

# ***Petition!***

Acts 4:23-31

March 15, 2015

**S.T.L.**            Sermon begins here today....

Video - "Suffering Churches"

Video - Soul Seekers: "It's All God"

**INTRO:**            Video - "Piper on Biblical Suffering"

**CONTEXT:**            Acts 3:1 - 4:31 = 1 extended account...

Miraculous healing of the lame beggar...

Peter & John are conduits of miraculous grace...

Peter preaches confrontationally (repent!)

Persecution begins... the Christians are "taken"

Prosecution beings... the Christians are "tried"

Today... we pick up in Acts 4:23 & go thru v.31...

Let's see the "Way of God" in response to  
personal persecution & prosecution...

**BIG IDEA:**

*Obedient Christians suffer...  
**AND**  
prayerfully, proactively persevere!*

**PREVIEW:** (vv.24-30 = longest prayer in Acts)

- A. Released*
- B. Reported*
- C. Requested*
- D. Realized*
- E. Results!*

<sup>23</sup> *When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.*

**RELEASED...**

- **Acts 4:1-4 = Persecution** (context)
  - *“They were greatly disturbed”* (in response to *teaching & proclaiming* Christ crucified & Christ risen)
  - *“...they laid hands on them...”*
  - *“...they put them in jail...”*
  - 2,000 men were added to their number

VIDEO: “Suffering per Piper”

## REPORTED...

- **Acts 4:5-22 = Prosecution** (controversy)
  - v.7: *“By what power or in what name have you done this?”*
  - v.18: *“they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus”*
  - v.21: *“...they threatened them further...”*

QUOTE:

**They reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them** and no doubt received comfort and encouragement from the others. A primary benefit of persecution is that it results in greater solidarity. Persecuted believers naturally draw together for mutual support... Perhaps one reason for the disunity in today's church is the lack of external pressure. And the false unity being attempted through compromise and indifference toward true doctrine only compounds the problem by moving the church ever further from the true-unity that comes out of confrontation by the truth. If we confronted the world system more aggressively, the resulting opposition (and persecution) would drive us closer together and enrich our mutual dependence. That real-unity marked the early believers.

- MacArthur

v.24a: (Believers respond with unified PRAISE glorifying God)

***<sup>24</sup> And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM,***

➤ vv.24-30 = Acts longest Prayer (and praise)!

## REQUEST...

This is one of the truly great prayers recorded in the Bible, and it is a good example for us to follow.

It was a prayer that was born out of witness and service for the Lord.

If more of God's people were witnessing for Christ in daily life, there would be more urgency and blessing when the church meets for prayer.

**It was a united prayer** meeting as they "lifted up their voice to God with one accord" ([Acts 4:24](#); see [1:14](#)). The people were of one heart and mind, and God was pleased to answer their requests. Division in the church always hinders prayer and robs the church of spiritual power.

**Their praying was based solidly on the Word of God**, in this case, [Psalm 2](#). The Word of God and prayer must always go together ([John 15:7](#)).

## REALIZE...

### QUOTE:

*True prayer is not telling God what to do, but asking God to do His will in us and through us ([1 John 5:14-15](#)). It means getting God's will done on earth, not man's will done in heaven.*

- Bible Exposition Commentary

v.24b-26: (O.T. description of God's glory & Spirit's speaking...)

***and said (prayed), "O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM,***

***<sup>25</sup> who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, 'WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS?***

***<sup>26</sup> 'THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.'***

MOST OF THIS prayer is a reflection on the sovereignty of God.

Even the way God is addressed, "Sovereign Lord," is significant.

v.27: (Peter describes how EVERYONE was against Jesus...)

*<sup>27</sup> "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,*

## QUOTE:

The early church had no debates about Calvinism and Arminianism. There wasn't an Arminian to be found in the early church. Every Christian believed in the sovereignty of God, and they believed in it absolutely.

- St. Andrew's Expository Commentary

v.28: (Declaration of Doctrine of Pre-destination...)

*<sup>28</sup> to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.*

## QUOTE:

*The early church strongly believed in God's sovereignty and His perfect plan for His people. But note that they did not permit their faith in divine sovereignty to destroy human responsibility... It is when God's people get out of balance and overemphasize either sovereignty or responsibility that the church loses power.*

- W. Wiersbe

Augustine:

*"Pray as though everything depends on God, and work as though everything depended on you."*

## Remember Romans 8:28!

v.29: (Petitioning the Lord to empower His people... to suffer)

<sup>29</sup> *"And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence,*

## QUOTE:

**The glory of God, not the needs of men, is the highest purpose of answered prayer.**

- W. Wiersbe

When we **gaze** at our sovereign God, we need only to *glance* at our problems.

This prayer is for the ability to be obedient to Christ's command to them to preach the gospel.

### **(NOTE: Power & Dependence on the Spirit!)**

The character of the first-century Christian church was marked repeatedly with unparalleled boldness. Yet, just a matter of weeks before this moment, when the lanterns were appearing in the garden of Gethsemane as the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, His disciples fled in panic.

- St. Andrew's Expository Commentary

**VIDEO: "Stories of Christian Persecution"**

v.30: (Prayer: Lord we'll suffer while you shine...)

<sup>30</sup> ***while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus."***

It is significant that the only two requests in this prayer have to do with evangelism, which has just been outlawed!

v.31: ( Results... 3X:)

<sup>31</sup> ***And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.***

- |    |              |                                  |
|----|--------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. | Place        | shook...                         |
| 2. | People       | filled... (3 <sup>rd</sup> time) |
| 3. | Proclamation | empowered!                       |

- a. God shows up
- b. God fills up
- c. God NEVER shuts up!

This was not a "second Pentecost" because there cannot be another Pentecost any more than there can be another Calvary. It was a new filling of the Spirit to equip the believers to serve the Lord and minister to the people.

- W. Wiersbe

Like uses the imperfect tense for "spoke." In other words, as Bruce suggests, they "continued to declare the word of God with freedom of speech."

## QUOTE:

***Resurrection Courage... When the book of Revelation speaks of the final judgment of God, it mentions those whom God will send into the lake of fire — murderers, adulterers, and cowards. If anything marks the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is cowardliness. If anything describes the difference between us and the first-century church, it is our lack of boldness. — R.C. Sproul***

VIDEO: Chan - "Suffering Obedience"

Remember where we started...

*Obedient Christians suffer...*

**AND**

*prayerfully, proactively persevere!*

So..... if you don't have any  
persecution/suffering (for  
Christ) in your life....

**EITHER....**

You're not "obedient" .....

**OR....**

You're not a Christian.

A couple Application QUESTIONS:

**Question #1:**

Who might your perseverance in persecution serve to inspire?

“Christ-like courage encourages Christ-like courage!.” – JDP

**Question #2:**

Who might your cowardice rationalization have served to justify their own self-serving sin?

“Rationalized cowardice is Christ-denying & damning.”- JDP

“Rationalization & cowardice are Siamese-sins of the heart... one defies while the other defiles that which true-love would define & defend.” - JDP

“Take note & beware... cowards tend to be crafty & cunning in crowds. Master manipulators, they deceive & distort in defense of their devilish & diminished lives.” - JDP

“Cowards cower in clumps of cowards... like the old adage: birds of a feather flock together. Have you noticed, people tend to congregate with those similar to them in regards to: Courage, Character, Christ-likeness (or, in each case, the lack there-of)... The beautiful irony within Christianity is this, the more Christ-like one is, while

flocking together with other Christ-like sheep, they intentionally seek to love, find, & grow lost, Christ-less lives.” -JDP

Link David’s giant-killing role to future giant-killing

Link life & message of Christ to persecution

Link “blessed are the persecuted”

Link “blessed with the privilege to suffer in His name”

Link the life, ministry, death of Paul to this point

Link the life, ministry, death of the other Apostles...

Link the life, ministry, death of the martyrs past/present

## **CLOSE:**

## **QUOTE:**

Boldness in prayer is the result of faithfulness in life and service. The sovereignty of God is not an abstract doctrine that we accept and defend. It is a living truth that we act on and depend on for every need. When you are loyal to the Lord and put Him first ([Acts 4:19](#)), then you can trust Him to be faithful to you and see you through.

*"Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God.*

- Bible Exposition Commentary

## **Let's Pray!**

## **Research:**

### **Acts 4:23-31**

<sup>23</sup> *When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.*

<sup>24</sup> *And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM,*

<sup>25</sup> *who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, 'WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS?*

<sup>26</sup> *'THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.'*

<sup>27</sup> *"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,*

<sup>28</sup> *to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.*

<sup>29</sup> *"And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence,*

<sup>30</sup> *while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus."*

<sup>31</sup> *And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.*

v.23: (Share what God, the godly, & the godless are doing)

- See **the pattern**:
  - Released...
  - Returned...
  - Reported...
    - Inform
    - Inspire
- Key to this verse and those that follow... We MUST answer the question: **“What did they say to them?”**
- Answer:
  - **Acts 4:1-4 = Persecution / Taken** (context)
    - *“They were greatly disturbed”* (in response to *teaching & proclaiming Christ crucified & Christ risen*)
    - *“...they laid hands on them...”*
    - *“...they put them in jail...”*
    - NOTE: Yet... ~ 2,000 men were added to their number
  - **Acts 4:5-22 = Prosecution/Trial** (controversy)
    - v.7: *“By what power or in what name have you done this?”*
    - v.13: (more context)... *“they were amazed & recognized that they had been with Jesus”*

- v.14: (but seeing the healed man standing there)... *"they had nothing to say in reply."*
- v.15: *"they ordered them to leave the Council"* (so they could discuss what to do with them)
- v.16: *"what shall we do with these men"*
- v.16: *"for the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem..."*
- v.16: *"and we cannot deny it."*
- v.17: *"But so that it will not spread any further among the people..."* (note their devilish, anti-Great Commission goal)
- v.17: *"...let us warn/threaten them to speak no longer to any man in this Name"*
- v.18: *"they summoned them"* (back)
- v.18: *"they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus"*
- v.21: *"...they threatened them further..."*
- v.21: *"...they let them go – finding no basis on which to punish them..."*

- **Acts 4:23-31 = Prayerful Proclamation**

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QUOTE:

They **reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them** and no doubt received comfort and encouragement from the others. A primary benefit of persecution is that it results in greater solidarity. Persecuted believers naturally draw together for mutual support. [Acts 4:32-35](#) describes the unity that resulted from this initial outbreak of opposition. Perhaps one reason for the disunity in today's church is the lack of external pressure. And the false unity being attempted through compromise and indifference toward true doctrine only compounds the problem by moving the church ever further from the true unity that comes out of confrontation by the truth. If we confronted the world system more aggressively, the resulting opposition would drive us closer together and enrich our mutual dependence. That real unity marked the early believers.

- MacArthur New Testament Commentary

v.24a: (Believers respond with unified PRAISE glorifying God)

- vv.24-30 = Praise & Prayer!
- Unpack the particulars...

The greatest concentration of power in Jerusalem that day was in the prayer meeting that followed the trial. This is one of the truly great prayers recorded in the Bible, and it is a good example for us to follow.

To begin with, it was a prayer that was born out of witness and service for the Lord. Peter and John had just come in "from the trenches," and the church met to pray in order to defeat the enemy. Too often today, believers gather for prayer as though attending a concert or a party. There is little sense of urgency and danger because most of us are comfortable in our Christian walk. If more of God's people were witnessing for Christ in daily life, there would be more urgency and blessing when the church meets for prayer.

It was a united prayer meeting as they "lifted up their voice to God with one accord" ([Acts 4:24](#); see [1:14](#)). The people were of one heart and mind, and God was pleased to answer their requests. Division in the church always hinders prayer and robs the church of spiritual power.

Their praying was based solidly on the Word of God, in this case, [Psalm 2](#). The Word of God and prayer must always go together ([John 15:7](#)). In His Word, God speaks to us and tells us what He wants to do. In prayer, we speak to Him and make ourselves available to accomplish His will. True prayer is not telling God what to do, but asking God to do His will in us and through us ([1 John 5:14-15](#)). It means getting God's will done on earth, not man's will done in heaven.

They did not pray to have their circumstances changed or their enemies put out of office. Rather, they asked God to empower them to make the best use of their circumstances and to accomplish what He had already determined ([Acts 4:28](#)). This was not "fatalism" but faith in the Lord of history who has a perfect plan and is always victorious. They asked for divine enablement, not escape; and God gave them the power that they needed.

"Do not pray for easy lives," wrote Phillips Brooks. "Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for

powers equal to your tasks." That is the way the early Christians prayed, and that is the way God's people should pray today.

They addressed God as "Sovereign Lord," the God who is in control of all things. The Greek word gives us our English word *despot*, a ruler who exercises absolute power, either benevolently or abusively. Simeon used this same title when he prayed in the temple ([Luke 2:29](#)). It is good to know the Sovereign Lord when you are experiencing persecution.

They also approached Him as the Creator, for, after all, if your Father is "Lord of heaven and earth," what have you to fear? (see [Matt. 11:25-30](#)) Nehemiah approached God on this same basis ([Neh. 9:6](#)), and so did the psalmist (see [Ps. 145](#)) and the Prophet Isaiah ([Isa. 42](#)). Years later, when he wrote his first epistle, Peter encouraged suffering saints to yield themselves to the faithful Creator ([1 Peter 4:19](#)).

[Psalm 2](#) describes the revolt of the nations against the Lord and His Christ. The psalm originally grew out of the crowning of a new king in Israel, perhaps David; but its ultimate message points to the King of kings, Jesus Christ. Whenever a new king was enthroned, the vassal rulers around were required to come and submit to him; but some of them refused to do this. God only laughed at their revolt, for He knew that they could never stand up against His King.

The early believers applied the message of this psalm to their own situation and identified their adversaries as Herod, Pilate, the Romans, and the Jews. These enemies had "ganged up" against Jesus Christ and even crucified Him, yet God raised Him from the dead and enthroned Him in heaven. All of this was a part of God's perfect plan (see [Acts 2:23](#); [3:18](#)), so there was no need to fear.

The early church strongly believed in God's sovereignty and His perfect plan for His people. But note that they did not permit their faith in divine sovereignty to destroy human responsibility, for they were faithful to witness and pray. It is when God's people get out of balance and overemphasize either sovereignty or responsibility that the church loses

power. Again, we are reminded of Augustine's wise words, "Pray as though everything depends on God, and work as though everything depended on you." Faith in a sovereign Lord is a tremendous encouragement for God's people to keep serving the Lord when the going is difficult.

They did not ask for protection; they asked for power. They did not ask for fire from heaven to destroy the enemy (see [Luke 9:51-56](#)), but for power from heaven to preach the Word and heal the sick (see [Matt. 5:10-12, 43-48](#)). Their great desire was for boldness in the face of opposition (see [Acts 4:17](#)). The emphasis is on the hand of God at work in the life of the church ([Acts 4:28, 30](#)), not the hand of man at work for God. Believing prayer releases God's power and enables God's hand to move ([Isa. 50:2; 64:1-8](#)).

Finally, note that they wanted to glorify God's Child (Servant) Jesus Christ ([Acts 4:27, 30](#)). It was His name that gave them power to minister the Word and to perform miracles, and His name alone deserved the glory. The glory of God, not the needs of men, is the highest purpose of answered prayer.

God's answer was to shake the place where they were meeting and to fill the people once again with the Spirit of God ([Acts 4:31](#)). This gave them the boldness that they needed to continue to serve God in spite of official opposition. This was not a "second Pentecost" because there cannot be another Pentecost any more than there can be another Calvary. It was a new filling of the Spirit to equip the believers to serve the Lord and minister to the people.

We will consider [Acts 4:32-37](#) in our next study, but it is worth noting that the new fullness of the Spirit also created a deeper unity among the people ([Acts 4:34](#)) and a greater desire to sacrifice and share with one another. They enjoyed "great power" and "great grace," which ought to be the marks of a "great" church. This led to a great ingathering of souls for the Lord.

"Lord, Thou art God!" What a declaration of faith and what a practical application of good theology! However, if their lives had not been submitted to His control, they could not have prayed that way. Boldness in prayer is the result of faithfulness in life and service. The sovereignty of God is not an abstract doctrine that we accept and defend. It is a living truth that we act on and depend on for every need. When you are loyal to the Lord and put Him first ([Acts 4:19](#)), then you can trust Him to be faithful to you and see you through.

The name of Jesus Christ has not lost its power, but many of God's people have lost their power because they have stopped praying to the sovereign God. "Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God." I don't know who first said that, but the statement is absolutely true. Dr. R.A. Torrey, the noted evangelist and educator, said, "Pray for great things, expect great things, work for great things, but above all—pray."

The early church prayed, and God answered in mighty power.

- Bible Exposition Commentary

The word translated "together" is one of Luke's favorite words, *homothymadon*. We noted earlier the question whether this word should take the strong meaning "with one accord," which is its etymological meaning, or a milder form "together," which is how NIV translates it. Whatever the meaning, the word indicates a unity among the Christians as they prayed.

**Our passage gives us the longest prayer recorded in Acts. Presumably Luke intends this to be an example of prayer, especially of prayer in a time of crisis.** The prayer ends with the seal of God's approval ([v. 31](#)). The features we see in this prayer should therefore be relevant to us today as we too face trials. Several key points emerge from this passage regarding praying in times of crisis:

## APPLICATION

**Strength to face suffering.** Three keys gave strength to the disciples in this crisis.

(1) The first is united fellowship. The disciples were in one accord as they prayed ([vv. 23-24a](#)). The fellowship of the believers is a key theme in Acts, and we need not be surprised that this comes to the fore in a time of crisis. As Daniel shared and prayed with his friends when he heard of King Nebuchadnezzar's intent to kill all his wise men ([Dan. 2:17](#)), Peter and John shared and prayed with their own people when their supreme task was made illegal. Later, when Peter was in prison at night, "the church was earnestly praying to God for him" ([Acts 12:5](#)).

We noted earlier that the individualism of contemporary society has caused us to lower our standards of fellowship. One of the saddest results of this is that it leaves us ill-equipped for crises. The apostles shared what happened and prayed together. **Three things can strengthen us today** as well: **We meet with our colleagues**— "our own people" — who know us and are committed to us, we **share our situation** with them, and we **pray together**.

(2) The next major key giving strength to the disciples is the sovereignty of God, which was the primary focus of the prayer ([vv. 24b-28](#)). Because God is sovereign over the events of history, we have nothing ultimately to fear if we are obedient. That truth should give us hope and courage amidst crises.

(3) The final key comes from the fact that this prayer is saturated in Scripture ([vv. 24b-27](#)), as were the spontaneous prayers of Jonah ([Jonah 2:2-9](#)), Mary ([Luke 1:46-55](#)), and Zechariah ([1:68-79](#)). Scriptures hidden in the heart can minister to us in our times of need. In a crisis, we often do not have time to refer to the Scriptures to see how they can address our situation. The words of the Bible need to be stored in our hearts so that we can draw on them in a crisis.

**The two requests.** Following their gaze at God, the problems facing these believers received only a glance, while their major request had to do with obedience ([v. 29](#)). Today too obedience to God should be our primary concern when we face crises.

But what do we do with the second request of these believers—for signs and wonders to accompany their ministry ([v. 30](#))?

**God assures his troubled servants.** What should we make of the shaking of the place after the prayer ([v. 31](#))? This is an event that is not repeated in Acts (though what happened on the day of Pentecost had some similarities). It was a sign to the disciples of the presence of God (cf. also [Ex. 19:18](#); [Isa.](#)

[6:4](#)). But we should also remember that on one occasion God did not reveal himself to a troubled servant of his through a wind, a fire, or an earthquake, but through "a gentle whisper" ([1 Kings 19:11-13](#)). God can use various means to speak to our troubled souls in order to indicate that he is with us.

God does not have to act in this way. But he knows how much strain we can take, and at crucial times he comes to us with a revelation of himself that calms our troubled minds. He did this through a vision to Paul when he faced much opposition in Corinth, which reassured him and urged him to keep on ministering there ([18:9-10](#)). This must have been a great encouragement to the apostle, for he stayed there "for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God" ([v. 11](#)). After Paul's arrest and trial on his last visit to Jerusalem, he had a vision of the Lord that told him that he would testify in Rome ([23:11](#)). At a crucial time during the disastrous voyage by ship to Rome, an angel stood beside him at night and encouraged him ([27:24](#)). We can certainly glean an abiding principle from these instances that God often assures his servants in times of crisis.

- NIV Application Commentary

Peter and John returned not in a state of fear and dejection but of exhilaration. They had preached to the Sanhedrin and had been granted the privilege of suffering for their Lord (cf. [Acts 5:41](#)). When the rest **heard** their report, **they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is Thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them."** *Despotēs* (**Lord**) is an uncommon title for God in the New Testament, appearing only five other times ([Luke 2:29](#); [2 Tim.](#)

[2:21](#); [2 Peter 2:1](#); [Jude 4](#); [Rev. 6:10](#)). It is the word from which our English word "despot" derives, and denotes an absolute master. Faced with opposition, they took comfort in God's sovereignty. All their suffering was in His will. Being the Creator of everything, He is in complete control of all events. Confidence in the absolute rulership and might of God was enough to sustain them.

They derived further comfort from the knowledge that such opposition had been foreseen in the Old Testament.

- MacArthur New Testament Commentary

v.24b-26: (O.T. description of God's glory & Spirit's speaking...)

## **Psalm 2**

**“Who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: ‘Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ’”** ([vv. 25-26](#)). Immediately, in the midst of their prayer, they were reminded of the Word of God that came to Israel through the lips or the pen of David in [Psalm 2](#). The psalm begins with a question: “Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed” ([vv. 1-2](#)). Described in [Psalm 2](#) is a summit meeting of the most powerful rulers in the world about those who refused to submit to the dominion and reign of God. “Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us” ([v. 3](#)). This was separation of

state from God with a vengeance. David predicted that there would be an international conspiracy, one not limited to a particular country or group but one in which the rulers from all over the world would assemble together in defiance against the lordship of God Almighty and against His anointed Son.

When David describes this scene of the summit meeting of the enemies of God, we are told that the Lord sits in the heavens and laughs. He looks at the assembly of all the power and might of the kings of the world as they gather together and aim their arrows against Christ. He is amused at first with the power and the strength of these kings, and He makes fun of them. "The Lord shall hold them in derision" (v. 4), David said, but only for a moment, because God's amusement turns to wrath, and He says, "You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel" (v. 9). The latest generation of tanks will be scooped up by God in His hand, and He will turn it over and crush it against the ground. He warns them, "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way" (v. 12).

- St. Andrew's Expository Commentary - St. Andrew's Expository Commentary – Acts.

MOST OF THIS prayer is a reflection on the sovereignty of God. Even the way God is addressed, "Sovereign Lord," is significant. This translates a single word, *despotes*, used here rather than the more usual word *kyrios*. *Despotes* was used for the relation of a master to his slave. Classical writers used it for someone who had absolute powers, and it is from this use that we get the English word "despot." Josephus says it was used in connection with

confessing Caesar as lord. The Greeks sometimes used it for their gods, and the LXX uses it a few times for God. In the New Testament it is used three times each for God and for Jesus, indicating that the Christians found it a helpful, though not common, designation.

The content of the prayer shows the wisdom of the translation "sovereign Lord." When this title is put together with the Christians' affirmation that God is Creator ([v. 24b](#)), we see that his sovereignty over creation is being proclaimed. The implication is that the One who created the world is more powerful than those whom he created. Therefore, nothing can thwart his plans.

The prayer goes on to assert how God's sovereignty has been revealed in history.

#### QUOTE:

There is a note of cynicism here. The word translated "rage" is used in "late Greek writers, primarily of the neighing of high-fed, spirited horses." William Barclay comments, "They may trample and toss their heads; in the end they will have to accept the discipline of the reins." The great thrusts of evil are the work of one whose power is limited. Satan is on the loose, but he is on a leash. Moreover, these people may have great plans, but they are "in vain" (*kenos*). This word means "empty things."

- NIV Application Commentary

v.27: (Peter describes how EVERYONE was against Jesus...)

## The Sovereign God

John and Peter went back to the people of God and told them what had happened, and they began to praise God, and they remembered what David had said about the rulers of the world taking counsel together. **“For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done”** ([vv. 27-28](#)).

The early church had no debates about Calvinism and Arminianism. There wasn't an Arminian to be found in the early church. Every Christian believed in the sovereignty of God, and they believed in it absolutely. They never negotiated the sovereignty of God, because Jesus revealed exactly who God is and the power of the Almighty against all the machinations of the people of the world. The early church saw all the displays of power on the part of the ruling authorities as nothing. Just a few weeks before this, God's Son had been delivered into their hands for execution, but it had all been decreed beforehand by God. Our Lord Jesus would not have suffered a scratch through the conspiracy of human enemies against Him were it not for the determinant counsel of the Father, who ordained from all eternity that the Son should suffer at the hands of these wicked men for our sake.

Those in the early church understood that despite all the antagonistic actions of those authorities, God was still sovereign. God was still in control. That is why they said, **“Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.”** And when they had

**prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness ([vv. 29-31](#)).**

- St. Andrew's Expository Commentary - St. Andrew's Expository Commentary – Acts.

\*\*\* NOTE: Praying Scripture is very biblical...

v.28: (Declaration of Doctrine of Pre-destination...)

God foresaw the evil and planned to do something good out of it ([v. 28](#)). He used it to do the greatest thing that ever happened in the history of humanity: He won its salvation.

- NIV Application Commentary

\*\*\* cf. Romans 8:28

v.29: (Asking the Lord to protect & empower His people...)

➤ Non-believers make “threats”

- Believers are self-described as “doulos”

### *Two Requests (4:29-30)*

AFTER THAT EXTENDED reflection of God's sovereignty, these believers give only one passing reference to their problem ([v. 29](#))! Earlier they had reflected on the phenomenon of opposition to the work of God. But that was in order to demonstrate that history shows that opposition is always used by God to fulfill something good. When we gaze at our sovereign God, we need only to glance at our problems. The request they make is not for wisdom, protection, or favor with the authorities. All these are appropriate petitions, of course. But this prayer is for the ability to be obedient to Christ's command to them to preach the gospel.

The second request of the disciples is that God will show his power through "miraculous signs and wonders" ([v. 30](#)). It is significant that the only two requests in this prayer have to do with evangelism, which has just been outlawed! These people have a consuming passion for evangelism, and the only practical things that come to mind in this time of crisis are related to fulfilling the evangelistic task.

- NIV Application Commentary

The character of the first-century Christian church was marked repeatedly with unparalleled boldness. Yet, just a matter of weeks before this moment, when the lanterns were appearing in the

garden of Gethsemane as the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, His disciples fled in panic.

- St. Andrew's Expository Commentary

v.30: (

v.31: (

### **Resurrection Courage**

When the book of Revelation speaks of the final judgment of God, it mentions those whom God will send into the lake of fire—murderers, adulterers, and cowards. If anything marks the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is cowardliness. If anything describes the difference between us and the first-century church, it is our lack of boldness. Yet we see in Acts a sudden transformation. Just a few days before, the Apostles had been in the upper room hiding, cowering, terrified, locking the doors for fear of the Jews, and now here they are, standing up against the highest authority in the land without fear. Two things had happened: the resurrection and Pentecost.

The resurrection galvanized the faith of the early church. When they saw the risen Christ, when they saw His victory over death

and over His enemies, when He burst alive from the tomb, a faith was born in the breasts of the Apostles and the disciples that the whole world could not extinguish. Adding to the power of that faith was the power of Pentecost, in which God the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began to proclaim the Word of God fearlessly to the whole world.

#### ILLUSTRATION:

Jack Paar, in his inimitable fashion, wanted to speak frivolously and be silly with Billy Graham and said, “I guess you’re here tonight to try to save my soul and try to straighten my life out. You’re probably going to try to get me to repent.”

Billy smiled and said, “Well, Jack, have you thought about repenting? You know you need to, and, yes, I am concerned about your soul because without Jesus, Jack, you’re going to perish.” I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Billy Graham wasn’t nasty or insensitive, but he was bold before the whole nation. He wasn’t going to be manipulated into being silent about the truth of Christ.

Where is that boldness among us? I am not advocating a brash, foolhardy, obnoxious, or offensive approach. I am saying that we need to be done with cowardliness and proclaim the gospel with the boldness that characterizes a Christian who has been persuaded of the resurrection of Christ and the defeat of death. We can have the same change in us that was in these men who went from fearful infidels to valorous saints.

How far those gathered together were from being intimidated by the Sanhedrin's threats is seen in the conclusion of their prayer. After asking the **Lord** to **take note of** those **threats** to register their guilt and to protect the threatened preachers, their praise turns to petition as they request that God enable His **bond-servants** to **speak His word with all confidence**. Their description of themselves as **bond-servants** refers back to the use of *despotēs* in [verse 24](#) to describe God. They asked not for protection or a place to hide but for even more courage to boldly proclaim God's truth—the very thing they had been ordered not to do. They also requested that God would continue to **heal** and perform **signs and wonders through the name of His holy servant Jesus** to confirm His gospel.

God's answer was not long in coming. **When they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together** (perhaps the upper room, [Acts 1:13](#)) **was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit** (for the third time), **and began to speak the word of God with boldness**. As on the Day of Pentecost, there was a physical manifestation of the Spirit's presence, a shaking. God granted them the fullness of the Spirit for the **boldness** they desired. As in [Acts 4:8](#), the filling of the Spirit does not involve speaking in foreign languages but speaking in their own language the gospel with power. After the first coming of the Spirit at Pentecost when the rest of the believers were also filled, the miracle of languages disappeared and the filling is for power in speaking the truth from God.

**CLOSE:** The church had successfully faced its initial trial of opposition. Instead of succumbing to the temptation to

compromise the gospel, it became even bolder. The persecution also served to draw the congregation closer together and to their Lord. In what was to become a recurring theme in church history, opposition only made the church grow stronger. As He had with Joseph ([Gen. 50:20](#)), God took the evil intentions of men and used them for His own purposes.

- MacArthur New Testament Commentary

### *God's Response to the Prayer ([4:31](#))*

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT the shaking of a place ([v. 31](#)) was a sign for a theophany, that is, a manifestation of God in a visible form ([Ex. 19:18](#); [Isa. 6:4](#)). I. Howard Marshall says, "It would have been regarded as indicating a divine response to prayer." It was God's way of indicating that he was present there and would answer the prayer. Next, "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." This is not a fresh baptism, but a fresh filling. This is another instance in Acts where filling does not describe the characteristic of a person, but a special anointing. As in most of these cases, the result of the filling is proclamation. G. Campbell Morgan believes that "the new filling was intended to prevent the development of incipient fear." Certainly when we experience God in a fresh way, one of the first things we receive is courage. The revelation of God makes us affirm with Paul, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" ([Rom. 8:31](#)).

Thus, it is not surprising to find [verse 31](#) ending with the announcement that the believers "spoke the word of God boldly." The same words are used here as in the prayer for boldness in [verse 29](#). Luke uses the imperfect tense for "spoke." In other

words, as Bruce suggests, they "continued to declare the word of God with freedom of speech."

- NIV Application Commentary

NOTE:

Link Peter's responses in 4:1-22 to his prayer in vv.24-30...

Incredible & insightful parallels

See the black and white theology of v.28

No rationalization!

See Charlie Bethmann video

Link David's giant-killing role to future giant-killing

Link life & message of Christ to persecution

Link "blessed are the persecuted"

Link "blessed with the privilege to suffer in His name"

Link the life, ministry, death of Paul to this point

Link the life, ministry, death of the other Apostles...

Link the life, ministry, death of the martyrs past/present

Link K.P. Yohannon testimony

Question #1:

Who might your perseverance in persecution serve to inspire?

"Christ-like courage encourages Christ-like courage!" –  
JDP

Question #2:

Who might your cowardice rationalization have served to justify their own self-serving sin?

“Rationalized cowardice is Christ-denying & damning.” - JDP

(see Revelation 22)

“The cross of Christ defies and denies the concept of Christian self-preservation.” - JDP

“Rationalization & cowardice are Siamese-sins of the heart... one defies while the other defiles that which true-love would define & defend.” - JDP

“Take note & beware... cowards tend to be crafty & cunning in crowds. Master manipulators, they deceive & distort in defense of their devilish & diminished lives.” - JDP

“Cowards cower in clumps of cowards... like the old adage: birds of a feather flock together. Have you noticed, people tend to congregate with those similar to them in regards to: Courage, Character, Christ-likeness (or, in each case, the lack there-of)... The beautiful irony within Christianity is this, the more Christ-like one is, while flocking together with other Christ-like sheep, they intentionally seek to love, find, & grow lost, Christ-less lives.” - JDP

Overarching Applications:

THIS PASSAGE HELPS those who are going through a difficult time. In 1983, just after the worst riot we had in the twenty-year ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the first message I preached was on this passage. In the past few years this passage more than any other text in the Bible has sustained me and given me the courage to persevere.

**How fellowship helps in times of crisis.** Like Peter and John we too must develop the discipline of going to our "support group" in times of crisis ([v. 23](#)) for strength. (1) When we meet with our colleagues (cf. "their own people" in [v. 23](#)) who know us and are committed to us, we will receive great strength and courage from knowing that we are not alone. When we are under attack, it is easy to get discouraged and to lose our boldness and compromise by not being totally obedient to our call. It is also easy to act rashly, creating unnecessary problems to the cause of the gospel. The strength of community helps overcome these temptations.

It is therefore important that workers under threat or facing opposition be undergirded by companions in Christ. If they are working in distant areas, people should go to them regularly, or they should be expected to come regularly to where there are other colleagues. This may seem to be a waste of time and money, but in the long run it is worth it.

(2) When we share our situation with our support group, we can unburden ourselves to them. How sharing clears the air! It helps us to look at problems rationally. When we keep it to ourselves, we can become so overwhelmed by the emotional influences of the situations that we cannot think straight about the problems. But when we share it with others, we are forced to think things through; otherwise, our colleagues will not be able to understand what is going on.

(3) When we are together with our support group, we can spend time praying together. The significance of partnership in a crisis is not only the strength that we give each other; being together also causes us to motivate each other to seek God, who is the source of our strength. When we are alone, we can be so engulfed by our problems that we lose

sight of the sovereignty of God. Being with fellow believers helps us to direct our attention to God because he is the reason for our being united to each other.

As noted above, the word *homothymadon* implies that the early Christians were united in this time of crisis. Maintaining this unity is a key way to prepare for crises that we will encounter. Sometimes at our staff meetings I find the staff reluctant to pray. This is unnerving for me as their leader, but I have come to regard this as a sign of health. The staff who refuse to pray will not permit a hypocritical situation of praying as if there were no problems, when there are actually serious problems that need to be ironed out. Of course, we must then take the initiative to do something about these problems. If we are unable to pray together because of disunity, we must struggle with the causes of disunity until we can come to a situation of unity that enables us to pray. We meet the people concerned and confront them with the things that bother them. The day we get used to living with such problems without confronting them is the day when a deadly cancer has infected the body. It will do its work of destruction and cause spiritual death.

Crises can often break marriages and destroy the peace of churches. The individuals were not united with each other, but they were able to hide this from public view until troubles came. Then the weakness of the relationship was revealed as people began to fight over how to respond to the crisis or they blamed each other for the crisis. But if there is unity before the crisis, usually the crisis helps to deepen such unity. If, however, crises reveal a lack of unity, leaders realize they must take remedial steps, with the result that unity is deepened.

**How a vision of God's sovereignty helps in times of crisis.** The perspective of God's sovereignty, the major theme of the prayer in these verses, is perhaps the most important teaching that Christians need to have in times of crisis. When we are going through a crisis, the enemy seems so powerful and his schemes so well planned that we feel weak in comparison. Christians serving God in difficult and unreached areas feel

like this sometimes, especially when opponents of the gospel use the authority of the ruling powers to attack them. Those working in inner cities, with drug addicts and with abused children, in remote areas, and in the business world have all testified to this sense of powerlessness. But they do not need to be discouraged. Evil may seem to have won the day, but history will show that God used that temporary loss to further the agenda of the kingdom.

We see a dual perspective in this prayer. It takes into account the full force of the enemy—and let's face it, the enemy is powerful. We would do well to know the forces that attack us and to anticipate their moves. Short-sighted "positive thinking" will not do. Biblical positive thinking takes into account the enmity of the evil one to the things of God. There will be suffering, and it may be quite severe. But God will turn it into good. While the prayer takes evil into account, before and after that accounting is a description of God and his ways. Evil is a reality, but God is a deeper and more powerful reality.

Thus, we have courage to be obedient even to death, for we know that obedience leading to death will be used as a stepping-stone for victory by God. The disciples did not know here what was in store for them. What in fact did happen was that the persecution intensified. Stephen was martyred, and after that the people were scattered ([8:1](#)). But great progress took place for the cause of the gospel. God proved his sovereignty by making the suffering Christians not just conquerors but more than conquerors!

Therefore, the most important thing to bear in mind in a crisis is the sovereignty of God. An envoy from the Pope once met Martin Luther and threatened him with what would follow if he persisted in his course. He warned him that in the end all his supporters would desert him. "Where will you be, then?" he asked. Luther replied, "Then, as now, in the hands of God."

For these disciples a vision of sovereignty seemed to have come at once. But for other biblical characters it came only after a time of grappling

(see the book of Job; [Ps. 73](#); [Jer. 15](#)). We must not rest until that vision comes to us. At such times what we know of God (i.e., our theology) must address our experience with the truth of sovereignty, even though that truth may seem to run counter to what we are experiencing. This is what the psalmist did in [Psalm 42-43](#). Three times we find the refrain, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" ([Ps. 42:5, 11](#); [43:5](#)). The psalmist is addressing his experience with what he knows of the sovereignty of God. To those who grapple in this way God will give a revelation of himself that leaves them stronger in their trust in him.

In 1874 a French steamer collided with another ship and sank, with almost everyone on board being drowned. A Christian woman on the ship, Mrs. Spafford from Chicago, was saved by a sailor who found her floating in the water, but her four children died in this accident. Her husband, Horatio Spafford, was not on the ship and received a telegram from Wales from his wife with the words, "Saved alone." Two years later he wrote a hymn in commemoration of the death of his children.

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows, like sea billows, roll,  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Spafford had learned to apply the principle of God's sovereignty to every situation he faced.

We should add that belief in God's sovereignty does not give us immunity from fear. Fear is a natural human emotion in the presence of danger. But when we experience such fear, we should address it with our belief in God's sovereignty, which will enable us to concentrate on obedience without compromising and choosing an easier path. By taking fear into consideration we can also act wisely under pressure. Christians

do not need to be foolhardy in their response to danger and unnecessarily cause trouble for themselves through such folly.

**Bible Christians.** We have a great challenge today to develop men and women of the Word, who can face crises with the strength that Scripture hidden in them can give. The early Christians were what John Wesley liked to call the early Methodists: Bible Christians. Actually they were following the example of their Master, Jesus, who in the Gospels referred to the Old Testament at least ninety times. The attitude we are talking about was well expressed by Charles Spurgeon: "It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until at last you come to talk in scriptural language, and your spirit is flavored by the words of the Lord, so that your blood is bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows through you." Spurgeon said in one of his sermons, "Be walking Bibles."

I think the biggest crisis facing the evangelical church today is a spiritually weak leadership. We wilt when crises come. We act without adequate spiritual strength in the face of conflict, criticism, hardship, persecution, and temptation. We say we accept the Bible's authority, but in a crisis that authority seems to be forgotten so that we act in unbiblical ways. A major cause for this may be that the average Christian leader does not give time for diligent daily study, meditation, and application of the Word. If that is so, we are in serious trouble, for if our leaders exhibit this deficiency, what can we expect from the members of the church?

**The priority of obedience in times of crisis.** We noted that the first request that the disciples made was for boldness in being obedient to Christ's command. This is because in any time of crisis, the supreme battle we have is the battle for obedience. No evil power can thwart God's marvelous plan. The only way this can happen is by our disobedience—by our not doing what we should do or not saying what we should say. Our obedience depends on availing ourselves of God's enablement for living the Christian life. If we do that, God will give us victory. The biggest enemy is not our circumstances or the wickedness

and injustice of the world; rather, it is our own proneness to disobedience. D. L. Moody is reputed to have said that he had more trouble with D. L. Moody than with any other person he had met.

**How God's assurance helps in times of crisis.** We said that God often reassures the faithful when they encounter crises. God does not always act in this way. Sometimes he lets us be subjected to long silences, which some have called "the dark night of the soul." Though it may be difficult to go through these periods of silence, they ultimately deepen our faith. Yet in a time of crisis it is right for us to seek his face as the disciples did here. In one such time David said, "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple" ([Ps. 27:4](#)). When David sought God in his house at time of crisis, he was probably "looking for the divine word or action that would satisfy the longing in his heart."

God has his way of confirming to his children that he knows what is happening and that he is involved in the situation. Usually this confirmation comes when we are seeking God in prayer. I have often found that it comes during my devotional time, in the form of a clear message from the Word relating to the situation I am facing. I am delightfully surprised at the providence of God in getting me to read a passage appropriate to what I am going through.

At other times God's assurance comes through something that happens to us: We read or hear something that speaks specifically to us; someone gives us a gift of money in a time of serious financial crisis; someone says a word of encouragement during a time of deep discouragement; God gives us a glimpse of how he has used us at a time when we feel useless. God can even use a miraculous means like a dream, a vision, or a prophetic utterance. Whatever the means, God uses it to comfort us and help us to persevere along the path of obedience. **- NIV**