

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Why Does God Allow Trials?

Acts 4:23–37

Go ahead and take your Bibles and turn with me to the book of Acts, chapter 4. We've got a lot of ground to cover today, so let's get right into it.

The question I want to ask and answer in today's message is the following: Why does God allow trials in our lives? Why doesn't God just make life smooth sailing for Christians who are committed to him? Why not answer all our prayers, no questions asked? Why doesn't God just make Christians who faithfully serve him the richest, the most liked, the most famous, and the most successful people in the world?

The answer to that is obvious to most of you. But let's just tease that out a little more. What does Acts 4:23–37 show us as the positive results of a trial?

Now remember what happened previously in Acts 3 and 4. Peter and John encountered a man who was lame from birth in the temple. The Spirit of God rose up inside of them and they said to this man, "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise and walk" (Acts 3:6). And the man was healed. And Peter wasted no time after this miracle directing the attention of the people to Jesus. He preached the gospel. Luke tells us that the church grew after this event to 5,000 men.

But instead of receiving commendation from the Jewish leaders in the temple, these apostles received condemnation. The leaders of the Sanhedrin, including the chief priests Annas and Caiaphas, condemn Peter and John. They throw them in jail for the night, and they threaten them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Even as they were releasing them from custody they continued threatening them. Their threats probably went something like this, "If you keep this up, we will put you to death. We killed your 'Messiah' Jesus, and we'll kill you too if you don't stop preaching the name of Jesus."

How's that for poetic *injustice*? Peter and John heal a crippled man and preach the gospel just like Jesus told them to do. And for their faithful efforts they get persecuted, threatened, and thrown into prison. "How could God be so unfair? Why would God allow them to be persecuted like that?"

Some people might say this, "If I was Peter or John right now I'd be as mad as a hornet. I'd raise my fist to heaven and give God a piece of my mind for making me go through that." But the apostles don't do that. They're not angry. In fact, we'll see examples in the pages to follow of them actually rejoicing and thanking God for their privilege of suffering. Why is that? Are they crazy?

Well, it's probably because they took Jesus's words seriously when he said, "Blessed are you when others revile you, persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt 5:11–12).

Now watch what Peter and John do after they are released. Look at verse 23.

²³ When they were released, they went to their *friends*

The NIV translates this "their own people." The Greek word means "their own." What does this mean? Peter and John returned to their church family.¹ They went to the church with whom they had mutuality of soul and fellowship.

they went to their *friends* and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

Thank God for good friends who offer comfort after an experience of trial and suffering. Amen?

²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices *together*

¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 203: "The expression is not accidental, as it presses the point of how the early church saw itself as a community of mutually supportive friends."

The Greek word here is literally “one-mindedly” (ὁμοθυμαδόν [*homothumadon*]). So, they lifted up their voice one-mindedly...

to God and said, [as follows]

Now let me stop there and give you the first answer to this question, “Why does God allow trials in the lives of believers?” Here’s one reason why. Because...

1) Trials **facilitate** unity and togetherness (4:23–24a)

Obviously “togetherness” is a big deal for Luke in this book. Acts 1:14 says, “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together...” Acts 2:1 says, “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.” Acts 2:44 says, “And all who believed were together and had all things in common.” Acts 2:46 says, “And day by day, attending the temple together.” Luke doesn’t miss an opportunity to tell us that the church was together.

And the togetherness that the church experienced initially in this book is only accentuated by threats and persecution. Peter and John didn’t come back and say, “Every man for himself!” “Head for the hills! Save yourself! They’re coming for us!” No. They got together with their friends. They confided in them. And then they cried out to God together.

Now let me be clear about what a trial is. If you go out and rob a bank tomorrow morning and get thrown into jail, that’s not a trial. Okay? That’s a consequence of your sinful action. If a pastor goes out and commits adultery on his wife and ruins his marriage and disqualifies himself as a church leader, he can’t say, “I’m just going through a difficult trial right now.” That’s not a trial. And that doesn’t facilitate unity or togetherness. That is sin, and sin has consequences.

Yes, there’s forgiveness that’s available for that sin. But that doesn’t mean that the consequences are just going to disappear automatically. A trial on the other hand is a difficult circumstance that God allows to transform our character. And we rest in God during trials. We *repent* of sin. We *endure* trials. And one of the things that helps us rest in God during a trial is leveraging the collective strength found through togetherness in the Body of Christ.

Let me just give you one more exegetical nugget from verse 24. The word for “voices” in your ESV Translation is actually singular in Greek. The ESV makes it plural to smooth out the translation. But technically it should read “they lifted their voice together.” They one-mindedly lifted up their *voice* to God.

What’s the implication of that? Well the unity between these brothers and sisters was so tight, it’s as if they were lifting up one voice to the Lord. Instead of the trial driving a wedge between these believers, it unified them. It’s as if God used the trial to meld their souls together forging a powerful, prayerful, bond. Trials facilitate togetherness. Trials facilitate genuine, authentic unity and friendship among brothers and sisters in Christ.²

I had a friend who told me once that you never really know a person’s character until you see that person go through adversity. Some people appear as sweet and kind and committed at first glance, but when you apply a little pressure to their lives... when the heat gets turned up through adversity or conflict or hardship... their character just unravels right in front of you.

But that’s not what we see here in Acts 4. Peter and John came to their brothers and sisters and reported the threats against them. And this group of believers got together and cried out to the Lord with unity. They were unfazed by this threat to their lives. **“Lord, give us that kind of unity and togetherness here at this church!”**

You might say, “How do we do that, Tony? How do I pursue unity and togetherness in the midst of a trial?” Well if someone in your small group is going through a difficult trial, stand by her in loving support. If someone is carrying a difficult burden that is crushing them, cry out to God with him. If there’s an outstanding conflict that is fracturing the unity of the church or fracturing the unity of your family, deal with that matter. Get it settled. Forgive. Repent. And labor to make sure that trials foster unity and togetherness, instead of disunity and divisiveness.

² Similar ideas are found in Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” Also Proverbs 18:24 says, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Here's a second answer to that question, "Why does God allow trials in the lives of believers?"

2) Trials **stimulate** theological reflection (4:24b–28)

Look how the early church prays in **verse 24**. **This is good. We should pray more like this.**³

²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their **[voice]** 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,

Now stop right there. They are about to quote a Scripture here from **Psalm 2**. And this is a wonderful example to us of how to use Scripture in prayer. I hope you've been able to see in these first few chapters of **Acts** just how saturated in Scripture the early church was. They were so saturated that they were able to extemporaneously quote Scripture even while they prayed. **Charles Spurgeon** told his congregation once, "**Be walking Bibles.**"⁴ **Let the truths of Scripture naturally and constantly flow out of you.** That's what I see here with the early church.

Notice also how they set up this Scripture in **verse 25**. "Our father, David said by the Holy Spirit." Does everyone see that? This is one of several affirmations of the dual-authorship of Scripture.⁵ David wrote **Psalm 2**.⁶ The Holy Spirit wrote **Psalm 2**, as well as the rest of Scripture. Or to say it more succinctly, David spoke as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit (**2 Peter 2:21**).

And here's what David said in **Psalm 2**.

^{25b} "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'—

Let me summarize what that is saying in one short sentence. "**Why do people oppose the Christ?**" "**Why do they do that?**" That's what David asked in **Psalm 2**.

By the way "anointed" in **verse 26** is Χριστός in Greek. It's a translation of מָשִׁיחַ in Hebrew (Anglicized as "Messiah"). So David is asking in **Psalm 2**, "**Why do people oppose the Messiah?**"

And by the way, **Psalm 2** isn't a lament. The psalmist didn't write it like this: "**Why do people do that?!!! Why do you let them God?!!!**" It's not a lament. It's a rhetorical question that reads like this: "**Why do people try to stop the unstoppable?**" "**Why are they so ignorant as to think that they can actually oppose the sovereign God of the universe and his Anointed Messiah?**" That's how this should be read.⁷

So what we have here is a group of people who are reflecting theologically on what God has promised concerning his Messiah in **Psalm 2**. And by the way, all accurate theology originates from the Bible! Right? So they are squaring their experiences with what the Bible prophesied.

And it's interesting how they look through the lens of Christ and his experiences and what was written about him in **Psalm 2** to understand their own experiences. They are persecuted, but they interpret that as persecution of Christ! Why do they do that? Because they know that Christ promised them that they would suffer like he did. Christ promised them that the world would hate them. Why? Because the world hated him first. The world raged against them, because the world raged against him!

So they have a proper theological reading of what's happened to them. Of course the powers-that-be in Jerusalem oppose them! Jesus prophesied that.⁸ And even David prophesied it a thousand years before Jesus!

³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 202: "This is the second example of corporate prayer in Acts; the first was the appeal for aid in selecting a twelfth apostolic member in 1:24–25."

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, "Declaring the Works of the Lord," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 43 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1897), 507.

⁵ See also Acts 1:16; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:21.

⁶ Technically there is no Davidic ascription in Psalm 2 like we see in other psalms (דָּוִד "of David"). But Acts 4:24 would suggest that the unattributed psalms of the Psalter are in fact Davidic. 73 psalms are directly attributed to David. Approximately 27 are attributed to others (e.g. Solomon, Moses, Asaph, Ethan). And approximately 50 are unattributed. If the unattributed psalms are added to David's total, then that makes 123 or more than 80% of the total. So it's possible that the Apostles are attributing Psalm 2 to David, because David (maybe along with his cohort?) is assumed to have written most of the book. See the following video/article on the authorship of the Psalms by Jeffrey Kranz, 10-12-18: <https://overviewbible.com/who-wrote-psalms-besides-david/>

⁷ For more on Psalm 2, see my message "Kiss the Son," 07-01-22: <https://www.vbvf.org/a-new-look-at-the-old-testament#gsc.tab=0>

⁸ In John 15:18–20, Jesus said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

Look at **verse 27**. Here's their continued prayer.

²⁷ for truly in this city [Jerusalem] 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.

Wow, that is an amazing prayer right there! **When was the last time you prayed a prayer this rich in theology?** Probably Luke summarizes here a much longer and more involved period of prayer.⁹ But nevertheless this is some deep stuff that they are contemplating before God.¹⁰

There are three theological reflections in this passage that are worthy of comment. 1) Notice how completely Christ-centered the early church is with their prayer. They don't interpret their own experiences in light of what God has prophesied concerning *them*. They don't interpret their experiences in light of what Jesus warned *them* about. They get threatened by the religious leaders, and they respond to that by saying, **"What an injustice they performed against Christ."** They interpret persecution towards themselves as ultimately persecution directed towards Christ. **When was the last time you went through a trial and said to yourself, "Boy, Satan really hates Christ... I don't know why he opposes him?" I'm not in the habit of doing that. But maybe in light of Acts 4, I should be.**

2) Notice too that the plotting and conspiring of evil men... Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Jewish leaders... all the collective Jews and Gentiles that put Jesus to death... the plotting and conspiring of evil men are never outside the auspices of a sovereign, Almighty God.¹¹ Evil people conspired to kill an innocent man. They killed the Author of Life. And yet even in that, God's sovereign, predetermined plan doesn't falter. **Satan may have won the battle, but he's already lost the war. "Satan [may be] on the loose, but he is on a leash."**¹²

Luke writes, "They gather together against your holy servant Jesus... to do exactly what your hand had predestined to take place." But that doesn't absolve these evildoers of their sin. It doesn't make God culpable for evil. It doesn't mean that God is the author of evil. And it doesn't mean that the execution of Jesus is deemed a righteous act.

But however you slice it, however you put these theological pieces together, you have a sovereign God who allowed this great evil to be perpetrated against his Son, so that he could bring about the great work of redemption that we needed. God did that! God sovereignly ordained this to happen!

Ajith Fernando says in his commentary on this passage, **"When we gaze at our Sovereign God, we need only glance at our problems."**¹³ **I think some of us are tempted to gaze at our problems, and only glance at our sovereign God. But shouldn't it be vice-versa? It was for the early church.**

And here's the great thing we can take away from this in terms of application. No suffering that we endure, no trial that we experience, no hardship that we have to go through in this world, is outside the realm of God's sovereignty. Our suffering is never wasted. It's never unused for God's greater purposes. I don't know about you, but that gives me hope.

3) Thirdly, here's another thing to notice from this statement. Notice that one of the peoples who are raging against God is identified as Israel. Do you see that in **verse 27**? It says, "For truly in this city [Jerusalem] there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius

Remember the word that I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours."

⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 203–4: "They speak as one voice (φωνήν, *phonēn*; note the singular noun) in prayer and approach God for God's enablement to perform their task. One person probably prays here with the whole community p 204 sharing in the spirit and nature of the request."

¹⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 202: "How do the members of community react to persecution and the report of the leadership's charge not to preach Christ[?]. They do two things (vv. 24–30). First, they pray, neither for judgment on those who are persecuting them nor to avoid persecution but for their own strength and enablement in the midst of persecution. Second, they pray to be able to preach the message boldly, not to cower in fear of the social and political power the leaders possess but to be faithful to God, who is the true Sovereign, following Jesus's instruction in Luke 12:4–7."

¹¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 204: "In a situation that includes a power play by the leadership against the community, the prayer begins with an assertion of God's absolute sovereignty."

¹² Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 169.

¹³ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 169.

Pilate.” Those two heathen Gentile rulers aren’t surprising (technically Herod was half Jewish).¹⁴ Also the statement “along with the Gentiles”... that’s to be expected. But it’s the other statement, “and the peoples of Israel,” that is surprising.¹⁵ Do you see that?¹⁶

This is something that David probably didn’t have a full understanding of when he wrote **Psalm 2**. One of the nations that will eventually rage against the Messiah, one of the peoples that conspire against God, was in fact, Israel. And the early church recognized that they weren’t an ethnic or geographic entity anymore. The church was a religious entity. Even Israel was raging against Messiah and Messiah’s church.

Look at **verse 29**. Let’s follow their prayer and see where else it leads.

²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats

Believe it or not there are only two requests in this prayer. **When we pray, as Americans, we begin and end with requests. Sometimes that’s all we do is make requests.** But for these believers, they spend time at first acknowledging God’s sovereignty and reflecting theologically on what God had shown them in the Scriptures.

But now in **verse 29**, they make a request, **“Look upon their threats, God.”** Aha! What are they going to say now? **“Strike them down with your righteous indignation, Lord.”** Is that what they pray? **“Look upon their threats God and destroy them. And while you are at it, Lord, protect us so that we aren’t in any danger!”** Is that what they pray?¹⁷ **That’s probably what I would pray if I was in this situation.**

But here’s what they pray instead. Look at **verse 29**.

²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants¹⁸ to continue to speak your word with all boldness

Boldness? Really? That’s what they pray for? Look at **verse 30**.

³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”¹⁹

Forget security. Forget comfort. Forget a safe, happy, cushy life where miracles don’t happen and where people aren’t confronted with the truth. They don’t pray for that. What do they pray for? **“Do more miracles through us, Lord. Give us more opportunities to speak with boldness. We got a taste of just how awesome it is to do great things in the name of Jesus, and we want more of that.”** What a prayer!²⁰

Write this down as #3.

3) Trials **bolster** fervency and potency in prayer (4:29–30)

Maybe I should add the word “should” into that third point. Trials “should” bolster fervency and potency in prayer. They did for the early church. **And they should for us too.**

Now watch what follows. Not only was this a fervent prayer, but this was also an effective prayer. They got on target with God’s will and God’s desire for them, and they experienced an immediate response to their prayer.

¹⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 207: “Only Luke details a role for Herod Antipas in the trial [see Luke 23:6–12].”

¹⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 206: “The point of the citation is that the Gentiles and people are arrayed against God and his Messiah. In an original reading of the psalm, most Jews would argue that these opponents are completely Gentile, reading the lines as simple parallelism. The prayer’s point, however, is that once one sees who the enemy of God’s Messiah is, then one can identify God’s enemies, which here explicitly include both Gentiles and Jews.”

¹⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 205: “Only in Acts is the nation, ironically, taking part in the rejection along with the nations.”

¹⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 209: “The community leaves to God the moral judgment of the opponents and their actions. It does not pray explicitly for opponents to be crushed, nor does it seek to be spared opposition. It asks to face the opposition and suffering faithfully.”

¹⁸ The Greek is δοῦλος “slaves” here not παῖς “servant-son,” used of Jesus in verse 27. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 209: “There is a cultural irony here, as in the Greek context the right to speak freely was the activity of free men, not slaves ... As God’s slaves, the community is free to address God and make requests of him, while submitting to God’s leading.”

¹⁹ For a similar prayer in the OT see Isaiah 37:16–20: “O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷ Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. ¹⁸ Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, ¹⁹ and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. ²⁰ So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.”

²⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 210: “The reliance on God, the resting in God’s justice, the willingness to suffer persecution, the desire to preach Jesus, and the call to God to show himself—all are signs of a healthy community.”

So Luke writes in **verse 31**.

³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled²¹ with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.²²

So let's just summarize what we've seen in **chapter 4** thus far. The disciples get persecuted for preaching the gospel. They are threatened by the authorities to stop preaching in Jesus's name. And then, the first thing they do after that is pray to God that he would help them to disobey that command. **"Hey you, Peter and John. Stop preaching in the name of Jesus."** **"Yeah, whatever! 'Lord, please help us to disobey what they just commanded us to do.'"**

Now remember what I said last week. This isn't just reckless civil disobedience. The instruction that these religious leaders gave them directly conflicts with what Jesus told them to do. Who should they obey? God or man? The Sanhedrin who rules the nation? Or God who rules the world? Jesus told them, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (**Matt 10:28**).

And so, they pray for courage and boldness to preach the gospel despite the opposition they face. And the Holy Spirit shows up powerfully and fills them up. And God rocks their world, *literally*.

Write this down as #4 in your notes.

4) Trials **embolden** faithful disciples (4:31)

Listen, whenever you get opposed by others for your faith in Christ... that shouldn't be a deterrent. That should be a stimulant. Whenever we go through trials, that should embolden us to press through that in Christ. Convert the energy that comes from anxiety and crisis into energy for prayer.

So when you get hit with a problem, or when you get smacked down by a crisis or a trial... when the adrenaline starts to flow in your system, don't waste that energy on worrying about the situation. Get some brothers or get some sisters together and cry out to God like you've never done before.

And do this too. Affirm God's sovereignty in that moment. Quote Scripture. Pray. I used to look at anxiety as a bad thing. I used to resent it when it would well up in my soul. But now I look on it as an opportunity. It's a trigger that reminds me that I'm not in control, that I need God, that I'm weak, and that I need to call out to him. "Do not be anxious about anything" **the Bible says**, "but in everything with thanksgiving present your requests to God and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (**Phil 4:6-7**).

Listen, when you are going through a trial in your life, pray for courage. Pray for boldness. If God allows a trial in your life, that means he loves you and he wants you to grow. So thank him for that.

And by the way, don't pray for your personal comforts to be re-established. Here's an area that I want to grow in. Don't pray for a little, safe, secure, cushy, unchallenged life. Where's the adventure in that? Where's the opportunity for spiritual growth and boldness and courageously standing up for Jesus in the midst of a trial? Don't just pray for the trial to be removed! Pray that God would do something awesome through you in the midst of the trial.

Here's a fifth answer to that question, "Why does God allow trials in the lives of believers?" Write this down.

5) Trials **generate** displays of generosity in community (4:32-37)

Look at verse 32.

³² Now the full number of those who believed

Who believed what? What did they believe in? Did they believe in themselves? No! They believed in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. They believed in his death and resurrection! And their faith acted as a kind of glue that bonded their hearts together.

³² Now the full number of those who believed [in Jesus] were of one heart and soul,

²¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 210: "The filling with the Spirit means the enablement to proclaim the word that follows. This is a separate act from the indwelling that appeared in Acts 2. It is specific to the request for boldness, not a 'second blessing' or 'second Pentecost.'"

²² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 211: "The word is both preached and lived, but most important, the people of God are enabled for the task God calls them to undertake. The best way to face opposition is through what God provides."

There's that togetherness again. They were of "one heart and soul." That's a great way to describe unity and togetherness.

By the way, the Greek word for "full number" is πληθος. And it can mean "quantity" or "multitude."²³ The ESV translates it "full number." The idea here is that there are too many to count at this point. First there were 120, then there were 3,000 at Pentecost, then 5,000 men were added, and then... there's just the "full number." The church is too big to count now. It's growing too fast to count.

And in fact we don't have any more numbers in the book of **Acts** on the size of the church. Probably because it became too big to count.²⁴ Look at the back end of **verse 32**.

*and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.*²⁵

So they were unified. They were knit together "heart and soul." And one of the products of that solidarity was generosity.

And this was not forced generosity. This was not fake generosity. This was not compulsory generosity. This was not manufactured or manipulated generosity. Generosity emerges naturally from a group of people that love each other and are committed to one another. Generosity flows from a church that is unified, heart and soul.

By the way, the word for "in common" in **verse 32** is κοινός. The early church had everything κοινός, that is "in common." κοινός is etymologically linked to κοινωνία. Do you remember that word for fellowship, κοινωνία? **Acts 2:42** said, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the **fellowship** [κοινωνία], to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

So their "fellowship" led to generous sharing. **It wasn't just hanging out together and drinking coffee.** Their fellowship was mutuality of soul. And part of that was mutuality of possessions. It was the sharing of financial burdens, and the alleviation of financial hardships for those in our community. **And generosity flows naturally from a church that is unified and experiences true Biblical fellowship. This is a Holy Spirit thing! This is something God does! God brings the unity and God brings the generosity.**

Now the opposite of that can happen too. If you are part of a church that is divisive... if you go to a church full of backbiting and grudges and unforgiveness... if you go to a church that lacks oneness of heart and soul and lacks a genuine love for one another, you are very rarely going to find generosity. You might find compulsory giving. You might find mandated tithes and offerings. But you won't find generosity. I don't care how red-faced the pastor gets when he pounds the pulpit and preaches generosity.

Likewise if you don't have a church that is sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and is quick to repent when convicted and quick to forgive when asked, you won't have unity or generosity. Because it's a God-thing! God has to counter our natural proclivities for selfishness and independence and isolation.

By the way Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Do we really believe that? Do we live our lives like that is true? Jesus modeled that for us. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). **Our God is a generous God, and we should be too.**

Look at **verse 33**.

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.*

So the early church was generous with their possessions. But they were also generous with their testimony about Jesus.²⁶ They weren't holding that back. With great power they were testifying to Jesus's

²³ BDAG, s.v. πληθος 2 (pg. 825).

²⁴ But another way that this word could be translated is "community" or "congregation." The NASB translates this word "congregation." Probably both ideas are intimated here. The "large congregation," "the multitude of people in community" This large community of those who believed were of one heart and soul... here's where the generosity kicks in.

²⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 214: "The expression may be a bit hyperbolic, an example of litotes common in Luke, as Acts 5:4 says that money collected from a sale is at the disposal of Ananias and Sapphira."

²⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 218: "Community life means both mission and mutual care. These occur because people care about one another and the cause they share."

resurrection. And as they did that, God **rained down grace** upon them. God gave them... here's another way to translate this word "grace"... "favor." Great "favor" was upon them.²⁷

This might seem like a digression from the topic of generosity, but it's not. They were generous with possessions and they were generous with the proclamation of the gospel.

Look at **verse 34**.

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.*²⁸

Notice, the church took care of its own. The church got busy doing Christ's mission. And as they did that a rich generosity welled up among them so that there was no needy person among them.

Now we've seen evidence of this generosity already in **chapter 2**. **Acts 2:44–45** says, "And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need."

But there's a new twist here in **Acts 4**. The proceeds of what was sold wasn't going directly to those who had a need. There was a process that was established. And that process involved bringing these proceeds to the apostles who with wisdom would distribute to each who had a need. This is the first time that we see in the Bible a pooling of resources for the benefit of church life. The people trust their leaders with finances to steward for kingdom purposes. The church was generous, and they entrusted their generous giving to their leaders.

Let me just say a few things about this generosity in the early church before we continue. **1) First of all, Generosity doesn't mean the elimination of private property.** We talked about this already in **Acts 2**, but it bears repeating. **Were the apostles communists? Did they abolish private property? Or did the early church all live together in the same house like a bunch of hippies? Did the early church have a monastery where all the Christians renounced their worldly wealth and became monks? Let me answer all those questions with a resounding "NO!"**

Not only do we have evidence of Christians owning houses in the book of **Acts** and in the early church, we have evidence grammatically in this passage this wasn't a once-for-all-time renunciation of all private property. The grammar here indicates that the early church sold property periodically as needs came up.²⁹ Their attitude was like this, **"Hey this belongs to God. We hold these things in common. If someone has a need, and I can meet it, I'll meet it."** But their practice was as needs came up or as they were prompted by the Spirit. They didn't liquidate all their property at once and give it all to the apostles.

2) Generosity emphasizes "needs" over "wants." Notice in **verse 34** that the Bible says there wasn't a "needy" person in their fellowship. And in **verse 35** it says, "as any had need." These are strong terms. The first word indicates a state of impoverishment. **So this wasn't a family that wanted Christmas presents for their kids. This wasn't a group of people who wanted to climb the ladder of prosperity.** These were people that couldn't feed their families. These were people that were penniless or jobless or homeless.

I read a commentary this week that estimated that 10% of Israel at this time made up the "middle class" and roughly 5% made up the upper-class. So the majority of the people in the church were, by our standards "poor" or "lower-class."³⁰ And if the church spent its resources on "wants" instead of "needs" it would go broke in a hurry.

Actually there was a problem that emerged in time as the apostles were so busy distributing aid to widows and orphans that they had to delegate that task to others. This is where the office of deacon originates. We'll see that in **Acts 6**.

3) Generosity should never be used to enable ungodliness or idleness. Benevolence should never be used to enable bad habits. See **1 Timothy 5** for more on that. **Sometimes benevolence hurts instead of helps.**

²⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 214: "The context, which highlights what God is doing, favors a reference here to grace from God, not favor from the people as in 2:47."

²⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 214: "The type of mutual care and concern it foresees is commended as exemplary and runs through the NT (2:45; 11:27–30; 24:17; Rom. 15:26; Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 9:11–12)."

²⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 215: "The imperfect verb ἔφερον (*epheron*, were bringing) and present participle (πωλοῦντες, *pōlountes*, selling) in combination suggest a gradual liquidation of assets, not selling everything all at once."

³⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 215: "Some members own houses and land, part of a very small middle class in this first-century culture, about 10 percent of the population. The upper class was even smaller, constituting 4 to 7 percent."

So we should never use Acts 4 or other passages in the NT indiscriminately to finance bad habits among church goers.

4) Generosity should be both planned and spontaneous. In the OT, God set up regulations for planned tithes and offerings that supported the Levitical Priesthood and the temple. And it's clear in Paul's letters that the practice of giving continued in the NT. But there are also examples of spontaneous giving above and beyond what was regular, to meet needs when they occur. If some of the believers in Jerusalem were from Galilee, then this need would have been especially acute within the early church.³¹ You had people far from home who were in need in the local church. And the church mobilized assets to help them.

5) Generosity means valuing people over possessions. "These actions do not reflect an ascetic ideal, as in some Greek and Jewish sect, but instead the practice of radically valuing people over possessions. Such behavior reportedly continued among Christians well into the second century, and it was long ridiculed by pagans..."³² **Here's a great reminder about worldly possessions: "You can't take anything with you! It's all going to burn!" You can take "heavenly treasures" with you. Jesus makes that crystal clear. But you can't take your "earthly stuff" with you. And the early church lived their lives like they actually believed what Jesus said about that.**

And speaking of valuing people over possessions, let's go back to the text. Look at **verse 36**. Luke's going to provide an example of someone who does this. Luke's readers might have said, "**Yeah, right! Who really sells their own property and give the proceeds to the church? Nobody does that!**" Not true! Luke gives us a concrete example of this kind of generosity. And it was someone who was pretty well-known in the early church.

³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement),

That's a great nickname, by the way. Wouldn't you love to have that as a nickname—"son of encouragement"? Probably they had too many Josephs in the church, and so this nickname was practical if nothing else. But the fact that they chose this nickname is telling. They didn't call him "son of gluttony" or "son of rage" or anything like that. He was the "son of encouragement."

The Greek word for "encouragement" (παράκλησις [paraklēsis]) means the "**act of emboldening another in belief or course of action, encouragement, exhortation.**"³³ But this word suggests a teaching or speaking role. So Barnabas wasn't just some guy going around whispering encouragement to other people or passing notes of encouragement to people. He was publicly speaking and teaching through exhortation.

Later on Barnabas becomes a prominent member of the early church. He recruited Paul when others were leery of him. He went on Paul's first missionary journey that spread the gospel to the Gentiles. He's mentioned 23 times in the book of **Acts**. So Luke's readers must have recognized him as an important person.

And Luke says about him, he's one of the people who sold property and brought the proceeds to the church.

³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,³⁴

³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.³⁵

Now why did Luke mention Barnabas by name here? I think for a few reasons. **1)** First of all he is setting up this character who is so important later in the book. Luke says he's from Cyprus, and interestingly

³¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 213.

³² Keener, *IVPBBCNT*, Ac 2:43.

³³ BDAG s.v. παράκλησις 1 (pg. 766).

³⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 216: "The Jews settled the island of Cyprus during the Ptolemaic period (after 330 BC) but were expelled in AD 117 after rebelling. Barnabas most likely was born there or his family came from there. His religious roots are indicated by the fact that he is a Levite, one of only three references to a Levite in the NT (Luke 10:31–32; John 1:19; Acts 4:36–37). Levites were often wealthy and very well educated, but not all were priests. Generally, Levites were not to own land (Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9). Exceptions, however, existed in the OT, and life for Levites was different by the first century (Jer. 1:1; 32:7–9; Josephus, *Life* 13–15 §§68–83; 76 §§422–30; Bruce 1990: 160). Levites served in the temple, keeping watch over the gates, policing the area, instructing, and copying the Torah (Le Cornu and Shulam 2003: 258)."

³⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 273: "While Levites were not allowed to own land in Israel in Old Testament times (Num 18:20; Deut 10:9; Josh 21:1–41), this had changed by the first century. Barnabas 'owned' (ὀπάρχοντος, genitive absolute) 'a piece of land' (ἀγρός), perhaps on Cyprus, perhaps in the vicinity of Jerusalem."

Paul and Barnabas begin their first missionary journey in Cyprus. That's not an accident. So he's a strategic person for the early church.³⁶

2) Secondly, Luke wants us to imitate Barnabas's godly character. Luke is showing us, even us in the church 2,000 years later, the goodness and the godliness of generosity. It blesses the church. It strengthens the church.

3) Thirdly, Luke mentions Barnabas as a positive example of generosity, honesty, and character right before he gives us an example of dishonesty and lack of character in **Acts 5**.³⁷ You see the early church wasn't perfect. There were godly people and ungodly people. Just like in the church now! **The godly people, like Barnabas, were recorded for our emulation. The ungodly people, like Ananias and Sapphira, were recorded as a warning to us.**

To that you might say, "Ana-who?" and "Sapphire-what?" Who are those people? What's that all about? **Come back next week and I'll tell you.**

But let me close with this. The five points of our message were as follows:

- 1) Trials **facilitate** unity and togetherness
- 2) Trials **stimulate** theological reflection
- 3) Trials **bolster** fervency and potency in prayer
- 4) Trials **embolden** faithful disciples
- 5) Trials **generate** displays of generosity in community

But let me drill down a little bit more on that last point about generosity. Because you might say, "Yeah, Tony, that's great for the early church, but nobody does that today. Nobody sells their property and gives the proceeds to the church. Nobody's that generous in this day and age. That's just idealism recorded in the Bible."

I read an article at Forbes.com not that long ago about a man named David Green. Anybody ever heard that name before? Green is an evangelical businessman and philanthropist who owns the \$3 billion arts and crafts chain, Hobby Lobby. "Hobby Lobby takes half of total pretax earnings and plunges it directly into a portfolio of evangelical ministries." "Forbes estimates [Green's] lifetime giving at upwards of \$500 million."³⁸ His giving to both church and para-church institutions have helped advance the cause of Christ around the World. "Ministries approach him constantly with proposals for their new church or Christian community center" and "He won't help them unless they pass a doctrinal vetting process, which includes questions about the Virgin Birth."³⁹

In the Forbes interview, Green says, I don't care if you're in business or out of business, God owns it....You can't have a belief system on Sunday and not live it the other six days."⁴⁰

I've shared with you previously about R.G. LeTourneau, the inventor/philanthropist who started LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas. "[LeTourneau's earthmoving equipment] represented nearly 70% percent of the earthmoving equipment and Engineering vehicles used during World War II, and he was responsible for nearly 300 patents."⁴¹ He was referred to by his colleagues as "The Dean of Earthmoving." How's that for a nickname?

But LeTourneau was also known as "God's Businessman" because he committed 90% of his vast wealth to the cause of Christ. Not 10%. But 90%. He figured he could live off 10% and give the rest to

³⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 216: "Part of the function of the unit is to introduce him to Luke's audience. He surely is one of Luke's heroes."

³⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 218: "In Acts he cares for the poor, gives of his resources, welcomes Paul when others are skeptical, encourages him in ministering alongside him, leads a mission in a way that takes the initiative of engagement, and testifies about the work of God to those outside and within the community."

³⁸ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/briansolomon/2012/09/18/david-green-the-biblical-billionaire-backing-the-evangelical-movement/>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. For a more recent interview with David Green, see the following video with Kirk Cameron:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL3vuTQyKP4>

⁴¹ Taken from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LeTourneau>

God. On his gravestone in Longview, you can read the inscription from Matthew 6:33, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His Righteousness. And all these things shall be added unto you.”

Now not all of us are David Greens or R.G. LeTourneaus. Maybe someone in this room will be someday? But it’s not about how much we have and how much we’ve given. It’s about this—have we been generous with the things that God has given us? 2 Corinthians 9:6–7 says, “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Ask yourself this question in light of 2 Corinthians 9 and Acts 4. Has your giving been generous? Has it been cheerful? Has it been bountiful? Has it been sacrificial? That’s the standard that God uses. Lord, help us to be generous. Pray with me.