

AM Acts 4:23-31

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 4. And we're going to read from verse 23 to verse 31.! But just to set the scene, the book of Acts really begins in the time after Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

And he appears to his disciples and he commissions them to be his witnesses, to take his message to their own locality, Jerusalem, Judea, but also to the ends of the earth.

And he promises that they will receive the Holy Spirit. But Jesus is then taken up into heaven and ten days later at the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out on all the disciples.

A number of phenomena occur. They speak miraculously in different languages that are recognized and heard by people who are there from all over the world for the festival.

Peter preaches on that occasion and 3,000 are added to their number. And we read about the earliest fellowship of believers. And then in chapter 3, we have a sort of a new section really beginning.

[1 : 27] When Peter and John go to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. And there at the gate is a man who is lame. In fact, he's so lame he has to be carried there. And he's begging for alms.

And he asks Peter and John for some money. And Peter and John say they don't have any money, but what they have they'll give to him. And they say to him, in the name of Jesus, the Messiah of Nazareth, rise up and walk.

And immediately his feet and ankles are made strong. And he goes into the temple with them, walking, leaping, praising God. A crowd gathers and they know who this man is.

They're amazed at what's happened and Peter again preaches to them about the Lord Jesus Christ. And then when we come to chapter 4, we read of opposition to that from the Jewish religious leaders.

The ruling council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. And they have Peter and John arrested and kept in prison overnight.

[2 : 36] And then the next day they're brought out and questioned and interrogated. And again, Peter and John speak very boldly to them. That it's in the name of Jesus of Nazareth that this man has been healed and saved.

Well, they're threatened. The Jewish ruling council threatened them. Don't speak anymore in the name of this man, Jesus. You're not to preach about him.

And so they're released. They're released from prison with those warnings, those threats ringing in their ears. That if they preach anymore, they will be in trouble.

So we take up the reading in chapter 4, verse 23. When they, that's Peter and John, were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

[3 : 45] Who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed.

For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant, Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant, Jesus.

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

[5 : 10] May God bless to us that reading of his word. Let's join together again in... Just to turn back to the passage that we read a few minutes ago, to Acts chapter 4, verses 23 to 31, and that's on page 1099 of the Church Bible.

What is prayer? Well, we can describe prayer as talking to God. And prayer, talking to God, is built on the fact that God is a relational being.

God is one who communicates, one who speaks, and who hears. God is not an impersonal force, as some people would claim.

The ultimate being, the ultimate reality in the universe, is capable of personal relationship.

And in fact, this God has been in relationship from eternity. The one God has been in relationship, because within the one God, there is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who from eternity have been in relationship with each other, and who have communicated and communed with each other.

[6 : 43] And this God has created us as human beings, made in his own image and likeness. And a large part of that, what it means to be in the image and likeness of God, is that we are made to be in relationship with him.

In the account of the creation of humans in Genesis 1, we read that God spoke to them. Now, God spoke things into existence, and he made different creatures, but the only creatures that God actually speaks directly to are human beings.

And that tells us that we are created to be in relationship with God, to hear his voice, and to respond to him, and to respond to him in prayer.

As the Shorter Catechism puts it, that we are made with the purpose of to glorify him, and enjoy him forever. That's to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.

So from the beginning, we read of people relating to God, praying to God, speaking to God, in prayer. And in fact, the Bible is just a long, long story of God in relationship with his people.

[8 : 03] God in conversation with his people. God speaking to his people, and his people also responding to him in prayer. And so throughout the Bible, there are many examples.

Of prayers. We're not just told that people prayed, but we're given quite a number of examples of different prayers that people prayed. Probably the biggest collection is in the Psalms.

Many of the Psalms, not all of them, but very many of them are prayers. They're in the forms of prayers. They're addressing God. Speaking to God. And addressed to him. But also, in other parts of the Bible, there are different situations that God's people find themselves in and where they speak to God in that situation.

Sometimes as individuals, or sometimes as here in Acts chapter 4, as a group, as a group of people together. And here it is very much a group in verse 24.

We read that when they heard it, that's the news of Peter and John's interrogation before the Jewish authorities and the threats made against them.

[9 : 15] We read in verse 24 that when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God. Now, it may have been one person particularly, in particular, voicing this prayer and everybody else joining and it expresses what's on their hearts and they say, Amen at the end of it.

Or it may even be that Luke is sort of summarizing a number of prayers here. But this is what we have, what Luke records for us. Luke is the writer of Acts and this records, it gives an account of the prayers uttered or the prayer uttered on this occasion.

So, Luke records their prayer or at least a summary of it in verses 24 to 30. And there are two parts to this prayer. First of all, verses 24 to 28, it's focused about on God.

It's praising God, worshipping God. And then the second part in verses 29 and 30 is it's requests made to God.

And I think that's significant. Out of seven verses of this prayer, the first five focus on God, on who God is and on what God does.

[10 : 41] And it's only in the final two verses that the disciples ask God for something. And even then, when they're asking for something, they're seeking God's glory and honour.

So this is a really God-focused, God-centred prayer. Nicholas Copernicus lived from 1473 to 1543. and he was an astronomer who transformed the way we understand the universe. Up to that time, in Europe at least, people believed that the earth was at the centre and that everything else, the sun and other heavenly bodies revolved around the earth.

And Copernicus argued that that was not right, that the sun was at the centre of our system and that the earth revolves around the sun.

And of course, that is what we know to be true today. But what Copernicus discovered was that there is a new centre. The centre is not the earth, but the sun.

[11:57] And perhaps we need that in our praying and indeed in the whole of our lives. A new centre. Because our tendency is for myself to be at the centre of my thoughts, my prayers, my life.

As if everything revolves around me. And what I need is a new centre. What we all need is a new centre that life does not revolve around me. It revolves around God.

He is at the centre of all things. And so our praying should not be focused on me and my needs. Of course, that's not totally wrong because we are encouraged to bring our needs to God and to express our own concerns, to bring our burdens to God in prayer.

So it's not wrong to bring our needs to God. In fact, it's the right thing to do. But our first focus, our first priority should be on God.

To offer God-centred prayer, which should also reflect that our lives, the whole of our lives, should be God-centred. We see that in the Lord's prayer, that balance, because in the Lord's prayer, we do pray for our own needs, our needs of daily bread, forgiveness, protection from evil.

[13:17] people. But the first three requests of that prayer are that God's name be hallowed, that God's kingdom come, and that God's will be done on earth as in heaven.

And I think also that when we get that right, when our prayers are God-centred, it brings our own needs into right perspective.

we see our own needs, our own situation, in the light of God, in the light of who God is, and in the light of what he does. And so let's look at their prayer, and the first point is really just who God is and what he does, and then the second is looking at their requests.

So first of all, who God is and what God does. And there are four things that they speak of in this prayer. The first is that he is the God who rules.

They address their prayer, in verse 24, to the sovereign Lord. And the word there for sovereign Lord, it's actually the word we get the English word despot from, but despot probably has negative connotations of someone who is throwing their weight around, someone who is maybe a tyrant, which of course is not true of God.

[14:46] But it does kind of convey the idea of someone who has absolute rule and control, the master, the owner, the one with supreme power.

And that is who God is. And that itself puts their recent events into perspective. You see, Peter and John had been hauled before this ruthless Jewish ruling council.

people, they were living and their whole lives in Roman-occupied Judea under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. But they recognized that rule, ultimate rule, does not lie with the Jewish authorities, doesn't lie with the Roman Empire, but to God, to the sovereign Lord.

He is the one who rules. He is the one who has all power and control in the universe. One other feature of this prayer that I want to just notice in passing is that it's addressed to God, the Father.

Now, you might think, why is that worthy of remark? Well, often in the book of Acts, prayer is addressed to the Lord Jesus. So, for example, at the end of chapter 1, in verses 24 and 25, we read that the disciples prayed and said, you, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.

[16:20] So, they're praying about a replacement apostle for Judas, a twelfth apostle. And the context of that suggests that the Lord there is Jesus. Now, you could argue that the other way, but another place where there's no ambiguity at all, is in the end of Acts chapter 7.

It's when Stephen is being martyred, he's being stoned to death for his testimony about Jesus. And we read there in Acts 7, 59 and 60 that as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. So there, very clearly, prayer is addressed to Jesus, and I think there's a number of other places in Acts where that is the case.

But here in Acts chapter 4, in their prayer, they refer in the prayer to your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, in verse 27. And also, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the prayer, in the third person.

And so that indicates that this prayer is addressed to God the Father. Now, in prayer, we can focus our address to God the Father, to the Lord Jesus Christ, or to the Holy Spirit, or indeed to the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[17:57] But of course, whichever we keep, the threeness and the oneness of God in mind. The fourth century theologian, scholar, Gregory of Nazianus, said this.

He was famous for his theology of the Trinity. He said, no sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three.

No sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one. So when he thinks of the one God, he thinks of the three. When he thinks of the three or any of the three, he's immediately brought back to the one.

Well, the second thing they focus on about God is that he is the God who makes. In verse 24, Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything that is in them. God's creation encompasses the entire universe. That's what the heaven, the earth and the sea mean. It's just everything. The whole of creation, the whole universe, is God's work.

[19:16] In all its vastness, its complexity, its teeming diversity, pulsating with countless forms of life, in its awesome beauty, it is all of it, this God's creation.

God is its maker and this is the one that they and we also address in prayer. This is the one that we are engaging with today in this church.

We have prayed, we have sung praise, we are reading his word. It's the maker of the universe that we are engaging with this morning. That's an amazing fact.

And again, it puts their situation into perspective. This is God's world. He made it by his creative power. Our God is not some kind of local tribal deity with a limited amount of power, but the Lord and creator of the universe.

So this world does not belong to the Roman Empire or any empire that's currently on the world stage. It belongs to God, the creator. and we also need to frequently remind ourselves of that fact.

[20:31] So he's the God who rules, the God who makes. Third, he's the God who speaks. In verse 25, it says that it's God who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit.

So these disciples see their situation in the light of God's great plan and purpose that is revealed in the scriptures, in the Bible.

And here the focus is on Psalm 2. It's interesting, we see that they mention in their prayer the dual authorship of scripture, that it's through the mouth of God's servant David, of course David was the writer of the psalm and of many of the psalms.

David wrote them of his own volition, he knew what he was doing, he decided to write them, he felt he wanted to express his thoughts in those psalms.

But also we see here the divine authorship of scripture because God the Holy Spirit spoke through him. What David said, he said, by the Holy Spirit.

[21:50] So the Bible is both a human book and a divine book. And these disciples are steeped in the Bible. Of course, for them, their Bible was what we call the Old Testament.

They didn't have the New Testament at this point. We have that also. But they're steeped in the Bible, in the scriptures. Because the Bible tells God's great story, how God's great plan and purpose unfolds in history.

And they understand themselves as being actors in that story, characters in that story. And their prayers are biblically informed and biblically directed.

created. And that challenges us today. Do we seek to know the Bible better and to understand it and to understand not just as some work of literature, of course it is that, but it's more than that.

To understand that our lives are playing a part in the great story that the Bible tells. In God's story, God's story of the universe. Well, the fourth thing about God is that he is the God who plans.

[23:09] Again, in verse 25, they quote from Psalm 2, Why did the Gentiles or the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed or his Messiah. For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

So this psalm that they quote in the prayer is about the reign of the Lord and of his anointed or Messiah and the word Messiah also the word Christ it means the anointed one.

So Messiah is from the Hebrew Christ is from the Greek but it's the same meaning it means the anointed one. Now in the Old Testament era kings were anointed as were priests and on at least one occasion a prophet is anointed with oil it means when oil is poured on the head and sort of rubbed in and it's a kind of a sign a symbol of God's choosing that person appointing them equipping them for the service to which God has chosen them.

Psalm 2 was originally it seems a coronation psalm for a king in ancient Israel coming to the throne being crowned as king and a king in the line of King David so quite likely it was first written perhaps with Solomon's coronation in mind and then it may have been used and sung utter the coronations after that but the disciples understand it as having ultimate reference in the ultimate anointed one who is the Messiah Jesus he is not just any old anointed one he is the anointed one the Messiah and they see this psalm as being fulfilled in him these verses verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 2 that they quote is about the opposition of the nations against the Lord and against his Messiah and they see this fulfilled in this conspiracy against Jesus the conspiracy that involved

[25 : 52] Herod and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate the Jews and the Romans all together and in their own way each played a part in the opposition to Jesus and in putting him to death in his execution his crucifixion and now that opposition is also continued against them and they see that as being part of the same thing the same plotting against the Lord and against his anointed it's interesting that they call Jesus they speak of him as your holy servant Jesus and that seems to be I think what they have in mind there is many passages in the book of Isaiah which speak about this figure called the servant or the servant of the Lord and in Isaiah 42 49 50 52 and 53 this figure the servant of the Lord appears so this is just a few verses from the first of those

Isaiah 42 verses 1 to 4 which says here is my servant this is God speaking through the prophet here is my servant to my support my chosen one in whom I delight I will put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations he will not cry out or raise his voice or be heard in the streets a crushed reed he will not break and a faintly burning wick he will not snuff out he will faithfully bring forth justice he will not grow faint or be crushed until he establishes justice on earth in his teaching earth's remotest islands remotest lands will put their hope so the disciples see Jesus as fulfilling God's plan revealed prophesied predicted in Psalm 2 and in Isaiah as well as in many other passages in the

Old Testament I want us to look also at verse 28 in verse 28 again it's still they're speaking about the events that had recently taken place in Jerusalem the plot against Jesus and his crucifixion how these people gathered together to do what your hand and your plan had predestined to take place so what they're saying there is that even the plot against Jesus and the brutal evil carrying out of that plot by crucifying him even that was in God's plan God's great plan to bring salvation to the nations and nothing can stop or hinder God's plan from being carried out Herod Pilate the Jews the other nations may conspire but they will only find themselves furthering

God's plan I remember hearing about China in 1949 there was a new atheist communist government under chairman Mao Zedong and in 1949 they expelled all foreign missionaries from China and the aim of that was to undermine and get rid of the Christian faith and to promote atheism and many missionaries who were kicked out were very fearful about the young church in that land but now 75 years later on the numbers of believers numbers of people who profess Christ in China have grown from an estimated 4 million in 1949 to 44 million in 2018 and that's according to the Chinese government many Christian organizations say that the numbers are probably tens of millions more than that people and there also we see an example that you can fight against God you can try and rage against God and fight against him but if you do you'll end up the loser just one question that may be raised from this and that is that if God's plan will succeed anyway does it matter what we do and the answer to that is yes it does matter what we do we see from this and other places in the book of

Acts that Herod Pilate the Jewish leaders the Romans are clearly held responsible for their actions Peter in his speech in Acts chapter 2 at Pentecost speaks about this Jesus whom you crucified he is holding them responsible and he calls them to repent from that which many people do indeed and that indicates that they are held responsible for that action as we are all held responsible for all our actions but also we see that the disciples pray you might think well if God's purpose is going to succeed anyway why bother praying but these disciples do pray they recognize that God has

planned all this that God has predestined all these things to take place but they pray nevertheless that's because we are commanded to pray so we do that anyway but also God in a mysterious way that maybe isn't we don't fully grasp

[31 : 52] God takes up our prayers God uses our prayers and indeed all of our service for him he takes it up into his own plan and he uses it in his working out of that great plan so we are responsible and we should pray let's move to their requests and there are three requests!

here in verse 29 they pray now Lord look upon their threats now the threats are huge this Jewish ruling council had only weeks earlier condemned Jesus to death and handed him over to the Romans to be crucified they were brutal they were ruthless they were utterly unprincipled and merciless I wonder how we would pray in those circumstances think I would be inclined very much desperately to pray for safety and protection maybe we pray for the immediate downfall of those leaders but they simply ask give attention to their threats so if they are laying those threats before the Lord leaving them with him in his hands and then in verse 29 also the second request is that grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness and that word boldness it sort of includes the idea of confidence and courage to keep speaking

God's word what matters to these disciples is that God's word God's message which is about Jesus Christ is proclaimed everywhere and that's their task and it is our task today also and we too should pray for that confidence and courage to proclaim God's word God's message about Jesus Christ and then the third request is in verse 30 it is while you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus so their great concern is for the name the honor the reputation of Jesus Christ but what are we to make of the healings signs and wonders is that something we should pray for today well of course God can do these healings signs wonders at any time of his own choosing but even in the

Bible we see that in certain periods these things were more frequent than other times in fact miracles and wonders by their very nature have to be rare they have to be out of the ordinary otherwise they will no longer cause wonder some of you are like me old enough to remember the 1990s and maybe you can remember the first time you sent an email or the first time you went onto the internet and it was called the world wide web in those days and you could surf the net and just find information at your fingertips and it was amazing we were just absolutely bowled over by this experience of being able to go onto the internet and have this stuff all available from our keyboards but now it's normal it's everyday life it's what we do it's ordinary for us and in the same way if in every church around this country around the world every week since the time of the apostles people were healed people are cured from disability and sickness the dead are raised it would become ordinary it become commonplace so signs and wonders just by the very nature have to be out of the ordinary and elsewhere in the new testament these signs and wonders are described as signs of the apostles so they're particularly related to the time of the apostles 2 corinthians 12 verse 12 speaks of the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience with signs and wonders!

that is not to say that God may not answer our prayers sometimes in very remarkable ways in any age in any place or time and of course when Jesus Christ returns there will be total healing and indeed death itself will be put into reverse but the main point here is that what they're praying for what they want is that the name of the Lord Jesus be honored that is what their great concern and really the nub of their request is well lastly and very briefly we see God's response in verse 31 when they prayed the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness so God honors their prayer there is a!

[37 : 19] renewal of power and it's not only the apostles but all of them and I think this is just basically the church gathered here all the believers and they are all filled with the Spirit and all speak the word of God boldly so the episode begins with the healing of that lame man in Acts chapter 3 and then their proclamation and then arrest their witness to Jesus to the Jewish leaders they're released with threats and word this great prayer that these disciples prayed we pray that we would be people of prayer prayer that is

God centered and God focused and God honoring and glorifying help us in that we pray as individuals as a fellowship of your people in Jesus name we pray Amen