

Mission Fuelled Prayer

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Date: 03 December 2023

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, we just read some verses about the early church in Acts and the believers as they prayed together for boldness. And prayer is actually a subject that's been in the news this week.

If you've been following the news, it may have been you've heard prayer mentioned about the debate on silent prayer outside abortion clinics in Scotland.

That's on at the moment in Parliament. Or there was a new multi-faith prayer area at Bristol Airport. You may have seen it online. It's really just a smoking shed or a bus stop, but they're calling it a prayer area by sticking a sign outside of somebody bending down on their knees.

And they look to be praying. So prayer is still something that is in the public consciousness despite living in a secular society. Prayer is still something that is worthy of being spoken about.

Because whatever people think of Christianity, it is often to prayer that people turn when they are desperate. And that's whether they call themselves a Christian believer or not.

[1 : 04] For example, during the coronavirus pandemic, it prompted a surge in interest in prayer. So the Google data of searches showed an increase online of 50% in searches for prayer.

People wanted to pray because of what they were facing in this world. Or just another example. On Monday, I met a friend who doesn't believe and she asked me to say a wee prayer for her because she had a job interview the next day.

I haven't heard whether she got the job, but she was keen as somebody who doesn't believe to get some prayer support and hope that it might help her get a new job. And so this afternoon, as we look at prayer, the prayer of the believers in Acts chapter 4, we learn why prayer is vital.

And so the context of this passage is that the church, the believers, they are facing opposition because of their preaching and proclamation of the message of Jesus.

So they are opposed and being persecuted for speaking about Jesus Christ. And so what is their response to this? Well, their response is that they join together in prayer.

[2 : 21] And we've got the actual wording of their prayer here in the text. And so their prayer shows who we pray to. It shows how God works. And it shows what God answers.

And so this afternoon, we're going to think about prayer that knows who God is, prayer that knows how God works, and prayer that knows what God answers.

So first of all, let's look at prayer that knows who God is, verse 23 and 24. Because we need to know if we're going to pray who it is that we are praying to.

And so what we see here in the context is that Peter and John were opposed by the religious authorities for proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ.

Verse 23. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

[3 : 17] So what did the chief priests and elders say to them? Well, it's there further up in verse 18 of chapter 4. Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Okay, so they had been imprisoned. They had been intimidated. They had been threatened. And the religious authorities wanted to punish them. And so this wasn't some kind of game.

This wasn't fun. This was serious because these religious leaders who are after the followers of Jesus were the leaders who had killed Jesus on the cross.

And so the response is to pray to God. Verse 24. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

So before they do anything else, the first thing they do instinctively is to pray. But it's not just, of course, that they pray that matters, but that they know who it is they're praying to.

[4 : 28] And so they address God as sovereign Lord. And it's interesting because the word they use is despota in the original Greek. And it's where we obviously get the word despot from.

And despot, despota, means a master of slaves. It means a ruler with absolute power and absolute authority. And so they're addressing God in the knowledge that he is the absolute sovereign master.

God has total control over all things. He rules over everything, they say, because he made everything. So they pray, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. And so, yes, they face opposition and persecution. Yet, the first thing they acknowledge is that God is sovereign.

So they're aware that what is happening to them is no surprise to God. God is not caught out. God is not wrong-footed by their present circumstances.

[5 : 36] They realize that God is in control of all that is happening. All that is happening because this is his world. He made it. And so their present circumstances are under his sovereign control.

And so here's the thing, knowing who God is, he is the sovereign Lord, should give great assurance and comfort to God's people.

And whatever age and stage that we live in. Because whatever is happening is not outwith God's control. Which means all of history and every situation, each circumstance, every encounter, each detail, all the triumphs, as well as all of the trials, hostility, opposition, persecution, all of this is under the control of the sovereign Lord who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

And that's the first thing these early believers acknowledge in their prayer to God. They're praying to the sovereign Lord.

And that's why, for us, knowing who God is, is fundamental, not just for our praying, but it's fundamental for living our lives.

[7 : 01] Because knowing the absolute power and authority of the one that we pray to helps us keep everything that's going on in our lives in proper perspective.

And so their prayer begins in this way. And so shouldn't our prayers also begin with this Godward focus, knowing that God is the sovereign Lord?

There's a focus on who he is rather than on me and my circumstances. And that's how to begin prayer, isn't it?

It's not that we shouldn't pray for ourselves. We should pray for ourselves and for our circumstances. And these believers do get to that. They do pray for boldness later on.

But we start praying by acknowledging who God is and what God is like. Because it gives us a much-needed reminder, and we need it often, reminds us that God is in control.

[8 : 03] Nothing is outwith his sovereign power and purpose. One of my favorite films is Chariots of Fire. It's an old film. But in it, Eric Loodle's dad says this.

He says, And then he's questioned.

A dictator, you mean. To which he replies, And that's the God we pray to.

He is the sovereign Lord, but he is a loving God. He knows exactly what he is doing. And so we need to get to grips with his sovereign power and never forget it.

Because knowing who we pray to will give us confidence, not just in what we pray for, but confidence in how we live. Because we can rest assured that our lives, our circumstances, have not somehow spun out of control, but they're under God's control.

[9 : 17] And so the application of our first point is to know the sovereign Lord and to trust him.

Because if we don't acknowledge his sovereign power and pray accordingly, then we'll be essentially living as functional atheists.

And you know what an atheist is? An atheist is somebody who does not believe in God. So for an atheist, everything is really just completely random and chance.

There's no rhyme or reason or purpose. And yet if we are not convinced that God is the sovereign Lord, then we will be prone to function just like an atheist.

So we'll panic. We'll be afraid. We'll live in fear. We'll struggle. We'll be confused. We'll live our lives as if God were not there.

Because we forget that he is the sovereign Lord. And so when we know the true God, we will instinctively approach him in prayer, knowing that he is the sovereign Lord.

[10 : 22] That's the first thing. Prayer that knows who God is. Second, prayer that knows how God works. Verse 25 to 28. It's interesting because what the believers prayed was shaped by their understanding of God's purposes.

So in other words, their prayer was informed by the scriptures. So we sang Psalm 2 because what they do in their prayer is quote Psalm 2.

And so David speaks of world leaders who would oppose God and God's anointed one. Who's the anointed one? The anointed one is Jesus Christ.

And so the psalm applies to the opposition that Jesus faced. But also to the opposition that the people of Jesus face.

And so the psalm describes how earthly powers who set themselves up against God and against God's chosen king will never succeed. And so the psalmist is asking why?

[11 : 22] Why do powerful rulers and authorities think that they can oppose God? And he's saying it's vain.

It's futile. What is the point of them plotting against him? Because those who stand against God, the psalmist is saying, will never succeed in their plans.

Their attacks are always doomed to failure. God simply laughs and scoffs at their bravado. And the early believers knew this. That's how they can face opposition and persecution.

Because they know this is also part of God's work. God knows what he's doing. This is how God achieves his purposes.

And Psalm 2 is saying, this happened with Jesus, the Lord's anointed one. With the nations raging and the peoples plotting and the kings and the rulers banding together against Jesus.

[12 : 25] And Jesus was then killed. And so for these early believers, they're not surprised when persecution is directed at them for being God's people.

Because if God allowed his son Jesus to be killed, then it's hardly surprising that in God's purposes, his people may sometimes find life tough.

And it's because they knew how God works. They knew from the scriptures the way that God accomplished his purposes. And because they know what God said in his word, and because they had seen it played out in the life of Jesus, and then in his death, they could trust God.

And so they say in prayer, verse 27 and 28, Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. And so Psalm 2, that's quoted earlier, speaks of those who were against the Lord's anointed, who is Jesus.

[13 : 39] That's King Herod, Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles, Roman soldiers, and the people of Israel, the religious authorities, the Jews.

They all plotted together in that very city to kill Jesus. But, and here's the sting in the tail, all of these evil actions were only achieving what God had planned and predetermined should happen.

So God had decided beforehand that all of this would happen, that Jesus would be rejected and falsely accused, that there would be a miscarriage of justice, that Jesus would be mocked and beaten, that he would endure intense pain and suffering and death by crucifixion.

And those who killed him were being told, were simply carrying out God's plans. And so what looked like a crushing defeat of God's purposes, as Jesus died on the cross, was actually the triumph of God's purposes, as they were being fulfilled in the death of Jesus on the cross.

And so can we see how the sovereign Lord is so powerful that he even uses his enemies and the death of his own son to carry out his purposes.

[15 : 12] And that's what gave these early believers confidence as they brought their situation to God in prayer. They had the assurance that just as God had determined to accomplish his great salvation plan through the death of his own son, so then absolutely nothing that happened to them was outside of God's will and control.

In fact, God was using it all to accomplish his purposes for the church. And so I guess it's worth just taking a moment to say something here about God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Because this passage in Acts teaches us that these two things always go together and they always work in parallel. God is sovereign. Humans are responsible.

God's sovereign. And humans are responsible for what they do. And as much as we might try and separate God's sovereignty and human responsibility in our minds, we can't actually do it.

Because it's clear from Psalm 2 that God's will had decided beforehand what would happen in the death of Jesus. And so Herod and Pontius Pilate, the soldiers and the Jews were all part of this. [16:29] And yet all of these human powers were still responsible for their actions in killing Jesus. They were guilty. They were culpable. And that's why Psalm 2's predictions about kings and rulers opposing the Lord's anointed one has application to the Lord's people and the opposition they face.

And so when it comes to God's sovereignty and human responsibility, a good way to think of them is like a train track. Both tracks are running and they're going in the same direction, but those train tracks never cross.

But they're heading in the right same way. And that's what it's like with God's purposes. And we can't figure out in our minds how we can be responsible as humans and how God can be sovereign, but both are true.

And that's what we see here, primarily in the death of Jesus. And so for these early believers, that's why they could pray knowing how God works.

This is how God works. And so what they do is they connect their own situation with what the scriptures say in Psalm 2 and with what happened in the life and death of Jesus.

[17:41] And they have every confidence to know that God's will is being done in all of these circumstances. And so they've got absolutely nothing to worry about, however, it turns out.

So whether they're killed like Jesus or they continue to live on, they're certain God's work will never be stopped.

And that's why it's completely futile to stand in opposition to God because God's purposes will always prevail no matter how bad things seem. God works his purposes out as they're revealed in his word, as they're played out in history and as they impact our lives.

God knows what he is doing. That's what this prayer is telling us. One of the early church fathers was a man called John Chrysostom.

And he lived from around 347 to 407. And he was brought before the Roman Empress, Eudoxia in AD 404.

[18:50] And she threatened him as a Christian with banishment if he insisted on continuing to preach and on independence as a preacher.

And so Chrysostom responded, you cannot banish me for this world is my father's house. And so she said, but I will kill you.

And then he said, no, you cannot for my life is hid with Christ in God. And so she said, I will take away your treasures. And he said, no, you cannot for my treasure is in heaven and my heart is there.

To which she responded, but I will drive you away from your friends and you will have no one left. And then John Chrysostom said, no, you cannot for I have a friend in heaven from whom you cannot separate me.

I defy you for there is nothing you can do to harm me. Can you see how different our lives are when we believe in the sovereign Lord?

[19:53] When we know who God is and when we know how God works, then nothing should really faze us, should it? And that's not some kind of naive escapism that ignores the reality of opposition and suffering and persecution and everything else.

It's not an unhealthy escapism. It's actually a healthy realism that comes from a right understanding of God and how he has revealed himself to us in the scriptures and in history and in the death of his son.

And it's a healthy understanding of God's ways because whatever we face, we can be sure that God is somehow working everything together.

And so can you see how knowing God and knowing how God works will better help us to pray? So that's the second thing, prayer that knows how God works.

So first, prayer that knows who God is. Second, prayer that knows how God works. And finally, prayer that knows what God answers. Verse 29 to 31.

[21:05] It's only now in verse 29 that we get the petition or the asking part of their prayer. So let's look at the petition first and then we'll see the answer.

So the petition is there in verse 29 and 30. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. Okay, so they had been intimidated, imprisoned, threatened. The religious authorities wanted them punished. But can you see what they pray? In fact, can you see what they don't pray? They didn't pray, Lord, just protect us. Keep us safe, please. Lord, remove us from this difficult situation. And it's not wrong to ask those things in prayer. And they didn't even pray, Lord, just wipe out our enemies. [22 : 05] Zap them. Take them away. Off the park. No, there's none of that. They say nothing at all about their circumstances. It's very interesting because they understood that there's something far more important at stake than just their circumstances.

And so they make two simple requests. Did you see those? The first is that God would enable them to continue to speak his word with boldness. And the second is that God would perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus.

So that these signs and wonders would essentially authenticate the message of Jesus that they were proclaiming. And so rather than pray for their personal safety, they pray for boldness so they can keep on speaking the good news of Jesus.

And they don't pray that God would stop the opposition, but even in the midst of the opposition, God would help them to boldly speak about Jesus.

And that's the kind of prayer that God loves to answer. Prayer that's focused on him, first of all, and prayer that's focused on his will and his purpose.

[23 : 23] How do we know that's the kind of prayer that God loves to answer? It's because he answered it immediately, straight after they prayed it, verse 31. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

So God answers their prayers through an external sign and also through an internal power. So the external sign was their meeting place was shaken. I think that's the meeting place was shaken so that the believers would not be shaken.

Because God also answers their prayer with this internal power because they're all filled with the Holy Spirit. Now that's not that they didn't have the Holy Spirit in them already.

They were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost because every believer is filled with the Holy Spirit. So this must be a filling to enable these believers to speak the word of God with boldness.

Perhaps like a balloon that's already filled with air, and yet it can still be expanded when you blow into it with a fuller fullness.

[24 : 38] Because the result of this filling was that they spoke the word of God boldly. And so the opposition from the religious authorities didn't stop them proclaiming the word of God and the message of Jesus.

And so God answered their prayer by propelling them towards the ends of the earth, speaking the word of God boldly. And that's the kind of prayer that God answers.

Prayer that ultimately asks for the good news of Jesus to be proclaimed. Prayer that wants God to empower his people to speak his word with boldness so that his kingdom advances.

Prayer for the name of Jesus and the fame of Jesus to spread further and wider in this world, into our cities and towns and villages, our communities, our workplaces, our streets, and our homes.

It's the kind of prayer that God loves to answer because it's prayer that's in line with the will and the purposes of God. And so can you see how these early believers were clearly less concerned about being saved from suffering and they were more concerned about people being saved by believing in Jesus as they heard the word of God.

[26 : 01] And so they prayed in the light of that desire. And so for me and for you, how much does this emphasis in their prayer characterize my prayer life and your prayer life?

I've given the sermon the title Mission-Fueled Prayer because it helps us see that the focus of much of our prayers is often not on the mission of Jesus in this world, but the focus is so often on my mission, my needs, and my wants.

And their prayer here is not so much on their personal needs, their personal safety, their personal security, their comfort, and their well-being. Not that it's wrong to pray about any of these things, but their prayer and their focus is for the word of God to be declared and for the work of God to advance in this world.

Because prayer that knows who God is and how God works and what God answers will surely produce God's results.

And so this should never be a disincentive to pray. It should fuel our prayers even more. And so do we pray this kind of mission-fueled prayer that we see here in the early church?

[27 : 29] Prayer that knows who God is. He is the sovereign Lord. Prayer that knows how God works, his patterns seen in his word and through the work of Jesus.

Prayer that knows what God answers. God answers prayers when they're prayed in line with his perfect will. Is that how we pray personally?

Is that how Christ Church Glasgow prays? praying that the sovereign Lord who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them would enable us, his people, to continue to speak his word with great boldness.

May it never be said of me or you or us as a church that we do not have because we do not ask. and so no matter how challenging our lives are right now and no matter how perplexed we are about what's going on, whatever is happening can't be happening outside of God's good purposes.

[28 : 37] and so whatever is happening can't be happening because God doesn't love us. How do we know? Well, God has already declared his amazing love for us at the cross where Jesus died.

That's where God achieved the ultimate good for us through the suffering and death of Jesus for our sin in our place. and it's what God's will and power had decided beforehand should happen that Jesus would face God forsakenness so we would never have to.

Jesus suffered the ultimate loss because of our sin so that we could have the ultimate security in life and in death. And it's only as we know this and it sinks deep down into our hearts while we keep praying for boldness to spread the saving good news of Jesus in this world so that other people will come and find their joy and their hope and their security and their peace in him.