

Petitionary Prayer
Acts 4:29-31

We are in this section where we observe how the disciples responded to the early persecution of the church. Peter and John as they appear before the Sanhedrin are commanded not to preach in the name of Jesus or there are going to be further repercussions. And they go out and find other believers and report what they have been told. They pray and quote Scripture, and after quoting Psalm 2 we have those wonderful verses that remind us that God is not only greater than all those who oppose him, but even sovereign over all their decisions and even the outcome of those decisions. And then they apply it to the gospel of Christ. The things that happened to Jesus were not an accident or something that was outside of God's will or plan, but everything that came to pass was absolutely planned by God.

And this is such a comfort in our lives for a couple of reasons. One is that what is most important in our lives - our eternal destiny and the eternal worship of his Son was planned by God. And therefore nothing that can ever come into our lives that can take us outside of his love. When Jesus cried out "it is finished," everything that God plan and require for our salvation was accomplished. And secondly therefore, nothing can come into our lives that has not been planned or ordained by God. These things can take us by surprise but they never take God by surprise. He not only knows the events of our lives but has planned them. They are there for our good and his glory. We might not see the good or all that God is doing, but the cross and all the evil around the cross scream out that God can bring the greatest good out of the most horrendous evil and wickedness. Our trust is in who God is. He is not our helpless lover, but one who has all power and authority whose will always comes to pass. In the darkest days of our lives, we need to preach the message of the sovereign God who is the lover of our souls, and the greatest example of proof of that is the cross of Christ.

And the application for the disciples is God is over this opposition that they now face, and he is not helpless against the threats of the might of the Sanhedrin. But after they pray and praise God for who he is and what he has done, they enter into petition. The praise was not to butter God up that he might respond to them, but they enjoyed God and delighted in who he is, and that delight led to worship of God. But now they petition God in the midst of trying and fearful and uncertain circumstances and suffering. And one of the things I love about the Biblical prayers that are recorded in Scripture is they teach us to pray. They teach us what is important to God, and also what these early Christians thought was of utmost importance. The Psalms teach us to pray in the midst of adversity and heartbreak, and they cause us to express our deepest sorrows to God. They give language and expression when we search for language and expression. And many of Paul's prayers focus on believers recognizing the glory of God in Christ the hope of our salvation. Listen to this prayer of Paul, and remember this is inspired Scripture, and this is what we should be praying for one another in Ephesians 1:16-23, **"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which**

he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." There are many things he prays for, but Paul does not pray chiefly that people might have an easy life or their temporal difficulties might be taken away but that they might know something of the height and depth and glory of Christ. And it is amazing how our problems and suffering become less and less in our estimation even though they have not changed when we see something of the grandeur and expansiveness of Jesus Christ and his love for us.

But as we are going through struggles, how do we pray? How do we pray for those causing difficulties and trials in our lives? We all pray if we are believers. We all make requests to God, but what are those requests in the face of opposition and suffering and pain and sorrow? Answering that question exposes what is most important to us, what we want to see God do with our lives and the lives of those around us. I want us to look at what these believers asked of God, and then I want us to look at the answer given by God. May God change our hearts so much so that we desire the same things that most glorifying to Him regardless of what that brings into our lives. May God change us and our prayers!

1. We need to see the request. Vv. 29-30.

It is amazing how many of our requests to God, many of our petitions on our behalf are just about escaping the difficulties and trials of life. Or about our personal joys and goals and dreams. It is almost as if life is about us and getting the most pleasure out of this life is the whole goal. When there is struggle the highest goal is escape. Don't stay in it no matter what God says or what good may come. The whole goal is physical and temporal, and we really do not know what to pray outside of God healing or taking away a problem or obstacle to our happiness. And God is there to deliver on our happiness. You would think by listening to our prayers that our goals are much like those of the health, wealth and prosperity gospel. Our goals are much like the world around us to have more of this world and life. Yet, when we come to the scriptures and the prayers of Scripture, it is amazing what the goal is - none other than the glory of God no matter the cost - the fame of Jesus and that others might know him and love him because he is worthy of praise and trust from all people and all lips.

And therefore, knowing what they have just experienced and what could happen to them this prayer is so different and challenging to our prayers. Think of what you would pray for if someone threatened your livelihood or threatened your life for worshiping and preaching and testifying of Jesus Christ. We probably would have asked first and foremost that the obstacle or person be removed — that God would rain down judgment on the religious leaders. Or we would have prayed for our safety and then kept silent. But look at verse 29 again, **"And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all**

boldness.” Now there are three parts to their prayer. The first is for God to “look upon their threats.” Now what does this mean? And it means that the threat and the danger is real. These men have the power and authority to cause great harm. And then they begin the specific request this way, “and grant.” In other words, they were looking for something which only God could provide. And what is it? And we would think it would be safety or deliverance from the danger. And think of it because these men would have wives and children, aging parents who would need care. It would be so easy for them to pray for their personal safety, and then even make excuses that it is not the right time to make known Jesus Christ. We have to wait for circumstances to change or whatever.

But listen to what they prayed for, “**grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.**” God give us the boldness and conviction to preach or speak or articulate your word whatever might come our way. They knew that if they hated and persecuted Jesus then they would hate and persecute the followers and messengers of Jesus, but they also knew the command of Jesus in the Great Commission. The temptation would be to back down or change the message or just be silent. The greatest temptation in evangelism is always the fear of man. But when we realize as the apostles preach how sovereign and strong and how great God is, our fear of God eclipses the fear of man. And in prayer we are asking that we would be able see and apply the truths of Scripture - of who God is, and obey him.

So they want God to take in account why they are making this request. There is real danger, and therefore they ask God to give them boldness to speak and not be silent. Being silent is the opposite of speaking but look at what else in verse 30, “**while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.**” I cannot articulate how important these signs and wonders were in the early church. Remember, there was no church until Pentecost. It is still in its infancy and also there is no New Testament that God uses to speak to the souls of men. But God confirmed the message and the validity of the message - that this message was from God through signs and wonders. And notice that it was not performed in their own power but through the name of Jesus or person of Jesus.

And it is amazing how huge crowds of people gather for healing crusades today to see so-called signs and wonders. And all this is done supposedly in the name of Jesus. The amazing thing about the request by the apostles to God is the signs and wonders were not primary but secondary. What is primary is speaking - articulating the truth of God. And I do not mean to be unfeeling about peoples’ physical condition. But what people need and what all of us need most is not physical healing. It is forgiveness from God through the shed blood and resurrection of Jesus. It is to follow him. So what is primary is the specific message of Jesus - the historical message of his perfect life, his death and resurrection and the meaning of that. Look at verse 33, and here is the message and what they need is boldness to preach that message, “**And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.**”

And here is the thing, if you live in this fallen world you are suffering in one manner or another. And there is nothing wrong with praying for deliverance or even healing. But let me say there is everything wrong if that is the only thing we pray for or

the primary thing we pray for. If we suffer at the hands of anyone whether for our faith or for any other reason we have to ask: what is God's will for this situation? What is the highest goal in this situation? And that is that I would be his representative. I would be his messenger. I would make known Christ, not in arrogance but in loving boldness the glory and forgiveness found in Christ alone. Every single person will be found somewhere in eternity. God has called us in this life not to worry about our safety but he has called us to make him known no matter the cost. And they were able to live this life and calling out because people really could not ultimately harm them. Jesus is risen and that changes everything. They can take your life but they cannot harm you eternally. But we can harm others by being silent. God has chosen to use us as his mouthpieces to make known Christ. What should you pray for, for you, others and the church? We need to pray for boldness to make Christ known. This goes right along with his commission at the beginning of this book. They are we are to be witnesses.

2. We see the answer V.31.

It is amazing to look at this answer in verse number 30. It is also interesting to think of how the timing of this prayer is so critical in the history of the church. Certainly God is sovereign and he appointed these men to pray this specific prayer for boldness to preach the gospel, and then in his sovereignty he chose to grant that request for the spread of the gospel and for the eternal fame of his Son. But can you imagine if they decided that they ought to heed or submit under the threat of the Sanhedrin and not to speak and not to pray? Would we have a church today? These were the leaders. The church is confined to those who are in Jerusalem. The gospel stalls in Jerusalem and does not advance to Judea then Samaria and then the uttermost parts of the world. But God chose and planned for them to pray this prayer just as much as he gave the necessary grace to preach the message of the gospel.

And here is the thing we have to realize - God is a God who delights to answer the prayers of his people. God delights to answer prayer that is for the greatest welfare of his people which is the glory of God - the expanse of people trusting in Christ and praising him. And you can see that response here, **“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.”** Notice the place was shaken, and it shook in such a way that it indicated none other than the presence of God was with them. He was pleased with their request. And you can imagine the awe that this shaking created. It must have been something. It was visual confirmation God was with them and present. And when they prayed they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak the Word of God with boldness.

And this is so reminiscent of what we saw on the Day of Pentecost. We realize believers were gather together in prayer, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they they spoke the wonderful works of God. The difference in Acts two is they spoke those works in different languages, here it would have been in the language that they all knew. But here is the thing: we are able to speak and preach and testify when we are filled with the Spirit of God. And the filling here speak of being control by God, just like we could be filled by fear or anger or lust or alcohol or defiance, we can be filled by God's Spirit, seeking to do his will, and his will here is to speak boldly, to testify boldly of the resurrected Christ and sinners' need of him.

Now let us consider who the recipients of this request were. Who were the ones who preached and testify about Jesus Christ? And we would say rightly it is the preacher or the pastor who stands in the pulpit and says with boldness and preaches with conviction the truth of Christ. And he believes beyond any doubt this is necessary in the lives of those who are hearing, no matter how few or how many are present. Preachers need to be controlled by the Spirit of God by praying to God that God might be glorified through the exposition of his Word and saturating his mind and heart with that truth to be communicated. And again, when God becomes so grand and Christ becomes so marvellous, all the preacher can do is preach that message. And notice what they were speaking: **“the word of God.”** Notice in verse 29 what they prayed that they might speak boldly, **“your word.”** This is the commission - to speak a particular message which has its origin not in the preacher but in God. It is God’s gospel. Jesus’ good news. And to speak this message you need boldness and a love for God which causes a love for others even over personal safety or ease. And only God can give that boldness and conviction and character. It is not natural in and of ourselves.

But the apostles in this first century context were not the only recipients of this prayer request. The threat was real for all those who followed Jesus. And the commission was also given not just to preachers but to all. After the stoning of Stephen for preaching the gospel we read about the rise of persecution in Acts 8:1, **“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”** The “they were scattered” were the believers, except the apostles who remained in Jerusalem. But listen to what verse 4 says in that chapter, **“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”** The “those who were scattered” are not the apostles. They are not the first and main preachers of the gospel but your everyday believers in Jesus Christ. And this is not normal is it? People do not suffer persecution and are scattered away from friends and family and homes and jobs, and they do not keep up with the activity that caused their persecution. And the cause of persecution was not that they believed on Jesus but they proclaimed Jesus. He came, died for sinners, and God the Father has raised from the grave. You must repent and believe on him or you will perish. That was the cause for the rise of persecution.

So think of how we can apply this text. Some people can be arrogant and in your face in giving the gospel but for the vast majority of believers, it is never the right time. They are timid and overcome with fear. They fear the rejection and even the hostility that may arise from making known Christ. So they do not make known Christ. But here is the turmoil. We know that for anyone to come to Christ they have to hear that message. God uses means. Paul says in Romans 10:17, **“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”** They have to hear the word of Christ.

So here is the question: how can we overcome our fears to boldly and lovingly and patiently make known Jesus? And there are two main things in this passage. One is they filled themselves with the God of the Word. They filled their hearts with the truths of who God is and his sovereignty. It is seeing and Savouring the glory and greatness of Christ above everything and everyone. And once you see that you realize the relationships and opportunities he has given to us in this life are according to his

sovereignty. And it might not be easy. It might even bring opposition, but it is in that opposition that the glory and the brightness of the gospel shines through. But it is seeing God is bigger and grander than any person or obstacle. And then praying. God is aware of the opposition. He can and will give us the boldness to preach the gospel. It is through even this first persecution that's the gospel begins to go to the Samaritans and then to the world.

Saturate your heart with Christ through his Word. Pray for the opportunities, and let God shake our world for his glory. He still changes hearts for his glory through the faithfulness and the boldness of his people.