

ACTS | Shaken but Not Forsaken | Story 5

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Introduction

We are working our way through the book of Acts, learning not only about what God did in the early church, but also taking about what God did then — through the empowering of the Holy Spirit — and drawing that *into the here and now*.

What we've seen was this explosive movement of God 2,000 years ago was met with tremendous opposition and hostility. Throughout the book of Acts God was constantly giving His followers the power to suffer well. That's the background of our story today.

In the first part of Acts 4, Peter and John were arrested for preaching the gospel, and brought before the Sanhedrin — an administrative body, like a judicial court that consisted of the chief priests and elders. They were threatened with some form of punishment, if they didn't stop talking about Jesus!

Acts 4:19-20

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, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

Then they're threatened some more, and released.

And that's where we pick up in **Acts 4:23-31**.

Peter and John before the Sanhedrin

Acts 4:23-31

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 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.

CONTEXT: This prayer is being brought before God in light of the threats that were just made.

The Sanhedrin felt threatened by this new movement called the Church: at the idea of losing their own power, loss of control, loss of notoriety, loss of influence — they were scrambling to maintain power. They felt threatened — so they threatened Peter and John.

We don't know what specific threats the Sanhedrin made, but what could they have done to them?

- They could have seized their homes, their property...
- Imprisoned them, and isolated them from their families... and their community
- They could have beaten them, tortured them, in an attempt to silence them...
- Or they could have them killed...

What's so fascinating about this prayer... is they prayed very differently than we would pray... Because if someone is threatening us like that... our prayer would sound something like, "God, make their threats stop! Protect us from the harm they want to do to us! Protect our children, or our family! Protect our freedom, don't let them imprison us. Or remove the priests from their seat of authority and punish them!! Punish them and give us easier circumstances."

They didn't pray for any of those things...

What did they pray for despite the threats made against them?

BOLDNESS

Boldness

Of everything they could have asked God for — the one thing they asked for — is that they would be able *to have the courage, the confidence to push through, to be faithful.*

Acts 4:29

And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness

They didn't pray for anything else! They didn't ask for anything else!

That doesn't mean it's wrong to pray for better circumstances. A few chapters later Peter is imprisoned, and at one point his friends gathered together to pray for his release. Even in the healing of the Lame Beggar from Acts 3, his circumstances were radically changed. So, it's not wrong to pray for those things. But there is an incredibly profound lesson for us in this prayer.

Under what circumstances do you need courage?

- When you're afraid.
- When you're shaken.
- When you're scared.
- When you're facing something that seems much larger than you can handle.

When they prayed for boldness and nothing else — what they were acknowledging in their prayer is that while their current circumstances were terrifying, **their real problem was something else entirely.** They recognized that their problem wasn't the threats, their problem wasn't the potential punishments that awaited them, the loss of wealth, or freedom...

They realized that their real problem was the fact that circumstances are volatile, unpredictable, and fragile. So, instead of praying for better circumstances (which would only be a temporary solution) — **they asked God for a boldness that goes beyond circumstances** — *for a supernatural courage that would allow them to endure, to persevere through the best and worst of circumstances!*

**What they're praying for is an ability
to be unshakeable, unoffendable,
unphased and immovable —
no matter what circumstances they face.**

PROBLEM: One of our major problems is that many of us have adopted a view of life that our circumstances should nearly always be good — and if they're not — then we must be doing something wrong. ***One of our biggest problems in western culture is our expectations about life.***

When hard circumstances show up — our first response isn't to ask God to give us power and courage to endure, to be faithful, to remain steady...

- Our first response is the beg God to stop our world from shaking! For easier circumstances... to make things more comfortable and stable...

But if you just take biblical history into consideration for a moment...

- Descendants of Cain built cities... what happened? The flood.
- The Tower of Babel... God confuses their languages and scatters them...
 - Pentecost is the reversal of Babel!
 - Babel, God confuses their languages and scatters — Pentecost, God clarifies their languages and unites.
- Sodom & Gomorrah... destroyed...
- Everyone living during the time of the Roman Empire would have thought it was an unshakeable empire. But in Acts 17, the apostles are taken before another tribunal and their accusers say, "These are the men that are turning the world upside down!" And the Roman Empire — gone.
- And no matter how much we might hate the idea... every nation, every city, every community, every family, every person is going to go through a shaking at some point because circumstances are far more fragile than we'd like to believe.

But in their prayer — the disciples didn't ask God to stop the threats, to stop the shaking, or to solve the problems — **they asked for courage.**

But something else they did was to acknowledge that there are certain things in life that are unshakable.

Unshakable

Acts 4:25-26

'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'—

They're quoting Psalm 2...

In Psalm 2 there is turmoil... rebellion... there's war, there is shaking going on —and yet — what is also in the middle of Psalm 2 is this...

Psalm 2:4-6

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. ⁵Then He will speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury, saying, ⁶"As for Me, I have set My King on Zion, My holy hill."

What are they saying?

- They're saying "God, we know that the world is falling apart... but not everything will fall apart. There are some things that are fixed. They are set for all of eternity. These things are unshakeable..."

Psalm 103:15-16

As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; ¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. ¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, ¹⁸ to those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments. ¹⁹ The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom rules over all.

**There is something that will never be shaken —
that will never return void —
that is absolutely certain and immovable.
The Word of the Lord.
Everything that is done in, for, and by the love of God.**

1 Peter 1:23-25

...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

All of creation will wither and fade — the mountains will be shaken! The Galaxies tremble — but the Word of God, the promises of God, the works of God, and the people of God — born again through the imperishable seed of God's Word, will live on forever.

God's Eternal Kingdom

There is something that will outlive every civilization... and outlast the sun!

Hebrews 12:26

At that time His voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

The warning for us is not to get caught in all the cares, fears, worries, and concerns of our circumstances — and only to try and pray our bad circumstances away.

But in our praying for better circumstances, we need to remember that *the circumstances we face are not the main problem. The problem is how we are shaken by our circumstances* — whatever they might be.

Our problem is that we forget that we've been brought into an unshakeable kingdom.

PERSONAL: When I first came to Christ, some of us had a phrase that we would use to remind ourselves of the limited nature of whatever drama we would face in the moment, “*100 years, all new people!*”

Look at the first two words in the disciple's prayer:

Acts 4:24

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “**Sovereign Lord**,

- Before the disciples say anything else, after being threatened, they acknowledge the reality that God has allowed those threats to be made over their lives.

What does that mean? It means that if you feel shaken in life — it's a reminder that somehow, and for some reason — God has allowed that shaking to take place.

One pastor once said, *“there’s nothing that happens to us that isn’t first filtered through God’s hands.”* That’s God’s sovereignty. **And that begs the question... “why?”**

ANSWER:

Hebrews 12:27

...in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

That’s why the disciples are praying — God, ground us in the reality that we are children in your unshakeable kingdom —because we feel shaken right now! Give us the courage, the boldness to remain unshakable — in light of the threats being made against us.

The place where they were was literally shaken!

- In Exodus 19, when God came down on Mt Sinai, and the whole mountain trembled violently... there was an earthquake.
- In Acts 2 at Pentecost, the whole place shook with a sound of a mighty rushing wind.
- The earth shakes when God is present.

So, when God shows up and shakes the place where they are, when they pray this prayer in Acts 4 — he’s not shaking them to scare them — He’s shaking the place as a sign that His presence is with them.

Look at what happens as a result!

Acts 4:31

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.**

The more you are shaken by the world — the more it reveals a lack of closeness with God. But the more God shakes you, the less the world will. If you’re filled with anxiety today, if you’re filled with terrible worry, fears, if the world is shaking you, you haven’t seen much of the reality of God. You’re not communing with him. His weight hasn’t come down into your life.

You say, “Well how does that happen?”

How to Press into Unshakable Life

One of the greatest shakings in human history — in Matthew 27, Jesus is dying — hanging from the cross.

Matthew 27:50-51

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. ⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

Why?

- Something was coming down that was heavier than the universe.
- God coming down, not in blessing, but in justice.
- The justice, the wrath of God was poured on Jesus
- With terrifying, crushing weight, the justice of God in great earthquake came down on Jesus.

- Jesus' yields His spirit, cries out in a loud voice, and dies
- The curtain that separated God's presence from the world was ripped to shreds
- There was an earthquake, dark clouds across the sky, rocks breaking apart
- What is happening?

It's Mt. Sinai all over again, but instead of us bearing the weight on the mountain, Jesus Christ took the weight for us. Instead of us being shaken, sifted, judged, Jesus took it all on for us. Jesus Christ took the shaking we deserved.

Jesus Christ was shaken so that you could be made unshakable.

And because of what Jesus has done — the circumstances that used to take you out — crush you and wear you down — *(not that they won't affect you — but they won't bring you into utter despair)*, but they will bring you closer to the Ruler of the Eternal Unshakeable Kingdom that is from Everlasting to Everlasting.

Discussion Questions

1. Even after being threatened for preaching the gospel, what was the one thing that Peter and John prayed and asked God for.
2. What do you think you would ask God for if you were in similar threatening circumstances?
3. Discuss: One of our biggest problems in western culture is our expectations about life.
4. How do we get beyond looking at and praying for current circumstances — and move to asking God for a supernatural courage that would allow us to endure through the best and worst of circumstances?
5. Knowing that God is on His throne and His kingdom rules over all, and will live on forever — how does this affect you when hearing the daily news? How does it affect your daily activities? Do you still participate in actively doing what He has given you to do?
6. Discuss how Jesus Christ was shaken so that we could be made unshakable.

NOTES