

The Divided City

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[0 : 0 0] So just like the past couple of chapters in our Acts series, Acts chapter 2 and Acts chapter 3, Acts chapter 4 is an incredible passage. And we're only going to focus on verses 1 to 23 primarily, because there's too much to talk about. This passage is so incredible because it's so modern.

It's so contemporary. This passage is so 21st century. And to see why you have to understand something of the context, in verse 7, when Peter and John are before the council, they say to them, by what power did you do this? Right? And the little word this in verse 7 is a clue that says, something else has already happened that you have to remember in order to understand what's taking place in this chapter.

For 40 years, a man who was disabled in his legs and feet, sat at the gate called beautiful at the temple, begging for alms for financial benevolence. And one day, the day before this, Peter and John walk up to him, and instead of alms, he gets a miracle. Peter says, I don't have silver, I don't have gold, but what I have, I give to you.

In the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk. And if you remember from last week, he didn't just rise up and walk, he rose up and he leaped, he jumped, he ran. And then Peter preached a sermon about the fact that the only way this was possible was by the power of the resurrected Christ. And the rulers and authorities in chapter 4, the leaders of the Jewish society and the temple there are not happy about it. And that's where we are in this passage.

And it's so strikingly modern and so contemporary because it teaches us three things especially. The first is that Christianity grew up in a pluralistic context from the very beginning.

[1 : 5 3] Pluralistic context meaning that there are many different views, many different systems of belief, many different ways of thinking about the world already present in the time of Jesus in the very first century.

And we see that in this passage. The second thing it teaches us is that Christians from the very beginning have always made exclusive truth claims in this universal pluralistic context.

They've always made exclusive truth claims. And then the third thing it teaches us, and this is, we'll only talk about this if we have time, is that when Christian faithfulness, faithfulness to the exclusivity of Jesus Christ, produces both fruit on the one hand and suffering on the other. They go hand in hand.

Look at those three things. So first, Christianity has always existed in a pluralistic context. We're titled at this point the divided city, that's the title of the sermon, the divided city.

Acts 1-3, if you've been with us you'll have seen that Acts 1-3 is some of the happiest moments in the whole Bible. The spirit comes down, there's a ton of joy, everybody's sharing everything.

[3 : 0 5] There's a nice Christian commonwealth that's happening. The climax in Acts 3 is Peter performs this miracle and things are really good. When you transition to Acts 4 to chapter 7, things change. Persecution starts to occur.

Suffering, judgment, animosity, immense animosity. And the climax of the next three chapters is when Stephen the deacon is martyred, stone to death. So you have the great climax of chapter 3, the miracle, and then three chapters later you have the climax of persecution, the first martyr, the murder of Stephen. So you can see the transition. The transition is from the glories of the early church, how the early church came together in such unity and how that unity in the early church actually caused great division in the city, great polarization in its local context. Christianity helped create a divided city in Jerusalem in these early days.

There was a growing contingent of what was called the Way, the Christian movement. We've seen 3,000 people are converted, now 5,000 people are converted, and that's a massive political revolution. It has massive implications for the context and the culture.

In the prayer, when Peter quotes Psalm 2, he says it outright. He says, why God, why did the people's plot against your anointing, particularly this line, the rulers are gathered against the Lord in verse 27, for truly in the city people are gathered against Jesus.

So the Old Testament, he's saying, says that the anointed one, the anointed one to come, he's going to be divisive, he's going to divide, he's going to polarize, that there's only two options when it comes to confronting this man and his claims, and those two options are belief and unbelief. It causes a divided city, but that's not the whole story.

[5 : 08] Because the fact is that Jerusalem was already divided. It was already a divided city. You'll see in verse 1, in verse 5, and in verse 15 that the authorities that are annoyed with these two guys for doing a miracle, for preaching a sermon are quite different, quite unique.

So in the first verse, you have the priest, the captain of the temple, the Sadducees, then in verse 5, you have the rulers, the elders, the scribes, the high priestly family, Caiaphas, Annas. By the way, these are basically all the same people that called the council to determine to crucify Jesus, not too long before this. And in verse 15, it says that the next morning the council came together, and in Greek, this little word for council is the word *synhedron*, or the Sanhedrin.

So this is the Sanhedrin, the great Jewish council that rules the city, that rules the culture. But on this Sanhedrin, in this council, there are Pharisees and Sadducees. Who are they?

Well, these are religious political groups that rose up in the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And they're very polarized. You can almost think of the difference between the Pharisees and Sadducees as the difference between conservatives and progressives.

The Pharisees are quite conservative, but the Sadducees are very progressive. For instance, the Sadducees deny the bodily resurrection, that there's no such thing as a bodily resurrection, which is why they're especially annoyed with Peter for preaching a resurrection.

[6 : 46] So you've got this divide between political religious parties, one conservative, one progressive. And then you've got the scribes. The scribes are the local academics.

There are the Oxford, Cambridge, St. Andrews, Edinburgh, Bred scholars of the text. They're the ones that read all the other languages. They explore the text, right?

So you've got two political parties, one conservative, one super progressive. You've got the academics in this council that are saying, no, we know what the text really says. We know how to really do things. We're the smartest of the bunch.

Then you've got the priest and the high priestly family, which have more leadership clout than anybody else in the whole council. You have rulers and elders, which are distinct even from the priest.

The rulers and elders are kind of like the local mayor, the local Edinburgh City Council, right? They're kind of like that. They kind of rule the normal day-to-day operations. And then you've got the captain of the temple, the muscle, the police, the police of the temple, right?

[7 : 50] You've got all of these different groups in here, all uniting in their opposition against what's been preached. And they're all coming together in this council, the academia, the local city council, the two main political parties, the conservatives, the progressives, the religious elite, the local police.

And guess what? They don't agree with each other on anything. How modern? How contemporary? Have you heard of this? This is the way it's always been. There's never been cultural consensus about politics or religion, even amongst people who all confess the Judaic religion.

They're completely disparate. They're at odds with each other in this very council. Except. Except. The name of Jesus is the one thing that they can be sure to come together on.

The name of Jesus is bad for business. You see? It's bad for culture. It's bad for the values and the morals of the day. It's bad for both liberal religion and politics, and it's bad for conservative religion and politics.

The name of Jesus comes in and divides so much that all the different opposed parties come together against it. You see, it's the one thing that they can all agree on. How modern? How contemporary?

[9 : 08] But even this is not the whole story. There's more to the picture than even this, because the broader picture, and you'll see this as we work through the rest of the Book of Acts, is that just like today, the official, similar to today, the official position of the Roman Empire, which Israel and Jerusalem is a part of at this point in history, is that you can believe in any God that you want to believe in.

You can build a temple to any God you want to build a temple to. You can believe in one God. You can believe in a thousand gods. It doesn't matter. They don't care. Everybody can find their own path. Everybody can pursue their own truth.

This is the official position of the Roman Empire. Every different city has different gods, right? Except the one thing you do have to do is you have to say, Kaiser Curios. Caesar is Lord.

Everybody has to confess that Caesar is Lord, and besides that, you can believe in whatever gods you want to believe in. Jesus was very much a part of that context. You'll remember in Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, in his Gospel, in Luke chapter 20, some of the Jewish leaders come to Luke and say to him, should we pay tax to Caesar? Should we give Caesar tribute? Is this not a violation of the fundamental Torah law, the Genesis Deuteronomy law, that we shouldn't be offering something to a foreign political power, to a different religion? Right?

And what does Jesus say? Jesus has a coin probably in this passage in his hand. He's looking at a coin, and the coin is called a denarius. And the beautiful thing is we have tons of these denarii, I suppose, some New Testament scholar here can tell me if that's right later. Some denarii.

[10 : 57] You can go down to the British Museum in London and see them. I've looked at them. And on the one side in the first century of this coin is Caesar's face.

And so Jesus looks at Caesar's face more than likely, and he says, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. In other words, who printed this money? Whose face is that? It's Caesar's face. Give it back to him.

Pay your taxes. Be a good citizen. And then he makes an alternative statement. Do you remember? But render to God the things that are God's. You see, on the flip side of the denarius, it doesn't just have Caesar's likeness, but in Latin it says Caesar, son of God, the majestic, the august.

You see what he's doing? On this side of the coin, sure, this is Caesar's money, but on the flip side of the coin, don't give this to Caesar. You see, Caesar's claiming to be a son of the gods. You give Caesar his money, but you don't give him your homage. You see, Jesus was well aware of the cultural context, that it's a pluralistic environment where you can believe anything you want to believe in.

You can go to any temple you want to be a part of. You can be a Jew, you can be a pagan, you can believe anything as long as you pay homage to Caesar. And it was a great issue in the local Jewish community.

[12 : 14] Now, why is it that in this pluralistic context, in this context where you can pursue your own truth, you can believe what you want to believe, right? Why is it that Christianity is the thing that comes in and it is so divisive?

When all the other religions were tolerated, what is it about Christianity that made it so divisive, so polarizing in this first century context? And we get hints at that for the rest of the Book of Acts from this passage.

And you can see particularly what are the Jewish leaders annoyed with Peter and John? There's four things in this passage they're annoyed with. The first is in verse 7, and it says that they were annoyed that they proclaimed this miracle in the name of Jesus.

So in chapter 3, Peter claims that Jesus is resurrected, that he went to heaven, that he's coming back again, that he's going to restore the entire cosmos, and that it's the power of this resurrected Christ that made it possible to heal this man.

They're very annoyed at that. That's the first thing. The second thing they're annoyed at is that Peter and John, you'll see, they claim, you're uneducated, you're common men. I think that's in verse 13, you're uneducated and common men.

[13 : 33] In other words, there's a division here between the authorities as the elite, the rulers of the society, of the cultural elite and the common people. And what they're saying is you're not officers, you're not academics, you didn't go to school, you're not a priest, you don't have the cultural pedigree, the academic pedigree, to be coming and doing things like this. It's just not, you're, as we say in the States, you're from the county.

You're not the kind of people that are made to do this, right? Not even more than that. In chapter 3 verse 17, Peter said in his sermon, the rulers are ignorant. They acted in ignorance against Jesus.

So he's called them out. He's made this really public claim, this common, low and educated guy. The third thing is implicit that they were annoyed with. And that's, that this was the miracle and the preaching of Christ was highly attractive in Jerusalem. Highly attractive. 8,000 people thus far, we've been told, have come in a matter of days to Christianity.

It's super attractive. So on the one hand it's very polarizing and very divisive. On the other hand, it's extremely attractive. There's calling in all sorts of people. People are very interested in this gospel and they're also interested in this community that's being gathered, that are sharing things with one another, that are loving each other in a very unique way.

It's extremely attractive and they don't like that. I mean, you can imagine when 8,000 people in a matter of a few days convert in the middle of a city at the cultural center of an entire nation, what that does to the society.

[15 : 08] It's an uproar. It's a revolution of sorts, right? So they're greatly annoyed by that. But fourth and finally, and most of all, the climax of this passage, it's in verse 11 and 12. Did you see it?

This is the summary of Peter's entire sermon from both chapter 2 and chapter 3. Jesus, this man whom you crucified, is the stone that the builders rejected. In other words, in their architectural scheme, the cornerstone, the authorities rejected the most important stone of the foundation of the future of Israel. He was the cornerstone and you rejected him. He is the only name under heaven by which a human being can be saved. Oh boy.

You see the problem. In this slightly pluralistic context in Jerusalem and the much broader pluralistic society in the Roman Empire, Peter's coming in and making some very absolute claims to truth. You see? These are absolute claims.

He's just told them, look, it's not only that I healed a man by the power of the name of Jesus, it's that this man's name is the only hope for salvation for the entire world. The only one, he says. You see, it's exclusive.

He's making a very exclusive truth claim. And this doesn't work in a pluralized society. You see, exclusive truth claims in pluralized society come at odds with one another. They don't work well.

[16 : 48] We live in a pluralistic society also. And it's different in many ways from this one, but there are striking similarities. Similarly, our society is also united against absolute truth claims in the general public culture.

So in our day, religion is a private affair. It ought to be private. It ought not to be public. But even if it does go public, when it does go public, it needs to be as inclusive as possible. So absolute truth claims aren't inclusive.

They're not welcome. They're arrogant. They're unfair. They're unjust. They're not kind. And so Christianity, in the same way, has been divisive in every single culture throughout all of history. You guys have probably heard of the very common cliché illustration or analogy of the elephant in the pluralistic society. Pluralistic societies believe that truth is like an elephant.

And religions are like blindfolded men. And every single one of these men comes up to the elephant and touches a piece of the elephant. You know, the Christianity is grabbing hold of the trunk and Islam is grabbing hold of the leg and Buddhism is rubbing the belly or whatever.

They're all blind men touching this elephant. And because they're blind, they know that they're touching something, something, skin, or whatever it may be, a living animal. But they can't see the whole. They can't see the elephant, right?

[18 : 19] So in a pluralistic context, the view is that every religion has a piece of the truth, but no religion has all of the truth. And there's the point is that both in the first century in the Roman Empire and today that was true in the popular culture, in the cultural imagination. This isn't brand new. Our day is not as unique as it seems in this way. It's kind of always been that way.

There are definitely differences, but it's always been that way. So this brings us to point to the name of Jesus. The question then becomes this. Can you really say in a pluralistic society like we live in that Jesus is the only name under heaven by which a person can be saved?

Can you really be so arrogant to make a claim like that? Peter says yes. The Bible says yes. Numerous texts.

But this man, he was a blue collar worker from a town called Nazareth, which Nathaniel said is the town from nowhere. Nothing good comes out of Nazareth. It's not special. You're saying that this first century man from nowhere, this blue collar worker, is really the source that will heal the cosmos, that will cure the disease of the nations, and that he's the only way to get to heaven.

Now, before we answer that question, let's just look for a second at how Peter responds, because this will help us give some answer to this question briefly. How does Peter respond to the charge, to the annoyance that he is to the council?

[20 : 11] And the interesting thing about his response is that it's highly logical. It's very precise. So in verse 9, he says this, basically, are you indicting us before the council for healing a man who's been lame in his legs for 40 years?

Am I right in asking that? Is that what you're mad about? That I just healed a man who's been sitting at that gate begging for money for 40 years? And that's what you've brought me up on charges for. Sounds like a good work to me, but is that what it is?

And the answer is yes, and he says, and I know why, in verse 10, it's because I did it in the name of Jesus. It's not that you're upset about the miracle, you're upset about the fact that the miracle was done in the name of Jesus.

Now, verse 10 and 11, the implicit logic works like this. Listen, guys, if I can come to the temple in the power of the Spirit of Christ and heal a man who's been disabled for 40 years, if I, using the name of Jesus, can resurrect that man's legs from the dead, how do you think I did it? If it's in the name of Jesus, don't you suppose logically that it works to say that the man Jesus himself is raised from the dead?

How can a dead man's name be so powerful as to resurrect a man's legs from the dead? You see, it's highly logical. He's saying, don't you see my argument, Sadducees, you people who do not have the resurrection, if Jesus isn't resurrected from the dead, I couldn't have done it because I did it in his name. So why don't you believe? That's Peter's argument, that's Peter's point, but he goes a step further.

[21 : 56] It's not only that if this man's truly healed, that Jesus must have raised from the dead, I'm telling you now that he is the healing of the nations.

The only source of salvation. You see, he's upping the ante on the logic. It's incredibly rational. It's incredibly sound argument. You see, based off what I've just did, doesn't it make sense now to say Jesus must have been risen from the dead? Don't you see that?

And in verse 13, there's credent. They give credence to it. They're amazed. It says, they're astonished. They're somewhat convinced even because the logic works.

It's a good argument. They recognize that, so they say, this man was indeed with Jesus. He's uneducated. What do I do with that? I can't make sense of the fact that he speaks this way and he's uneducated. So they're putting the pieces together and saying something miraculous has indeed happened.

He shouldn't be able to speak like this. And then verse 16, we cannot deny that this miraculous work has been performed. And so even the Sadducees, even the rulers, the people that are totally opposed to him say, actually, this kind of works.

[23 : 13] And so they dismiss the case and they reject Jesus. They don't believe. So they're giving credence on the one hand that this kind of works, but they're saying, I don't care. I'm not going to believe it anyway.

And the first of two lessons, and then we'll be done, that we have from this is first this. Belief systems are extremely complex.

Belief systems are extremely complex. In other words, people don't generally come to believe in the claims of Jesus Christ as polarizing as they are by simply looking at logic on paper.

Peter's laid out a good argument here and there's a lot of good evidence and rational, holistic arguments in the book of Acts for believing in Christ. And they're helpful. But belief systems are much more complex than that.

Jonathan Height is a scholar who's recently from NYU, who's recently wrote a book called The Righteous Mind. It's a New York Times bestseller. It's a brilliant book. Get it if you're interested in why politics and stuff are so divisive and set against one another.

[24 : 26] He's exploring human psychology. And the theses that he promotes in this book are things that the Bible has known for centuries, right? And that's his basic thesis is this, that belief systems aren't completely based on your intellect, on thinking, that they're based on all of who you are.

That most of the time we believe things first in our desire because of our desires and our intuitions. Because things satisfy what we want most in life. And only then do we come to think about the logic.

This really does make sense. This really is rational. The Bible, Paul says it all the time, which is why Paul is so big on saying, you have to change your desires. You have to change your desires because you won't truly know God. You won't truly believe unless your desires are changed.

And so Height says this, our beliefs are a conglomerate of our backgrounds, of our communities, of the opinions of people that we respect in life, of logic, of reason, of evidence, of testimony. It's a conglomerate of all those things.

Peter's argument here is not rejected because it doesn't work. It's not rejected because it doesn't make sense. It does. And they even give credence to that. It's rejected for a variety of reasons that have to do with the vast complexity of the human person.

[25 : 46] You see, listen to Height's quote and you'll see how relevant it is for the rulers in this passage. We should not expect individuals to produce good, open-minded, truth-seeking reason, particularly when self-interest or reputational concerns are in play.

In other words, one of the hardest things about believing the Gospel, one of the hardest things about believing in Jesus is that Jesus claims all of you.

Jesus comes to get all of who you are. It's so hard to believe in Christ because the Gospel is not something small or light. The Gospel comes and says, I'm here to change everything about you. And the leadership at the time knew that if they believed this, their authority would change, their position in the culture would change, what they loved about their lives would change, the tradition would change, everything would change.

Because Jesus doesn't come to simply claim a part. I heard one pastor tell a story of a woman who came up to him and she just said, Pastor, I've been sitting in this peace for years and I finally figured out I know why people reject Jesus even when they hear the beauty of the Gospel.

I know why. And she said, you know, from the spiritual standpoint because of the work of the Holy Spirit. But from the human standpoint, it's because Jesus doesn't just ask for a sin for saying yes, but he asks for your whole person.

[27 : 15] He asks for you to change everything. He demands that you change from head to toe, from head to heart, all of who you are. And so Christianity isn't something to enter into lightly. That's one of the lessons here.

And the second and final thing is to come back to the question now that we've seen how Peter defends himself to ask, what do we do with this exclusive truth claim? What do we do with the exclusivity of Jesus in a pluralistic culture?

Can you really say that Jesus is the way, the truth in the life? Can you really say that there's no other name under heaven by which a person can be saved? How arrogant, how unfair, how unkind, how exclusive a claim.

But there are three brief things inside this point. I promise they won't take long. How can Peter say this? The first issue is that it sounds arrogant.

But if you think about it, Jesus demands all over the Bible exclusive allegiance. And he also demands all over the Bible or proclaims himself to be exclusive, to truly be the name above all names.

[28 : 26] And that's found in this climax with Peter in verse 11 and 12. The answer is this simply, first, you have to listen to his claims. You see, it's not arrogance if you come to the truth claims of Jesus and you simply listen to them.

In other words, we don't go out, no Christians going out into the community hopefully and saying Jesus is the only way because they want to be a bigot. No, it's not a matter of arrogance, it's a matter of obedience.

Because we don't claim it on our own authority. It wouldn't make any sense if you said, I believe in Jesus, I believe in who he said he was. I believe in the Bible because Jesus said the Bible is true and then you said, but I don't believe in half of the stuff he said.

It wouldn't make any sense, right? It's not an issue of arrogance to say that Jesus is the only way to the Father. It follows from belief. You would simply be disobedient to say anything else, right?

Because that's exactly what he claims for himself. It's not an issue of arrogance, it's an issue of following him, of coming underneath his authority. So that's the first thing.

[29 : 35] The second thing is this, is it really true to say that every religion sees only a slice of the elephant? Is it really true to say that Christians and Muslims and Jews and Buddhists only have claimed to a slice of the elephant, to a piece of the truth, and can't see the whole truth?

Well, listen, the problem with saying this, maybe you've called on to it already, is the only way somebody can say that that's the case is if they can actually see the whole elephant?

You can only say Christianity only has this piece, Judaism only has this piece, Islam only has this piece, unless you're standing in the objective position where you actually see the whole truth, right?

You have to be able to see the whole truth to say, that guy's blind, that guy's blind, that guy's blind, that guy's blind. You see, actually the pluralistic claim that no religion has any claim to absolute truth is one of the most exclusivist absolute claims out there.

Because it's saying, everybody else is wrong, I can see the whole truth, I'm the only one, right? It's extremely exclusive, it's actually much more arrogant than Christianity's claim, because Christianity's claim comes under the authority of someone outside of you.

[30 : 48] The only reason you say Jesus is the only way is because Jesus said he's the only way. But in the pluralist, universalist concept, they're saying, I can see the whole truth, therefore Jesus isn't the only way, right?

You see, it's much more arrogant, it's much more exclusive. And the point is that everybody's view on religion is exclusive. Everybody's is exclusive. You know, to say otherwise is to be very unfair to historic religion, because almost every single religion in history has always made the claims that their religion was exclusive to some extent.

So not only is it actually arrogant to say nobody has the truth, it's actually very disrespectful and intolerant to suggest that for the past however many thousands of years, all of these religions who have claimed exclusivity are completely wrong.

It's actually much more arrogant, much more disrespectful than to say that we have an exclusive claim to salvation. You see, the third and final thing to say about this exclusive claim of Jesus is this.

The pluralistic elephant in the room view of religions has its own gospel, and you've probably heard it, it has its own good news about salvation.

[32 : 05] And it basically says this, as long as you are good, as long as you generally do good things, if you're a decent citizen in life, etc., then it doesn't matter what you believe, you can go to heaven, you can get God, you can do this, right?

But the question that you have to confront this type of a gospel with is this, but what about the bad people? You see? But what about the bad people? As long as you're good, it doesn't matter what you believe, you can have whatever you want, you can have whatever religion you want as long as you're good, but what about us bad people?

What about me? I know myself, right? Here's the beauty of the Christian gospel.

The exclusivity of the name of Jesus Christ above all other names actually means the most inclusive good news that there has ever been.

You see, the uniqueness of Jesus, the exclusivity of Jesus is actually a claim to the most inclusive religion that there's ever been in the entire planet. You see, Peter came to the rulers and they said, you don't have the pedigree, you don't have the clout, you don't have the political authority, you don't have the cultural moxie, you're not an academic, you can't do these things, you can't be a part of this group, right?

[33 : 30] And Peter says, exactly, exactly, I don't, I don't have any of those things. The Christian gospel is that the highest authority in all the world became the lowliest of the low.

He didn't ride in on a horse in night's armor with an army ready to take down all the authorities into history. He came into history taking on human weakness, becoming sin, and subjecting himself to these authorities.

You see, it's at the very heart of the gospel that it's exclusivity, it's so unique because it's so inclusive. You can come to this gospel as a tax collector, as a sinner, as a prostitute, as a rich man, as a Pharisee, as a Sadducee, as a poor, as the lowest of the low and highest of the high, it's completely inclusive. There's neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female before Christ.

Everybody is included, it's the only religion like it. You see, the pluralist, universalist claim is this, get your act together, be a good citizen, and you can believe whatever you want to believe, and maybe you'll get heaven.

And the Christian gospel is this, come ye sinners, poor, wretched, weak, weary, wounded, and sore. You see, the exclusivity of Jesus is precisely the inclusivity of every type of person in the world, and that's the beauty of the Christian gospel.

[35 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you have given us a gospel that is for the world, for the cosmos, for the healing of the nations.

So we ask that you would give us the boldness and courage like Peter and John had to take that gospel into the pluralistic context we live in, and to use it to love neighbor, and to tell them about Christ.

I'm going to pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.