

A BURR UNDER THE SADDLE

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Acts 4:1-12

I would like to tell you a story. There was a man in Jerusalem who had been born with some disability that prevented him from walking. Because he could not walk, he could not work and so he was forced to beg. Every day, friends would carry him from his home to the great temple in Jerusalem. There, they would leave him at the entrance gate lying on the ground where he would beg from the people who were going into the temple to worship.

One day, Peter and John—two of the apostles—were entering the temple when this man called out to them asking for alms. The apostles examined him carefully and said, *Look at us*. The man turned his attention to them expecting a handout. Peter told him, *I don't have any money, but this is what I can give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk*. And Peter reached down and took the man by his right hand and lifted him up. The man's feet and ankles, which had never supported him in his life, became strong—strong enough for him to stand and walk. The man entered the temple with the apostles and as he went he began to dance and jump and run around praising God in a loud voice.

The people in the temple saw this and were surprised because they recognized the man as the beggar from the gate. They gathered around Peter and John and the man pointing and asking the obvious question—what happened?

Peter, never one to pass up an opportunity to share his faith, gathered the people toward him and he began to preach. He told them what had happened to the man. He told of Jesus who was recently executed but whom *God raised from the dead*. Peter explained that it was through his faith in the name of Jesus that God made the man strong. Peter called for all those there who witnessed this miracle to repent.

The man running around, the crowd, and Peter's preaching caused such a commotion in the temple that it caught the attention of the priests, the temple guard, and the Sadducees. The Sadducees were especially annoyed because Peter was teaching about resurrection, and the Sadducees (who were a particular denomination within Judaism) did not believe in any resurrection. So, they had Peter and John arrested and held overnight.

The next day, a council gathered to address the situation regarding Peter and John. But they were concerned with more than just the events in the temple. They were aware of the increasing number of people who believed in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. What were they going to do?

This council was probably what we know to be the Sanhedrin—the high court of Judaism in Jerusalem. At this hearing were rulers, elders, and scribes, Annas the former high priest, Caiaphas the current high priest (and son-in-law to Annas) and others of the high-priestly family. This was religious nobility. Their job as Sanhedrin was to interpret and guard Jewish law and practice and to discipline those who strayed. The council included Sadducees who did not believe in a resurrection and Pharisees who did.

Their interrogation of Peter and John was not so much about resurrection as it was about authority. The central question they put to the apostles is this: *By what power or by what name did you do this?* In other words, they wanted to know on whose authority they were performing tricks and preaching in the temple.

The gospels often place the Jewish authorities as the antagonists in the story of Jesus. Luke is especially guilty of this. But here, the council has a legitimate concern. They are the guardians of the Jewish faith and they have to deal with anything they view as threatening that religion.

Think about it this way. If you go into McDonalds and start putting up posters advertising Burger King, they are going to ask you to leave. If you go into Regions Bank and start telling people that they can get better rates at First Tennessee, they are going to ask you to leave. If you go to the Wilson County Fair and start telling people that there is a better county fair somewhere else, they'll never find your body.

Peter and John are brought before the high council because the growing group of followers of Jesus are seen as a potential threat to Judaism.

The council asks Peter, *By what power or name did you do this?* We are told that Peter is *filled with the Holy Spirit* and he says to them, *If you brought us in because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and you want to know how this man was healed, then I want you and all the people of Israel to know that he is in perfect health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.* Then Peter quotes from the psalms when he says, *the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.* Peter views Jesus as the new cornerstone of the Jewish faith. The leaders of the faith are *the builders*. They rejected him when they crucified him but he has returned to new power.

This episode began when Peter, out of compassion for the man who could not walk, heals him outside the temple. I don't believe that Peter planned this. He and John were simply going to the temple to worship and pray. But their spontaneous action, along with Peter's preaching, proved to be an annoyance to the Sadducees and set off a chain of events. To the Sadducees and the temple leadership, Peter and his cohorts were an annoyance. They were like a burr under a saddle.

Now, I've only ridden horses a handful of times in my life, but I understand the meaning of the phrase "a burr under the saddle." A burr, or a thorn, or where I come from, a sticker, is painful if you get one stuck to your skin. If a burr or sticker gets between a horse and its saddle the horse may not feel it at first, but as the ride continues and the saddle presses and rubs against the horse's flesh, in time the burr will become a painful irritant to the horse. For us, it may be like having a rock in our shoe or an itch we can't scratch. It hurts and it is annoying.

For the Sadducees and the temple leadership, the name of Jesus had become a burr under their saddle. Although he was dead, his followers continued on stirring up the people in his name. Their movement was growing; the burr was becoming too annoying to ignore.

We should not be surprised by this. Jesus had already warned his followers that this is what it would be like when he said, *Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.* Jesus knows that the message of salvation that he brings to the world will force people to go in differing directions. Some will follow him. Some won't. Families will be divided; communities will be divided. Jesus offers peace but not the sort of peace that comes from people simply not fighting. His peace is deeper than that. Some would say it is wonderful; others would label it annoying.

The church was willing to stand up to the Jewish authorities, and then the Roman authorities. The church survived because it held fast to its core belief in the resurrection of Christ.

The church, I believe, is at its best not when it is seeking to make everyone happy, but when it chooses to be like a burr under a saddle, irritating the things that need to be changed and bringing salvation in Jesus' name to the world. The church is at its best when it is a rock in the shoe of injustice, when it is an itch on the back of hatred. The church is at its best when it is a piece of sand caught inside an oyster. In time, that irritating grain of sand becomes a beautiful pearl.

As Christians, we are called to show compassion, to love our neighbors, to help those in need. Doing these things may irritate some, but it is Jesus' calling for us. It is not a burr. It is a priceless pearl.