

Title: What are you praying for anyway?  
Text: Acts 4.23-31  
Theme: Prayer and the Sovereignty of God  
Series: Acts  
Prop Stmtnt: God's Sovereignty is a glorious motivation for prayer.

Acts 2.42 gives us a form for the life of a local church. A local church is comprised of people who are devoted (committed) to the doctrine, to the fellowship (membership), to involvement in each others' lives (eating together and praying together). Here is an example of that.

Read Text:

Let's say that you are Division I football player and you were drafted by the Detroit Lions before you actually graduated from college. They offered you a good contract with a generous signing bonus and you took it. The next day, a couple of million dollars showed up in your bank account. It was kind of a crazy. But, then, for some bizarre reason, one of your professors, who never seemed to like you threatened you after class and said, "I am going to bury you. Mark my words, I am going to destroy your college career." Your head is spinning. You feel this sense of terror rising up in your gut as fresh adrenaline is pumping into your veins. You call the Lions General Manager and tell him what just happened and he says to you, "Don't worry kid. You are ours now. We'll take care of you. He/She can't do anything. Besides, go look at your account. That money that we gave you is yours. That prof cannot ruin you.

Or, let's say that you have been working for a terrible manager/boss, when another company hires you. The new company is kind, generous and appreciative. You had no idea how great it could be to go to work where your work and ideas are valued and sought out. It is beautiful. But one day at a trade show, you run into your old boss who is livid that you left and he threatens you and tells you that he is going to destroy your career. For a moment, you are stunned. You tell your new company about the threat and they just shake their heads and reassure you. "Don't worry. You work for us now. He can't touch you. We know who he is and what he is like. You have nothing to worry about."

Did they really make the threats? Yes. Are you tempted to be intimidated by the threats? Yes. Do the threats feel dangerous? Yes. But, are they, really? Can they really do anything? No. In a similar way, the Sanhedrin really made threats to Peter and John. Peter and John were tempted to be intimidated by the threats. The Sanhedrin was serious about the threats, but Peter and John knew Christ and they knew that Christ had their back. Christ told them that they would be persecuted. Christ did not promise them "the good life." He promised that he would be with them, that he would never leave them and that it would be worth it. So, what we are witnessing in this text is not just history, but a theology of suffering. This text is a great case study on the Sovereignty of God, the suffering of a Christian and the role of prayer. So, most of the sermon I am going to be addressing the question of: If God is Sovereign, what are you praying for anyway? Why even bother, right? Let's see how this plays out.

1. **Following Christ comes with a cost.** (23)

Changing sides comes with a cost. In John 16, Jesus is talking to the disciples in the upper room during the Passover on the night before he died. Jesus said to them, “*They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.*” Wow, that is sobering isn’t it? Jesus is letting us know that following him is no game. Expect persecution. Expect conflict. Expect to be misrepresented. Expect to be called an enemy of the people, even an enemy of God. If the most important thing in your life is to be liked by people then do not follow Jesus. You cannot follow Jesus and pursue the approval of your world. Following Christ comes with a cost, why? If you are living a righteous life, your life will feel like condemnation to those without Christ. What starts out as ridicule usually ends up as persecution. This is our life. This is what happened to Christ and this is what happens to us. There is resentment against us when we do not live like the rest of the world and when we do not condone what they do.

If someone tries to tell you that if you have enough faith that your problems will fade away, they are lying. Jesus did not promise ease and comfort in this life. The fact is, no one is promised that. But following Christ means that you are out of step with this world.

My high school marching band was a pretty big deal. We were big, we were loud and we were good. In fact, we were recognized as being among some of the best high school bands in the country and were invited to march in the Rose Bowl parade, Orange Bowl parade and perform the national anthem and the half-time show of a Monday Night Football Game. Of course, one of the things that made us good was the fact that our marching was so crisp and precise. If you were out of step, it was obvious, and you would get called out in such a way that you made certain that it never happened again. The pressure for perfection was huge. As a follower of Jesus, we do not fit in. We march to the beat of a different drummer. The cultural police want to intimidate you. There are social band leaders who demand that you walk in step with them. It shows unless you aren’t marching any differently. If you are walking in step with the world, then you need to ask yourself if you are really a follower of Christ. If you are a follower of Christ, you will be out of step and the world will call you out. They did to Peter and John. When they do, what do you do?

## 2. **How to respond to the challenge** (23-24)

### a. **Share with others**

Peter and John went to their friends and told them what happened. If these two giants of the faith, these apostles who helped write books in the NT, shared their burden with other believers, so should you. Of course, this assumes that you have brothers and sisters in your life who will help you shoulder these concerns. So, let me ask you some questions: 1) What do you feel anxious or concerned about right now? 2) Who have you shared that with? 3) Who can you share that with? 4) Who can share with you, their threats and burdens?

Please hear me on this. It is wonderful that we sing together. It is wonderful that we have events that we share in together. It is wonderful that we hear the Word together. It is wonderful that we see each other and greet each other and welcome each other. But, as followers of Christ, our relationship with one another goes deeper. We get to bear each other’s burdens. But we won’t do

that, if you don't share, if you don't ask, if you don't listen, or if you don't care. But, we want to know these **things** about one another so that we can pray for another.

#### **b. Pray with others**

Don't you love this?! They did not organize a committee to discuss what threat level this situation arose to. They did not form a task group to study the threat and report back what evasive actions, or public relations efforts they should employ. They prayed! Their instinctive response was to pray. I think it was Martyn Lloyd-Jones who said that you should always heed that personal sense of prompting to pray. You know what he is talking about, don't you? You are in a conversation with someone and they are sharing a particular challenge they are facing and you know you should pray for them. Do it! Right there, do it!

When someone tells you that their dryer isn't working and they are not sure what to do, don't you love it if you can recommend someone who you know can fix it, is honest, is reasonable and is nice! Listen, when someone tells you about a problem that is threatening to capsize the boat of their life, pick up the phone and talk with the Creator. As a follower of Christ, you have access right to the top. This is what they did here. They responded this way because they were ready to.

### **3. How to be ready to respond to the challenge (explain)**

#### **a. Be in community with others (23)**

I will not belabor this too much more, since I've already been hammering this. But you need to be community with other believers. That is called the church. Membership in the church is primarily not for keeping records, but for providing a structure for commitment that we might love and care for another. Some of you want to act like you don't need others, but in so doing, you do not let others depend on you. Peter and John had relationships that they knew they could go to and depend on and pray with. If they needed it, so do we. Don't wait for the crisis. Develop those relationships now.

#### **b. Know God (24)**

They were ready to pray because they knew who God was. They knew he was Creator and that he was Sovereign. I love the three-fold description they state of God's creative activity. He made the heaven, the earth, the sea and everything in them. That pretty much sums it up. He made it all. And he is Sovereign Lord. He rules it all. He made it all and he rules it all. Their confidence in who God is motivates them to pray. Because of who God is, they know that he is involved in this. So, they pray. And when they pray, they pray the Scriptures because this situation reminds them of a Psalm. Brothers and sisters, some of you have a rather shallow and somewhat flimsy faith because you have not given yourself to knowing God. There is a lot of talk of experiencing God, feeling God, sensing God, being moved by God, etc., but honestly, a lot of that is fluff and borderline idolatry because without grasping who God is, as he has revealed himself, we will assume that our own views of God are true. True knowledge of God are the deep pylons of the soul that ground our lives in the storms. These men had deep thoughts of God that gave them

deep love for God and deep confidence in God. There is no sense of panic in their prayer. They know God and in knowing God, they know there is never, never, never a reason to fret.

### **c. Know God's Word (25b-26)**

These believers knew God's Word, so when the storm came to their door, they were able to respond by praying God's Word. When they prayed, God's Word came out. God's Word came out of their mouths because God's Word was in their hearts. That is one of the major reasons why we read and study God's Word. We not only want to think right, we want to pray right. Without God's Word, we will ask God for everything to go how we want. God's Word gave them and gives us the proper set of glasses through which we can view our present challenges.

Why? 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 (the Christ). Why? What is the point? Do they actually think that this is going to work? But, let's look carefully at this text. Verse 25b and 26 is a quotation from Psalm 2. The Psalm is a coronation Psalm that was used when the King was coronated (David). The Psalm, attributed to David, is ultimately from God (Holy Spirit – 25a). But, how is it applied? Hold that question for a second.

How do we normally apply Scripture? We are tempted to think of ourselves as being the good guy. We read the story of David and Goliath and we identify with David. But, the truth is, we are not the warrior fighting in the valley. We are the cowards who need a champion warrior. We are the ones who need to be rescued. But, sin affects us so profoundly that we frankly do not see ourselves as we should. We lack self-awareness. We think too high of ourselves, too much of ourselves and at times too little of ourselves. Therefore, when we read the Bible, too often we identify with the wrong characters in the story. I've told you this before, but, when we read the story that Jesus told of the publican (sinner) and the Pharisee who both went to the Temple to pray, the Pharisee prayed, "I am so glad that I am not like the publican." And the publican prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner." What do we do when we read that? Most of us look at the Pharisee and we think "I am so glad that I am not like the Pharisee!" And when we think that, then we are exactly like the Pharisee. I've come up with a new worship song, it's called, "You're so vain you probably think this text is about you." It is so good, so necessary, so humbling, to stop and ask God to reveal our blindspots because we have them. In this case, the leaders of the Sanhedrin knew Psalm 2. They assumed, rightfully so, that Psalm 2 was about the futility of fighting against the Lord's Anointed one because you cannot stop God. They would have all agreed with that. What they did not understand was that they were the ones who were fighting against the Lord's Anointed.

So, when I challenge you and say that we need to know God's Word in order to be prepared for the challenges that come, and to know how to pray, I mean that we need to rightly know God's Word. That is the case here. These believers knew God's Word and therefore they were able to rise above the challenge itself and were able to realize that this was bigger than them. One of the reasons why some of you get so stuck in your challenges and feel like you are slogging through quicksand is because your view of life is so small. Your view of life is small, and therefore, your view of your life is too big. All you see is the immediate situation. All you think about is how you can get relief right now. All you want is to get this over with. God's Word takes you up to

30,000 feet and tells you that there is a whole lot more going on than you can know. This Psalm gave these believers perspective. Sure, there is a threat to Peter and John, but there is more going on here than that.

Sure, they are threatening us, but this isn't really about us. They are threatening us because of who we represent. That is the where the battle is. That is what the issue is about. We love God and they (frankly) hate God, so they are acting out on us what they want to do to God. But, taking on God, by threatening us is a battle they will not win, and because of that, this is a battle that we do not have to fight.

#### **d. Know what God has done (27-28)**

Look at verses 27-28. Do you see how the Word of God informs their prayers. They know what God has done. They know what Psalm 2 says. They know that this Psalm was fulfilled in Jesus. They know that God planned for Herod and Pontius Pilate (kings of the earth) and the peoples (Gentiles and Israel) to plot against Jesus and that all of this, all of this rebellion, all that happened to Jesus was "*whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*" The persecution of Jesus was predestined by God. They read Psalm 2 and realized that this was all God's plan. The fact that God had ordained that the evil decisions of these people would be overruled for God's purposes did not discourage these believers from praying. Oh no! They looked at Psalm 2 and realized wow! God really does rule over all. Therefore, we ought to pray. Do you see it now? The Sovereignty of God over all things does not discourage us from praying but it encourages us to pray. These believers did not gather together and say, "look God is Sovereign. He has established his plan and predestined these things to take place. Therefore, it really doesn't matter whether or not we pray. Whatever will be, will be. We are just cogs in the machine." No! They said, "Look, God is Sovereign! He rules. He controls all things. He ordained that the evil intentions and actions of the rulers be used to carry out his plan to save sinners. Let's pray that God will do the same thing again in this situation. If you believe what the Bible teaches about the Sovereignty of God and therefore, the doctrine of pre-destination, and people try to tell you that this must mean that you don't pray, or share Christ with others, send missionaries, you can see from this text, that is simply not true. Jesus taught pre-destination. Jesus knew the plan and was carrying out the plan and Jesus prayed. The fact that he knew what was going to happen and even ordained it to happen did not slow down his prayer life, but encouraged it.

#### **e. Lean on God now (29-30)**

In verses 29-30, we get to the heart of their prayer. This is their petition. This is what they are asking for. "And now Lord, look upon their threats..." Listen to what they are saying about you. They are saying that we can't speak in the name of Jesus and we know that you have a problem with that. By saying this, these brothers and sisters are agreeing with what God has said. The name of Jesus is the name above all names. Jesus is the ONLY means by which we can be saved. No one can be forgiven of sin and made a child of God unless they go through Jesus because only Jesus lived a perfect life in our place and died a death in our place that paid for the sins of every single person who would believe in him. To tell people that you cannot say that or believe that, would be to attempt to defy the plan of God that has predestined that people come to faith in Christ by hearing about him and what he has done. So, God, we know that you will respond to

this because this matters to you. What are they doing? They are leaning on God. By praying they are leaning on God. By praying they are expressing their dependency upon God. God, we are asking for you to act in a way that addresses their threats, not just to us, but to the gospel.

f. **Realize that this is about God and not you.** (29-30)

What do they pray for? They pray for what is important to them. They do not pray for their comfort. They do not even pray for deliverance from the trial, even though that would not have been wrong if they did. They prayed for courage to face this present opposition so that the message of the gospel would continue to spread. They asked for boldness to keep preaching God's Word because that is more important than their comfort and getting delivered from the trial. In v.29, the disciples refer to themselves as the slaves (servants) of Jesus. They have removed all rights from their lives. They are entirely yielded to Christ for whatever he wants. They realize that this event, like their lives is not about themselves, but ultimately about God and the advancement of his gospel. They were praying like they had been taught. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

If God answered all of your prayers today, what would happen? Would anyone come to faith in Christ? Would the gospel be preached with clarity? Would our church look more like Jesus? Or would you have a nice day, with comfortable weather? If God answered all of your prayers today, would you actually sin less, or would you simply have more stuff? If God answered all of your prayers today, would our missionaries see more fruit or would you pass a test or win a game or get a date?

g. **Press on boldly.** (31)

God answered their prayer. What a beautiful assurance. They may be on the wrong side of the officials, but they were on the right side of God, and beloved, that is all that matters. "*They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.* When you talk with God and understand his Word, the threats of this world don't work.

Conclusion:

To the unbeliever – you still live east of Eden – how do you handle it?

To the believer – you live east of Eden, and in conflict with the world – how do you handle it? When your hope is strengthened, the gospel is displayed. Who do you pray for? Who prays for you?