

God's People Unite in Prayer

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Preacher: Chad Eckard

[0:00] Good morning, church. It's great to be with you this morning.

Good morning, my name is Chad Eckerd. I've been married to my wife, Bethany, for 18 years, and God has blessed us with six kiddos.

We've attended Maranatha now since early 2023, and it has been a great privilege to be part of this church and to serve alongside all of you.

The sermon series is titled, Becoming the Church, and the message today is God's people unite in prayer.

Pastor David has gotten us back into Acts the last two weeks, and we've been working our way through chapter four. He provided a helpful summary by chapter, especially considering how many months we were in judges.

[1:12] In Acts chapter one, he pointed us to Jesus commissions his witnesses. Acts two, Jesus empowers his witnesses.

Acts three, we see that Jesus works through his witnesses. In Acts four, Jesus builds his church. Two weeks ago, we looked at the arrest of Peter and John.

The priests and Sadducees interrupted their message to the crowd and physically removed them and threw them into jail. It was the message that they preached, and specifically the resurrection and power of Jesus, that drew the opposition and the rage from the spiritual leaders.

But despite the opposition, Pastor David pointed out that the text clearly reveals the authorities are unable to control Christ's work.

As the narrative states, many believed the message that they preached, and the number of the men was about 5,000. Nevertheless, Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin in an official trial to answer the question that we find in verse seven of chapter four.

[2:31] By what power or in what name have you done this? What we see in Peter's answer is that spirit filling brings about a proclamation of God's work in Christ.

The visible result was faithful, courageous, Christ-centered speech. Despite the opposition, the filling of the Holy Spirit makes the reality of Christ greater.

Peter boldly points the Sanhedrin to the truth that salvation is found in Christ alone. Ponder the reality of God's grace in this moment.

He's using Peter, the same guy who just weeks before fell flat on his face. In this moment, God wanted to use him.

And we know God will continue to use Peter to preach his word and grow his church. It highlights the point that Pastor David made last week.

[3:43] When we fail, our focus doesn't mainly need to be on ourselves. It's an easy tendency to beat ourselves up when we fail. That doesn't diminish the importance of being honest, of acknowledging our failures, repenting of our sin.

But the greatest need that we have is to see more of Jesus. He's at work. And he's empowering his people to do great things.

Even the ones that just failed. Last week, we saw that the response and confidence of Peter and John completely astounded the Sanhedrin.

This group of the most influential and highly esteemed spiritual leaders with all their education were left speechless by two fishermen. To the point that they sent them away so that they could gather their thoughts and come up with a response.

What we saw was that the council was simply unwilling to accept the truth about Christ. The truth that was standing right in front of them in a healed lame man.

[4:57] So they ordered Peter and John to stop speaking of Jesus. And this was in direct opposition to Peter and John's commissioning.

Jesus sent them out to be his witnesses. And so the response to the Sanhedrin was, as for us, we must speak. They cannot stop speaking because they're filled with the Holy Spirit and compelled to proclaim his name.

They cherish Christ more than anything else. And this unified response leaves the Sanhedrin obviously angry. But they don't have as many options as they'd like to impose upon Peter and John. Which brings us to our passage today. If you're using the Pew Bibles, you're going to find our text on page 912. The focus this morning is on unity and prayer.

Let's start in Acts 4, verse 23. It says, When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

[6:22] If you're following along in the bulletin, the first note is right here. The fellowship we share as believers is essential. The fellowship that we share as believers is essential.

Our fellowship as a body at Maranatha is essential. Let's think about what Peter and John just experienced in this trial before the Sanhedrin.

This was an intensely intimidating, high-stakes confrontation. The Sanhedrin were the highest legal, political, and religious council in ancient Israel.

They possessed immense wealth and political influence and authority. And although the text doesn't specifically state it, we're likely safe to assume that the threats included threats of physical violence.

This wasn't just a stern talking to that they received. It's probable that they threatened physical harm against Peter and John and maybe even their loved ones.

[7:31] And we'll see in chapter 5 that that's exactly what they inflict upon the apostles. There was also likely the threat of social and religious exile.

This would mean being completely outcast from the spiritual life of Israel. And also, a natural result of that would be personal ruin and business as well. The threat of death, which obviously just happened to Jesus as Peter and John witnessed.

Pastor David pointed us to the parallels between the trial in Acts 4 and Jesus' trial before essentially the same men. So we know that they're willing to take this step if necessary.

It's also worth taking a moment just to think about what we know about Peter and John. Just to briefly focus on the reality of their lives.

Peter's married. The Gospels mention Jesus visiting Peter's mother-in-law. And Paul mentions Peter's wife accompanying him on multiple trips.

[8:44] John has been given responsibility over Mary, Jesus' mother. And we know that his family runs what seems to be a pretty successful fishing business. There were people just like us dealing with the pressures and decisions of everyday life.

And they stood before a council that had the power and authority to completely change their life. To completely change the reality that they faced.

And after responding boldly and courageously to the council, Luke tells us that Peter and John return to their church or group of believers.

our text says their friends. The fellowship that we share together as believers and as Maranatha Baptist Church is something that we should cherish and prioritize.

It's a privilege to build community together, to share victories together, to bear one another's burdens, encourage and build one another up, to be devoted to each other in brotherly love.

[9:58] We need to spur one another toward love and good deeds. And we need to hold each other accountable. Jesus states explicitly in John 13, 35 that it is our love for one another that bears witness to all men that we are his disciples.

It's our love as a church that makes people see were his. And so I think it's very clear, even though it's a small part of our text, that fellowship as a body is essential.

And we see the evidence of this reality in the fact that Peter and John immediately seek out this fellowship. The second point this morning is when God's people are united, they pray together.

When God's people are united, they pray together. look at the first part of Acts 4, 24. And when they heard it, speaking of the people Peter and John returned to, they lifted their voices together to God.

The New American Standard says, and when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord. Peter and John report what the Sanhedrin had threatened them with, and they unite in

prayer.

[11:27] And we see the emphasis of their unity. The Greek word that's translated with one accord describes people who share like precious faith, creating a God-produced unity between them.

Here they have the same mind because each receives the same revelation of his word. Now the New Testament uses this word 11 total times and 10 of them we find in Acts.

And Luke has already used this word to describe this group of believers. The first instance that we see is in Acts 1, 13, following the ascension of Christ.

starting in the first part of verse 13, it says, and when they had entered, they went to the upper room where they were staying.

If you drop to 14, it says, all these with one accord, that's our word, were devoting themselves to prayer. We find it again used in Acts chapter 2.

[12:34] Look at the unity described starting in verse 44. Acts 2, 44. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common.

And they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple and breaking bread from house to house.

They were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. What we see Luke communicating is that God is producing a special unity amongst this people.

It's unity that he produces through the fruit of the Spirit working in his church. and we see that this unity produces prayer.

The persecution from the Sanhedrin and all the pressure was initially directed at two men, Peter and John. Now the entire community is together and calling out to God to bear the burden.

[13:53] Persecution against one or all unites God's people. Now the corporate prayer life of the early church was already well established. Just in the couple chapters leading up to this, Luke highlights several instances where the same community gathered to pray.

As they were waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, they prayed together as we just read in Acts 1, 13 and 14. When they were replacing Judas, they prayed together to seek God's will in Acts 1, 24 to 25.

Right after the day of Pentecost, Acts 2, 42 describes the believers devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

By the time they faced the Sanhedrin's threats in chapter 4, corporate prayer had been established as a way to unify their hearts and seek God.

It was an essential aspect right at the birth of the early church and a way to continue walking in step with Him. And that hasn't changed for us.

[15:12] Which brings us to the actual prayer found in our passage today. And it's the bulk of what we'll be looking at. starting in verse 24.

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, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, why did the Gentiles rage and the people's 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.

What we see first in their prayer is that they recognize who God is. They recognize who God is. The prayer begins calling out sovereign Lord.

[16:52] We see this term used ten times in the New Testament, and it's consistently used to underscore absolute authority, whether divine or human.

In our passage, they're praying, addressing God as sovereign Lord, legitimizing their confidence in divine control, despite the hostile rulers.

They're focusing on His power and His purpose in creation. God is the true authority over all human authorities. And what we see, even just in how they start the prayer, is that the courage of the church is rooted in a clarified vision of who God is.

they start by reminding themselves who's in charge of their circumstances. The second thing we see is they recognize the authority of Scripture.

The beginning of verse 25 says, who threw the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit.

[18:07] It's God's decisive work evident in His people. The Scriptures are written by man, inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. It also points to their knowledge of the Word and their reliance upon it.

They're about to recall Psalm 2, but there are numerous examples, again, that we see right before this chapter 4 in Acts that point to their emphasis of knowing God's Word.

We're not going to take the time to look at each one, but just to list them out as an example. In Peter's sermon at Pentecost, he references three Old Testament passages.

He quotes Joel in Acts 2, 17-21. He quotes Psalm 16 in Acts 2, 25-28. He references Psalm 110 in Acts 2, 34-35.

Then in Acts 3, 18, he connects the rejection of Jesus to what the prophets foretold. And the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12, he cites in Acts 3, 25.

[19:20] The point is, the early church knew Scripture well, and they frequently reminded each other of God's promises and His faithfulness by referencing it.

And now we see they quote Psalm 2, specifically the first two verses. The second part of verse 25, Why did the Gentiles rage and the people's plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His anointed. This psalm is quoted explicitly four times in the New Testament, and it's referenced another dozen, making it one of the most frequently referenced Old Testament chapters found in the New Testament.

Psalm 2 is a call to kings and rulers of the earth to worship God, to honor Christ, and take refuge in Him.

It declares God as sovereign, the true king. It tells us that He scoffs at earthly rulers and has declared Christ as king.

[20:36] C.H. Spurgeon notes, This psalm sets forth as in a wondrous vision the tumult of the people against the Lord's anointed, the determinate purpose of God to exalt His own Son, and the ultimate reign of that Son over all His enemies.

We have in the first three verses a description of the hatred of human nature against the Christ of God. In terms of the believers recalling Psalm 2 in this prayer, Spurgeon says, No better comment is needed upon it than the apostolic song in Acts 4, 27-28.

And what we find in verse 27, this is called a pescher hermeneutic. I put it in your notes. I had no idea what it was before I started studying this passage.

A pescher treatment of a text is a method of scriptural interpretation where an ancient prophetic text is explained as having meaning that applies directly to current circumstances.

In this instance, what we see is the early believers taking groups mentioned in the Psalm and equating them with persons involved in Christ's crucifixion. You see the Gentiles and nations mentioned, those are represented by the Roman authorities.

[22:03] The peoples, that's the people of Israel. Kings of the earth represented by King Herod. Rulers, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

And the anointed, of course, that's Jesus, the Christ. Christ. What the believers are doing is recognizing continuity between the hostility that Jesus endured and the hostility it now faces. It's truly a hostility against Christ's rule. The Sanhedrin have made this quite clear as they've taken issue with who Peter and John give credit to.

Remember the question, by what power or by what name did you do this? They've forbidden them to speak or teach in the name of Jesus.

The fourth thing that we see in the prayer is that they recognize God's providence. verse 28.

[23:15] To do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. So, sitting on my shelf at home, there's a rather large book.

It's got about 700 pages that I've cracked open a couple times, but this sermon led me to getting into it a little bit more. The title of it is Providence, written by John Piper.

And although I was very eager to get the book, I have not read it all. And I've only referenced it a few times as I've studied different topics.

My wife would say that this fact applies to far too many books on my shelves. And for now, she's not wrong. Amen.

In the book, Piper's goal is that Christians would see and savor the providence of God.

[24 : 26] Now, providence is not a word that's found in Scripture. But I think the purpose of using the word will become evident as we define it. And it's exactly what John Piper does at the beginning of the book.

He says, Providence is purposeful sovereignty. It's the active outworking where God applies His sovereign power to guide all things, govern creation, and successfully achieve His ultimate goal for the universe.

He says, Sovereignty establishes that God has the supreme right, absolute authority, and total power to rule. Providence is the actual outworking of that power as He actively manages, sustains, and guides creation.

Now, although Luke doesn't use the word providence, I think it's exactly what the believers are communicating in their prayer.

Almighty God is the one that they pray to, the creator of heaven and earth. And He has used men to communicate His holy word to His people.

[25 : 42] And He's also used men to come against Christ. according to His purposes which He predetermined. What the believers recognize is that God is at work and they trust in His plan.

The next thing we see in their prayer, they ask for confidence and boldness. In verse 29, it says, And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.

They note the threats that the priests and Sadducees have threatened them with and they ask God to give them confidence and boldness to continue to proclaim His name.

This is what they have just faithfully done in verse 20. They had just done this. They recognize their need for new mercies despite previous victory.

And sometimes I think this can be a stumbling block for us. Maybe a source of pride. We experience spiritual victory in some way and we lose sight that God is the one who produced it.

[27 : 11] or we start to believe that we can duplicate it ourselves. Even though Peter and John had just faithfully defended the work of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and boldly spoke in His name, we see them here along with the rest of the believers asking for boldness to proclaim His name.

They don't ask for escape or removal and depending on the circumstances I'm not sure that that's wrong.

In fact, Paul asks for the thorn in his flesh to be removed and Jesus asks for removal in the garden. But in this instance, Jesus had commissioned this group of believers to give testimony to Him to the ends of the earth.

So when the Sanhedrin charged them not to speak in Jesus' name, this order is in direct conflict with Jesus' order. Pastor David pointed us clearly to the fact that Peter and John cannot stop speaking and the reason they cannot stop speaking is because they're cherishing Christ appropriately.

What we see is the believers have a clear view of their circumstances and their dependence on God to work through them. They're asking God to help them to remain faithful to their mission and displaying true humility and dependence on Him.

[28 : 50] next we see that they declare faith that God will continue to work. They declare faith that God will continue to work.

Verse 30, while you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. The council forbid the name of Jesus.

Jesus. So the church asks God to keep displaying the power of the name of Jesus. They're praying that God would continue to work, continue to do the work you have purpose to do and help us to remain faithful to what you call us to do.

The challenge here is that we don't allow the obstacles in life to grow bigger than what they are in reality. This doesn't diminish the challenges that we face.

There are many challenges and struggles that we are facing every day. Many great challenges even people within this body are facing.

[30:07] But our God is so much greater than any challenge that we might face. God has given us his word to strengthen our confidence and illuminate our understanding.

He's given us his spirit to recognize how he is at work and to empower us to be faithful to him. I know I far too often spend too much time looking at my problems or looking at the circumstances that I'm facing.

I like to analyze and sometimes that can be a good thing. But when I get distracted by analyzing the problems in front of me and I delay or I fail to bring it to God, what happens is I end up focusing far too much on the problem itself.

And generally when I do that, the size of the problem gets out of proportion to reality. I lose sight of the bigger picture. And often when I do this, I'm trying to resolve the issue in my own strength and in my own wisdom.

What we see in chapter 4 is this group of believers immediately take this to God. not only that, scripture implores us in the book of James, specifically when we face trials, verse 2, James says, count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

[31:54] What a challenge that is. Count it joy. joy. And as I thought about joy, I couldn't help but also think about what Hebrews tells us about Jesus.

I'm sure it's familiar to all of you, Hebrews 12, 2, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.

As believers, when we face trials, it's our joy that is to be evident to others in those moments.

And we have that joy because our hope is in Christ. We know the victory is found in him. And so despite what we face here on earth, we have joy.

It's my prayer that God would produce this focus on all of us. When trials appear, that we would be joyful, that we would recognize that the trials verify and strengthen our faith, that they would enhance the unity we have in Christ as a body.

[33:24] And that we would be encouraged because it's through the trials that God draws us to himself and deepens our intimacy with him. Each trial is an opportunity to trust him more.

Which brings us to the last point this morning. God answers immediately and definitively. God answers immediately and definitively.

Verse 31. 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.

God responds by causing the place they were gathered to shake. They're all filled with the Holy Spirit and speak the word of God with boldness. The exact thing that they were praying for.

When it says that the place was shaken, it's the same word that's used to describe when the prison was shaken that Paul and Silas were imprisoned in. The earthquake that happened, that's the same word that's used here.

[34:44] This was a real shaking. It was unmistakable. God responds immediately. Note the unity of the people.

The entire group, not just Peter and John, are speaking boldly. There was no way to miss that God was at work.

The filling of the Holy Spirit they experienced, this was not a second Pentecost. It's a fresh filling.

The filling of the Holy Spirit God. The church is empowered for boldness and confident witness.

What an amazing God that we serve. What a gracious God he is. And as I was contemplating the main message in this passage, what we see is that God's given us a clear picture of a united people devoted to him.

This passage is a pristine example of a group of believers that cherish God rightly and how they pray. I'm not saying they're a perfect people, but we do see God working mightily through them to cherish him despite the circumstances that they face.

[36:12] and they pray with great faith. My favorite gospel is John. And as I thought about their prayer, I couldn't help but think of what Jesus tells us in verse 13 of chapter 14.

He says, whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

We can be confident that when we pray in accordance with his will, he's faithful to do it. What we've seen in Acts 4 is that despite the opposition, God builds his church.

And God is still building his church. May we be a body that prioritizes fellowship and prayer to the honor and praise of him.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are humbled to be able to approach you.

[37 : 35] We are humbled that you are at work upon us. We are humbled that we get to experience the power of the Holy Spirit working in us.

I pray for our church that you would move mightily amongst us. We recognize that you have done great things. Please continue to work in us and help us to see the opportunities that you put before us each day.

You are still at work. You are still building your church. church. It is our desire to be obedient to you and to represent you well.

I pray that you help us to recognize each opportunity that we have in front of us. It's in the great and powerful name of Jesus that I pray.

Amen. may may