

CORPORATE PRAYER FOR SPIRITUAL BREAKTHROUGH

Acts 4:23-31

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES gives snapshots of the early life of the church. These pictures clearly show the early church was devoted to prayer. Acts 4:23-31 is the first prayer recorded in Acts. It is also the longest prayer recorded in Acts. This prayer teaches us the church can experience spiritual breakthrough when believers pray together with confidence in the sovereignty of God. We desperately need to learn this prayer that we may experience breakthrough. Let me teach you this prayer by asking three questions of the text: What moved the church to pray? What did the church pray? And, what happened then the church prayed?

I. WHAT MOVED THE CHURCH TO PRAY?

This impromptu prayer meeting took place in the aftermath of the miracle recorded in Acts 3. Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray when they met a crippled man asking for money. Acts 3:6 records Peter's response: "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" Taking this invalid by the right hand, Peter lifted him up. The man crippled man stood up for the first time in his life. The people were amazed and wanted to know how this man 40-year-old man who was born crippled was healed. Peter used this opportunity to tell them about Jesus, whom they crucified but God raised from the dead. Acts 4:2 says the religious authorities were "greatly annoyed." Only a couple of months had passed since Jerusalem was in an uproar over the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. To ensure the name of Jesus did not consume the city again, they arrested Peter and John.

The next morning, Peter and John were brought before the religious authorities. They also wanted to know how this crippled man was healed. Peter again used this opportunity to tell them about Jesus, whom they crucified but God raised from the dead. Verse 13 says, "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus." The religious leaders could not deny an astonishing miracle had taken place. Yet they could not allow this miracle to become a platform for the name of Jesus to be magnified in Jerusalem. So they commanded Peter and John not to speak in the name of Jesus anymore. In verses 19-20, Peter and John answered, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." The religious authorities then tried to defuse the issue for the time being. They threatened Peter and John again and let them go.

Verse 23 reports what happened next: "When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them." Peter and John returned to their friends. The text literally says they went to their own. They went to church after the were released. The group was comprised of the other apostles and some members of the church, which numbered over 5,000

believers. They possibly met in the upper room where the Holy Spirit descended upon them on the day of Pentecost. This is an essential mark of true faith: genuine love for the people of God. You can test your faith by where you turn for support, encouragement, and companionship in difficult times.

Peter and John told the believers about the threats the religious authorities issued. Verse 24 says, “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God.” When threatened, the church did not give in or shut up or lay low. They prayed. It was their first response, not their last resort. They prayed with spiritual unity. They were not just together. They were on one accord in prayer. This should be our battle plan. We, too, are in a spiritual warfare. All around us there is a conspiracy against the name of Jesus – in the media, classrooms, in courts, politics, and false value system of the God-ignoring culture. This conspiracy against Jesus is even taking place in the church. Note the religious leaders did not tell Peter and John they could not teach or minister to the sick. They commanded them not to do it in the name of Jesus. That same spirit of man-centered religion has a way of creeping into the church. It shows up when maintaining the way we do things takes precedence over glorifying the preeminence of Christ. There is still a conspiracy against the name of Jesus. How should we respond? Let’s follow the example of the early church. They did not quit or scheme or fight. They prayed.

HAVE WE TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS? IS THERE TROUBLE ANYWHERE?
WE SHOULD NEVER BE DISCOURAGED. TAKE IT TO THE LORD IN PRAYER.

II. WHAT DID THE CHURCH PRAY?

Verse 24-30 records the prayer of the church. It is one of the most dramatic prayers in the New Testament. It begins by addressing God as “**Sovereign Lord.**” This title translates the Greek term *despotos*, from which we get our English word “despot.” It was used for a master of slaves who was the lord of the house. It is used in the New Testament for the supreme power of God’s divine rule. This is the sense in which the word is used here. When the saints called on the Sovereign Lord, they affirmed his total control, perfect authority, and unimpeachable jurisdiction over everything. Addressing the Sovereign Lord, this prayer falls into two major sections.

A. THE INVOCATION

This invocation praises God for his sovereign acts. They did not think God had forgotten what he had done. Their invocation exalted his glory and built their faith by telling God what he had done in prayer. This is how you should pray in times of crisis. Tell God about what he has done. This invocation declares three ways God has put his sovereign rule on display.

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD. Verse 24 says, “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them...’” Creation is the first theater in which

God put his sovereignty on display. God made everything in the heavens above us. God made everything on the earth around us. God made everything in the seas below us. Psalm 24:1-2 says: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers." Everything that exists in the sky and on the land and in the waters belongs to God. No rebellious creature can withstand the Creator. In the beginning God created the heavens and earth. And God will reign over heaven and earth as Sovereign Lord at the end.

THE REVELATION OF SCRIPTURE. Verses 25-26 point to God's sovereignty on display through biblical revelation. God's sovereignty was at work in the manner of biblical revelation. Verse 25 says that God "who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit." This is a succinct statement of the divine inspiration of Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God." God is the source of scripture. The Bible is not man's word about God. It is God's word to man. Yet it is God's word to man through man. Verse 25 says God spoke through the mouth of David. God used David's intellect, personality, and convictions to write scripture. But the Holy Spirit superintended the process to ensure that only what God wanted said was included. 2 Peter 1:21 says "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Because the authors were moved by the Holy Spirit, what David wrote in Psalm 2 is in complete harmony with what Luke wrote in Acts 4. Furthermore, we find here an affirmation of the Trinity. The theological term "Trinity" is not found in scripture. And no chapter and verse explicitly states God is one in essence and three in person. But the triunity of God is indicated throughout scripture. In this New Testament reference to an Old Testament psalm, God the Father speaks through man by God the Holy Spirit to proclaim the person and work of God the Son. If you need assurance the Lord is in charge of everything just read the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ!

God's sovereignty was also at work through the message of scripture. Verses 25-26 quote the opening verses of Psalm 2:1-2. Psalm 2 was most rebellion that arose against God's anointed king and God's chosen people. But the psalm was read by the people of God as a prophecy about the coming Messiah-King. Verse 25 asks, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?" These rhetorical questions address humanity's futile attempts to overthrow God's authority. The word "rage" was used for a neighing horse bucking in rebellion. But it would have to submit to the one who holds the reigns. Verse 26 says, "The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed." The picture is of a UNITED NATIONS meeting in which kings, presidents, and prime ministers strategize to get rid of God. How does God respond to this rebellion? Psalm 2:4 says, "He who sits in the heavens laughs." When God laughs, it's not funny. God is amused by humanity's attempt to get rid of him. In Psalm 2:6, God says, "I have set me King on Zion, my holy hill." It's too late to stop God's plans. Jesus reigns. Psalm 2:10-12 says, "Now therefore, O kings, be wise, be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled."

THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS. Verses 27-28 directly apply the quotation of Psalm 2 in verses 25-26 to the crucifixion of Jesus: “for truly in this city 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, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” The parallels between these verses and the messianic psalm quoted in verses 25-26 are obvious. About two months before this prayer meeting, a confederacy of forces came together against Jesus. Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee and Pontius Pilate the Roman governor of Judea conspired together against Jesus. Luke 23:12 says: “And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.” But this conspiracy of Jesus was not just taking place in the courts of human authority. It was also a grassroots movement. Verse 27 says that “the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel” were also in on it. It is rare for scripture to link Jews and Gentiles together. But here Jews and Gentiles are mutually indicted for the assassination of Jesus.

Individually and corporately, sinful humanity plotted to execute Jesus. But notice what verse 28 says. Better yet, notice what it does not say. It does not say that Herod and Pilate and the Gentiles and the Jews gathered together to do what they wanted to do to Jesus. Verse 28 says they came together “to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

Feel the biblical tension between human responsibility and divine sovereignty. The text does not acquit those who were responsible for the death of Jesus. To the contrary, it declares all humanity guilty. Yet it asserts something greater was taking place beyond the sinful acts of men. Jesus did not die as religious nonconformist to the Jews or a political nuisance to the Romans. He died according to the eternal plan of Almighty God. The crucifixion happened as God predestined it to happen. The key word of verse 28 is the word “whatever.” Sinful men only did what the Sovereign Lord permitted them to do – nothing more, nothing less. In John 19:10, Pilate Asked Jesus, “Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” In verse 11, Jesus answered, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” The same is true for all who trust in Jesus. The enemy can only do to you what God allows. Romans 8:31 says, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

B. THE SUPPLICATION

This prayer is recorded in seven verses. The first five verses exalt the sovereignty of God. The final two verses record their actual prayer requests. This is a model for how we ought to pray when the burdens are heavy, the crises are mounting, and the enemy is threatening. Talk to God about what he is doing more than about the enemy is doing. Focus on God so that you will not have to focus on the situation. Gaze at God and you will only have to glance at the problem. The believers exalted the sovereignty of God. Then they made two prayer requests.

A PRAYER OF PERSONAL RESIGNATION. Verse 29 says, “And now, Lord, look upon their threats.” Consider what they did not pray. They did not ask God to stop the threats or to prevent the threats from coming to past or to convert the ones who made the threats. These were no idle threats. In subsequent chapters, they would make good on their threats. In Acts 7, they stoned Stephen for preaching that Jesus rose from the dead. Acts 12:2 records that Herod killed James the brother of John with the sword. He then arrested Peter, planning to put him to death after the Passover. But the church prayed and the Lord delivered Peter from prison. The religious authorities meant business when they warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus. Yet the church responded by praying, “Lord, look upon their threats.”

The king of Assyria enemy sent a letter warning Hezekiah not to trust in his God to deliver him. The gods of the nations had not saved them. And Judah’s God could not save it from the power of Assyria. When Hezekiah read this message, he took it to the house of God and spread it before the Lord. In Isaiah 37:16-17, Hezekiah prayed, “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. Incline your hear, O Lord, open your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God.” The messenger brought Sennacherib’s threatening letter to Hezekiah. When he read it, Hezekiah said, “He is no talking about me. He’s talking about God.” So he took the letter to God and said, “Lord, look at this! I thought you would want to know what the enemy is saying about you so you can handle your business.” With the same sense of personal resignation, the church prayed, “Lord, look upon their threats. This is not about us. It is about you. We just wanted you to know so that you can handle your business.” This is what you do when life gets to be too much for you to handle. Give it to God!

The papal envoy threatened Martin Luther with what would follow if he persisted in his course and warned him all his supporters would desert him in the end. “Where will you be then?” demanded the envoy. “Then as now,” Luther answered, “in the hands of God.”

A PRAYER FOR SPIRITUAL BOLDNESS. The believers made a general prayer request in verse 29: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats.” Then they made a specific prayer request: “and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.” This prayer for boldness reflects the priority of these believers. They were more concerned about pleasing God and exalting Christ than about their own safety. It did not matter if they lived or died. It only mattered that the word of God was proclaimed. So they asked God to give them boldness to proclaim the world, even if they that meant putting their wellbeing in jeopardy.

Could this be why the gospel is not advancing in our city? Could this be why the church is not considered relevant? Could this be why so many in the church are only going through the motions without experiencing true change? We lack spiritual boldness. It think the problem starts with the leadership. We who are pastors and deacons and trustees and staff members and ministry leaders are not as bold for Christ as we should be. We are comfortable with the status quo. We suffer from the fear of man. We are more concerned about being criticized or persecuted or rejected than about pleasing God. We chose the path of least resistance. We claim the word of

God is our final authority. Yet we act in unbiblical ways when we get in a crisis. We put the success of the institution of the church ahead of the glory of the Head of the church. We are prone to ignore the threats of moral failure, doctrinal compromise, and spiritual divisiveness and fight about things that have nothing to do with making disciples of Christ. The church cannot be strong if it is following weak leaders. May we repent of our self-reliance and pray for spiritual boldness!

This prayer for boldness is a request for something they already had. Verse 13 says that the religious authorities were astonished by the boldness of these common, uneducated men. Yet they prayed the Lord would grant them boldness to continue to speak the word with all boldness. Why did they feel the need to pray what they already had? It seems the believers were wise enough to know that yesterday's grace will not work for today's challenges. There are times when you need to look back and remember what the Lord has done. But there are also times when you must forget the things that are behind you. Yesterday's success can become today's complacency that becomes tomorrow's failure. So no matter how bold you have been in the past, don't stop praying! Thank God for yesterday's grace. But we need future grace to help us face what is before us. In Ephesians 6:19-20, Paul asked the saints to pray for him "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak." We will only be able to say what we ought to say and do what ought to do if God gives us spiritual boldness.

III. WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE CHURCH PRAYED?

Verse 31 says, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." This is what happened when the church prayed. God did something great around them and in them and for them.

A. GOD DID SOMETHING AROUND THEM.

Verse 31 says, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered was shaken." Acts 2:2 says on the day of Pentecost, God made his presence known to the believers with a sound from heaven like a mighty rushing wind. Here God made his presence known by shaking the meeting place. As with an earthquake, God shook the place as a sign to the church that he was with them. And the more God shook up the place, the more the church became unshakable in their confidence in God. And God is still able to do something in our circumstances to show that he has everything under control. It does not have to be an earthquake. It may be a still, small voice, with which he spoke to Elijah. But you can trust that there is nothing happening around you that God cannot handle. An unbelieving professor mocked a Christian student, saying, "I'll give you \$10 if you can tell me where God is right now." Undeterred, the young believer answered, "I'll give you \$20 if you can tell me where God is not right now."

B. GOD DID SOMETHING IN THEM.

Verse 31 also says “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” This was not another Pentecost or second baptism of the Spirit. It was a fresh infilling of the Spirit’s enabling power to resist temptation, serve faithfully, and endure persecution. This text makes it clear that the infilling of the Spirit is not a one time occurrence. The 120 original believers were filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:4. Peter was filled with the Spirit in Acts 4:8 to respond to the religious authorities. And here all the believers in this prayer meeting were filled with the Holy Spirit. When DWIGHT L. MOODY was asked if he was filled with the Spirit, he answered, “Yes. But I leak.” So do we all. We did to be continually filled with the Spirit. When we pray, God will do a new and fresh and life-changing work in us by the power of his Holy Spirit.

C. GOD DID SOMETHING FOR THEM.

Verse 31 closes by telling us that these praying believers “continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” In verse 29, they prayed specifically for boldness to continue to speak the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Verse 13 tells that God specifically answered their prayer by enabling them to continue to speak the word of God with boldness. This passage is a wonderful reminder that God hears and answers prayer.

IF THE WORLD FROM YOU WITHOLD OF ITS SILVER AND ITS GOLD
AND YOU HAVE TO GET ALONG WITH MEAGER FARE
JUST REMEMBER, IN HIS WORD, HOW HE FEEDS THE LITTLE BIRD
TAKE YOUR BURDEN TO THE LORD AND LEAVE IT THERE

IF YOU BODY SUFFERS PAIN AND YOUR HEALTH YOU CAN’T REGAIN
AND YOUR SOUL IS ALMOST SINKING IN DESPARE
JESUS KNOW SHTE PAIN YOU FEEL, HE CAN SAVE AND HE CAN HEAL
TAKE YOUR BURDEN TO THE LORD AND LEAVE IT THERE

WHEN YOUR ENEMIES ASSAIL AND YOUR HEART BEGINS TO FAIL,
DON’T FORGET THAT GOD IN HEAVEN ANSWERS PRAYER
HE WILL MAKE A WAY FOR YOU AND WILL LEAD YOU SAFELY THRU
TAKE YOUR BURDEN TO THE LORD AND LEAVE IT THERE

WHEN YOUR YOUTHFUL DAYS ARE GON AND OLD AGE IS STEALING ON
AND YOUR BODY BENDS BENEATH THE WEIGHT OF CARES
HE WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU THEN, HE’LL GO WITH YOU TO THE END
TAKE YOUR BURDEN TO THE LORD AND LEAVE IT THERE