

PRAYING FOR BOLDNESS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 6:9-15

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 4:1-31

ACTS 4:23-31

²³ 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.



KEY VERSE

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. —Acts 4:31

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY COMES ALIVE

Unit 1: Seeds of New Growth

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List key elements of the apostles' prayer.
2. Explain the apostles' reaction to threats by the Jewish leadership.
3. Write a prayer asking God for boldness in witness for the week ahead.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Useless Axiom
- B. Lesson Background

I. Release (ACTS 4:23)

II. Prayer (ACTS 4:24-30)

- A. Praising the Creator (v. 24)
- B. Remembering Christ (vv. 25-28)
Raging Against God

C. Requesting Help (vv. 29, 30)

III. Results (ACTS 4:31)

- A. On the Structure (v. 31a)
Transformational Shakings
- B. On Those Gathered (v. 31b)

Conclusion

- A. Do We Have Not Because We Ask Not?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

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 bestowals 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 us 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 two-day time frame (note particularly the time references “the next day, for it was already evening” and “on 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 2:1-41.

Following that birth, Acts 2:42-47 describes the pattern of fellowship that developed. The indefinite time references “day by day” in verses 46, 47 and “now” 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 souls” on the Day of Pentecost (2:41) to “the number of the men came 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 text is the healing miracle of Acts 3:1-10, which took place in the temple precincts. That miracle resulted in an opportunity to teach

the crowd that gathered (3:11-26). Peter's gospel message did not sit well with "the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees" (4:1). So they arrested Peter and John, holding them in custody to answer to the Jewish religious authorities the next day (4:3, 5, 6). Those authorities constituted "the council" (4:15), also known as *the Sanhedrin*.

Referring to the miracle described in Acts 3:6-8, the question the council posed to the two apostles was straightforward: "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (Acts 4:7). The bold response by the two "uneducated, common 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 (4:14-16, 21, 22)!

The best the members of the council could do was to order Peter and John "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18). Peter and John, however, already had received orders that superseded those of the council, and they fearlessly said so (4:19, 20). The end of the council proceedings brings us to today's text.

I. Release

(ACTS 4:23)

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

The word *they* refers to Peter and John (see the Lesson Background). After being released by the Jewish authorities, it is significant that the two apostles report everything to *their friends*. This group consists of the other apostles and believers, and Peter and John hide nothing from them. There is no sugar coating! The first recorded persecution of the new church has just occurred, and with it the first recorded resistance by the apostles. The new believers need to know what lies ahead. Jesus had forewarned his apostles of persecution for his name's sake (John 15:18-21).

One has to wonder if that warning is yet to sink in for the apostles at this point, let alone for the newer converts. Jesus had told the apostles about various things that they failed to grasp until later,

and prediction of persecution may be among those. Now they have actually experienced it.

Tellingly, Peter and John do not run from persecution and hide (contrast Matthew 26:56b, 69-75; John 20:19; etc.). But neither do they just go right back to preaching and healing. Something else must come first: reporting to their fellow believers *what the chief priests and the elders had said to them*. We do not know how many of the 3,000 new converts of Acts 2:41 are still in the city at this time. Many Jewish visitors who were in the city for Pentecost undoubtedly have departed for home. But the group of believers in Jerusalem probably numbers many more than the 120 of Acts 1:15.

Many people today who consider themselves Christians seem to have no use for the church, but such an outlook would be incomprehensible for the apostles! After being detained overnight and grilled before the authorities, Peter and John need interaction with fellow believers. Those two are not ashamed of what has happened to them, and it is not necessary or appropriate to keep anything hidden from the rest. This is an important facet of genuine fellowship—the open sharing of experiences, whether good or bad. The result is mutual encouragement and strengthening of our faith.

What Do You Think?

What are your church's policies and practices for sharing various kinds of information? What can be done to help people and share their issues?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding praises
- Regarding challenges being or to be faced
- Other

II. Prayer

(ACTS 4:24-30)

A. Praising the Creator (v. 24)

24a. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said,

After the group receives 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 move. 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, who made the heaven 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 imageries in this part of the prayer are quite familiar to those of Jewish background (see Exodus 20:11; Psalm 146:6; contrast Acts 17:22-26). It is God who has made all that is. He 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?

How does recognition of God’s sovereignty influence how you pray?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning a terminal illness
- Concerning a natural disaster
- Concerning a personal tragedy
- Concerning a national tragedy
- Other

B. Remembering Christ (vv. 25-28)

25a. “who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

This half verse introduces Psalm 2:1, 2 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 pens the words of 2 Peter 1:20, 21 many years later.

25b, 26. “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’—

In the original setting of Psalm 2, the reference is probably to the enthronement of the king and the opposition faced from enemies. As the apostles and their fellow believers consider this passage, they see clear parallels with the actions of those who set themselves in opposition to Jesus, the Christ. We note that the latter part of Psalm 2:2 speaks of actions “against his Anointed.” The Greek word *Christ* means “anointed one,” a connection seen further in our next verse.

✠ **RAGING AGAINST GOD** ✠

In September 2013, members of a motorcycle gang surrounded an SUV in New York City, brought it to a halt, and started smashing its windows. Bikers dragged the driver out onto the street as his wife and 2-year-old child watched in horror. Several assailants were arrested for the attack, including an undercover detective who was riding with the gang. This incident of road rage apparently was touched off by a minor collision between the SUV and one of the motorcycles; the rage escalated when a more serious collision occurred as the nervous SUV driver tried to drive off.

The incident seems to be part of a pattern that has become a feature of modern life. Unruly demonstrations over economic issues in America and other countries, violent political riots in the Muslim world, deadly attacks by deranged gunmen in schools, and lack of civility generally tell us something is seriously wrong in our world. Yet this is nothing new; we are just more aware of rage incidents because modern technology allows them to be reported instantly. And if evil people will rage against their fellow humans, why should they not rage against God as well?

We cannot control anyone else’s rage, but we can control our response to it. The first-century Christians responded by looking to God and

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
- Other

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,

The identities of the Lord's enemies in Psalm 2:1, 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 peoples of Israel*, who had crucified Jesus. To put an innocent man to death at any time is an atrocity; to have done so to Jesus, the Lord's anointed, borders on the incomprehensible!

But even as this psalm 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?

28. “to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

HOW TO SAY IT

Elymas	<i>El-ih-mass.</i>
Ephesians	<i>Ee-fee-zhunz.</i>
Gentiles	<i>Jen-tiles.</i>
Herod Antipas	<i>Hair-ud An-tih-pus.</i>
Jerusalem	<i>Juh-roo-suh-lem.</i>
Pentecost	<i>Pent-ih-kost.</i>
Pontius Pilate	<i>Pon-shus (or Pon-tee-us) Pie-lut.</i>
Sanhedrin	<i>San-huh-drun or San-beed-run.</i>
Thessalonians	<i>Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz</i> (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).

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 *predestined to take place*. 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, the resurrection being God's attempt to make the best of a bad situation. As we can see in this verse and 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 slain “before the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).

C. Requesting Help (vv. 29, 30)

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

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, 29; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26; 28:31.) A majority of the uses in Acts describes Paul's preaching. Elsewhere, Paul specifically requests prayer “that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:19, 20).

Visual for
Lesson 1



Keep this map posted as you study lessons 1–10 to give your learners a geographical perspective.

That later request by Paul is very much in harmony with the group’s request that we see in the text before us. More than anything else in this first experience of persecution, they ask God to enable them to continue speaking forthrightly so that the progress of the gospel will not be slowed by any fear on their part.

What Do You Think?

How do we know when we should pray for boldness rather than deliverance and vice versa?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Matthew 26:39, 42
- Colossians 4:3
- 2 Thessalonians 3:1, 2
- Other

30. “while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

In addition to the request for boldness, the group asks God to continue to do what he is already doing regarding *signs and wonders*. These miracles, which include healing, confirm the message of the gospel for receptive audiences. The miracles are going to *be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus*, the very name the Jewish authorities have just forbidden to be preached (Acts 4:18). It is apparent that the Father and the Son are working together, which is entirely consistent with the claims of Jesus in the Gospels (example: John 5:19-23).

When we consider the numerous healings in the Gospels and in the book of Acts, we see 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. And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together 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.

✠ **TRANSFORMATIONAL SHAKINGS** ✠

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 Aleutian 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 temblor in American history. On the other side of the Ring of Fire, the earthquake that hit Fukushima, Japan, in 2011 captured worldwide attention. Both quakes, 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 impersonal destructive force of nature—just the opposite! Accompanied by filling with the Holy Spirit, it was a personal constructive 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)

31b. and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

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 (4:8) 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 with boldness*. The fourth (13:9) is in conjunction with Paul's condemnation of Elymas the magician. The fifth (13:52) is accompanied by the disciples' being filled with joy. (In passing, we may note that 9:17 offers a sixth use of this phrase; this one concerns Saul, with no further explanation, as a requested result of his conversion.)

Analyzing these five, we see that the second and third are the only ones that happen on the same day. God is intensely aware of what is unfolding in this first recorded persecution of the church, and he knows just what to do about it. The gathered believers have prayed the right prayer with the right motives (contrast James 4:3).

The result is that those gathered are and will be given the boldness they need to continue to carry out the commission they have received (Matthew

28:19, 20). Holy Spirit-enabled boldness counteracts fear.

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

- Esther 4:14
- Ecclesiastes 3:7b
- Amos 5:13
- Other

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 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 this daily and with right motives. In the name of Jesus, for whom we are to be bold, amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God still grants boldness.

VISUALS FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 14) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Fall Quarter. That packet also contains the very useful *Presentation Tools* CD for teacher use. Order No. 020019215 from your supplier.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson presentation with the reproducible activity page, available as a free download at www.standardlesson.com.

Into the Lesson

Distribute index cards on which you have printed the following situations, one situation per card: (1) a promotion at work; (2) a serious health problem; (3) an amazing answer to prayer; (4) losing your wallet or billfold. Duplicate cards as necessary so each learner has one. Ask for volunteers who have *situation one* to say whom they would first share the news with and why. Repeat for the other three situations. Keep this moving rapidly; don't let it drag out.

Make a transition by saying, "Whether good news or bad, we usually want to share information right away. The same was true with the apostles Peter and John when they were persecuted for preaching about Jesus. They had friends they wanted to tell! Let's find out who and why."

Into the Word

Form learners into three groups; hand each group one of the following assignments. Give these instructions to all groups: "You will be conducting an interview with one of the characters from today's lesson and its background. Select one person to conduct the interview and another to be interviewed as you work through the assigned passage."

Group 1: Interview of Annas, the high priest. Read Acts 4:1-22 and pose these questions to be answered: 1. "What was it about Peter and John that so disturbed you?" 2. "When you questioned those two, how did Peter respond?" 3. "What was it about those two men that astonished you and your colleagues?" 4. "When you commanded them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, how did they react?"

Group 2: Interview of John. Read Acts 4:18-31 and pose these questions to be answered: 1. "When the Jewish leaders commanded you and Peter to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, why did you refuse?" 2. "What was the first thing the two of you did when they released you, and what was the reac-

tion?" 3. "Why did you ask God for boldness when it seems that you already demonstrated plenty of that trait?" 4. "What happened then?"

Group 3: Interview of a Christian at the prayer meeting. Read Acts 4:23-31 and pose these questions to be answered: 1. "When you heard Peter and John's report, why did you and the others decide to pray rather than, say, have a strategy session on what to do next?" 2. "Why did the treatment of Peter and John make you and the others think of Psalm 2:1, 2?" 3. "Why did you conclude that the actions of Herod and Pilate were part of God's plan?" 4. "How did the dramatic event at the end of the prayer time affect you personally?"

Allow five to eight minutes for groups to prepare their interviews; then ask the groups in turn to conduct them for the whole class.

Into Life

Begin a discussion by stating, "When Peter and John prayed with their fellow Christians, there were other things they could have asked God to do, but they didn't. What might these have included?" (*Possible responses:* they didn't pray for deliverance from future persecution; they didn't pray against the Jewish leaders; they didn't ask for wisdom or strength.)

Then ask, "What two specific things did they ask God to grant?" (*Expected responses:* boldness when speaking and further "signs and wonders" in Jesus' name.) Then observe: "In fact, they were asking for more of the same things that got them in trouble with the Jewish leaders in the first place! How can this serve as an example of how we should pray?"

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Parts of the Prayer" and "Improving Your Prayers" activities from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have learners complete as indicated. Encourage use of the resulting prayers in devotional times in the week ahead.