

June 9, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

And When They Had Prayed

Acts 4:23 – 31

What we have seen so far in this passage are two responses to the gospel. On the one hand when the saving message of the gospel is preached, you have people whose hearts are pierced and they embrace the cross with joy. In this chapter 5,000 people heard and received the message. On the other hand, in the very same setting you have others who react violently and irrationally and not only reject the gospel, but persecute and harass those who bring the good news. And the reason people hate the message of the gospel is that it is incredibly offensive to the human heart. People are offended by the idea that they have done anything worthy of death. They're offended by the idea of an ultimate authority to which they find themselves accountable. People find it insulting to be told that they are too weak and sinful to do anything to contribute to their salvation. Their minds rebel at the the idea that there is only one way to God; and the idea that without the cross, 'good' people are in as much trouble as 'bad' people. When we preach the gospel then, we should expect great acceptance **and** great opposition.

And what we have in this passage today, is the response of those who love the gospel to the opposition of those who hate the gospel. And what we see is that prayer breaks out: *'When they were released they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God...'* Acts 4:23 Luke says that Peter and John went to their friends – he didn't say they went to the big guns – the other apostles – but to their friends. No doubt the other apostles were present – but it was the church that lifted up their voice in prayer to God. ***It is the church gathered together that has the authority of Christ to pray for God to give boldness and to heal and to do signs and wonders.*** Jesus told the disciples in Matthew 16 that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church – that is the corporate expression of Christ. They may not bend before an individual saint – but they cannot stand against the church united in corporate prayer. And it is to the church that Christ gives the keys of the kingdom of heaven; to bind and to loose. And when the church prays, hell trembles. And today I want to look at three things this passage highlights for us: **the occasion of prayer, the content of prayer and the answer to prayer.**

The occasion of prayer Acts 4:23

Peter and John had just gotten out of jail. They told the other believers specifically what the chief priests and elders had said. Verse 29 tells us what this was. The believers pray, "*Now, Lord, look upon their threats.*" In other words, Peter and John had told them about the threat mentioned in verse 18 where the priests and elders demanded that Peter and John "*not speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.*" And in verse 21 they threaten them more. So the occasion for this prayer is heavy opposition to the gospel. On the one hand many received the gospel with joy – on the other, great opposition came against them. This is why the church went to prayer. ***They do not assume that they can have bold and effective ministry without a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit.***

Prayer never comes from people who are confident in their own ability. People who think they are strong, they can handle it, they know what to do – they never pray. Why would they? ***Prayer is the naked confession of our weakness.*** We pray because we're not strong, we can't handle it, we don't know what to do. Here the problem was opposition to the gospel. But it could be anything – our jobs, our relationships, tragic circumstances, anything. That is precisely why Paul tells us in Philippians 3:6: ***'Don't worry about anything – pray about everything'***. That's fairly inclusive – everything. What that means is that Christians are those who are always going to God. Whatever happens, their first response is to look to God.

And what this early church faced here was persecution and suffering. I imagine that Peter and John and all the others were beginning to understand that what lay ahead for them as Christians was what Jesus had already told them – ***'If they hated Me, they will hate you'***. And here it was. Suffering had come. The first three chapters they seemed to be going from strength to strength – great things were happening, people were getting saved, a sense of awe was felt by everyone, signs and wonders were breaking out, they had favor with all the people. But now threats were being issued and people were going to jail, and we'll see not too far in the future, those threats being realized in beatings, stonings and beheadings. And so the church's response here to suffering is noteworthy.

And I think it's helpful to look at another place in the Bible that deals with a response to suffering. The book of Job is about a guy who loses almost everything. He loses all his children, all his wealth, his status and reputation, loses his health – and for forty chapters he rants and rails and cries to God about the unfairness of all this. And as you read you think, 'This guy's not doing too well here'. But then at the end God shows up and vindicates Job, says he's done a good job, and affirms him and rewards him, and heals him and rebukes his friends for being bad friends – and your response is 'Huh?' And you won't really understand this unless you get the first part of the story.

In the beginning of the book we see God speaking to Satan and saying, '*Have you considered my servant Job, there is none like him in all the earth?*' And Satan, true to his job description, accuses Job saying, '*Does Job serve God for nothing?*' And what he's saying is that Job only obeys God because of the benefits; he's not a servant, he's a consumer. He'll do business with you as long as he's getting enough value for his buck. But if you raise the cost, it'll all go away. In other words, Job is not in this for Your sake – he's serving himself and using you. What he's really about is the benefits, and if you take those away, if suffering comes into his life, then you'll see. And the benefits begin to go away – his wealth, his health, his family. And what does Job do? It is important to see what Job actually does. When suffering comes – Job doesn't run away from God – **he runs to God**. In all his ranting and railing and crying – he's ranting and railing and crying **to God**. Which means that his suffering, his circumstances, didn't drive him away from God – **it only intensified his prayer life**.

Real Christians run to God for everything. Pray about everything. Pray when you're up – pray when you're down. Pray when the sun is shining and pray when the clouds obscure the sun. Pray because we're weak, pray because we can't handle it, pray because we don't know. But mostly Christians pray because they are not in this thing for what they can get out of it. Satan was right – he was wrong about Job, but he was right in saying, 'Does Job serve God for nothing?' Real Christians are those who serve God for nothing. They serve God for God – not for what they are getting out of it. And times of suffering will expose whether you got into this thing for God Himself or for what you could get out of it. And it will expose your prayer life. What are you praying for? What is the content of your prayers? Are you even praying? Look at these people. They know persecution and suffering are coming and some of them are going to die. So what do they do? They lift up their voice in prayer. They do what Job did. Instead of running away from God they run to God in prayer. So the occasion of prayer is every occasion. **Pray unceasingly.** And what is the content of their prayer?

The content of prayer

...they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed"--for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place. Acts 4:24-28

Did you notice? The church spends more time on who God is than on what they want. They begin with five verses about who God is and they end with two verses asking Him for stuff. **This is not because God needs to be reminded who He is – but we do.** And we need to be reminded just how great He is and to confess that He is the kind of God who can and will answer prayer. They spend a long time '**hallowing His name.**' They worship Him as Creator of all and ruler of all – if He created everything, then even these elders and priests are His to do with as He likes. And if He is the ruler of all – then He rules over all things – even the murderous deeds of evil men – which He even chooses to work out His eternal plan and purpose. This is great encouragement to an embattled church who appears small, and weak and powerless in the face of the established authorities.

First of all they prayed, '**Sovereign Lord**'. Literally they prayed, '**Despotes**'. And we get our word 'Despot' from that. It has come to mean someone who is a tyrant and an oppressor. But that is not what it originally meant, and that is not what it means here. It originally meant a king or ruler who had absolute and unlimited power. And that is how it is used here. The church comes together, not as aggressive demanders, telling God what they want. They come as supplicants – servants, even slaves, throwing themselves on His mercy, looking for His grace. There is a stream of thought in the Christian church that takes verses like Hebrews 4:16: *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need...* and bends it all out of proportion to create a strange kind of praying that demands things and declares things and calls things into being.

I've heard people here in the U.S. praying like this, and I see this kind of praying a lot in Kenya and it is absolutely unscriptural. I'll hear prayers like, '**We declare this a day of healing**' or '**we declare prosperity over this person**' or '**we speak healing and health into existence**'. And the sad thing is with all the demanding and declaring and speaking into existence – **nothing happens**. People are left just as sick, just as poor, just as needy as before they prayed. Unfortunately, this kind of praying has its roots primarily here in the U.S. within churches that emphasize experience at the expense of doctrine; and we have exported the worst of our theology to the neediest countries in the world. **Prayer, real prayer, is first of all founded on good theology. Real prayer starts with who God is.** He is Sovereign Lord, Master, Owner, Despot, who has absolute, unlimited power over everything and everyone. His will is preeminent in the universe. **Thy will be done...** Our praying lacks this because we do not really know God, and we are consumed with what we want and what we think we need. Our problem is that our theology is weak. We take verses like Hebrews 4:16, and conclude that since we are to be bold and courageous that means we should demand – but that is a very wrong view.

In speaking of the throne of grace in Hebrews 4:16, **Charles Spurgeon** said, "**The Mercy Seat is a Throne, and we must not forget this...If in prayer we come to a Throne, it is clear that our spirit should, in the first place, be one of lowly reverence...Familiarity there may be, but let it not be unhallowed. Boldness there should be, but let it not be impertinent. Still you are on earth and He in Heaven...My Brethren, I am afraid we do not bow as we should before the Eternal Majesty!**" Which means, we should be listening more than we are talking. If you are in the presence of the president of the United States, you are not going to be saying much about yourself or what your wishes, wants and needs are.

You see, prayer is not so much our speaking to God, but Him speaking to us. **Prayer is hearing and responding to what God has revealed in His word.** Prayer is an intimate connection with the Almighty, whereby He speaks to us and we respond. The results of the last poll on prayer that I heard said that there are something like 80% of Americans who say they pray, and many of those pray regularly. And when asked what they pray for, they responded by saying that they pray for their needs, of course, what are supposed to pray for? But if that is the extent of your relationship with God in prayer – a kind of laundry list of wants and needs, can you say that you really have a relationship with Him? A personal relationship goes both ways. And if you're doing all the talking, how personal can that be – if all you are doing is saying send me this and send me that and do this and do that?

Do you have a personal relationship with Amazon.com? If all you're saying is 'Send me this and send me that, God is just this Divine Amazon.com in the sky and it's not really a personal relationship. You might think you have a personal relationship with them, but I guarantee Amazon.com doesn't think so. Eugene Peterson, in his book, **Answering God**, points out that true prayer is not so much talking to God but answering God. Imagine someone sits down with you face to face and he pours out his story – an amazing personal story. It was thrilling and mysterious and wise and fascinating and moving. And he's telling you who he is and what he is about. And then when you open your mouth, for the next few minutes all you are talking about is you, what you need, what you want, how you see things. You act as though he hadn't said anything, you make no reference to his story, all you talk about is yourself. That would actually indicate a kind of mental illness. And yet most of our prayers are like that.

But in the Bible God has told you His story. He's revealed a wealth of information about who He is, what He is about, what His ambition and passions are. He's poured out His heart as it were. And when we pray we ought to be basing what we say on this, we ought to be responding to this. And that is exactly what we see here. You see, persecution has come, suffering is coming through the door. They're scared – they wouldn't be praying for fearlessness and boldness if they weren't scared. But look what they do, they go to the Bible. They rehearse the greatness of God, the sovereignty of God. They rehearse the puniness of man in the face of Divine rule. They don't say, 'Just zap us with courage here because we're scared'. They're saying, 'We are scared – but You are not. We are weak, but You are strong. The nations rage but you control the nations. The kings and rulers are against us but You are for us'. What are they doing? They're responding to God. They are taking what God has said about Himself and responding to that. They are taking a particular need they have and applying what God has said about Himself to that need, and letting God heal their hearts with the truth of who He is.

Don't let anything I've said to this point discourage you from praying for your needs. Indeed we are encouraged by the Lord to pray for things we need when He taught the disciples to pray – 'Our Father...lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil...give us this day our daily bread'. But realize too that deliverance from temptation and protection from evil and our daily bread is right there in the context of who God is – 'Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. **Thy Kingdom come – Thy will be done...Thine is the Kingdom and power and glory**' Of course we must ask for things, but let our asking be in the context of who He is and what He wants.

Here it is, here is what they asked for: '*And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus.*' Acts 4:24-28 Notice that they do not pray for a change in circumstances. They don't pray for vengeance on the people. They don't pray even for protection. They don't pray for all the things that you and I usually pray for. Essentially, what is at stake is the honor of His name – they were being forbidden to speak in the name of Jesus – and so they are praying – “Take notice Lord, rise up and deal with their arrogance and pride and self-exaltation and look on their threats – they are against Your reputation and we need You to vindicate Yourself so that we do not cave in to their threats.” You won't pray this way if all God is to you is the great Amazon.com in the sky.

So they pray three God vindicating things: that **God would grant them boldness** – not to be intimidated by their enemies, which would prove that they answer to a higher court – that **God would reach down and heal** – showing His power and authority – and **that signs and wonders would happen** as they proclaimed the name of Jesus – authenticating their ministry of the gospel. They prayed for boldness and healing and miracles. And all of these are in the context of what God wants – not what we want. They pray that they would have the courage to carry out God's will in the world. God has revealed to us in His word that His main aim and ambition is that He would be worshipped and adored in all of heaven and earth. And the gospel is the divinely appointed means through which that happens. Missions exist precisely because the worship of God does not. And if your prayers simply center on you and what you want and what you need without regard to what He wants, what His revealed will is, then you will probably be disappointed in your prayers.

Remember what James wrote: *You do not have, because you do not ask.* In other words, Scripture tells us over and over to ask. Jesus Himself tells us, **Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.** Asking is not the problem – our motives are. *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* James 4:2-3 The issue is not our passion, but His passion. Is His passion the focus of your prayers? Is His will really primary in your requests?

The answer to prayer

Finally, we see the answer to their prayer: '*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 spoke the word of God with boldness.*' Acts 4:31 Two things happen here. The place is shaken, and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. I don't think that the point of Luke's observation about the house shaking is that we need to pray for the house to shake. The house shakes because God comes in on the wings of their prayers. Whenever God shows up in the Bible, it seems like there is an earthquake. When God came down on Mt Sinai, the mountain shook. When He shows up in the temple in Isaiah, an earthquake shakes the foundations of the house. When Jesus dies on the cross, an earthquake shakes the place; and when He rises on the third day, an earthquake rolls away the stone. When God shows up, everything that can be shaken will be shaken. But the point is not that things are shaking, but rather that the believers weren't. The house shook, but they didn't. Their hearts and minds were filled up with the reality of who God is, with His power and His authority, His rule and His reign, and as a result they were filled with boldness. The house shook but they were unshakeable.

But the ultimate answer here was the Holy Spirit Himself, coming just like the day of Pentecost and filling them and empowering them to do things they could not otherwise do. Remember when Jesus was teaching the disciples about prayer in Luke 11? And He told them a story about how an earthly father would treat his son, and compared that to our Heavenly Father? And He said, 'How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?' The answer to all our prayers, the answer to our relentless and persistent appeals to heaven's throne is the Holy Spirit Himself. **We should pray expecting the Holy Spirit.** That is why they could continue boldly proclaiming the gospel. And this is what we need. We need extraordinary power because of the hardness of the culture, the evil, wicked intent of men's hearts, the open disobedience and rebellion of the people around us, and the blatant, open immorality and anti-God message of the culture. Only the power of the Holy Spirit is able to break through all of that which rises up against our God and His Christ.

So be encouraged to pray unceasingly. Be encouraged to pray God-sized, God-infused prayers that reflect His will, His passion, His ambition. Let His matchless character and power be at the center of your asking and expect Him to answer in house-shaking ways, supplying our needs and advancing His kingdom by the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit in and through us.

When the glory of the Father
Is the goal of every prayer:
When before the throne in heaven
Our High Priest presents it there;
When the Spirit prompts the asking,
When the waiting heart believes:
Then we know of each petition
Everyone who asks receives

Our gracious God and Father,

Hallowed be Your name. May Your name be glorified in us and in the world. Magnify Your name through us. Father, we long to see You honored more and more in our church and our city, and in our nation and in the world. Magnify your worth and your glory in our midst. And let your kingdom come. Take up your kingly rule more and more fully over our church and our lives and our families. And hasten the day of Christ's final appearing. Meet our physical needs we pray, so that we can press on with joy in the work you call us to for your name's sake. Forgive us, O Lord, where we have sinned and fallen short of your glory. And keep us from entangling temptations that will trip us up and bring reproach upon your name. May we be among those who cry to You day and night, relentlessly and shamelessly asking, seeking and knocking on heaven's door until Your kingdom comes and Your will is done, until Your name is glorified on earth as it is in heaven, we pray in the precious and exalted name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.