those who lived during certain times in history or for those in third world countries today. The apostle Paul, just before he gave his life for his bold faith in Jesus Christ, in his last letter to the church, wrote that *"God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love"* (2 Timothy 1:7). In facing the consequences for living a life with boldness for Jesus he then wrote, *"I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me"* (2 Timothy 1:12) and then told us to do the same: *"By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you"* (2 Timothy 1:14). God's Word tells us today how we can be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus. Our text reveals to us this morning you and I don't have to be apostles or super-saints or specially gifted and divinely anointed to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with boldness. What kind of people can be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ? Scripture tells us of five kinds of people who can be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ.

I. *Ordinary people* can be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ. Verse 13 says: *"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men."* Peter and John were not men of power or position or possessions. They had no special gifting or training that would have given them the ability to be bold in their witness. These just were regular guys, who struggled with the same things in life that we struggle with. The only observable difference between Peter and Paul and any of us – is that *they* had fully and totally surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ, so much so that when people saw them standing middle of a crowd *"they were astonished"* and *"they recognized that"* Peter and Paul *"had been with Jesus"* (Acts 4:13). What this means is that these two men had spent so time with Jesus, and they had so fully given so much of themselves to Jesus, that people saw their bold, Spirit empowered witness for Jesus Christ *just by looking at them.*

The fact that ordinary folks just like you and me can live boldly for Jesus should give us hope this morning. Regardless of how long we've been a Christian or how much education we have or how gifted we might be or how wise we think that we are or how successful we have been - or on the other hand, how short of time we've known Jesus or much schooling we don't have or how little gifted we might feel or how ignorant we might be or many bad choices we've made or how unsuccessful we have been in life – God can still do great and powerful things in our lives when we fully surrender our hearts to Jesus Christ, *and* totally submit to authority of God, *and* joyfully yield our lives to the Holy Spirit, so that we can then be bold, Spirit empowered witness for Jesus Christ. The qualifier we see in our text is simply that Peter and John were *"uneducated"* and *"common"* enough to believe God could do great things through them when they surrendered, submitted and yielded themselves to God.

The truth is, it is only by God's mercy and sovereign grace that any one of us can do anything in life. In the Kingdom of God those who are *"uneducated"* are those who are wise enough to realize that nothing good happens in life because of something they've done in their own ability, but rather by what God has done by His all-sufficient grace. In the Kingdom of God those who are *"common"* are those who are mature enough in their faith to embrace the reality that everything in life, everything in the universe, revolves not around them but around our most gracious and omnipotent and sovereign God. God uses ordinary people to be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ.

II. *Broken people* can be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ. *"But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition"* (Acts 4:14). Remember from last week that this crippled man had been pretty bold about pointing to God when God healed him: *"leaping up he stood and began to walk . . . walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God . . . were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him"* (Acts 3:8-10). God used a man who had been broken from birth to be a bold, Spirit empowered witness for Jesus Christ. People who are physically, emotionally, mentally, relationally, spiritually broken have great cause to be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ – because they know that no matter how many pieces we have been broken into, by His mercy and grace, God is the One who can put us back together into the completeness that God created us. Broken people understand the reality of Psalm 34:18: *"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."*

The broken who come to Christ find out that out of the brokenness of life, out of the ashes of all that has been consumed, there comes a hope that brokenness is not fatal, brokenness is not the final word for our lives. And for what the enemy has meant for evil, for our harm and destruction, God can always turn around for our good and for His glory. The lame man who was healed became a "the high-jumping cripple" who praised God: brokenness becomes a blessing when it's placed in the Master's hand. God uses broken people to be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ.

III. *Obedient people* can be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ. Told by the courts that they were not to speak or teach or preach in the name of Jesus, Peter and John responded: *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard”* (Acts 4:19-20). These words remind us that being a bold, Spirit empowered witness for Jesus Christ is not a matter of education or social status or ability but rather *about obedience to God*. The truth is God will overlook our lack of education, our commonness, our brokenness – even our stupidity – *but God will not ignore our disobedience*. In the face of fear and adversity and loss, God will test us in this. God uses obedient people. God glorifies Himself through obedient people. We see that in Peter and John’s obedience here; God wants to see that in us also.

God will not bless a mess; He will not work in our lives beyond the level of our obedience to Him and to the truths of His Word. Our obedience to God is a measure of our trust in Him. Our trust in Him is then the measure by which God will empower us to be bold witnesses for Jesus Christ. It is in showing ourselves to be faithful in the small things God then rewards us with the blessings of bigger things. But He does so - not because we are to keep and use the bigger blessings for ourselves – but so that we might boldly surrender His blessings and use them to point others to the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Once we obediently pass the test in the small things, God will bless with His Kingdom things. God uses obedient people to be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ.

IV. *Worshipping people* can be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ. *“And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened”* (Acts 4:21). We saw last week that the lame man who was healed worshipped God by leaping around the temple and praising God. And this week we read that the leaders of the day challenged Peter and John and they demanded Peter and John stop teaching and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ - Peter and John responded by saying *“we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard”* - but they couldn’t do anything about it because now *“all were praising God for what had happened.”* The status quo was not pleased by the worship of those following Jesus.

We still see the shadow of this issue in churches today when people criticize how things are done in Sunday morning worship services. The reality is, when God moves, the hearts of God’s people are moved to respond in worship according to the moving of the Spirit. In the same way, the hearts of God’s people are moved, the heart of God moves also. That’s the power of worship. In 2 Chronicles 20 we read of time when Jehoshaphat was facing the threat of an opposing army coming against him and God’s people. We read that as they worshipped and praised God, God’s heart was moved and His hand moved on their behalf: *“When they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the men . . . who had come against Judah, so that they were routed”* (2 Chronicles 20:22). We see this in our text; as God’s people worshipped and praised God, He moved on their behalf and protected them. God’s heart and hand is moved on our behalf when our lips boldly praise and boldly worship our God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The power of God moves in the hearts of His people in worship. God uses worshipping people to be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ.

V. *Praying people* can be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ. *“When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God”* (Acts 4:23-24). Of course as we’ve seen, we know that the core of what they prayed for was even more *boldness*: *“Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness”* (Acts 4:29) – and of course we also know that God’s heart was moved, and by the power of the Holy Spirit God’s hand was moved to answer their prayer for more *boldness*: *“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”* (Acts 4:31).

A story is told of a bus driver and a minister who were standing in line to get into heaven. The bus driver approaches the gate and Peter says, "Welcome! I understand you were a bus driver. See that mansion over there? It's yours." The pastor hears this and begins to stand a little taller as he says to himself, "If a bus driver gets a place like that, I can't wait to see what I'll get." The minister hurries up to the gate and is welcomed by Peter, "I understand you were a minister. See that shack in the valley. It's yours." The pastor is shocked and starts to complain, "I was a pastor. I preached the gospel; I helped teach people about God. Why does that bus driver get a mansion and I get a shack?" To which Peter responds, "Well, when you preached, people slept. When the bus driver drove, people prayed!"

The humor of this story dissipates in the light of the truth of the greater danger we face in the spiritual sleeping that occurs in God's house than there ever could be in riding with the worst bus driver. What we've been seeing over these weeks in the book of Acts is that prayer is not a plea for God's protection in the face of danger; *rather prayer is a plea for God's power, no matter if there is danger or not*. A few weeks ago we saw the foundation of the first church was built on prayer; it was the very first thing they did when they initially joined together: *"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet . . . they went up to the upper room . . . all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer"* (Acts 1:12-14). Jesus himself said: *"My house shall be called a house of prayer"* (Matthew 21:13). God uses praying people to be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ because prayer is what the church was designed and created to do, as we to worship and praise God by seeking His heart and power through the God-ordained intimate relationship of prayer. Calvin Miller spoke of this when he wrote: "Throughout history those who wrote about prayer were not largely people of intercession. They rarely went to God to get him to do things for them. Rather they were enthralled by a hunger for a deeper relationship with God." What kind of prayers do bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ pray? God's Word tells us of three kinds of prayers those who are bold in Christ should pray.

1) Bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ praise God in prayer for what God has done in their lives. *"When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God"* (Acts 4:23-24). The first Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ were thankful for the mercy and grace of God's deliverance (*"When they were released"*) and they were united of one heart in their love for God (*"they lifted their voices together to God"*). When the disciples left the council they rejoined the others in the first church and instinctively broke into united prayer. There is great power in praying together. A few years back at a horse-pull in Canada, one horse pulled 9,000 pounds, while another pulled 8,000 pounds. Together, it was assumed that they could then pull 17,000 pounds. However, when harnessed together they pulled 30,000 pounds, over three times what either could pull separately. In the same way, God's power through His church is greater than the sum of His power in our lives individually. When this first church faced extraordinary obstacles, they prayed to a God who was infinitely beyond extraordinary, a God who had delivered them from sin and death, and by the Holy Spirit would continue to sovereignly deliver them from any and all forces that were set against them.

2) Bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus praise God in prayer for His sovereignty over and above all things. In Acts 4:24-28 we read that the first church praised God for His sovereignty over creation (*"who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them"*); over revelation (*"who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit"*), and over all of history (*"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together . . . to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place"*). Those in the first church were bold in their faith because the God to whom they had prayed was the Creator of heaven and earth, the Sovereign God of the universe, who was totally and absolutely in control of all that had happened, was happening, and would happen. They were not concerned that they were being threatened by mere men. Regardless of who was against them, God was for them. Because their hearts and lives were focused on our most sovereign God and His sovereign purpose, by His sovereign power those in the early church could be bold in their faith.

3) Bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus praise God in prayer for what He will do in their lives. "*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*" (Acts 4:29-30). These folks prayed not for their safety in the face of danger but for boldness of faith in the face of danger. The threats they faced, the threats we face, from both within and outside the church, are intended to silence us from boldly speaking of and living for Jesus. This prayer was an admission of their weak faith and dependence on God. May this be our prayer also. "*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*" (Acts 4:31).

On the afternoon of Thursday December 5, 2013 gunmen shot and killed Ronnie Smith a 33-year-old American teacher at the international school in Benghazi, as he was jogging on his regular afternoon running route in Dubai Street, an upmarket area of the eastern Libyan. Ronnie and his family had moved to Benghazi to teach high school chemistry and to be a blessing to the Libyan people after Ronnie heard the call of God to be a "*witness*" for Jesus in a sermon John Piper had preached the year before. Ronnie, a born-again Christian who was a deacon in his church had written that "we are strive for and treasure Christ above all things. I don't want the church to be about people, programs, or numbers, but rather a body that reaches out to the hurting and that speaks the truth of the gospel uncompromisingly into people's lives." Ronnie's outspoken greatest desire was for peace and prosperity in Libya and for the people of Libya to have the joy of knowing God through Christ. Hours after assailants gunned down Ronnie Smith, grieving friends around the globe spoke of Smith's bold witness as a devoted teacher, a family man, and follower of Jesus Christ. Many lives were changed because of his bold witness for Christ, especially so, it was said with the students who knew him.

But the whole point of bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ in Ronnie Smith's life and death is that *there is something worse than death*. Ronnie was willing to risk his own life to rescue others from something far worse. And he could risk his own life because he knew his own risking and dying would work for him "*an eternal weight of glory*" (2 Corinthians 4:17). In Matthew 10:28 Jesus said, "*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" Our text for today and in our texts to come will reveal to us that being filled and empowered with the Spirit does not mean that we become exempt from the trials and tribulations of this life. Rather, in fact, Jesus promised those of us who are filled and empowered by the Spirit will experience greater testing and trials than others. This runs against the grain of the mindset of the culture of the North American church which *rejects* the concepts of Christian sacrifice and suffering, and *embraces* the idea of Christian entitlement and prosperity – which has deeply ingrained in us a massively unbiblical mindset of feeling at home in this world, demanding the rights and privileges of the world, and assuming that if we are good Christians things will go well for us here on earth. This then leads us to think that the worst thing that could happen to us would be poverty or sickness or suffering or death. And so we watch the tragic effect of Hurricane Matthew in Haiti, and we send money to provide food and medicine and shelter, and we then go about our lives in Port Alberni, while an overwhelming majority of people who live in Port Alberni, who do have food and medicine and shelter, are still lost forever when they die, because they do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

We live in a culture that has developed a form of Christianity to support the ingrained expectation of entitlement and acceptance and comfort and security and prosperity. This form of Christianity begins by focusing on our felt needs (rather than our eternal needs), which makes its appeal on the basis that Christianity will make life a lot better for us in this world. Rather than embracing the reality that Jesus calls us to sacrifice and suffer as an aliens, we pursue the call to be comfortable and prosperous as respected citizens. While there is nothing inherently wrong with being a comfortable and respected citizen, it should not trump being a sacrificial and suffering servant of Jesus Christ.

Much of Christianity today has elevated the relatively minor worldly spin-offs of faith and made them so dominant in our thinking and expectations that the New Testament pattern of Christianity that we see in the book of Acts seems almost incredible to us - and we can hardly grasp what it was like to be Christian in the beginning, and what God may be calling us to today. As we hear God's Word today may the Holy Spirit free us from a domesticated, comfort-seeking, entertainment-addicted, prosperity-loving, entitlement-minded; security-craving, approval-pursuing Christianity - so we might be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ whose prayer would shake the foundation of this city.

We here in North America are in early throes of persecution. The moral climate of our continent and culture is sliding away from the biblical principles and truth of God's Word. The Christian faith that was once so prominent has lost its place in society - and is even now, in some places, considered unacceptable. Some of us are beginning to experience intimidation for the sake of the gospel. This should not silence us. And when it does not, persecution will follow, here, as it has elsewhere. We should expect push back, and when it comes, we should rejoice in it, because it is our call to be bold, Spirit empowered witnesses for Jesus Christ. Romans 8:31 says: *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* Our faith in Jesus should be just as bold as it was for those in the first church. They prayed to the same God we pray to. The same God who shook them, will shake us if we pray. The same God who filled them with the Holy Spirit, wants to fill us too. The God who empowered them to be bold witnesses for Jesus Christ is seeking to do the same in us. May we do so, with an overflowing of joyful courage and with an outpouring of fearless confidence. Shake us Lord Jesus and make us bold!

9 October 2016

Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church