

THE FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS

Acts 4:23-33

Peter and John went to the temple to pray. They observed a lame beggar sitting near the entrance and asking for alms. Peter grasped his right hand and gave him a lift, whereupon the man discovered that his feet could function perfectly. A large and an amazed crowd assembled to hear what had happened. Peter told them that Christ had enabled him to perform this miracle, and then proceeded to preach the gospel to them. When he proclaimed the resurrection from the dead, the leaders thought it was necessary to silence such teaching, so they had the apostles arrested and imprisoned.

On the following day the apostles were arraigned before the Sanhedrin. Standing before this august court, the most powerful body of Jews in the world at that time, and without any hesitation or a flicker of fear, Peter calmly and frankly told them that it was in the name of Christ that this wonderful cure had been performed. He also preached that salvation was impossible apart from the crucified, buried and risen Christ. When they beheld the man who had been healed, the authorities could not deny that a miracle had been wrought, and a good work had been done, but still they wanted to put a stop to the preaching of the apostles. In their desperation they decided that the only thing they could afford to do was to threaten them, and command them not to preach or teach again in the name of Christ.

So far as the apostles were concerned, that command did not present any problem. There was only one thing for them to do, namely, to go on preaching Christ. They were under obligation to witness for Him. Knowing that they "must obey God rather than men," they left the council chambers undismayed and undefeated. To have heeded the command of the authorities would have been a mark of ingratitude and an act of disobedience to God, as well as a sin against the people, so the men of God refused to be silenced.

Members of the church in Jerusalem were fully aware of the arrest and arraignment of the apostles, and had been praying for their protection and release. When Peter and John were released by the Sanhedrin, they returned immediately to this company of believers and gave a full report on their experiences, and told "all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them."

There was a wonderful fellowship in the church at Jerusalem. From Acts 4:23-33 we get a glimpse of three phases of their fellowship.

I. Fellowship in Praise. Acts 4:23-28.

You will recall that on a previous occasion Peter was so frightened and cowardly that he had sworn that he did not know Christ Jesus, but, in the meantime, he had been transformed into a fearless and courageous disciple and apostle. Through courageous witnessing for Christ Peter and John had astounded the ruling class, whose influence was diminished greatly and whose business was affected adversely.

The boldness and wisdom which the Lord had given to Peter and John, and the marvelous victory which the Holy Spirit had given them over the Jewish leaders, caused the apostles and their brethren in the church to praise the Lord from the depths of their

hearts. They readily and heartily united their voices in praise to God for His deliverance of the apostles and for the numerous other blessings which He had bestowed upon them. They also acknowledged that this Sovereign Lord was the One Who had created "heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is," and that He was still in full control of the universe. Never had He been caught off guard by any of the nefarious plans of His enemies, who were also the antagonists of God's children.

These believers in Christ had implicit faith in the glorious promises of the inspired and authoritative Word of God. That accounted for the great strength and remarkable effectiveness of their church. The lack of such faith in the Bible today accounts for much of the weakness and ineffectiveness of so many churches. Denial of and hostility to the teachings of the Bible will continue and increase through this age and reach their climax with the coming of the great tribulation.

II. Fellowship in Prayer. Acts 4:29-31.

After a period of praise to God for His blessings upon His faithful servants and their work, they enjoyed a season of earnest prayer together. They had good reasons for praying as they did. They considered prayer as one of the greatest privileges that is given to the children of God. It is still that, even though many professing Christians do not appreciate its value, and do not make the most of this God-given privilege. The members of the first church prayed because the Lord's work was being resisted. They began their petitions by reminding God of His greatness, and then they followed that by praising Him for His goodness. They were grateful to God for not permitting His enemies to go beyond a certain point. Their prayers were characterized by sincerity, earnestness, definiteness, unity, and faith. Their praying was one proof of their implicit faith in the complete reliance on God. They realized that no amount of bustling service could ever take the place of prayer as a force in the spreading of God's truth.

One is impressed with the fact that they did not pray for protection from their enemies, but for God to give them the strength to go on preaching the Word with boldness. Inasmuch as their enemies were also God's enemies, they fully expected God to protect and sustain them, for He never deserts or forsakes His children. They besought God to give them the necessary faith, courage, and ability to speak His revealed truths without fear or favor. They wanted boldness to proclaim the Word of God, and the courage which would be necessary to take the consequences. Above everything else, they wanted sufficient courage to keep on preaching the Word of God, and the blessed assurance that God would demonstrate His mighty power.

Since "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," it is not at all strange that the prayers of that group were very effective. As an evidence of the Lord's presence, "the place was shaken where they were assembled." This incident was an unmistakable proof of the divine presence and power, a visible demonstration of the divine blessing and a harbinger of greater things to come.

The disciples had asked God for the ability to proclaim His Word "with all boldness," and they received it. God rejoices to answer the prayers of His children when they pray for the ability to do His will, to proclaim His Word, and to glorify Him. We are told that when they had prayed "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." This

experience prepared them for the duties, difficulties, and dangers which confronted them. They were enabled to conform to the will of God for their lives, and to render the service which He required of them. God did not fill them with the Holy Spirit merely to make them happy, but rather to cause them to be helpful to others as they labored under His supervision. It was His desire that they should be filled with the Spirit in order that the Lord might be glorified and that souls might be saved. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they proclaimed the Word of God with great boldness and effectiveness. Being filled with the Spirit is the privilege of every believer in Christ. There can and should be many infillings of the Spirit during the lifetime of a Christian. Joy, thankfulness, humility, and power are some of the inevitable results of being filled with the Spirit.

III. Fellowship in Possessions. Acts 4:32-33.

The church at Jerusalem was characterized by a marvelous spiritual unity. In their large membership there was a great variety of temperaments, dispositions, and capabilities, but all of the members "were of one heart and of one soul." The cause of Christ is strengthened tremendously when there is unity among the members of a church, but it is weakened greatly when there is strife and division among them. Loving the Lord supremely, the members of the church in Jerusalem were victorious over self-seeking, jealousy, distrust, ill-will, and strife. They were devoted to Christ and sought diligently to do the things that pleased Him. They were interested in spiritual matters to such an extent that material things did not appeal greatly to them. They took Christ's admonition literally, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). Since none of them were seeking anything for themselves, they were delighted to share what they had with others who were less fortunate than themselves. Their generosity was one of the outstanding characteristics. They did not abolish ownership of personal property, but they did sell some of it from time to time for the purpose of having cash to distribute to the brethren who were in need of financial assistance.

Another noteworthy thing about that great church was the fact that, at every opportunity, the individual members gave personal testimony of what the Lord had done for them. Filled and energized by the Holy Spirit, they witnessed boldly and faithfully to the resurrection of Christ. Their testimony was made effective by the Holy Spirit. God's grace was upon them. His grace will be upon any Christian who is filled with the Holy Spirit and who, like Christ, goes about doing good.