

The Prayer God Always Answers
Acts 4:23-31

Main Point:

When the reputation of Jesus is at stake, bold prayers receive bold responses from God

Introduction:

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 4. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 2 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).

Starter: The Prayer God Always Answers

When you pray, what do you find yourself most often praying for or about? In my experience as a pastor and a Christian, the prayer I most often hear from believers centers around physical health (healing). None of these things are wrong or sinful to pray for – in fact scripture encourages us to pray in this way. However, we know that in some cases, God doesn't heal or protect in the way we would like Him to for His own purposes. However, did you know that there is a prayer that God always answers, and delights in answering? Did you know there is a prayer that He will grant you, quite literally, 100% of the time? My guess is that if you knew there was such a prayer, you would want to know what it is so you could begin praying it, maybe even right now!

Well, friends, this morning, in our text in Acts, we will peel back the curtains and learn to pray the prayer that God loves (and always) answers. However, be warned: this prayer is not a safe prayer, and its one that could very easily bring about a lack of health and protection in your life. But, rest assured, no matter what happens when we pray this prayer, we can know that God will use it to advance His kingdom through us. Let us pray as we begin...

Setting the Context:

For those of you just joining us, we are going through the book of Acts together. I want to do a brief review of where we are:

- Before the Lord Jesus ascends back to the Father, His disciples ask Him about the restoration of the kingdom for Israel.
- Instead, Jesus gives the disciples a task: wait for the Holy Spirit to empower them to be His witnesses from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.
- The Lord Jesus ascends back to the right hand of God
- The Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost, enabling the disciples to speak in different languages and glorify God! The pouring out of the Spirit is in accordance of Old Testament prophecy, when God would bring His people out of exile and restore them in the land. This happened (geographically), but not yet spiritually.
- Peter preaches the first sermon and calls the people to repentance, with 3,000 being converted. The people then gather to worship, pray, teach, with signs and wonders being performed.

The last 3 weeks have covered the events of chapter 3 and 4. Peter and John go to the Temple to worship, and they encounter a crippled man who waits by the gate to beg for money from those passing by. Peter says that he has no silver or gold, but what He does have he will gladly share – and in the name of Jesus, Peter reaches out and heals this man, who goes off skipping (literally!) into the temple courtyard praising God. I shared how this miracle was not just a random occurrence but a prophetic sign of the “new creation” promised by the prophets, in which God would, in the last days, re-create the earth into what He had always intended it to be: a dwelling place for His glory and presence among His people.

Last week we saw how the conflict between Peter and John and the temple leadership replicates Jesus's conflict. They are warned not to speak in this man's name anymore (Jesus). Yet we find that Peter and John, being full of the Holy Spirit, become emboldened witnesses and declare that they answer to a higher authority – God's (implying that the temple-leadership is actually doing Satan's work and opposing God). Now the stage is set for the collision that will birth the first major wave of Christian persecution. Before that happens, Luke is going to give us another snapshot of the prayer life of the early church and how they respond to the threats of the temple officials.

Exposition of Acts 4:23-31***The church hears Peter and John's report***

Acts 4:23 - Keep in mind these were the highest ranking authorities in Judaism at that time. These were the REAL elders, spiritual authority. To defy them was not only shame, but quite possibly death. For most people, this would instill fear! Let's see how the church responds: Acts 4:24-28

They respond with prayer – crying out to God! But notice how the content of their prayer is not lament, or despair, or even fear. Instead, *it's a prophetic understanding of the times they are living in*. One of the key things Luke wants us as readers to understand is the times that we as followers of Jesus are living in. Luke has an agenda in telling us the story of the early church. It's not just recording history; he is showing us how the Old Testament, and the promises of the prophets, are being fulfilled in the death/resurrection of the Lord Jesus and birth of this new community we call the church who now minister in His name!

Too often we associate the "last days" with the events which will occur just before Christ returns. And so we have prophets and prophecy conferences trying to interpret modern day events and predict when Christ might return. Now, the New Testament does talk about some specific things that will happen before Christ returns. However, the "last days" language in the New Testament almost always refers to the present age that the church is living in, right now, under the lordship of Christ as we prepare for His glorious return. So let's take a closer look at the significance of Psalm 2 in light of the prayer they pray.

Background to Psalm 2

Psalm 2 is a "royal Psalm" which celebrates the Davidic kingdom and God's promises to put one of David's sons on an eternal throne. It's a Psalm that reflects on and celebrates David's coronation as "king", and prophesies that the house of David will eventually rule the earth. God will express His kingship through the Davidic kingdom. Furthermore, this kingdom will be persecuted and fought against by the ungodly nations; but in the end, God's king – God's Son – will win the war and receive all the nations as His own inheritance. In other words, their efforts at destroying this kingdom will be futile!

This Psalm shows up again later in Acts with Paul's preaching in chapter 13 when Paul introduces Christ to Jews in Antioch of Pisidia. It's also used by the writer of Hebrews to explain how Jesus is the true Son of God. Given that it's used here in this prayer, we can surmise that the early believers understood that Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Psalm 2: Notice how the characters of the story are changed in the new prophetic setting:

The Cast & Script of Psalm 2 in Acts 4

Jesus = the Son of David, the Son of God, the Lord's anointed

"Raging" kings and Gentile nations = Roman/Jewish authorities

The faithful one who takes "refuge" = the followers of Jesus

The church prays for boldness!

So, as they pray this Psalm together, they are acknowledging that though the nations rage against the Lord Jesus, His kingdom cannot be stopped or put down. He is the true Davidic king, who now reigns of the world, and is making the nations His inheritance. This claim echoes the Great Commission we have in Matthew 28:16-20. After interpreting the prophetic times they are living in, the church makes two requests from God. Acts 4:29-30

First, they pray: *Spirit-enabled boldness*. They see their leaders bearing costly witness to Jesus – and they say, "We want that too! Please God, give us even more boldness to proclaim the name of Jesus, even in the face of opposition."

We talked about this last week, but it bears repeating: "Spirit-enabled boldness" is not a personality trait that some people have, and others don't. It has nothing to do with whether you are an extrovert or an introvert. It has nothing to

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do with whether you are an accomplished public speaker or someone who doesn't like to stand out in a crowd. Spirit-enabled-boldness is not having strong opinions about politics and theology. It is not the ability to state your opinions in a way that persuades other people! It's not posting long rants on Facebook or Instagram, and owning your opponents. It is not a human quality!

What it is the Spirit-enabled ability to give witness to the gospel in any and every situation no matter the consequences.

Prayer Request #1 - Spirit-enabled boldness (God-given ability to witness to the gospel in any and every situation no matter the consequences)

Second, I want you to notice what follows their prayer for boldness. Look at the end of verse 30. They ask God to HEAL, and do signs and wonders so as to leave no doubt that this message is from God! I talked about miracles in Acts a couple of weeks ago to clarify a couple of things. First, I believe that God does miracles today, in just the same way as He does in the Bible. I've seen miracles, I've experienced miracles, as I am sure many of you have as well. However, the question is whether we still have miracle-workers who can perform miracles on-demand. That I am not quite so sure about.

But my purpose isn't to get too caught up on the debate over miracles but instead to give attention to what the church is asking for. Remember: the healing of the crippled man is a sign of NEW CREATION – that is the restoration of creation (including people) and God fulfilling the promise to Abraham to bless the nations! In other words, what they are praying for is God to dispense His grace to the world through them.

Prayer Request #2 - More dispensation of God's grace (signs of the new creation, restoration, and blessing)

God's Response to their prayer

Now, let's look at how God answers their prayers: Acts 4:31

Main Point:

When the reputation of Jesus is at stake, bold prayers receive bold responses from God

Application: Lessons for Today

The "boldness" the world needs most today: Spirit-empowered, Christ-exalting, Grace-dispensing witnesses.

Now, some Christian leaders and some groups pride themselves on their "bold" witness: pointing out the evils in the culture, the compromises that other churches are making, etc. In some cases, that may be true. But often times it's not really being bold, but just being "loud". Again, the kind of boldness you see with the early church is one that is not loud and boastful about how bold they are – but one that is effectively exalting Jesus and dispensing His grace to any all around, no matter what the cost.

So as a witness of Jesus, are you dispensing grace? Healing? In the wake of your life, is there restoration, peace, and blessing? As a follower of Jesus, you should be the most drama-free person in your family circle, friendship circle, social-circle. If you stir up trouble – it's holy trouble, like Peter and John – new creation, grace-dispensing trouble. If you are going to have issues in your life, let it be because you love Jesus so much, and nothing else!

And this leads to my second point:

Bold prayers on behalf of the reputation of Jesus elicit bold responses from God

I remember the very first time I read this text. It was in one of my first theology classes in college. I asked the professor how come we don't see this kind of thing happening any more in our day. He thought for a moment, and then simply said: "Lack of faith." I have never forgotten that, because I think he's right. We don't often pray this way, and we therefore don't often see God responding in this way. But don't make the mistake of assuming that God's apparent lack of response to a reluctance on His part to show more of His power! God does do this, God wants to do this, God can do this – the real question is: are we desperate enough to ask for it? Do we want this?

I've been privileged to travel to places in Africa with ELLS International where the church really is growing at a rapid pace. And while there are real problems in a lot of the place we go in terms of doctrine and theology (which is why we

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do what we do!), there aren't problems with the way these African brothers and sisters worship and pray. You hear absolute and total desperation for God. And, you hear passionate pleas for the name of Jesus to be made known throughout their land and even beyond. I always come back from those trips deeply convicted about the shallowness of my own prayer life.

It doesn't mean we don't pray for other things – I am not saying that! But there is an imbalance in most of our prayers that needs correcting. So for me – and 'Im just being transparent here – for me, this text exposes my own spiritual apathy. It exposes my lack of faith in God's ability and God's desire to show His power on behalf of His struggling church. And my guess is that I am not alone.

After all the trauma of 2020, and even the decade leading up to it, many Christians – and I'm sure many of you as well – have grown increasingly pessimistic and discouraged about the state of our country. And rightfully so! However, the upheaval that God has allowed to come about (and again, just like it was from the hand of God in the first century, so it is from the hand of God in ours) may not necessarily be because the end is almost here – things going from bad to worse. It may be because God is poisoning us for another great awakening. Historically speaking, revivals and awakenings have closely followed on the heels of times of distress.

Asbury Revival – response to desperation!

So for me – and I'm just being transparent here – for me, this text exposes my own spiritual apathy. It exposes my lack of faith in God's ability and God's desire to show His power on behalf of His struggling church. And my guess is that I am not alone.

So let us, as a church family, commit ourselves to helping one another pray these kinds of prayers – which I believe God loves to answer!