

Acts 4:23-31
The Early Church's Prayer
2018-05-06
Beseech your sovereign God in prayer

They were words that parents don't want to hear. "You need to get your son to a hospital in Portland right away." We were told to not even try to make an appointment because it would take too long, but to show up in the ER in Portland. We had noticed that Joel was short of breath much of the time. At his wrestling practice he couldn't even run from one end of the room to the other without stopping partway to rest. Natalie took him in for an appointment with our family doctor, which then led to a blood draw, and then the phone call when the results came back. Joel's body was dangerously low on red blood cells and hemoglobin. His body wasn't getting the oxygen it needed. We made arrangements with a family in the church for our girls to spend the night, and the three of us drove to OHSU. As our family doctor had predicted, our stay in the emergency department was short, as Joel was promptly admitted once they learned of his condition. We spent the night in a hospital room, were sent home the next day, but made trips to Portland every other week for Joel to receive blood transfusions and undergo testing to try to find out the cause of his condition. Blood draws, biopsies, scans, a hematologist and team of specialists, but no headway was being made. But then, after months of the same, there was a change. His blood work showed a marked improvement. Then it was normal. The hematologist we'd been working with couldn't explain it. She didn't know how, or why, there was suddenly this change in Joel's condition. But we knew, and we let her know that we knew. God had healed him. We were grateful for everything the doctors had done, and the blood transfusions that kept him functioning during this time. But they never performed any treatment, because they didn't know what the cause was. Our church had been praying to the God who knew. Friends and family had been praying. We had people across the nation, even around the world, praying for Joel. God heard every one of those prayers, and in his perfect time he answered. **Beseech your sovereign God in prayer.**

Scripture Passage: Acts 4:23-31

In Acts 4 *the church has a need*. It wasn't a need for physical health, but it was vital to the life of the early church. God had been working so miraculously among them that they had drawn the attention of the Sanhedrin council, and they were being threatened and ordered to stop preaching the name of Jesus. What would they do? A council intending their harm if they continued to preach. *They needed help greater than themselves.* **Beseech your sovereign God in prayer.**

They Return to their Friends (v.23)

1. **v.23** "When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and leaders had said to them." - They didn't go home, fleeing Jerusalem and returning to Galilee. Instead, they stay in Jerusalem and gather with their own, their companions, their friends, their church.

1. Through trials and persecution we see that the Lord was working to knit this group together, to grow them in interdependency, to build unity.

Transition: They return to their friends and then they respond to the threats.

They Respond to the Threats (vv.24-30)

1. **v.24** "And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God..." - Now, as they begin to pray, it says they lifted their voices together to God. Prayer was their reaction to difficulty, to trial, to persecution. **Have you had a difficult day recently? Chances are pretty good it wasn't a bad day like Peter and John (if you spent a night in prison please talk to me after service). But maybe you had a really trying day with children, or encountered some opposition at work, or recently received some bad news. What was your reaction? How did you respond? Peter and John knew that nothing would be more helpful than to gather with their church and pray.**

1. Interestingly and instructively, in the Greek, "voice" is singular, not plural. This further shows the unity of the church. Not to get too far ahead, but look down to the passage Nathan will be preaching from next week; it's the same Scripture we worked to memorize over the last two weeks. It says that all the believers were of one heart and soul. That's the kind of language we typically reserve for love letters to our sweetie. But this is spoken about the entire church. The way to one heart and soul? Praying together with one voice.

2. Let's look at some elements of their prayer that will be helpful in guiding our prayers.

1. Their prayer is focused on God

1. They pray, "Sovereign Lord". This is a stark contrast to the rulers, elders, and scribes who "conferred with one another" (Acts 4:15) when they had a serious matter to decide. The word they use to address the Lord as "Sovereign Lord" carries the meaning of **absolute ownership and unrestrained power**. Along with this he's the Creator of heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them.

1. Prayers acknowledging God as Creator. Nehemiah prays this way. **Nehemiah 9:6** “*You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.*” David prays in **Psalms 124:8** “*Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*” They may have been threatened by a powerful earthly council, but they were commissioned by the Creator. What a privilege we have, that through the work of Jesus we can come before the Sovereign Lord, maker of heaven and earth, and we can pray. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “*Our Father*” (**Matthew 6:9**), which is even more remarkable.
2. Joseph Scriven penned the hymn *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. “*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.*” Prayer is a blessed privilege.

2. Their prayer is informed by Scripture

1. This church draws from **Psalms 2** in their prayer. It is a psalm of a king’s anointing and coronation and the nations fighting against it. It’s ultimately a Messianic psalm, speaking of Jesus, and how he would be rejected by the earthly rulers. Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and Israelites all conspired against Jesus. The raging is like a horse snorting through its nostrils, showing its displeasure. But does the raging and plotting of the nations interfere with God’s plan? Not in the least. In fact, it only served to fulfill the purposes and determined will of God.
 1. **v.28** “*to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*” - Remember, he is the Sovereign Lord, maker of heaven and earth. The church acknowledges that even the most wicked scheme in all of history, the crucifixion of the Son of God, was not beyond God’s reach or outside his plan. Jesus even spoke this to his disciples during the institution of the Lord’s Supper in **Luke 22:21–22** “*But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!*”
 2. The doctrines of sovereignty and predestination should bring comfort to us and give us assurance.
2. Great men of prayer have learned this truth, to make Scripture the basis of their prayers. Matthew Henry wrote about using Scripture to inform and guide prayer. He wrote a short book laying out a method for daily prayer. Adoration, confession, petition, thanksgiving, intercession. Many people use the simplified acrostic ACTS - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. George Muller, well-known for the orphans he cared for in England and the stories of God’s miraculous provision, learned that his mind was more engaged and his prayers were more effective when he first read Scripture and let it lead him into prayer. I believe this is what the psalmist also knew, which led him to write **Psalms 119:147** “*I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your words.*”
3. Have you noticed the chalkboard in the fellowship room? Every two weeks it gets a new Scripture written on it. It’s the same Scripture that is announced every Sunday morning, and the same Scripture listed on the Family Table Talk. The intent is that, as a church, we’d be working together to memorize this. This is something I know we have room for improving upon at Pillar, and it’s so important. Write it down and tape it to your bathroom mirror, or your vehicle’s dashboard. Take a picture of the chalkboard and set it as the lock screen on your phone. Download an app for your phone that will help you with memorization. There are a variety of ways to do this, but the idea is to get Scripture into our minds and hearts so it can guide and inform our prayers and communion with God.

3. Their prayer is specific in its request

1. Their request doesn’t come until the end, after they’ve meditated on their Sovereign Lord and his word. Also, their request is pretty brief in comparison with the rest of this prayer. But what I most want to draw your attention to is their specific request.
2. They pray and ask for boldness. Boldness is courage in the face of opposition, but it also carries the idea of being straightforward. Not trying to invent less offensive ways of preaching, or seeing how the name of Jesus can be left out. They wanted God to grant them boldness, so that they might continue to speak the undiluted truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. “Do not pray for easy lives,” wrote Phillips Brooks. “Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.” They also ask that God would stretch out his hand so that miraculous signs, like the healing of the lame man, would continue. The very thing that led to so much trouble is what they ask would continue.

1. Does this request surprise you? They didn't ask for persecution to stop, or deliverance from trouble. Jesus had taught them not to be surprised at persecution, but to expect it (**John 15:20**). So they drill right in and make a very specific request of God. **Specific prayers lead to specific answers. I believe sometimes we fail to see prayer answered because we aren't specific enough in our requests.**

Transition: The church responds to the threats by turning to God in prayer. And, not surprisingly, they receive God's answer.

They Receive God's Answer (v.31)

1. **v.31a** "*And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken...*" - God was present with them.
2. **v.31b** "*...and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*" -
 1. This is now the third time we've seen a filling of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31**). Peter was present at all three of these, and we have every reason to believe that he was a recipient of this filling at each occasion. **But how do you fill something that's full? We might think of it like a glass, that once it's full it has no more capacity. But we're more dynamic than a cup. Think of a balloon. You give it one good breath of air and it takes shape, filled with air. But, if you put another full breath in, you'd find it would have even more capacity. And then another breath. And if you were to leave that balloon for some time, what would happen? It would begin to deflate, wouldn't it?**
 2. **Just like us. We're dynamic and can grow and increase in capacity. And, we're imperfect and leaky. So we need the filling of the Holy Spirit, and we should continue to seek after being filled with the Holy Spirit. This was Paul's instruction to the Ephesian church. Ephesians 5:18** "*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.*"
 3. What was the purpose of this filling? The heralding of the good news. It wasn't for goosebumps or gold fillings, but for bold proclamation of the gospel. Their specific request for boldness was answered. They continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Conclusion: What a great encouragement we have recorded here for us, that we might have our first reaction be prayer. Trouble or difficulty? Pray to your sovereign God. Great news and cause for rejoicing? Praise God. I know that sermons on prayer can easily become discouraging. Pray more often. Pray more fervently. There probably isn't a believer among us that is content with their prayer life; we are always desiring growth in this area. That's a good thing. But it's my hope and prayer that our examination of this passage this morning has been an encouragement to each of us, to inspire growth in prayer, that we might find ourselves closer in relation to our God, and better equipped as ambassadors for our God.

Family

Table Talk



May 6, 2018

Family Discussion

1. Have you had any problems today? Any difficulty? Any trials? What was, or presently is, your response to that situation?
2. What was the church's response to the difficulty Peter and John had just encountered previously in Acts?
3. How did the church pray in the verses you just read? What did they acknowledge about God (vs 24)? About history (vv 25-26)? About the situation at hand (vv 27-28)? What did they pray for and for what purpose were they asking (vv 29-30)?
4. Do you often pray in this way? Look at the result: What resulted in their prayer (vs 31)? God gave them boldness through the filling of the Holy Spirit, to speak the Word of God, even when the world disapproved. What power God's Spirit offers us through prayer! What faith and trust in God they had! Are you exercising this kind of faith and trust in God when you're in a difficult or opposing situation?
5. From this week's text, Acts 4:23-31, what do you learn from reading the response of Peter and John and the church to the difficulty they encountered? How can you apply what you've learned to the difficulty or trial in your life presently?

GOD'S TRUTH

Beseech your sovereign God in prayer!

Key Verse

"And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness."
Acts 4:29 (ESV)

TABLE READING



Lead your kids into God's Word...

2. Acts 4:23-31
3. Acts 4:23-30; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 124:8
4. Acts 4:31; Psalm 18:1-6, 28-33, 46; Ephesians 3:11-21

Scripture Memory: Acts 4:33

"AND THESE WORDS THAT I COMMAND YOU TODAY SHALL BE ON YOUR HEART. YOU SHALL TEACH THEM DILIGENTLY TO YOUR CHILDREN, AND SHALL TALK OF THEM WHEN YOU SIT IN YOUR HOUSE, AND WHEN YOU WALK BY THE WAY, AND WHEN YOU LIE DOWN, AND WHEN YOU RISE. YOU SHALL BIND THEM AS A SIGN ON YOUR HAND, AND THEY SHALL BE AS FRONTLETS BETWEEN YOUR EYES. YOU SHALL WRITE THEM ON THE DOORPOSTS OF YOUR HOUSE AND ON YOUR GATES." - DEUTERONOMY 6:6-9 (ESV)