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Turning the World Upside Down / Prayer; Answer; Petition / Acts 4:23–31
Acts 4:23-31 gives us several reasons why prayer is relevant.

Introduction

Have you ever prayed, and God clearly answered your prayer?

In his book *Say It With Love*, Howard Hendricks has a delightful story about a little boy who saw God answer his simple prayer. Hendricks writes:

We had a lovely couple in Dallas several years ago. He sold his business at a loss, went into vocational Christian work, and things got rather rough. There were four kids in the family.

One night at family worship, Timmy, the youngest boy, said, “Daddy, do you think Jesus would mind if I asked him for a shirt?”

“Well, no, of course not. Let’s write that down in our prayer request book, Mother.”

So she wrote down, “Shirt for Timmy,” and she added “size seven.”

You can be sure that every day Timmy saw to it that they prayed for the shirt. After several weeks, one Saturday the mother received a telephone call from a clothier in downtown Dallas, a Christian businessman.

He said, “I’ve just finished my July clearance sale, and knowing that you have four boys it occurred to me that you might use something we have left. Could you use some boy’s shirts?”

She said, “What size?”

“Size seven.”

“How many do you have?” she asked hesitantly.

He said, “Twelve.”

Many of us might have taken the shirts, stuffed them in the bureau drawer, and made some casual comment to the child. Not this wise set of parents.

That night, as expected, Timmy said, “Don’t forget, Mommy, let’s pray for the shirt.”

Mommy said, “We don’t have to pray for the shirt, Timmy.”

“How come?”

“The Lord has answered your prayer.”

“He has?”

“Yes, he has!”

So, as previously arranged, his brother Tommy goes out and gets one shirt, brings it in, and puts it down on the table.

Little Timmy’s eyes are wide like saucers.

Tommy goes out and gets another shirt and brings it in.

Out—back, out—back, until he piles 12 shirts on the table, and Timmy thinks God is going into the shirt business.

But you know, there is a little kid in Dallas today by the name of Timothy who believes there is a God in heaven interested enough in his needs to provide boys with shirts.

Friends, God delights to answer the prayers of his children.

Sometimes we pray for basic needs, like clothing, shelter, 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 go free, warning them not to preach the gospel anymore.

The apostles went and joined some of the other disciples and, after sharing their recent experience with them, they all stopped and looked to God in prayer.

The prayer of that first-century church is extremely relevant.

Scripture

Let's read [Acts 4:23-31](#):

²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And 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, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

**“ ‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?**

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

²⁷ 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, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And 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.

Lesson

[Acts 4:23-31](#) gives us several reasons why prayer is relevant.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Pray-ers (4:23-24a)
2. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Recipient (4:24b-28)
3. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Occasion (4:29a)
4. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Request (4:29b-30)
5. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Answer (4:31)

I. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Pray-ers (4:23-24a)

First, prayer is relevant because of the pray-ers.

Luke tells us in verses 23-24a, **“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 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 that which was his *own*, but his *own* did not receive him.”

The word **“friends”** simply means family, friends, close associates, neighbors, and so on.

Therefore, this prayer is relevant because it is prayed not by someone with special rights and privileges, but by Christians.

It is the church gathered, not only the apostles, that pray to God.

So the prayer is relevant because of the pray-ers—people like you and me.

Sometimes people will ask me to pray at a function, family gathering, or some event. I often wonder why I am the one who is asked to pray. Once in a great while someone will say something like, “Pastor, will you please pray—because you are a man of God,” or something similar.

I think that some people believe that pastors—vocational ministers—have some special connection to God that they do not have.

Friends, that is just not true.

All Christians have the same access to God—through our Mediator, Jesus Christ.

Now, it is true that some are more effective than others in their prayer life, but that is because they have developed the discipline of prayer and *not* because of their vocation.

The prayer of the church is relevant because of who is praying—*all* the believers **“lifted their voices together to God.”**

Christian, every one of you, at any time, can go to God in prayer through our Mediator, Jesus Christ.

You do not need to have a vocational minister pray a special prayer for you.

You can pray.

Children, you too can pray. If you have a concern, *you* can go to God in prayer through Jesus.

II. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Recipient (4:24b-28)

Second, prayer is relevant because of the recipient.

Remarkably, these Christians take five verses to tell God 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 God 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 the disciples are doing in verses 24-28 is hallowing God’s name before they pray, “Thy 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 24b by saying, **“Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.”**

So they appealed to God as the Creator of all things. They knew that if God created everything in heaven, earth, and sea, then the chief priests and the elders were his creation too and he could do with them as he pleased.

Second, they said that God was the one who was the 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, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel** (that is the conspiracy of the nations mentioned in [Psalm 2](#)), **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 have turned back on their own heads.

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 relevant for our praying today.

Many would tell us that doctrine and theology are not important if you can just have the power of the Holy Spirit. But these Christians knew better.

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, and 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 is so important to get involved in regular, systematic Bible study. Study the Bible personally. And study the Bible with others—in Sunday school, Adult Bible Fellowships, Men’s Bible study, Women’s Bible study, or wherever we have an opportunity to study the word of God.

III. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Occasion (4:29a)

Third, prayer is relevant because of the occasion.

Peter and John had just been released from custody. Verse 23 says they told the other disciples specifically what the chief priests and the elders had said.

Verse 29a tells us what it 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 chief priests and the elders charged Peter and John “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”

In verse 21, they had further threatened them.

So, the occasion for this prayer was the very dangerous threat 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 anymore.

So this prayer is relevant because of the occasion.

We face tremendous obstacles too.

Persecution of Christians is a way of life in many countries of the world.

In America, persecution is increasing and freedoms are narrowing, as the secular relativists feel more and more threatened by our message that there is one way to God and 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 they 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 today?

IV. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Request (4:29b-30)

Fourth, prayer is relevant because of the request.

In verse 29 they said, “And now, Lord, look upon their threats.”

Essentially, what they are asking is this: “Take note, Lord, of what is at stake in their threats. They have commanded us not to speak of your Son’s name anymore. 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 at their threats.”

The believers finally arrived at their request 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, they asked that God give them the boldness to speak the gospel.

Second, they asked that God heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders to happen—to authenticate their bold proclamation.

This prayer is relevant because of the request. It shows us how we should seek the power of God’s Spirit.

We should pray 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.

Let me ask you to make it a matter of urgency to pray regularly for opportunities to speak boldly for Christ.

We all need boldness in evangelism.

It begins by asking God in prayer for such boldness.

So, pray!

Ask God to make you bold.

Ask God to fill you with his Spirit.

And then, go and tell people about Jesus!

V. Prayer Is Relevant Because of the Answer (4:31)

And fifth, prayer is relevant because of the answer.

After the prayer meeting, Luke records in verse 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.”**

I want you to notice the parallels here with what happened at Pentecost, which was just a few weeks earlier.

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 the same thing, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”

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 Holy Spirit on the church after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. And here is another outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

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 Holy Spirit to empower the church for witness.

The blessing of Pentecost would happen in different ways and different measures throughout Acts and the rest of church history.

This prayer is relevant today because of the answer, which is that **“they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”**

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is desperately needed in the church today 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 the other praying saints were filled again with the Holy Spirit 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 sermon in particular, his famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” moved hundreds to repentance and salvation. That single message helped 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 three days Edwards had not eaten a mouthful of food; for three nights he had not closed his eyes in sleep. Over and over again, he had been saying to God, “Give me New England! Give me New England!” and when he arose from his knees and made his way into the pulpit they say that he looked as if he had been gazing straight into the face of God. They say that before he opened his lips to speak, conviction fell upon his audience (Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* [Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996], 1153).

Why?

Because Jonathan Edwards was filled with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit chose to work through him that day.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we need the filling of the Holy Spirit so that God can use us because the need and the hardness of people are so great.

Conclusion

This is a very relevant prayer.

Not for introspective people who are merely interested in unusual experiences, but for 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 we want, then this is the way to pray.

May God help us to pray in this way. Amen.