

April 18, 2021  
Sunday Morning Service  
Series: Acts  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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## POWERFUL PRAYER

### Acts 4:23-31

I remember as a child seeing a plaque hanging on the wall in a neighboring farmer's house. It read, "Why worry when you can pray?" Now if anyone had reasons to worry, it was the small-time family farmer. His livelihood depended completely on the cows producing milk. If they became weak or sick he was out of business. They would become weak and sick if he did not feed them well. In order to feed them well, his fields had to produce good crops. The fields would produce good crops only with the right balance of rain and sunshine. No one holds more tightly to the old adage, "Everyone talks about the weather, but no one seems to do anything about it," more than farmers.

In light of the number of farmers I knew who suffered heart problems due to stress, I think the plaques in their homes must have said, "Why pray when you can worry?" I also think I know a lot of professing Christians who may not articulate that truth but who do practice it. So often we really act as though we are personally responsible to make all things right in this world and to keep it running in orderly fashion.

I remember a couple of years ago hearing Stephen Jones tell a story at his mother's funeral. He said that when they would go on vacation his father would often point out a problem that needed someone's attention. Granted that was his job on the campus of BJU. Stephen said his mother would reply, "Bob, you're not the president of the whole world."

And neither are we. We live in a world that is thoroughly entrenched in sin. Our culture is soaked, sopping wet with sin. It is very difficult for us older folks who grew up in a generation past to

observe what is going on morally and ethically in our society. You might hear us say on occasion something like, "This is not the nation I have known." It's not. I am literally amazed at how quickly our whole culture is disintegrating right before my eyes. For a long time we have observed ungodly, irrational, utterly absurd ideologies and practices coming to the surface briefly like so many lightening flashes on the horizon. But now secularists who not only deny God but boldly proclaim their anti-God sentiment publicly are in charge of almost every aspect of our culture.

Oh my! What shall we do? Shall we protest? Shall we rebel? Shall we move? Here is an idea: Trust God and act like you trust God. I do not understand how we can read Daniel's revelation about the ten-horned fourth beast (Daniel 7), Paul's description of the man of sin (2 Thessalonians 2), and all the vivid promises of the beast Anti-Christ ruling the world during the Great Tribulation (Revelation 6-18) and not realize that the whole world (including the USA) MUST go in this direction according to God's plan. According to God's revelation, the entire world must be secularized.

Oh that we could respond to all the bad news around us like the early Christians did. They lifted their voices to God and quoted the Bible that God has given us. Powerful prayer not only speaks plainly to God and implicitly trusts God, but it reminds God of what He already said to us. The beauty of that reality is that by praying God's word back to God, we remind ourselves of what He already promised.

### Response to Persecution (vv.23-28).

How should the child of God respond to difficulty, even persecution? The example of the first Christians teaches us to lift our voices to God. That doesn't mean that we pretend we are not troubled. To pray to God is not to live in denial. Rather, in prayer and to others we acknowledge the trial. *When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them (v.23).*

Upon release, the persecuted Christians immediately gathered with like-minded believers. They went to their friends. It is doubtful this is a reference to only the twelve apostles. It is also doubtful that this includes all 5,000 men plus women and children who God had

brought into the Church recently. It appears the “friends” might have been a particular house church. We should know what that is like. Even in our local churches there will be groups of people who connect and share burdens and joys on a level the rest of the assembly does not.

Christ’s witnesses did not meet with the friends in order to whine, complain, or plan legal recourse. The witnesses simply explained that the appointed authorities forbid them from preaching about Jesus’ character and work. Obviously, they also spoke about the threats the authorities leveled against them. This is exactly the right way to respond to persecution. Informing Christian friends about real persecution accomplishes a couple of important things for the Body of Christ, the whole assembly. It builds solidarity as we are able pray for each other and encourage each other. To share and acknowledge the problem also sends a warning so that we are not surprised when a similar thing happens to us.

And so, having acknowledged the problem, the friends prayed. *And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God (v.24a)*. Immediately upon hearing this report, Christ’s followers *lifted their voices together to God*. It is quite a picturesque statement. Picture us with our voice in our hands raising them up to God. It is a graphic way of saying we not only address God but are presenting ourselves to Him in the address. It is a picture of intimate dependency.

Notice also that it was corporate prayer. Meeting alone with God in your prayer closet is a method of prayer Jesus taught. That kind of setting creates a most intimate, encouraging, personal time of communicating with God. But praying with others and hearing them pray the same thing is very edifying. While Jesus taught the importance of private prayer, He also taught the importance of praying corporately. *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:18-20)*.

It is obvious from our text that the early Christians did not respond the way some Christians would recommend today. This was

not a pity party where two persecuted Christians wanted others to feel sorry for them. The Christians did not determine that they needed a voice to focus on how their freedoms were being violated. They didn’t organize a political or social action group or draw up a law suit against the hypocritical, wicked, unjust Sanhedrin. They didn’t write blogs exposing all the scandals in which the high priest family was involved (and there were plenty of them). No. *They lifted their voices together to God*.

Those early followers of Jesus also gave us a wonderful example of how to pray, or what to pray. They prayed God’s word to Him. Knowing their Scriptures, they were able to recall God’s promise from olden times. The promise is that God is sovereign in all matters. Therefore, they prayed, *“Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them” (v.24b)*.

The words *Sovereign Lord* translate just one word from the Greek. The word is *despoteis*, which gives us the English word despot. By definition, a despot is a ruler or other person who holds absolute power, typically one who exercises it in a cruel or oppressive way. Because He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, God is everyone’s absolute, unquestionable master. But our God rules without any of the negative connotations of a despot.

And because of God’s sovereign control, Peter and John had the privilege to preach the gospel to the entire Sanhedrin (the same people who condemned Jesus to death). What human nature would view as a problem, being dragged before authorities, God’s servants see as a God-ordained opportunity. Also, and in a similar way, because God is the sovereign Ruler, Peter and John had the privilege to suffer with Jesus for Jesus.

The persecution that began so early for the Church was not a case of circumstances being out of control. The first Christians understood that they would face what befell their Master Jesus because they were like Him. Consider the words Jesus taught in the context of Peter’s confession that He is the Christ. *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised (Matthew 16:21)*. Then compare the warning that Jesus had given at an earlier time. *“It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his*

master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household. So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known” (Matthew 10:25-26).

Therefore, the servants of Christ must not have been surprised that they too were delivered up to suffer many things from *the elders and chief priests and scribes*. Paul taught us that because God is the sovereign controller, *share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too* (2 Corinthians 1:5). In those kinds of circumstances, such difficulties, do we respond like Paul who suffered to death for Christ? His desire was, *That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death* (Philippians 3:10).

We can have this same confidence, this same boldness because the Sovereign God communicates with His servants. Those early Christians prayed, *lying hold of God, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit”* (v.25a). Here is the evidence that the early Christians focused on the Scripture, the truth God the Holy Spirit had communicated. We have the same privilege and more. The Holy Spirit has given us so much more information about God and us. Through the completed Bible, we know God so well and know ourselves well. Pray to God what He has already revealed, what He has promised.

In His Bible God reveals His plans and purposes. That is what the Christians in Jerusalem quoted as they prayed. *“Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed”*(vv.25-26). Human history is full of evidence that the nations rage in anger and indignation. It is part of the curse of sin. And so authorities plot, scheme, plan to make war in an effort to fulfill their lusts, their strong desires.

James explained the common problem. *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions* (James 4:1-3).

But God has revealed that the ultimate battle, the battle about which all other skirmishes are only harbingers, is Satan against Jesus. Throughout history and especially at the last battle, it is Satan using his pawns to fight against Jesus. Persecution against Jesus’ followers is necessary because Satan can’t get to Jesus who is in heaven. But when Jesus Christ was on earth as one of us, it must have appeared at times to the angels that Satan working through human authorities was going to win the battle.

The Christians prayed the promise that God had made 1,000 years earlier through David and then they applied God’s promise to their circumstances. They easily concluded that David’s psalm applied very well to their current rulers. They concluded, *“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* (v.27).”

It was easy for the praying Christians to see how God’s promise through David worked out. The human authorities all arrayed themselves against Jesus, God’s holy servant. There was Herod who ruled as king over Galilee, and Pontius Pilate the governor over Judea. The Gentiles could be a reference to both rulers as well as the Roman soldiers who crucified Christ. And the people of Israel would have included the religious rulers and the crowd they stirred up.

What a tragedy! Did the Christians pray, “Lord, why did you allow that to happen?” No. They understood that David’s psalm was about God’s eternal plan. The rulers all gathered together against Christ, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place* (v.28). All of those people, rulers, authorities were simply carrying out God’s predetermined plan. Even while Satan was controlling and motivating his people, they were only doing what God determined must be done. That they all were willing servants of wickedness results in God’s righteous judgment against them for eternity. Judas pictured well how God will use a person’s determined rebellion to accomplish His own predetermined goal.

This prayer revealed great understanding of God’s sovereign control. This prayer revealed great trust in God’s purposes and work. This prayer revealed a willingness to be used according to God’s will and design. That truth becomes obvious as we read the petition, the request of the prayer.

## Request to God (vv.29-31).

The request of those followers of Christ was a desire for God to do His will (vv.29-30), which was a request for God to allow His work to continue. *“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness”* (v.29). We begin by acknowledging truth, reality, the difficulty. It would have been foolish for the Christians to say, “Oh, that was no big deal.” It is a big deal when an official authority demands that you disobey God at the cost of punishment. It is a big deal when many powerful people all over the world threaten to persecute and even kill our brothers and sisters in Christ unless they recant.

But in the face of such circumstances, our immediate prayer is not, “Lord, hide us,” or “Lord, give us better rulers.” We may pray for that in the long run. But in the face of persecution, we pray for grace to do God’s will. We should pray with the early Christians, *“Grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness”* (v.29b). That is to pray for continued opportunity to speak the Bible. It is to pray for courage to speak the Bible boldly. It is pretty doubtful that very many Christians pray like this even though we face virtually no persecution. Maybe we should compare how shallow our commitment is when our great fear is that someone might not like us if we speak the Bible boldly.

Furthermore, that request in prayer was that God would continue to show signs of affirmation. *“While you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus”* (v.30). The Christians prayed for God to continue doing signs and wonders. Jesus had promised that signs and wonders would accompany the founding of the Church. He promised the disciples, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father”* (John 14:12). Fresh on the Christians’ minds was the reality that God’s healing of the lame man opened a tremendous opportunity to preach the gospel to the crowd and to the Sanhedrin. So they prayed, “Do that some more, God!”

We should not pray for signs like that. But we should pray for answered prayers as affirmation. It is obvious by the time later epistles were written that God no longer intended to use attention-

attracting signs. Now God’s way of attracting attention to the gospel is the testimony of changed lives. Paul referred to this kind of affirmation in the opening words of his first letter to the Thessalonians. *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia* (1 Thessalonians 1:4-7).

Another great affirmation of God’s continuing work is answered prayer. Pray that God will answer your prayer simply to increase your faith.

God answer the followers’ prayer with an amazing affirmation. *And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit* (v.31a). The literal shaking of the building where the Christians were gathered was another unusual, miraculous, affirming sign that God was listening. God doesn’t do stuff like that very often these days. There was not a baptism by the Holy Spirit but the filling up, complete control by the Holy Spirit. This was in answer to their prayer, *“Grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness”* (v.29b).

Guess what the result was. It was a continuation of God’s work. *They continued to speak the word of God with boldness* (v.31b). The disciples kept on speaking the word of God confidently, courageously. They were undeterred by the threats from authorities. They went on speaking the Bible undeterred that the word of God was not popular with the people who were proud to be guardians of God’s law.

This is the continuing work of Christ to this day. We are still given to speaking the word of God. In many cultures, to speak God’s word will place you in the path of persecution and even threats of death. In more worldly-wise cultures, to speak the word of God will get you dismissed out of hand as being out of touch, on the wrong side of history, unwoke. Even in our “Bible-belt” culture to actually, faithfully, accurately speak the word of God will sometimes earn you

the label of “boring, irrelevant, or old fashioned.” In a culture where the popular people talk about the Bible, someone who speaks THE Bible will be rejected as too deep, irrelevant, unaware of the issues of the day. But we will pray for God to grant that we may continue to speak the Bible. And we will pray that God will affirm His will by the testimony of changed lives.