

“Leading in Prayer”
Acts 4:23–31
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Our text for this study is in Acts 4. Acts 4:23–31 says [23] *When they (Peter and John) 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.*

May God continue to bless His Word into our hearts as we feed on it together.

My wife and I recently watched again the movie *Darkest Hour*. It is set in London, England in May of 1940 and it portrays how precarious and uncertain was the future of England and how fearful and isolated the leaders were as Nazi Germany was sweeping across the country as country after country was falling to their rule. Now country could stop their army. The Luftwaffe ruled the skies. England’s European allies were really in no position to help. Her army of 300,000 soldiers was on the continent trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk. Most thought that few of those soldiers would ever escape. It was a time of great darkness.

The new Prime Minister Winston Churchill was isolated and ridiculed by many, even members of his war cabinet urged him repeatedly to go to the peace table and cut a deal with Nazi Germany. They believed that after conquering France all Germany had to do was get some boats to go across the channel and England would be next on their list. It was a frightening time. I’m a history major and watching the movie just reminded me again of how tenuous and fearful many leaders and people were in England during this time. It was a desperate time.

I thought of that movie when I think of this passage in Acts because from a human perspective it is easy for us to underestimate the danger that existed in the early church. With 2,000 years of history since then we know what has happened with the Gospel and where it’s gone around the world as tens of millions of people have come to Christ. We have magnificent sanctuaries around the world with people worshipping God but those early disciples had no clue and they were facing a very difficult environment.

Peter and John had some successes in Acts 3. They healed a beggar in the temple that was making the headlines of the day so to speak. People were filled with wonder and amazement and later on Peter preaches very powerfully and people respond but they had been

called on the carpet by the council in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin. They stepped up to the plate and defended their actions brilliantly but to the casual observer the thought was there was very little going for this early church. They were in a very desperate situation.

What were their liabilities and assets? On the liability side the disciples may say that everyone who was anyone hates us. One might say weren't 3,000 saved only a few days ago on Pentecost and the response probably would have been you know how fickle the crowds were. They turned against Jesus, the week before He was put to death so we can trust the crowds. Aren't you doing a lot of miracles and they would say Jesus did a lot of miracles and that didn't guarantee success. They could also say that they had zero political clout. They have greatly annoyed the priests and Sadducees of the temple with the multiple times they have had to come before them and even worse seven weeks ago Pilate had Jesus crucified. They are outraged because they think the body has been lost.

So what are the liabilities? The Roman authorities and all the civil authorities hate us and the people can't be all that trusted. On top of that our message is outrageously unpopular. It says in Acts 4:12, *[12] And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.* If we think that message is unpopular today then you should have heard it in the first century when the world was filled with Gentile gods by the thousands in Israel that was very devoted to Judaism to say that.

There are really not a whole lot of assets. There are a handful of baby believers and a number of zealous disciples but the disciples have kind of been iffy in the past and not really reliable. If you look carefully you can see the assets are far more than that. In Acts 4:8 it said they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were used by their Resurrected Savior to bring healing to others and they were confident in their sovereign God. Therefore these fledgling disciples when confronted by the agents of unbelief, the enemies of Christ and the allies of the devil they didn't blink but boldly said in Acts 4:20, *[20] for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*

Were they fearful? I'm sure they were. Did they know what was going to happen? They really didn't but that didn't rule the day for they knew Jesus Christ. They knew that they came to Him not on their own merits but that they had given their lives to Him and trusted Him by faith and He in turn had taken their sin and laid it on the life of Jesus, God's Son. He applied the righteousness of that same Jesus to them so they didn't stand on their record for they didn't have a record they could stand on. They were servants of Christ and children of God in Jesus' Name. This is something we all have to do to walk with these disciples and to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Rather than being discouraged they turned and worship and prayed. They were chewed out and threatened by the counsel and yet they praised the Lord. They called in a sense for a worship service and they gathered together in prayer. This provides such a model of confidence and power for us because in the midst of hostility it promoted prayer and worship. That is really what it needs to do with us.

Sadly, most often we're not there. In the church often we get way too comfortable with our affluence. We are way too professional in our organization. We are way too spoiled by a sympathetic society and we still live in a very sympathetic society. It is nothing like what some of our brothers and sisters face overseas. We are all preoccupied by our personal peace and prosperity to the extent that we're just not ready for the hostility that can come into our lives.

Years ago we saw it in response to the tragedy of 9/11 when the twin towers in New York City were both bombed and collapsed. It was interesting to see this great sense of urgency and

unity on the part of many people and for a couple of weeks after churches were packed with people attending but then as things begin to settle people drifted away. Most would say within a month to six weeks churches were back to their regular attenders.

Here we find a similar urgency. When they heard the counsel they lifted their hearts together but this wasn't a unity and urgency that would pass for it would continue. We see that their urgent prayer released a powerful witness in the face of overwhelming odds. In this Acts 4 text we see this very simple outline unfold into two realities, two responses and two results.

What were the two realities that confronted these disciples? What do we see in their prayer? Because of the urgency and danger of their situation the apostles took confidence in two realities that undergirded their prayer. The first reality is that God is sovereign. He is the Creator of all things. Acts 4:24b says *[24b] Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.* For the followers of Jesus at this time this was their Father's world. It had not been abandoned by Him or hijacked by His enemies. They were not subject now to just luck or misfortune in their attempts to serve Him and that's crucial.

I had a friend in high school that began to talk more and more about his parents talking about selling their house and move when he went off to college. He didn't pay a whole lot of attention to this and he went off to college at the University of Georgia. When he came back he remembered unlocking the door, walking in the house and being amazed at how his mom had remodeled everything. Then he saw a person lying on the sofa in the living room who sat up and looked at him and said 'Who are you??' He said 'Who are you?' Sure enough, his parents had moved and he had no idea where they were. Now the way he tells it you would think that his parents forgot to tell him but I'm sure they told him a lot and he forgot to listen.

I don't know which was the case but I can promise you that has not happened with God in this world. He has not moved. He had not forgotten to tell us. He is still very much alive and active. It is still my Father's world and for the apostles this truth was very important because it established their value as people. Their significance was not found in their political clout or in their financial influence or in their beauty or education or lineage or productivity nor is ours. We are His ambassadors in this world. We serve the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and the very Creator of the stars of the universe. When we walk out at night and look up into the sky we see what Jesus put together and He is in my heart. Those disciples had a profound sense that this was still their Father's world.

It also meant great assurance in God's ability to do whatever He wants in this world. They served a God who was not limited by sin in this world. He could raise up and subdue powerful nations or powerful armies for His bidding. Therefore they said with great conviction in Acts 4:20, *[20] for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.* That was a great reality that decorated their conviction as apostles despite their smallness in the eyes of the world.

A second reality is found in Acts 4:25 and that is man is sinful and hostile to God apart from Christ. The apostles were not surprised that they were in the minority. They were not shocked at the opposition they encountered. In fact they knew well the words of King David in Psalm 2:1-2 which say *[1] Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? [2] The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed.* That idea of opposition wasn't something they just saw in their Savior but it had been taught all through the centuries that there would be opposition in this world.

It's possible that they were expecting this opposition and weren't surprised. I am often amazed at how often I'm surprised by people without Christ do – why they are hostile or opposed to what I believe or how they are prone to do ungodly things. I'm a nice guy with a nice

family. I don't break the laws. I vote regularly. I pay my taxes. What's the big deal? Then we realize it's not a matter of us but those opposing the God we serve. I should never be surprised, angry or offended because there is opposition in this world. Sad is probably the best response.

Psalm 2:4 speaks of God's response to those who plot in vain and it says *[4] He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.* Those who have decided they don't want to follow God in their short little life they are making according to this verse a very tragic disastrous choice. God's response though they think they are right will be to simply laugh and to hold them in derision. That makes me sad because I don't know that the people without Christ understand the freight train that is coming toward them in eternity. Life is so precious and so short. It is a very dangerous situation to be in but the disciples knew it. Therefore they had an urgency and a unity to serve as ambassadors to get the Word of God out.

We are in the midst of this reality. We serve a sovereign God in a sinful world. We feel its influence and pressure every day. I remember in the ninth grade I had the opportunity to box for the first time. I had wrestled in junior high so I figured I was somewhat ready for what I might expect with boxing. I just didn't realize that the guy I was opposing was an experienced boxer. They put those gloves on me and pushed me into the ring and it was all I could do to throw a punch. I was waving my arms back and forth trying desperately but I remember staggering off the mat thinking 'I never want to do this again.'

I didn't understand the hostility I was facing or the hostility coming at me or the difficulty of the task that I had taken on. I think of so many Christians who go to Christians schools, engage in hard work and try to step out into the world but the hostility is difficult. Sometimes it comes from people who are lovable, friendly and compassionate. Hostility is Biblical and sometimes it comes from people who are lovable, friendly and compassionate who don't know Christ and have no interest in us knowing Christ. It can be very tough if we're not like these disciples and appreciate exactly what we're confronting yet they did with great boldness.

Ephesians 6:10–12 says *[10] Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. [11] Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. [12] For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* Paul knew what it would be like to encounter the hostility that we do. He advises us to be very careful and equipped. The disciples were and it was profound.

So the two realities we face is that we serve a sovereign God but we also minister in a sinful world and because of these two realities a powerful antagonism was established. Scriptures proved to be true and because of this the disciples saw two responses.

First response was human authorities gathered against God to do their will. Their prayer revealed that those who opposed Jesus Christ were primarily opposing and hating God which we see in Acts 4:26. Their eye was on God for they hated Him. They may have been religious and nice people but it was God who they were aiming at. These people had conspired together and invented a plan to rid the world of Christ but their target was the heavenly Father. It's the same with you and me. I can promise you that Satan is not interested in you but He is interested in knocking away at God so he will do what he can in and through us in order to get at the heavenly Father. We represent Him and that's an awesome privilege but an awesome responsibility.

When Adam had eaten the forbidden fruit and sinned he said to God in Genesis 3:12, *[12] The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and*

I ate.” He didn’t blame Eve, he blamed God when he stumbled. That is what the enemies of God tend to do. We’ll tend to do it sometimes when we’re hurt or angry.

In the parable of the tenants in Matthew 21 the master of the house had sent his servants to collect the fruit of his vineyards to the tenants. Matthew 21:35–38 says [35] *And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. [36] Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. [37] Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ [38] But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’* They killed the son to rob the father of what was truly his and that’s the pattern in this world.

You need to realize who you represent when you have invited Christ into your life. You represent the sovereign Lord of the universe in this world and that will meet with opposition. The passage teaches the deniers of Christ are really haters of God. The apostles knew you can’t love God and oppose, antagonize and persecute His Son. It’s quite a remarkable message but it’s very clear throughout Scripture.

The second response was God gathered against His enemies and used them to do His will. It is an astonishing statement of God’s sovereignty when we read this. Acts 4:27–28 says [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.* In other words, these people conspired to do the worst thing ever in history. They had their hands on God and they killed Him but God used it to do the greatest possible thing – the salvation of His people.

This is so true and so important on many levels. For instance, it’s important in relation to Jesus because that teaches us that Satan did not win with Jesus’ death. It was part of what God had planned, predestined to take place. John Calvin says ‘Since therefore the cross of Christ generally disturbs us when we see it at first Peter advises us that Christ suffered nothing by chance or because He lacked the power to deliver Himself but because He was thus appointed by God.’

Jesus said in John 10:17–18 [17] *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. [18] No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.* Jesus was very much in control doing exactly what His heavenly Father wanted.

This truth is important in relation to us because we take great assurance that God’s enemies are never free to do whatever they want. The Scripture says they are under His plan and under His hand. John Calvin says ‘The devil and all the wicked are bridled and restrained by God so they may not do us any harm. When they range most violently they are not at liberty to do what they choose but are given only such a loose reign as may serve our own benefit or our own profit.’

There is an interesting phrase in II Corinthians 12. This is the passage where the Apostle Paul is talking about his thorn in the flesh. We don’t exactly what it was but Paul prayed urgently for the Lord to remove it. It says in II Corinthians 12:7, [7] *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.* He calls it a messenger of Satan and I’m sure that Satan didn’t want Paul to be humbled. He wanted him to be angry, upset and revengeful yet God used Satan’s affliction to bring Paul to a state of wonderful humility before Him.

God does this again and again. It's amazing at what the world might call a great tragedy, difficult or hardship in our life and use it for His glory and our ultimate benefit. We sometimes forget that life is going to be very brief here and God is using everything He can to conform us to the image of Christ. Romans 8:29 says [29] *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* Like the apostles we must know that because God is sovereign that when adversity comes and even persecution that God intends to use it as a gift for His glory and our benefit in His Kingdom. This something only God can do. That's a response that God gathered against His enemies to do His will.

We conclude with two pretty spectacular results. In addition to these two realities and two responses the apostles ask God for two simple petitions. The first is to look upon the threats of His enemies. I wonder about that. Were the apostles seeking vengeance on their enemies? I really don't think so. The apostles simply didn't know what God was up to or what was going to happen. They didn't know if the Kingdom would grow but that certainly was their hope and what was prophesied but they prayed that He would keep His eye upon them and upon their enemies and that was sufficient.

I love what Matthew Henry says about this; it is a comfort to us that if we be unjustly threatened and bear it patiently that we may make ourselves easy by spreading a case before the Lord and leaving it with Him. We are comforted and sustained in all our trials and tribulations not by knowing what God will do or by what He is up to but by knowing that His eye is upon us as well as our adversaries. Everything we face is carefully measured and custom made so it will accomplish in us what He desires.

People will ask me sometimes 'Isn't being in pastoral care a depressing job?' Last week I helped with three funerals in one week. One might think 'what a bummer!' I go visit people in the hospital when they're sick but I would say 'depressing no, a blessing absolutely!' Again and again when I visit church members and other Christians and I see them struggling in times of loss and trouble, I'm constantly seeing them trust Christ confidently, not because they know what's going to happen but because of their hope in Him, their security about the future and because they know that He has His eye on them as well as on our enemies. He is watching it all and organizing it for His glory.

It may not be something I enjoy or I love or it may be something that brings me to the end of my life but I know that eternity is stretching out infinitely in the future and that the retirement benefits for us believers are rather good. I think this would be the perspective of those disciples to say 'Lord, You do whatever You need to do but we can't but speak about what we have seen and heard.

Secondly, they asked to help them speak His Word with boldness and we see this in Acts 4:29. Interestingly, they didn't ask God to change their circumstances or to defeat or remove their enemies or to assign someone else to take their task. When they asked for boldness it doesn't mean they would be bullies or brash or belligerent but that they would simply be able to take the initiative and with confidence speak with courage despite their circumstances. They wanted to be ready just as Peter says in I Peter 3:15, [15] *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.*

Then they prayed that Jesus would work miraculously as they spoke. That's not a bad prayer. Lord, I want You to do something supernatural here. I want lives to be changed. I want people to come to Christ. I want to see a victory over a particular sin in my life. I want to see

You change my family for Your glory. Notice that this whole focus wasn't that they prayed for miracles for themselves but that the miracles would promote the spread of the Gospel. That was their passion. Lord may whatever You do supernaturally may it go to ultimately spreading the Gospel. If it brings my peace and prosperity that's fine but we want to see the Gospel spread. That's exactly what happened.

The effect of their prayer was dramatic. They get into even deeper hot water in the next chapter where it's not like everything suddenly gets easy but God continues to use them and frankly you are reading this as an answer to this prayer. It is because of their boldness and their prayer to do something supernatural and their prayer was answered by what God had done in here, in your life and in your circumstances.

Acts 4:31 says [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.* This statement always brings a question to me of why Lord does the text add that fact about the earthquake when seldom do the earthquakes follow the prayer meetings of Your saints, even sometimes the most faithful believers? Remember when Jesus prayed 'Father if it be possible let this cup pass from Me, nevertheless not as I will but as You will'? There was no earthquake after that prayer. In fact, right after that He was captured and executed but the earthquakes would come. Paul prayed three times that the thorn in his flesh would be removed and it never happened, not in this life, no earthquakes. So how is mentioning the earthquake supposed to help me?

I think it has a very precise application in my life and in yours as well. That is God's way of saying that we can take confidence that He hears us. When they prayed in Jesus' Name they had an earthquake and for whatever providential reason I can't explain that but the emphasis is that they prayed and God answered and I think that's the message for me. God answers all the time and He answers quickly all the time. The answer may be 'yes' or 'no' but we know that God answers. God hears us and God answers as we pray. Someday I may get some earthquake and I'd love it if there was some rumbling in this building when I said 'amen' at the end of this study but I'm not holding my breath. God may or may not do that but I know that He hears me when I pray and I know that He is answering when I pray.

On June 4, 1940 under the dire circumstances in England that I described earlier Winston Churchill gave the second of three speeches to the House of Commons around the period of the battle of France. It is widely held to be one of Churchill's speeches ever. In part he said *"Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous states have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all of the odious apparatus of Nazi rule we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old."*

That statement was one of great courage and leadership of a dramatic commitment to say that whatever comes we will fight, we will prevail and I wonder if I apply that to my Christian life if I could be just as zealous. In whatever circumstances God has me in, He is a sovereign Lord but I have some enemies out there and they are hostile to Him but I am serving Him. I

speak and I pray with the same kind of boldness, “Lord, whatever temptation I’m facing I’m prevailing because You’re in me, I’m going to prevail. Whatever enemies may be raised up against my walk with You until my dying breath I’m going to prevail. It is not because I’m strong but because I’m filled with the Holy Spirit and You are working in me.’

If such words were said about one human nation how much more as we as followers of Christ and citizens of the Kingdom of God say with great boldness, no matter what opposition we encounter ‘[20] *we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard* (Acts 4:20). May that be our motto and the churches motto worldwide. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, we thank You for the great victories we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. We stand in amazement that You would visit us, a very mortal, a very sinful crew and to send your Son to die so that our sins might be paid for so that we might serve You in newness of life. I thank You for this privilege. Impress upon each one of us Lord how short our life is and how eternity will stretch out forever. I pray that will remain hard and committed to You, zealous for the Gospel, desiring to walk with You no matter what may come and we pray that God might use us for Your glory. We ask this in Jesus’ Name and for His Sake, Amen.

Power Point

To the casual observer, the early church had little going for it. Their liabilities were many and their assets were few. Yet, as they confronted a hostile society, we discover...

I. Two Realities (24–26).

Because of the urgency and danger of their situation, the apostles took confidence in two realities that undergirded their prayer...

A. God is Sovereign – Creator of all things.

B. Man is sinful – hostile to God, apart from Christ.

II. Two Responses (27–28).

Because of the two realities, a powerful antagonism was established – and Scripture was proved to be true. The apostles saw...

A. Human authorities gathered against God to do their will.

B. God gathered against His enemies and used them to do His will.

III. Two Results (29–30).

The apostles ask God for two simple petitions...

A. To look upon the threats of His enemies.

B. To help them speak His word with boldness.

Conclusion: God’s response to their prayer was powerful and prompt. (31)