

Acts 4:23-31
Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 24, 2010

Acts 4:23-31 (New International Version)

The Believers' Prayer

²³On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. ²⁴When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

" 'Why do the nations rage

and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶The kings of the earth take their stand

and the rulers gather together

against the Lord

and against his Anointed One. ^{[a]·[b]} ²⁷Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people^[c] of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

³¹After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

It's quiz time: what was the sermon about last week? If you answered, "Prayer," or "Praying for each other," you are correct. The privilege of speaking to our heavenly Father in prayer is a wonderful blessing. Sometimes we wonder what to say in our prayers. In today's text we see believers praying, what conditions prompted their words and what they said. They were facing serious difficulties. We can use this lesson, for our lives are full of challenges. Most days bring more of them. So we explore the question,

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH TROUBLE?

I. Know God is in control v23-28

II. Know God will empower you v29-31

When trouble strikes, or is looming on the horizon, know that God is in control. He has the ability to handle anything. We recognize that we face tough situations. So did these believers in the early New Testament. It was not long after Pentecost. Peter and John had healed a disabled man who was begging outside the temple. A crowd gathered, so the pair of apostles used the opportunity to proclaim the One who made it happen, that is, Jesus. They told how He had been crucified but had risen from death. The religious leaders heard their preaching, which upset them since they hated the name of Jesus, so they had Peter and John arrested. As they held a hearing, they were in a corner. They could not deny the miracle as so many people knew the man and had seen that he could now walk. They tried to intimidate the men with a command not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus any more. To this order the apostles replied, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." After trying additional threats the court released Peter and John.

Now what? The pair went where their fellow believers were gathered to report what had happened. The group did not start planning an escape to safer regions nor did they go underground to hide their faith. With one accord they prayed. The prayer addressed God as their Sovereign Lord. They recognized His power. He is the omnipotent ruler over all. He was the right one to go to, for He alone could hear and answer their request. Further reason for their assurance lay in His work as the creator. As they noted, He "made the heaven and the earth and the sea,

and everything in them." If He could design and produce all that exists, He could surely handle their needs now. It was a confident prayer that they offered.

Their confidence was properly placed, for God fulfills His Word. They recognized the recent events fit what Psalm 2 depicted: Jesus Christ, God's Anointed Son, meets all kinds of opposition. The nations rage literally, snort with disdain as they look down on Him. Kings and rulers join forces. Leaders of different areas who usually are rivals or enemies become allies in the fight against Jesus because their hatred for Him is so great. He is not popular with everyone in the world.

However, as the Psalmist noted, their intense hatred was useless. They plotted in vain. They cannot win. Their efforts are wasted. As God holds off His anger while waiting for some to turn from their ways, it may look like the foes of the Savior have the upper hand. No way! No one can match up with His unlimited power. God flexes His muscles and the enemies fall flat on their faces.

Evidence of the psalm's description was present in the recent events. Pilate and Herod were once enemies, but they became friends after holding hearings with Jesus. The murderous hatred moved Jesus from unjust treatment at His trial to crucifixion but it didn't defeat Him. Neither did the Jewish religious leaders nor the crowds that they persuaded to call out, "Crucify Him!" Jesus died, yes, but His death was the means of winning the battle. He demonstrated the victory won for you and me when He rose to life.

By keeping His Word God accomplishes His will. Jesus' enemies made their plans and took their actions in the murderous hatred of their wickedness but they ended up doing what carried out God's plans. It didn't excuse or remove their guilt and they were not forced into their actions, but what they did actually resulted in God's will being done. He had planned from eternity that Jesus would die for the sins of the world and by that death win forgiveness for you and me and every one. Unwittingly His enemies played right into His hand.

Although it is difficult to understand how God can plan and know what will happen but not force people into action, we are thankful that He accomplished His will. We know we are forgiven, set free from sin's curse, and saved eternally.

Seeing His operation in that most important event in all of history fills us with confidence as we face difficulties in life. God can do the impossible! He has the power, He is in control of everything that happens, He keeps the promises of His Word and He carries out His will. We know He has a good will for us and that is to do all that it takes to get us safely to heaven. He won't let troubles get the best of us. Relax, follow Him in faith, and see Him do everything in accord with His will.

Questions may arise in our minds and our faith may be tested when events like a terrible earthquake take place, but because we see the big picture and know the love of our gracious God, we realize the facts have not changed even then. God is in control. He will achieve what He desires. Trust Him at all times.

II.

He gets personal in His care so you can know that God will empower you as He supplies His strength in your life. The group gathered with Peter and John requested God's power. "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." Notice they didn't seek revenge against their enemies nor did they ask God to stop the threats against Christians. They asked for the ability to continue bold testimony in the face of the threats and opposition.

But they also didn't deny their Savior and they did not turn silent in fear. They requested the power to express their faith openly.

They also asked that the Lord would back up their testimony with marvelous deeds, with more healings and other miracles. As it happened when Peter and John healed the man at the temple, such events would attract attention and provide openings for witnessing to Jesus. Those mighty acts would also reassure the believers of the presence and power of God and would demonstrate the validity of their message to others.

God's power working through us gives boldness. The Lord answered the prayer of His people in that Jerusalem room quickly and completely. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." The shaking of the place was unnatural, likely localized to the spot where they gathered, and apparently caused no harm to the building, but it was obvious that the Lord was causing it. He was definitely present with them.

There was also an internal answer to the prayer as God granted them an extra measure of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was already dwelling in their hearts as believers because no one can believe without the Spirit's operation. This special gift of the Spirit equipped them for the challenges they faced. It was a continuing gift as they spoke boldly and not just inside the safe walls there with friends who already shared their beliefs. They continued faithful to the Lord, even in the face of persecution. The church kept growing.

We can be sure that this is a petition that the Lord will answer for us affirmatively. He wants us to do the same, that is, speak His Word with great boldness. He has given worldwide growth to the Christian Church over the centuries so we already have visible proof of His power. Thus healings at someone's command are rare, if they happen at all. We do turn to God for help and sometimes amazing reversals in conditions occur, even when there had appeared to be no earthly hope. More importantly He gives the needed boldness in speaking. You may think you are unable to talk to somebody else about Jesus, but you just might be surprised when questioned or put into a situation where you need to speak up. The Spirit guides you to give an appropriate response.

God's power comes through His Word. Just as the Apostles didn't perform the healing themselves, so it is not our persuasive logic nor our magnificent words that are going to change the heart of another. The Spirit works through the gospel that we share. He makes the Word effective. His power doesn't rule out study and preparation. We need to know the Word so we have something to tell. And use that Word for yourself so you have a foundation of faith. Note how the prayer of the believers cited Psalm 2. Knowledge of that psalm helped them cope with the situation at hand and to know what to pray for. We saw the effect of God's Word in the Old Testament reading. It works repentance for our sins and brings joy with the message of what God has done for us sinners. So use God's Word, grow in faith, and share the good news of the Savior with others. Come next week for more encouragement as our services focus on outreach and how you can help to bring the Word to more people.

So pray. Pray with confidence, knowing God is in control and that He fulfills His Word. Pray that He will use His strength to empower you to meet the challenges of each day and to speak His Word boldly. Keep praying. Keep using the Word. Follow your Lord in joyful faith.