



## ROAD BLOCKS AHEAD

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Sometimes good things have unanticipated consequences.

How many of you have HD TV? The new technology brings absolutely stunning clarity to television. That sounds like a good thing, right? Who wouldn't be excited about that news?

Well, as it turns out, aging actresses and actors, that's who. Apparently, high definition cameras are a little too unforgiving. Every large pore looks like a crater. Every wrinkle shows up like the Grand Canyon. One cinematographer has said, "For middle aged women, it should be outlawed." Hollywood make-up artists are learning a new technique where they spray on the makeup, because otherwise it looks way too heavy and exaggerates every flaw.

Like I said, sometimes good things have negative consequences you weren't expecting. Last week, Peter and John performed this spectacular miracle, healing a crippled man's legs so he could walk for the first time in his life. He was so happy about it he was jumping all over the place. Who wouldn't be excited about something like that?

Well, as it turns out, the people who were working at the Temple, that's who. They were bothered by this miracle, and it became the start of hard times for the church. Nobody could have anticipated the strong backlash that developed from such a wonderful act of God.

Last Sunday, we left Peter explaining to the crowd how it had been the power of the name of Jesus that healed the man. No sooner had he finished talking than things began to take a downward turn.

### **Acts 4:1-31**

*The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.*

*The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"*

*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is*

*"the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.'*

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

*When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name."*

*Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."*

*After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.*

### **The Reality of Roadblocks**

What a difference a day makes. One afternoon you're just headed to church to worship, and the next thing you know you're thrown in jail overnight and put on trial.

We could also say what a difference a chapter makes. At the end of Acts 2, the disciples were experiencing a little heaven on earth – God's presence, everybody getting along, miracles, popularity. Now, on the far side of chapter 3, they're deep in a crisis and conflict with the authorities.

I'm so glad Acts doesn't try to make it look like chapter 2 is where the church lived all the time. Even though they kept doing all the good things they were doing in chapter 2,

the results were not constant bliss. Even when they were obeying God, things didn't always go their way.

I want to talk about road blocks this morning. They go with the territory when you're a Christian. I'm sure that's just what you were hoping to hear this morning, but that's the way it is. One of the most difficult misconceptions to overcome in Christianity is this:

**“If I'm doing what God wants me to, life will go smoothly.”**

I'm living for God, so I expect that he's going to bless me in return. We might not say that out loud, but that's how our minds tend to process things. We want a little reward for our effort. Surely there has to be some payoff for all the work it takes to follow the Lord. So we convince ourselves that if we just work hard enough at it, or if we just believe a little more, God is going to shower down the blessings on us. Because we deserve it.

We also believe the corresponding misconception, which is this:

**“If life isn't going smoothly, I must be doing something wrong.”**

We assume that the bumps in the road are some form of punishment from God. He's paying us back for our mistakes. People in the middle of a tough situation have come to me and said, “What am I doing wrong?” But that's more like karma than God's grace. That puts the emphasis on us, our power, our influence. Hear this: God is not in the business of pay back. Jesus took all our punishment on himself when he went to the cross. Our sins have already been taken care of.

### **Psalm 103:10**

*He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.*

Actions will always have natural consequences, but God does not send hardship our way to get even with us for disobeying. He doesn't treat us the way our sins deserve. Still, those ideas are deeply ingrained in us. It's human nature to think that way. We have a built in need for fairness and justice, and those beliefs seem logical on the surface. But real life just doesn't operate by logic. We don't take into account just how much destruction sin has introduced to the universe and how broken the system is.

God never made any kind of promise that life would be pain free for the people following him. In fact, he sometimes said just the opposite.

### **John 16:33**

*In this world you will have trouble.*

### **1 Peter 4:12**

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.*

### **1 John 3:13**

*So don't be surprised, friends, when the world hates you. This has been going on a long time.*

That's what Peter and John discovered after this miracle. Trouble. Suffering. Being hated. Here they do this incredibly good thing and it ends up putting them into a major conflict.

Something very unexpected seems to be true: For us as Christians, sometimes bad things happen BECAUSE of the good things going on in our life. The more growth that takes place in your life, the more effect you're having on the world for God, the greater the chance you will encounter some type of resistance to it. It's not a sign that you're doing the wrong thing – just the opposite. It's a sign that you're doing the right thing.

You have some incredible breakthrough in your life, only to have a blow up with your spouse. Or you're seeing God answer all kinds of prayers, when all of a sudden an unexpected crisis comes along that puts a big question mark over whether or not God is listening. Why is that?

For Peter and John, the resistance had faces and names. It was actual people. Sometimes it is for us as well, but other times it takes on all kinds of different forms.

The life of John Calvin is a great example of this. Alongside Martin Luther, he was one of the most influential minds behind the Protestant Reformation. He was a huge force for God in shaping the church. But his entire ministry was marked by resistance. He was a gifted preacher whose views were seen as heretical in France so he left the country. He was invited to come to Geneva to help reform the city with another preacher. He felt God had called him to do that. But within 3 years, both preachers were run out of town because of theological conflicts.

Calvin moved to Strasbourg, and things were going well in the church there, but he had serious money problems. He couldn't pay his mortgage. So he rented out rooms to try and make ends meet, but even that wasn't enough, so he was under major financial pressure. Plus, he had hired a housekeeper who screamed all day at the tenants who had moved in to help pay the rent. This is all while he is trying to write his book, Institutes, which was to become his major contribution to Christianity, and the whole time he wrote, he was suffering from severe headaches and stomach problems. It's been said that he never had a day in his life when he didn't have a headache.

Having been a bachelor until he was in his 30s, Calvin decided he needed a wife to help him in his work. Eventually he found one who seems a perfect match. He called her, "the best companion of my life." She was a sharp woman who wholly supported his cause. They seemed like a good team. Then they had three children die in infancy. And then she got sick and died after only 9 years of marriage. He wrote to a friend a week later and said "Truly mine is no ordinary grief."

Here's a man who devoted his life to God yet who faced every kind of resistance imaginable: People trouble, financial trouble, discouragement, medical problems and emotional grief. His life is like a textbook of all the kinds of opposition we can face in our walk with Christ. Yet at the end of the day, he was able to write these words:

*Seeing that a Pilot steers the ship in which we sail, who will never allow us to perish even in the midst of shipwrecks, there is no reason why our minds should be overwhelmed with fear and overcome with weariness.*

All kinds of circumstances can interfere with our attempts to serve Christ. This is a real pick-me-upper sermon, isn't it? Life's unfair, being a Christian is hard, bad things happen to good people...it's enough to make anyone depressed. But the point is not to bring us down – in fact it's the opposite. The more we know what to expect, the better prepared we'll be to deal with what the roadblocks and move past them.

### **The Reasons for Roadblocks**

Before we move past them, though, we need to know why they're happening in the first place and how to recognize them. Let's go back to Peter and John. In their case, they healed the man, then explained how the healing occurred. It was right at that moment the priests held up their hands and said, "Wait a minute! Stop! We can't go there!"

*They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.*

This is what I call **Christ opens a closed system**. Do you remember the dunking bird from high school chemistry experiments? They have some special liquid inside that evaporates and condenses with just slight temperature changes. So when the bird tips into the water, it cools the liquid, which condenses then runs down to the bottom of the bird tipping it back up. Then the liquid starts to evaporate until the head is once again heavier and it tips itself into the water. This happens over and over, because the inside of the bird is a closed system. Nothing is getting in from the outside. But as soon as some student decides to poke a hole in the bird's head, it won't work anymore.

The priests and Sadducees had a closed system working. They had power and control. Jesus comes in from the outside and heals this man, and everything changes. Power bases are threatened. Christ has entered the system and introduced something new .

Anytime Christ does something in someone's life, it is interfering with the status quo power structures, because he comes in with power.

We can expect roadblocks in our faith because Christ is powerful and he threatens other powers in our life. We may not think about there being spiritual forces at work in our hearts and minds, but make no mistake: There is a war going on for your soul and mine.

## **Ephesian 6:12**

*This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.*

Other translations of that verse say our struggle is against the powers of this dark age. And as they say, you mess with the bull, you're going to get the horns. The more evidence of Christ's work in our lives, the more we will need to be on guard for a fight, because he is messing with a closed system where other players don't want to lose.

I don't mean to go looking for a demon behind every snuffle or argument. Everyone has those whether you're a Christian or something else. Hardship makes no distinction. However, I do believe Satan can use all the different difficulties we experience to trip us up and get us off track spiritually, regardless of the cause. He can use an illness to make you question God's love. He can use a money problem to make you doubt God can provide. He can take a tough relationship and convince you to give up on it. The devil wants to see us fail. If God is real, then evil spiritual forces are also real and have to be acknowledged. There is something bigger going on than just us.

Another way to think about why we hit these roadblocks is because **following Christ means traveling his path**. The reason we can expect to be opposed in what we're doing is quite simply because that's what he experienced. Jesus did God's will perfectly and still suffered the ultimate injustice. To follow Christ means to follow him to the cross. There is no other way to do it.

The comforting piece in that is that Jesus didn't stay on the cross. He moved through it and on to resurrection. The writer of Hebrews says it was for the joy set before him that he endured the cross. There was something beyond the pain that was far better, and that's true for us as well.

## **Romans 8:17**

*We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!*

This is the logic that ultimately DOES make sense of life. We don't get the good we deserve and we aren't punished for the bad we deserve. When we've grabbed the hand of Christ, we hold on to it through what he experienced – pain, injustice, grief...and ultimately resurrection, hope and joy. ***It is our association with him that both explains the trouble we have and enables us to get through it.***

When we view roadblocks as part of what it means to participate in the life of Christ, when we see our hardships as settings for identifying more fully with Jesus and his hardship, then it transforms the situation from something annoying or horrible into something meaningful. Even though it is still painful, we can find significance in how we respond to it.

Take a look at how Peter and John responded to their roadblock.

*On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:*

*"Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together  
against the Lord  
and against his Anointed One."*

*Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*

*After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

### **The Response to Roadblocks**

The disciples had a number of options open to them as far as how to react to the priests. They could have been openly defiant and angry and headed right back to the Temple courts to teach to show they weren't afraid. Or they could have given into fear and run away to hide. Instead they did neither. The path they did choose is one we can follow as well.

First, they **learned to lean**. Luke tells us that as soon as Peter and John were released, they "went back to their own people." The word that is used there is one that would normally refer to your own family or clan, but here it is being used of the church. This was their support system. They reported to them everything that happened to them, and then joined together to pray.

It's never easy to ask for help when you're going through it. We don't want to be a burden to anybody else. We don't want to have people think less of us because we need help. So we often choose to face our battles alone, thinking we're stronger than we are.

Listen, we all need each other. We need each other for support. We need each other to help figure out what to do. We need each other as reminders of who we are and what's at stake and that God is aware. One of the prayers of the church was that God would

consider the threats made against Peter and John. They pressed the need up to God's face, and in doing that, reminded Peter and John that God knew what was going on.

It is the duty of the church to come alongside brothers and sisters in times of crisis – whether it is a faith crisis, a physical crisis, a mental crisis or a financial crisis. If you're struggling today, I would encourage and even challenge you to make your first step be to reach out to your own and learn to lean on the body of Christ for support. Where else are you going to see the tangible love of God demonstrated? If you're wanting him to speak to you, first listen to the voices of people who love God that he has put around you.

As the church surrounded Peter and John with prayer, they immediately **found confidence in God's control.**

*“Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.”*

The church used a rather unusual word for sovereign in this prayer. It emphasizes absolute authority. This is someone who has total control.

It's no accident that they chose to zero in on that aspect of God's character. When you really stop to analyze what the priests did with Peter and John, it was an attempt to make them think that they were the ones in control. There was no real substance to the threats – it was just posturing. Everything was about intimidation and scare tactics to convince these men they didn't have the freedom to keep preaching Jesus.

Think about an actual physical roadblock. When Karin went with her family to Cameroon, the military had set up all these roadblock checkpoints, and the only purpose of them was to keep people feeling intimidated and scared and to get bribes. The missionaries had made a commitment that they wouldn't give bribes, which put them in a vulnerable position

Normally, the guards waved the missionaries right through, but one night they stopped them. Karin was in the back seat. The soldiers were drunk and started trying to grab at Karin through the window. They told the driver, “You go on through but leave her behind to be married.” Fortunately, they were so drunk they didn't put up a fight when the driver refused. But there was this moment of tension when nobody knew what they would be allowed to do.

That's a road block. And that's how we recognize spiritual roadblocks as well. They try to make us think that they are the most powerful influence in our lives and we better not cross them. I once heard someone say the “real issue” is never the real issue. The real issue is always control. Who or what are we going to give control of our lives to? Are you going to give away your thoughts, energy and attention to roadblocks or do you decide to go to Jesus?

Is God bigger than your roadblock? Is he bigger than your fears and limitations? He is the Sovereign Lord. The early church turned to Scripture in their prayer and saw in the Bible that God was in control even when the rulers and people raged against Jesus, so they applied that to their situation as well. They said, “Lord, you had things fully in hand when the whole world rose up against your Son, so surely you’re still in charge in the middle of what we’re going through.”

How does that change how we live our lives? When we’re grounded in God’s sovereignty, when we’re firmly convinced that he’s still on the throne, we will have the freedom to stand up to whatever would normally intimidate us.

That’s exactly what happened for Peter and John. What’s maybe the most startling about their response is what they prayed for next.

*Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.*

If it had been me, I would have said, “Oh Lord, change their hearts. Make them like us.” Or maybe, “Lord, strike them down. Remove this barrier to your work. Don’t let them get away with this.”

They didn’t even go there. Instead they **resisted the resistance**. The priests wanted to shut them up, so they asked for God to make them loud. The priests wanted to contain the spread of the gospel, so they prayed that God would do the opposite and help it go out boldly and clearly. They looked at what they were feeling pressure to not do, then asked for the courage to do just the reverse.

Tom Doyle is a missionary in the Middle East who regularly travels into Palestine. There are only about 250 known Christians in Palestine – a country of 1.4 million Muslims. The Christians are severely persecuted, not to mention living in the middle of a war zone. One of their key leaders was just kidnapped and murdered last fall for his beliefs. They face many of the open hostilities the early church had to deal with.

The church in Palestine has become known for their prayer. Tom Doyle says they will pray into all hours of the night. But they’re not just praying for God’s safety or protection or an end to the fighting. He says their number one prayer is for courage to share the gospel.

And that’s exactly what they’re doing. They’re taking food into the refugee camps sent by overseas mission organizations. They’re asking the Muslims there if they can pray for them. When they do, the Muslims are shocked and amazed at the personal way the Christians talk to God, and they have started to seek out the Christians for prayer. God is working to reverse the opposition.

I love the story I think I’ve shared before of the man from England who felt God was calling him to be a missionary in Colombia. He had no training and he was a little later

in life, so no mission agency would take him. He felt strongly enough about it that he sold his family farm in England, bought himself a one way ticket to Colombia and headed out. He spent the next 25 or 30 years on his own, trekking to mountain villages and sharing the gospel. He had always done everything on foot, but as he got into his 70s, he was getting tired, and so he decided he was going to pray for a car. But he didn't feel like that was what God was wanting him to pray. He felt like God was saying, "If you're tired, I'll strengthen your legs." So he prayed for stronger legs. And he never did need to get that car.

That is what it looks like to not let resistance get the better of you. Instead of praying the prayer that would make life easier, it's choosing to pray the prayer that goes further -- the prayer that resists the resistance. Prayers for endurance instead of escape. Prayers for courage instead of what's comfortable. Prayers for strength instead of a stop to the problem. Prayers for strong legs.

We're all up against something. What are you battling today? How would God have you change your prayers as you resist what's resisting you?

Luke tells us that the early church didn't stop there. They also **asked God for the amazing.**

*Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*

*After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

The disciples knew that the best argument was changed lives. What could anyone say if people were being healed and restored to wholeness? So they asked that God would continue to do the big things. And God demonstrated his approval of that request with an earthquake.

Around 400 A.D., John Chrysostom preached on this passage and he said, "The whole place was shaken, and that left them all the more unshaken."

As we come together, as we resist resistance together, as we pray together for God to do big things among us, we won't only see answers to prayer. We will see God at work, making us more and more unshakable.

Many of you are facing big road blocks today, heavy situations that are doing a good job of putting a damper on your faith. We want to practice a little Acts church here this morning. I'm going to open things up here at the end of the service for us to come together, lean on one another and ask big things of God. If you're needing some type of healing this morning, physical, emotional or otherwise, let's ask God together for that. If you're facing a fearful future, bring it to Je

sus with someone else here this morning and find new courage and peace. If you're battling ongoing issues that aren't going away any time soon, you need endurance and strength.

I've asked several people to be ready to pray with you, and I'm going to ask them to come on up front right now. As we sing the closing song, this morning, I want to encourage you to bring whatever your road block is to Jesus. You don't have to fight it alone. Come let God shake things, and leave here more unshaken.