

A Prayer Meeting You Wouldn't Believe!

Acts 4:23-31

Last week in Acts 4 we studied the response of the government to the evidence of the power found in the name of Jesus and of the bold preaching of the church.

It was the First Persecution of the Church!

The government leaders, being the priests, the Sadducees, and the temple guard, "laid hands" on Peter and John.

- The Greek word being {*epiballō*} "*ehpeeballo*"- *To throw upon, with force.*

They arrested – by forceful hands – and physically removed from the temple and cast into a jail cell until the following day.

- Prison cells back then were not the motel rooms inmates recline in today.
 - There was no bed, no mattress, no blankets.
 - No sink to wash in and no toilet.
 - No nutritiously adequate meal was provided.

The following day the whole of the Jewish government had these Peter and John brought before them.

The power to have them imprisoned, or even to pursue charges of death as they had done with Jesus was in their grasp.

As they began to question them, Peter and John had a choice to make-

- Speak softly and acquiesce to their government.
- Or stand firm in their testimony of Jesus Christ

Well, we know the story, Peter "Filled with the Holy Spirit" not only spoke the name of Jesus in boldness but rebuked the government for rejecting the truth regarding the Word of God and Jesus the Nazarene, who is the Christ, the Savior and Messiah through whom and through whom alone is salvation.

The government was astonished by not only the boldness and the conviction of this man, but by the wisdom in his words.

His manner of speech was not bravado, where he hailed himself a hero – but was a testimony, supported by the word of God, regarding the identity of this Jesus, whom the government had put to death.

All of the honor was directed to Jesus, and to God.

Besides this – Peter and John offered as evidence of their testimony the man lame since birth.

There in Acts 4:14 we see the lame man had been brought in for questioning as well – **but here he STOOD beside Peter and John** – undeniable evidence of the truth that these men proclaimed.

*Friends, this message from scripture shows us sadly that a lack of proof is **NOT** the reason people reject the word of God and Christ Jesus. It is a lack of **FAITH**.*

Confronted with these things, the government brought no charge against Peter and John.

But they did command them to never teach or speak in the name of Jesus again.

And they did so for this ONE reason- That the truth regarding the man they had slain, whom God had raised, and whom through His name miracles were still worked, would not be spread among men.

Sadly, little has changed among the governments of men. The name of Jesus is still not **RIGHTLY** honored nor is the Word of God obeyed.

- Granted there are governments, including our own, who recognize His name and will even occasionally speak and refer to the Word of God.
- But we are no Christian nation when we see the atrocities, the sinful lusts, **protected by law** and the **celebrations** of the immoral, and the blasphemous parading in our streets.
- **But take heart Christian!**
 - Remember we who are in Christ **HAVE NO** nation in the world.
 - The church has been called out of the world to be **ambassadors of Christ** and HIS kingdom – OUR kingdom

Like Peter and John, you and I have a choice to make-

- Whose government reigns supreme?
 - Is it the government of men – and the fear of its persecution?
 - Or is the government of God – and His promise of reward?

As for Peter and John, their reply is a call to the banner of Christ!

Though commanded to be silent they proclaimed-

“Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Acts 4:19-20

The government was powerless to stop these men without causing even more problems for itself – and at the end of the day – that is what the government of men cares most about – ITSELF, and so these men were released.

Today we are going to look at the response of the church to these happenings.

Things to consider:

- What persecutions is the church facing today?
- What commands is the government giving the church today?
- What threats does it make?
- How ought we respond to these things?
- What attitudes should we maintain?

Acts 4:23

²³ When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

Can you imagine the surprise and the relief when Peter and John were released?!

- It is a reminder to us that our God is ALWAYS in control!
- He doesn't provide for the release of every follower under persecution, but He certainly has the authority to provide for the release of **ANY** follower under persecution.
 - Why some and not others? Better to ask why ANY rather than why some?
 - But praise be to God who rescues whom He chooses!
 - For in this God chose to rescue you and I from our sin.
- So, we pray for those being persecuted.
- And if it be we? Then we praise His name that we were found WORTHY of being persecuted for His name's sake!
- While in persecution –
 - May the persecuted stand firm in the truth of God's Word.

- May the persecuted be filled with the Holy Spirit and speak boldly and with wisdom the Word of God
- May they with confidence proclaim the name of Jesus Christ and His promise to redeem any and all who call on His name in faith.

James 1:2 *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds*

1 Peter 4:13 *But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed.*

If He rescues? Blessed be His name!!

If He chooses me to perish under suffering for His name's sake? Blessed be His name!

In the words of God's servant Job –

Job 13:15

Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him: nevertheless, I will argue my ways before Him

- Regardless of who persecutes us – we place our hope in Christ.
- Worldly people may accuse of wrongdoing, but if we have acted according to God's word? We would rather have the case of our guilt or innocence heard in His court than that of man's.

The church rejoiced and gave all praised to God for delivering their brothers from the hands of wicked men.

Acts 4:24

²⁴And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them,

Unity. One accord. One mind.– {homothymadon} "hōmahthamadon " – One mind

Found 12 times in scripture, 11 of those in the book of Acts!

- In this introductory letter of the church age, see how important the topic of UNITY was, **and still IS today.**

– The importance of unity –

- Division in the church is a stumbling block to the spiritual power of prayer!
- We have been commanded to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.
 - For our church’s prayers to be powerful we must pray with one heart, one soul, one mind, and in one strength -

Praying in unity they proclaimed God as:

- Lord –
- Creator-
- And revealer of the truth-

Our brother in Christ Paul – who was no stranger to suffering persecution for his testimony regarding Christ Jesus- encourages us with this message on unity:

Philippians 1:27

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,

Illustration:

In his book “The Pursuit of God”, author A.W. Tozer wrote the following regarding UNITY:

“Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other?”

*They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, **but to another standard**, to which each one must individually bow.*

*So one hundred worshipers [meeting] together, each one looking **away to Christ**, are in heart nearer to each other, than they could possibly be, were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.”*

What an amazing way to look at unity.

- Those who commit **FIRST** to seek Christ and honor God, will naturally begin to come together in Christian unity.

Friends, I was called to church ministry many, many years ago. I have been a witness and part of seeing a church rise and fall for no other reason than a lack of unity.

Fractions within, and manifest agendas lacking the capacity to set apart personal convictions for the greater glory of magnifying Christ together as a healthy body.

- Trust me on this, there is little harder to bear witness to than a church family torn apart by division.
- I implore you, church family, that we commit ourselves at Pine Grove Community Church to put unity in Christ first and far before personal agendas.
- That we commit to stand firm in ONE spirit, with ONE mind, SIDE-BY-SIDE, for the faith of the gospel - Amen?

With one voice, in unity, the church received the good news Peter and John reported regarding their captivity and declared:

Acts 4:25-26

"O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them,²⁵ who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said,
'Why did the Gentiles rage,
And the peoples devise futile things?
²⁶'The kings of the earth took their stand,
And the rulers were gathered together
Against the Lord and against His Christ.'

Much of this is an excerpt of **Psalm 2**

*Why are the nations in an uproar
And the peoples devising a vain thing?
The kings of the earth take their stand
And the rulers take counsel together
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying,
"Let us tear their fetters apart
And cast away their cords from us!"
He who sits in the heavens laughs,
The Lord scoffs at them.
Then He will speak to them in His anger
And terrify them in His fury, saying,*

*"But as for Me, I have installed My King
Upon Zion, My holy mountain."
"I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to Me, 'You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.
'Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession.
'You shall break them with a rod of iron,
You shall shatter them like earthenware."
Now therefore, O kings, show discernment;
Take warning, O judges of the earth.
Worship the LORD with reverence
And rejoice with trembling.
Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish in the
way,
For His wrath may soon be kindled.
How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!*

Part of finding strength and joy in the moment was the realization that what was happening there that very day was in keeping with the words of the prophet from so long ago!!

Sadly again we are reminded that there are only TWO CATEGORIES for mankind:

Those who LOVE God – and those who DESPISE God

Those who with unity in purpose to seek God ~Vs~ those who in unity in purpose plot to deny Him

- Why are the nations in an uproar?
- Why do they devise vain things?
- Why do the rulers of the earth stand and take counsel together AGAINST the Almighty Sovereign God and His anointed?

ANSWER:

- Because they despise God. Because they are at WAR with God.
- Because they have said in their heart: *"There is no God"* (Psalm 14:1)
- Or just as arrogantly, they have acknowledged God, but said in their heart *"I will be LIKE God – deciding right and wrong"* Isaiah 14:14

As it was then – so it is still today

Acts 4: 26 ²⁶ 'The kings of the earth took their stand,
And the rulers were gathered together
Against the Lord and against His Christ.'

The example of the rejection of Jesus as the Christ is the par excellence example of this.

From Pilate, to the Jewish leaders, to the Jewish people and the non-Jews found in the city those days- they rejected Jesus NOT because of a lack of PROOF – but because of what? A lack of FAITH.

Acts 4:27-28

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 purpose predestined to occur.

And the world is no different today.

Governments, religious leaders of false religions, and the people of the nations, still reject, despise, and plot against Jesus Christ AND His followers.

And yet all this – is according to foreknowledge, will and predestined plan of God who is sovereign over all things.

2 Timothy 3:1-5

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

2 Peter 3:3-4

Knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."

Luke 21:25-26

"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Matthew 24:42-44

Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

The church gathered that day in unison lifted their prayers toward heaven.

Acts 4:29-30

²⁹ And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, ³⁰ while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”

In the face of **persecution** – having been **commanded** by the government to be **silent** about Jesus of Nazareth and **threatened** if they did not **comply** – asked God only to make note of the threats of godless men and grant their TWO petitions:

- Confidence to speak the Word of God
- To see the power of God working in the name of Jesus

In the face of persecution, what would **you** pray for?

In the face of persecution, and in the unity of the church, what should **we** pray for?

- Confidence to speak His word.
- And to see His mighty works manifest on the earth to glorify the name of Jesus.

Acts 4:31

³¹ And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and *began* to speak the word of God with boldness.

- **AND GOD ANSWERED THEIR PRAYER!**

The faithful church in Jerusalem became “A Rockin’ Little Church”

- Filled with the Holy Spirit

- Speaking the word of God in Boldness

Let us pray for God to so move here at Pine Grove! **Amen?**

The Power of Prayer Alignment-

I want to talk about the importance of **Prayer Alignment**

The front two wheels on most vehicles is where the steering is done from. These two wheels are connected by an axle, and they must be aligned with one another for the vehicle to travel straight down the roadway.

A vehicle with wheels out of alignment shakes, shudders and wanders as it goes.

Like two wheels in alignment there are two tracks to align in our prayers as well.

These are the track of **God's sovereignty** and **mankind's responsibility**.

When people, or churches, get these out of alignment, that person, or church, can begin to shake, shudder and wander.

Too much emphasis on God's sovereignty while reducing man's responsibility leads to fatalism.

Fatalism- Everything is all God's doing with no responsibility/accountability for man.

- This can lead people to believe that we are not responsible or accountable for our actions.
- God is going to do what God is going to do, so it doesn't matter what I do.
- It can also lead to people believing there is no point in doing anything.

The other side of this an over emphasis on man's responsibility which in the end denies the sovereignty of God and leads to SELF-righteousness

- Here God becomes a spectator of man's will.

BOTH ARE DENIALS OF THE TRUTH found in the word of God.

- Our God alone is the Fully Holy, Sovereign God of all creation!
- And yet, made in His image, mankind is fully accountable for his actions.

So then, the truth is a harmonious balance where God is fully sovereign, and man is fully accountable for his actions.

How can this be? – I grant you it is a mystery, but it is a mystery declared by the word of God.

Sovereignty- The word of God speaks much about this, but consider this:

Colossians 1:16-17

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Proverbs 16:9

The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps

Accountability- The word of God also however declares that man is held accountable, not for the sovereignty of God, but for his own actions.

Ecclesiastes 12:14

For God will bring every work into judgement, every secret thing, whether good or evil.

In the final judgement of those who have rejected God and Christ Jesus

Revelation 20:13

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.

Having a proper alignment is important for how we pray

The theologian Augustine wrote, *"Pray as though everything depends on God, and work as though everything depended on you."*

Knowing that we are accountable before God and trusting that God is sovereign, that is over all things, is important as we pray for confidence, boldness and for His will to be done.

True prayer, sincere prayer, godly prayer is not about telling God to do our will – that would be to try to steer God to OUR track!

No, prayer that is powerful, and effective, is the prayer where we ask God to align us to HIS track!

It is within this alignment with God, in prayer, that we align our will with His will.

Asking and seeking that **His will** be accomplished **FOR** us, **IN** us, and **THROUGH** us.

It is prayer that asks, and truly seeks to have His will done on earth, as it is in heaven.

The church of today needs recall how to pray like the first church did!

They did not ask for God to protect them, they asked for power to overcome persecution.

They did not ask God to smite their enemies, they asked for confidence to stand firm and declare the word of God to their enemies.

Their desire from God was that He would manifest the power of the works of His hand in the name of Christ Jesus to magnify Him, not the church.

In prayer we communicate DIRECTLY and PERSONALLY with God

When we pray rightly, according to His will, and asking only for the confidence and power to see His will accomplished, anything is possible!

1 John 5:13-15

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

Author and preacher Phillip Brooks is best known for writing the lyrics to the Christmas carol "*O little town of Bethlehem*"

In another one of his writings he wrote wise advice regarding prayer:

"Do not pray for easy lives," - "Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks."

That is the model of the prayer we see here in Acts and of those first members of the church.

I pray let us pick up the mantle of their example here at Pine Grove and pray with expectant confidence in the name of Jesus to see the will of God accomplished in and through us! **Amen? – Amen.**