Urgent Prayer

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[0:00] So as I said earlier, we're continuing the series on prayer. And today we're going to be looking and learning about how to pray with urgency and boldness when we face difficult times and we need courage.

So the passage in Acts that Cherry's just read is set during the early life of the church, at a time when the church was experiencing both massive growth, but also massive persecution.
And two of the church leaders, Peter and John, had just been arrested by the authorities for preaching about him. But before we dig into the passage, I think it's really good to acknowledge that although we in this room, we're not probably facing death, but actually we in the Western Church face our own challenges, which are similar but different to the ones that Peter and John did.
So like the early church in Acts, we here also are here to proclaim the gospel of the good news to all those around us. They were given a great commission by Jesus and so are we.
And that has to be, as a church, our top priority. And like the early church, we also have many reasons to rejoice. Even though we've been through a horrific pandemic, this church has actually grown in numbers and it is amazing to see new faces each week and we really rejoice in that.
[1:27] And also we rejoice in the opportunities that we've had to actually love our local communities through TLG, through the Make Lunch, through all the things we've been doing, through bereavement stuff just over the past couple of years and continuing on, all the amazing things we've been able to do.

But we've also had massive challenges as a church. We've been through COVID lockdowns and all that that's brought. We've had deaths of loved members of our community.
Our finances, like every church in the country, they've been tightened and so it's difficult to kind of do the ministry we need to do because we're worried about finance. We've got lack of volunteers. People are taking time to come back and actually not so many people are volunteering and getting stuck in.
They don't feel they're able to at this time sometimes. And people still feeling isolated and people still being ill. And the list goes on and on. And we're also living in an increasingly secular and materialistic society.
A society where Christians that are open about their faith are more and more looked upon with suspicion and hostility. And also a society where people think we actually really don't need God.
[2:39] And at home, I know many people have faced many challenges, frustrations and anxieties. Some of them brought on by COVID, people having poor health, job insecurity, relationship difficulties.

The list goes on. But faced by these challenges, we can be tempted to just run for the hills and ignore it all. And throw up our hands in despair.
But this passage that we're going to look at in a minute teaches us that no, we're not to do that. So the passage, as Cherry said, started halfway through a story. Peter and John have been released. Why have they been in prison? Why are they now released? And who's been holding them? It's quite an exciting story. And in the context that Cherry said, they'd been out, they'd been preaching, they'd healed the guy that had been lame for 40 years.
And then the authorities, who basically hated the disciples, wanted to shut them all down, basically give them a massive threat.
[3:52] And they throw them into prison. I imagine they beat them the night before. And then they bring them out again to find out, interrogate them, what's been going on. And Peter and John, rather than being quiet, Peter says his sermon again, basically because of Jesus and his healing spirit, this is why this lame guy has been healed.

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And look at all the people that have repented and turned to Christ. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they don't want to cause a riot. So they get them together, Peter and John, and they basically say, we're banning you now from talking about Jesus.
Now this is not just a friendly little chat that they're having here. This is a real threat. It's a, we're going to beat you up. We're going to break your legs. We might even kill you kind of a threat. But what do they do?
They continue to speak about Jesus, and they go back to their little fledgling church. So after that long-winded introduction, we look at the passage.
So 23 to 31 says, So it tells us, So Peter and John had experienced all of this.
[5:04] The guy being healed, the 5,000 people turning to God, their brutal imprisonment and interrogation the next morning, and the terrifying threats that had been made to them.

And they go back to their church. And what does their church do? Do they run for the hills? No. They pray urgently after all they've been told.
And it says, With one voice, they lifted and raised their voices in prayer to God. So their response wasn't to revolt. It wasn't to run away. It wasn't to riot.
But what they did is, they turned their concerns to God in that scary situation. And why did they do this? Well, I think they did this because they knew who God is.
As the prayer continues, it says, And with their prayer, they say, Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in it. They are saying, God, you are the biggest and the best, the most powerful one that there is.
[6:06] There is no higher name. No one higher than you. And it's not just Lord. It's Sovereign Lord. It's Lord with a capital L. The biggest name under heaven and earth.

And like them for us, it's really important for us that we are also sure about who God is. If we want to be an out-facing church, which is all about discipleship, evangelism, and being on God's mission together, telling people how much Jesus loves them and living a bold life, we need to know who God is and what he can do, how magnificent he is, and we serve a God that doesn't make empty promises.
He's got the power to overcome death. He's the beginning and the end. And by him and through him, all things are made. Planets in motion and set the stars in the sky.
That is the God that we worship and we want to encounter through Jesus Christ. And that is the God that the early church knew. God had just raised Jesus from the dead.
Of course he could heal a crippled man and save 5,000 people. He just raised Jesus from the dead. To them, the threats from the Sadducees don't seem to matter. And that is the God that we want to present to the world as we go out, just as Peter and John did, to meet the needs of those around us, speaking God's word of new life, resurrection, of hope, love, grace, and mercy.
[7:35] We can be bold to proclaim Christ because we have a God who backs this up. He is the sovereign Lord and we need to know who he is.

But knowing all that doesn't make it any easier as we continue on with the prayer. So if we look at verses 26 and 27, it continues.
Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against the anointed one.
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. So what they're doing here, I think, is they're praying through scripture.
It's the first part of Psalm 2. They're praying through scripture and they're echoing it in their own situation. They're saying whatever is going on, the political, the social, and the hierarchical powers that plotted against Jesus to crush him, even he, who was God, he suffered and died.
[8:49] So what about them? Well, the hope we have for them and us for suffering is Jesus' name. As we live and speak for Jesus, we are going to suffer for his name.

Now that is really tough to say and to think about. But if we are fully sold out for Jesus, if we're all in for him, we are going to experience suffering in our lives.
Christ himself experienced suffering for our sake. Peter and John were all in for Jesus. If we look through the pages of Christian history, they're marked with suffering.
All the 12 disciples, bar one, were martyred. If you follow charities like Open Doors, things like that, and you hear about Christians being persecuted all over the world, look at the Chinese church for

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an example.
In 1980, there were 700,000 Christians living in China, living under a brutal dictatorship where Christianity is definitely not encouraged and it still carries on today.
[9:47] And now they're in the region of over 40 million Christians. Both massive faith and suffering. And we hear many other stories through countries like Syria and Afghanistan, Iraq, where there are Christians, there's faith growing, maybe underground churches, actually they're under a lot of persecution.

And what I would say is, although we're probably never going to be under that persecution, it is vital that we support charities such as Open Doors and we also pray fervently for our brothers and sisters that are in those countries being persecuted.
And we thank him every day that we are not in that situation. So I'm not saying that anybody here is going to be killed. I think that most people living here in the UK are not called to die for him, but we are called to live for him while we can.
So we will all experience suffering for his name. And it's our response to that suffering that we're going to be judged by, by the world. So if we're going to be all in with God and we're going to nail our flags to the cross, actually other things don't matter.
My reputation, my name, my comfort, my security, what actually does it matter? If we stand boldly with God, we can withstand oppression and persecution.
[11:07] Whatever that may look like, we must ask him to help us to stand. And if when we're struggling, rather than being really struggling, being overwhelmed by our worries and our concerns, let's try and be overwhelmed by the magnificent God through prayer.

And therefore, we cannot help but speak about what we have heard and experienced. If we go all in with God, as the early Christians did, we'll see more of this God that was all in for us.
Our sovereign Lord who emptied himself on the cross to die that humiliating death. And because of this, we can empty ourselves out too because Jesus has done it. There's no need to gain status or reputation.
And we can accept some suffering. We can go all in for God. And then this bold and urgent prayer continues on to verse 29. And it says, So these Christians here, they weren't actually asking to take the suffering away or even to alleviate it.
With this prayer, they're asking God to give them boldness to enable them to stand firm in the face of suffering. They're not questioning God's goodness at this time of trial and persecution, but instead, they are committed to proclaiming the name of Jesus.
[12:26] They are fully convinced that the love and strength of God and are prepared to endure what they need to do to proclaim his name. And their prayer for boldness is answered by the coming of the Holy Spirit and an earthquake.

And it's not the earthquake that they're looking for. Or it's also not the shaking and maybe the strange thing that might have been going on with the Holy Spirit being there. But it is the Holy Spirit that's within them that takes them and fills them and gives them boldness and sends them out.
And if when you get home, you go on to chapter 5, you will see that the apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And the believers met. They didn't really want to join them, but they saw their example.
And because of that, many turned to faith afterwards. So there was no clever trick or fantastic video or brilliant worship song. By their example, the church grew.
So to conclude my talk, the three things to think about is knowing that Lord is sovereign, we must know who God is. We must be willing to suffer for the name of Jesus. And we must remain faithful to him through it.
[13:38] And when suffering comes, we're not to run away, but we need to know that God's in that suffering with us. A God that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is creator, sustainer, and redeemer.

He's rich in love and slow to anger. No tower too high and no landscape too wide. He has numbered the stars in the sky. No name unknown or hair accounted for.
He's all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful. And it's by going all in with great and glorious God that we can be bold. For he is the kingdom, he is the power, and he is the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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