

Series: *The Book of Acts: A Fresh Encounter*

13th Sermon in Series

Grant Boldness to Your Servants

Acts 4:23-31

Our text for this morning can be easily be divided into three sections.

- 1) The Report (vs.23)
- 2) The Request (vs.24-30)
- 3) The Result (vs. 31)

The Report (23)

4:23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

Peter and John had been arrested by the Jewish religious leaders after healing a man who was more than 40 years old and never walked a day in his life. They were held overnight and then along with the man who had been healed, were brought in for questioning before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

They had asked Peter and John “by what name or what power” they had performed the miracle. Peter, full of the Holy Spirit (4:8), explained that Jesus of Nazareth had healed the man. The council found no grounds to charge them and so they warned them “not to teach or speak at all” any more in the name of Jesus (4:17-18).

Peter (filled with the Spirit) answered the council by telling them that their decision was in direct opposition with the will of God (4:19) and that “they were unable to stop speaking” about Jesus (4:20). All the council could do at that point was “further threaten them” (4:21) and then release them.

They Went to Their Own

When released, who did they go to? Verse 23 tells us when they were released they went to their friends. Literally the text says they went to “their own.” This word is used only one other time in Acts 24:23, where the Centurion guarding the apostle Paul is commanded not to prevent Paul’s friends, “his own” from visiting him.

Luke does not tell us that they went to the apostles. He does not use the word for apostles (*apostolon*). He could have used this word but he didn’t. He uses a different word (*idios*) that means “their own” friends. The point is they went to a group of people the majority of whom were not the other apostles, but their own close friends.

All That Was Said

They reported to this group of friends “all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.” What did they report? We know two things they said. First, they commanded Peter and John not to “teach or speak at all in the name of Jesus” (4:18). Second, we know they threatened them (4:21).

What was the nature of the threats? They arrested Peter and John and held them over night so we can assume that at least they threatened them with further imprisonment. We also know that this was the same council that had Jesus killed. Therefore it is not unreasonable to assume that the threats included “ending up like Jesus,” i.e. dead (from the point of view of the council).

Furthermore, as we keep reading in the book of Acts the disciples will be beaten (5:40) and then in chapter 7 they will begin to be killed. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the threats were in the direction of them losing their lives. They reported all of this to their friends.

Can You Go To “Your Own?”

When you are in danger, where do you go? When your life has been threatened, to whom do you go? Do you have a small group of friends that you can call “your own?” If you were to lose your job to whom would you go?

This week we saw the inauguration of president Barak Obama as the 44th president of our nation. Yesterday he posted his first weekly address to the public. In it, he stated, “Just this week, we saw more people file for unemployment than at any time in the last twenty-six years, and experts agree that if nothing is done, the unemployment rate could reach double digits.”¹

Losing a job can shake the foundations of your life. Do you have a small group of fellow believers that you could turn to in order to help carry the burden?

They gave the report that then led them to make a request.

The Request (24-30)

4:24 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.

¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/president-obama-delivers-your-weekly-address/> accessed Saturday, January 24, 2009 at 3:15 p.m.

When they heard all that the chief priests and elders had said to Peter and John, **they lifted up their voices to God** and prayed.

Who Is Praying?

Whose is doing the praying? Verse 24 tells us the ones who heard the report were the ones who began the praying. And they were praying **together** (“in one accord” NASB) along with Peter and John. This is important because these are just common people. They are not even named!

This group is **not** the twelve disciples. These people are close friends with Peter and John. This is helpful to us because **this prayer is answered**. *This teaches us that you do not have to be a credentialed super-Christian in order to have your prayers answered.* These are just normal Christians like you and me. They are simply expressing the desire of their hearts by lifting up their “**voices**” to God and “letting their request be made know” (Philippians 4:6).

What Do They Pray?

After hearing this report of the command to stop speaking about Jesus or teaching in His name and the of the threats of what would come if they disobeyed the command, this group of Christians lifts up their “voices” to God and offer a request. What they pray is interesting.

First, they tell God who He is and then they tell Him what to do. The first five verses (24-28) of this prayer are a description of who God is and what He has done. Then the last two verses (29-30) of the prayer are requests for what God should do.

Why Pray Like This?

The question that comes to my mind is why did they pray like this? God certainly does not need to be reminded of who He is. Prayer is not a mechanism through which God is informed of something He has forgotten or didn’t know.

Jesus tells us, “*Your heavenly Father knows what you have need of before you ask Him*” (Matthew 6:8).

Secondly, God does not need for us to tell Him what to do. Prayer is not us providing counsel to God so He can figure out His next move. So why did they pray like this?

When Did They Pray?

I think one reasons they prayed like this was because of **when** they prayed. They were praying right after hearing about the threats of the chief priests and the elders. They were facing intense opposition and resistance to what Jesus had commanded them to do, namely, **preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name to all nations beginning in Jerusalem** (Luke 24:47).

They prayed like they did to remind themselves of who their God was and what He had called them to do. They prayed like they did to proclaim out loud (with their mouths) that they would be obedient to His commands and **not** be silenced by the threats of wicked men.

Lets look at the prayer.

Sovereign Lord

They begin by reminding themselves that God is Sovereign Lord. The word used is *despote*²s from which we get our word “despot,” which means “a ruler who holds absolute power.” To our minds this has a negative connotation, but that is not the sense here. God alone possesses the right and the authority to rule and govern this world.

Psalm 24:1 *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.*

Deut. 10:14 *Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.*

Exodus 19:5 *“All the earth is mine.”*

Ezekiel 18:4 *“Behold, all souls are mine.”*

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, including these chief priests and elders. They take comfort in knowing that these chief priests and elders who are threatening them do **not** have ultimate authority. Only God does. The chief priests and elders can only do what God allows them to do.

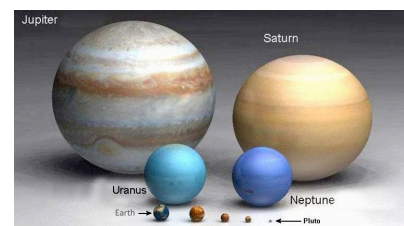
Creator

Secondly, they remind themselves that it was this Sovereign Lord who created heaven, earth, the sea and everything in them.

Why mention this? Why is it helpful to remember in the face of life threatening situations that God created “the heavens, the earth, the sea and everything in them?” The answer is simple. There are some very powerful things in all three arenas and this reminds us that **God is more powerful than anything we have ever experienced.**

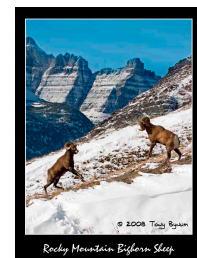
He Is the Creator of the Heavens

First, in the heavens are planets. Consider the power of the gravitational pull of a planet. Do you know how much force is needed to break free from the gravitational pull of this planet? The Space Shuttle needs two Solid Rocket Boosters each simultaneously generating 2,800,000 pounds of thrust³ just to break free from earth's gravitational pull and the earth is not very big. The Creator of the planets is exponentially more powerful than the combined pull of every astronomical body in the universe.



He Is the Creator of the Earth

Second, in the earth are some very powerful creatures. Have you ever seen two Bighorn rams crash their horns together releasing the same amount of energy as 130-grain bullet leaving the muzzle of Winchester .270?⁴ The Creator of the earth is immeasurably more powerful than two rams crashing heads on a mountain peak.



² Used of God only five other times (Luke 2:29; 2 Tim 2:21; 2 Peter 2:1; Jude 4; Rev. 6:10).

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Shuttle_Solid_Rocket_Booster

⁴ http://books.google.com/books?id=refNgfls6fQC&pg=PA99&lpg=PA99&dq=energy+released+rams+crash+horn&source=web&ots=VV28nao9Vb&sig=iWAGE9oUjunnMNTbN-HMZfZa0ux8&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result#PPA100.M1.

He Is the Creator of the Sea

Third, in seas are whales. How much strength is needed for a 60 foot-long 50-ton (or 100,000 lbs. or about 20 cars) Bowhead whale to propel itself 15 feet above the surface of the water? The Creator of the sea and all that is in them did not expend all its strength when He endowed the creatures He made.

The Creator is stronger than all the creatures of all the seas combined because of those massive creatures gets his strength from God. We should be comforted in knowing that our God is mighty in power and possesses all strength. We should not be discouraged at the opposition of men.



A Prophetic Creator

The Creator is so powerful that He even warned us in advance that there would be peoples and nations and rulers and kings that would attempt to defy Him.

Verse 25 tells us that this same powerful Creator and Sovereign Lord spoke by His Holy Spirit through the mouth of David and foretold that this opposition would surely come. These believers quote Psalm 2:1-2 in their prayer.

4:25 ..., “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—

These humble, prayerful Christians are not discouraged by the opposition of chief priests and elders. They see it as a fulfillment of prophecy! This persecution was not a surprise, it was all predicted.

Verse 27 is an explanation of Psalm 2:1-2.

4:27 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.

The “Lord’s anointed” of Psalm 2:2 is ultimately understood to be God’s “holy servant Jesus.” The “kings of the earth” who “set themselves” against God are represented by Herod. The “rulers” find expression in Pontius Pilate. The raging Gentiles are probably represented by the Romans and the “peoples” are explicitly names in the “peoples of Israel.”

All of the plotting and raging against God is completely in vain because the Sovereign Lord accomplished His wise and perfect will through the same plotting and raging. It was through the wicked actions and sinful rebellion of Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the Jews that God brought about the salvation He had so long ago promised. So even though Herod, Pilate, Gentile, and Jew had “set themselves” (i.e. determined, intentional, conspiratorial rebellion) against God, in reality they simply did **“whatever God’s hand and plan had predestined to take place.”**

Boldness Is Their Greatest Need

Well, if the opposition (raging and plotting) and the persecution (i.e. threats) were all part of the God's plan then what is the greatest need of these praying Christians? It would appear their greatest need is boldness to continue speaking.

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

Boldness

The first thing they asked for is boldness to continue to speak. Why do they pray for boldness? Look again at the wording of verse 29, *"And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness."*

If we could boil this verse down it would look like this...

"Look upon their threats... and grant... your servants... to speak... with all boldness."

Threaten My Life :: What About My Wife

We have no certain way of knowing exactly what the specific nature of those threats was. However, I suspect their lives had been threatened (given how the rest of Acts turns out). What would go through your mind if the courts said to you, "You will be killed if you continue to speak and preach in the name of Jesus of Nazareth?"

If someone had threatened my life like that, my thoughts, I think, would instantly go to my wife and children. "What will happen to my wife and children if I'm thrown in prison or killed for preaching about Jesus?"

Did this thought occur to Peter and John?

Peter Had A Wife

You know Peter had a wife don't you? In Matthew 8:14ff we are told that Jesus visited Peter's house and healed his mother-in-law who was sick with a fever. If you have a mother-in-law, then you must have a wife. And we know from what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:5 that Peter took his wife with him when he traveled around preaching the gospel. If Peter had a wife, then most likely he had children. Did his thoughts go to his family as he considered the command to stop "teaching and speaking in the name of Jesus."

Bunyan & Boldness

This was on the mind of John Bunyan (author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, next to the Bible the second most widely translated book in the world) when he was thrown in jail in Bedford, England for preaching. Bunyan was in prison for 12 years, from 1660 to 1672 because he refused to stop preaching about Jesus. And he could have been released from prison any day if only he would have promised not to preach.

Here's what Bunyan wrote while in prison.

The parting with my wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling of the flesh from my bones . . . not only because I am somewhat too fond of these great

mercies, but also because I . . . often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries and wants that my poor family was like to meet with should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides; Oh the thoughts of the hardship I thought my blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces.⁵

As Peter and John and the others considered the threats, they prayed for God to grant them to continue to speak about Jesus with all boldness.

What They Did Not Pray For

It is interesting for just a moment to think about what they did **not** pray for. They did not pray that God would remove the persecution. They did not pray for escape from suffering. They did not ask God to spare them from having to suffer for the name of Jesus. And neither did they ask God to let His righteous judgment fall down upon these rebellious, blind, power-hungry, selfish, jealous chief priests and elders.

They simply asked for three things:

- 1) boldness to continue to speak,
- 2) that God would stretch out His hand to heal (like He did to the lame man), and
- 3) that signs and wonders would happen through the name of Jesus, His holy servant.

And God answered their prayer!!!

We've seen the **report**, we've heard the **request**, and now let's see the **result**.

The Result (31)

4:31 *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.*

Does this not sound similar to Pentecost?

- At Pentecost they gathered together in a small group praying (1:14; 2:1). Here they were together in a small group praying.
- At Pentecost the Holy Spirit rushed in and filled the house with the sound of a mighty rushing wind (2:2). Here God shook the place where they were gathered.
- At Pentecost they were "all filled with the Holy Spirit" (2:4). Here they are "all filled with the Holy Spirit" (4:31).
- At Pentecost everyone heard in their own language the mighty works of God (2:11). Here they "continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (4:31).

So Pentecost was not a unique event. It was the first of many outpourings of the Holy Spirit upon the church. Is this not what we need today? If the early church was in need of being filled with God's Spirit in order to do God's will and there were those among them who had personally witnessed Jesus, do we who are 2,000 years removed from the time of Christ need Him any less?

⁵ John Bunyan. *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, (Evangelical Press, 1978), p. 123

The early church was obeying Jesus and meeting needs, and devoting themselves to prayer and to the apostle's teaching. They were obedient and doing things right and they needed the power of the Holy Spirit. How much more then do we stand in need of being filled with the Spirit?

Application: What Are We to Do?

1) See the Value of Small Groups and Begin Praying About Joining One

When Peter and John were released they went to "their own." They had a small group of friends to whom they could go to pray with, share their burdens with, and worship together with. We as elders are presently working on developing a philosophy of small group ministry that we hope will provide the structure for all who desire it to be a part of a small group.

There are many questions that are presently unanswered, but we are working our way through this. We need your prayers. We need you to pray for us as we put flesh on this effort. And we need qualified leaders and hosts. So please be praying about this. We would love everyone in this church to be able to be a part of a small group with whom you can both worship and reach lost souls.

2) Understand That Right Doctrine Is Vital to Powerful Prayer

There are several basic Christian doctrines that provide the backbone of this prayer.

- 1) The doctrine of the Sovereignty of God
- 2) The doctrine of God as Creator
- 3) The doctrine of Inspiration of Scripture
- 4) The doctrine of the fulfillment of prophecy

We are helped in prayer by each of these doctrines. The doctrines of Sovereignty and Creation give us great confidence that God possesses all power and authority over this wicked world. The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture gives us confidence in knowing that the written words of the Bible are not merely the words of men, but are in fact the very words of God. Finally, every prophecy in Scripture will be fulfilled. God's word concerning future events will be accomplished.

3) Prepare For the Intensification of Opposition

We should not be discouraged when face persecution. Read the book of Revelation. The world only gets worse, not better.

Matthew 24:9 *"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake."*

John 16:2 *Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.*

Matthew 10:25 *It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household?*

John 15:18 *If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.*

4) Pray For Holy Spirit Empowered Boldness

I believe we stand in greater need of Holy Spirit empowered boldness than did the early church. We too face a world that would have us be silent about the name of Jesus. The world would be happy if all followers of Jesus would not “teach or speak at all” in His name. And yet, if Christians remain silent about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are depriving the world of the only means of salvation ordained by God the Father.

5) Expect God To Answer This Prayer

If we were to pray this prayer would God answer it?

They asked for three things:

- 1) boldness to continue to speak,
- 2) that God would stretch out His hand to heal (like He did to the lame man), and
- 3) that signs and wonders would happen through the name of Jesus, His holy servant.

Would it be wrong for us to ask the Lord for these things? I’m sure we’re all comfortable to ask the Lord for boldness to continue to speak. Would we be comfortable enough asking God to “stretch out His hand to heal” sick and hurting people? Would we be comfortable asking the Lord to grant “signs and wonders through the name of Jesus?”

Jesus offers us a caution in Matthew 12:38.

*Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”
39 But Jesus answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign...”*

There is a difference between seeking a sign and seeking Him to whom the sign is pointing, namely Jesus. These scribes and Pharisees were seeking a sign. This prayer in Acts is requesting that the name of Jesus be glorified through God granting signs and wonders.

Signs and wonders in the book of Acts always serve to provide opportunity to preach the gospel of Jesus. If we are seeking signs and wonders because we love crowds of people or because we have a lust to see cool things, then that prayer will not be answered. But if we are praying that God would do wonderful, humanly impossible things so we can tell people about Jesus, that He is the only Son of God, that He lived in the flesh, that He died and then rose from the dead, and that He is alive and one day every human soul will stand before Him and face Him as either Savior or Judge, then I think God will answer that prayer.

Father God, glorify the name of your only Son Jesus through Hope church.