

The Prayer of the Believers: Acts 4:1-31

24 November 2024

INTRODUCING THE THEME

This is our final sermon in the prayer series we have been doing. Over four weeks, we have looked at the prayers of four people who lived in close relationship with God. Prayer was not a one-sided process for any of them, but a conversation with the living God. Those prayers and conversations with God changed people as individuals and equipped them to deal with the situations they faced.

Today we come to a passage in the book of Acts. To put this in context, Jesus has been raised from the dead and returned to Heaven. The Holy Spirit has come upon the disciples, and they are now carrying on the work that they saw Jesus doing.

We are going to watch a short video to find out what John and Peter were up to in Acts 3, so we have the context for reading from Acts 4 later in the service.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz0HptfaN0s>

1 min 44

SERMON

As I mentioned earlier, this is the final sermon on prayer and we are going to spend a moment to recap what we have looked at in this series.

We started with two prayers based on our need to be living in God's ways and not the ways of the world.

In the Old Testament, Moses prayed, '**Teach me Your ways...**' (Ex. 33) Moses did not want to live without God's presence because in God he had found the path of life. Moses wanted to live his life God's way, in God's presence.

Then, in the New Testament, we looked at Jesus praying for those who believed in Him, '**Sanctify them by Your truth – Your word is truth.**' (John 17:17) Jesus prayed for us to be set apart from the ways of the world through the truth of the Word of God. For that setting apart to happen, we need to know what the Bible says *and to let it change us* – the way we think, the way we behave, the choices we make. Like Moses, we need to desire God's ways and choose to welcome them into our lives.

Then there were two prayers that were a response to terrible circumstances.

Elisha was a prophet who faithfully served God. This angered the King of Aram who sent an army to kill Elisha. An army of soldiers against one man of God! Understandably, Elisha's servant was overwhelmed with fear at the sight and the thought of disaster. Elisha did not pray against the fear, nor did he pray for his servant to have courage. Instead, he asked God to '**Open his eyes, so that he may see.**' (2 Kings 6)

Last week, we saw what happened when the nation of Judah turned back to God and His ways. A combined force of three armies were sent against them. Three armies against one nation of God. The response of King Jehoshaphat was to gather the people of Judah to take a stand in faith, praying, '**We will stand in Your presence... and will cry out to You in our distress, and You will hear us and save us.**' (2 Chron. 20:2-18) They saw the deliverance of God.

These prayers were not empty words.

We have been believers for different lengths of time here, but just take a moment to consider how many times you have prayed the Lord's prayer. Hundreds of times? Thousands?

One of the lines that we have prayed each of those times is to ask that God's will be done and God's kingdom come on Earth as in Heaven.

But what does God's kingdom coming on Earth as in Heaven look like?

Elisha prayed for his servant to see, and as a result he could see God's chariots of fire on the hillside around them: something of God's kingdom came on Earth.

Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah prayed for deliverance, and the armies they faced were miraculously routed by God: something of God's kingdom came on Earth.

Today we have a passage of the New Testament where we see something of God's kingdom coming on Earth as in Heaven.

As we saw earlier, this story starts in Acts 3 with two of Jesus's disciples, John and Peter. They were men who had been taught God's ways by Jesus. They had been sanctified, set apart from the world's ways, by the truth of the word of God. Their eyes were opened to see the spiritual dynamic of the situations they faced. They knew the value of praying in agreement together in the presence of God, whatever the circumstances. They were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and they healed someone in the name of Jesus.

Whilst many rightly rejoiced and praised God for this miracle, there were those who were 'greatly disturbed' by this miracle.

The foundational point here is that there is power in the name of Jesus. When we speak and act in the name of Jesus, we release something of God's will and kingdom to be established on Earth as in Heaven. That matters. It is vital that we do this.

The will of God that Jesus preached and lived out is seen in Isaiah 61:

He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Isaiah 61:1-3

Jesus' ministry was and is about restoring men and women to wholeness. He came to bring salvation once and for all through His blood shed for us at Calvary. Without that, we cannot come to God the Father and spend eternity with Him. This is not about being a good person by the standards of the world – it is about accepting that we need salvation through Jesus Christ.

However, Satan opposes that salvation. After all, Jesus did the will of God and consistently experienced opposition so we should be prepared and equipped for that. When Jesus healed and restored a man possessed by demons in Matthew 12:24, the question for the Pharisees was where Jesus got the necessary power and authority from. The Pharisees decided that:

"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

But Jesus responded, "²⁶ If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

The Pharisees' logic made no sense, but they did not want to acknowledge that Jesus was acting in the power of God. The Holy Spirit of God *was* at work and the kingdom of God *was* being established around them, but the Pharisees wanted no part of it.

When we remember that episode, the exchange we see in Acts 4 between the religious leaders and the disciples seems rather familiar, because the critical question was this:

“By what power or by what name have you done this?” (v.7)

Peter responded,

⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed...¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” (NIV)

The New King James Version translates part of verse 10 as,

By Him this man stands here before you whole (NKJV)

The religious leaders and their family members (all gathered to deal with just two men of God) were all highly educated men, trained and experienced in the ways of public speaking and debate. They were an intimidating group of men to face for an uneducated fisherman. But Peter was no ordinary fisherman now. He was a man who had lived alongside Jesus, witnessing the kingdom of God coming on Earth as Jesus touched lives and made people whole in body, mind and spirit. Peter was a man who had seen the Scriptures fulfilled in Jesus. By the name of Jesus, Peter stood before them whole. He was a changed man; now filled with the Holy Spirit to speak God’s words with authority. In verse 13 we read that the religious leaders realised that John and Peter had been with Jesus: there was no other explanation for the authority with which the disciples spoke.

In the face of the evident and undeniable work of Jesus, the religious authorities started working out how to stop it happening again. They took a stand against the name of Jesus and against God’s kingdom coming on Earth as in Heaven. For preference, they would have denied that there had been a miracle (verses 14 and 16), but there were too many people who had seen it happen! So the second option was to command John and Peter not to speak again in the name of Jesus, ‘so that it spreads no further’. (verse 17-18) They could do whatever they wanted, as long as it did not involve speaking or acting in the name of Jesus. That is how powerful and transformative this name is.

The apostle Paul had a remarkable testimony. He had started off as one of these religious leaders who opposed Jesus, violently persecuting those who followed Him. When on trial in Acts 26, Paul said this,

⁹ “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible **to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth**. ¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.”

He had committed his life to stopping anyone speaking or acting in the name of Jesus. That obsession with aggressively persecuting Christians clearly indicates that there was a spiritual force at work. It was only after he met Christ that Paul was able to see that he had been opposing the name of Jesus and had been part of that kingdom clash against those who believed that salvation came through Jesus.

The disciples, however, refused to comply. They took a stand for Jesus, for doing God’s will and seeing His kingdom come. John and Peter had been set apart from the world of the religious leaders by their time with Jesus and they could not, would not, go back to the way things had been before they met Jesus. They lived for God’s kingdom alone, because that was where they found life, truth and wholeness.

I think we see something of what they felt when we read the words of the prophet Jeremiah, when he was fed up with the backlash he got when he spoke God’s word to the people:

‘But if I say, “I will not mention His word or speak anymore in His name,” His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.’ Jeremiah 20:9

As with Jeremiah, if the disciples had tried to stop talking about Jesus and acting in His name, they would have struggled. It was their calling, their purpose, their life. On an earlier occasion, when asked if he would leave Jesus, Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.” John 6:68-69

Peter and John had found the one who brought wholeness, life in all its fullness and meaning. They were financially poor but spiritually rich. They were part of God’s mission of bringing wholeness and life to others. How could they leave Jesus and His ways? That was not an option for them. Speaking and acting in the name of Jesus was the whole purpose and point of their lives. It could not be removed from them.

This is the background, the context, to the prayer of the believers. Following this experience, John and Peter rejoined their companions. There are times with the Bible when I like to look at what did *not* happen, as well as what *did* happen. What did not happen: John and Peter did not whinge or complain about how unfair it was that they were arrested but simply reported what had happened. In response, their companions did not problem-solve, try to fix things, launch a campaign to complain to the authorities, or rush out to tell someone else what had happened.

The believers dealt with the spiritual situation together, in agreement, as a team, as a family.

- They raised their voice (singular) to God with one accord (v.24)
- They proclaimed God’s authority over all creation (v.24)
- They used the word of God for context to the spiritual situation, referring to Psalm 2:1-2 and the spiritual truth that the Pharisees’ opposition was to Jesus Himself. (vv. 25-27)
- They asked God to deal with the threats of the religious leaders so that they could focus on their mission, doing God’s will in the name of Jesus. (v.29-30)

When we take our own understanding and attempts to deal with situations out of the equation, it is much easier to come into agreement...

The believers were in agreement about God’s ultimate authority over all created things and over all situations on Earth.

The believers were in agreement that there was a spiritual dynamic to the situation so it was for God to deal with the threats and for them to stay in God’s presence and will.

They were in agreement that they needed to continue with the Isaiah 61 ministry of Jesus, acting in the power of His name, and bringing something of God’s kingdom onto Earth as in Heaven.

Following this time of prayer, the place where they assembled was shaken, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the Word of God with boldness.

What can we take away from this?

Firstly, and very simply, that these points are a good starting point for us as we come to our day of prayer on Saturday.



Secondly, what really struck me in Acts 3 was that Peter, said, “Look at us!” Look at us... Over the years we have been in this building, we have often been frustrated and disappointed that we have not seen the fulfilment of our vision for this place to be a thriving ‘seven day a week Christian Life Centre’. We have lots going on, but we have not seen all that we hoped for and expected.

But how does God see us? I believe His word for St. Andrew's is this, from Revelation 3:8, 'I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.' They were faithful and God opened a great and effective door for them to do His will and to bring His kingdom on Earth as in Heaven.

We are a people who value and proclaim the name of Jesus and His word. We have held this place in the name of Jesus, faithfully and with determination. That should not be underestimated. Having the person of Jesus, the name of Jesus, the mission of Jesus at the heart of all we do and say is essential.

Jesus is all we have to offer. It is Jesus alone who brings salvation, healing, unity, understanding, wholeness and peace. He alone has purity of heart.

Next Saturday, let's gather together as believers who have found that Jesus has the words of eternal life, that He is the holy one of God and that there is power in His name.

Let's pray.

We pray as Moses did: Teach us your ways so we may know You and continue to find favour with You.

We pray as Elisha did: Open our eyes so that we may see (more of the kingdom of God coming on Earth as in Heaven).

We pray as Jesus did: Sanctify us by Your word – Your word is truth. (Let us be set apart by You and for You, so we can help others become whole in the name of Jesus).

We pray as Jehoshaphat did: We will stand in Your presence... and You will hear us and save us.

We pray as the disciples did: Grant to us that we may speak Your word with all boldness. Stretch out Your hand to heal. May signs and wonders be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.

We ask that:

¹⁷ ... the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give us the Spirit^[f] of wisdom and revelation, so that we may know Him better. ¹⁸ We pray that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened in order that we may know the hope to which He has called us, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people, ¹⁹ and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (Ephesians 1:17-21)

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.