

Sunday Seconds

Encouragements for Prayer

Acts 4:23-31

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Encouragements for Prayer

Scripture

Our Adult Bible Fellowships are studying the Lord's Prayer. And so I thought I would look at encouragements for prayer in the word of God.

In Acts 4:23-31, after the Sanhedrin released the apostles Peter and John, they went back to the rest of the believers and reported what had happened to them. Then they all stopped and prayed. It is a remarkable prayer with remarkable results.

Let's read about encouragements for prayer in Acts 4:23-31:

²³When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

**" 'Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?**

**²⁶The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord
and against his Anointed?—**

²⁷for 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, ²⁸to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants

to continue to speak your word with all boldness,³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:23-31)

Introduction

God delights to answer the prayers of his children. Sometimes we pray for basic needs, like clothing and shelter and food and warmth. Or we may pray for things like health and family concerns. Sometimes we find ourselves in really difficult circumstances and we pray for wisdom.

The apostles Peter and John had just faced the first persecution against the first-century church by the Jewish authorities. Unable to legally punish the apostles, the Sanhedrin let the apostles free, warning them not to preach the gospel any more. The apostles went and joined some of the other believers and, after sharing their recent experience with them, they all looked to God in prayer. The prayer of that first-century church is an extremely encouraging prayer.

Lesson

The prayer in Acts 4:23-31 is encouraging for five reasons. The prayer is encouraging:

1. Because of the Answer That Came (4:31)
2. Because of Who Is Praying (4:23-24a)
3. Because of the Occasion on Which It Was Prayed (4:29a)
4. Because of Whom It Was Prayed To (4:24-28)

5. Because of What Was Asked (4:29-30)

I. Because of the Answer That Came (4:31)

First, the prayer is encouraging because of the answer that came.

At the conclusion of the prayer meeting, the author Luke records in verse 31 that **“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.”**

I want you to notice the parallels here with what happened earlier at Pentecost. Here they had just prayed. There (Acts 1:14) they had been praying. Here it says, **“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”** In Acts 2:4 it says, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Exactly the same verb for **filled** is used.) Here God shakes the building to demonstrate his presence and his power. There in Acts 2:2 a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind. Here they speak the word of God with boldness. There they began to speak in other tongues the great things of God (Acts 2:4, 11).

In other words, Pentecost was the first great outpouring of the Spirit on the church after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. And here is another one. In both God gives physical demonstrations of his power. In both he gives the fullness of the Holy Spirit. In both he releases open and courageous speaking. Whatever else Pentecost is, it is not unique as an outpouring of the Spirit to empower the church for witness. The blessing of Pentecost would happen in different ways and different measures throughout Acts and throughout the rest of church history.

This prayer is encouraging today because of the answer

that came, which is that **they were all filled with the Holy Spirit**. The outpouring of the Spirit is exactly what is desperately needed in the church in America because of the enormous challenges that face us. This is true even in the best of churches—notice that the people on whom this blessing came were not disobedient or faithless. Some of them—Peter and John—had just been spectacularly obedient. In fact, Acts 4:8 tells us that Peter had been filled with the Holy Spirit when he stood up to speak before the Sanhedrin in the courtroom. Now he and other believers are filled again in this extraordinary way.

More than anything else, our church needs the outpouring of God's Spirit. We need to be regularly and continually filled with the Holy Spirit. Not because our church is so bad but because the need and the hardness of the world is so great.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was a brilliant theologian whose sermons had an overwhelming impact on those who heard him. One in particular, his famous "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," moved hundreds to repentance and salvation. That single message helped to spark the revival known as "The Great Awakening" (1734-1744).

From a human standpoint, it seems incredible that such far-reaching results could come from one message. Edwards did not have a commanding voice or an impressive pulpit manner. He used very few gestures, and he read his sermon from a manuscript. Yet God's Spirit moved upon his hearers with conviction and power.

Few know the spiritual preparation involved in that sermon. John Chapman gives us the story: "For 3 days Edwards had not eaten a mouthful of food; for 3 nights he had not closed his eyes in sleep. Over and over again he was heard to pray, 'O Lord, give me New England! Give me New England!' When he arose from his knees and made his way into the pulpit

that Sunday, he looked as if he had been gazing straight into the face of God. Even before he began to speak, tremendous conviction fell upon his audience.” Why? Because he was filled with the Spirit and the Spirit chose to work through him that day.

We need the filling of the Holy Spirit so that God can use us, because the need and the hardness of the world are so great. We need to pray that God would again send his Holy Spirit.

II. Because of Who Was Praying (4:23-24a)

Second, the prayer is encouraging because of who is praying.

Luke tells us in verses 23-24a that **“when they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God.”**

Luke does not say they went to “the other apostles.” He says they went to **“their friends,”** literally, “their own.” The word is used like this one other time in Acts, namely, in Acts 24:23 where it says that Felix commanded that none of Paul’s friends (i.e. his own) should be prevented from attending to his needs. It is the same word used in John 1:11 about Jesus: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” It simply means family, friends, close associates, neighbors, etc.

Therefore this prayer is encouraging to us because it is prayed not by someone with special privileges, but by Christians. It is the church gathered, not just the apostles, that pray to God. So the prayer is encouraging because of who prayed it—*all* the believers **lifted their voices together to God.**

Here we see a wonderful picture of the church gathered together for corporate prayer. Throughout the ages, local

churches have gathered together for weekly corporate prayer. We are encouraging our Adult Bible Fellowships to include significant times for prayer in their gatherings. Let us raise our voices together in prayer to God.

III. Because of the Occasion on Which It Was Prayed (4:29a)

Third, the prayer is encouraging because of the occasion on which it was prayed.

Peter and John had just been released from custody. Verse 23 says they told the other believers specifically what the chief priests and elders had said. Verse 29 clues us in on what this was. The believers prayed, **“And now, Lord, look upon their threats.”** In other words, Peter and John had told them about the threats mentioned in verses 18 and 21. In verse 18 the priests and elders commanded Peter and John “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” In verse 21 they threatened them further.

So, the occasion for this prayer was the very dangerous threats against the preaching of God’s word in the name of Jesus. There were extraordinary obstacles in the way of the spread of Jesus’ name. This is why the church was so urgent in its prayer. They did not assume that they could keep on and advance in effective ministry without a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit. Fear could paralyze them at any moment. One look into their children’s faces and they wanted to run away to where it was comfortable and safe and not risk speaking for Christ in public any more.

This prayer is encouraging for us because of its occasion. We face obstacles too. Persecution of Christians is a way of life in many countries of the world. In our own country, freedoms

are narrowing as secularists feel more and more threatened by our message that there is only one way to God and only one set of commandments valid for all.

But even short of physical persecution, the obstacles we face in making Christ known are great—with the anonymity of neighborhoods created by mobility; the entertainment industry that keeps people saturated with the world and numb to spiritual things; a thoroughly God-ignoring culture; a medical technology so advanced and so available that people seldom think of resorting to God for help; and on top of all this, the relative weakness of the church so often enmeshed in the very values of the world we are supposed to confront with a radically different Christ.

If the first-century Christians, with their first-hand experience of the risen Christ and their immediate access to apostles needed to seek a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit to keep on evangelizing, how much more do we?

IV. Because of Whom It Was Prayed To (4:24-28)

Fourth, the prayer is encouraging because of whom it was prayed to.

It is remarkable that these Christians take five verses to praise God for who he is, and two verses to ask what they want from him. Now God does not need to be told who he is. But Christians need to know who he is—and precisely in their prayers they need to know and confess that he is the kind of God who can and will answer their prayers. In essence what they are doing in verses 24-28 is hallowing God's name before they pray, "Your kingdom come."

They identify God in two ways. *First, they said that God was the Creator of all things.* The believers began their prayer in verse

24 by saying, **“Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.”** So they appealed to him as the Creator of all. They knew that if God created everything in heaven, earth and sea, then the chief priests and elders were his creation too and he could do with them as he pleased.

Second, they said that God was the one who is ruler of all, even over the deeds of evil men. He put to naught the rage of the Gentiles and emptied the plans of his adversaries. They said this by quoting Psalm 2 in verses 25-26, and then by showing that the Psalm was fulfilled in the way God was in control when evil men killed Jesus. So they said, in verses 27-28: **“For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed** (that’s the conspiracy of the nations mentioned in Psalm 2), **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** (that’s how God turned their rage into a vain thing, and then accomplished his saving purpose).” In other words, just like the Psalm says in verse 25, **“Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?”** Their rage came to naught and their plotting was in vain, because God rules even over the sinful deeds of men and causes them to backfire—Jesus is risen and the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. All their rage and all their plotting has turned back on their own head.

Now remember all this is a prayer! All this is a prelude to asking for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Here is what makes this encouraging for our praying today. Many would tell us that doctrine and theology are not important if you can have the power of the Holy Spirit. But these early Christians knew better than that. For them the doctrine of creation, the doctrine

of inspired Scripture (v. 25), the doctrine of God's sovereignty even over the voluntary acts of sinful people, a knowledge of Old Testament prophecy—these things were essential. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Truth. He is not indifferent to bad doctrine in the mind when he comes to fill the heart.

If we want to be filled with the Holy Spirit, we will do well to fill our minds with the truth he has revealed about God in Scripture. Then we will pray more like the early Christians.

We fill our minds with truth by studying the Scriptures. That is why it so important to get involved in regular, systematic Bible study. Study the Bible personally. And study the Bible corporately—in Adult Bible Fellowships, Women's Bible Study, Men's Bible Study, wherever we have an opportunity to study. We study the Scriptures because we want to understand accurately who the God is to whom we are praying.

V. Because of What Was Asked (4:29-30)

And finally, the prayer is encouraging because of what was asked.

In verse 29 they arrive at their request: **“And now, Lord, look upon their threats.”** Essentially, what they are asking is: “Take note, Lord, of what is at stake in their threats. They have commanded us not to speak of your Son's name any more. That is what is at stake here. So rouse yourself, because nothing is of greater interest to you than the honor of your Son. Rise up. Take note. Look on their threats.”

The believers continued their prayer, in verses 29b-30: **“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.”**

They asked for two things. First, that God would give them boldness to speak the gospel. Second, that he would heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders to happen—in order to authenticate their bold proclamation.

This prayer is encouraging for us because it shows us how we should be seeking the power of God's Spirit. We should be praying for the outpouring of God's Spirit in a specific way: for the gift of boldness to speak the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest weaknesses of our church is in the area of evangelism. We urgently need to pray in a more focused way for boldness to proclaim the gospel.

We all need boldness in evangelism. It begins by asking God in prayer for such boldness. So, pray! Ask God to make us bold. Ask God to fill us with his Spirit. And then, let's get out and tell people about Jesus!

Conclusion

This is a very encouraging prayer. Not for an introspective people who are merely interested in unusual experiences, but for a people who long for the salvation of sinners and the magnifying of God's glory and the public vindication of Jesus' name. If that is what you want, then this is the way to pray. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
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