

EMPOWERED TO STAND

Acts 3:1–4:31

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several weeks we have been walking through Acts and asking what it means to live as people empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We have seen the Spirit empower ordinary people for mission, form them into a new kind of community, and give them courage to remember God's faithfulness and move forward.

But Acts now presses the question further: what happens when Spirit-empowered witness meets real-world opposition?

- What happens when faithfulness becomes difficult?
- What happens when following Jesus becomes costly?
- What happens when obedience creates opposition?

Those questions are not theoretical questions. They are questions every believer eventually faces.

Most of us will never be arrested for our faith. Most of us will never stand before a court because we proclaim Jesus. Yet all of us know what it feels like to encounter resistance. We know what it feels like to be afraid. We know what it feels like to wonder whether we have the strength for what lies ahead.

Sometimes the opposition comes from outside us. Sometimes it comes from within us. Sometimes the greatest obstacle is not another person. Sometimes it is our own uncertainty, our own fear, our own exhaustion, or our own reluctance to take the next faithful step.

Acts 3 and 4 remind us that courage is not something we manufacture ourselves.

Courage is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

The disciples did not suddenly become brave because they attended a leadership seminar. They did not suddenly become courageous because they developed a strategic plan. They became courageous because they learned to depend upon the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit does not empower the church only for inspiring moments; the Spirit empowers the church to remain faithful when obedience becomes costly.

Acts 3 shows us the church's public witness; Acts 4 shows us the cost of that witness and the source of renewed courage.

The Holy Spirit empowers ordinary believers to see the overlooked, speak of Jesus, stand with courage, and return again and again to the source of their strength.

I. THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS US TO SEE PEOPLE DIFFERENTLY

The story begins in a surprisingly ordinary way.

Peter and John are on their way to the Temple for prayer. This was part of their normal rhythm of life. They are not looking for a miracle. They are not organizing a crusade. They are simply being faithful in the ordinary practices of worship.

As they approach the Temple gates, they encounter a man who had been lame from birth. Luke tells us he was carried there every day to beg. Think about that for a moment.

Every day. Not occasionally. Not once a week. Every day.

The people coming through those gates knew exactly who he was. They had seen him countless times. They knew his story. They knew his condition. They knew where he would be sitting.

And because they saw him every day, many had probably stopped really seeing him at all.

Human beings have an incredible ability to become blind to what is familiar.

We walk past people. We rush through conversations. We become focused on our schedules, our worries, and our priorities. Before long, people who deserve our attention become part of the background.

Peter does something different. He stops. He looks at the man. Then he says, "Look at us."

What strikes me is that before Peter offers healing, he offers dignity.

- Before there is transformation, there is recognition.
- Before the miracle, there is relationship.
- The Holy Spirit has a way of changing how we see people.

One of the things I have enjoyed over the last several weeks has been digging into some of the older records of this church. I spent time looking at old minutes, old names, old documents, and old files. Some of those records are over a century old. Some are written in old German script that takes considerable effort just to decipher. Then I took some more time this week to dig into my own families records, especially during World War 2 in Germany.

It is easy to become fascinated by the historical details. But every time I look at those records, I remind myself that these are not merely documents. These are people.

- People who had hopes.
- People who had fears.
- People who raised families.
- People who prayed.
- People who sacrificed.

And for the ones who are found in our church's historical documents, they were people who probably wondered whether the church they were building would survive.

- People who had no idea that 108 years later we would still be reading their names and giving thanks for their faithfulness.
- The church has never been about preserving paperwork.

- The church has always been about people.

The Holy Spirit continually calls us back to that truth.

When churches become unhealthy, they become inward focused. They begin asking primarily, "How do we survive?" Healthy churches ask a different question. **"Who is God calling us to serve?"**

Those are not the same thing. The Spirit continually redirects our attention toward people.

- Toward neighbors.
- Toward visitors.
- Toward those who have been hurt.
- Toward those who have wandered away.
- Toward those who feel invisible.
- Toward those who wonder whether anyone notices them.

I want to be clear. As a pastor I have always been passionate about growing churches. But that passion is not borne out of a need or desire for numbers. The passion comes from a desire to connect real people to a real God in a real way.

Our quest for new people at St. John's is not to make St. John's bigger or better. The quest is to see people where they are, and meet them right there, and introduce them to the One who changed our lives so completely! One of the most powerful things the church can do is simply refuse to overlook people. Peter saw someone everyone else had learned to ignore. That is often where ministry begins.

II. THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS US TO SPEAK ABOUT JESUS

The healing of the lame man immediately attracts attention. People begin gathering from all directions because they know this man. They have seen him sitting at the Temple gates for years. They know his story, and now they see him standing, walking, and praising God. Naturally they want an explanation.

Peter suddenly finds himself with an audience. What is remarkable is not that he has an audience. What is remarkable is what he chooses to do with it. Peter does not focus on himself. He does not draw attention to his own faith, his own authority, or his own abilities. Instead, he immediately points people toward Jesus.

Throughout the Book of Acts, the apostles consistently refuse to become the center of the story. The miracle matters, but only because it points to Christ. The healing matters, but only because it reveals something about the power of God. Peter understands that if people leave impressed with him, they have missed the point entirely. His goal is not admiration. His goal is witness.

Peter does not offer the crowd inspiration in general. He proclaims Jesus specifically: the crucified One whom God raised, the rejected stone who has become the cornerstone, the name through whom healing and salvation come.

What makes Peter's boldness so remarkable is remembering who Peter used to be. It is easy for us to read Acts and forget the Gospels. We know how Peter's story develops. We know he becomes a leader of

the church. We know he preaches powerful sermons and stands before authorities without backing down. Because we know the ending, we sometimes forget the beginning.

This is the same Peter who denied knowing Jesus. This is the same Peter who was overcome by fear in the courtyard on the night of Jesus' arrest. This is the same Peter who, when pressured, chose self-preservation over faithfulness. Peter was not naturally fearless. He was a person who had experienced both failure and restoration.

That matters because many Christians assume courage is something people either possess or lack. We often imagine courage as a personality trait. Some people are brave. Others are timid. Some people are leaders. Others are followers. Scripture presents courage very differently.

Biblical courage is not the absence of fear. It is not pretending fear does not exist. Courage is what happens when obedience becomes more important than fear. Peter still understood risk. Peter still understood opposition. Peter simply became more convinced of Christ's faithfulness than he was afraid of the consequences.

I think this is one of the reasons so many believers struggle in their faith. We spend a great deal of time waiting to feel ready before we obey. We want certainty before we take action. We want confidence before we move forward. We want all our questions answered before we take the next step.

The Christian life rarely works that way. More often than not, courage develops through obedience rather than preceding it. We take one step of faith, then another, then another. As we walk with Christ, we discover that He is faithful. Over time our confidence grows not because our circumstances become easier but because our trust in Him becomes deeper.

That principle applies far beyond what we usually call spiritual life. Over the last year I have experienced it through my own health journey. Transformation was not visible day by day, but faithfulness accumulated. One decision became another. One walk became another. One act of discipline prepared the way for the next.

This week marked an encouraging milestone for me. I reached a goal that once felt far away. But the change did not happen because I felt motivated every day or because one dramatic moment fixed everything. It happened because daily choices accumulated over time. From one day to the next, the results were often hard to see. But over time, what was hidden became visible.

The same thing is often true spiritually. We become the people God is calling us to be through repeated acts of faithfulness. The Holy Spirit empowers us to take the next step. Then the next. Then the next. Over time, transformation occurs.

Peter's sermon reminds us that the Spirit does not merely comfort us. The Spirit also sends us. The Spirit empowers us to speak about Jesus in a world that desperately needs hope. Most of us will never preach to thousands of people as Peter did. Yet every one of us has opportunities to bear witness to what Christ has done in our lives. The question is whether we will trust the Spirit enough to speak when those opportunities arise.

That is what costly faithfulness often looks like. The Spirit gives us strength for the next step, not always the whole road. But as we keep walking, obedience becomes witness.

III. THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS US TO STAND WHEN FAITHFULNESS BECOMES COSTLY

The response to Peter's sermon is immediate. Many people believe. Lives are changed. The church continues to grow. Yet alongside that growth comes opposition.

The religious leaders are deeply disturbed by what is happening. They are troubled by the miracle, but even more by the message that accompanies it. Peter and John are arrested and brought before the authorities. They are questioned, challenged, and pressured to stop speaking about Jesus.

This is one of the first major moments in Acts where the church discovers that faithfulness and opposition can coexist. Up to this point the story has been filled with excitement, miracles, conversions, and growth. Now another reality emerges. The Gospel is advancing, but not everyone welcomes its advance.

I think this is an important lesson for modern Christians because we often assume that if we are following God's will, things should become easier. When difficulties arise, we begin questioning whether we have done something wrong. When opposition appears, we wonder if we have somehow stepped outside God's plan.

Acts presents a different picture. The apostles are exactly where God wants them to be, and yet they encounter resistance. They are faithfully proclaiming Christ, and yet they are threatened. They are doing God's work, and yet their path becomes more difficult rather than less.

The lesson is not that God has abandoned them. The lesson is that faithfulness often requires perseverance.

One of the things we have discovered together over the past year at St. John's is that healthy growth frequently requires difficult conversations. As we worked through the lessons from Nehemiah and began examining our own life together as a church, we came to recognize that many of the challenges we faced could not be solved simply by working harder. They required us to become healthier.

That process was not always comfortable. We had to discuss trust. We had to discuss communication. We had to discuss governance, expectations, accountability, and mission. Those conversations would have been much easier to avoid. Yet avoiding them would not have produced renewal.

Many of us entered that season assuming our greatest problems were external. We looked at attendance numbers, cultural changes, demographics, finances, and countless other factors. Eventually we realized something far more important. Our greatest need was health. Spiritual health. Relational health. Congregational health.

That realization changed everything because it forced us to confront realities that would have been easier to ignore. Yet that discomfort became part of God's work among us.

The same pattern appears throughout Scripture. God often does His deepest work not when circumstances become easier but when people remain faithful through difficulty.

The authorities eventually command Peter and John to stop speaking about Jesus. Peter's response reveals the source of his courage. He does not argue from personal preference. He does not appeal to his rights. He simply explains that he cannot deny what God has done.

There is tremendous power in that testimony. Peter is not speaking as a religious professional. He is speaking as a witness. He has seen what Christ can do. He has experienced grace, forgiveness, and restoration. Having encountered Christ, silence is no longer an option.

Perhaps that is one of the greatest challenges facing the church today. We often approach faith as information rather than testimony. We talk about ideas, programs, and institutions. Peter talks about a Savior he knows personally. His courage flows from relationship.

Acts tells us that the authorities observed Peter and John and recognized that they had been with Jesus. What an extraordinary description of a faithful life. Not that they were the most educated people in the room. Not that they possessed the most influence. Not that they had all the answers. They had been with Jesus.

Everything else flowed from that reality.

IV. THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS US AGAIN AND AGAIN

After Peter and John are released, they return to the believers and tell them everything that has happened. The church immediately gathers for prayer. This response is significant because it reveals where the early church instinctively turned when facing uncertainty.

They did not begin by developing a strategy. They did not begin by discussing public relations. They did not begin by calculating risks and opportunities. Their first response was to seek God together.

As they pray, they acknowledge God's sovereignty. They remember His faithfulness. They place their fears and concerns before Him. Then something remarkable happens. The place where they are gathered is shaken, and they are filled with the Holy Spirit.

This detail deserves our attention because these are not people encountering the Holy Spirit for the first time. These are the same believers who were present in Acts 2. These are people who have already experienced Pentecost. These are people who have already been empowered by God. **Yet they are filled again.**

The reason is simple. Courage is not a one-time experience. Dependence is not a one-time experience. The Christian life is not something we can live on yesterday's strength.

One of the themes running throughout Acts is that the church remains healthy because it remains dependent. The believers continually return to prayer. They continually seek God's guidance. They continually rely upon the Spirit's empowerment rather than their own abilities.

That is a lesson the modern church desperately needs.

It is possible to remember what God did yesterday without depending upon Him today. It is possible to celebrate past victories while neglecting present faithfulness. It is possible to build our identity around memories rather than around a living relationship with Christ.

Last week we spent considerable time talking about remembrance. Remembering matters. The early church remembered. Israel remembered. We remember. Looking through the earliest records of this congregation has reminded us of God's faithfulness across generations. Those memories are valuable because they teach us what God has done.

However, remembrance was never intended to replace dependence.

The courage that sustained the church in one generation must be renewed in the next. The faith that carried believers through one season must be renewed for the season that follows. Every generation must learn for itself what it means to trust God.

Paul captures this idea in Ephesians 5 when he tells believers to be filled with the Spirit. The language suggests continuous action. **Be filled and keep being filled.** Live continually under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Maintain a posture of ongoing dependence.

This is one reason spiritual renewal is never a destination. It is a way of life.

A few weeks ago we talked about how hard seasons often reveal what needs to change. The same principle applies here. The early church did not receive the Holy Spirit and then move on. They continually returned to the source of their strength.

The same is true for us. Churches drift when they begin depending upon programs, traditions, personalities, or past successes. Congregations remain healthy when they continually return to Christ and rely upon the Holy Spirit.

The Christian life is not sustained by a single experience with God. It is sustained by daily fellowship with Him.

CONCLUSION

Acts 3 and 4 remind us that courage is not something we create for ourselves. Courage grows out of dependence upon God.

The Holy Spirit empowered Peter to see someone everyone else overlooked. The Holy Spirit empowered him to speak about Jesus when the opportunity arose. The Holy Spirit empowered Peter and John to remain faithful when opposition appeared. Then, when new challenges emerged, the Holy Spirit renewed and strengthened them once again.

What strikes me most about this passage is how ordinary the disciples actually were. They were not extraordinary because of their education, resources, influence, or abilities. They were ordinary people who learned to depend upon an extraordinary God.

The same invitation stands before us today.

We do not know every challenge that lies ahead. As individuals, families, and as a congregation, there will be moments that require courage. There will be decisions that require faith. There will be opportunities that require obedience.

The good news is that God does not ask us to face those moments alone.

The same Holy Spirit who empowered the early church continues to empower believers today. The same Spirit who sustained Peter and John continues to sustain Christ's followers. The same Spirit who guided the founders of this congregation, carried this church through generations of change, and sustained us through recent seasons of renewal is still at work among us.

Our calling is not to manufacture courage. Our calling is to remain dependent upon the One who provides it.

INVITATION

As we prepare to close, I invite you to consider where God may be calling you to greater dependence and courageous faithfulness.

Who have you stopped truly seeing? Where is God asking you to speak of Jesus with courage? Where has fear made obedience smaller? Where do you need to be filled again?

The promise of this passage is not that God will remove every challenge. The promise is that He will not abandon His people in the midst of those challenges.

The Holy Spirit remains present. The Holy Spirit remains active. The Holy Spirit continues to empower, strengthen, guide, and renew those who seek Him.

Maybe there is a conversation you have been avoiding, a person you have overlooked, a step of obedience you have postponed, or a place in your life where you feel weary and need fresh strength.

Today, let us ask God not only for help with our circumstances but for deeper dependence upon His Spirit. Let us ask Him to fill us, keep filling us, and teach us to live each day from His strength rather than our own.

Amen.