

“WITH ALL BOLDNESS”

Acts 4:23–31

Key verse: 4:29

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness...”

What are you praying for? If we pray, often it's about problems in our own lives, or maybe in the world. Sometimes we pray for our needs. We even may be praying secretly for what we honestly want. In today's passage the early believers come to God in prayer. Throughout his writings Luke emphasizes the importance of prayer. Here he describes how believers pray together. Their prayer is a great example for us. Especially, in the words of their prayer we learn both their faith in God and their faith in Jesus. We learn from them how we should pray, why we should pray, and what we should pray for. May God help us to really listen to him through his word.

After Peter's second message about Jesus, another 2,000 men repented and joined the Christian community (4). But Peter and John had been arrested, kept in jail overnight, then interrogated by the religious leaders about the man's healing (3,5–6). They were asked, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (7) When Peter again spoke boldly about who Jesus is, these so-called “leaders” were astonished and could say nothing in opposition (8–14). So they conferred together and decided to charge them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus (15–18). Peter and John answered, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (19–20). Then they are further threatened and almost punished (21a). But God is helping them to stand firm as faithful witnesses of Jesus. For the time being, the people are all praising God for what has happened, for the healed man is over 40 years old (21b–22). But this is no small matter. The top leaders of the new Christian movement have just been arrested, interrogated, and charged to keep silent. And it's just the beginning. For the first time, the early church experiences serious persecution.

What do Peter and John do? Look at verse 23 (ESV). It says they went to their friends and reported what had been said to them. Here, the word “friends” is touching. When we're in trouble, it's a beautiful thing to have friends. Literally, in Greek this word means “their own.” It implies that this is no elite clique. Peter and John regarded themselves as belonging to the entire Christian community, their real friends. This one word, “friends,” is so important. The Bible tells us that in Christ, we're brought into community with other believers. God changes us from self-centered to Christ-centered,

and so, we become true brothers and sisters, true friends. God arranges us together and urges us to have no divisions among us. God urges us to have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together (1 Cor.12:18–27). And that's what's happening here.

It says they “reported.” This word means they made it known openly. They shared all about the intimidation, the interrogation, the charge not to speak at all about Jesus, and the threats. Look at verse 24a. “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God...” They didn't all start talking about their own opinions. They didn't spiral downward into criticizing, arguing, or complaining. It says “they lifted their voices together to God.” Together they prayed to God.

Here the word “together” literally means “with one accord” or “unanimously.” It's the same word Luke used to describe the prayer of the 120 original followers of Jesus who gathered in the upper room to pray (1:14). He used it again to describe them as they were waiting for the Holy Spirit to come (2:1). Again he used it to describe how they gathered the new believers day by day to join them at the temple (2:46). Luke will use this word again to describe their fellowship in Solomon's Portico (5:12). Apostle Paul uses this same word in his letter to the Romans, urging Jewish and Gentile Christians, “...that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom.15:6). He also wrote to the Corinthian Christians, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor.1:10). When we are united like this in mind and heart, though we're all different, we can truly pray together. We share the same faith in Jesus, the same dependence on him, the same passion for him. Such authentic unity in prayer pleases God, and together, it makes us useful to him. May God help us repent and really work on this.

How do they begin to pray? Read verse 24b. “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.” They're not thinking about the religious leaders; they're looking up at the living Creator God. They take these words from Psalm 146. This Psalm describes God who made all things, visible and invisible, all creatures, and all human beings. It says princes die and return to the earth, and on that very day their plans perish, but our God lives forever. It says he always cares for the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, those bowed down, the exiles, the widows and the fatherless (Ps.146:3–4,7–9).

In their prayer they call him “Sovereign Lord” (24). Literally, it means “Master of All.” Because of the reality of this God, we need not fear anyone. As we carefully read

their prayer, twice more they use the word “Lord” (26,29). They say he’s the One who does whatever his hand and his plan predestines to take place (28). They call themselves “your servants” (29). Literally, this means “your slaves.” They’re not telling the Sovereign Lord God what to do. In their uncertainty, they’re ready to submit to whatever God decides should happen. This is the right attitude in prayer, which we all need.

Most of all, they’re aware that this persecution is because of God’s holy servant Jesus. Twice they refer to him as the “anointed” one (26,27). The expression “his Anointed” literally means “his Christ.” In the Bible Jesus is called “Lord,” “Son of Man,” and “Son of God.” But most often he’s called “the Christ.” “Christ” is not his last name; it means he’s the One anointed by God. The chief priests and elders really didn’t like Jesus of Nazareth. They refused to recognize him as the Anointed One because of his human background. But they couldn’t change the truth that God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power (10:38a). God anointed him to be our true King, Prophet and Priest, our true good Shepherd. Jesus, the Anointed One, who died for our sins and rose from the dead, is the one mediator between God and men (1 Tim.2:5). As Peter just declared, “...there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (4:12).

Look at verse 25a. It shows how they pray based on Scripture. They’re quoting Psalm 2. After praying based on the first two verses of this psalm, they mention how “in this city” people raged and plotted and gathered together against Jesus. King Herod and Pontius Pilate plotted against him. Now the religious leaders are still plotting, and this time it’s against them—those who believe in Jesus. But they know that their great Creator God made Jesus the Anointed One. Praying based on the word of God given through his servant David gave them great conviction in their prayer.

Also, three times in their prayer they use the word “against.” Based on David’s words in Psalm 2, they could see that being against Jesus and his people is always being against God. Proud people still reject Jesus and his people. But God has made Jesus the cornerstone. Jesus is not only the only way of salvation; he’s the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead (10:42). On God’s fixed day, Jesus will judge the world in righteousness (17:31), and he will vindicate all his servants who suffered for his name’s sake. As it says in Psalm 2:9, on that day he will break the proud “with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (cf. Rev.2:27; 19:15). So, the religious leaders’ plots against Peter and John are really nothing to be afraid of. As Psalm 2:4 says, “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.”

In light of this truth about Jesus, how do these believers pray? Read verse 29. “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness...” They say, “Lord, look upon their threats.” They bring even this negative element to God in prayer. Peter and John had been threatened to stop speaking about Jesus. But the believers all pray to “continue to speak your word with all boldness...” Even in hostile environments, God wants his servants to “not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent” (Acts 18:9). These people praying are not depending on their recent experiences. They’re not trying to do it with their own strength or ability. They’re fervently asking God for his help. So should we.

They pray to “continue to speak your word.” Speaking about the Bible is important. Whether it’s a passage in our morning devotions, or a one-to-one Bible study, or group Bible study, it’s good to talk about the Bible and what it means. But what’s important is not just the act of Bible reading or the act of Bible study or the act of Bible teaching, in and of itself. There can be tons of so-called Bible teaching, but none of it really about Jesus. In the Book of Acts, “your word,” “the word of God” or “the word of the Lord” always has a clear focus and point. Peter summed it all up so well: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). In brief, “your word” is all about the good news of Jesus for sinners. We need to be asking God to help us tell people about Jesus, how we all need to repent and believe, be forgiven of our sins and receive the Holy Spirit. This is God’s message, God’s own word, for all people of all times. We shouldn’t study or teach the Bible intellectually, speculatively, or to make others do what I think they should. We should be learning about Jesus as the very word of God, so that we can truly repent and come to him personally.

The last part of verse 29 adds “with all boldness.” This boldness doesn’t come from our human character. It doesn’t mean to be reckless, impulsive or pushy. It means to press through our fears and have courage from God to say and do what’s right. It especially means to speak up about who Jesus is and what we all need to do because of him. In Greek, the word “boldness” also means to make the message clear and plain. Where does such boldness come from? According to verse 31, it’s given by the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, Peter even with all his human boldness denied Jesus before a servant girl. But with the Holy Spirit, Peter rebuked all those who crucified Jesus, including the religious leaders, and he proclaimed Christ so clearly and plainly that thousands of people repented. Apostle Paul wrote, “[pray] also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel...that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph.6:19–20). How often do we pray for all boldness in sharing the gospel of Jesus? It’s good to be asking God for boldness every day.

And they pray for something else. Look at verse 30. They ask that as they speak God's word boldly, God himself will stretch out his hand to heal, and perform signs and wonders through the name of his holy servant Jesus. It's not just to alleviate human misery. It's not to gain glory for themselves, either. It's to bring glory to the name of Jesus, to help people take the gospel message seriously. We should pray not only for boldness, but also that people would be healed deeply, in every way, because of the holy name of Jesus. We should pray that God will show the truth of the gospel today, through signs and wonders that cause people to repent of sin and turn to Jesus.

Read verse 31. In the midst of persecution, when they pray like this, God is pleased to answer right away. He even shakes the place where they are gathered. And it's not only Peter and John, but all of them who are filled with the Holy Spirit and continue to speak the word of God with boldness. It's what they all prayed for. It's why just receiving the Holy Spirit once is not enough; as our Lord Jesus taught us, we need to ask for the Holy Spirit regularly (Luke 11:13). Acts shows us how, during times of persecution, ordinary believers go out to speak the word of God.¹ Let's pray that God may fill us with the Holy Spirit to go out to speak his word about Jesus with all boldness.

Today we learned what God wants. God wants us all to be truly united in Christ as real friends. God wants us, in the midst of all our challenges and problems, to lift our voices together in prayer to God. God wants us all to learn how to pray based on Scripture. God wants us all to believe that Jesus is his Anointed One. And when people are against us because of our faith in Jesus, God wants us all to pray. Read verse 29 again. This summer, may God grant us all boldness to speak to people about our faith in Jesus, and do his mighty work to bring people to repentance and faith in him.

¹ 8:4; 11:19; 13:49.