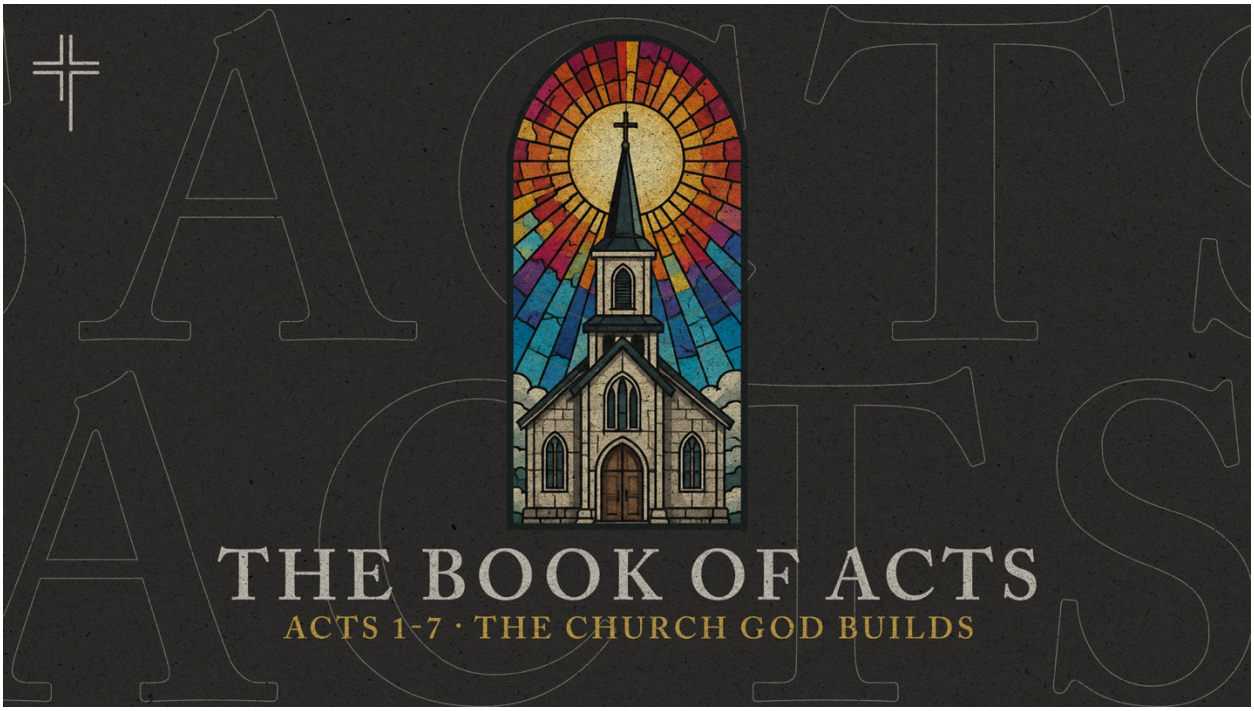



**IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH**
**SERIES: THE CHURCH THAT GOD BUILDS**
**SCRIPTURE: ACTS 4:23-37**[1]
**DATE: NOVEMBER 8, 2026**

## INTRODUCTION

Legendary heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson is often credited with this memorable reflection on strategy in the boxing ring: "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

Perhaps never more true than it application for those who fought Tyson in his prime, this quote captures something important about adversity—it changes things and often requires adjustment. This is particularly true when the impacts or strength of the challenge prove to be greater than anticipated. Many times, this quote is used when talking about the tendency of life to present unexpected challenges that may be far beyond what a person or family had ever anticipated. In those moments of challenge one may crumple and fall, or they might regroup, adjust, and fight back.

In Acts 4:23-37, we catch a glimpse of a changing reality and the onset of emerging persecution as the church has to grapple for the first time with the

[1] This lesson is written by Caleb Osborne.

implications of exterior pushback on their activities and their Gospel mission. This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons, but one of the greatest is that there is no effort to hide, minimize, or obscure the real impact that this emerging persecution is having or will have on the church. Rather, the Apostles chose rightly to look beyond the immediate challenge to instead focus on the God who is the ultimate source of their strength. In doing so, they not only provide a template for us to emulate but challenge us to think rightly about the full meaning of the fact we serve a truly sovereign God.

## Text

### Acts 4:23-37

*23 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,[d] 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'[e]—*

*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.*

***They Had Everything in Common***

*32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was*

*upon them all. [34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold [35] and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. [36] Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, [37] sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

## Explanation

We find the disciples in Acts 4 on the precipice of a critical moment for the church (or The Way) as it will begin to be called. The groundswell of support and unified early days of the church in Acts 2 and 3 have given way to the first genuine opposition the disciples have faced since the crucifixion. Their response in this passage will tell the reader much about how they have changed, how this new project of the "church" is likely to fare, and will give indications about what the path forward will look like.

### The Persecution Begins (4:1-20)

To understand the passage, one should start by reviewing the details of what has just transpired. As you will recall from previous lessons, in Chapter 3, Peter and John had miraculously and publicly healed a lame man as they entered the temple to pray. The public spectacle this invoked opened the door for Peter to preach the Gospel to the gathered crowd, and the subsequent stir had resulted in both men being imprisoned overnight by the Jewish religious leaders. The next morning, seemingly having made their point, the religious leaders gathered Peter and John before the high priest and others of the ruling class. Unintimidated by the accusers, Peter defended their actions with a powerful statement of the Gospel. In fact, the power with which they spoke left the assembled group amazed. The distinguishing characteristic was the disciples had been with Jesus. Unable to deny a miracle had taken place and fearing the implications for their reputation and standing with the public, the religious leaders decided to threaten Peter and John in a futile attempt to demand silence.

- **The Demand**: Religious leaders demanded Peter and John (and presumably their associates) no longer "speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."
- **The Reply**: Peter and John did not argue. They simply said they could not help

but witness…they must tell what they have seen and heard. This was shared not in an argumentative manner, but in a humble yet certain way.
- **The Threat**: The leaders harassed Peter and John in a manner to make clear they intended future difficulty if they persisted in their teaching. However, the leaders were stymied in their intentions to go further by the lack of a clear violation of the law and, perhaps more persuasive, by the response of the people of Jerusalem praising God.

Having departed their interrogation, the passage turns to two powerful snapshots of life in this new church: one that provides a vision of the response by the Apostles to this threat and the other that gives a glimpse of the daily experience of the members of this new church.

**Response by the Disciples (v. 23-31)**

Peter and John returned to their fellow Apostles upon their release and recounted in full detail their experience from the miracle through imprisonment to the threat. In response, the assembled group together turned to immediately pray about the situation. The prayer that follows (v. 24-30) may at first seem unusual, even surprising, but upon closer inspection, it reveals great insight into the heart and mind of these early church leaders. Each element of the prayer is worth considering. The following is one brief outline to capture the key contents of this prayer:

1. Praise for a Sovereign God (v. 24): The Apostles started the prayer not with their own experience and struggles or requests for help, but instead, they focused on God as the Creator of all things. Looking to who God is, they drew reassurance that every situation, every leader, and every power/institution was subject to the God of the Universe.[2] Knowing God is in control will shape the remainder of this prayer and really of their actions beyond this situation. Understanding their recognition of and submission to God's sovereignty colors this entire story.
2. God Carries Out His Purposes (v. 25-28): The Apostles went on to quote David's words from Psalm 2:1-2 which they identified as a prophetic vision of what God would do through Jesus. In this, they identified the "Gentiles [who] rage" and the "Kings of the Earth" and "rulers [who] were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ" (v. 25-26) as Roman

[2] For a deeper dive into how this passage reveals the sovereignty of God, consider the John Piper "Look at the Book" lesson "Sufferers Need a Sovereign God: Acts 4:23-31" available at https://www.desiringgod.org/labs/sufferers-need-a-sovereign-god.

leadership in Jerusalem (Pontius Pilate and Herod), Gentiles, and the Jews. This group collectively, in their view, were responsible for the death of Christ. This was a theme that Peter had hit on in Acts 2:22-24 and Acts 4:10 by directly confronting the Jews, specifically the Jewish leaders, about their role in the death of Jesus. However, this was not about blame. Rather, they went on to say in v. 28 that the role these leaders played in the death of Jesus had been in accordance with God's plan. God, in His sovereignty, had been in control even in the awful moments of Jesus's crucifixion. A reality that had clearly changed the way the disciples thought and in turn acted. If God was in control of that moment, the Apostles recognized he was in control in the moment of persecution they now faced.

3. Prayer for Boldness (v. 29-30): Having acknowledged God as Lord, even in these emerging difficult circumstances, the Apostles brought their plight to the Lord, laid it at His feet, and asked not for relief but for *boldness* to continue to teach and preach God's Word despite these circumstances. They went on to make clear their focus in v. 30 by pointing to the need for their proclamation to open up opportunities for the continued signs and wonders to be done in the name of Jesus. Their burning desire was to see the mission continue apace. The culmination of this prayer was a remarkable moment. We see these believers, specifically the Apostles, completely yielded to God's plan primarily concerned about the continued, confident proclamation of His Word. This seems to assume that just as Pilate was part of God's predestined plan for Jesus's death. These men were part of His predestined plan for Kingdom advance. They were eager not to miss a moment. Not to falter in the least. To proclaim God's Word boldly!

This prayer was met immediately by an equally remarkable response. According to v. 31, the place where they met was physically shaken, the Spirit filled those gathered, and they *immediately* began to speak with boldness. These tangible reminders of the remarkable power of God should inspire even modern readers. This outburst of power was not a fluke. This was the kind of sign of an active, triumphant King on the move establishing this Kingdom.

**Life of the New Church (v. 32-37)**

Following this dramatic outpouring of the Spirit and the continued bold proclamation of the Gospel, Luke pulls the story back from the specific to a more general view of the life within the church in these days. In many ways, his report echoes the summation at the end of Acts 2:43-47 depicting a vibrant church, growing and spreading throughout the city as lives were changed and community fellowship expanded. Specifically in 4:32-37, Luke focused on two

areas of flourishing for the church: (a) unity throughout the church acted out in met needs and (b) leadership of the Apostles.

1. Unity of the Church Body (v. 32, 34-37)
   Luke returns to the theme of a united congregation emphasizing their unity in faith and practice, but he also speaks to the manner in which the church body was addressing physical needs in their own ranks. In v. 32, he refers to the fact property was held in common within the congregation, and in v. 34-35, he went further in explaining the manner by which resources were made available—through property sales and distribution under the guidance of the Apostles. Such distributions and care have been fascinating to many readers of Acts because it seems at odds with typical behavior/human nature. In fact, this may be why Luke emphasizes this point. The behavior of this group of people suddenly thrown together in the wake of Jesus's resurrection and ascension stands in stark contrast to the experience of generations of people throughout human history. Clearly something new and different is happening.

   The text does not explicitly state this, but it seems that this remarkable sharing of resources and meeting of needs is influenced by their understanding of God's sovereignty. After all, if the God who made the universe is sovereign over Roman rulers and the Jewish high priest, why would he not also be sovereign over the possessions He has given these church members which can be used to meet the needs of their new brothers and sisters. If truly yielded to and submissive to God's ownership and mastery of all things in life world, the notion of private property takes on an entirely new cast. It seems the church was fully embracing the truth of His control, trusting Him even with their daily material needs. Even if it cost their great wealth. Moreover, they trusted the Apostles with these resources to use them to the best effect (see v. 35 and 37). Their trust was not placed in men but in God.

2. Leadership of the Apostles (v. 33, 35 and 37)
   Luke also incorporates references to the daily work and activities of the Apostles within this new congregation emphasizing two aspects of their leadership. First, he points out their continued work in proclaiming the truth of God's Word (v. 33). This is the core of their ministry and a theme that Luke will return to in coming chapters. As those who had been closest to Jesus and that had been commissioned by Him for this work, they assert themselves in leadership roles by teaching the people, focusing on doctrine. However, that is not all they are doing. As he points out in vs. 35 and 37, they are part of the administration of resources and gifts made available to support other church members in need. They are

therefore exercising a pastoral work, shepherding the church and supporting those relationships internal to the organization.

Luke closes the chapter with this brief highlight of what their lives and interactions looked like. He spoke to the ways even the lay membership had embraced the meaning of God's sovereignty over all creation and how that shaped their willingness and manner of providing for each other. Likewise, Luke gives a glimpse of the emerging distinct roles to be played by the Apostles in leading this church body and helping to shepherd this flock.

## Discussion Questions

- In the wake of the first confrontation with the Jewish leaders, how might you have expected the Apostles to respond? What stood out to you about their prayer?
- Take a moment to look at their prayer. Consider the components you see. What can you learn from how they prayed? What aspects might you want to incorporate into your own prayer life?
- Consider the picture of the disciples at the end of the Gospels and the beginning of Acts. What has changed about them and about their actions? In what ways are they the same? What does this teach us about the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives? How does this translate to our lives?
- When the text says in v. 31 that all present were filled with the Holy Spirit, is this talking about a replay of Pentecost? Weren't these people believers who had already received the Spirit? Consider what this reference to a "filling" of the Spirit means. How does this impact us today?
- Why does the reference to believers having "everything in common" stand out to the modern reader? Is this a fair response to this situation? How would you explain to someone who doesn't know Scripture well what this really means and how it does or doesn't relate to our daily lives now?
- Consider the picture of the church in v. 32-37. How does this relate to your experience? Does it challenge you in how you feel about your brothers and sister in the church body? What practical things can we do to emulate these believers?

## Conclusions or Applications

### GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY CHANGES EVERYTHING FOR US

The behavior of the Apostles and of the church in this chapter is truly remarkable and in many ways distant from our own experience. While they had been with Jesus for years, experiencing first-hand His life and work, the major difference in how they behaved was not simply having been with Jesus. No, they recognized that all that happened to them, all they experienced (good and bad), and all they owned or had control over is God's. He has a plan, and we can trust that plan.

Looking through this lesson, the reader should consider how well they are acknowledging and trusting God's sovereignty over every aspect of our lives. They should ask themselves how well they reflect His plans and desires in how they use their material possessions and time. It is worth asking, how might we act/think/behave differently if we truly believed we were subject to His plan and His control?

### DON'T PRAY FOR RELIEF. PRAY FOR BOLDNESS

The Apostles led the church in choosing well. In praying for boldness in the proclamation, not relief from circumstances, they demonstrated an exceptional truth. God stands ready to empower us for the work, but we need to ask Him for help and support. True, room-shaking power is at our disposal if we will ask.

Too often, it feels like circumstances and challenges stand in the way of bold, faithful living. We can learn from the Apostles who recognized that God is even God over these. It is not an easy lesson to learn, but it is one we must to fully appreciate the magnitude of what He has done for us.