

## Chapter 10: Praying for Boldness

*Acts 4:23–31*

Although the religious leaders had sought for an excuse to punish the apostles with severity in order to deter them from continuing to speak in the name of Jesus, they ultimately could only threaten them and release them (Acts 4:15–21). How, then, will the church respond? Will the church give thanks to God for the deliverance, but then resolve to avoid any future run-ins with the authorities? Will they allow a root of bitterness to grow against those who attempted to oppress them? Or, will they become fleshly and self-dependent, boasting in their own strength? In a tremendous example of prayer in the church in Acts 4:23–31, we learn how we ought to react to this event. Namely, we must learn dependence upon the Lord, since *Christians must suffer boldly for Jesus*.

### Gentiles Rage against Believers (Acts 4:23–28)

The apostles, now released, immediately returned to “their own” (ESV: “their friends”)<sup>1</sup> to report “what the chief priests and the elders had said to them” (v. 23). After the Lord had brought them through this great trial, they reported it to other believers for at least three reasons: (1) to advise the church of the danger that had arisen against them; (2) to encourage the other believers about what the Lord had done for them in the face of such danger; and (3) to draw the whole church together to seek the Lord’s power in the midst of their danger.<sup>2</sup>

It is this third reason that directs their next steps: “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God...” (v. 24a). In this verse, the word “together” is a weak translation of ὁμοθυμαδὸν (*homothumadon*), which means, “with one impulse,” from θυμός, which means “wrath” or “anger.” In other words, they were driven forward by one *passion* or *impulse*—an impulse which led them to pray. Bock notes that the word “voice” is singular in the original Greek, emphasizing the unified impulse of a church which lifted a single “voice.”<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that they all prayed a set prayer in unison, but that an individual apostle prayed, and the rest of the congregation joined their

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<sup>1</sup> “Many interpreters see this as referring only to the other apostles, viewing vv. 24–30 as the apostles’ prayer for boldness in their witness. The apostles, however, were not the only bold witnesses in Acts. Note Stephen (6:10) and Philip (8:5), to mention only the next two major witnesses in Acts. The whole community was involved in the proclamation of the word, and the community gathered for prayer when the apostles were in difficulty (cf. 12:12).” (Polhill, *Acts*, 148.)

<sup>2</sup> “Here is a double fruit of this history, that the disciples of Christ do not jest when they hear that their enemies do threaten them so sore and press so sore upon them, as careless and sluggish men use to do; but being touched with fear, they fly to seek help at the hands of God; and again, they are not terrified, neither yet do they conceive any immoderate fear; but crave of God invincible constancy with right godly petitions.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:182.)

<sup>3</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 204.

hearts with the one praying.<sup>4</sup> The need for prayer is dire, since “A great critical moment has come: all their preaching and teaching must henceforth be done in open violation of the highest legal power and authority of their nation. They must, therefore, depend wholly upon the still higher power and authority of God.”<sup>5</sup>

The prayer itself is a model, both in its form as well as its content, especially considered against the context of recent events. In the midst of tumultuous trials, the church addresses God as “Sovereign Lord” (Δέσποτα; *Despota*), from which we get our word, “despot,” one who rules with absolute and unrestricted power by his will alone, but the Greek word does not have the connotation of arbitrariness and tyranny which we associate with the word despot.<sup>6</sup> This address, along with the remainder of the v. 24, is filled with Old Testament imagery and language: “God was addressed as ‘Sovereign Lord,’ a common designation for God in the Old Testament and appropriate to this gathering of Jewish Christians. God was further addressed as Creator, Maker of heaven, earth, the seas and all that dwell in them, again in language thoroughly steeped in Old Testament phraseology (cf. Exod 20:11).”<sup>7</sup> This is not simply stock language from the Bible to fill out their prayers, but by praying in ways that recall the Lord’s creation of the heaven, earth, the sea, and all that is in them functions as a reminder to the early church that the same God who brought forth all things by the word of his power is the same God who still upholds all events that are unfolding around them.

Up to now, the prayer has simply *sounded* like Old Testament prayers. At this point, though, the apostles shift into directly citing Psalm 2 as an Old Testament prophecy being fulfilled in their midst: “Sovereign Lord...who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘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). As Peter had noted twice earlier, David is here cited as a prophet who speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (see also Acts 1:16; 2:30–31). The “rage” of the Gentiles cited here is a visceral word: “The verb appears only here in the NT. It refers to being insolent. In its everyday use, it refers to ‘spirited animals,’ such as snorting horses before a race.”<sup>8</sup>

Regarding Psalm 2 as a whole, Polhill writes: “Most likely originally relating to God’s triumph over Israel’s enemies through the anointed king, the Christians came to see it as in a real sense prophetic of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> In some sense, Psalm 2 is a timeless declaration of the opposition of all peoples and nations in the world against the kingdom of God; however, it finds a particular fulfillment in the persecution of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the prayer charges all “peoples” with 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

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<sup>4</sup> “We pray in the same manner. The pastor’s voice is the voice of the entire congregation speaking to God.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 177.)

<sup>5</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 177.

<sup>6</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 177.

<sup>7</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 206.

<sup>9</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 149.

<sup>10</sup> “The conjunction γάρ [*gar*; ‘for’] frequently specifies by introducing an example; it is like our ‘for instance.’” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 181.)

hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (vv. 27–28). Note that this list includes Herod (an Edomite), Pontius Pilate (a Roman), a generic reference to “the Gentiles,” and a specific reference to “the peoples of Israel.”

Once again, the church is deeply aware that the raging of the world against Jesus was under the complete, sovereign control of God (v.28; see also Acts 2:23; 3:18). Yet, this statement makes the point more forcefully than either of the statements before, since this prayer acknowledges that the raging nations had only done “*whatever* your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (v. 28, emphasis added). As Calvin observes, “herein is contained a singular doctrine, that God doth so govern and guide all things by his secret counsel, that, he doth bring to pass those things which he hath determined, even by the wicked.”<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that the nations intended to do what the Lord had planned, since their purposes were “empty,” as far as *their* purpose and intent were concerned; but in God’s hand and counsel these vicious things were made to serve *his* purpose and intent....It is thus that God rules in the midst of his enemies, and when they do their own wicked will most perfectly, they become mere tools for his high and blessed will.”<sup>12</sup>

### Believers Pray for Boldness (Acts 4:29–31)

With this prayer in view, the request of the church is striking: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness” (v. 29–30). The word “now” in this context is important, since it implies that what the apostles “have just experienced is a continuation of the opposition experienced by Jesus himself.”<sup>13</sup> What had happened to Jesus at the cross is “now” happening to the disciples—an observation that connects with the thematic parallels between the persecution of the apostles in Acts 4:1–22 and the persecution of Jesus in Luke 19–20 on the way to his cross.

This continuity is important not only to express the solidarity that believers have with Christ, but also to shape the way that we endure our suffering. What the apostles pray for is of deep practical significance to the church: “One would expect them to ask God for further deliverance. They did not.”<sup>14</sup> More than that, “They do not ask for punishment of the Sanhedrin.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps even more surprising within the context of the prayer, “the believers do not use the wording of Psalm 2 for their petitions. They do not pray that God may laugh at the Jewish leaders (cf. Ps 2:4), or terrify them in his wrath (Ps 2:5), or break them with an iron rod or dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel (Ps 2:9) so that they perish (Ps 2:12).”<sup>16</sup>

That said, this point should not be overstated, since the apostles do ask the Lord to “look upon their threats...” (v. 29a). Within the Old Testament, the wicked often boast that God will not see their wickedness (Psalm 10:7, 11; Psalm. 64:3, 5; 73:8, 11). The Lord, on the other hand, insists that he does see and judge the wicked, specifically for the purpose of judging: “But you do see, for you

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:187.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 182.

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 198.

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 150.

<sup>15</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 183.

<sup>16</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 258.

note mischief and vexation, that you may take it into your hands” (Ps. 10:14a; see also Ps. 11:4–6; 14:2–3; 53:2; 64:7–9; 94:7, 10, 13). In light of this context, it does not seem accurate to say that the disciples are *not* praying for the Lord to judge their enemies; rather, it would be better to say simply that they are not *focused* on that judgment. They are entrusting the judgment of the wicked to the Lord and instead focusing their attention on strength to accomplish the mission they have been given.

So, the church asks that the Lord would “grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.” Why would they pray this? Quite simply, the apostles recognize that the same God who was in control as Jesus went to the cross is still in control as they follow in the footsteps of their Lord’s suffering: “In the paradox of human freedom and divine sovereignty, despite all the raging of humanity, God’s purposes prevail. They did so in Christ. They did so with the apostles before the Sanhedrin.”<sup>17</sup> What Jesus endured because of his unfailing trust in the purposes of his Father, his apostles can endure as they trust in the purposes of God as he builds his church.

This helps also to understand the additional petition that the apostles make: “while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (v. 30). They do invoke the power of God, but not (as noted earlier) for the sake of their “protection against the execution of these threats, nor for anything regarding their own person.”<sup>18</sup> Instead, as they plead for the power of God, they ask that God would pour out his power in signs and wonders that would confirm the message that they are preaching about (and through) “the name of your holy servant Jesus.” If they must suffer, they must suffer. More than suffering, they must make the name of Jesus known, and they ask for God both for boldness and power as they declare his message as witnesses of the resurrected Lord Jesus. As Calvin writes, “Therefore, the more we perceive ourselves to be holpen [i.e., helped] by the Lord, let us learn to crave at the hands of God that we may go forward hereafter; and especially seeing the free confession of the gospel is a singular gift of God, we must continually beseech him to keep us in the same.”<sup>19</sup>

The Lord answers their prayer immediately: “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” (v. 31). Importantly, “This was not a ‘second Pentecost.’ They had already received the Spirit....It was a fresh filling, a renewed awareness of the Spirit’s power and presence in their life and witness. This was not an ephemeral ecstatic manifestation but a fresh endowment of power for witness that would continue (cf. 4:33).”<sup>20</sup> As on the Day of Pentecost, however, the blessings are not restricted to the apostles alone: “they were *all* filled with the Holy Spirit” (emphasis added). Moreover, “all” is likely the subject in the next phrase: “[all] continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” The word for “speak” is a very general word for “speak,” rather than a more technical word like “preach,” “proclaim,” or “teach.” As church historian Michael Green has suggested from phrases like this, the early church engaged in “gossiping the gospel”

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<sup>17</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 149.

<sup>18</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 183.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:189.

<sup>20</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 150.

everywhere they went.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Peterson writes that “Praying for God to bless the ministry of others can be a dangerous way of getting caught up in it yourself!”<sup>22</sup>

What, then, might we expect from our own prayers? Should we expect that the places where we pray will be shaken? Calvin is very helpful on this point:

For the shaking of the place should, of itself, have done them small good; but it tendeth to another end, that the faithful may know that God is present with them. Finally, it is nothing else but a token of the presence of God. But the fruit followeth, for they are all filled with the Holy Ghost, and endowed with greater boldness. We ought rather to stand upon this second member. For whereas God did declare his power then by shaking the place it was a rare and extraordinary thing; and whereas it appeared by the effect, that the apostles did obtain that which they desired, this is a perpetual profit of prayer, which is also set before us for an example.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas the miraculous shaking of the place where they prayed belonged to an era of signs, wonders, and miracles, the boldness that the disciples gain through this prayer is normative for every age. The church can, and does, gain boldness by praying for this boldness—especially prayers that meditate on the biblical testimony of God’s sovereign control in the midst of the raging nations. By this example, we should pray for bold confidence to speak God’s word faithfully to all those with whom we come into contact.

## Discussion Questions

1. To whom did the apostles go when they were released from the custody of the Sanhedrin (v. 23)? What did they say? What was the effect of their report? What does the word “together” in v. 24a tell us about the nature of their prayer together? What does the word translated “Sovereign Lord” mean (v. 24b)? What aspects of God’s sovereignty does the church emphasize (v. 24c)?

2. Why does the church stress the inspired nature of Psalm 2 in their prayer (v. 25)? What does this quotation of Psalm 2 affirm? How does this shape the church’s view of Christ’s suffering (v. 27)? Who all was involved in the conspiracy against Jesus (v. 27)? How many nations does that group represent? How do their wicked actions fit into the sovereign power of God? Why does the sovereignty of God over providence factor into the church’s prayer?

3. How does “now” connect the sufferings of Jesus with the sufferings of the church (v. 29a)? From psalms that call upon the Lord to “see” or “look” upon the evil of the wicked, what is the church

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 243.

<sup>22</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 203.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:189.

asking for when they ask God to “look upon” the “threats” of the leaders (v. 29b)? How does this posture avoid extremes that believers struggle with in considering God’s righteous judgment?

4. What does the early church pray for most (v. 29c)? How is this prayer answered (v. 31b)? What kind of boldness to speak God’s word do you need in your own life? How does this scene of praying God’s Word teach us about how we should pray for God’s boldness for ourselves? What is one detail you can apply from this scene to strengthen your own prayer life? How might you seek the power of God’s Holy Spirit for a circumstance in your life today?