

Church 2.0 Acts

“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.” (Acts 5:42 ESV)

“Since we have such a hope, we are very bold,” (2 Cor. 3:12 ESV)

Persecution and Prayer

Acts 4:23-31

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Open your Bibles and turn to **Acts 4:23-31**. Our text today is the final section in a story we have been tracking over the past few weeks. Peter and John had performed a miracle by healing a lame beggar in the name of Jesus. This angered the Jewish priests, and they arrested Peter and John and brought them before the high-priest Annas. Peter, filled with the Spirit - during his own trial mind you – boldly preaches the gospel. Because the religious leaders cannot find anything to charge them with, Peter and John are let go with a stern warning, “Do not speak or preach the name of Jesus ever again.”

But John and Peter replied to their threats this way, *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”*

In our text today, we are going to see how the church responded to these threats.

It is critical that we see HOW the church responded to persecution, because God’s Word promises us that if we follow Jesus, these threats **will** come.

We are told by the Apostle Peter, in his letters, that we should expect opposition to the gospel, and we should expect to be threatened and attacked for preaching Jesus.

Jesus will tell us in **Luke 6:22**, *“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!”*

So persecution **will** come, but we need to be prepared for how we should respond, and in our text today we can draw some principles from the example of the early church.

So what should we do when the threat of censorship or of hostility comes against the Church?

How do we pray when we are pressured to modify the message of the Gospel?

What does the church do when we are told, “stop preaching the message of Jesus”?

Hear now the inspired and inerrant Word of God,

Acts 4:23-31

23 When they 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

The disciples hear from Peter and John the threat of the Jewish leaders – “Stop preaching Christ.”

This is the start of state sanctioned persecution against the church.

But it’s fascinating what do they do first! Did you notice?

They pray!

I mean, before anything is done, before any response is formulated, they pray.

The early church clearly believed what **Psalm 34:17** says, “*When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.*”

So this morning, I want us to look at HOW they prayed in response to these threats.

How Did The Church Pray?

The first thing we see is this,

1. They prayed together.

The first thing that jumps out in this text is the incredible unity and dependency the church found in one another.

If you recall, **Acts 2:42** tells us that right after Pentecost, the early church, “*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*” The church, from the start, prioritized the discipline of gathering frequently for prayer and fellowship.

So when the threat of persecution came, it was already their instinct to gather and pray.

In **Acts 12** we will see how a similar occasion will happen again. Peter will be arrested for preaching Christ, and it will tell us that the church will gather in earnest prayer, and he will be miraculously delivered by an angel. Peter will head to the house of Mary (the mother of John Mark) and when he arrives, he finds them what? – praying together!

See again what it says in our text, “*When they were released, they went to their friends... and they lifted their voices together to God...*”

What a beautiful line! They saw themselves as friends! As family!

Who else would we run to in times of trial?

Do we turn to strangers? Do we turn to acquaintances? No, we run to those closest to us!

This lesson was driven home to me this year. Many of you know back in April, I went to visit our missions partners in Newfoundland, Steve Bray. We spent several days in St. Johns, and then Steve and I had gone up to Labrador for a few days. We spent a TON of time together, and really developed a close relationship. We had just gotten back into St. Johns when I got the call from Sienna that we had lost our baby – she had a miscarriage. I remember was in a small backroom at the Mile One Mission offices, alone – hundreds of miles from my wife.

The first thing I did after I found out was I called Steve. We had just dropped him off at home and he was sick as a dog, but I was so distraught I needed a friend. I could have called someone else first, but I was driven to my brother in Christ.

He wept with me, and most importantly – we prayed.

Suffering ought to drive us to one another in prayer.

And so the question is this – when persecution comes, where will I be found?

Do you have close, intimate, and spiritually rich friendships like this? Do you see the church this way? I worry, at times, for my generation and the generations after me when it comes to this. Building relationships, getting connected into the community of faith, seems to be an especially hard thing for us.

I think there are all kinds of factors for this – the advent of cell phones, the internet, social media – they all play a part. But I also think we have just lived in the lap of luxury and prosperity as generations, and we have inherited so much from our parents, that there is not a sense of need and urgency that drives us to one another in fellowship and the spirituals rhythms.

We seem to not realize how much we need one another because we have so much else and so little opposition, and so we often neglect or trivialize opportunities to gather for prayer and fellowship. It's often excused under the guise of, “social anxiety”, “self-care” or “guarding your time”.

But the enemy loves this, because when persecution comes (and it shall) we will not have developed the self-discipline or self-control to stop blaming anxiety, get off our couches, turn off Netflix, get dressed, and get into the community of faith to pray, and we will be easily tempted to fall away.

Jesus speaks of people like this in the Parable of the Sower. **Matthew 13:20-21** says, *“As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.”*

Therefore we MUST prioritize the development of deep friendship and relationships in the church. We MUST prioritize being individuals and being a church where we welcome one another, we share our homes with one another, where we fellowship frequently around the dinner table and pray together.

The author of Hebrews makes this point when he says, we ought to not fall into the habit of, *“neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*

If ever we should live to see the day where governing authorities tell us, “Stop preaching the name of Jesus,” then the first action of the church should be to gather and pray with our friends.

When the threats came against the church, immediately the church gathered to pray. Secondly, they prayed FROM the Word of God.

2. They prayed from the Word of God.

We see in this text that the very content of the prayer is being guided and educated by the Scriptures. The text that is referenced in this prayer is **Psalms 2**, which is a Psalm where David speaks of how the kings of the world oppose God and His rule, and will oppose the rule of His anointed Son, but also how God would give the nations to His Son in victory.

But notice how the prayer says God spoke, *“through the mouth of our father David, your servant, by the Holy Spirit...”*

The early Christians had understood that **Psalm 2** was not simply written by David about opposition to his reign, but that David was prophesying (by the Holy Spirit) about the opposition that God's Anointed One, the Christ – David's greater Son - would experience. If you remember in **Acts 2:30**, Peter calls David a prophet, and so one of the things the early church was doing was combing through the Psalms and identifying prophetic passages about Christ!

So they KNEW, because of the Scriptures, that opposition was coming against them! They KNEW from **Psalm 2** to not expect ease in following an Anointed One against whom the nations raged! They understood that if the Messiah was opposed then THEY would be opposed!

Darrell Bock comments here, "The early believers also recognize that their rejection was something to be anticipated, and they accept it with praise. God said that there would be people who want nothing to do with his Anointed and would reject him, failing to recognize him."¹

And so, knowing the truth of the Scriptures, they prayed them together.

Often, when we pray, we want to know, "Will God answer my prayer? Will God grant my requests? Will He respond positively?"

One certain way to know that God will grant our requests is when we pray God's Word and promises. This is what Jesus is getting at in **John 15:7**, "*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*" When we abide in God's Word, when we saturate our prayers with God's own words and promises, we can know that God will be faithful to His own Words and promises!

And knowing the Scriptures allowed them to interpret what was happening in that very moment! Look at **vs. 27-28**,

"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."

¹ Bock, *Acts*, pg. 202.

As they prayed, they reflected on the actions taken against Jesus, and they reminded themselves, based on the authority of the Scriptures, that **they were in the center of God's plan, guided by His all-powerful hand.**

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is highlighted here in this prayer. In **vs. 24** they address God as, "*Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them*" and then, understanding God's total power and control over all things, they see that the rejection of Christ, and then the rejection of the message Peter and John had preached, was all part of God's plan!

I. Howard Marshall, commenting on this verse, hits the nail on the head here, "It was this Sovereign Lord who had prophesied in the Psalms the fruitless efforts of the rulers of the world to rebel against Him and the Messiah. The unspoken thought is quite clearly that it is futile for men to scheme against a God who not only created the whole universe but also foresaw their scheming."²

Our trials, when people mock us, when persecution comes against Christ's Church – none of it happens outside of the purposes and plans of the same Sovereign Lord who made everything!

The point is this – they found comfort in God's power and plan when persecution came. Before any decision, action or response, they burrowed themselves deep in the truths of God's Word.

Oh, how we desperately need to do the same in times of fear!

When we see glimpses of hardship, of persecution, of threat, or of opposition, it is all too often that our default reaction is to react with fear, anger and frustration. But that ultimately reveals something about our theology that differs dramatically from what we see here in the early church - we don't respond in prayer and bible-believing faith to threats and hostilities because **we are sadly still surprised by them!**

Perhaps it is our over-abundance of wealth, comfort, and ease that we are still surprised. Perhaps soft times create soft people.

² I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1980), pg. 111.

But often, the reason we respond so poorly to threats and opposition is because we don't truly know what the Scriptures say about suffering, persecution, and trial.

The Apostle Peter, years later, will say this to us, *“do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings.”*³

Peter says we ought not to be surprised by persecution, but rather see how persecution is sign that we are indeed Christ's! Persecution is a proof of our position, and an affirmation of our adoption!

So when persecution comes, we can pray this prayer to God! “God, we know Your Word says that this world rejected Christ and will reject His people. The nations opposed David, the nations opposed Christ, and the nations will oppose us. But Your Word also says that ‘The Nations will be given to Christ as an inheritance.’ Thank You that we are yours! Thank You that Christ will be victorious!”

When we are rooted in God's Word, when we are aware of His promises to His people, then when persecution comes we are not caught unaware, or unprepared – we can respond by simply praying God's promises and finding courage in them!

So the early church here prayed together, and they prayed rooting, centering, and refocusing prayers that were educated and instructed by the Word of God and a deep trust in His powerful sovereign will.

So, do you know God's Word? Is it residing deep within you, so that when the trial comes what rises to the surface in prayer are His promises and the truth of His Word?

Thirdly, we see that,

3. They prayed for power from God.

Look with me at **vs. 29-30**.

³ 1 Peter 4:12-13

“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.”

After praying what God’s Word said about their context, they *then* ask this powerful God for one thing – they ask Him for power. **Specifically, they asked for boldness to keep preaching Jesus, and they asked for more miracles to be done in the name of Jesus.**

It is interesting to note what they don’t pray for.

They don’t pray for deliverance. They don’t pray for a meteor to fall on their enemies. They don’t pray for creativity to make the message more palatable.

They prayed for boldness. They prayed for courage to KEEP preaching.

I wonder, what the average Evangelical Christian would pray if state sanctioned persecution came? What would you pray for if tomorrow the government said, “You cannot share Christ anymore?” It’s an important question.

The early church didn’t ask God to deliver them from persecution, rather they asked God to grant them **power** so that they would not shrink back in fear but continue in faith and courage.

Paul himself, years later, will model this kind of prayer. He will ask for prayers for boldness from the church in Ephesus that, “...*words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.*”⁴

Darrell Bock, again, says here, “In sum, this prayer is an expression of complete dependence on God, a recognition of his sovereignty, a call for God’s justice and oversight in the midst of opposition, for an enablement for mission, and for the working of his power to show that God is behind the preaching of the name of Jesus in healing and signs.”⁵

⁴ Ephesians 6:19 (ESV)

⁵ Bock, pg. 201.

And look at what happens once they pray, **vs. 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.”

In a powerful sign, the entire house where the church was praying began to shake with power.

I. Howard Marshall helps us understand this miraculous event, “This was one of the signs which indicated a theophany in the OT (Exod. 19:18; Isa. 6:4), and it would have been regarded as indicating a divine response to prayer. The point is, then, that God signified that he was present and would answer the prayer.”⁶

This was God telling them, “I have heard your cries, and your prayers have been answered!”

The result of this powerful sign is immediate – the church believed that God had heard them, that God was with them, and that God would go with them, and they kept on preaching Christ boldly!

In fact, we will read in **Acts 5:12, 14** that, *“many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles... ¹⁴And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”*

They continued to preach with boldness, and many signs and wonders accompanied that preaching, and the church grew and grew!

Persecution could not stop the power of God at work in His people.

It could not stop it then, and it cannot stop it today.

This is our confidence - there is boldness, there is confidence, and there is power for you even in the face of opposition and persecution.

We should not let cultural norms or “Canadian politeness” ever be an excuse to allow fear and timidity to prevent us from sharing Christ boldly.

⁶ Marshall, pg. 114.

Paul will tell us in **1 Tim. 1:7**, “*for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.*”

All we need to do is reach out with brothers and sisters in prayer and ask for it.

This is the point of this text - prayer is the primary Christian response to persecution.

When persecution came, it drove the church together, it drove them deeper into the Scriptures for strength and comfort and it caused them to pray for power and boldness from on high.

The glaring question that flows from this text is quite convicting – how will we respond in the face of fierce persecution and opposition?

How will you respond when you suffer as a Christian for preaching Christ and living a godly life?

How Will We Respond When Persecution Comes?

This passage not only simply describes what happened, but I think it also prescribes to us what we ought to do when persecution, trial, and hardship comes our way!

Do we ever desperately need to digest this truth!

I think this text brings an indictment on the modern church.

In recent years, when North American Evangelicals get a whiff of what they perceive to be persecution, the first response is not PRAYER, it's PROTEST! It's ANGER!

But that's not what we see here from the early church.

Listen to what John Calvin says on this text, “...the disciples of Christ do not jest when they hear that their enemies do threaten them so sore and press so sore upon them, as careless and sluggish men use to do; but being touched with fear, they fly to seek help at the hands of God; and again,

they are not terrified, neither yet do they conceive any immoderate fear; but crave of God invincible constancy with right godly petitions.”⁷

Calvin points out that the Church did not receive this threat with dismissiveness or apathy, or with anger and aggression – they responded by running to God and asking for invincible constancy. They run to God and ask for courage to stand firm!

But for many Christians, instead of (as Calvin says), “flying to seek help at the hands of God” in prayer - when (perceived or actual) persecution comes, many Christians instead get angry, speak out against those who would seek to persecute us, rant and do ALMOST EVERYTHING ELSE BUT what we see in this text!

If we truly believed God’s Word - that what we need is not to be bailed out but rather be given boldness - if we truly believed that the answer to persecution was *more* preaching, then we would engage in less posting, posturing and paranoia and more prayer.

So here is the question - when persecution, cultural opposition, or threat falls upon you, will you be found alone, or will you fly to seek power from the hands of God with brothers and sisters in prayer?

We need the basic, fundamental patterns of word, worship, prayer and fellowship to meet head on the storms of opposition and threat that WILL assuredly come.

The world might attempt to control what we say. The culture might turn against us.

The government might one day impose laws to ban the preaching of the Gospel.

But when we trust what the Scriptures say - that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation (**Rom. 1:16**), that the Spirit of God who gives life alone (**John 6:63**), that God is for us and no one can be against us (**Rom. 8:31**), that the Gospel to some is foolishness but to others it is the power of God (**1 Cor. 1:18**) – then those theological truths ought to produce confidence within us! We can share Christ with those we know, with kindness, gentleness, but with conviction, and we can trust that God’s Word will accomplish what it sets out to.

⁷ John Calvin, "Commentary on Acts 4", Calvin's Commentary on the Bible, (<https://www.studydrive.net/commentaries/eng/cal/acts-4.html>. 1840-57).

This lands on many of us in different ways this morning:

Maybe you are being mocked for your faith at work or school. How do you respond?

Maybe you are in an environment where the expectation is you jettison your Christian beliefs and compromise on everything the Scriptures say.

How do you respond? Do you attack back? Do you fall back in fear and change the message?

Or do you run to the community of faith, the word of God, for prayer and encouragement?

When hostility comes against us, when we are threatened to be silent, or when we are tempted to edit the message of the Gospel for fear of rejection, we can stand strong together – not in arrogance, not in anger or aggression, and not in loud outcries of injustice – but in prayerful humility and bold preaching.

The Apostle Paul will say this in, *2 Cor. 4:1-2*,

“Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.”

This is what the church does when the heat gets turned up - we refuse to rely on cunning or underhanded means.

We don't edit the message.

We don't shy away.

Instead, we pray together, we trust in God's Word, and we seek the power of God that we would continue to preach boldly.

May it be so with us.