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Learning how to

# **talk to God**

from the great prayers of the Bible

## **How the Early Church Prayed**

**Acts 4:23-31**

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia

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## HOW THE EARLY CHURCH PRAYED

### Acts 4:23-31

The majestic creator of the universe has invited us to talk to Him. Oh how I hope that truth has stirred your heart as we've talked about prayer for the last few months.

Prayer is the wonderful gift of experiencing a relationship with God and having a conversation with Him. This invitation to pray proves how much He loves us and cares about us. It's permission to cry out to Him for help anytime about anything. And it really makes a difference, because He promises to listen and He promises to act.

That's why for four months, we've been studying prayer and *learning how to talk to God from the great prayers of the Bible*. We've studied the great prayers of David and Solomon and the desperate prayers of Jonah and Jeremiah. We looked at John 17 and how Jesus prays for us. We've studied several principles of prayer. Like Jesus giving us permission to ask, and how much faith it takes for God to answer our prayers, and intercession, believing enough and caring enough to pray for other people. We dealt with hard issues like when God says no. So we've studied a lot about prayer. But the goal was not to learn more, but to pray more! And I hope during this series you have prayed more and are experiencing the joy of talking to your Father.

Today, in the final message of our series, we're going to look at how the early church prayed. The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection. It is filled with stories of incredible people. And what inspired them and sparked a movement was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They heard His teaching, they witnessed His miracles, and they were there when He was horribly crucified. And amazingly, they saw Him alive again, proving He was the Son of God and proving that everything He said was true. They were convinced it was true, they were compelled to talk about it, and they were courageous to take a stand at great risk. These first Christians are our mentors, and we can learn much about prayer from them.

Prayer was the driving force in the early church. We read in the book of Acts ...

- “With one mind they were continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14, NAS).<sup>1</sup>
- “Many were gathered together and were praying” (Acts 12:12, NAS).
- When commissioning missionaries, “they fasted, prayed, and laid their hands on them, and sent them away” (Acts 13:3, NAS).
- When selecting elders, “with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord” (Acts 14:23, ESV).
- Paul encouraged the early believers to “rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, and be constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12, ESV).<sup>2</sup>

Again, prayer was the driving force in the early church.

In the 1st century, one of the earliest church fathers, Clement of Rome prayed, “I beg, O Master, to be my helper and protector. To save the afflicted, have mercy on the lowly, raise the fallen, appear to the needy, heal the ungodly, restore the wanderers, feed the hungry, ransom the prisoners, raise up the sick, and comfort the faint-hearted.”<sup>3</sup> Clement poured out his heart asking for God to help so many who were needy.

Also in the 1st century, Ignatius of Antioch prayed, “O Lord, you have formed us into one great choir, to sing your song, to praise the Father and to praise the Son, Jesus Christ.”

In the 2nd century, Irenaeus of Lyons, who expanded Christianity into France, prayed, “I appeal to you, Lord, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob and Israel, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... You made heaven and earth. You rule supreme over all that is. You are the true, the only God ... Through our Lord Jesus Christ ... may we know You.”

In the 3rd century, Cyprian of Carthage who took Christianity into North Africa, desperately prayed, “We beg you O God, the enemies of the church are forever provoking and irritating us, O that you would tame their wild hearts. May their rage subside ... May their minds, clouded by the darkness of their sins, repent and see the light.”

And in the 4th century, Ambrose of Milan prayed, “O Lord, who has mercy upon us all, take away my sins, and kindle in me the fire of your Holy Spirit. Take away my heart of stone ... and give me a heart to love and adore you, a heart to delight in you, to follow and to enjoy you.”

We can go back further in history to earlier prayers, to 33 AD, to prayers recorded in the New Testament just months after the resurrection.

In Acts 3-4, Peter performed a miracle on the steps of the temple. Peter declared the man was healed by the name of Jesus. And there were two purposes of that miracle. One, the miracle proved the power of His name to heal, and two, the miracle proved the power of His name to save. As Peter said, “There is salvation in no one else, there is no other name ... by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12, NAS). Peter and John were arrested, interrogated, and warned to stop speaking about the name of Jesus. Acts 4:23 tells us what happened next.

As soon as they were released, Peter and John returned to the other believers and told them what the chief priests and elders had said. When they heard the report, ***all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God.***

“O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them, you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our father David, your servant, saying, ‘Why are the nations angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.’

In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will.

And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, boldness to speak your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power, may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

After they prayed, the place where they prayed was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:23-31, NLT).

This is an actual prayer of the early church. It’s as if we were there. We can hear their faith. We can feel the mood in the room. This is how the early Christians prayed. They are our mentors, and we can learn much about prayer from them. And one thing we can learn is that their prayers revealed their priorities. And the same is true of us. What we pray reveals what’s important to us. ***Our prayers reveal our priorities.*** So as we learn from them, may we pray as they prayed.

### GOD’S AUTHORITY

How did they pray? ***They prayed believing God’s authority was greater than any other.*** “As soon as they were released, Peter and John returned to the other believers and told them what the chief priests and elders had said. When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God. ‘O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them’” (Acts 4:23-24, NLT).

“All the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God.” They turned to God. With oneness, unity, and purpose, all crying out to God, all praising God. And they prayed together, with voice, with one mind.<sup>4</sup> “Together.” Corporate prayer is like an orchestra compared to a solo instrument. Listening to a piano solo is nice, but listening to an orchestra is much more.<sup>5</sup> The harmony of the instruments, the power of all the instruments playing together, penetrates the soul and lifts the spirit. So the harmony and power of praying together lifts our spirits.

When they prayed, they acknowledged God as the “Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them.” As Creator, He is certainly greater than any power on earth. David said, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made ... He spoke, and it came to be” (Psalm 33:6, 9, ESV). Isaiah said, “For the Lord, who created the heavens and who formed the earth ... says, ‘I am the Lord, and there is no other’” (Isaiah 45:18, ESV). Paul said, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... and he gives life and breath and everything else ... For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:24, 25, 28, NIV). When we pray, we pray to the one who created us. We pray to the one who gives us life and breath.

They called Him “Sovereign Lord.” Sovereignty means God is above and beyond everyone and everything. It means He is supreme. There is no one greater or higher or bigger or wiser. No one can question Him, challenge Him, oppose Him, compete with Him, defeat Him, or compare to Him. Psalms says, “God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne” (Psalm 47:8, ESV).<sup>6</sup> “And His sovereignty rules over all” (Psalm 103:19, NAS). Perhaps the definitive verse on the sovereignty of God is Psalm 115:3. “God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.” They prayed believing God was supreme. They prayed believing He was stronger than any enemy and stronger than any problem.

Sometimes, we forget that when life is overwhelming. Let's say this ping pong ball represents your problems, and the basketball represents God. The closer I hold the ping pong ball to my eye, I cannot see the basketball even though it's bigger. The same is true with our problems and our fears. The more we focus on the problem or the fear or the threat, we lose sight of God. But when we put our problems beside God, we see who is bigger.

How did the early church pray? They prayed believing God was bigger than their enemies, bigger than their fears, and bigger than problems. And they prayed believing His authority was greater than any other.

### **GOD'S PLAN**

*They prayed believing God's plan would prevail.* They believed the events of the last few months were all part of His plan. They prayed believing God's plan was unfolding before their eyes.

"You spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our father David, your servant, saying, 'Why are the nations angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one'" (Acts 4:25-26). In their prayer, they quoted Psalm 2, a prophecy of David predicting that many would stand against the Messiah, the Christ. "In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will" (Acts 4:27-28).

In the first sermon after the resurrection, Peter declared that the cross was God's idea, all part of His "predetermined plan" (Acts 2:23). And the first Christians believed there was more to come. They were not just witnessing His plan. They were participating in His plan. They believed they were a part of the unfolding of God's plan, a plan that could not fail.

Perhaps they remembered Job saying, "I now know that you can do all things, that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2, ESV). Or perhaps they remembered David saying, "The plans of the Lord will stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Psalm 33:11, NIV). Or perhaps they remembered Solomon saying, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (Proverbs 19:21, NIV).<sup>7</sup>

They prayed believing God's plan was unfolding before their eyes. And they prayed believing His plan could not be hindered and His plan would prevail.

### **GOD'S SPIRIT**

As I said earlier, our prayers reveal our priorities. Now, of course, it's appropriate to pray for health issues and other problems we face. But when the church prays, the Gospel must take priority. Even as they faced increasing opposition, they prayed for boldness over comfort.

***They prayed asking God's Spirit to fill them with boldness.*** “And now, O Lord, hear their threats” (Acts 4:29, NLT).

They knew it could get worse, and it did. Perhaps they remembered Jesus saying, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18, NIV). Yet they did not pray for safety or protection even though they were risking their lives for the Gospel. They knew it could get worse, and it did.

Weeks later, Stephen would be the first martyr of the church. When he was dragged before the religious leaders, Acts 6 says, “his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15, ESV). Acts 6 says, Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit, and gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him ... And a great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 7:55-58, 8:1, NLT).

That kind of persecution did not just happen 2,000 years ago, it still happens today. While talk of tariffs and Epstein dominated our headlines last week, last Sunday, Islamic terrorists ravaged and burned the village of Komanda, Congo.<sup>8</sup> Terrorists stormed a church with machetes killing 49 Christians and decapitating 9 children. Those who fled were chased down and hacked to death. With tears, one witness said, “There is sadness upon sadness everywhere.” Another witness said, “The church is on the run. Christians snatching up their children and running for their lives.” In the previous month, 66 Christians were killed in Congo. Even worse in Nigeria, 3,100 Christians have been killed in the last 12 months. Of course, this is extreme. It’s not happening in Lake Arrowhead, but it is happening in many parts of the world.

And it was happening to those first believers in Jerusalem. That’s why they cried out to God in prayer, “And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, boldness to speak your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power, may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30, NLT).

They asked for two things. One, for “boldness.”<sup>9</sup> They prayed for boldness to go public with their faith. They prayed for courage in the face of ridicule and threat. The application for us is that we would talk about Jesus as freely and boldly outside the church as we do inside the church. The other thing they prayed was for God’s power. “Stretch out your hand with healing power, may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:30, NLT). They prayed to see God move in a way that would convince people that Jesus was the Son of God. They prayed for Him to “stretch out your hand.” Acts 11:21 has often been my prayer through the years, and says, “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21, NAS).

In the face of ridicule and threat, they did not pray for comfort. They prayed for boldness to speak. They prayed for God to move. And Acts 5 records the answer to their prayer. “The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people ... and more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (Acts 5:14, NIV). God answered their prayer!

“After they prayed, the place where they prayed was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). Read that again. “After they prayed, the place where they prayed was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.” Imagine being there. God showed up. He shook the place. He shook their hearts. He answered their prayer and filled them with the Holy Spirit and with boldness.

A few years, when I was in Austin, seventy pastors gathered for a meeting of Christ Together. Christ Together was a prayer movement in the city of Austin. And when we got together, we prayed for the lostness of our city. At that prayer gathering that day we prayed Acts 4:31. We prayed for the Holy Spirit to fill us and to fill our churches. We prayed for the people in our churches to speak with boldness. It was a great day. And I’m not lying, while we were praying, the room started shaking. Now it just so happened we were next to a construction site, where they were hammering rock. We all laughed yet still took it as a sign that the Holy Spirit was with us!

Imagine that moment in Acts 4. Praying for the Holy Spirit to show up and the room starts shaking. That’s what the early church experienced when they prayed, and may we experience that when we pray.

## CONCLUSION

“All the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God ... And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:24, 31).

Their prayers revealed their priorities. That’s true of us as well. Of course, it’s appropriate to pray for health issues and other problems we face. But when the church prays, the Gospel must take priority. So, this morning, please join me in praying the Acts 4 prayer.

*Father, as our first century brothers and sisters addressed You as ‘Sovereign Lord’ and ‘Creator of heaven and earth,’ so we address You as our Lord. We pray submitting to Your Lordship and trusting Your Lordship. Each day, may we bow in humility before You as our Lord, and may we pray with confidence to You as our loving Father.*

*As Your plan unfolds before our eyes, we believe Your plan will prevail. Therefore, we submit to Your will, and we count it a privilege to participate in what You are doing in the world and what You are doing in Lake Arrowhead.*

*And as our first century brothers and sisters prayed, we pray for boldness. Of course, we ask for help as we carry burdens, face illness, and encounter problems of every kind. But first of all, most of all, may the Gospel be the priority of our lives. We pray for love for those who do not know You. We pray for open doors for conversations. And we pray for boldness to speak. To tell others what Jesus has done for us and why we love Him so much.*

*And we pray that Your hand will be on us. How we long to see You move in our church, in our families, and in our community. Lord, whatever You're doing in Lake Arrowhead, we want to be a part of it.*

*"All the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God ... And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness."*

*It happened then, may it happen again.*



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See also Acts 2:42, which says, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

<sup>2</sup> See also Colossians 4:2, where Paul said, “Devote yourselves to prayer.”

<sup>3</sup> These prayers of the early church fathers found at [www.medium.org](http://www.medium.org).

<sup>4</sup> The NAS says “they raised their voices to God with one mind” (Acts 4:24).

<sup>5</sup> Packer cites this illustration. [J. I. Packer, *Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), page 110]

<sup>6</sup> See Psalm 29:10.

<sup>7</sup> Or perhaps they remembered Isaiah saying, “What the Lord of hosts has planned, who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?” (Isaiah 14:27, NAS).

<sup>8</sup> Reported by Paul Tinsley, Fox News, 7/31/25.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek word for “boldness” used in Acts 4:29, 31 is *παρρησία* (*parrasias*).