

Acts 4:23-31 - Bold Praying

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Preacher: Guest: S. Estock

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

It's my privilege this morning to introduce a friend and mentor to you, Stephen Estock. After serving in the Air Force for a few years, which I know some of you appreciate in particular, after serving there, he felt a call to vocational ministry and has been a pastor and a leader in our denomination. He has served Southwood very well. Both of your current pastors interned for him. I think what he said to me last night was that the three best interns he ever had have come to Southwood.

So, yeah, Jake Patton interned for him and then Chad, and I think that was the way he put it. He loves Southwood that much. I hope this is recorded for all of his other interns to hear.

He's also preached here before. Stephen is currently serving as the director of the PCA's Committee for Discipleship Ministries, which basically means that he is the absolute best guy in the whole denomination on Christian education and teaching.

[1 : 26] So, I'm going to build him up really well for you. It does mean that he's a gifted teacher and a great leader who shares and connects others to great resources for that.

And so, he has led and served and pastored many people, myself and Chad included. We're really, really privileged to have him here with us this morning to open God's Word.

He's staying for lunch to teach us at the Telling God's Story lunch. He and I will be talking with you together. Please feel free to stay for that across the street at the lodge. We're delighted to have Stephen Estock.

Thank you. Thanks, man. Thank you. Now, I am disappointed in your introduction, though, Will. You didn't call me super cute. And I've got a tie and a suit on and everything.

But I do have a family that's super cute over there. It is a pleasure to be with you. A lot of times when I go around part of my position, I travel around the denomination. I tell people, well, I'm Stephen Estock.

[2 : 25] Well, who's he? I'm with CDM, coordinator for CDM. And then they say, what's that? I say, well, maybe you knew us by our old name, Christian Education and Publications. And still get the blank face.

So what I'd like to do is tell you a little bit about who we are, what we do. Now, many churches, and I'm sure you're the same, you have a session that governs the church. And then you have work that's done through different committees, right?

Right? You can nod. This is interactive time here. You have different committees. You have a missions committee. You have a worship committee. Different churches do that. Well, what we have at the General Assembly level is we have a session, presbytery, General Assembly.

I work for the General Assembly on one of the committees. Now, a lot of people have heard about Mission to the World, which is a committee of the General Assembly that helps local churches do international missions.

A number of people have heard of Mission to North America. That's a committee that helps the local church plant churches and do mercy ministry. And then many people have heard of Reform University Ministries or Reform University Fellowship.

[3 : 34] They're a committee that comes alongside the local church to do campus ministry. Who helps the local church do discipleship within its walls?

That's CDM. So we help local churches in the area of children's ministry, youth ministry, men's ministry, women's ministry, older adult ministry, and leadership training.

And so that's what we do. Now, we're not a large office. We have less than ten people in our office. But mainly what we try to do is go around to different churches and connect people to people and

people to resources.

We were here, I think it was March a year ago, we were here for a children's conference and had a number of people from Providence Presbytery come join us here. And we just began to share what's going on in children's ministry.

And that's much of what we will do. In fact, I'll be in Cincinnati, Ohio next week doing something along those lines. One of the things I also do is I go and meet with session members as we talk about churches that are going through transition.

[4 : 39] I'm sure you know a little bit about that. You're now in the process of finding a new pastor. And so one of the things I want to look at today, our text is Acts chapter 4. If you have your Bible, I invite you to turn in that to Acts chapter 4.

We'll be looking at 23 through 31. This idea of what are we called to do as God's people, especially as we go through transition. A number of years ago, I heard a podcast from a friend who is leading his church through transition.

In fact, this man was a fairly new pastor. And so he was having a gathering and one of the people got up and they were saying, Here's our new vision for our church and we want to be men and women of prayer.

And when I heard that, I thought, you know, that's an interesting statement. In some ways, it's almost like a throwaway statement in contemporary Christianity of, We want to be men and women of prayer.

Well, what does that say about them before? Were they not men and women of prayer before?

Well, that's probably not the case. They probably prayed before.

[5 : 47] Or consider the Embers to a Flame ministry, which is in our denomination and helps churches go through a church transition, a church recovery. One of their strategies is number five.

It's the ministry of prayer. And the idea is that prayer usually exists in a church, but many times it becomes anemic. And we need to realize that we can be perfunctory and rote when it comes to prayer.

And we need a vision. I think that vision comes as we look at Acts chapter 4. Remember, we're coming out of Easter.

And we're living in this reality. What does it mean to be those who are sons and daughters of the resurrection? Understand, this text in Acts chapter 4 probably occurred less than six months after the resurrection.

We don't know exactly when, but it was probably pretty soon where the events of crucifixion and the resurrection and Pentecost were still very fresh on the minds of people.

[6 : 56] And what we have is Peter and John go to the temple and they heal a lame man and they were arrested, they were tried, they were released. With this warning, don't talk about this Jesus anymore.

Don't talk about this resurrection. But the disciples who had been so bold in proclaiming the truth, we now see their boldness continues. But it's a boldness in prayer.

And their prayer is recorded. And as we read through this, these words challenge and encourage us. Follow along with me as I read Acts chapter 4, beginning in 23.

When they, of course speaking of Peter and John, were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and elders had said to them.

And when they heard it, they lifted up 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 peoples plot in vain?

[8 : 06] 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 there 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.

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.

Pray with me. O Lord, now we pray that you will open our eyes, that we may see the wonderful things you have for us in your word.

O Lord, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

For, O Lord, you are our strength and our redeemer.

[9 : 37] The grass withers and the flowers fade. But your word, O Lord, stands forever. Bless your word to our lives now, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. When God takes me home to heaven, I'm looking forward to seeing a man I knew in our church in Montgomery.

His name is Orville Bach. Orville was a tall man with huge hands and a deep voice. It was one of those voices where you, when you're trying to picture the voice of God on Mount Sinai, it's, you know, you got James Earl Jones and Orville Bach, in my mind.

That's just the man he was. And one thing about Orville is he was very active in prayer requests. We would have an evening worship service and we'd always get together and sing some hymns and then we'd have prayer requests.

And I could usually count on Orville to give some prayer requests. Well, a number of years ago, Montgomery was going through a long drought and Mr. Bach, in his deep voice, said, we need to pray for rain, pastor.

[10 : 51] And so that became part of the intercessory prayer for that evening. And then we went from prayer to the sermon. It was a sermon on Deuteronomy 12 and I was preaching that night.

And in Deuteronomy 12, God says to Israel, Israel, obey. You have seen the great works of the Lord, the sovereign Lord, the sovereign Lord who's conquered your enemies and given you a land of great blessing.

And in light of that, we're called to go out, even in a world that opposes us, knowing the greatness of the God we serve. Well, sermon was finished.

We had the closing prayer. And during the benediction, you could hear rain falling outside. Mr. Bach came up to me and said, that's a pretty good prayer, pastor.

You ought to pray more often. Well, I'll let you... That is a red letter date in my prayer life and in my ministry because here was this request and the answer came so quickly.

[12 : 00] And I remember my motions there. It was like, I didn't say this out loud, but I was feeling it. God does answer prayer. It's almost like this is the exception rather than the rule.

You ever do that? I think most Christians do. But you see, in the history of the church, especially the early church that we have here in Acts, we see a different era of bold prayer.

But one of the things we have to watch is we can fall into this idea that, oh man, we read these stories in Acts and wasn't it great? God was so powerful and so present there.

It was wonderful. And we can begin to think that that was the God of back then. He's not the God of right now. That's not the case.

The God that was present that's recorded here is the God that's here now. And God is present with all of His power. It's not like He had a lot of power then and only a little power now.

[13 : 07] But the idea is, just as He's powerful there and He used prayer there, He's powerful here and uses prayer here. But we fail to see it. And so what we need as we come to this text is that God gives us insight into His purpose for prayer and it challenges us.

It spurs us to pray more boldly as we face a world that does oppose us, as we face challenges, transition in our lives, in our businesses, in our churches.

God is near to thwart His opponents, to spread His Word and to accomplish His plan. Now the nearness of God, understand, is assumed throughout this text.

Earlier in chapter 4, verse 19, the message that the apostles had spoken to the leaders, the Jewish leaders said, our ministry is in the sight of God.

It's not that God is up there and He doesn't care. No, He's watching what we're doing. In verse 29, it even says that they're praying, Lord, look upon the threats that are given against us.

[14 : 12] The idea is that God is present and God is concerned. He really cares about what's happening. And then, of course, you have verse 31 where the place was shaken.

And, of course, that harkens back to Acts chapter 2 when the Holy Spirit came down on the day of Pentecost and the whole building was shaken in the upper room. And you have to understand that what was happening here in verse 31 is God was giving His people assurance.

Now, don't fall into the error of thinking, well, because that building was shaken, that means that God showed up. No, it's better to understand that in this case, God, who was always present, pulled aside the veil and made that presence known in a special way.

Now, of course, the question that comes out of that is, well, why doesn't He do that now? And understand that God could shake this building right now if He so chooses.

But He's also given us Acts chapter 4 where He assured His people that He was present, that He is Emmanuel. It's the same God.

[15:37] The same purposes. The same presence. Now, how does this help us? God is near. Why? Well, He's near to thwart His opponents and so we pray.

Look at verse 23. The prayer flows out of this arrest of Peter and John. And if you go back earlier in the chapter, it's very interesting.

It's almost like as if Luke is recording this. Who's who of all the powerful people that were existing in that time and they were all against Peter and John. And then you go to verse 25 and 26 and the prayer references Psalm 2.

Psalm 2. The opponents gathering together and setting themselves up against God. And then you go to verse 27 where there's a reference to Christ's arrest and His trial and His crucifixion.

And remember, these were probably events that were still fresh on the people's minds. And what the apostles are saying through their prayer is all of that, that people were gathering against them, people were gathering against Jesus, it's all a manifestation of Psalm 2.

[16:57] In verse 29, they reference these leaders told them to be quiet about Jesus. And so, here we have it. Luke is presenting to us in the face of unified, determined, powerful opposition.

What do God's people do? They pray. Verse 29 and 30, they appeal for justice. God, bring justice. They appeal for God to continue His work. And they realize that their prayers are part of the battle. Because the opposition is not against them, the opposition is against God.

But what do we do as we face a culture that opposes us? What do we do? We take it personally. Oh, it's all against us. And we cry, victim, victim.

And we separate God out of the situation. But we must see that all the opposition is against God. Now, sometimes, because of the obnoxious behavior of Christians, sometimes the opposition is against the obnoxious behavior.

[18:11] We need to pray. That's where we need to start. Not too long after I came into my current position of coordinator, because your work for the General Assembly, you know how sometimes pastors can get those letters from church members about how much you're doing wrong.

I get them from the whole denomination. And there was a man who wrote from Virginia. I can't remember the name of the man or his church.

He was a PCA member. This letter was 14 pages long. Full of fear and condemnation.

I read it and I could just hear his voice in my ears. He was talking about the culture of the United States and everything, everything in the letter dealt with U.S. politics.

And the message of the letter was just basically, wake up! And so what he was doing, he said, I'm going to write to the leader, one of the leaders of our denomination and say, wake up! Speak out!

[19:20] You know what was missing throughout all 14 pages? Never once was there a call to prayer. Never once was there any hint of bringing this before the Lord.

Instead, what it was is a call to militant action. One of my favorite hymns says, it's not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums, but it's deeds of love and mercy.

Finally, the heavenly kingdom comes. And that deeds of love and mercy begins with prayer. I ask you, what is your default position in the face of opposition?

It's true, God defeats His enemies through the prayers of His people. This text calls us to pray. Humble words of petition to God more than harsh words of rebuke. to our opponents. God is present.

[20:26] But more for just turning back the bad things, He also promotes the good things. God is near to spread His Word, and so we pray. Remember the cause of the arrest. Peter was preaching about Jesus.

And note the desired goal of the prayers. Right there in verse 29, they were to, Lord, do this so we will speak the Word of God with boldness. And so it was the Holy Spirit.

They were asking for Holy Spirit-inspired courage, Holy Spirit-inspired clarity, and the result of the prayers there in verse 31, they did continue to speak with boldness.

And the ministry that had begun at Pentecost was continued. Brothers and sisters, understand that that was a chapter in redemptive history.

But the redemptive story continues, and we are in a new chapter of redemptive history, but the story is the same.

[21 : 25] Salvation is through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we are to spread that Word. God spreading the message of salvation through Jesus Christ and through the grace of God.

Not by doing good works or doing good deeds. It's through the grace of God who changes our lives and enables us to live with redemptive purposes.

Matthew 28, we are to go and make disciples. What happens to us? We grow weary. We grow distracted. Sometimes we pray from ministries, but it's just so the ministry program will be effective. God will bring the people and God will bring the money rather than God spread your Word. Spread the message about Jesus. I work in education.

Church education. And we pray for sermons. We pray for Sunday school lessons. But do we expect change? It's easy to complain about the malaise that happens among Christians today.

[22 : 44] Do we eagerly pray, God, change hearts? Change lives? Brothers and sisters, we must pray for God to act and for us to spread the Word.

I was humbled a year or so ago. So, part of my position is to work with our women's ministry, the PCA Women's Ministry. It's led by a lady named Karen Hodge.

And we have regional advisors throughout the denomination who gather together on what we call the women's ministry team. And we were preparing for a conference that we have every year in Atlanta. And so, what was happening, I was, because I was one of the speakers, I was on this email chain of speakers, what are you talking about?

And they were going back and forth about here, this prayer request and this prayer request and they were praying for each other. And all of this, it's just email after email after email. I'm praying for you, I'm praying for this, I'm praying for that, please pray for this.

And, you know, I had this thought. They pray about everything. And I really, I mean, I seriously thought, isn't this a little over the top?

[24 : 05] Now, the theme of the conference that year was leading with truth. serving the church through the ministry of the word, building relationships with one another.

And when I reacquainted myself with the theme, and then I looked at that email chain, God used it to convict me.

I'm a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. I'm a minister. I'm a teacher. Yet, I am so prone to trust my skill at being able to convey the truth.

And I minimize prayer for God to spread the word. I appreciated so much even this morning. Will leaned over and said, can I pray for you?

It's so necessary because it's through prayer that God spreads the word. It's prayer more than skill that softens hard hearts and reigns in distracted minds.

[25 : 17] I've talked to people, well, I can't share the gospel because I just don't know all, I might not answer all the questions they have. No, you pray and share the gospel as best you know how because it's not your eloquence, it's not your skill, it is the Holy Spirit that changes hearts.

And so you pray. Because God causes His word to spread through prayer. He thwarts opponents, He spreads the word.

And that's all part of His third purpose. You might call it a greater purpose or an overarching purpose in that God is near to accomplish His plan. The theme of God's faithful execution of His covenant promises, it's throughout this whole text.

It's the backdrop of the prayer, in fact. Verse 24, it starts with covenant language where they pray as the sovereign Lord, creator, ruler, all of that is covenant language that the people of Israel know about.

And then verses 27 and 28, they're very open and honest. Even Christ's passion fulfilled God's plan. verse 29 and 30, the presupposition is that God's plan would continue.

[26 : 36] God is working out this huge story that salvation will be made through Jesus Christ and the brokenness of the fall will be undone. And God is doing that work.

And His people pray to that end. And here's the great mystery of the Christian life. The sovereign Lord accomplishes that plan through the prayers of His people.

I can't explain how it works. But God does it. Your prayers are necessary.

Verse 29 and 30, that prayer was important because that petition that they lifted thousands of years ago was necessary.

for God to work out His plan. And brothers and sisters, our prayers have the same effect because it's not based, well, I'm not an apostle, so God doesn't listen.

[27 : 35] No, He doesn't listen to them because they're apostles. Why does He listen to our prayers? Because we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And so our prayers, Revelation uses the image of our prayers are like bowls of incense going up to the Father.

And our prayers are imperfect. But what does Romans 8 say? It's the Spirit that takes our prayers. I love the image a pastor told me years ago.

It's like God takes this feeble prayer that I lift up, He wraps it in the righteousness of Christ and says, here Father, answer for my sake. prayer. And so we pray.

And so we pray. The problem is sometimes our practice of prayer doesn't reflect our doctrine of prayer.

We don't truly embrace our doctrine or we would pray. We lose sight of this fact that we're participating in this story of redemption. We are players.

[28 : 43] We're not spectators. Prayers offered in a fallen world join the stream of petitions offered by other saints, the saints before us, and even the prayers of Christ Himself.

God has not abandoned His fallen creation. He proved that by giving us Christ. And now He's near to accomplish that plan.

And so we pray. John Calvin said this, by means of our prayers, God does what He planned all along to do. And prayer reorients the believer to what God is doing.

over a year ago I had a friend who preached in his congregation. It was towards the end of the year and he was preaching to get ready for the new year.

And he preached on revival. He told the story of a South Carolina pastor named John Gerardot. in 1857 this man was a white pastor in a black church in Charleston, South Carolina.

[30 : 09] And they had reached a point in the life of the church where the congregation had sort of plateaued and there was this lethargy that was sort of happening. And so what they did, the officers got together with the pastor and said, Pastor, you just got to preach.

You got to preach and get us out of this. Preach. And Gerardot said this, I don't want to preach until God sends revival. And until that happens, we will pray.

And so they began a series of prayer meetings night after night. Now one evening, while he was leading in prayer, Gerardot said he felt a sensation.

It was like a bolt of electricity hit his head and went through his body. And he was speechless for a while. And he was able to talk again.

He says, the Holy Spirit has come. We will begin preaching tomorrow. He sang a hymn, gave the dismissal, he walked down, congregation stayed.

[31 : 19] nobody left their seats. So the people sat down, pastor got up and he prayed.

He preached. He proclaimed the gospel. And basically, his message was very, very simple. Embrace the gospel. Accept the gospel. Accept what it means to be saved by Jesus Christ, by his work alone.

And the reports are the sanctuary was filled with the spirit of humble repentance and joy. Some were confessing their sins. Others were just elated at the forgiveness they enjoyed in Jesus Christ.

And the messages, the meetings night after night for eight weeks, large numbers of whites and blacks were converted. Churches throughout the city were blessed. Christ, this was in 1857.

Four years later, Charleston would begin to experience the horrors of the Civil War. But in that season, God shook the hearts of his people.

[32 : 28] It all began with prayer. Brothers and sisters, bold prayer is our calling.

And I wish I prayed more than I do. But let's see what God does. Let's pray. It was true for the disciples in Jerusalem.

It's true for us today. God is powerfully present to thwart opponents, to spread his word, to accomplish his plan. And because he is working, we must pray.

Join me now. Almighty God, sovereign creator, ruler, redeemer, we praise you.

You are the God who made us. You are the God who redeems us. You loved us even in our sin.

And you lift us up and embrace us through Jesus Christ, cleansing us of our sin.

[33 : 33] And not only that, Lord, you fill us with your Spirit so that when we walk out of this sanctuary, we are not alone. The power of Emmanuel is with us.

Oh, Lord, soften our hearts. Move our hearts to prayer. Oh, Lord, bring your blessing on this congregation. Bring your blessing in our lives, in our ministries, in our relationships.

Bring healing. Bring change. Lord, as we go now to a time of the sacrament, it is another token, a sign and seal that you indeed are with us.

You cleanse us. You've redeemed us. Oh, Lord, bless us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

Thank you. Thank you.