

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Thank You, merciful Lord Jesus, for Your forgiveness, which sustains us each and every day. May we be forgiving people who show love in all we do, so that by forgiving others, especially those who have offended us, we may be the light of love in this world of darkness and sin. May we put love into practice in every part of our lives, and show the whole world that the Gospel is real and effective in this world. We ask this in Your name and for Your praise and glory: AMEN.

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: SCHOOLS

**1. For yourself**

*Pray for the schools close by to where you live and work, and pray for any schools workers in your church*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray for any children who are going to school within your extended families. Pray for their safety and progress*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray for those who teach in the Sunday School or equivalent, in your church, and pray that they will teach young children the truth about God's love*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Pray for those who make the policy for schooling within your country, and pray that they will be blessed with wisdom*

### Meditation

Shadows pass us by, almost unnoticed;  
The suffering of a victim of rape; unspoken:  
The bullied child or office worker; petrified:  
The sick, whose pain is always there; constant:

But the shadow leaves its moment's mark;  
If it stirs up true compassion in a stony heart,  
If it switches on a light within a stubborn mind,  
If it shames a rigid man or woman into bending.

When the shadow moves, it has not entirely gone;  
For Christ has stirred the passions of a soul,  
For human hearts have felt the Spirit's breeze,  
For God has made His mark on consciousness ...

And something of the pain of those who suffer  
Will begin to be healed if someone truly notices,  
And if, for just one moment, the shadow of the Cross  
Reminds one human soul to stop and help another.

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## Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 4:13-22

<sup>13</sup> Now when they saw the confidence of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were astonished, and recognized that they had been with Jesus. <sup>14</sup> When they also saw the man who had been cured standing there beside them, they had nothing to say in reply. <sup>15</sup> So they ordered them to go outside while the Sanhedrin conferred in private. <sup>16</sup> They said,

‘What will we do with these men? It is obvious to everyone who lives in Jerusalem that a remarkable miracle has taken place; we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup> But to stop this from spreading further among the people, we should threaten them to speak no more in this name to anyone.’

<sup>18</sup> So they summoned them and warned them to speak or teach in the name of Jesus no longer.

<sup>19</sup> But Peter and John replied;

‘You must decide for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight for us to listen to you instead of to God, <sup>20</sup> but we cannot fail to speak of what we have seen and heard.’

<sup>21</sup> Then, after threatening them again, they let them go. They could find no way to punish them because of the people, since they all praised God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup> Now the man who had been miraculously healed was certainly more than forty years old.

## Review

***Peter and John stand before the Sanhedrin for their punishment, but there is little the Council can do, they want to hear no more of Jesus, and tell them to be quiet. The two apostles show an amazing ability to confound the Sanhedrin and they promise to ignore its edict!***

Opposition is often something we dread or fear, but sometimes, it can be embraced because it brings out the best in us and enables us to go forward. Today’s reading is a spiritual example of the second principle, for as Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin, they were not frightened, they were emboldened, and God’s will was done. Instead of being crushed by the authority of the Jewish legal and religious court, Peter and John stood tall. They dealt with the situation before them with confidence and in Jesus’ name, speaking with inspired wisdom and leaving the much respected and learned members of the Sanhedrin in disarray. In the complex and ill tempered dispute between the leaders of the early church and the Jewish authorities after Pentecost, this was a clear victory for God and the church, and it led to the release of Peter and John (4:23).

Behind all that we have read today, lies the shadow of what had taken place just over 50 days previously, when Jesus had been hauled before the Sanhedrin on trumped up charges that could not be proved. On that occasion (Luke 22:66 - 23:12), the Jewish court had pressed through a charge of blasphemy even though as Pilate clearly observed, they did not have a clear case, and eventually by public demand, Jesus was sent to the Cross. For even the most fervent Pharisee or opponent of Jesus, this was hardly a shining example of Jewish law at work; so as the same people met to deal with the followers of the same man, they clearly had Him on their minds.

Peter and John could not forget Jesus; He was their crucified, risen and ascended Lord. With great presence of mind, they had just challenged the Sanhedrin to accept that Jesus was the power and authority behind the healing of a well known lame beggar (4:8-12). For the Sanhedrin, to accept what the disciples said was unthinkable; they were not going to change their mind. Yet the evidence of His power stood before them (4:14)! We can almost feel the tension in the air. The Sanhedrin members were clearly uncomfortable, and where Peter and John had previously run away from their responsibilities when Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin, they now possessed the same confidence Jesus showed.

So, a decision was taken to review the situation in private (4:15), which was likely to have been at the suggestion of the High Priest Annas, the most senior family figure in the Sanhedrin (4:5,6). The council members knew that if they tried to confront Peter and John in open court then they could be humiliated in the court of public opinion, for no one could deny the miracle that had taken place. Their only course of action was to find a way to exert some authority by making the matter an issue of public order, and attempting to control the situation. This is the route taken by all institutions when their power is threatened either by something just, or simply by the inevitable future.

The Sanhedrin’s response to Peter and John is found in verse 18; they told the apostles not to continue speaking or teaching ‘*in the name of Jesus*’ (4:18). Obviously, the Sanhedrin was more afraid of Jesus than of Peter and John! It was fundamentally afraid of Jesus because it had sent Him to be crucified, and any

acceptance of His power or presence turned all their religious ideas upside down; they wanted to hear no more of Him. Perhaps some were uncertain about what they had done, perhaps some were leaning towards believing in Him, but as a whole, they simply could not accept any mention of His name.

The most significant verse in our passage comes in Peter's response to the Sanhedrin. He flatly rejected their command, and with insight that came from the Holy Spirit, cut the argument from beneath the feet of his accusers. What right did the Sanhedrin have to oblige someone to ignore the voice of God within (4:19)? With the whole thing thrown back at them, the Sanhedrin had no other course of action open to them but to issue further threats; but as Peter now knew, their 'bite' had no 'teeth'. As Luke records, *'they could find no way to punish them because of the people, since they all praised God for what had happened'* (4:21).

Peter and John had won a significant victory which enabled them to continue preaching for the time being, but it was not the end of the matter, as we will find out. They had nevertheless faced their enemy and won the day. They also encouraged the young church by proving that it was possible to stand against even the enemies responsible for Jesus' death, and prevail. This was now a new age for God's people, the age of the Holy Spirit.

## Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The Sanhedrin and Jesus
- Peter and John's reply – the principle of conscience?
- The age of 40

### **Notes on the translation of the passage**

#### **V12 'confidence'**

Other translations:

*'courage'* (NIV)

*'boldness'* (NRSV)

The Greek word used here refers to 'confidence' in public speaking', possibly 'openness' or 'frankness', or 'poise' in public speaking. The translation 'confidence' has the merit of avoiding the word 'bold', which is based on the idea of gallantry and strength, which is quite another matter. Unfortunately, people compare this passage too easily with Joshua 1:9,18, in which God commands Joshua to be 'bold' (Joshua 1:9,18). God's word to Joshua is a command to courage and strength, and it has little to do with qualities of good public speaking, which is the underlying meaning of the word used here.

#### **V12 'untrained'**

Other translations:

*'ordinary'* (NIV)

*'laymen'* (New King James)

The Greek word used here is the emotive word 'idiotes', from which we get the word 'idiot'. However, the word did not have the negative connotations it has today! In common Greek, this word referred to people who were religiously or socially untrained according to the standards of the day, perhaps, 'laymen'. I prefer the term 'untrained' because it is open and does not suggest to the reader anything else.

#### **V19 'You must decide for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight for us to obey you instead of God'**

Other translations:

*'judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God'* (NIV)

*'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge'* (NRSV)

If you read the other translations, you will find that they are in fact a little vague; they translate the Greek as if this is a general point being discussed, but this is not what is going on here. Peter and John are not speaking generalities but specifics; it is about them. You will see that I have therefore added the two small words *'for us ...'* (properly implicit in the Greek), that is *'for us to obey you instead of God'*. This makes the whole sentence easier to read and understand.

### ***The Sanhedrin and Jesus***

As far as we know, the Sanhedrin was made up of a fixed group of people, who met irregularly in Jerusalem, most probably at festival times, to regulate the life of the Jewish people. It seems inconceivable to me that the group who met Peter and John were any different from those who dealt with Jesus. The phrase in verse 13 says this, '*they recognised that they (Peter and John) had been with Jesus*'. Think for a moment what this means. As they saw Peter and John before them, their worst fears about the affair with Jesus were being realised. They had asked for a Temple guard to be placed on Jesus' body (Matthew 28:62-65) so that there could be no chance of a 'resurrection', but this caution had been blown away by the events on the first Easter Day. Now, a group of people who followed Jesus was 'making trouble', in the Temple.

It is also likely that the private discussion (verse 15) meant that some of the Sanhedrin were genuinely uncertain about how to deal with the apostles. Some may have begun to believe; church tradition certainly has Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea as influential members of the Sanhedrin, and they were believed to have accepted Christ at some point. The idea that Jesus had been raised and was now at God's right hand exercising power by which a man was healed would have split the Council. Luke's report gives us the majority response of the Sanhedrin, but we are left wondering what individual members felt.

### ***Peter and John's reply – the principle of conscience?***

The stance of Peter and John is sometimes likened to that of prisoners of conscience. Throughout history, and in all societies, perhaps more in oppressive societies than so-called 'liberal' societies, people have made their stand against the authorities, believing that it is right for them to obey their consciences more than to accept the rule of law as practised. For example, 'conscientious objectors' refused to accept the call up in the U.K for the first and second World Wars, and although those who took this stance were not sent to jail during the Second World War, and they certainly experienced considerable ostracism.

What is said by Peter and John here in this passage of Scripture is slightly different, however. They do not appeal to conscience, they appeal to the voice of God within. They speak to the Sanhedrin, a body set up to discern God's will for the people, and they ask whether or not it is right for them to listen to the voice of God within, or to the advice given to them by the Sanhedrin. They place the members of the council in an impossible position, for by their very terms of reference, they must seek to hear God's voice, even when it is not what they want.

### ***The age of 40***

For some, the age of forty is a milestone, and we can wonder whether this was the case in the days of the first century AD. Certainly, Luke reports the age of the man healed to be over forty. Why does he report this? One answer could be this. As a doctor, Luke may have believed that as the human body aged it deteriorated (a generally observable fact), and it was of added significance to him that one who was 'growing old' was miraculously healed. This was the mercy of God for people of advancing years!

One other possible reason for Luke's comment is this. The man had been lame from birth, so his infirmity had lasted for forty years. From writing in the first century AD we can be fairly clear that people regarded forty years to be 'one generation', in terms of reckoning history. This fact can sometimes help us interpret other parts of Scripture (see Amos 5:25, 1 Kings 2:11 etc). In this case, the idea could be that the man's healing after forty years indicated that a new generation had begun for God's people, marked by the activity of the Holy Spirit and the power to heal!

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

#### ***Standing against various authorities***

There is something truly inspiring about the way Peter and John stood up to the authorities, knowing that those who stood in judgement over them had previously condemned Jesus to death. This is a story from which God's people can take heart, for it tells us that sometimes, God gives His people victories against the prevailing powers of this world.

Now this may sound odd to people who live in stable countries where the constitution is based on broadly Christian principles. People who attend church in such countries often see relatively few occasions when

they must 'confront the authorities', but they would be foolish to believe that it is not necessary. Modern secular principles are never the same as godly ones, and unless God's people are willing to stand against the authorities, perhaps in the fields of education or of social law, then they avoid their prophetic role in society.

We should not forget that in large numbers of countries in the world, Christians live as a minority under a hostile government, for example, those who live in parts of China or countries where other religions are established (such as Islam or Buddhism). It can be extraordinarily hard for God's people to stand up against these authorities, but they must be supported, prayerfully and practically, whenever they feel it is right .

There is one other interpretation of this passage which some may find difficult. Sometimes, individual Christians are called to make a stance in God's name against church authorities, which claim to be the agents of God's will. The question then becomes this, who is the proper interpreter of God's will, the church or the inspired individual? Surely, the church is always wise to stand back from assuming the mantle of the arbiter of all truth, that is, as an institution. The church institutions that exist are at their best when they enable the work of the Spirit in individuals, and not stifle it, however odd this may seem from an institutional point of view.

## Questions for groups

1. Where does the courage showed by Peter and John come from?
2. Discuss in your group whether it is ever worth making a stance today against worldly authorities on Christian principles, when few people accept such principles.
3. What difference does the presence of the healed man make to this story? How important is the testimony of one who has been healed?

## Discipleship challenges

- *Have a look through Scripture and make a note of the names of those who have had to make their stand against the authorities. You will find that it is a common theme throughout Scripture*
- *Have you ever had to take your stand against the trend and against worldly authorities? Take time to pray, and in that time, ask the Lord to strengthen you for the tasks ahead. You may know what these are, or you may not, but being ready will help. So pray that when the time comes you will have the courage to keep close to your Lord in all things. Remember, most people do not pray these things because they do not imagine that they will ever have to stand against authority; but I ask you to consider this because the day is coming when more and more of God's people will have to do this.*

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## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, make me worthy of Your name, I pray. I am sometimes uncertain about my ability to do what is right, but I long to grow in grace, and I look forward to being proved in the heat of everyday life. Make me a true servant of Yours, and use me for all that is good and true in this world I pray. AMEN

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