

# Acts

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **A Prayer For Perilous Times**

**October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

**Acts 4:23-31**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 4.

As you turn there in your Bibles, I want to remind you of the scene that we are jumping into. After healing the man who had been born lame and after preaching a sermon that saw thousands turn to Christ, Peter and John were arrested and forced to spend a night in prison. The next morning, they were brought before the Sanhedrin which was made up of 70 of the most powerful and influential men in Jerusalem. They were threatened, and they were intimidated, but they were BOLD in their message, and they were UNWAVERING in their witness, because they were filled with the Spirit of God. Eventually, they were ordered not to speak about Jesus, and they were released.

With clothes that still reeked with the stench of the prison cell, and with threats reverberating in their minds, Peter and John made their way back through the dark streets of Jerusalem to the place where their friends were gathered.

These men already knew what it would cost to follow Jesus. Peter was in the courtyard when Jesus – beaten and bloodied – was subjected to an illegal mockery of a trial. John stood at the foot of the cross with Mary while Jesus breathed his last agonizing breaths. They knew the cost.

But, for the first time, they were *feeling* the cost. They were being confronted with the reality of what it means to take up their cross. That brings us to our text for this morning. The Jerusalem church has just experienced her first taste of hostility and adversity. How will she respond?

How would you respond? Imagine this scene. Imagine the police stormed in right in the middle of today's sermon and arrested all the leaders of this church. Imagine if we came back the next day and reported that it had officially become illegal to preach the name of Jesus in this country, and that the rulers are watching you – eager for the chance to take you in. How would you respond?

Let's lean in and learn from the example that this church has set for us. We pick up the story in verse 23 of Acts 4. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup> 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,<sup>25</sup> 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?

<sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed'—

<sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. <sup>29</sup> And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, <sup>30</sup> while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” <sup>31</sup> 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. (Acts 4:23-31 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The Sanhedrin has issued their warning: If you keep speaking about Jesus, we're going to do to you what we did to your King.

The Apostles have drawn their line in the sand: We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.

The church is about to feel the wrath of the world. So how do they respond?

And **when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God** (Acts 4:24a ESV)

This is how people of faith respond in seasons of persecution. What we find in our text for this morning is a prayer for perilous times.

## A Prayer For Perilous Times

In this passage, we find a tremendous example that is worth following. We will never face the exact circumstances that these believers faced, but we would naïve to assume that we will live our lives without ever facing real, sustained hostility. When that day comes, this passage presents us with a healthy model of the kind of prayers that we ought to be praying. So, how should the church pray in times of peril? First, we need to:

### 1. **Right size our view of God**

I want you to notice with me that they don't begin their prayer with an emphasis on their problems. They begin their prayer with an emphasis on their GREAT GOD! Look at verse 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 (Acts 4:24 ESV)

Big problems tend to produce big fear. Therefore, when the church has big problems, the first thing that she needs to remember is that she serves an even BIGGER God! A church that prays to a little god will forever be a church with little faith and little courage.

Right now, in our Life Together program we are memorizing question and answer 2 in the New City Catechism. Does anyone here have it memorized yet?

Q: What is God?

A: God is the creator and sustainer of everyone and everything. He is eternal, infinite and unchangeable in his power and perfection, goodness and glory, wisdom, justice and truth. Nothing happens except through him and by his will.

Do you know why we're disciplining ourselves to memorize that? Because, as R.C. Sproul says and as we often quote here: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."<sup>1</sup> And this is particularly true in perilous times.

This church in Jerusalem is on the brink of a crisis! Persecution is coming! Prison is coming! Death is likely coming! They have every reason in the world to be FILLED with anxiety and fear! So, what do they do? Where do they turn? They bring their big trouble to the:

Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them  
(Acts 4:24b ESV)

They say: "The leaders are threatening to make trouble, but you made the HEAVENS! You made the EARTH and the SEA and EVERYTHING in them! You are the CREATOR and the SUSTAINER of EVERYONE and EVERYTHING! We have a clear view of our troubles, God, but we will not be afraid because we have a CLEARER view of YOU!"

Let me ask you this morning: Are you quick to surrender your fears and anxieties to God? Or do you carry them with you all day long? A neglected prayer life is a common problem, and so often our answer to that problem is to try to impose greater discipline on our lives. We feel convicted, so we set a prayer alarm on our phone, and we purchase a prayer journal, and we write out a prayer calendar.

And don't get me wrong, all of that is GREAT!

But none of it really addresses the root. Why don't you pray?

If your life is marked by prayerlessness, then I would suggest to you this morning that your deepest problem is a deficient view of God. If we do not have a right size view of God – if He is small in our hearts and minds – then our problems will always appear bigger than they really are. We need to see Him as He truly is.

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 3.

This is why we pray the Lord's Prayer week after week. As a people, we need to remember that God is our Father who art in heaven. Jesus taught us to begin our prayers there. This is also why we pray Psalm 23 every month. We need to remember that the Lord is our Shepherd. This is why we're memorizing the catechism. We need to remember that God is the creator and sustainer of everyone and everything. We are intentionally locking these truths into our minds because we want every single person in this church to believe along with the puritan John Knox that:

A man with God on his side is always in the majority.<sup>2</sup>

Amen? Lord teach us to pray! In times of peril especially, we need to right size our view of God. That's the first thing we learn from this example. Second, as we pray in times of peril we need to:

## 2. Remember that God has a plan

When the heat is turned up, and the opposition leans in, it can feel disorienting. In those moments, we are all tempted to believe the lie that our future is in jeopardy – that we are somehow floating aimlessly in a meaningless chaos.

But the early church knew better than that. As they braced themselves for a frightening future, they turned their hearts and minds to God's word, and they reminded themselves that their trials were all part of God's plan. They quote Psalm 2 – a Psalm that was written by David – but before we get to that quote, I want you to notice what they *believed* about the Bible. Look with me at verses 24-25:

**Sovereign Lord**, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them,  
<sup>25</sup> **who through the mouth of our father David**, your servant, **said by the Holy Spirit**  
(Acts 4:24-25a ESV)

From here, they move directly into the quotation from Psalm 2. So, here's a question: Who wrote Psalm 2? David did. But, that's not the full answer, is it? While David was the *human author* of Psalm 2, God was the *ultimate Author* and He spoke *through* David by the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle Paul explains:

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<sup>2</sup> John Knox as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 5536.

All Scripture is **breathed out by God** (2 Timothy 3:16a ESV)

As Christians, we believe that this book is not a library or a collection of loosely connected stories. It is not like any other book in the world. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains:

The Bible claims to be the Word of God – the Word of God about himself, the Word of God about man, the Word of God about the world, the Word of God which tells us why the world is as it is, and the Word of God as to how the world can be put right.<sup>3</sup>

So what? Why am I drawing your attention to this? Because IF the Bible is just a collection of books written by men who lived long ago, then plop it on your shelf, crack it open whenever you're bored, and you *might* find something interesting and relevant. That is, in fact, how so many of us treat it, is it not?

But the early church understood that this is not an ordinary book. They understood that this is GOD'S BOOK, and that it is LIVING and ACTIVE and that it speaks today! They understood that the only way that they could make sense of their lives, and their circumstances, and their next steps was if they consulted the Word of God. And as they looked to God's Word for wisdom, the Spirit directed their minds to Psalm 2. We find this quote in verse 25:

“Why did the Gentiles rage,  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
<sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed’— (Acts 4:25b-26 ESV)

This Psalm was written by David 1,000 years before Jesus was born and yet, it so clearly pointed forward to him. Psalm 2 was a prayer for the perfect King, and in Jesus, the perfect King has come! And yet, in accordance with God's plan, the perfect King was met with *hostility*. In verses 27-28 we see the church drawing lines from Psalm 2 to their present circumstances:

<sup>27</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1995), 208-209.

Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. (Acts 4:24b-28 ESV)

The hostility that they were facing – as disorienting as it must have been – was all PART OF THE PLAN that God revealed long ago. This knowledge stabilized the young church, and it helped them to face the hostility with resolve and courage.

And this is why it is so important for us to ROOT OURSELVES in the word of God! We need to know the plan! We need to recognize the patterns of providence! We are not in uncharted waters. The world is not meaningless chaos. God has given us the script! He has told us how the story ends! Therefore, in perilous times, we need to remember that God has a plan.

But what if His plan is thwarted? What if these new circumstances RUIN what God was up to? That brings us to the third lesson we learn here about praying in perilous times. We need to:

### **3. Remember that God is completely in control**

This church begins their prayer by referring to God as their sovereign Lord. The title that the church uses here is the Greek word “despotes” and it has a particularly strong meaning. The leading koine Greek dictionary describes a “despotes” as:

one who has legal control and authority over persons, such as subjects or slaves<sup>4</sup>

So, they begin their prayer by acknowledging God as the Master of the world. Over and above the Sanhedrin and the state is the God of the universe, and HE is the One who is ultimately in control.

This conviction allows them to declare in verse 28 that Herod, and Pilate, and the Gentiles and the religious leaders – all of these people and powers who were threatening the church – were all ultimately APPOINTED by God:

to do whatever **your hand** and **your plan** had **predestined to take place**. (Acts 4:28 ESV)

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<sup>4</sup> BDAG, s.v. “δεσπότης,” 220.

God is large and in charge. God has a plan. And nothing can possibly stand in the way of His purposes. He is completely, entirely, SOVEREIGNLY in control.

Here we find one of the grand mysteries of our faith. Think about this for a moment. If this church is right in what they are praying, then – ultimately – the cross was GOD’s plan! The arrest of Peter and John was GOD’s plan! And the looming persecution that the church was about to face – persecution that will include the *stoning of Stephen* – was predestined by GOD Himself!

Now, God is not the author of evil. He cannot sin. And humans are not robots. We have freewill. But somehow, in the mystery of God’s will, even our sin and rebellion fits into the predestined plan of God. Peter said exactly this in his sermon at Pentecost.

this Jesus, delivered up according to the **definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified** and killed by the hands of lawless men. (Acts 2:23 ESV)

God ordained the cross. Nevertheless, those who crucified Jesus were responsible for their sin. God is sovereign. And we are responsible. We see both of those truths in Scripture, and as Bible-believing Christians, we are called to hold them both in tension.

As we reflect on God’s sovereignty, let me ask you: Do you believe this? Or do you bristle at this?

In perilous times – when persecution is at your doorstep and the ground you’re standing on feels like it won’t stop shifting – I hope and pray that you will know, and that you will REST in the reality that the God who loves you is completely in control. Because He is. The New Testament presents this doctrine not as a riddle for you to try to solve, but as a comfort for you to rest in. It is only because this is true that the Apostle Paul can declare:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

This young church in Jerusalem believed and rested in this. As G. Campbell Morgan describes it:



They saw the people, assembled tumultuously together, but high over all they saw the Throne, and God governing and compelling.<sup>5</sup>

When things don't go your way, do you see the Sovereign Lord seated on the Throne – high over all – governing and compelling? I pray that you do. Because He IS there.

Our God is not a *reactive* God. He doesn't frantically scramble about trying to manufacture positive outcomes from our terrible mistakes.

Our God is not a *passive* God. He doesn't sit indifferently at a distance, watching the universe play out like a sitcom.

Our God is not a *powerless* God. He is not bound in *any* way by *any* force – and that includes the force of those who oppose Him and even the force of your freewill.

Our God is the Sovereign Lord! We need to remember that in times of peril. And that brings us to the fourth lesson that we learn in this passage. As we pray in perilous times, we need to:

#### **4. Recognize the opportunity in adversity**

This step is impossible without the first three. If you worship a little god, and if you think you live in a world that is not orchestrated by His sovereign decree, then your prayer life is going to be fixated on your circumstances. Your prayers will start and end with: “God, make this hardship go away!” Or, more likely, you'll just bypass prayer altogether and take matters into your own hands.

However, if God is right sized in your mind, and you believe that your present trials are a part of His good plan, and if you remember that he is completely in control, then you're going to recognize those trials as an opportunity. You'll start to ask wise questions like: “God, what are you teaching me here?” Or: “God, how can I glorify You in the midst of this?”

I want you to look with me again at verses 29-30. These folks are on the cusp of persecution, prison, and death. But what kinds of things are they asking for? Listen closely:

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<sup>5</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 131.

And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness,<sup>30</sup> while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. (Acts 4:29-30 ESV)

Grant to your servants to continue to speak with boldness!

They don't pray down curses on the wicked leaders.

They don't plead with God to change the laws of the land to make Christianity safer.

They don't ask for new circumstances, or a new place to live, or a new strategy to lay low.

They ask for boldness to continue to live the life that God has called them to live in the circumstances in which He has placed them! They recognize the opportunity that is before them, and their only request is that God would embolden them to lay hold of it!

Now, don't hear me wrong. I'm not suggesting that we should never ask God to alleviate our difficult circumstances. On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus prayed:

Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. (Luke 22:42a ESV)

We're allowed to pray that way. JESUS prayed that way! We're allowed to bring our difficult circumstances to God and to ask Him for relief. But what I'm saying is that we need to recognize that God just might be up to something BIGGER than the changing of our circumstances! Which is why Jesus immediately followed that request with:

Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done. (Luke 22:42b ESV)

That humble, faith-filled, disposition is what we see modelled in this prayer in Acts 4.

God is working in our adversity. We are followers of Jesus – the One who accomplished His great victory by suffering and dying on the cross. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find that

sometimes our winning looks like losing. Sometimes the witness that God has called us to involves suffering and even death.

But there is an opportunity in our adversity. Ask for the eyes of faith to see it, and to seize it!

Fifth, and finally, as we consider this example of a prayer in perilous times, we learn to:

## 5. Request and receive the filling of the Holy Spirit

I love this! Look with me again at verse 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. (Acts 4:31 ESV)

What exactly happened here? Didn't these believers already have the Spirit? Didn't Pentecost already happen? Yes! It did! And yet, even though they had *received* the Spirit, this church needed to be FILLED with the Spirit once again! G. Campbell Morgan explains this well:

This was no new Pentecost, but a new enduement, a new filling. A simple formula of New Testament terminology concerning the activities of the Holy Spirit will always help us to intelligent thinking: One baptism, many fillings, constant anointing. These are all phrases of the New Testament.<sup>6</sup>

These believers were already indwelt by the Holy Spirit. However, even though they were *indwelt* by the Spirit, they needed to be *filled* once again. This was true for these believers in Jerusalem, and it is true for us today. Let's consider some of the New Testament passages on the Spirit to solidify this teaching.

First of all, I want you to see that *every Christian* is indwelt by the Spirit of God. There are some slivers of Christianity that suggest that it is possible to be a Christian without having the Spirit – they refer to the reception of the Spirit as a “second blessing” – however that view is obviously false which is why it is held by so few<sup>7</sup>. Paul clearly explains in Galatians 4:6:

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<sup>6</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Even within Pentecostalism where this view was once normative, I have never met anyone who still holds to this doctrine.

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6 ESV)

Why has God sent the Spirit into our hearts? Is it because we have reached a level of Christian maturity? Because we have spoken in tongues? No! God sends the Spirit into our hearts because we are SONS! And we become sons – children of God – upon conversion. Which means that EVERY child of God is indwelt by the Spirit.

But what then of this language of “filling”? Can you possess the Spirit, and yet fail to be *filled* by the Spirit? Well, the Apostle Paul certainly seems to think so. He told the church in Ephesus – believers who were already indwelt by the Holy Spirit – to:

be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18b ESV)

My good friend and mentor Tim Kerr taught me a helpful analogy to picture this reality.

Therefore, if we would be obedient to what we see in the Scriptures, then we should request and receive what God has promised! We should ask for more of the Spirit of God in our lives and in our church. Jesus taught us:

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; <sup>12</sup> or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?<sup>13</sup> If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!**” (Luke 11:11-13 ESV)

Church, do we ask for this?

These believers in Acts did! Peter did! The cowardly Peter who denied Christ was transformed into the courageous Peter who testified boldly before the Sanhedrin. And what was the difference? The Spirit of God was the difference! Therefore, when he got back to the church, and he told them about the troubles that were looming over the horizon, this church that was *already* indwelt by the Spirit sought the Lord – and they were FILLED ONCE AGAIN!

O that we would be FILLED! Again and again! We have the Spirit of God in us, but so many times we go through life with the bare minimum of His power! We grieve the Spirit with our quarreling. We hinder the Spirit with our lust. We stunt the Spirit with our unforgiveness. And in days of ease, perhaps we can get by with the bare minimum of what God has offered to us.

But in perilous times, we need the walls to shake! We need to be filled to the brim! The bold church is the Spirit filled church, so let us ASK our Father for a greater filling of His Spirit in our midst!

When you roll out of bed each morning, make your first request: “God, fill me with Your Spirit!” As you open your Bible, pray a quick prayer: “God, if there is anything in my life that is hindering Your Spirit’s work, expose it and help me to let it go.”

Request. Receive. Be filled. And become BOLD!

To that end, let’s pray together.