

Heart of Worship

Lesson 6: Prayer in the Life of the Church -- Acts 4:23-31

Peter and John had spent the night in jail, and now they were free, but the threat still hung in the air. The same council that had crucified Jesus had hauled them in, warned them, and ordered them never again to speak in that name. These were powerful men, the rulers and elders of the nation, and they had the will and the means to make life very hard for a young and fragile church. So when Peter and John were released, they went straight to their own people and reported everything the chief priests and elders had said. And the church did the most natural and the most powerful thing it could do. It prayed.

Watch how they pray, because it is a model for the church in every age. They do not begin with their problem; they begin with their God. "Sovereign Lord," they say, "who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them." Before they mention a single threat, they remind themselves who is on the throne. Then they turn to Scripture, quoting a psalm about the nations raging against the Lord and his Anointed, and they recognize that the very rulers threatening them are doing nothing that God's hand and plan had not already foreseen. They set their crisis inside the sovereignty of God.

And then, having seen God rightly, they ask. But notice what they ask for. Not safety. Not the destruction of their enemies. Not even an end to the threats. They pray, "Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness." They ask for courage to keep doing the very thing that landed them in trouble. They ask God to stretch out his hand to heal and to work wonders through the name of Jesus. This is a church that wants boldness more than comfort and the spread of the word more than its own ease.

When they finished, the place where they were gathered was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they went out and spoke the word of God with boldness. That is what prayer did in the early church. It was not a formality at the edge of their life together; it was the engine. When they were threatened, they prayed. When they needed boldness, they prayed. When the work seemed impossible, they prayed, and God moved. Read this scene slowly, and let it ask a searching question of us: when trouble comes, where do we run, and what do we ask for when we get there?

Group Discussion: When the early church faced a real threat, its first instinct was to gather and pray, and to pray not for safety but for boldness to keep speaking. What does our congregation tend to reach for first when it faces difficulty or opposition, and what might it look like for prayer to become our true first response rather than a last resort?

Personal Reflection: These believers prayed for courage to keep doing the hard thing, not for an easier path. Think about a pressure or fear you are facing right now. What have you been asking

God for, and would you dare to pray, as they did, less for escape and more for boldness to be faithful? What makes that kind of prayer hard for you?

Read Acts 4:23–31

Study Questions

1. The church begins its prayer by addressing God as “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth” (v. 24), before mentioning any threat. Why do they start with who God is rather than with their problem, and what does this teach us about how to pray in a crisis?
2. When trouble strikes, our prayers often begin and end with our fears. How would beginning your prayers, as the church did, by deliberately remembering who God is change the way you pray about the things that frighten you? Name one truth about God you most need to rehearse before you ask.
3. The believers turn to Scripture in their prayer, quoting Psalm 2 and seeing their situation through it (vv. 25–26). How does praying in line with God’s word shape and strengthen prayer, and what does it tell us that they understood their crisis through the lens of Scripture?
4. The early church let the Scriptures supply the words and the perspective for their prayer. How full is your own prayer life of the language and promises of God’s word, and what is one way you could let Scripture shape your prayers more deeply?
5. They recognized that even the rulers who opposed them were doing only “whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (vv. 27–28). How does confidence in

God's sovereign rule, even over their enemies, free the church to pray boldly rather than fearfully?

6. It is one thing to confess that God is sovereign and another to rest in it when you are afraid. Where do you most need to trust that God's hand is over a situation that feels out of control, and how might that trust change what you pray for?
7. When they finally make their request, they ask not for safety but for boldness to keep speaking the word (vv. 29–30). What does it reveal about the priorities of this church that they prized courage and the spread of the gospel above their own comfort and security?
8. Much of our praying is aimed at our own comfort, safety, and relief. If you compared your recent prayers to this one, what would the comparison reveal about your priorities, and how might you begin praying more for boldness, fruitfulness, and the advance of God's work?
9. This scene shows prayer at the very center of the church's life: not a ritual at the margins, but the means by which a threatened church found courage, sought God's power, and was filled with the Spirit to speak the word boldly (v. 31). What does this teach us about the place prayer is meant to hold in the worship and work of the Lord's church, and why must we resist letting prayer shrink into a mere formality while still expecting God to work? How does this passage call a congregation to depend on God in prayer for everything it does?

10. Look back over the whole prayer: a sovereign God, the word of Scripture, confidence under threat, a cry for boldness, and a Spirit-filled church speaking the word. Name one specific way this scene is reshaping your understanding of prayer, and one concrete step you will take this week to make prayer more central in your own walk and in your part of the church's life.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 2:42, the early church devoting itself steadfastly to the prayers; Philippians 4:6–7, bringing everything to God in prayer and receiving his peace; Ephesians 6:18–20, praying at all times and asking for boldness to make known the gospel; 1 Thessalonians 5:17, praying without ceasing; James 5:16, the powerful effect of the prayer of a righteous person.