

Main Idea: When the nations are raging against the Lord and His people, it’s time to pray. That’s what the early church did in Acts 4:23-31, and there’s much for us to learn from them. There are three scenes in our text.

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Scripture Reading: Psalm 2

Listen to something by E. M. Bounds:

“This is not a praying age; it is an age of great activity, of great movements, but on in which the tendency is very strong to stress the seen and the material and to neglect and discount the unseen and the spiritual. Prayer is the greatest of all forces because it honors God and brings Him into active aid.

“There can be no substitute, no rival for prayer; it stands alone as the great spiritual force, and this force must be imminent and acting... We cannot run our spiritual operations on the prayers of the past generation. *Many persons believe in the efficacy of prayer, but not many pray.*”²

E. M. Bounds penned those words about one hundred years ago. Edward McKendree Bounds was a lawyer in the 19th century until God called him to preach the gospel. While serving as a chaplain during the Civil War, he was captured and held prisoner in Nashville, Tennessee. After his release he became a pastor. He is most remembered, however, as an ambassador for the importance of prayer.

Perhaps Bounds’ most well known prayer observation is this one: “What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

² E. M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer*, p. 39.

The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer.”³

It’s one thing to talk about prayer—after all, who would say prayer *isn’t* important? But it’s another thing to pray.

One of the things that strikes me about the record of the early church in the book of Acts is that God was *real* in their midst. And when God is real in a church there will be evidence of it.

We’re going to see two of the evidences in our next two studies. When God is real in a church, people will get serious *about each other*—that’s what happened in Acts 4:32-37 as we’ll see next time. But first of all, as we’ll see today, when God is real in a church, people will get serious *about prayer*.

When the nations are raging against the Lord and His people, it’s time to pray. That’s what the early church did in Acts 4:23-31, and there’s much for us to learn from them. There are three scenes in our text: the problem (23), the prayer meeting (24-30), and the power (31).

I. Scene #1: The problem (23)

A couple of months had passed since Jesus returned to heaven. The Holy Spirit had come, and the followers of Christ had begun to fulfill their mission of making Christ known in the world.

One day Peter and John healed a crippled beggar at the Temple, and used the event as an opportunity to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the crowd. As a result, the church grew to some 5,000 men.

Motivated by jealousy, the Jewish leaders arrested Peter and John and put them on trial. Peter used the court setting, once again, as an occasion to proclaim Jesus. This infuriated the Sanhedrin, who told the apostles to stop preaching Jesus. Indeed, the court commanded them to be quiet.

What happened next, Luke tells us in verse 23, “On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people.” Stop there for a moment. That’s an interesting way to refer to the church, isn’t it? They went to “their own people” (to their “own company,” as the KJV puts it). In contrast with the *world’s* people, Peter and John went to their *own* people.

They’d just been with the *world’s* people and felt their hostility. Luke told us how the world’s people treated them in verses 5-22. In fact, he named some of them in verse 6: Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander. They are part of the *world’s* people. But once released, Peter and John went to their *own* people, the church.

Is that how you think of the church, as *your* people? Is that where you can’t wait to go when you face trouble? Sadly, some who profess Christ run *from* the church, and many more have no meaningful relationship with the church.

If you are a Christian, the Word teaches you to view the church as the forever family to which you belong. You are devoted to it. You do life in connection to it. It’s in the church that you find your *own* people.

If you’d like to know more about being added to this local church, I’d love to talk with you. *Added* is the term we see again and again in Acts. When people came to know Christ, they were *added to* the church and its number/membership (see 2:42, 47; 4:4; 5:14).

³ E. M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer*, p. 10.

What did Peter and John do once they assembled with the church? Verse 23 continues, “And reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.” In other words, they told them about the threats, specifically about the prohibition to speak any more in Jesus’ name (18).

Herein was the problem. There was a conflict of messages.

A. God said one thing. But...

B. Man said the opposite. What was Jesus’ command to His church in Acts 1:8? “You will be My witnesses,” He said. This wasn’t a suggestion, but a directive. Go, tell the world about Me, so they, like you, can receive the gift of eternal life.

But what did the Sanhedrin say? Don’t tell. This, too, wasn’t a suggestion, but a command. “Don’t speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus!” was the order.

Any time God says one thing and man says the opposite, you’ve got a problem on your hands. When God’s Word says that we are here by God’s creative act, and man says we are here by evolutionary process, we’ve got a problem. When God says marriage is supposed to be for life, and man says you should get out of marriage if it doesn’t make you happy, we’ve got a problem.

Are we going to affirm God’s Word or man’s word? Friends, it’s no different today, so we need to pay careful attention to what the early church did. This was a pivotal point for them. Think of what they could have done.

They could have moaned, “Oh, my! What are we going to do about this problem? Maybe we should write our Congressmen and see if he can put some pressure on the court system. No, that won’t work. We don’t have a Congressman.

Well, then, maybe we should get a petition together and send it to Caesar. No, that won’t work. Caesar doesn’t like Christians. He wants everybody to worship him.

Oh, no! What are we going to do? Maybe we should just lie low for awhile.”

Don’t take me wrong. There’s a place for writing letters to Congressmen. But don’t miss this. That wasn’t the early church’s *first* response to a problem, nor should it be ours. What was their instinctive reaction to the problem?

II. Scene #2: The prayer meeting (24-30)

I read the story about a man who took his small son with him to town one day to run some errands. When lunch time arrived, the two of them went to a familiar diner for a sandwich. The father sat down on one of the stools at the counter and lifted the boy up to the seat beside him. They ordered lunch, and when the waiter brought the food, the father said, "Son, we'll just have a silent prayer." Dad got through praying first and waited for the boy to finish his prayer, but he just sat with his head bowed for an unusually long time. When he finally looked up, his father asked him, "What in the world were you praying about all that time?" With the innocence and honesty of a child, he replied, "How do I know? It was a silent prayer."⁴

When the church met, they had a prayer meeting. I mean, they had a *real* prayer meeting. They didn’t just mouth words. They engaged in a vibrant conversation with God.

And I mean *they*. According to verse 24, they *all* prayed, not just the leaders. “When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.” How did they all pray together? It’s hard to imagine that they uttered aloud the following prayer in unison. One commentator suggests that possibly early Christian congregations repeated prayers

⁴ *Our Daily Bread*, December 12

one phrase at a time following a leader.⁵ Perhaps one person spoke as a representative for the whole congregation. Perhaps several participated vocally while they all prayed in their hearts.

One thing is for sure. They *all* prayed, and here's why. It was crisis time. If God didn't act, the church would perish.

What do you do when you know God wants you to do something that someone else is opposing? The early church prayed. Then they took action.

We can learn from them. Before us is one of the most amazing prayers in all of the Bible. What are the ingredients of God-honoring prayer? We see four of them right here.

A. Prayer should express what God is like (24). Notice how they began their prayer, "'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.'"

When we pray we mustn't just rush into the presence of God in a flippant manner. We are talking with One who is unique in power and majesty. Thus, the first ingredient of an appropriate prayer is a high view of God.

The believers in Jerusalem began their prayer with the acknowledgement of what God is like, namely, by rehearsing two of His attributes.

1. *He is sovereign.* "Sovereign Lord," they said. The Greek word is *despota*, an uncommon title for God in the New Testament. The term appears only five other times (such as in Luke 2:29; 2 Tim 2:21; Jude 4), and is the word from which we get our English word "despot." It signifies that God is the absolute master. He is the Lord.

Let that sink in. God-honoring prayer doesn't tell God what to do, but asks Him to do His will. When praying biblically we're seeking God's will to be done on earth, not man's will in heaven. He is the *despota*, the Sovereign One.

2. *He is the Creator.* "You made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them," the believers prayed.

Why did they tell God that? Why did they begin their prayer acknowledging that God is the Creator? Had God forgotten? No, God doesn't forget that but we often do.

We need the reminder. We need to express this truth to God. Why? If God made everything, then two things follow. One, He deserves honor from it all. It's His world, all of it. And two, if He could make the universe, then there's *nothing* He can't do.

What a vital way to begin a prayer—by acknowledging what God is like. Right here is one of the reasons why our prayers at times are so wimpish. We have a wimpish view of God. Once we're gripped by the reality that God is the Sovereign Lord and Creator of this universe, it will affect the way we talk to Him.

B. Prayer should express what God says (25-26). "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.'"

Do you ever struggle to know what to say to God? Is it ever hard for you to find the right words? It is for me at times. I find some practical help right here, however. Notice how the believers did two things in this second portion of their prayer.

1. *They quoted Scripture.* Specifically, they recited the first two verses of Psalm 2: "Why do the nations rage...?"

⁵ I. H. Marshall, p. 103.

This is key. When God's people worship God rightly, they always do two things. One, they reflect on the Scriptures. And two, they pray. It's been well said that prayer is our talking to God, while in the Scriptures God talks to us.⁶

The two always go together. In fact, if we want to pray rightly we must study the Scriptures rightly. And if we want to study the Scriptures rightly, we must pray rightly.

When the early church prayed, the words of Scripture came flowing off their lips. Does that happen when you pray? Do you pray Scripture back to God?

I've found it helpful to use the Lord's Prayer. I also use the Psalms, and Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1, and Ephesians 3, and Philippians 1, for starters. These prayer-passages function as handrails which guide me as I talk to God. I recommend the practice to you.

You say, "But why did they pray Psalm 2?" It wasn't coincidental. In fact, they weren't merely quoting Scripture to God. Instead...

2. *They interpreted the present in light of what God said in the past.* Psalm 2 was a royal psalm. It was originally composed for the coronation of Israel's kings. When a new king was installed in Israel, it was cause for celebration. And for potential rebellion.

The political transition from one king to another gave surrounding nations an opportunity to rattle their sabers. If the new king didn't have enough power, they might resist him, or even attack him.

You see, then as now, the world didn't like God, nor His people. And that's why the early church identified with the beginning of Psalm 2, "Why do the nations rage...against the Lord and His Anointed One?"

William Barclay comments, "The word translated *rage* is used of the neighing of spirited horses. They may trample and toss their heads; in the end they will have to accept the discipline of the reins."⁷

It's no different for people. They may rage against God and God's people, yet in the end God will prevail. But that doesn't keep them from raging.

Beloved, the battle isn't new. It was raging ten centuries before Christ in David's day. It was raging 1,900+ years ago in the early church. The world has always hated the Lord and His Anointed One, and desperately wants to snuff out both.

By the way, the rest of Psalm 2 (which the early Christians knew well, though they didn't mention it in their prayer here) shows how God responds to man's opposition. Do you know what He does? Psalm 2:4 says, "The One enthroned in heaven *laughs*; the Lord scoffs at them." He laughs! Not because it's funny but because it's tragic.

Then in verses 5-6, "He rebukes them in His anger and terrifies them in His wrath, saying, 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.'"

What's this King going to do to His rebels? The King shares a special message God gave Him in verses 7-9, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery."

Do you see what the early believers were doing? They were making sense of the present challenge by looking to what God said in the past in His Word.

Moms and Dads, do you encourage your kids to study their Bibles? That's good. We should do that, and model it. But don't just tell them what to do. We also need to help

⁶ James Boice, *Acts*, p. 88.

⁷ William Barclay, *Acts*, p. 42.

them understand *why*. Why should we study God's Word? For many reasons, and right here is a vital one. So we can make sense of what's happening in the world around us.

If you don't know God's Word, then listening to Fox News or CNN will just cause your blood pressure to rise. But knowing the Scriptures helps you interpret what you're hearing, and then enables you to pray in a God-honoring way about it.

Prayer should express what God says.

C. Prayer should express what God is doing (27-28). "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

I'm impressed by the church's perspective in prayer. Biblical prayers should reflect a high view of God and a high view of Scripture, yes. But they should also exhibit a realistic view of what God is doing in the present. This prayer certainly did. Notice what they said about the present conflict. First, they acknowledged that...

1. Men rejected God's Messiah. Why did Jesus die? Because Herod and Pontius Pilate formed a wicked coalition with the Gentiles and Israelites. The rejection of Jesus was a combined effort. All of these parties conspired against Jesus and killed Him.

Did you realize that prior to Jesus' trial Herod and Pontius Pilate were enemies? They were, but according to Luke 23:12, their mutual hatred of Jesus brought them together.

It's ironic, isn't it? Love can bring people together, but so can hatred, in a perverted sort of way. When a group of self-centered people rally together in opposition against a mutual enemy, they have a twisted, devilish sort of fellowship.

Indeed, that's why Jesus died, because evil men conspired against Him and literally rejected God's Messiah. But that's not the ultimate reason Jesus died.

This is.

2. God fulfilled His plan. Don't miss verse 28, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Please note that the early believers acknowledged their conviction concerning the sovereignty of God as they prayed. In fact, God's sovereignty is an important theme in the book of Acts (1:16; 2:23, 39, 47; 3:18), indeed throughout the whole Bible. Why would that be? Because it's bedrock reality. The God we meet in the Bible is in absolute control of everything that happens in the realm He created.

So did Herod and Pilate catch God off guard on Good Friday? Not on your life! Nothing does. It's been rightly said that God is the supreme historian who wrote all history before it ever began.⁸

Who was responsible for Jesus' death? Herod and Pilate? Yes. The Jews? Yes. We were too, for our sins put Him on that tree. But according to Peter and John (and the rest of the Bible), God orchestrated it all. God did what His hand and counsel determined beforehand would be done.

The conviction of God's sovereignty affected how the first church prayed. It should us, too. When good things come our way, we thank the Sovereign One. And when tragedy occurs, we likewise affirm our trust in the wisdom of the Sovereign One.

So prayer should express what God is like, what God says, and what God is doing.

D. Prayer should express what we need God to do (29-30). "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out

⁸ John MacArthur, *Acts*, p. 141.

your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.””

John Bunyan (who wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*) observed, “You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”

Friends, if we're going to pray biblical prayers, we need to express in clear, specific ways what we need God to do.

I'm intrigued by what these believers *didn't* ask God to do. They didn't ask Him to put their enemies out of office. They didn't ask Him to cause the persecution to ease up. Their concern wasn't for personal well-being or comfort. Instead, they asked God to do three things.

1. *Give ear to the opposition.* “Consider their threats,” they said.

Martin Luther faced severe opposition many times. Once the pope's envoy threatened him with what would happen if he didn't stop preaching the Word. They warned him that in the end he would be deserted by all his supporters.

“Where will you be then?” demanded the envoy. Luther answered, “Then as now, in the hands of God.”⁹

2. *Give us boldness.* Not relief, but boldness. Their specific words? “Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”

Why did they ask for boldness? So they could speak the word. Why did they want to want to speak the Word? Because that's what God told them to do. That's also what the Sanhedrin prohibited them to do.

Know this. It's always right to ask God to help you do what He commands. Always. We need to learn to do what the believers did, base our prayers on God's character, God's promises, and God's will. They asked God to help them do what He had commanded them to do.

Augustine said, “Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as though everything depended on you.” Phillips Brooks wrote, “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.”¹⁰

That's how the early Christians prayed. They didn't ask for protection. They asked for power. Give ear to the opposition. Give us boldness. Then came a third petition.

3. *Give evidence of the power of Jesus.* “Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

That's what God had just done, right? In the name of Jesus, He'd just restored the limbs of a forty year old cripple. Now they were asking Him to do more of the same. Why? The miracles would open up more opportunities for the message. Indeed, the miracles would confirm the message.

So should we ask God to do miraculous “signs and wonders” today like He did in Acts 3? We can certainly ask God for anything, for He's a generous Father that loves to give good gifts to His children. But to ask Him to do signs and wonders is to ask Him to do something that had a purpose that has been fulfilled.

During the transition time between Jesus' return to heaven and the completion of the New Testament, God did signs and wonders. We're seeing one in Acts 3. And why? God did this to confirm the message of the apostles. That's what Hebrews 2:3-4 says.

⁹ William Barclay, *Acts*, p. 42.

¹⁰ In Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, p. 418.

But there are no apostles today. They did miraculous signs, as Jesus said they would, and confirmed the message of Jesus, which they and their associates (like John Mark, Luke, and Jude) wrote down in the record of the New Testament.

So there's no need today for signs and wonders as there was in the first century.

But that doesn't mean we don't need for God to do amazing things, even miraculous things today. We do. We need Him to get people's attention. We need Him to authenticate the truth of His Word in a skeptical world.

And what we need, He continues to do. He restores broken marriages. He sets people free who've been enslaved to alcohol and drugs. At times He grants physical healing. God hears the prayers of His people, and grants their requests. Sometimes He answers yes, sometimes no, but always so people will receive what they need most.

Himself.

Indeed, every time God saves a sinner it's the miraculous evidence of the power of Jesus' name. No one is too far gone for Jesus. No one.

Beloved, I believe we ought to be asking God to do great things in our day. In our prayer meetings, and in our prayer closets. Not to make life easy, but so people will see and affirm the power and beauty of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

John Newton said it well, "*Thou art coming to a King, large petitions with thee bring, for His grace and power are such none can ever ask too much.*"

Scene #1—the problem. Scene #2—the prayer meeting.

III. Scene #3: The power (31)

"After they prayed." Stop there. We can do more than pray, but we should do nothing until we pray. They prayed, and *after* they prayed here's what happened...

"The place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." God gave two amazing demonstrations of His power that day.

A. God did something to the place. The building shook. That was one of the signs of a theophany in the Old Testament (Ex 19:18; Isa 6:4). God gave them a physical manifestation of His presence, just like He did at Pentecost. He wanted them to know He'd heard their plea, so He did something to the place. Also...

B. God did something to His people. So that two things happened...

1. *They were filled with the Holy Spirit.* This wasn't a "second Pentecost." There can't be another Pentecost any more than there can be another Calvary. Pentecost was a one-time historical event. The Holy Spirit came to earth and formed the Church one time, and He hasn't left since.

But His filling is different. We experience the Spirit's baptism one time, the moment we trust Christ. But we experience His filling more than once (see Eph 5:18). This was a fresh filling in Acts 4:31. Some of these very people were filled back in Acts 2:4, but they needed a fresh filling for the task at hand.

2. *They spoke the Word boldly.* Don't miss the connection. The evidence of the Spirit's filling is the people's bold speaking.

Do you see the significance? What did the people pray for in verse 29? Boldness to speak. And what did God give them in verse 31? Boldness to speak. God answered their prayer by filling them with His Spirit, and as a result they spoke boldly for Christ.

And the church moved ahead, not without opposition, but in spite of it.

Take Inventory: We will not pray as we ought if...three things are true.

We will not pray as we ought if...

1. *We don't view God as the first church did.*

Do you know God? Do you know Him personally? The truth is, we do not know Him naturally. We enter this world cut off from Him, blind to Him, prone to misrepresent Him.

But in His grace He revealed Himself to us in this book. And ultimately, He sent His Son into the world to reconcile us right into His family. His Son died for sinners, and rose again for their salvation.

To know God you must come to know His Son, Jesus the Christ, as your Lord and Savior. If you want to know God, call upon His Son right now and ask Him to save you.

But there's more to this point. We will not pray, even as saved people, if we don't view God as the first church did. They knew He was sovereign. They knew He was sufficient and wise and good. And it showed in the way they prayed.

We will not pray as we ought if...

2. *We don't view ourselves as the first church did.*

When asked to explain the secret of his remarkable ministry, Charles Spurgeon said, "My people pray for me."

Many of us in the American church seem to have forgotten something very basic. We *really* need God.

The early church knew that. They were desperate for God. The essence of their prayer in Acts 4 was this, "If you don't help us, God, it's all over!"

We lack that kind of "holy desperation." We've lost our sense of urgency. Know this. We won't experience power in prayer until we admit our weakness.

We will not pray as we ought if...

3. *We don't take steps to mortify our pride as the first church did.*

Proud people do not pray. They don't spend time in private prayer, nor in public prayer. And they won't until they consciously, by God's grace, take steps to kill their pride and cultivate a heart of humility. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble," says James 4:6.

The first thing I do in the morning is go to my study in the basement, read my Bible, and pray. I do it *first* thing and here's one of the main reasons. I'm a proud man. I know my default is to try and live the upcoming day in my own strength and for my own purposes. I need to take steps to mortify my pride and pursue humility.

Am I saying you need to begin your day the way I do? No. But I am saying that you must take concrete steps every day to put the stake through your pride, in the way you begin your day, and finish it. Then, and only then, will you/we pray and thus experience the supply of God's grace as the first church did.

Let's learn from the first church today. It's time to pray.