

The Believers Pray

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Preacher: Tom Campbell

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. If you have a Bible, you can turn to Acts chapter 4.

We're going through a series in the book of Acts, and we're continuing this week in Acts chapter 4, and we're going to read from verse 23 down to verse 31.

So, Acts chapter 4, reading from verse 23 to 31. Now, I believe if you don't have a Bible, there are some at the back.

I'd encourage you to grab one or wave your hands in the air. Someone might drop one down to you. The words should be on the screen here as we read so you can follow along if you haven't brought one with you.

I might ask if someone could keep that going while I'm reading, if that's okay. So, reading from verse 23. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

[1 : 06] 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.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant David. Our Father. Our Father. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in the city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

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.

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.

[2 : 16] Heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege it is to be able to read your word so freely, to think about it so publicly.

And we pray now that your spirit will be moving in our hearts to convict us, to challenge us, to change us, to encourage us as we hear these things.

Please help us in Jesus' name. Amen. So how do you respond in times of great difficulty?

Do you take the ostrich approach? And apparently ostriches have a bad name for burying their heads in the sand. When a problem comes along, do you bury your head in the sand and pretend it's not there?

Well, apparently ostriches do bury their heads in the sand. It's not because they're stupid. It's not because they're avoiding problems. Apparently they're tending to their eggs. Or do you try to convince yourself that everything is fine?

[3 : 22] This is fine. Everything's okay. Or do you run as fast as you can away from the problem? Maybe you throw yourself into your work to distract yourself or you withdraw from life.

You stop seeing people. Stop engaging with normal life. Well, in some ways, each of these are natural or tempting responses when things become hard.

In our passage today, we see how the believers responded to persecution, having been brought before the Sanhedrin, this Jewish court, and told not to speak in Jesus' name and threatened.

So I want to think today about what we do when facing adversity, when facing times that are difficult.

First, join together in prayer. There's real support from fellow believers as we share with one another about what we're going through.

[4 : 28] We receive comfort from others who've had their own crises, and we gain perspective from others who are not currently in the midst of crisis. We're helped to process what we're facing as we share with others.

And here we see in this passage the response is prayer. Peter and John, they report back to other believers about what has just happened. And verse 24, they raise their voices together in prayer to God.

And this prayer is one that focuses on the sovereignty of God, and it's saturated in Scripture. Look at how God is addressed as they pray in verse 24.

Sovereign Lord. They immediately recognize God who is in control of all things. They then speak of how God is the creator of all things.

He made everything, pointing to God in His sovereign power as creator. He is above all created things. Then we see in the prayer that they point to the evil actions of Herod and Pilate, of the Gentiles and people of Israel, that actually they were fulfilling what God's power and will had decided beforehand.

[5 : 57] So in their prayer in the midst of persecution, they think about God's sovereignty. Their prayer is also saturated in Scripture.

They quote from Psalm 2. We see in verse 25, Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers band together against the Lord and against His anointed one.

They see in Scripture the very thing that's happening around them. For our prayers to be saturated in Scripture, we need to be saturated in Scripture.

We can't see life and think, What does God's Word speak into the situation if it's not in our heads and our hearts? So in the midst of adversity, let's be people who join together to pray.

Now, I don't think this is an encouragement for us to pray more individually, although that would be great. If you pray more by yourself, that would be amazing.

[7 : 13] This is encouraging us to be people who join together with other believers to pray. I wonder, is that your first reaction?

When things are difficult, do you go to other people who are followers of Jesus to pray with them? I don't think that's my default reaction. Maybe I withdraw into myself.

I'll pray a bit more, but maybe by myself. In the midst of adversity, we need to join together as believers to pray.

How can we do this? Well, we already have a few structured ways within church life where we can do this.

We have home groups each week where we can share and pray together. We can come together and get to know each other in a safe environment, share the struggles we face, and pray.

[8 : 10] We have our Friday Zoom. If you can't connect in one way, you can come on Zoom virtually, share what's going on, and pray together. Some even meet before the service on Sunday to pray.

But what are the other ways we can share with fellow believers and pray? Maybe we can try and foster a culture of prayer in our social lives.

If we have people over for dinner and we hear the struggles people are facing, well, let's pray. The Lord Jesus is here present with us. Let's speak to Him.

Or if we meet someone for coffee, could part of that time be to pray? What other ways can we join together to pray?

Because in the midst of adversity, let's be people who join together in prayer. We can see how the prayer of the believers here focused on the sovereignty of God.

[9 : 18] God is creator of all things.

Nothing can thwart the plans and intentions of God the creator. There's a verse in Romans chapter 8 that assures us that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

And resting in God's sovereign control, it doesn't negate the evil and the wrong that happens. The believers here even pray that nations rage.

People plot. Kings of the earth rise up. Rulers band together against the Lord. Lord. We see Herod and Pilate conspiring. These are evil plans and actions by people.

But ultimately God was working His plan. We see this at the cross. And Peter, in a couple chapters previous, in chapter 2 of Acts, we see Peter speaking of this dynamic when he addresses the crowds, explaining that Jesus was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge. [10:41] And you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. Wicked people put Jesus to death.

Yet this was the deliberate plan of God. When times of adversity come, we can rest in God's sovereign control.

We can rest knowing that God is the one ultimately in charge of everything. It's a comfort to know that something didn't slip by with God.

That something in our lives didn't fly under His radar. That the devil isn't getting the upper hand. God is in control of everything.

And we can rest in that knowledge. When times are hard, let that be a source of comfort and peace. This is exactly what the believers focused on in the midst of their persecution.

[11:51] Sometimes we are called to trust and keep going, even though we don't understand and can't explain. When I was thinking about this, parenting came to mind in a simplistic sort of way.

A young child may not understand some of the things that they have to do that they don't like.

Things like brushing their teeth, or washing their hands, or going to bed early.

Maybe you still don't understand those things. But their mother or father, they know that they need to do these things. So their teeth don't fall out.

So they don't get sick. So they can face the next day without meltdowns. The parent is acting in a good and loving way towards their child.

They know more. They have this bigger picture. Well, God is sovereign in ways far more and far beyond this example. He knows all things.

[12:55] He knows the whole picture. And He is working for our good. And His sovereignty doesn't mean that hard times won't come.

But that when they do, we can trust in His control and His purpose. When hard times come, it is good and right to grieve.

To mourn. To be full of sadness and sorrow. And as we do that, as we grieve and mourn and cry and long for change, we do it in the arms of a sovereign God.

God's sovereignty is not a quick fix to a hard situation. Oh, I'm sorry you lost your job. But you know what? God's sovereignty. That's not how we interact with God's sovereignty.

There's a deep richness in having someone who's in control of all things. We weep and struggle and strive during hard times, knowing that God is with us and that His sovereign control is working for our good and for His glory.

[14:09] It's a deep reality and comfort, not a chipper response, which can undermine someone's difficult circumstances. So when times of adversity come, rest in God's sovereign control.

Third, in the midst of hard times, we need to ask God to act. We see the believers praying here and they ask the Lord to act.

We see in verse 29, Now, Lord, consider their threats and remove these leaders from their positions so that we would not face this persecution anymore.

Is that what it says? That's why you should have your Bibles open. That's not what they pray. Isn't it interesting what they pray for? In the midst of persecution, they don't say, Lord, let there just be freedom that we can preach.

Look at verse 29. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

[15:18] Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. They ask God to act, to enable them to speak boldly and to stretch out his hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus.

And now, just to say, it would not be a bad thing to pray for evil or godless rulers to be removed. We can go to God with any request, but this is not their focus.

And it encourages us to shift our focus, too, in times of difficulty. Their minds are focused on the task of evangelism, of sharing the good news of Jesus.

They want to fulfill the Great Commission. So that's what they ask for when they pray. So first, they ask that God would enable them to speak his word boldly.

They've just been told, keep quiet, keep your mouth shut, do not speak in this name of Jesus anymore. So they need courage and boldness to continue speaking in Jesus' name now that this activity was forbidden.

[16:37] I don't know about you, but I could certainly do with more boldness in speaking God's word in evangelism. It's easy here to say these things.

This is church, isn't it? You all want to be here. Well, most of you want to be here. You agree. You believe. Well, it's another thing entirely when your work colleague asks you about church.

What is that thing that you go to on Sunday? How is it different from what I do? Or your new neighbors, they're trying to figure you out about all this Jesus stuff.

Are you one of those crazy, wacky religious people? We need to pray for courage and boldness so that we can share our faith clearly and confidently with our friends and family.

Let's ask God to act in this way for us. And the second thing they ask for is signs which would accompany the preaching of the gospel.

[17:43] These signs would point people to Jesus and would have validated the message they were preaching. They wanted people to be convinced that the message that they preach is real.

So they asked God to heal and to do signs and wonders in Jesus' name so they would be pointed to this gospel reality. What about praying something like this today?

Can we pray that God would heal and do signs and wonders in the name of Jesus? Well, I would say in a simple answer, yes.

These signs and wonders we see in the early church in the New Testament were vital in understanding and validating and authenticating the message of Jesus.

And so they did. As the signs and wonders came, they proved and confirmed that this message was from God. So the message has been validated.

[18:47] The full canon of Scripture is complete. The writings of the apostles have been gathered. So on one hand, I would say there is not the same urgency for signs and wonders as Scripture provides everything we need to validate the truth of Jesus and to present that good news about Him.

And then on the other hand, it doesn't seem that these signs and wonders will just stop. The Bible doesn't speak about them ending, at least not until Jesus returns.

So then while we do not need signs and wonders like they were needed in the early church, God is powerful to act and work signs and wonders if He so chooses today.

And we can pray to that end. We can ask God to act to enable us to speak boldly and we can ask Him to act that He would stretch out His hand and heal and do signs and wonders in the name of Jesus so that people would be drawn to Him.

And let's make sure our motivation for praying for God's extraordinary working is for the purpose of directing people to the gospel. A man called Martin Lloyd-Jones said this, What is needed is some mighty demonstration of the power of God, some enactment of the Almighty that will compel people to pay attention, to look, and to listen.

[20:32] When God acts, He can do more in a minute than man with His organizing can do in 50 years. So when things are hard, in the midst of adversity, let's shift our focus away from first asking God to remove the hard things, although that may not be a bad thing to pray, but to firstly ask God to act to enable us to speak boldly and that He would work in extraordinary ways in the name of Jesus so that many would come to Him.

Finally, in the midst of adversity, receive assurance from God. We all like to receive assurances, don't we? Maybe assurance that we've done a good job or assurance that if we pay this money, we will receive the goods that we've ordered.

We like to be assured that someone will do what they say they will do. Or if we've started off in one direction on a journey, that we're in fact going in the right direction. Maybe you've experienced that driving along at night, maybe trying to find your way in a foreign place, somewhere you've never been.

You come to a T-junction and you're not sure which way to go. So you take a chance on the right hand. You drive a few miles in the dark and suddenly you're relieved to see the sign for the place you're heading to.

You feel assured that you're going the right way. Well, after the believers pray, something very interesting happens. They receive assurance from God.

[22 : 18] Look at verse 31. It says, 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.

In the Old Testament, the shaking of a place was a sign for a manifestation of God. This shaking of the place where they were meeting was a divine response to their prayer.

They received assurance from God that He had heard and He would answer their prayer. We don't read of too many occasions when something like this happens.

This is very unique. We read in Pentecost of this sound of a violent wind coming in. This room was shaken. So these are certainly unique occurrences.

Maybe don't expect the hall to shake after my closing prayer, although that would be great. But what we can expect is to receive assurance from God.

[23 : 24] I believe He does this in a few ways and I'll just briefly mention three. First is His Word. How often do we read something and that it is speaking so clearly into our life situation?

Or it's encouraging us about something that we're going through or about to face. You see, God uses His Word to speak into our lives and to assure us.

Assure us of His presence or of His control or of His love or whatever we need. God's Word does this. But you know we might miss this assurance if we don't read His Word.

I often think of this when I read something and find assurance from God. I think, wow, if I didn't read this today, I would have missed this. I would have missed what God wanted to say to me today.

So His Word. Second is prayer. We receive assurance from God through prayer. As we pray, we're entering into a spiritual realm where we're seeking God and asking Him to act, to intervene or to save or to do something.

[24 : 44] God always hears us. He always answers, not always as how we want or expect, but God answering prayer is a way in which we receive assurance from Him.

As we pray, God is working in us and in the world. And as we see prayer being answered, our faith is strengthened. Our love for the Lord grows and our confidence in His power increases.

But if we fail to pray, how can God answer? How can we receive assurance from God through prayer if we're not praying? Thirdly, is people.

We receive assurance from God through His people. We can be a great source of encouragement, of help, of timely reminders or needed challenges to one another.

as we journey through life together. As members of God's family, we are here for each other. And as we pray for each other, as we study the Bible together, as we do life together, we can speak into each other's lives.

[26 : 01] A helpful thought, an encouragement from Scripture, a timely prayer, a loving rebuke, are all ways in which we can speak into each other's lives and be a means by which God assures us and works in us.

And that means coming alongside each other, getting to know one another, spending time together, and praying for each other. We need these things, even more so in times of adversity.

God's Word, prayer, and His people. And we can expect to receive that assurance from God, just like these believers were assured that God was saying, yes, my people, what you are doing is what I want you to do.

So, in the midst of adversity, let's not stick our heads in the sand, avoid the problem, tell ourselves everything is okay, or run and hide.

Let's join together in prayer, rest in God's sovereign control, let's ask Him to act and receive assurance from Him.

[27 : 17] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word and for how You have spoken to us so specifically.

We thank You for the way that You worked in the lives of these believers and how that is relevant to us today. We pray for help, Lord, in those times of adversity, in times of persecution, of trials and struggles, that You would help us by Your Spirit to run to You, to be found in fellowship with one another, and to be encouraged and helped, Lord, as we walk through this life.

Lord, we praise You for Your sovereignty and for Your loving care. We pray that You would use Your Word, Lord, in our lives. In Jesus' powerful name, Amen.