

Last we were together we were finishing the drama of Peter and John's testimony of the Lord's power, demonstrated in the miraculous healing of this man who could not walk, and the opposition that they faced---subsequently jailed, brought out again, had to testify, had to defend themselves, threatened and oppressed. They were then told, basically, to stop talking about Jesus. Of course they did not. They gave the very hard question: Should we obey you or God? And the fact that they were speaking to the religious leaders of Israel, they were asking them a question that they knew that the answer had to be: Then you must obey God. And they continued to threaten them. In fact, last we were together we heard them say, "After further threats they let them go. They could not decide on how to punish them." These religious leaders were out of place. They didn't know what to do. Their world was being turned upside down. And indeed, "All the people were praising God for what had happened," this healing. They were listening to the testimony of Peter and John.

After letting them go, Peter and John returned to the church, returned to the people of God gathered, who were surely praying for them and supporting them. And the text before us this morning is the response of the people of God, the early church, to the opposition and trial that Peter and John had faced, and that they, too, were taking as their own. And what we find, is we find a praying church. Hear now God's word. Acts 4:23-31.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me. O Lord, Father of grace, by your Holy Spirit may you enable us to be a church that is praying. A church that is praying for your work, your name to be proclaimed, the restored renewal and vigor of your body, for Christ's sake. Lord, may we be recipients of this grace. So Lord, help us, we pray, to see you at work in our midst and through us, just as surely as we see demonstrated your presence in and your work through the early church. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

As I was reading and studying this passage in Acts and seeing the church's response, I was drawn to this Psalm, which I read a portion of it for you this morning: Psalm 27. The Lord is my light and my salvation---whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life---of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident. One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.

Peter and John had proclaimed the name of Christ. They had given a defense for by what authority had they produced this healing. They had seen this thing happen, they had testified to it. They were put in jail. They were facing great opposition. At the Psalmist would say, a great army was besieging them---an army of their own people. Their own religious leaders were coming against them. Now they're going back to this small example of the Lord's work---to a church that was, if you will, in exile. It was not at the center of the culture; it was at the periphery. It was being set upon and pushed out. It was being oppressed. And what we're going to see in the next few chapters as we go along, not everyone responded by prayer. Not everyone responded by asking for boldness. They were being tempted to turn against the profession that they had made.

But here we hear the echoes of the psalmist: The Lord is my light. The Lord is my salvation. Of whom shall I be afraid? That is to be the testimony of Christ and his church. And yet that proclamation comes not from a pride of place or position. We will see that that proclamation, that hope, comes from a people in very dire circumstances who call on the name of the Lord. For what we hear in this prayer is the echoing of so many of the great themes of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, particularly of the Psalms. That what does the Lord require of you if you profess faith in Jesus Christ? To go out and do great things in his name? No. The Lord first requires that we simply and humbly call on the name of the Lord. That is precisely what we see the church doing.

We will see in this prayer three things. We'll see a *Prayer of Thanksgiving*, a *Prayer for Power* and *God's Response*. A *Prayer of Thanksgiving*, a *Prayer for Power*, and *God's Response*.

So, a *Prayer of Thanksgiving*. We see in verses 23-28 before us we see this prayer of thanksgiving. After hearing what had taken place with Peter and John, the people of God respond very quickly by going into prayer. And what, by the way? It shows us how to pray. They used the very Scriptures of the Lord as the foundation of their prayer. They do it by using prayers of thanksgiving to call on the name of the Lord. In so doing, we see these three things: They give thanksgiving for God's presence, his provision, his sovereignty.

So we hear again when they say in verse 24, "When they heard this [report], they raised their voices together in prayer to God. 'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.'" What is so beautiful about the response of the early church is they do not turn first to strategy. They do not turn first to plans on how they're going to come against those who oppose them. Rather, they call on the name of the Lord, and they do it by way of thanksgiving: thanksgiving for his presence and thanksgiving for his provision. They both come out of the very same sentence when they say, 'Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.' What they're doing is they're directly drawing on Psalm 146. Now remember, these early converts were indeed not Gentiles, but rather Jewish believers who have been converted to the way of Christ. This psalm would have been familiar to them. Psalm 146. It says, "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save." Notice: Do not turn to mortal men and first try to strategize. Let us call on the name of the Lord. Verse 4: "When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing." Do you hear that without calling on the name of the Lord our plans fall to dust. Verse 5. "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God..." Now hear how they picked up this psalm in Acts Chapter 4---"...the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them--- the Lord, who remains faithful forever." But then the psalm continues. I will guarantee you as surely as I stand here, no way did these early Jewish converts simply quote that verse and not know the rest. Listen to what it says: "He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. The Lord reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all

generations. Praise the Lord.”

Do you see, friends, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century, do you see at the very heart of the early church were not grand strategies (there's nothing wrong with strategies), there were not grand plans, (though there's nothing wrong with plans). What began first was a prayer of thanksgiving and calling on the name of the Lord.

And they give thanks for his presence and his provision. For in calling on the name---and they use that phrase and that name: Sovereign God [Lord]. When they use that phrase, Sovereign God [Lord], they are calling on the reality and the truth that God is not as deists would have us believe, that he is a God who has created all things and then has distanced himself from its operation. Rather, the Scriptures proclaim God has created us in his image, and he upholds all things, he governs all things, he is powerful and knows all things. And in so doing, they say, thank you, Lord. We call on your presence. Because to call him Sovereign Lord, Sovereign God, is to say, 'You are most certainly present.' And is it not Jesus who taught his disciples this truth: 'Apart from me you can do nothing.' The branches cannot live apart from the vine. The sheep cannot live apart from the Shepherd. The sheep know the voice of the Shepherd, the Shepherd knows his sheep. They are thanking the Lord for his presence.

They are also thanking him for his provision, though they do not necessarily call out what those provisions are. But they are drawing on the great biblical truth that the God who is sovereign, the God who is there---we are thanking him because....why? We know he knows what we need. Is this not how Jesus taught us to pray? For the Lord knows what we need. We do not need to worry about what we will wear or what we will eat. We do not need to be anxious about what is tomorrow, because tomorrow has enough of its own concerns. We can call on the name of the Lord today, and we can give him thanks.

For they not only give a prayer of thanksgiving for his presence and his provision, but also his sovereignty. Let me come back to his sovereignty again. In verse 25 they then do very good biblical theology. They've already called on Psalm on 146 and applied it to their day and Christ's work in their midst. They go further when they say this: "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David..." Jewish converts to the way of Jesus are now looking back, as they have been taught, guided by the Holy Spirit, and they see the Holy Spirit didn't just show up at Pentecost. He has been there. He has spoken to us. He spoke through our father David. And what did our father David say? They then quote Psalm 2: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" That question is a question of why does the world bother? Because their pursuit of trying to overthrow the ways of our God will ultimately end up fruitless. "The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." And then they apply it, and they say, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel..." to what? "...to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." And then this phrase of God's sovereignty---and they are thanking him for it. "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

So what we see intersect there is a mystery, but an irreconcilable, inescapable issue---that God is both completely sovereign and providential in upholding and sustaining all things. He knows every action. He knows every thought. He knows every motive from the beginning of history unto the end. He is the one who designed and purposed and willed that his Son would be put to death outside of Jerusalem at the hands of Roman and Jewish religious leaders. And if God knew all of that, does that mean, therefore, that he is the source of sinful rebellion? The Scriptures declare not. Why? Because God's purposes and will also bring into its powerful orbit the free human actions of men and women. He knew that the nations would plot against his Son. He knew it. Though he's neither responsible for their sin, nor the source of it, he simply willed that those two would come into an inescapable

intersection of God's holy Anointed Son and their vengeance and revenge against a holy God, to then take his life outside of Jerusalem.

And because they were thanking God for his sovereignty, they could rest, because they're saying, Why do the nations conspire in vain? Why do they rise up against your Anointed One? Because look what happened. That one that was spoken of in Psalm 2 was not David. It was Christ. And look what they did to him. But look what God did. God raised him from the dead. He took what looked like an absolute, abysmal failure, and he turned it into victory over sin and death for all who call on his name.

I found a writer who summarized this thought this way, regarding the sovereignty of God in our prayer. Because some of us might be tempted into thinking, that if indeed God knows everything, and he wills what does come to pass, then why should I pray? It is because in the mystery of the power and authority of God, he means for his will and his purposes to be achieved through the prayers of his people. The writer says this: In the time of threat, prayer can be the rediscovery of the sovereign God who wins by letting our opponents win, and then transforming the expected result. This rediscovery can keep God's witnesses faithful in spite of threats. Let me repeat that again: In the time of great threat, it is prayer that enables us to rediscover that the sovereign God will allow our opponents to win so that he might turn what looked like an expected win upside down, to make a defeat into a victory for his people. He uses prayer in the midst of great trial, opposition and peril and threats, as the great opportunity to celebrate the Lord's power. We do not walk by sight, but we walk by faith in the Son of God. We do not pray because we know what the future holds. We are called to pray because our sovereign Lord knows the future and means to will it and to bring it in by causing us and calling us to pray.

And in that intersection of God's will and our prayer is the intersection that is so incredibly important for the Christian, that goes way beyond and way deeper than answered prayer. It is our dependence on the God who upholds us. We go to him because we want an answered prayer, but the Lord has given us prayer that we might become more dependent on his power. That is what this prayer of thanksgiving is about. This is why we are called with them to give first, not space and time to our plans and strategies---oh, how tempting that is---but to call on the name of the Lord.

But therein lies the problem, does it not? We can call on the name of the Lord today. We can become recharged in seeing prayer and the prayer of thanksgiving and calling on the name and being a praying church. And yes, that's precisely what we need to do. But I don't know about you, but I can go home today and get recharged in my desire to pray just like this. And I don't know about you, but I know my heart, that indeed, one week later, I need to be restored again, because I will forget feeling recharged. I'll go right back into subtle self-dependence. Are you with me?

This is why the people of God then turn after a prayer of thanksgiving, and what do they say? They pray a prayer for power. This is what they say. Verse 29. "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." In this prayer for power they are calling on the power of God's consideration. They're calling for boldness by the Spirit. And they're asking for a demonstration that indeed he is with them.

Let's look at that. What is so interesting about what they ask for after they've given a prayer of thanksgiving, is that the first thing that they say is this: "Now, Lord, consider their threats..." What they are doing is, they are, in prayer, putting authority where it belongs. What they are doing is, instead of taking on their own shoulders the possibility of trying to figure out what the motives are of those who threaten us and come against us---in this prayer they're essentially saying, that's not our dominion. That's not a place of our authority. Let's go to the sovereign Lord and say, Lord, consider the threats of those who stand against us. And what they're doing in saying, 'Consider,' is they're

saying, Lord, look at it. Think about it. That is your dominion. You know what's in their hearts. You know what's going on behind closed doors. You know what their plans are. It's your power that needs to be manifested in that place. That is not for us to figure out.

That's hard for people, right?...for whom judgment comes very easily. That comes hard to us as people who feel that our instincts and our knowledge tell us what might be going on in the hearts of others. But in this prayer they do not go there. They say, Lord, that's yours. You consider it. But what they ask for, then, is: Will you give us boldness? Boldness. Here's what they say. A boldness...of what? A boldness to proclaim or speak your word.

Last week I had as a part of my sermon outline, *A Humble Boldness*. This is what they're praying for. It's humble boldness because one, they don't say give us boldness in our speech, or give us boldness in our words, or give us boldness in our personalities. What they're saying is give us boldness in speaking your word, not their wisdom. What they are praying for is remarkable when you consider what they are not praying for. What's missing in this prayer as they ask God for his help? They are not praying for protection. They are not praying for deliverance. They are not praying for destruction of their enemies. They are not praying for separation from the world. They are not praying for privilege. And they're not praying for position. They're not asking God to do any of those things. Indeed, they want the Lord's power to be made manifest in the proclamation of the word, because the word doesn't need protection.

And because they are his people, they do not need deliverance. Why? Because they worship the sovereign God who holds all things in his hands. They do not need to pray for the destruction of their enemies. Rather Christ has taught them to love their enemies. They are not called to separate themselves, and so they don't ask for it, because it is Jesus who sent them out into the world to be salt and light. Salt belongs where things are rotting. Light belongs where there is darkness. Give us boldness to preach and proclaim your word where things are rotting and where there is darkness.

And they're not praying for privilege. Let me say this to every professing Christian in this room. The Church of Jesus Christ does not need a Christian president. It does not need a Christian Supreme Court. It does not need for Christian laws to be enacted. Regardless of what you may think about those positions, you are free to think, but I will say to you, the church does not need any of that for the gospel of Christ to go forward. You know why? Because it wasn't here. The church of Jesus Christ does not need....does not need for the culture to be transformed so that the gospel can go forth. Why? Because it wasn't here. They were at the periphery. They were small. They were in a multi-religious setting. They were being oppressed and under trial. They did not have the freedoms that you and I enjoy. They were being put in jail. They're getting ready to be stoned.

Friends, what they needed was the Lord's power. They needed boldness to proclaim. It is ironic, is it not, that so often the moments of the greatest growth in the church of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God expanding is not in times of great freedom, but great opposition. Does that mean we should wish for opposition or great difficulty? No, because that's the sovereign Lord's will. Does that mean we should not work for transformation and restoration? No, God has called you to work out, if you're a Christian, the gospel of the Lord in word and deed, wherever he has you. Does that mean we shouldn't vote for people who hold similar beliefs that we do? I'm not saying you shouldn't do that. I'm saying folks, let us not put our hope in kings. Let's not put our hope in armies. Let's not put our hope in politics. Let's not put our hope in position. Let us put our hope in the boldness that breaks down the hardest, steel trap known to man: the heart of man. And it is that spirit that transformed this church, and they are saying, Lord, give us boldness.

But then they asked for demonstration when they say, Lord, "Stretch out your hand..." And then they say, "...to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant

Jesus.” They are asking that which is right and good, but there is a danger here, if we miss it. And that is, we need to be asking for the demonstration of Christ and his power to be made manifest through his church. But this passage is not here so that we can try to relive it exactly word for word for word. Because remember, folks, the very people to whom Peter and John were preaching were not transformed into believers by miraculous signs. So this is not meant for the church of Jesus Christ to go back and to pray and to use Jesus's name as some sort of magic name to then be able to perform miraculous things. Notice what they're doing. What they're actually doing is not necessarily praying for just these things to be done. They're praying for whom to work, whose power to be made manifest...theirs? They're not praying for the gifts of the church to be made manifest. They're praying for the power of God to be made manifest.

When they say, 'Stretch out your hands...', that is an Old Testament theme of the people of God, saying, stretch out your hands, O Lord, meaning make your presence known, make your power known. How he does that is up to the sovereign Lord. That's going to be through healing at times; other times it's going to be through miraculous ability to preach the word of God at the right time and seeing people come to Christ. That's up to the Lord. But it is right to ask for demonstration,

Lord, if this we're asking you for is boldness, then will you not go before us? Go before us, go behind us, go with us. Because unless you go up before us, as the Israelites would say, we cannot go up from this place. Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders build in vain. It's the same idea. Lord, demonstrate that you are with us. And that is the prayer for power---not for themselves. Indeed these Jewish converts would have known not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be glory. And that's what they are praying for---the power of God to be made manifest in bold preaching and living out of the gospel with the Lord's demonstration within them.

But then watch what happens. Verse 31. The Response of God. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." First let me go off on a very short tangent that's important. This verse is not telling us of a second Pentecost. What it does tell us is that the Lord's response to his people calling on his name, not from selfish motives, but for the Lord's glory---he hears that prayer, and he responds. But what happens here is that the Lord demonstrates that he hears, and he responds, but it is not meant for us to see as the only way that the Lord responds. Notice, too, that there is the great power the Holy Spirit filling his people again, but there is no demonstration of the use of tongues. How is the power the Spirit demonstrated in this verse? They speak the word of God boldly.

So in other words, this is not a formula that we need to determine and use as a litmus test as to whether God's Spirit and the Lord are at work in hearing the prayers of his people. But rather that is up to the Lord. What it does say is that when the Lord is at work, when his Spirit is stirring up his people, what begins to happen is that they are transformed by that Spirit and by that word, and they began to speak it to one another and speak it to those around them. That is the Lord's response.

But there is something else here. This church, Columbia Presbyterian Church, is some thirty-five years old. Are we in need of restoration and renewal of God's Spirit? You absolutely bet we are. Is it because it's something peculiar to us? Absolutely not. It is because this church that is in prayer, that receives the renewing work of the Spirit stirring them up to preach boldly, is the early church---early, early church. And if they needed that, after seeing what the Lord did at Pentecost, how much more, then, are we not to be expecting, and ought to ask for the Lord to restore and to renew and to strengthen us in our proclamation of the Word by his Spirit.

But lest you think I'm telling you that the application of the sermon is that we need to be as a church---that we just need to be praying more---that is not what I'm saying. Nor am I saying what we need to is, we need to be like the early church. I am not saying that. Yes, we need to be a praying church.

Yes, we need to see the early church and what the Spirit is doing and ask the Lord to do the same. But we will never be able to do it, unless what happens....unless the Lord of glory comes in and renews us. Our actions will be failing unless we call on the name of the Lord. Why is this important? It is important because of this. I want to be bold. I believe many who are professing Christians here this morning want to be bold. We want to pray more. But as I said earlier, the problem is our hearts grow cold. We turn again to self-dependence. We turn again to the idols that entice us. And we turn away from him.

What we need is a fresh work of God, by his Spirit, to take our hearts and the eyes of our hearts, and have them gaze on the one who is able to give us the boldness, the one who is able to empower us, and that is Christ. Think on this. It was Christ, who on the night in which he was betrayed, was going into the Garden of Gethsemane. And here what we see is this. In this garden he was indeed looking at what was ahead of him. He was feeling the weight, as the Son of God, about what was getting ready to happen. And he looked at the suffering which was ahead and said, 'Take this cup from me.' He looked at the armies before him. He looked at the threats which were getting ready to be hurled at him. He looked, most importantly, however, not of what humans were going to do, but what was about to happen between him and his Father: separation. And he said, 'Take this Cup.'

But he knew the cup would not be taken from him, and he was faithful. He called on the name of the Lord. He gave up his spirit. He called on the name of the Lord, and on his enemies. He said, 'Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And after that, giving up his spirit he said, 'It is finished.' You see, no boldness is ever possible for any branch of the Jesus Christ Church unless we ask for the Spirit to give us such a picture of the vine that is Christ, who was bold in our place, who was faithful in our place. Therefore Church of Jesus Christ, let me say it is nothing other than we need Christ before us, Christ behind us, Christ in us. That by his Spirit we might be renewed in seeing just how beautiful is Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who was raised on the third day and is now sovereign, who is now the head of his church.

And he is the one on whom we call. He is the one who gives us that boldness. Because he is the one who has gone before us to face our ultimate enemy, death, by taking on our sin and being raised victorious. And if he has gone before us---let me say it again---if he has gone before us, Columbia Presbyterian Church, then should we not be able to say in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord is my light and my salvation---whom shall I fear? The Lord is our stronghold---of whom shall we be afraid? When evil men advance against us to devour our flesh, when our enemies and our foes attack us, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege us, our hearts will not fear; though war break out against us, even then we will be confident. And one thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep us safe in his dwelling; he will hide us in the shelter of his tabernacle and set us high upon a rock. [Psalm 27]

That rock is Christ. And it is Christ who has sought us. And it is Christ who gives us his Spirit to be in us. May he make us a renewed people, a praying church, because of Christ, and for Christ alone. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, come and renew us as a people of worship, as a people who recognize our idolatry of safety and comfort and largess, and make us a people hungry for worshiping the Lord, to call on your name that we might see your kingdom extended, Sovereign God. Though the nations rage, though the nations conspire against your Anointed One, O Lord, will you give us a boldness to proclaim your Word, in thought, in word, in deed. And may you, O Lord, demonstrate your power through your church. And may you, O Lord, stir our hearts to see Christ, for his glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.