

Prayer to a big God

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[0:00] Do turn to Acts chapter 4, verse 23 to 31 we're looking at this morning. And as we come to God's living word, we need his help.

We want to ask him to speak to us, so let's do that now. Let's pray. Father God, thank you so much this morning that we have this freedom to open your words.

Father, as we look at this passage, we pray please would you speak to us. Would you work in us and would you change us, we pray.

To help us and equip us for walking with you through life in this world. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Who's in charge?

That's what we've been trying to work out as a nation over these last six weeks or so. Some of us this morning will be rejoicing at the new government.

[1:07] Others of us may be disappointed. Others of us may be somewhere in between or don't really care. But it's good on this Sunday after the election to remind ourselves to stop and think, who's really in charge?

Last week Peter and John stood on trial before the authorities in Jerusalem. And the authorities told them, don't speak in the name of Jesus anymore.

Be quiet. Zip it. Are they in charge? Well, they certainly have been given power and authority by the Lord to rule.

But as we saw last week, Peter and John recognize that God is their ultimate authority. And if they're told to stop speaking, they will carry on in obedience to their Lord, who is sovereign in heaven.

Whatever any leader or any government chooses to do, they cannot stop the work of God in his world.

[2:25] They try, but you can't. For us. Imagine for a moment if you were a Bible college lecturer and you tweeted your views on same-sex relationships, views which align with the Bible, and the next thing you know, you've lost your job.

What would you do? What would be the first thing you would do? Or imagine you're a Christian and you're standing silently outside an abortion clinic and you are told by the police to move on from where you're standing.

What would you do? Where would you turn? Where would be the first place you would go? I only mention those things because those are real situations recorded in this country in the Evangelicals Now newspaper this month.

I think our passage this morning helps us to know where we should turn when situations like that happen. We rejoin the story in Acts chapter 4 where Peter and John return to the church that has grown in numbers in spite of the persecution and they tell them everything that has happened to them.

They talk about the lame man who was outside the synagogue who they saw the Lord miraculously heal. They saw him walking and leaping and praising God.

[4:11] They tell them all about the opportunity they had to speak of the Lord Jesus. And then they tell them that they were arrested. They were put in jail and they were put on trial by the authorities and told not to speak of Jesus anymore.

What would we do if we were in their situation? What would we do if someone ran into our prayer meeting on Wednesday evening and said, I've been told by the authorities, don't speak in the name of Jesus anymore?

What would we do? Maybe we would panic. Maybe we would hide away and lock ourselves in the church building. We would go out and protest.

Maybe we would just carry on regardless. What about first turning to prayer? That's what this church in Jerusalem does.

They pray. We join them here in this passage at their prayer meeting. Their prayer. Facing threats and opposition to what they believe, they pray.

[5:24] And it comes so natural to them. Have a look. Verse 24. When they heard this, when they heard the report from Peter and John, they raised their voices together in prayer.

Is that our natural response? When things go wrong? A few weeks ago, on a Tuesday morning, sitting upstairs at my desk, things were going okay, and then suddenly, something went a little wrong.

I had to deal with it. And I tried to deal with it. I tried to make some phone calls and send some messages and emails to try and solve the problem. And for about an hour or so, I was just really stressed.

And then I thought, I need to stop. And I need to pray. And suddenly, though things didn't get sorted at all that day, things felt calmer.

The problem wasn't fixed, but a clearer way ahead was found. If only my first response was prayer, then maybe that hour would have been a lot calmer.

[6:34] I guess we're all still learning to do as the hymn we sometimes sing says, take everything to the Lord in prayer.

How we need to do that. How we need that refrain to be going around in our heads in all situations.

When things go wrong, do we pray? When things feel out of control, do we pray?

Well, that's what these Christians do. As things seem to go very wrong. As they're told to silence.

Stop speaking in the name of Jesus.

And as they pray, we see first that they pray to a big God. They pray to a big God. Have a look there.

At the beginning of their prayer, in verse 24. Sovereign Lord, they said. Sovereign Lord, they pray.

[7:40] They don't address their mate in heaven. God is their friend. God is a friend for sinners. But they don't call him that.

They don't begin their prayer, Father. Though we can. It's a great privilege for Christian people to pray our Father in heaven. Jesus has taught us that.

But here, they choose to pray, sovereign Lord. Which is reminding them who is really in charge.

Who is really overruling in this situation. Who is really the ultimate authority compared with the Jewish authorities. They pray to their sovereign Lord.

They pray to their sovereign Lord. There is a higher throne than all this world has known. It's where our sovereign Lord reigns. And they continue in their prayer to remind themselves and to address the sovereign Lord who has made the heavens and the earth.

[8:49] Have a look. Verse 24. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

This vast world full of beauty, full of life, the entire universe that we exist in, the stars and the planets have been made by our sovereign Lord.

He is a big God who has created all things. And so this week, Keir Starmer may have entered into 10 Downing Street, the place where the authority in our land lives.

But Keir Starmer has not made the heavens and the earth and is not ruling from his throne in heaven. His authority is simply given for a time by the one who is sovereign.

in heaven. For Christians who read this in countries like North Korea where it is even illegal to have a Bible, their ruler Kim Jong-un is in authority there.

[10:04] He has power and even the power to put them to death. But even Christians there can know that there is one who is on a higher throne than all this world has known.

They can look to the sovereign Lord who has made the heavens and the earth. They have full access to his throne through the Lord Jesus Christ.

I've seen recently this little diagram. It might look more like an optical illusion but hopefully this helps us to picture what's going on.

The small little blue circle, that's us and our problems. and then the next circle is the earth and all its problems.

But then the next circle is our God who is bigger than all of this. And that circle isn't big enough to show how big our sovereign Lord is. as they face their problems of hostility and rejection for believing and speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, they recognize that they can turn to a God who is even bigger than them and a God who is in control.

[11:33] when problems arise in our lives, Christians, we get to speak to the one in authority and the one in control. So many times we just may feel our lack of control in different situations.

And maybe that's a good thing if we're encouraged to again see the one who really is in control. These Christians may have felt like this situation was out of control.

The church had been so blessed and encouraged and now everything seems to be going wrong. How could they keep going on while they look to the sovereign Lord in heaven who is in control? And this sovereign Lord, he has his servants doing his work in the world. There's three servants mentioned in this passage. There in verse 25 we're told about the Lord's servant David.

In verse 27 and verse 30 we're told about the Lord's holy servant, the Lord Jesus. God himself come and step down to be our servant, to serve us.

[12:53] And finally, ourselves. In verse 29, they pray, enable your servants, enable us, so three servants of the Lord to see in this passage.

So listen to what the first servant, David, wrote in a psalm. 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 holy one. These are words by David written in Psalm 2 which help us to see God in control.

Just note for a moment that these Christians, they're praying words of scripture. the words of God can shape our prayers to God.

That's why we would begin our prayer meetings in the word of God to help us to fuel our prayers and to help us in praying in a line with the Lord's will.

[14:16] We want scriptures to guide us. When you read a passage at home, during the week, you can read a passage and think, what can I praise God for?

What can I thank him for in these verses? What can I ask him for in these verses? We can let the word of God shape and direct our prayers to God.

Just like maybe you chat to someone and you say to them, remember when you said that we go out for coffee together? Well, let's do it this week or something like that.

These Christians are taking the very words of God to him. Lord, you said this in your word and this is happening now. And this scripture is so relevant to their situation, isn't it?

The nations raid, people's plot in vain, rulers banding together against the Lords. They're against their maker. they're against the sovereign Lord who reigns enthroned above them and their rule.

[15:28] As the church in Jerusalem pray, they know that this scripture fits very well Herod and Pontius Pilate who banded together against the Lord.

Look at what they carry on to say in verse 27. They say 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 were planning, plotting against the Lord against his anointed one. But as Psalm 2 itself says the one enthroned in heaven laughs.

Before our big God enthroned in heaven this is futile behaviour. This is silly, this is pointless.

They're trying to stand against the maker of heaven and earth but really they don't have a leg to stand on.

He is still sovereignly in control of all things even when rulers think that he is not.

[16:51] And so verse 28 as they continue in their prayer they said they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. As they met as they plotted as they conspired against the Lord thought they were defeating the Lord who reigns above thought they were defeating his

anointed one actually they were doing the very work of the Lord God's plan was being worked out God's purposes were not derailed and we'll be remembering that again as we take the Lord's supper this morning as we take the bread as we hold it as we taste it and eat it it reminds us that the authorities weren't winning that God's salvation plan was being worked out as Jesus hung in our place as we take the wine we don't see a tragic accident we don't see a weak man bleeding and defeated by the authorities but we see life in his blood we sometimes sing what can wash away our sins it's nothing but the blood of

Jesus so in all this prayer going on at this prayer meeting how is this all relevant to their situation well on the cross Jesus himself was silenced by the authorities he lay dead in a tomb silenced by the authorities but we know so well the story continues and Jesus rose again you cannot silence him you cannot stop his work in the world and now those same authorities are telling Peter and John and the believers to silence to zip it but the believers in their prayer take confidence that this is nothing new that God has not let what happened to Jesus derail his plan and he won't let what's happening to Peter and John and the believers derail his plan these believers in Jerusalem they follow and they pray to the same God at this prayer meeting and so surely they will ask God to rescue them from their situation surely they will ask for the leaders to be brought down so that they can go on in peace but no look at what they actually asked for they asked for courage to keep on speaking!

verse 29 now Lord consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness they asked for courage to continue speaking despite the hostility and threats that they face let me remind you where Peter and John found their courage for speaking of the Lord at verse 8 of chapter 4 then Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit they found their courage to speak from the Lord himself from his spirit at work in them and so of course when the church is persecuted when the church is mocked when the church is suffering we must and we can turn to the sovereign Lord in heaven the God we know that is bigger than us and know that he will equip us to speak boldly of him because you cannot silence him you cannot silence his work in the world maybe we purposely shy away from speaking about church with our colleagues at work or maybe and I know this all too often we shy away from speaking about Jesus speaking about the fact we're Christians as we get our hair cut by the barber because we think maybe he'll just go silent and the whole shop will go silent we'll never be able to show our face in there again yet here the concern of the Christians is to pray for boldness to speak!

[21:57] the prayer of these Christians is help us carry on help us to keep getting the word out and so perhaps we need to be falling down more before the sovereign Lord enthroned in heaven and praying these kind of prayers that these believers pray asking that the Lord would give us courage to speak even if the barbers shop fall silent even if our colleagues at work try to ignore us afterwards but could it be that we're too concerned with our own personal safety and comfort to pray such prayers could it be that we're too concerned with our own personal safety and comfort to pray such prayers reading a

Christian writer and leader in America Al Moeller on this passage he says in other words they were praying Lord in the face of opposition don't let us weaken don't let us compromise please keep working out your purposes and please keep us working for your purposes these Christians recognize their weakness and value the success of the gospel far above their own physical comfort do we value our personal comfort more than telling others of Jesus please don't mishear me as saying our safety isn't important absolutely it is

God cares about that we should pray for protection but what matters most to us is it our personal safety or the mission of telling others of Jesus so that souls can be saved from hell a good opportunity for us to grow in confidence in this is when the US mission team comes in a few weeks time we spoke about at the beginning from the 21st of July see if you could pop in at some point during the week to join them so we can grow together in our confidence for speaking about Jesus finally in this passage we see that their prayer is answered their prayer is answered when we pray do we expect answers when we come to our prayer meetings do we expect answers that may be a silly thing you might think to say but

I think there's many times when I've asked the Lord of things and I assume I know the answer every time I've asked somebody to come to church or to a church event I've prayed Lord please would they come but assuming they won't I need to say Lord forgive me for my unbelief God you're far bigger and more powerful than that I don't think these believers were praying for boldness and not expecting it would happen I think they prayed believing it would whatever they were praying they certainly got an answer have a look at 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 their prayer meeting made the earth shake

God is sovereign he is big and he did hear them so much so that he answered by shaking the earth around them and what about their request their request for courage well it says they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly not that they didn't have the spirit they did we saw that wonderful day when the spirit came upon them on the day of Pentecost spirit lives inside believers but it's like we we need to be continually filled by him God answered their prayer in a mighty way three things to say from this firstly let's pray for courage to speak sure pray for safety as we said but more than that let's pray that

[27:49] God would give us boldness to speak whatever may happen before you go to work before you get your hair cut before you get on the bus before you chat to your neighbour before that family gathering pray that the Lord would give you courage to be able to speak!

of him pray for open doors for speaking of the Lord Jesus secondly pray there's a theme going on here isn't there pray pray at home absolutely but don't just pray at home this passage is at a prayer meeting the people they gather and they pray together I think that's showing us there is an important thing about praying together with believers and so thirdly come to prayer meetings don't just say it's only a prayer meeting when you get to a Wednesday it's okay if I don't come why wouldn't you want to come and join the Lord's people as we speak to the Lord of heaven and earth who is in control of all things but not just that there is power when his people pray we see that here in this passage the sovereign

Lord of heaven works and he does answer prayer we're living in dark days in our world in our city if only we would gather more together and pray and let me say I'm encouraged by many of you that do come regularly to our prayer meetings praise the Lord for that sometimes it's a huge encouragement to me because there are Wednesdays when I come and think actually I'd rather not but then I come and there's people here and they're praying and I'm like wow this is a great thing to be doing!

there's always room for more maybe 50 or so of us in this building right now we could open the dividers if we had to and meet in here that would be a lovely problem to have I know there's good reasons why many of us can't come but let's just think could we make it more of a priority in our weeks to gather and pray with the Lord's people it's a powerful thing at the very least let's join together now and pray together let's pray sovereign Lord of heaven thank you so much for your word thank you for giving us this passage and encouraging us that we can turn to you the sovereign Lord who reigns on your throne who has made the heavens and the earth thank you that we can come to you when things feel out of control when situations seem to be against us thank you that we can come to you the God who is for us and if you are for us who then can be against us help us we pray to keep coming to your throne to keep praying to you to look to you for confidence particularly as we'd love to share the Lord

Jesus with more people but Lord we feel our weakness we feel our frailty Lord you know our fears you know what gets in the way but Lord work in us we pray by your spirit use us this little Calvary church in Brighton to speak to many many more of the Lord Jesus and we ask this in Jesus name Amen and we're going to turn now to sing a song that he's tried to stand against the Lord against his work against the son and his name being proclaimed but Psalm 2 encourages us don't stand against the Lord don't stand against his anointed one his son the

[32:38] Lord Jesus Christ rather serve celebrate his rule we've seen he sits in heaven we've sung he's the sovereign Lord who rules over all things who is in control of all things and so David as king of the Lord's people says to other rulers and authorities in him you can find wisdom he is the one you can bow before and serve and he makes a way for people to come and find refuge in him safety in him salvation in him that's what

the psalm says at the end blessed are all who take refuge in him psalm 2 this is radical information comes after psalm 1 and at the beginning of psalm 1 it says blessed is the one or blessed is the man how are they blessed psalm 2 helps us to see blessed are all who take refuge in him who take refuge in the

Lord's anointed king who has suffered in our place at the cross who has on the cross faced the Lord's wrath the Lord's anger upon our sin and this morning we get to remember that we get to celebrate what Jesus has done for us in his death I've asked Ray if he can lead us in a prayer of thanksgiving for this do you want to come and use the microphone up there thank you Ray blessed are all who take refuge in him and father we thank you for being able this morning once again Lord to remember our Lord's death Lord taking our sin upon him in his own body on the tree we thank you

Lord for the blood that was shed for us because without the shedding of blood there is no remission there is no forgiveness for sin and father we thank you for these elements of the bread and the wine the bread symbolizing his body that was broken that was tortured that was beaten that was scourged and father we thank you too for the wine for the great juice the wrath of God trodden upon our Lord Jesus Christ who at his the last he cried out it is finished and that curtain that separated the holy of holies from the rest of mankind apart from the high priest who was only allowed once a year to enter and not without sacrifice and we thank you Lord that we can now come boldly with confidence to that throne of grace in prayer because of the

Lord Jesus Christ the blood that was poured out for us and father we do pray that as we give thanks this morning as we look back upon that death we look forward to that time when he will bring us once again Lord into the garden as it were into the presence of God and father we look forward to that day and so father we pray that you bless us now in Jesus name we ask Amen thanks Ray for leading us in that prayer the Lord's supper is a meal for sinners who are trusting in Jesus as their only saviour if that's not you this morning