

The Church Alive – The Church At Her Finest (Part 1)

Acts 4:23-31

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. 24 And 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, 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.' 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. 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." 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.

On a recent episode of a Discovery Channel program, the hosts of the show were seeking to answer the question as to whether or not a human can walk, swim or drive in a straight line if blindfolded and having his ears plugged. With every attempt made, even with the help of other kinds of aids, it was impossible for the participants to walk, swim or drive in straight line without their sight; every time they would veer off course and often times end up going in circles. Each of the participants would think to themselves with each subsequent try, that if they could just picture the target with their minds eye, they could then make course adjustments; but they just could not.

As I was thinking about that episode, I had an epiphany of a spiritual application. For often times we can get a picture of what would have us do, or where we think God would have us go, and yet, we often times look up after going some distance only to find that we are not any nearer to the goal God has given us than when we first begun. It is like we are handicapped with a sort of spiritual blindness. We go to church and hear a message, we read our Bibles in the morning, we spend a few moments in prayer and then we go off on our way, sometimes getting to the end of that day only to realize that we somehow and somewhere veered off course. When that happens, what is the missing ingredient, what is it that we need so that the spiritual blindfold is taken off so that we might clearly see the target to which God has us aiming? I say to that the missing ingredient is often frequent and fervent prayer.

And what is true for us as individuals, is equally true for us as a church. A church can have a vision, a good, purposeful, meaningful vision of what it is God would have us do and how God would have us accomplish His purposes, and then, if we leave off prayer, individual and corporate prayer, the spiritual blindfolds go on and although we are moving, we end up veering off course and going in circles. The remedy for this is prayer, and in the case of the church as a body, it is corporate prayer – praying together. The church, our church, you and I, need to pray together so that the spiritual blindfolds fall off and we all can see exactly where we are going to the glory of God.

And this is what we find in our text this morning as the early church, as it has just experienced its first taste of persecution, as it has this first potential of having spiritual blindfolds

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go on, gathers together to do one of the finest labors she could ever do, and that is to look to God in a time of corporate prayer. It is in prayer that the church is seen in her finest.

If you stop to think about it, there is nothing quite as amazing as prayer. Why do I say that? How is it that greatest Being in the universe listens to us when we call on Him in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ? The God of the universe calls us, invites us, beckons us, and commands us to pray. And yet, to talk with God, to carry on this wonderfully offered dialogue with the Creator is one of the things we struggle with the most. E. M. Bounds, a preacher who spoke often of prayer, noted the following over one hundred years ago, something that is equally, if not more true of our times today. He wrote:

“This is not a praying age; it is an age of great activity, of great movements, but one in which the tendency is very strong to stress the seen and the material and to neglect and discount the unseen and the spiritual. Prayer is the greatest of all forces because it honors God and brings Him into active aid...There can be no substitute, no rival for prayer; it stands alone as the great spiritual force, and this force must be imminent and acting. It cannot be dispensed with during one generation, nor held in abeyance for the advance of any great movement—it must be continuous and particular, always, everywhere, and in everything. We cannot run our spiritual operations on the prayers of the past generation. Many persons believe in the efficacy of prayer, but not many pray. Prayer is the easiest and hardest of all things; the simplest and the sublimest; the weakest and the most powerful; its results lie outside the range of human possibilities—they are limited only by the omnipotence of God.

Those words hit home as truly many people do believe in the efficacy, the power and ability of prayer, but not many pray; or at least pray as we ought. Generally speaking, prayer meetings are the least attended services in the church. And yet, if John Bunyan was right, and I believe he was, then what he said is true; “You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.” We need to pray people. Again, hear the passion of E.M. Bounds when he wrote, *“What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better [machinery], not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer.”*

We need to be serious about prayer. The church is at her finest in prayer! If we would be a people who would be serious about God and His glory, then we must be a people serious about prayer! And we, to our own demise, have not been serious about prayer. We can talk all we want about prayer, but it is nothing until we pray! I believe that the early church continually experienced the reality and the presence of God in her midst because she was serious about prayer. The church experiences the presence and the blessings of God to the degree in which she is committed to prayer.

Now then, as much as I truly desired not to divide this sermon on prayer into two parts, there is just too much to process in these verses if we would improve ourselves for the purpose of prayer. So, this morning I would like to present to you two key points, first **the problem that the church encountered** (23), followed by **the prayer in which the church engaged** (24-30). As we look at the prayer the church engaged in, we will notice what was included in their time of prayer, elements that we, if we are to be serious about prayer, must be included in our prayers.

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

I. The problem the church encountered (2:23)

Upon the heels of Acts 4:1-22, we just learned about Peter and John having been arrested for healing a crippled man in the name of Jesus. Because preaching in the name of Jesus along with the miraculous signs proving the validity of who Jesus is, the Sanhedrin, that group of power hungry religious men, arrested Peter and John, the apparent ring-leaders of the new church, and then, as an act of intimidation, ordered them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus upon threat of further imprisonment and punishment.

This brings us to Acts 4:23 where we read, "**When they had been released, they went to their own companions...**" Let us stop there for a moment as this sets up for us the contrast and the problem the church was facing. Peter and John went to "their own companions" – to their own people. This is in contrast to what? This is not speaking of Peter and John having been with the Gentiles and then going to the Jews for they were with their own people of racial descent. No, the contrast here is between "their own companions" in Christ, and the people of the world.

In the verses before, Peter and John had been with the world's people and felt the world's hostility toward Jesus. Luke takes the time to name some of the world's people, but now, having been released, Peter and John are quick to God to their own people, the church. Let me ask you a question. Be honest as you reflect upon this. Do you think of the church as your companions, as your people; the people who belong to you and to whom you belong? When you have a problem in and with the world, do you go to your church companions? Truthfully, we see many who profess Christ run from the church rather than running to the church. And yet, beloved, if you are truly a Christian, you **must** view the church not simply as a place you go once a week, but as a family to whom you belong and to whom you are committed. Biblically speaking, that is, according to God Himself, the it is in the church that you find your *own companions* and your own people.

And what did Peter and John do once they gathered with the church? Let us read the rest of verse 23, "**and [they] reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.**" Peter and John gave a testimony, they shared **the problem** they had experienced, the threat that was coming upon them and the rest of church by being ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus. Notice that Peter and John's problem became a shared burden, it became the church's problem. God had told the disciples one thing, to go into all the world and preach the gospel; that they were to be witnesses of Jesus to all the world (Matthew 28, Mark 16, Acts 1:8) but men were telling them to do something different. Jesus said, "Tell the world about Me!" The Sanhedrin said, "Tell no one about Jesus!" Both Jesus and the Sanhedrin's statements were commands, authoritative directives. They were not given as options, but as orders to follow.

We need to remember that whenever we learn of God commanding one thing and man commanding the opposite, we have a problem. Something has to give. We will be unable to please both God and men. For example, God says that He created all the world with purpose and meaning in the space of six days and all very good. Man says that we are all here by a meaningless, mindless process called evolution and that through mutation and death. When we speak of God as Creator, we have a problem with the world of men. God says that marriage is between a man and a woman, between Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve; and further that marriage is supposed to be for life. Man says anything goes, that whatever makes you happy, sexually or otherwise, is fair game. With this, the church has a problem with the world. The question is this, are we going to take God at His Word, or are we going to compromise with the sinful whims of men?

These are the kind of things the church will be in conflict with the world. And just what is to be done in this circumstances. When things get dark and the spiritual blindfolds are being

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wrapped around our spiritual eyes, do we just hope we can continue to walk toward the goal, thinking we can walk that straight line. And do not think for a moment that you just instantly panic when the blindfold is lowered. It can seem to be the right thing. Maybe we should call our Congressmen, maybe we can petition the courts. Not that there is anything wrong with these things but this is not what we see was the first response of the early church. They had no Congressmen to call and to appeal to Caesar was not an option, for he did not like the Christians but wanted all people to worship him there in Rome. So what did the early church do when in a crises? Beloved, their instinctive reaction was to pray! Is that our instinctive reaction – let us pray! This brings us to the second episode of our text, the first was the problem, and the second was the church in prayer!

II. The prayer in which the church engaged (2:24-30)

The story is told of a man who took his young son with him to town to run some errands. When it was time for lunch, the two of them went to the town diner to eat. They sat at the counter, ordered lunch, and when the food came the father said, “Son, we will just have a silent prayer for the food.” The father finished his prayer and waited for the boy to finish. For the longest time, the boy just sat with his head bowed. Finally looked up and his father asked him, “What in the world were you praying about all that time?” And with the innocence and honesty of a child, he replied, “How do I know? It was a silent prayer.”

Here in our text the church had a prayer meeting, a true, meaningful prayer meeting. They did not talk about prayer requests; they did not just flap their jaws reciting the same old tired phrases they had always heard. What we see in our text, here in verses 24-30 is that they were ALL engaged in energetic, meaningful dialogue with God. It was not that just a few of them praying as verse 24 says, **“And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said...”** Now, we do not know exactly what this looked like. Did they all utter this prayer together in unison? It has been suggested that the early Christian congregations repeated prayers one phrase at a time following a leader. It might of have been that Peter or one of the other Apostles spoke this prayer as a representative for the whole congregation, or that many of the people prayed aloud while the others prayed the same things in their hearts and minds. But we cannot miss the point for the Scripture says that they all prayed. And what prompted the prayer? A problem. And what was the problem? The problem was that the church would surely perish if God did not act! God’s people took action by appealing to the God of all action! Let us learn from this prayer of the early church then what are the ingredients to real, God-glorifying, God-trusting prayer! There are four of them in verses 24-30.

A. True prayer expresses confidence in God’s person (24)

Look at the beginning of their prayer in verse 24, **“O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM...”**

What I would have you notice is that they did not rush into their complaint or concern. They knew to whom they were speaking, the very Lord and Creator of heaven and earth. Beloved, one of the first ingredients to be found in true prayer is a high view and a high expression of that view of God. This prayer begins with these believer’s confidence in God’s person as they remind themselves of what God is like. Our prayers ought to begin with a declaration of who God is and what God is like. And as I alluded to, there are two clear attributes of God expressed here.

First, we see God as being sovereign, that is, in control. He is the Lord. Last week during our second hour, we learned that the word “Lord” speaks of God being master, ruler, and owner

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of all things. The most common Greek word for “Lord” is *kurios*, but that is not the word that the church uses here in verse 24. They will use the more common word for Lord down in verse 29, but here the Greek word *despota*, which again is an uncommon title for God in the New Testament. It is used only five other times (Luke 2:29; 2 Tim 2:21; Jude 4) in the NT, and from which we get our English word “despot.” It signifies that God is the absolute sovereign – that no one else controls all things as He does; that no one else tells Him what to do. He is the absolute Lord, Master, and Sovereign. The *despota* possesses illimitable ability and authority. The God to whom these believers were speaking is the sovereign Lord of the entire universe. And so one of the first characteristics of true prayer is realizing that in the midst of whatever terrifying or terrible circumstances you find yourself, you go without hesitation, immediately and direction, with full confidence and boldness, to this gracious Lord!

We need to meditate on that in the midst of our problems and especially when we bring our problems to the Lord. For true prayer never presumes to tell God what to do, but rather pleads with Him to do His own good will. The church is at her finest when she is asking for God’s will, God’s purposes, and God’s plans to be done on earth, not man’s will to be done in heaven. Like the early church, we must remember that God alone is the *despota*, the Sovereign One, not we ourselves, not the pastor of a church, not the politicians of our government, no one but the Lord.

But not only must our prayers express our confidence in God as Lord, as the *despota*, but also notice the confidence in God as the Creator! The early church prays, **“O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM...”**

Does it seem strange to you to pray to God, to being a conversation with God by acknowledging that God is the Creator? Did they believe they needed to remind God of who He was? No, God cannot forget who He is, but the truth of the matter is that we often forget, practically forget who He is.

And so, by way of reminder, we see here that prayer express the truth of who God is, and the first revelation of all of Scripture as to who God is, is that He is Creator. What does Genesis 1:1 declare, **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”** In Psalm 102:25, the Psalmist proclaims, **“Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands.”** And even in the consummation, the bringing together of all things at the end of time, as the final judgments of the book of Revelation come to a close, we find an angel of heaven proclaiming this truth as part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Revelation 14:7, the angel preaches, **“Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and the springs of waters.”** Why is this important? It is important for two reasons. First, since He created all things, He deserves honor from it all. This is God’s world, it belongs to Him and it was created to honor Him. The second reason is important to state that God is Creator is because of this confidence building truth, especially in the face of problems as big as the Jewish government breathing threats down your neck. That truth is this, that if God could make the universe, all out of nothing, then we can be assured that there is *nothing* He cannot do.

We see this idea of God as both Lord and Creator applied throughout Scripture, but so beautifully in the life of Abram. When speaking to the king of Sodom, who was “offering” Abram to take things from his hand, Abram responded, **“I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth.”** God alone is the possessor, the owner, the proprietor of heaven and earth. What a perspective to have whenever we encounter our various trials.

Now then, let us apply this. How do you begin your prayers? If you can think back upon the majority of your prayers, how do they begin? Do you begin with simple acknowledgements of who God is and what God is like? Do you strive to reflect upon the nature of who God is and of

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what God does? Is He first and foremost Lord and Creator? One of the reasons why our prayers may be so powerless, so ineffective and so seemingly empty is that we fail to acknowledge the God of all power for His power; the God of all grace for His grace; the God of great forgiveness for His great forgiveness! If we pray as though to a little God, then little will be accomplished. But as we pray to a great God, then we can be assured that great things will be accomplished. Once we have been gripped by the reality that God is the Sovereign Lord and Creator of this universe, it will affect the way we talk to Him.

So then, our prayers ought to begin with a declaration of who God is and what God is like. To pray in this way is to take off the spiritual blindfolds so that we can see our God and see where He would have us go. In the time we have remaining, I would like to take you through a few passages of Scripture that reveal this very principle, that as men of God prayed and acknowledged the greatness of God, great things were revealed.

Exodus 34:1-8

1 Now the Lord said to Moses, "Cut out for yourself two stone tablets like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered. 2 So be ready by morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to Me on the top of the mountain. 3 No man is to come up with you, nor let any man be seen anywhere on the mountain; even the flocks and the herds may not graze in front of that mountain." 4 So he cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. 5 The Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. 6 Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." 8 Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship.

1 Chronicles 29:10-13 – Dedication of Solomon by David

10 So David blessed the Lord in the sight of all the assembly; and David said, "Blessed are You, O Lord God of Israel our father, forever and ever. 11 Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. 12 Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone. 13 Now therefore, our God, we thank You, and praise Your glorious name.

Nehemiah 1

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislew, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." 4 When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 5 I said, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and

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lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, 6 let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. 7 "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. 8 "Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; 9 but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' 10 "They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. 11 O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

In each of these cases, and what is true in the other accounts that we do not have time to cover, as the people engaged in prayer, they first acknowledged who God is and what God is like. Is this not in fact what the Lord Jesus Himself prescribed as we pray, directing in Matthew 6:9, **"Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.'**" In other words, "Father, who dwells in that most glorious of places, may Your name, may that which reflects Your great character and being, may Your name be set apart; may it be revered, honored, glorified and regarded as singularly perfect."

Beloved, how do we start our prayers? Our prayers ought to begin with a declaration of who God is and what God is like. We acknowledge that God is in control and that we are not; that God is holy and we are not; that God is powerful, and able to save; and that we are not. Beloved, how do you being your prayers? Will you begin in this way? **"O Lord, it is You who has made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them!"** And will we, as a congregation, as we face whatever problems we have, broken lives, busted heaters, budget shortfalls, or even belligerent people, rather than just run and start to complain to God, will we stop and reflect upon and have confidence in our God who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above and beyond all we ask or think? Lord, remove the spiritual blinders and help us to pray in such a way so as to behold who You are and what You are like! To You be the glory in the church!

Soli Deo Gloria

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