

Making Christ Known: The Priority of Prayer (Acts 4:23-31)

Matthew Williams

February 13, 2022

If someone told you they had discovered a way to lose weight without doing anything, would you be skeptical? What if someone else told you they became an Olympic level competitor in the snowboard halfpipe simply by watching YouTube videos? It doesn't pass the sniff test, does it? Why not? Because losing weight doesn't happen automatically. It requires the use of means, usually some combination of diet and exercise. Snowboarding is no different. Developing Olympic level skill doesn't just happen. It requires the use of means in the form of thousands of hours of practice.

Friends, the same principle applies when it comes to the mission of the gospel, to the work Jesus is doing to rescue sinners like us out of the kingdom of this world and bring them under his redemptive rule. It does not happen by divine fiat. God uses means, chief among them the prayers of his people, the life-giving labor of calling on the name of the Lord.

If you read through the book of Acts, an unmistakable pattern emerges. **The kingdom of God advances as the church is faithful to pray.** That's the message of Acts 4:23-31. It's a case study in the priority of prayer. Peter and John have just healed a 40-some year-old man who was lame from birth and used the opportunity to preach the good news of Jesus to a large crowd.

That didn't go over very well with the Jewish religious leaders. Acts 4:2 says they were "greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead." So they arrested Peter and John and hauled them before the authorities for a trial. They couldn't punish Peter and John, lest the people celebrating the miracle start a riot. Instead, they tried to threaten the men into silence. Acts 4:18, "They called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."

That's where v. 23 picks up. "When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God..." They didn't isolate from community when life got hard. They shared their struggle with their brothers and

sisters in Christ. And instead of forming a mob or starting a gripe session, they immediately stopped and prayed.

Is that your response, friend? Whether you're testifying to the truth of the gospel as an employee at Capital One or a missionary halfway across the world, are you quick to pray when you meet resistance from a coworker, a classmate, or a child in your home? The kind of prayer God uses to advance the mission of the gospel, especially in the teeth of opposition, has several characteristics.

1) GROUNDED IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD (vv. 23-28)

Don't miss the way they address the Lord in v. 24. The first recorded prayer of the church is clearly informed by the character of the one to whom they are praying. It begins by affirming and exulting in who God is! "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them..."

There's no deism here. No divine watchmaker who got it all started and is now letting the world do its thing. The doctrine of creation and providence go hand in hand. That's where a Christian view of the world begins – with the God who created all things and rules all things because he created all things. It's what gave them confidence to pray in the first place!

Friends, when we pray to the Lord, we are calling on the God who reigns. Heaven is his throne. The earth is his footstool. He is not part of a pantheon of rivals in the spiritual realm. He is the Lord of Hosts. The King of Kings. He has sovereignly controlled the circumstances of your life from the moment you were conceived and will continue to do so until the moment you die.

Some might say, "Then why pray at all? Que sera sera. Whatever will be will be." I say, "It's the fact that God is sovereign that gives me confidence to pray." He has the power and ability to do whatever we ask in accordance with his will. And he mediates his sovereign authority through the agency of his Word. The Sovereign Lord who made all things and rules over all things is not silent. He's a God who speaks.

V. 24, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit..." And then they quote Ps 2. "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the

peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.”

So what does our Sovereign Lord say in Ps 2? He says the opposition they’re experiencing isn’t a sign of his failure to rule or evidence that he’s losing his grip on the world. To the contrary, it’s a direct fulfillment of his Word. The resistance they’re experiencing vindicates the truth of God’s promises. What’s happening to them is exactly what God said would happen. It’s what God the Father, God the Son, and his chosen people have experienced from wicked men since the very beginning.

Whenever we encounter hardship on the path of obedience to Christ, it’s easy to be consumed with what we’re feeling or what other people are doing or not doing. Our attention is confined to what’s happening to us and how painful it is. That’s a deadly trap, friends. We need to process our experience through the lens of Scripture, to see our situation from God’s perspective. As the disciples own the words of Ps 2, allowing the sovereign Word of God to frame reality, their prayer is shaped in several ways.

First, it’s conversant in the language of lament. What’s the very first word of the psalm? Why. Why, Lord? Why are all these people, people who ought to love your Son and defend those who do, why are they attacking us? Why are they threatening us? It’s not supposed to be this way, Father! You’re our Creator. You’re our Redeemer. You’re good and wise and abounding in steadfast love. We don’t understand. We have so many unanswered questions. But our eyes are on you. We’re looking to you. You’re the one we need, especially when life hurts.

Second, it acknowledges the true nature of the battle. Neither David nor the people of God are directly referenced in the portion of Ps 2 they quote. It’s all about opposition to “the Lord” and “his Anointed” or the Christ. That’s not accidental. The disciples recognize the religious authorities opposing them are ultimately raging, plotting, setting, and gathering against God himself. Sure, they’re threatening Peter and John. But what’s really going on? They’re taking up arms against the Almighty.

When you stand up for the truth about God in class and get mocked, they’re not ultimately mocking you. They’re mocking him. When you speak the truth in love to your wayward child and get a torrent of anger in response, they’re not ultimately fighting you. They’re fighting him. That doesn’t necessarily lessen the pain of our suffering, but it does keep us oriented in the battle and lessen the surprise factor.

Finally, it rests in the ultimate triumph of Christ. The disciples don't quote the entire psalm, but their interpretation in vv. 27-28 indicates they know exactly how it ends. "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..." And here's the key phrase. What are all these enemies of God doing besides fulfilling everything he said they would do in Ps 2? V. 28, they are doing "whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

Yes, they're raging. Yes, they're plotting. Yes, they're doing their very best to frighten us into silence. But this we know, Lord. Because you're sovereign, because you reign, because you work all things (wickedness included) according to the perfect counsel of your will, two things are true. All their opposition is ultimately in vain. Ps 2:9, "You (King Jesus) shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Brothers and sisters, when we pray like that, when our prayers in response to suffering for Jesus' sake are grounded in the sovereign Word of God, we will find rest in knowing even the actions of wicked men cannot escape the secret will of God. The chief priests and elders were doing exactly what they wanted to do. And it was exactly what God planned for them to do. God never does evil. Nor is he morally responsible for evil. And yet in a way we cannot fully understand, he doesn't just allow it or cope with it. He ordains it.

It's the story of the gospel. What men intend for evil God intends for good. Therein lies our hope as the people of God! It's what gives us confidence to pray even when it feels like the kingdom of God is being assaulted on every side. The kind of prayer God uses to advance the mission of the gospel is grounded in the sovereign Word of God.

2) FOCUSED ON THE WORD OF CHRIST (vv. 29-30)

You could argue this point is rather obvious. If the mission of the gospel is all about the good news of Jesus, of course the kind of prayer God uses to advance his mission is all about Jesus. Here's the real challenge. Many of the requests we bring to the Lord are focused on all sorts of other things.

If you were the disciples and you just had your life threatened by the same people who killed Jesus, what would be at the top of your prayer list? How about, “Lord, spare my life!” I mean, talk about a traumatic experience. Imagine the temptation to fear. Imagine the concern for your wife and kids.

Peter and John are influential leaders in the church. We need wisdom to create a succession plan if one of them goes down, we need a counseling strategy for the thousands of new converts who just watched their lead pastor get arrested. There are countless good things they could have prayed for and asked their friends to pray for.

But there’s one thing they focused on. And it has nothing to do with physical safety, contingency planning, or trauma recovery. Without denigrating the value of any of those things, they simply were not the main priority. Something else of infinitely greater value was at the top of the priority list. V. 29, “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness...”

Their suffering did not prompt them to pray self-centered or enemy-centered sorts of prayers. There was a radical Christ-centeredness to their prayers because their chief desire was not for their own comfort, but for the furtherance of the gospel through the faithfulness of their witness. Our greatest concern is not for ourselves, Lord. It’s for your cause. It’s for your mission. It’s for your work of salvation accomplished through the proclamation of your word.

So make us bold, Lord. Make us fearless. Give us a holy courage that isn’t constantly taking the temperature of what people think and is faithful to say what is true. Not the truth of the Republican party platform. Not the truth of a politically conservative worldview. But the truth of your Word. The truth about Christ. How there is no other name by which we may be saved from the judgement of God we deserve.

And as we do, authenticate your Word by working miracles in our midst. Heal the sick. Rescue the perishing. Bring back the lost. Bind up the wounded. Humble the proud. Raise up the downtrodden. Deliver the addicted. Convince those who don’t know you, in my family, in our city, in Bolivia, Namibia, and Thailand, that there is a God in heaven who sees and saves!

What comes pouring out of your heart when you pray, friend? Your personal troubles? Or the cause of Christ? A longing for the gospel to advance through the faithfulness of your witness and the demonstration of God's power that Jesus might be exalted? I'm not saying it's wrong to pray for other concerns. I'm saying many of our prayers are often far too small and self-centered. I'm saying our desire for the Lord to lessen our suffering is often greater than our desire for Christ to be exalted through our suffering.

The fact they call themselves the Lord's "servants" or more literally "slaves" in v. 29 says something. They're using prayer to advance God's mission, not their own. Christ is the one they're living to please and honor. And the work of a slave of Christ primarily consists of speaking the word of Christ. We don't come up with the words. We speak his words. The need of the hour is not how give a snappy answer to every conceivable question, but rather holy courage that doesn't equate sensitivity with silence.

Biblical boldness is strikingly different from the spirit of our age for whom the highest value is not offending people! We must not excuse a lack of love as being "bold." But if we always wait for other people to cross the spiritual conversation barrier, or consistently give ourselves a pass by saying we should probably build a little more relationship before saying anything about Jesus, we've exchanged a spirit of boldness for the fear of man. The kind of prayer God uses to advance the mission of the gospel is focused on the saving word of Christ.

3) ANSWERED THROUGH THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT (v. 31)

Look at v. 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." Friends, when we pray, God moves. God answers. Your prayers for the sake of his kingdom do not vanish into thin air. They cause things to happen in the spiritual and physical realm that would not otherwise happen.

So what happened when the disciples prayed? God provided tangible, physical proof in the form of an earthquake that the Lord of Hosts was in their midst! And he blessed his disciples with a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Why? Because it's the Holy Spirit who applies to our lives all the graces and blessings Jesus has won for us, including the spiritual fruit of courage rooted in the fear of the Lord.

If you've read Acts before, you might wonder, "Wait a minute. I thought they were already filled with the Spirit back in Acts 2. Do they really need to be filled again? The moment you become a Christian you are filled with the Spirit, friend. But the Lord tells us in Eph 5:18 to keep on being filled with the Spirit, to labor in prayer that we might come more fully under his power and influence in every moment of our day.

That's exactly what happens in v. 31. The disciples prayed for boldness. And the Lord answered their prayer in a powerful way by filling them with greater measure of the Spirit. What a sweet gift the indwelling Holy Spirit is, friends! All the spiritual resources we need to accomplish the mission the Lord has given us – boldness included - come to us through him. We do not have what it takes within ourselves. We can only speak his words if we are empowered by his Spirit. Praise God that's a gift he is eager to provide!

Where the Spirit is present, Christ will be exalted, evangelism will thrive, and the church will grow! I love the report Luke provides a few verses later in Acts 4:33, "And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." The church didn't grow because they were strong, or wise, or diligent, or well-trained, or never made mistakes. The church grew because the Holy Spirit empowered them to not stop sharing the good news of Jesus in the face of relentless opposition.

CONCLUSION

God uses means, brothers and sisters. Without fail, where the gospel is advancing, the church is praying. We can give millions of dollars. We can go to all sorts of people. But if we are not a people who pray, our labor will be in vain. Prayer is not the icing on the missions cake. It is the cake. It is the work. When it's grounded in the sovereignty of God, focused on the Word of Christ, and answered through the power of the Spirit, prayer becomes the means God uses to advance his agenda in the world.

One of the qualities I most respect about my missionary friends, is that they are a couple who prays. I've asked them to share a testimony with us of how the Lord has reinforced the priority of prayer in their lives. And then we'll take some time to pray as a church for their entire family as they head to Southeast Asia in a few weeks.