

The Praying Church

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Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0:00] Good morning. It's good to see you all here. If you're wondering, Pastor Nick and his family are up at Shoreline Bible Church in New London, preaching.

! If you don't know about Shoreline, they're kind of a daughter church of ours in that a group of guys came down and were part of our church from New London and they kept sharing and gathering people so effectively that it seemed like God was wanting to plant a church up there.

So we helped them plant a church, which is great, and they're flourishing up there and Pastor Nick is preaching up there this weekend. So, I want to begin this morning by asking you a question. How do we respond when faced with opposition to the gospel of Jesus?

This has been a high-level discussion in American society for the last 10 years. We think of a cake decorator in Colorado who was sued for not making a wedding cake for a couple that did not match his Christian views of marriage.

We think of a football coach in Washington State who was suspended and terminated for his participation in on-field prayer after the games. I know of a pastor here in Connecticut who has been seeking a place for their congregation to meet permanently, who continues to face opposition from the town zoning board, seemingly without any real basis.

[1:32] These are the local things that we hear about in America. When we turn our eyes globally, we see that opposition is much more severe and sometimes much more consequential.

South Sudan is marred by violence against Christians. Pastors in Central Asia are arrested and beaten. Churches in China are raised.

Whether they're governmental or social opposition, there is a lot of opposition to the gospel of Jesus in the world.

Churches in the world. How do we respond to this? We often want to respond on a horizontal level. We want to appeal to human rights.

Or here in America, we want to appeal to American citizenry and look for legal and societal grounds to contest these actions. And as we see in the Bible, there is actually a place for this.

[2:31] We'll see as we go along in the book of Acts. In Acts 16, when Paul was arrested, he was in jail in Philippi. And he appealed to his Roman citizenry as a way of trying to call out the injustice of the way that he had been treated.

And we'll see also in Acts 22 in Jerusalem. Again, Paul being arrested in the temple for his preaching of Jesus for all people, including Gentiles.

The Jews were provoked and caused a stir, and he was arrested. And he called upon his Roman citizenship when he was about to be beaten. But interestingly, even there, his goal was not to be free, but his goal was to preach the gospel.

All that to say, there may be times when appropriate appeals to the laws of the land are good and right. And God may use those things to help and bring aid to his people.

But he may not. And our hope is not in winning a culture war or in securing governmental protection. Our hope in the face of opposition is much richer and deeper.

[3:44] It's in the person of God. And this is what we see in the early church. And this is what we see in our passage this morning. So, this is what we're going to turn to. We're in Acts 4.

That is in page, I think, it's page 858 or 869, depending on the printing of the Bible you have. Again, that's book of Acts chapter 4.

And if you remember, if you were here last week, as we continue to preach through the book of Acts and what God is doing in the world to establish the church so that Jesus Christ and the salvation he brings will be proclaimed to all peoples, we see this narrative story in chapter 4.

Remember in chapter 3, John and Peter went to the temple and healed a man? Well, in chapter 4, they get arrested for it. They get brought in on charges. And they're asked and confronted, by what name or by what authority can you do this?

And they say, we did this by the name of Jesus. And the authorities can't really punish them for healing a guy because that's a bad look. But they're not quite sure what to do because they're greatly annoyed.

[4:49] And so, in verse 18 of chapter 4, they said, so they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

And Peter responds and says, choose to yourself what's right here, but we're going to keep talking about Jesus. And then they go away. They warn them again and beat them and sent them away. Right? And so, when we come to our passage this morning, it's these two, John and Peter, returning to the gathered disciples in Jerusalem, the gathered church, and giving a report of what they've heard.

And we see how they responded to this situation. And so, we're going to see not only what they did then, but also what this has to teach us today. So, with that, let me pray for God's help as we look at this.

And then we'll look at God's Word together. Father, thank you, Lord, for your Word. Thank you that you have recorded your acts in establishing and building the church so that the name of Jesus may be proclaimed to the end of the earth.

Lord, we pray this morning that you would help us to see all that you have for us in this Word about what it means to be your people, and particularly how we are to respond, Lord, to hard things, to trials, to opposition.

[6:10] Lord, I pray for your help, that you would help me to speak clearly as I ought. And I pray for us this morning, Lord, that we would be submissive to your Word, that we would sit under it, knowing that it is a Word of life to us and a revelation of who you are.

Lord, that we would receive your Word this morning by your Spirit. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. How did the early church respond?

How are we to respond to opposition? They prayed. It's very simple. That's the theme of my sermon this morning. They prayed. And so we're going to look at the context of prayer, the focus of prayer, the request of prayer, and the result of prayer.

And so there's your outline, if you're wanting to follow along. The first thing, then, is the context of prayer in verses 23 through 24a. Oh, I haven't read this yet, have I?

Well, let's read God's Word together. Yeah, that's a great idea. Okay, let me read this, and then we'll look at it. All right, so verse 23 of chapter 4. When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

[7:26] And when they'd 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 do 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, 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.

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.

So we've seen verses 23 and 24, our first point, which is the context of prayer. The disciples return, they come to the gathered people, they're together and gathering, and they're hearing a report of the warning that they had received from the authorities, and in response to this, they turned to the Lord and they prayed.

[9:05] Now, it's important just to start by saying they didn't file a protest, they didn't whine and complain, they didn't blame God or cry out in despair, they didn't write online posts decrying the evil of those who opposed them, they turned to God in prayer.

Now, I'm going to spend a little bit of an excursus on this this morning. Is this how we would have responded? And I ask that question because my fear is that too much of the church is consumed with what I would call a culture war response to opposition to the gospel.

There has been a desire to, an increase in the desire to gain control of cultural influence, to find avenues of power, to shape and mold societal narratives, to turn the tide of secularism through political or social influence.

And listen, we live in a society that is broadly, increasingly moving away from a historic Judeo-Christian ethic that has shaped it. And we feel that loss and we feel the tensions.

And we want to see our society reestablish this Judeo-Christian foundation because we believe it's good, because we believe it would bless our country.

[10:30] And so, in response to this, we often make an appeal to human rights or rights as a human, as American citizens, looking for legal and social grounds to contest actions that would go contrary to this.

But, these actions, not only in what we do, but how we do them, it's so important to recognize how we do them.

If we are going to engage in social action to influence our society in various ways, I want to give five points of perspective briefly on how we might do it well before we return to what I see as actually the point of our passage this morning, which is, the greatest thing we can do is pray.

But, if we are going to do this, let's look at this. Here are five points, right? First, it is right and good for us to seek to inform and influence societies towards godliness because we believe it's good.

I've already said that. I won't belabor it. The second thing is, the means by which we do this must match the scriptural pattern in the New Testament. What we see in the New Testament is that we do so by appeals and persuasion, not by using powers or forces.

[11:51] It is not an attempt to gain control of the situation, but to believe that God will work as we proclaim and appeal to what is right and good in the world. Bold and humble obedience to God is something that we can continue to do regardless of how others act.

Speaking the truth in love is a means by which we are to live out whatever we do. Third point, the church has historically neither required nor expected governmental or societal support.

We could have a long conversation about this, but when you look at the church throughout the ages, it's just not necessary. We may not hold to the belief that the church must have societal support for us to be who we are.

In fact, the church typically flourishes in opposition as much as it does with government support. So that's my third point.

Fourth point, we should expect opposition and not think that there's something wrong, but just to know that this is part of what it means to be God's people in a fallen world. So remember what Jesus says in John 15, remember the word I said to you, a servant is not greater than his master.

[13:08] If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. And then my fifth point is this, when we think about it as a culture war, so often we make the other our enemy.

we make people our enemies. And yet, what did Jesus say even about our enemies? You have heard it said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his Son rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?

Do not even the tax collectors do the same. All right, so this is a framework in which Christians, if we are going to engage in some of these things, we need to think about how we do it so that we are sons of the Father, which means we are those who reflect our Heavenly Father as daughters and sons of Him.

We are meant to embody their character, which does mean standing for righteousness and goodness, but it also means graciousness and love, just like He sends rain on our whole world.

[14:27] How do we seek to be a blessing to our whole world and not simply a judge? Okay? All right, that was an excursus. We don't normally talk about this stuff at Trinity.

You guys have probably figured it out, but this, it felt like, was an opportunity to address that. What I want to go back to is say, the early church, what did they do? Instead of social action, they turned to God in prayer.

Why? What did they focus on in their prayer? This is my second point. Verses 24 through 28, look with me. When they started, how did they pray to God? Look at the first word, sovereign Lord. It's this great word. It's actually the word that has the root for despot today. That is, it's someone who has absolute, complete control and authority over everything. That's where they start. And when he, when they end their prayer, this part, this section, and particularly in verse 28, what did they reaffirm? That even the enemies of God are doing exactly what God intended to do to accomplish His good works of redemption in the world.

[15 : 39] That's what verse 28 says. And in the middle of it, He fills this out. So what the people of God do in the face of opposition is they look to God and remember in particular that He is a sovereign God.

He is the sovereign God who created everything, which means that there is no power in this creation greater than the one who created it. They turn to Psalm 42, the words that Jeff read earlier. A Psalm of the Old Testament people of God as they cried out in the face of opposition. And it's a great, you know, it's a great Psalm.

I wish we could spend all day just doing the Psalm. But to say that as they, in the picture of the raging opposition of the nations of the world against God and against those that God had anointed to represent Him in the world, in the Old Testament Israel, in the New Testament we see it's Jesus, right?

God will vindicate and elevate His holy ones and none of the powers that stand against them will in the end prevail. God laughs.

[16 : 59] Even the greatest enemies of God in the view, in view of a sovereign God is like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum.

And as a father, he may allow him to throw a tantrum for a few minutes to just let him get his arrow. But in the end, right, he has no power. That two-year-old has no power to contend or to change that father.

And what he will accomplish. And God looks at the powers of the world that oppose him and he laughs. He says, you have no power.

Verse 27, then the church applies the psalm from the Old Testament to the very present realities of the opposition against the anointed one that they knew, which is Jesus.

And think about this. Think about how, where they were situated. This small group of believers now recount that all of the societal powers around them were against them.

[18 : 14] Herod was the Jewish leadership, political and social and religious. Pilate was the governmental and military power. Both of them opposed, right?

But it wasn't just governmental and institutional, it was also societal. The people of God or the people of Israel in the first century opposed him as did the crowds of Gentiles.

So everybody stood against Jesus in his ministry and he was arrested and he was crucified. Jesus faced opposition on every side.

But that opposition did not defeat him. God's redemptive plan was far greater than that. Though Jesus was opposed, arrested, beaten, and crucified and for all appearances he had lost, it was in that very moment in fact when he won.

Because it was at that very moment that God's greatest plan was accomplished. It was at that very moment when our redemption was secured. Jesus' voluntary death for us defeated the greatest enemy that we face which is not governmental opposition, which is not persecution and trials, but sin and the result of sin, death itself, Jesus defeated by going to the cross for us.

[19 : 53] And even those who opposed Jesus were instruments in God's hand to accomplish this final great work of redemption. This was the centerpiece of all of history for God.

And this then became the centerpiece of the church. This is what is most important. This is what is most valuable. That Jesus Christ is our redeemer and able to redeem us from sin and death.

And so, verse 28, these opponents acted to do whatever God's hand and God's plan had predestined to take place.

this is a sovereign God to whom the church turned to. His sovereign power is what we most need. And friends, I wonder, I wonder if your prayer life has become stale because you've been looking for God to fix things on a horizontal level rather than trying to turn to God as a sovereign power and submitting yourself and your requests to Him.

[21:04] Opposition is obviously one great trial that we may face in this life. You may be facing opposition in your workplace or in your family, in your classrooms, in dormitories.

You may be facing those who think that your faith is foolish, that your life is wasted in following Jesus. You may face those who are even more angrily opposed to it.

This is real. Do you pray to God, the sovereign God? But it's not just in opposition. It's also in the greater trials of life where the opposition of just living in a fallen world and what that means.

And so we may have broken relationships that we can't fix. We may be facing needs that we can't provide for ourselves. We may be facing trials that we cannot escape from.

and God wants us to turn to Him as a sovereign God who has redeemed us in Christ and find comfort and hope and help.

[22:11] And certainly there are times when God miraculously intervenes and aids and helps us in our horizontal situations. There are times when He brings relief.

But there are other times when He says, I will walk with you through the fire and you will not be burned. Right? You will still have to walk through the fire.

I'm not going to make the fire go away. But as you walk through it, I will walk with you through it. So His sovereign answer doesn't always fix all of our problems in this life.

But what it does do is have this great plan of drawing us into His redemptive purposes both for us and for this world that we live in.

And He calls us to be a people who pray because there is no opposition, no enemy, and no trial too great for Him. And all we have to do to remember that is to look at the cross.

[23:14] So because of that, friends, let us turn to a sovereign God in prayer. So that's the second point. The context is the opposition.

The focus of the prayer is God's sovereignty. Verse 29 and 30, look at what they ask for when they ask for help. When they actually turn from praising God and recognizing Him, this is a great pattern of prayer, by the way, start with who God is and then begin to maybe ask for, make petitions to Him, requests to Him.

But what do they ask for? Right? Now, if we were in this, what might we pray for? We might pray that the laws would be changed and enforced. We might pray for a supernatural intervention to protect us from arrest or prison.

We might pray that the person who opposed us would be somehow removed. Right? We might pray for regime change if we're in a really terrible situation.

Right? And the thing is, we can pray for all these things. Freely, under a sovereign God, we can pray for all of these things. And I want you to hear me say, it's not bad to pray for these things. But here, what is actually the thing that they pray for?

[24:29] Look with me in verse 28 or 29. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with boldness.

what they prayed for was that the gospel would continue to go forward and that they would be empowered by God to continue to be a part of this redemptive work in the world.

In the face of opposition where it'd be so easy for fear to grip them and for them to want to pull back into a self-protective, self-preserving mode.

Instead, they prayed, God, do what you need to do in us so that we can continue to be bold and courageous and fearless because Jesus and His redemption is so great and so wonderful that I never want to stop talking about it.

They recognized how easy it would be for them to be afraid. Think about this. They had just been pulled in by the authorities in Jerusalem and said, you can't do this anymore.

[25:48] None. Stop. And they say, God, pray that we would have the boldness to be more obedient to you than fearful of them.

Pray that we would be so gospel-filled people that we couldn't stop talking about Him no matter what the consequences would be. they didn't ask for deliverance.

They asked for redemption, that the redemption they had experienced would go so deep in their hearts that they would be quick to share, and redemption for those who would hear because they wouldn't be silent, but because they would continue to share with boldness.

brothers and sisters, I wonder, how much do we spend time praying to God to change our circumstances so that they're easier, or to take away the things that are fearful or scary or out of our control, rather than praying that God would change us to meet these things with His heart for the

redemption of both ourselves and the world?

Do we ask for boldness to share? Do we ask for help to be more faithful, more godly, more changed by His Spirit? Do we ask for God to be in control, or do we ask Him to give us more control over our circumstances?

[27 : 23] So, the request is shocking and striking, isn't it? What they ask for, it's a wonderful thing, and they ask not only that, but they say, and God, will you continue to do the work that you have already set out to do, right?

So, do healing and signs and wonders. Why? Because they authenticate the preaching of the gospel and the healing of the resurrected Christ, most importantly by our spiritual redemption and healing of our souls.

God, would You do that? Would You do the work that would authenticate this message that we are asking for the boldness? Would You do whatever it takes to open the eyes of those who don't yet see the glory of God in the face of Christ?

Would You do this? God, would You do that? You know, it occurs to me that if this is a very unfamiliar way for you to pray, I want to recommend a book.

It's a book called The Valley of Vision. It's written by old dead guys. They're pretty much all old white guys too. Sorry. It's just, they're Puritans. I'm sorry, they came from Europe. That's where, but they were godly men who sought the Lord and The Valley of Vision is a book of prayers prayers.

[28 : 33] And it's a wonderful way, if you're not sure how to turn your prayer life in this direction, let them guide you. Get this book and pray through it. Pray through one a day.

And I know that sometimes feels weird because we want our prayers to be spontaneous and come from our heart, but let this be a chance for others who have walked before you in the faith to teach you how to pray.

Just an opportunity or an exhortation along that line. So, finally, we've talked about the context of prayer being the opposition, the focus of prayer being the sovereignty of God, the request of prayer being give us boldness to continue to preach the gospel.

Verse 31 then is the result of prayer. God responds to their prayer, right? 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.

Well, friends, this could be a whole other sermon. It won't be. But just briefly, I want to say what a wonderful thing. First, God responded to their prayer. How? By reminding them of His presence.

[29 : 45] When the place was shaken, this is an Old Testament picture that they would have understood, right? So, when Moses takes people to the feet of Mount Sinai, having delivered them from Egypt, and how He's about to give them the law to create a covenant with this people saying, I will be your God and you will be my people.

When they show up at the foot of Mount Sinai, what does God do? He shows up and there's an earthquake. The ground trembles. Why? Because this is a sign of God's presence with His people. If we look ahead in Isaiah 6 when the prophet has a vision of the throne room of God that He's taken into, right? Again, the temple is shaking.

Why? Because it is God Himself, His presence that is being pointed to. So, the New Testament, so the early church would have known these Old Testament themes and would have said, oh, the ground is shaking.

God must be here, right? We'll see it again. God does this in chapter 16 to let Paul out of prison, saying, yeah, I'm with you. I'm going to send an earthquake. Then all the prisons will get open.

[30 : 56] So, it happens over and over again. This theme, God is reminding them, I am with you. And that presence is reinforced by this phrase, being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now, if you haven't gone to Sunday school, and you have adult education, and you haven't gotten all this in detail, let me just remind you, right? What happened in Pentecost in chapter 2 was a unique moment in redemptive history, where the Holy Spirit was poured out on the gathered church in a unique one-time way to launch the early church and this era of the kingdom of God.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on people, the disciples, and the Holy Spirit dwelled in them at that time in a particular way. This is not a repeat of Pentecost, but an affirmation of Pentecost.

As God fills us with His Holy Spirit, He is reminding us that for all who have put their faith in Christ, He has already given us His Holy Spirit in our hearts, making us new as a sign and a seal of our redemption until we go to glory and be with Jesus.

And so this filling of the Holy Spirit is a reaffirmation that not only is God with them, but God has put Himself in us in the form of the Holy Spirit to empower us to live the lives of boldness that they had just prayed for.

[32 : 26] And we know God answered that prayer. Why? Because it's what we see at the end. And they spoke the Word of God boldly. God empowered them to do exactly what they had asked for, that they would proclaim Jesus more and more.

Oh, friends, as we think about our culture and navigating our world today, there are good places for us to seek to do good to our city, to think about how we might influence and speak words that would persuade so that our society would be a more righteous society.

But let our hearts be captured by the redemption that's in Christ Jesus. let our hearts be captured by the glory of the gospel of grace and let our mouths be filled more with that than with anything else, that we would speak to others about salvation for all who believe in Christ Jesus.

This would be the thing that I would pray. And as we broadly think about our prayer lives, may we ask that God will work that more in us so that it may then flow more out of us.

I mentioned the Valley of Vision earlier. I'm going to close my sermon by reading a prayer or by praying with this old saint and I'm going to ask you to pray with me as we pray together.

[33 : 52] For those of you who know, the Puritans wrote in older English with these and nows. I have updated this one so don't be surprised if you know this prayer and I've edited it for 21st century English.

So, but this is a great chance for us to pray together. So please bow your heads and join me as we pray this prayer. Oh God, you are very great.

My lot is to approach you with godly fear and humble confidence for your condescension equals your grandeur and your goodness is your glory.

I am unworthy but you welcome. Guilty but you are merciful. Poor but your riches are unsearchable. You have shown boundless compassion toward me by not sparing your son and by giving me freely all things in him.

This is the foundation of my hope, the refuge of my safety, the new and living way to you, the means of that conviction of sin, brokenness of heart, and self despair which will endear me to the gospel.

[35 : 07] Happy are they who are Christ's in him at peace with you, justified from all things, delivered from coming wrath, made heirs of future glory.

Give me such deadness to the world, such love to the Savior, such attachment to his house, such devotedness to his service, as proves me a subject of his salvation.

May every part of my character and conduct make a serious and amiable impression on others and impel them to ask the way to the master.

Let no incident of life, pleasing or painful, injure the prosperity of my soul, but rather increase it. send me your help, for your appointments are not meant to make me independent of you, and the best means will be vain without super added blessings from you.

In Jesus' name I pray, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.