

Why do we pray? (2)

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[0:00] Well, the situation is set out in verse 23 of our passage. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people, the church, and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

What's happened? Peter and John, at the beginning of the chapter, were seized, arrested, and put on trial before the religious authorities.

And it seems to be that the situation that brought them there, well, it was partly the healing in chapter 3. But the issue really is about the Lord Jesus.

Verse 2, they were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. Yet, that was the big thing that had them seized, arrested, and put up on trial.

And I say that because in verse 1, we see who's involved in that. The priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees. And the Sadducees, particularly, a well-known Jewish sect who not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

[1:24] And if Peter and John were proclaiming Jesus and proclaiming his resurrection, they took offense to that news. That was the big problem that they had, proclaiming that Jesus brings resurrection life, life, proclaiming that Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life.

It's blasphemy to the Sadducees to say such a thing. And so, put on trial, all because they stand up and speak of our Lord Jesus.

Stand up for life in his name. And today, I guess, we ourselves, though we might not be imprisoned, may face opposition one way or another to our faith in the risen Lord Jesus.

And we certainly know around the world it's a reality that believers face suffering, like Peter and John face here, imprisonment, trial, because of their faith in Jesus, and often even worse.

And so, when that happens, when we and others face such opposition, what's our reaction? Where do we go? What do we do?

[2:41] We could do many things, couldn't we? We could live in hiding. We could deny knowing Jesus in front of certain people. We could stand up and protest against injustice.

That's quite a modern thing to do nowadays, isn't it? It's not anything old, of course. We could go online and sign a petition. Go on change.org.

But would our first reaction actually be to pray? That's what this church does. As soon as they hear the news of Peter and John, what they shared, verse 24 says this, when they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer.

That's what they tend to do. The church joins together in prayer. And that's what we're interested in this evening. That continues our subject from this morning.

The church is devoted to prayer. It's the job of the church to pray, we said this morning. And it's the job of the church to pray in all sorts of circumstances, including in hostile situations like this one.

[3:49] It seems to me this is the first very early test for this church. These early believers that experienced not long before this, the wonderful day of Pentecost.

The mass baptisms must have been thrilling to be involved in. But now they're experiencing the reality of persecution that comes with following the Lord Jesus.

Which could be a cause of people sort of falling away. A cause of disunity. A cause of people saying, I didn't sign up for this. It was all wonderful on the day of Pentecost.

But their response is actually a show of wonderful strength, isn't it? As God's people unite around the throne of God in prayer. Lift their voices up to Him.

So what do we see in their prayer? We see, first of all, that they address the Lord as the sovereign Lord. That's who they come to. Verse 24. Sovereign Lord, they said.

[4:48] What a great start for them to pray in this way. Sovereign Lord, after the rulers who seized and questioned Peter and John, probably believe they are in some way sovereign.

They're the ones who reign. They're showing that by seizing Peter and John. They told them to be quiet. But God's people know better. There's a king who reigns above all the kings of the world. There's a throne that's far higher than any other throne. An authority far higher and far better. And one that's unending.

And so that's who they trust that they are praying to. Sovereign Lord. And they continue the prayer there in verse 24. Saying to God, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

The Lord, of course, knows that. The Lord knows as his people come to him that he is the one who made the heavens and the earth.

[5:57] But it's a right beginning to our prayers to come to him and say, this is who you are. We give you the praise for this is who you are.

This is who we get to speak to. Rather than quickly coming with our own requests, it acknowledges you're greater than us. We didn't make the world and everything in it, but you did.

We're trusting you in our prayers. It's actually quite a while before they make their request. We'll get to it eventually.

It's actually quite a small part of their prayer. They spend much of it in praise and saying to the Lord, this is what your word says. And it's wonderfully reassuring for them that they come before a sovereign Lord.

And it's wonderfully reassuring that we can be reminded that as we're the church together, we come to a sovereign Lord who reigns on his throne, who's over all creation. At a prayer meeting on Wednesday, some of us were there and we were praying for the world, weren't we?

[7:05] Praying for the world, which feels very shaky at the moment, particularly in terms of world politics. World leaders exercising their power and dominance, perhaps in ways we feel uncomfortable with.

Trump after Greenland. The recent US intervention in Venezuela. The political instability in Iran. The fragile peace process in Gaza.

The ongoing war in Russia and Ukraine. And many other things we just don't hear about. And when we look at these things, we may despair and we may think, if only there was a good king.

If only there was a good ruler around. Then the world might feel a bit better. And perhaps like Peter, who we saw a few weeks ago, when he was walking on the water. We look around the world and suddenly we start feeling like we're sinking.

Rather than looking to the Lord Jesus. And so it's so important. So important that like these believers, we gather and we lift our eyes up to the highest road.

[8:11] It's so easy to forget. Forget to look up. Forget to pray. When we're on our road. And that's why we need to be together. That's why we need to join in prayer.

Together to our sovereign Lord. In this prayer, they also quote scripture. Verse 25. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David.

These words from Psalm 2. Why do the nations rage? The peoples plot in vain. The kings of the earth rise up together. The rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

They quote scripture. Why do they do that? Well, remember this quote from this morning. From Tim Keller. Prayer is continuing a conversation with God that he has started through his words and his grace.

Which eventually becomes a full encounter with him. As they pray, they speak the words of the Lord back.

[9:20] They're in dialogue with the Lord. Perhaps they read this psalm at the beginning of their meeting. Let's read Psalm 2 and then we'll pray together to the sovereign Lord.

It's part of continuing the conversation back to God. And we can do that ourselves. In our prayers. It's good to begin our prayer meetings with the word as we do. And take those words as a springboard to pray. To continue together that conversation with God.

It's good to do that at home when we're spending time in prayer. Spend time in the word and then pray it back to the Lord. We're in a conversation with him. It's not a one-way thing.

Us to him or him to us. It's a two-way thing. And they appropriately, as we've seen, pray that Psalm 2 back to God.

[10:20] And they see that it's very relevant to the situation they had seen with the Lord Jesus. Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate were rulers who banded together, met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant, the Lord Jesus, whom you anointed one.

Whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. They remember it's relevant to their situation of following Jesus in Jerusalem, in the city that they're praying in.

And now it's relevant to Peter and John's situation. As rulers are banding together against them and against the church, trying to stop them from speaking about the resurrection.

So, quoting scripture, and then finally we get to a request. God's people do request of him.

But before we read that, I wonder what you would request of God in this situation. Maybe you'd request, please take down these leaders.

[11:35] Please remove their authority. Please remove the suffering that we're experiencing. Please give us a peaceful life. But that's not actually what we see.

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

They say, help us to keep going. There's this persecution going on, but we want to keep faithfully proclaiming your words with great boldness.

Despite the opposition that's going on, please give us boldness. They could ask all sorts of things. They're coming to the sovereign Lord, the maker of the heavens and the earth.

He can do miracles. And they say, don't remove the suffering. Just help us to keep going. What about our requests of God?

[12:40] What about our requests in suffering? Perhaps we're very happy to pray, Lord, take it away, rather than, Lord, help me to endure.

Oftentimes, we pray in our prayer meetings for those who are sick, for those who are struggling.

And some have been on our list of prayers because they're sick and struggling and have been for some time. And it seems to not get any better.

What do we do with that? Let's just take a brief pause from Acts 4 and 10 to 2 Corinthians 12.

Because it's relevant to that question.

2 Corinthians 12, 1 to 10. This is Paul writing to the church in Corinth.

And he says, I must go on boasting, although there is nothing to be gained. I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven.

[13:59] Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And I know that this man, whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know.

But God knows. Was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that. But I will not boast about myself.

Except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool because I would be speaking the truth. But if I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

Or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh.

A messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you.

[15:05] For my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses. So that Christ's power may rest on me.

That is why I, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses. In insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I think this passage helps us in some way. For when we pray, Lord, please take this sickness, take this suffering away. This passage helps us.

And Paul prays three times in verse 8. I pleaded with the Lord, take it away from me. What's he asking to be taken away from him? Verse 7, I was given a thorn in my flesh.

Now, we don't really know what that thorn in the flesh was. People spill much ink over what it might be. It could be his eye condition. It could be some other illness. It could be some sort of temptation.

[16:09] It could be another person who's aggravating him, who's just annoying him. Whatever it was, something was causing torment for him. And so he pleads with the Lord, please take it away, take it away, take it away, three times.

But then he says this in verse 9, that the Lord said to me, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness.

The answer from the Lord isn't, I'll take this away from you. I'll take the suffering away. It is, what I will give to you is sufficient to see you through this thorn in the flesh.

I'm going to help you through your weakness. I'm going to hold you fast through your suffering. And by my grace, you will get through.

And it might not be until you get to enjoy the new resurrection life with the Lord forever. But one day, it will be removed.

[17:28] But for now, my grace is sufficient. When you feel at breaking point, my power is going to keep you. And I guess we could think of various brothers and sisters we know in our church family for whom that must be the case.

It's just not going away. Perhaps it's getting worse, but God's grace is sufficient. We don't understand why.

But the Lord is good. And he is working for his glory through suffering. Back in Acts 4, so the church prays this incredible request.

Don't remove the suffering. Keep us going. Keep us going. Give us the boldness to faithfully follow you. And unlike Paul with his thorn in the flesh, the church does see a very immediate answer to prayer.

Because the Lord does that sometimes. Sometimes it's instant. Sometimes it's wait. Sometimes it's no. And here it's very much God answering his church's prayer.

[18:43] 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. Spirit filling them.

Not going to spend long thinking about that. The Spirit has come to them on the day of Pentecost. But the Spirit here seems to be equipping them to do what they ask for in prayer. Giving them the boldness to continue to speak of the Lord.

And there's also a powerful earthquake. We don't tend to come away from our prayer meetings having experienced an earthquake. This was very much the very early church.

God establishing a new work and showing, yes, I do answer the prayers of his people. But the principle is there is power, isn't there, in the church's prayers.

There is a powerful God that those prayers go to. And he will do what is right with our prayers. What a privilege it is that the church gets to pray to the sovereign Lord.

[19:48] I want to end with this little picture. Quite a famous picture, I think. President Kennedy there in the Oval Office. The seat of the highest power. And under there is his son.

He gets to be there. Not because he's some diplomat, some politician coming to have a meeting with the president. But because that's his boy. And he gets to come close to the seat of power.

And the early church here in Acts. With all the hostility that they're facing. All the trouble that they're going through and will go through. They get to come to the throne of their father.

And they get to speak to him. And say, sovereign Lord, see our situation. And that's the case for us too. Whatever we're going through.

Whatever people in our church family are going through. We get to go there. Not to the Oval Office. But to the highest throne. That this world has ever known. And so we're the most privileged people.

[20:58] When the world feels shaky. When our faith feels under attack.

And we just don't know what to do. When there doesn't seem to be any answers. We get to go there to his throne. Say, I'll go and speak to my father.

He rules. He reigns. And he'll know just what to do. Amen. We'll spend some time praying together in a moment.

But we're going to sing. Thank you.