

CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS

“Prayer in Community”

Acts 4:23–31

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Long before I was called to be the lead pastor here at NC, the month of January was devoted to the theme of discipleship: what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus. I think it’s a great way to begin the year, and we have continued to begin the year with messages on discipleship, missions, the importance of storing God’s Word in your heart... and prayer.

CONTEXT:

- The book of Acts is the story about the beginning of the church.
- Jesus has conquered death (1:1–3).
- He gave His followers the great commission of being His witnesses “*to the end of the earth*” (1:4–8).
- And then He ascended into heaven (1:9–11).
- He sent His Spirit to come live inside His followers (2:1–4).
- OT prophecies came true (2:5–28).
- Peter preached the first sermon in the church age, and over 3,000 people surrendered their lives to the Lordship of Jesus, were baptized, and became active members in this brand-new church (2:40–47).
- Peter & John go to the temple to spend time in prayer, and God uses them to heal a man who had been lame his entire life (3:1–8).

“And all the people saw him walking and praising God.

Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him...”

~ Acts 3:9–11

- Peter saw this as an opportunity (*not to enhance his social media presence or to boost the number of his followers or as a fundraiser for his ministry or enhance his portfolio...*). God had used him to heal a man who had been lame his entire life, and Peter saw it as an opportunity to preach Jesus (3:12–26).
- The religious leaders were “*greatly disturbed*” with his preaching, and so they took Peter and John and threw them into prison (4:1–3). Isn’t that amazing... (*gospel of Jesus & calling for repentance = disturb*).

I’ve been part of full-time ministry my entire life, and of all the tensions that arise within a local church, I think “preaching” is probably near the top of the list. I’ve preached somewhere around 800 sermons & listened to somewhere around 3,000 in my life, and I have learned that it is very hard to preach in a way that pleases everybody, which is why the only One a faithful preacher should seek to please in his preaching is His Father in heaven.¹ The aim of the preacher is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ & repentance from sin (*with compassion & sincerity & urgency & warnings*) regardless of how it might thrill some people or how it might offend others. On one occasion during Jesus’ earthly ministry, His disciples came to him and said, “*Do You know that the Pharisees were offended [by Your sermon]?*” (Matt 15:12). And Jesus responded by saying, “*Let them alone...*” (Matt 15:14). He wasn’t focused on whether His message offended people; He was focused on communicating the truth of the gospel.

As you share the gospel of Jesus, there will always be people who are offended by your words, but (*by the grace of God*) there will also be people whose lives are changed forever. And this was the case for Peter’s sermon: some of the people (*particularly the religious leaders*) were “*greatly disturbed*”, but “*many*” others came to saving faith in Jesus through the preaching of the Word.

“However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.”

~ Acts 4:4

- The next day, the religious leaders were all gathered together, and they brought Peter & John before them to interrogate them (4:5–7).
- And, once again, Peter sees this as an opportunity to preach the gospel (4:8–12; cf. 2 Tim 4:2).

¹ E.g., Matt 15:12–14; 24:10; John 6:66; 1 Cor 1:23–24; 2:1–5; Eph 6:5–8; 2 Tim 4:3.

“Now when they saw the **boldness** of Peter and John,
and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled.
And they realized that they had been with Jesus.”

~ Acts 4:13

- Isn't that amazing! There was something about these disciples that made people know they had spent time with Jesus. *Would people conclude that about you & me?* So, what do the religious leaders do? They attempted to keep the gospel message from spreading by “*severely threaten[ing] them*” (4:17).

READ ACTS 4:18–22

This brings us to our passage this morning. Peter & John had been thrown into prison and then severely threatened because of their “**boldness**” with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Notice that they weren't commanded to stop **believing** in Jesus. They weren't even commanded to stop **worshipping** Jesus. They were commanded to stop **speaking** about Jesus (4:17). *What you believe about Jesus is just fine so long as you keep it to yourself.* That's **the same message** that is so widely promoted in the world around us today: “*When it comes to matters of faith, it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you keep it to yourself and respect everybody else's beliefs.*”² **The issue here** is not about what they believe; it's about their boldness to talk about it in places where they have been told not to.

So, what do they do?

First, it says that “*they went to their own*” (4:23). What does this mean?

- Does it mean that they went to their own *homes*? That they went to their own *families*?
- No. It means that they went to their own *people* – their own *brothers and sisters in the gospel* – their own *companions* in Christ Jesus. **They went to their church family.**

Isn't that beautiful! Don't miss the language here: *they went to their own*. Jesus had brought them together in a way that they now belonged to each other.³ We see this kind of language all over the book of Acts. **The gospel doesn't create isolated Christians; it creates communities of Christians.** The gospel creates Christians who do life **together** because Christ has made us one. In Christ, we belong to each other. *So they went to their own.*

Secondly, after they reported all that they had experienced over the past 24 hours, it says that **they prayed together.**

“*So, when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord...*”

~ Acts 4:24

And their prayer is a like **a window** giving us a view of what they believed it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

What would you pray for if you were in their shoes (*or in their sandals*)? For safety? For protection? For justice? For increased freedom of speech? For divine favor with those in authority so that they might grant us some special privilege in sharing our faith? Or maybe we pray that God would remove the opposition altogether?

One of the things their prayer reveals is that the early church had a very different worldview when it came to safety, security, health, prosperity, or religious freedom than the prevailing worldview here in the West. I often think that if the Christian churches in America learned to pray like this... I believe we would see one of the greatest revivals in the history of our nation.

² E.g., “*It's fine if you believe in heterosexual relationships, but don't impose your beliefs onto somebody else who believes in homosexual relationships. So long as your beliefs don't infringe upon the beliefs of others, then 'it's all good'.*”

³ See 1 Cor 12:12–27; Eph 2:4–7, 14–18.

THE PRAYER

1. Their prayer starts with God || Read **Act 4:24**

Not only do they begin by addressing God (i.e., “*Lord*”) – which most of us do when we pray (e.g., *Lord, Father, Heavenly Father, God, Jesus...*), but they begin by praising God for who He is and what He has done.

So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said:
“**Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them.**”

~ *Acts 4:24*

Q. What situation instigated this time of corporate prayer?

A. They were forbidden to speak about Jesus by the religious authorities.

And so, they begin their prayer by acknowledging that God has all authority over all things and in all places for He is the **Maker** of the universe. They don't begin by asking; they begin by adoring – exalting – praising. “*You are God.*”

If you were here last week, you heard *the Sermon on the Mount*, and in that sermon, Jesus gives His followers **a model for prayer** (**Matt 6:9–13**). And how does this prayer start? It begins by addressing God (“*Our Father*”), and then it starts and ends by praising God for who He is:

- *Your* name is holy.
- *Your* kingdom come.
- *Your* will be done.
- The kingdom is *Yours*. All power is *Yours*. The glory is *Yours*.

Application 1: This year, try beginning your times of prayer by taking a moment to **praise God** for who He is and what He has done (*both in your life, and in the world He has made*).

2. Their prayer is full of Bible.

After praising God for who He is, they spend time praying the Bible back to God. **Verses 25–26** are a direct quotation from **Psalm 2:1–2**.

What does this mean? It means that they had spent time in God's Word. It means they spent time listening to the voice of God as He spoke to them through the pages of Scripture. It means that they had stored God's Word in their hearts so that they had immediate access to God's Word in moments like this.

They were being threatened, and so their immediate response was to gather together with their church family and pray a passage of Scripture that directly related to their situation. **Psalm 2** speaks of God's power over people who threaten His people. In this moment, they were being threatened, and so they encouraged one another by reminding each other that this wasn't the first time God's people had been threatened and that God was not intimidated by such threats (i.e., *Psa 2:4*). Bringing the Word of God into their prayer reminded everybody in the room that **God has something to say about the circumstances in our lives**. That was true then, and it's just as true now. **2 Timothy 3:16** tells us that God gave us His Word so that we would be “*thoroughly equipped*” for every situation we face.

Application 2: This year, try bringing God's Words into your prayers as a way of reminding yourself of what God has promised you. [E.g., *You are for me, and not against me. You are working in this for my good. Though nobody here sees the work I do for You, Your Word says that one day You will reward me openly. You know how hard this situation is, but You have promised that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*]

3. Their prayer is full of confidence in the sovereign goodness of God.

As they are praying, they recall how people banded together against Jesus in His crucifixion, yet even as they nailed Jesus to the cross, they were only doing what God had already purposed beforehand to be done. Their scheming wasn't a threat to God; it was part of His sovereign plan to offer Jesus as the sacrifice to save us from the eternal consequences of our sin. God used their wickedness against Jesus for His purpose in our salvation.

READ ACTS 4:27-28

What is sovereignty?

- When the wind and the waves obey the voice of Jesus = that's sovereignty.
- When demons tremble in His presence = that's sovereignty.
- When the lame walk and the blind receive their sight = that's sovereignty.
- When tax collectors trade their wealth for a life of joyful sacrifice = that's sovereignty.
- When the dead hear His voice and come back to life = that's sovereignty.
- When the schemes of the enemy is the means of our salvation = that's sovereignty.
- When the stone is rolled away and His body is gone = that's sovereignty.
- When He ascends into Heaven and sits down on His throne = that's sovereignty.
- When He fulfills every promise He ever made to His people = that's sovereignty.

Application 3: as you pray, seek to honor God & to encourage one another by speaking of God's sovereignty over this world & over your life

4. They prayed for boldness to speak the Word of God

- **Why** did they get thrown into prison and severely threatened?
 - *Because of their **boldness** in speaking the Word of God.*
- **What** did they pray for immediately after being released?
 - *They prayed for **boldness** to go back and do the same thing all over again...and again...and again... until it finally cost them their life.*

The burning desire of their heart was not for *safety*. It wasn't for *health*. It wasn't for *better paying jobs*. It wasn't for *bigger homes* or *better vacations*. It wasn't for *religious freedom* or *political favor*. The burning desire of their heart was for the world around them to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came to rescue them from their sin and that He had made a way from them to have a restored relationship with their Creator. And this wasn't just the desire of the apostles; this was the prayer of the entire church. **They were praying this together.**

Application 4: pray that God would help you to see Him as the greatest treasure in this world and that He would fill you & your church with a desire and with a boldness to use every opportunity as a platform for speaking the gospel of *Jesus no matter what the fallout is*. Do it *even if the sky falls*.

RESULT

“And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with **boldness.”**

~ Acts 4:31

God moves in power when His people pray like this *together*. The Bible says that when two or more are “*gathered together*” in His Name, He is there in a special way (**Matt 18:19-20**), and He will move in power. We may not always **feel** it (*like the church felt it here in Acts*), but our feelings have never been the barometer of truth. Just because you don't feel God working in your life (or working through your prayers) doesn't mean He isn't. When His people pray for His kingdom to come and for His will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven, God always moves. They asked for boldness, and God gave them boldness. *By the grace of God, let's make 2024 a year of growing in prayer together as we ask God to do great things in our midst for His glory.* **PRAY**