

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #12

Acts 4:23-31

Back in the 1500s there was a Scottish Reformer whose name was John Knox. He went to Geneva, Switzerland to study with John Calvin. He particularly consulted with him on matters pertaining to opposing government given over to idolatrous religion. In 1559 he went back to Scotland and boldly declared that the Catholic Mass was idolatry and that all Catholic churches and monasteries should be closed. The queen of Scotland had Knox arrested for treason but the court acquitted him. It was said of John Knox that “He feared God so much that he never feared the face of any man.” John Knox had the same commitment to truth that the early church had. He was in the same mold as the Apostles Peter and John.

Acts 4 is a critical moment in the beginning history of the Church because it answers a critical question. What do we do when we are threatened by the highest authority in the land? Do we back down? Do we give in? Do we give up? Do we defy civil and religious authority? Do we take a stand and pray? Peter and John give us God’s answer.

The religious leaders of Israel had threatened this new church. They wanted preaching about the name of Jesus stopped. These religious leaders were dedicated to law, liturgy and works and now the apostles were teaching that any who will believe on Jesus Christ will be saved, simply by believing in His name.

Peter and John had been arrested (Acts 4:3), and were forced to appear before some of the same powerful religious leaders who had killed Jesus Christ (4:5-6). They were warned to stop preaching, but Peter and John refused (Acts 4:18-20). They stood their ground even when they did not know what would happen to them. They took a stand for God and they won. What we see here is what happened after this epoch moment.

THE FIRST THING THE EARLY CHURCH DID WHEN THEY LEARNED THEY WERE THREATENED AND FACING INTIMIDATIONS WAS TO LIFT THEIR VOICES IN UNITED PRAYER, AND GOD ANSWERED THEIR PRAYER IN POWERFUL WAYS.

Prayer is an important part of having victory in the church. Prayer is an important part of surviving various threats and intimidations. Prayer is an important part of having God’s Word boldly proclaimed in great power. God does powerful things with a church that prays. We need people to pray and take prayer seriously. Thank God many of you do.

Now you will notice from **verse 23** that after Peter and John had been released, the first thing they did was to go back to “their own,” which refers to their own fellow believers and report everything to the church. It is possible he reported to all 5000 plus converts, but in view of the fact that they are in one room, it is probable that this is the initial Upper Room group that was the first church (1:13-15; **4:31**).

Years ago we were interviewing a missionary that we suspected was not doing the job on the field, yet was being supported at a high level by many churches. The first thing we asked him to do was to take us through one of his weeks - start with Monday and take us through Sunday.

You would have thought we asked him to discuss philosophies of nuclear physics. He was caught completely off-guard.

What we see in the early days of the church is you didn't have to ask the apostles what they were doing; they came and laid it out for you. They told them about the warning and the mandate not to preach in Jesus' name, and they told them their reaction and how they were going to keep preaching. When they did, there were two main responses:

RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH #1 - The early church prays to God. 4:24-31

This prayer is amazing. It is one of the most dramatic prayers you will ever read in the Scriptures and it shows us how the early church prayed. The actual prayer takes about sixty-five seconds to pray. But when this prayer is over, the power of God is dramatically unleashed.

The main emphasis of the prayer is acknowledging the truth of the sovereignty of God. There are three parts to the prayer:

Prayer Part #1 – Prayer begins by acknowledging the sovereignty of God. 4:24-28

This prayer is truly focused on the sovereignty of God because this is exactly where true prayer starts. There are five facts brought out about this amazing prayer.

(Fact #1) - They prayed this prayer in complete unity. 4:24a

Now this is important because some in the group could have thought, now just a minute, you have just taken a stand against the most powerful people in the world. Maybe we should rethink your position. But notice the emphasis, they lifted their voices “in one accord.” This phrase shows up eleven times in Acts. **This church was Spirit-empowered and this church was united.**

(Fact #2) - They prayed acknowledging He is the Sovereign Creator. 4:24b

The prayer begins by a focus on the sovereignty of God specifically as the Creator of the heaven and earth and the sea and all in it. In fact, it starts out “God is Sovereign Lord.” The word “Lord” (δεσποτα) is the word from which we get our English word “despot” which means that He is the Master and Lord who owns and controls everything (G. Abbott Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 102-103). Everywhere you look in this universe, whether in the sky or on the earth or in the sea, you may observe the sovereign hand and work of the Sovereign God.

Keep in mind that they are all united in this prayer. They lifted up their voices in unity and, based on what they pray, there was not an Arminian in the group. In fact, I find this point very interesting because Arminians tends to place a major emphasis on their own works and their own will. What this prayer suggests is that those who are truly in tune with the Holy Spirit are non-Arminian in their doctrine. Every believer believed in the absolute sovereignty of God.

No wonder God did such powerful things in Acts, the doctrine promoted a reverence for and a belief in the Sovereignty of God. One question that demands consideration is why does this prayer begin by reminding God that He is the Sovereign God? Why does this prayer begin by reminding God of something He obviously already knows? We suggest three reasons here:

- 1) If we expect God to do powerful things in prayer, our theology must be consistent with what God has revealed in His Word.
- 2) God is in sovereign control of everything, not the religious rulers and leaders. In fact, He is the One who actually made all people who live in His creation. Our big concern is to submit to the Creator, not someone trying to get us to do something contradictory to Him. We must submit to God's sovereignty, not man's sovereignty when faced with a conflicting decision of doctrine or action.
- 3) The fact of the sovereignty of God is the very foundation of prayer (Acts 14:15).

Any person in tune with the Holy Spirit acknowledges the sovereignty of God.

(Fact #3) - They prayed acknowledging His Spirit inspired the written Scriptures. **4:25**

Much of what they will mention here comes from Psalm 2. As they prayed, they carefully reflected on the written Scriptures, which they acknowledge were inspired by the Holy Spirit. If a church is going to see God do powerful things, it must acknowledge the Scriptures are inspired by God and they are literal. It has been said that "prayer is us talking to God and the Scriptures is God talking to us." When we carefully and prayerfully study the Scriptures, and when we pray consistent with the inspired Scriptures, we may expect to see God do powerful things.

(Fact #4) - They prayed acknowledging His Spirit inspired prophecy concerning Jesus Christ. **4:25-26**

The Holy Spirit will always promote and honor Jesus Christ, not Himself. The Psalm which is cited here is Psalm 2 and it is a Messianic Psalm. The early church connected this prophetic Psalm to what happened to Jesus Christ. The Gentiles, the people, the kings of the earth, and the rulers were gathered together against Jesus Christ. They devised futile things, thinking they could stop and silence Jesus Christ. However, notice in **verse 26** who the church identifies Jesus Christ to be, "the LORD" meaning He is God and "the Christ" meaning He is God's Messiah. You cannot stop the Sovereign God and you cannot kill God's Messiah. In fact, according to Psalm 2:4, God gets a good laugh at proud arrogant people who think they can stop Him.

(Fact #5) - They prayed acknowledging all things done against Christ were predetermined by God. **4:27-28**

In **verse 24** we have reference to creation. In **verse 25** we have reference to inspired revelation. In **verses 27-28** we have reference to the sovereign purpose of the incarnation.

The Greek concerning Jesus Christ in **verse 27** is emphatic. Jesus Christ is "the holy child of God" (τον αγιον παιδα σου).

The word "servant" (παιδα) is one that refers to a child who is under the authority or instruction of another. The word "anoint" means Jesus was consecrated by God the Father for very sacred service (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 485).

What is revealed here is that Jesus Christ was given a sacred assignment as the Holy Son of God, and Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the peoples of Israel carried out the predetermined plan of God in precise accordance to God's sovereign hand and God's sovereign purposes. The death of Jesus Christ was no accident; it was the sacred sovereign plan of God.

What is particularly interesting about Herod and Pilate is that both of them initially found Jesus Christ innocent (Luke 23:13-15). How is it that these two would permit an innocent Jesus to be crucified? The predetermined sovereign plan of God!

Our theology starts right here. God is so sovereign that even the most hellish people doing the most evil things are part of the sovereign plan of God. God is sovereign over everything.

Prayer Part #2 - Prayer that requests God uses His sovereignty to help them. **4:29-30**

Because this church was based on proper doctrine about the sovereignty of God, they could make three requests. What is amazing about these requests is that they do not ask any immunity from the danger. They are more concerned with the fact that they remain bold in communicating truth.

(Request #1) - They request that God take note of their threats. **4:29a**

The verb "take note" and the noun "threats" are interesting. The word "threat" (*απειλη*) means just what it says, to be threatened (*Ibid.*, p. 46). However, the verb "take note" means the request is for God to take an attentive look, give special attention to these threats (*Ibid.*, p. 165). Now the specific attentive look may be for the purpose of blessing or punishment.

If we let this word stand in the context it seems to me that the request is for God to look at these threats and keep pouring out His blessings on them any way. Here is the best thing we can do when we are threatened, go to God and ask Him to deal with the threats and those threatening us.

(Request #2) - They request that God grant them the ability to speak God's Word with confidence. **4:29b**

Do not miss this because here is what these believers ask God to do for them. They did not want the threats to intimidate them and their work in any way. They did not trust in themselves to have the power to keep boldly proclaiming the Word, but they did ask that God would grant them the boldness and confidence to keep going and to speak forth the Word of God. **By the way, notice how the Word is boldly declared: by speaking, not by acting or singing. Notice also they do not want to speak in tongues; they want to speak the Word of God.**

It is amazing that they do not pray for relief from the threats; they pray for confidence and courage in the midst of the threats to be able to boldly speak and communicate the truth of God. The cry of most in today's church is tone it down to reach the lost. The prayer of the first church is make us bold and confident so we may thunder forth Your Word and truth by our speech.

I recently heard one minister say that he does not like to say anything negative from the Bible for fear that people won't want to come back to his church. I believe many churches have lost their boldness to accurately preach the Word of God. Very few even systematically expound the books of the Bible. They have caved into modern day pressures, intimidations, and threats. They have replaced bold preaching with financial seminars, retirement programs, video series, and shallow studies. Some people threaten to leave if you don't come up with things that will entertain them and their kids. Many churches are caving in to the pressure.

Some are so ashamed of the Word of God that they don't even have a pulpit anymore. You look at the stage and you see a band, and the minister walks around in shorts and a T-shirt and just shares nothing.

What ever happened to this philosophy in Acts? What ever happened to the prayer that the church will boldly preach God's Word with Spirit led intensity? What ever happened to expounding the Word of God book by book? The church has lost "the Spirit" of the early church; in fact, I would almost say most churches lack any real power of the Holy Spirit.

When I go to a mechanic, I want one who takes charge and knows automobiles and how to fix them. When I go to a doctor, I want a doctor who knows physiology and medicine, not one who faints when he sees blood. When I get on a jet, I want a pilot who knows jets inside and out and knows how to fly. I expect they will take charge and get the job done. I don't want some wishy-washy mechanic, doctor, or pilot who wants to share fuzzy stories. When we go to church, if we have the same attitude of the first church, we will want to hear God's Word and we will want it taught confidently and boldly. That is exactly what the church prayed for.

(Request #3) - They request that God will continue to do powerful things with them through the name of Jesus. **4:30**

The important thing to see here is that the purpose of the healings and the signs and the wonders was to establish the saving name of Jesus. The apostolic sign gifts stopped once the saving name of Jesus had been established. The Gospel centers on a name - one name, one and only name - Jesus.

Notice the major emphasis in Acts 4 given to this one name: 4:7, 10, 12, 17, and 18. The name "Jesus" is the only name that can save you. You cannot be saved any other way than through believing in His name and that is all you have to do. In fact, this is what you "must" (4:12) do to be saved from your sins. You must believe in His name.

All of the signs and the healings and the wonders that were being wrought through the hands of the apostles (Acts 2:43), were about the importance of that name.

It seems to me that not only has the Church lost the focus of bold preaching, but it has also lost the focus of the saving value of simply believing in His name. Religion has muddied up this simple truth and added a whole bunch of things: 1) Repent and believe, 2) Believe and surrender to Him and make Him Lord of your life; 3) Believe and make a public confession of Christ; 4) Believe and be baptized in water; 5) Believe and confess your sins.

All of this misses the truth. **You are saved by simply believing in the name of Jesus.** That is exactly the doctrine taught by the Church. You are saved by believing in His name.

What a powerful prayer that early church made and what powerful things they would see God do. We need men praying, women praying, children praying. You pray for this ministry and watch what God will do. He'll shake this area up with this church.

RESPONSE OF GOD #2 – God answers the request of the church. **4:31**

When they had prayed this prayer God answered in three ways:

(Prayer Answer #1) - The place was shaken . **4:31a**

Now they began this prayer by acknowledging that God is the Creator of all things. Therefore for Him to shake this room is nothing but a powerful display of Almighty God. This same word will be used again by Luke in Acts 16:26 and it refers to an earthquake-type shaking. It is funny that most people think of an earthquake as a sure sign of Divine displeasure, but in this case it is a sure sign of Divine favor. God's power was with this church.

There is absolutely no doubt that God reveals in many places that He is the Sovereign God of tornadoes, rainstorms, floods, droughts, and earthquakes (i.e. Nahum 1:3-5). J. A. Bengel believed that the reason why God shook this place is because God was showing this early church that He was going to shake the whole world with this Gospel they would proclaim.

(Prayer Answer #2) - They were all filled with the Holy Spirit. **4:31b**

They all received a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit. We are baptized one time by the Holy Spirit. We are regenerated one time by the Holy Spirit. We are sealed one time by the Holy Spirit. We are indwelt one time by the Holy Spirit. But we will always be in need of the Holy Spirit controlling more and more of our lives. It would be the Spirit's filling that would enable these believers to go forward. To do that they needed to be completely yielded to the Holy Spirit and at this moment they were.

(Prayer Answer #3) - They all began to speak the Word of God with boldness . **4:31c**

They did not speak in foreign languages; they spoke the known Word of God with boldness. The more we know of God's Word the more authoritative we can be. **When the Holy Spirit is truly working in the church, there will be boldness and a confidence in the presentation of God's Word.**

Some churches are almost apologetic for the Bible. Some think it is better to just share and not get too serious about the Bible. However, God's Word is not designed to tickle ears; it is designed to cut souls. We boldly declare to you today that there is only one name that can and will save you; it is the name Jesus. Believe in Him and you will be saved.