

# How the Church Should Pray

---

## **Text:**

Acts 4:23-31

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 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? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'-- 27 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, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." 31 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.

## **Introduction:**

The passage we have read records the actions of the Apostles immediately following the release of Peter and John by the Sanhedrin. Remember they had been arrested following the healing of the man born lame and Peter's sermon in Solomon's Porch. The Sanhedrin had ordered them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. What do you do when you are forbidden by human authorities to do what God has commanded you to do? The first thing you do is have a prayer

meeting, and that is exactly what the Apostles do, and Luke records the prayer that they prayed. It is this prayer that I want us to examine together.

Before looking at the prayer, let's think about its place and its importance within the book of Acts. First, I remind you that Luke has a special emphasis on prayer. In Luke-Acts there are more than fifty references to prayer. In his Gospel Jesus is often at prayer, especially at critical junctures of his ministry. When Jesus is baptized, for example, only Luke records that he was praying (Luke 3:21). In 5:16 we are told that during his ministry in the midst of his miracles and teaching he would withdraw into desolate places and pray. In 6:12 we are told that before choosing the twelve he spent the entire night in the mountains praying. In 9:18 it is recorded that just before the series of questions in Caesarea Philippi that led to Peter's confession that he was the Messiah that Jesus was praying. A few verses later in 9:28-29 we are told that Jesus took Peter, John, and James into a mountain to pray. It was while they were on the mountain praying that he was transfigured before them. In chapter 10 he speaks to the twelve to send them out to preach and his very first words in verse 2 are: "pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest". At the beginning of chapter 11 Jesus gives the disciples the Lord's Prayer. The way it comes about is that while he was praying his disciples came to him and said: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." At the beginning of chapter 18, he tells a story to encourage us to always pray and not to lose heart. In 22:32 after telling Peter that he will deny him, he then tells him that he has prayed for him that his faith fail not. In the same chapter in verse 40 upon arriving in the Garden of Gethsemane he warns the disciples: "pray that you enter not into temptation." He then prays his own agonizing prayer: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

No, you cannot read Luke's Gospel without being profoundly impressed with the importance of prayer in the life of the Lord Jesus. Now if Jesus who was God's Son did nothing outside of prayer, how much more we, who are but frail humans, need to "pray without ceasing".

What begins in the Gospel of Luke continues in Acts. As Luke portrays Jesus as being constantly in prayer and accomplishing his work through prayer, so in Acts he portrays the Apostles and the early church as being constantly in prayer and advancing through the power of prayer. It must be noted, however, that while he puts a great emphasis on prayer and reminds us that the early believers relied on prayer, he only records two prayers. We have already looked at the first in chapter 1, the prayer offered before the choosing of Matthias; our text for today is the second. Herein lies the importance of this passage. It is the only post-Pentecost prayer of the Apostles that Luke records, therefore we may assume that he is recording this particular prayer not just to tell us what the Apostles prayed on that occasion, but to give us an example of how the Church should pray at all times as it assumes its God-given task of taking the Gospel to the Nations.

The question for us then is: What is there in this prayer that helps us understand the power and advance of the early Church, and what can we learn from this prayer that will teach us to pray in a way that brings the same power of God to bear upon our mission?

As we examine the prayer we see that it divides into three parts. First, the apostles lay out the problem to God in so doing they reveal their motive. Secondly, in verses 29-30 they make their requests, and finally in verse 31 we see God's answer.

## **I. Why Pray? Our Motivation**

The first important fact about prayer is its motivation. James says "we ask and receive not because we ask amiss that we might consume it on our own desires." True prayer always begins with God's glory as its motivation. Nothing is ultimately good that is not according to God's will and that does not bring glory to God. The Apostles make it clear in this passage that their prayer is not ultimately about them, but about God. Notice they do not say to God that they are under attack and need his protection, but rather that he is under attack. They quote the beginning of Psalm 2 "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.” Then they say: “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 hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” They never mention themselves. Never do they say: “Lord, enemies have risen up against us.” They understand that the attack is not against them, but against Christ. Their cause is not their own. It is the cause of Christ. The real battle that still rages in the world is a battle between the Kingdom of Christ and the Prince of the Power of the air. It is a spiritual battle that must be fought with spiritual arms. Our cause is not our own, it is the cause of Christ and of God.

When Luther stood before the Imperial Diet at Worms in a decisive hour, the conflict between his faith in the righteousness of the cause for which he fought and the anxious fear of a threatened catastrophe found expression in a vehement prayer: “Ah God! Ah God! O Thou my God, O thou my God, stand by me, against all the world, wisdom and reason; do Thou it, Thou must do it, Thou alone. It is indeed not my cause, but Thine” (F. Heiler, *Prayer*, p. 259)

## **II. For What Shall We Pray? Our Requests.**

Verse 30 records the requests of the Apostles. They ask for only two things: first that God would act that he would stretch out his hand to heal, and that signs and wonders would be performed through the name of his holy servant Jesus. We have already seen that one of the consistent elements in the advance of the gospel in the book of Acts is mighty acts of God which give opportunity to the Apostles to bear witness to Christ. We have seen this pattern repeated twice already: the miracle of the day of Pentecost and the healing of the man born lame in chapter three. The Apostles pray that such acts will continue so that the message of the gospel might continue to powerfully advance.

Is this a legitimate prayer for us? I think it is. To understand why it is, recall the nature of the conflict. Our situation may differ greatly from that of the Apostles,

but what has not changed is the nature of the battle. The Apostle Paul describes this battle vividly in II Corinthians 10 where he writes: "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." Individuals are not lost simply because they have not heard the message of the gospel, but because they are held captive by the evil one. In the same book Paul writes: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (II Cor. 4:3-4). The veil which blinds the eyes of unbelievers can only be lifted by the power of God. Mere human logic and persuasion are not sufficient to penetrate spiritual darkness and bring the unbelieving to faith. We must pray to this end that God would act, that he would break the strong holds that are blinding people to the saving truth of the gospel.

The second thing that the Apostles ask for is that they might be enabled to continue to speak the word with boldness. The key word here is boldness. It means more than what we mean by boldness. It means that, but more. It means that they will be able to speak without fear in the face of opposition, but it also means that their words will be so empowered by the Spirit of God that they will be convincing to the hearers. One of the things that Jesus said the Holy Spirit would do when he came would be to "convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come." The way he does this is by enabling witness of Christ to speak the word boldly. This word, although it is not always translated "boldness", appears a dozen times in the book of Acts. It is an absolutely necessary concept to understand if we are to grasp how God works through human individuals to advance his work.

The best illustration of how it works is found in the passage just preceding our text. This is what we read in Acts 4:13 -18:

"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a

crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead--by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

### III. The Answer to Their Prayer

Let us conclude simply by noting that the prayer was immediately answered. When we pray for the right things with the right motives, God answers. When the Apostles pray to be empowered to again speak the word of God with boldness, they are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do just that and the mission continues.

In light of this allow me to conclude with a quote from John Piper's book, *Let the Nations be Glad, The Supremacy of God in Missions*. He writes:

"Now we can say and again safely and stunningly, what the awesome place of prayer is in the purpose of God to fill the earth with his glory. Not only has God made the accomplishment of his purposes hang on the preaching of the word; he has also made the success of that preaching hang on prayer. God's goal to be glorified will not succeed without the powerful proclamation of the gospel. And that gospel will not be proclaimed in power to all the nations without the prevailing earnest faith-filled prayers of God's people. This is the awesome place of prayer in the purpose of God in the world. That purpose won't happen without prayer."

"Prayer is the walkie-talkie of the church on the battlefield of the world in the service of the world. It is not a domestic intercom to increase the temporal comforts of the saints. It malfunctions in the hands of soldiers

who have gone AWOL. It is for those on active duty. And in their hands it proves the supremacy of God in the pursuit of the nations. When mission moves forward by prayer it magnifies the power of God. When it moves by management it magnifies man". (John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad, The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 1993, p. 66)