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PRAYING FOR BOLDNESS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 6:9-15
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 4:1-31

ACTS 4:23-31
23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God, “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. 25 You 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?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.”

26 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 27 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 28 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

"Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

29 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.

KEY VERSE
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. —Acts 4:31

Introduction
A. Useless Axiom

A sarcastic axiom of warfare is, “There are old soldiers, and there are bold soldiers, but there are no old, bold soldiers.” Even as we recognize that that is simply false in an absolute sense, we acknowledge more than a kernel of truth to be present, since the majority of bootstraps of the Medal of Honor—the highest award for valor in America’s armed forces—are posthumous. But does even that kernel of truth help as we in our Christian walk? Not at all. The axiom suggests a way for one not to have his or her life ended prematurely, but a long, earthly life is not the ultimate goal of the Christian. The ultimate goal, rather, is eternal life for ourselves and for as many others as we can influence for Christ as possible. To influence others in this way requires boldness, the subject of today’s lesson.

B. Lesson Background

The nine verses of today’s lesson come at the very end of the larger textual section of Acts 3:1–4:31. The chain of events in this larger section occurs within a week-three frame (note particularly the time references “because it was evening, they put him in jail until the next day” and “the next day” in Acts 4:3, 5). These events were preceded, of course, by the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost in AD 30, related in Acts 2:41. Following that birth, Acts 2:42–47 describes the pattern of fellowship that developed. The indefinite time references “every day” and “daily” in verses 46, 47 and “next day” that opens chapter 3 mean that we are unable to calculate how much time elapsed between the Day of Pentecost and the chain of events of Acts 3:1–4:31. It may be tempting to suggest a time frame based on the growth of the church from “about three thousand” on the Day of Pentecost (2:41) to “the number of men... grew to about five thousand” (4:4), but such efforts are speculative. The first link in the chain of events that leads up to our lesson is to the healing miracles of Acts 3:1–6, which took place in the temple precincts.
Don’t just look at the lesson in this sampler—experience them

That miracle resulted in an opportunity to teach the crowd that gathered (Acts 4:1-26). Peter’s gospel message did not sit well with “the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees” (v. 1). So they arrested Peter and John, holding them in custody to await a decision by the Jewish religious authorities the next day (Acts 4:5, 6). Those authorities constituted the Sanhedrin (4:18).

Referring to the miracle described in Acts 4:6-8, the question posed to the two apostles was straightforward: “By what power or what name did you do this?” (Acts 4:7). The bold response by the two “untrained, ordinary men” was startling (4:13). The fact that the man who had been healed was standing right there was an enormous complication for the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:16, 21, 22).

The best members of the council could do was to arrest Peter and John and “not let our words go unspoken or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:8). Peter and John, however, already had received orders that superseded those of the council, and they fearlessly said so (Acts 4:18). The end of the council proceedings brings us to today’s text.

I. Release
(Acts 4:1-22)

23. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

After being released by the Jewish authorities, it is significant that Peter and John report everything to their own people. This group consists of the other apostles and believers, and Peter and John probably were not the only ones. The church had experienced a dramatic event, and it was important that the entire community be aware of what had happened.

II. Prayer
(Acts 4:23-31)

A. Praising the Creator (v. 24)

24a. When they heard this, they raised their voices in prayer to God.

After the group收到 the report about what has happened to Peter and John, the first reaction is to pray. They do not first have a brainstorming session to figure out their next course. They do not call in experts to advise them as to how they should proceed under such circumstances. No, they turn to God in prayer.

Whether one person leads in this prayer or several people voice spontaneous prayer is unknown and unimportant. What is vital is their unity as they pray together. This unity has its roots in the fellowship described in Acts 2:42-47.

24b. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.

The prayer does not begin by asking for God’s help. Rather, it begins by acknowledging God’s place in the universe. The idea of prayer in this part of the prayer is quite familiar to those of Jewish background (see 2 Esdras 2:20; Ps. 103:6; contrast Acts 17:22-26). It is God who has made all this, who is the Creator, and ultimately the one in control. No matter what has happened to Peter and John—or is yet to happen to any believer—God is still in control. When facing difficult and disheartening times, a return to that fundamental truth is vital. God is still on the throne. He has not relinquished control to the forces opposed to his kingdom, nor will he ever do so.

What Do You Think?

- Stolen identity: What are your church’s policies and practices for sharing various kinds of information? What can be done to help people share their issues?
- Talking Points for Your Discussion:
  - Regarding purposes:
  - Regarding challenges being or to be faced
- Other

B. Remembering Christ (v. 25-28)

25a. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

This verse introduces Psalm 2:2, 3 to be part of the prayer. Even though there is no part of that psalm that names David as its author, the text before us clearly identifies it as such. David wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as Mark 12:36 and Acts 1:16 establish. The mechanics of the inspiration are not described, but the source is clear: God. He is the ultimate author of all Scripture.

Peter will leave no doubt about this when he reminds the people of 2 Peter 1:19, 21 many years later. 25b. “Why did the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one:

In the original setting of Psalm 2, the reference is probably to the establishment of the kingdom and the opposition faced by enemies. As the apostles and their fellow believers consider this passage, they will see clear parallels to those of those who set themselves in opposition to Jesus, the Christ. We note that the latter part of Psalm 2:2 speaks of action “against his anointed.” The Greek term Christos means “anointed one,” a connection seen further in our next verse.

Verbal illustrations help bring each lesson to life and make it relatable.

“A new light on Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God” (v. 25-28).

With real-life examples, it gives a bigger picture of where our lives should be, and how we should grow in God’s grace.”

- Pastor Troy Winters
  - Sunday School Teacher
  - First Christian Church, KS
acknowledging his sovereignty in such situations. So can we.

C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways nations or organizations attempt to work against God’s will today? How should Christians respond?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding opposition to God’s will for salvation

Regarding opposition to God’s will for meeting the basic necessities of life

“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. The identities of the Lord’s enemies in Psalm 21, 2 are now specified. Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, and Pontius Pilate, Roman governor or procurator of Palestine, had been key players in the condemnation of Jesus (Luke 23:1-25). It was the Romans (the Gentiles), persuaded by the people of Israel, who had crucified Jesus. To put an innocent man to death at any time is an atrocious thing to have done so to Jesus, the Lord’s anointed, borders on the incomprehensible!

But even as this is applied to Jesus, the believers also see its relevance to their own circumstances since the same people are in authority. Can Christ’s followers expect to be treated any differently than Christ himself was?

“38. ‘They did what your power will and had decided beforehand should happen.’

H.O.W. TO SAY IT

Elim-bas

Ephesians

Galilee

Herod Antipas

Jerusalem

Pentecost

Pontius Pilate

Sanhedrin

Thessalonians

El-im-bas.

E-foh-suh-nee-uh.

Gal-lee.

Her-oh-ant-uh-pas.

Jer-u-ruh-lem.

P-en-tuh-kast.

Puhn-tee-uhs.

San-hud-ruhn.

Theh-uh-soh-luh-nee-uhns.

The word translated boldness occurs a dozen times in Acts in noun and verb forms, with two of those dozen in today’s lesson text here and in verse 31. (Compare other occurrences in Acts 2:29; 4:13; 9:27, 28; 13:46; 18:20; 19:8; 26:26; 28:13.) A majority of the uses in Acts describes Paul’s preaching. Elsewhere, Paul specifically requests prayer “that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should” (Ephesians 6:19, 20).

The culprits in verse 27 have acted according to their own free will. But when all is said and done, they act to bring about what God in his foreknowledge and sovereignty had decided beforehand should happen. God had not lost control of the situation when Jesus was crucified.

Several books popular in the last century proposed that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus were reactions by God to a situation that had spun out of control, transforming the crucifixion being God’s attempt to make the best of a bad situation. As we see in this verse in Acts 2:23, nothing could be further from the truth! God is always in complete control, and the death of his Son was planned from the beginning. Jesus is indeed the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world!” (Revelation 13:8).

C. Requesting Help (vs. 29, 30)

29. “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”

Again, it is important to note that the part of the prayer requesting God’s help is not the first part! Acknowledgement of God’s power, authority, foreknowledge, etc., comes first.

Also interesting is what the believers do not pray for: they do not pray for future deliverance from such persecution. Nor do they pray condemnation on those who have attacked Peter and John so unfairly. Instead, they pray for great boldness to go on speaking God’s word. In a way, they pray that God will help them get right back into the same kind of situation that Peter and John have just escaped from!

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When we consider the numerous healings in the Gospels and in the Book of Acts, we are a couple of motives for performing these. The first and most obvious is simple compassion (example: Matthew 20:34). But in addition to compassion, Jesus and the apostles also perform miraculous healings as signs of the authority of the message they bring. The miraculous display of compassion opens hearts to accept the truth of the gospel.

III. Results

(ACTS 4:31)

A. On the Structure (v. 31a)

31a. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken.

God responds to the prayer in dramatic and powerful ways! The word shaken has both figurative and literal applications in the New Testament; figurative uses indicate people are agitated or disturbed in some way (compare Acts 17:13 and 2 Thessalonians 2:2), while literal uses imply a swaying back and forth of physical structures, as if by earthquake or tremor (compare Acts 16:26). The literal is intended here, since the text refers to the place where the believers are gathered as being shaken.

The physical shaking is only the introduction to God’s response to the prayer, however. The most important part of his response comes next.

B. Transformational Significance

The Ring of Fire is the popular name given to a horseshoe-shaped volcanic zone of the earth’s crust. It stretches 25,000 miles from near the tip of South America, up the Pacific coast of that continent and North America, across the Alaskan chain of islands, then down through Japan, the Philippines, and New Zealand. The Ring of Fire features over 75 percent of the world’s volcanoes. The seismic forces that trigger volcanic eruptions are at work in earthquakes as well. Thus, not surprisingly, 90 percent of all earthquakes (and 80 percent of the most severe ones) strike along the Ring of Fire.

The city of San Francisco lies on the Ring of Fire, and the 1906 earthquake that struck that city...
is probably the most famous teacher in American history. On the other side of the Ring of Fire, the earthquake that hit Fukushima, Japan, in 2011 captured worldwide attention. Both qualify, as do many others, exhibited transforming power in a destructive and tragic sense.

The trembling that shook the place where the disciples were gathered was not an impressive destructive force of nature—just the opposite. Accompanied by filling with the Holy Spirit, it was a personal transformative force of God. As we meditate on this account, let us remember that future shakings by the hand of God are certain, but he and his kingdom cannot be shaken by anything (Hebrews 12:25-29). May this realization give us courage and boldness today. —C. R. B.

B. On Those Gathered (v. 31b) And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

There are five occasions in the book of Acts where individuals or groups of people are described as being filled with the Holy Spirit. The first such filling (Acts 2:4) is accompanied by the apostles’ being empowered to preach the gospel in other tongues (languages). The second (6:8) is accompanied by Peter’s bold address to the Sanhedrin. The third is the verse before us, as accompanied by empowerment to speak the word of God boldly.

The fourth (Acts 13:9) is in conjunction with Paul’s condemnation of Elymas the sorcerer. The fifth (19:12) is accompanied by the disciples’ being filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking with new boldness. The fifth verse is a good example of the dynamic change that can come to a person when they are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

A. Do We Have Not Because We Ask Not?

The church had a radical transforming influence as it spread over the Roman Empire and beyond. Boldness was a critical factor in that success—boldness that often seems to be lacking in the twenty-first-century church. Some may attempt to excuse lack of boldness by asserting that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit in a special way. The text indicates, however, that all who were present were empowered by the Spirit to speak with boldness. That empowerment for boldness followed from asking for boldness.

Reflect on this for a moment on all the prayer requests you hear expressed each week at church. When was the last time you heard a prayer request for boldness?

B. Prayer

Dear Lord, help us put boldness at the very top of our prayer requests! May we ask for daily

C. Thought to Remember

God still grants boldness.

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What Do You Think?

Are there times when boldness in witness would do more harm than good? Why, or why not?

Talking Points for Your Discussion:

- Either 4:14
- Ecclesiastes 3:7b
- Acts 5:13
- Other

The conclusion gives a summary of the lesson, suggested prayer, and reinforces the lesson’s central theme.

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- Step-by-step lesson plans
- Class activities and reproducible worksheets
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