

The Believers' Prayer for Boldness: Acts 4:24-31

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This prayer from Acts 4:23-31 is recognized as the believers' prayer for boldness. It is loosely modeled after Hezekiah's prayer in Isa 37:16-20, and it generally fits the pattern of most of the prayers in the Bible. It contains most of the aspects of common biblical prayers except one – confession. It is heavy on the exaltation of God and very brief and specific with regard to the petitions being made. Those petitions, as we'll see, align perfectly with God's will.

Context

The section that this prayer falls within has its beginning at the start of Acts 3 and concludes just after the prayer. We begin in Acts 3:1-10, which recounts Peter's healing of the lame beggar outside the temple. The beggar was hoping for monetary aid from Peter and John, but Peter offered more than the beggar had imagined. The formerly lame beggar leaped to his feet and danced around giving praise to God. The people who had witnessed this miracle were astonished at what had happened, and so they assembled to hear what Peter might have to say about it.

Given the opportunity that had arisen from the gathering of people to the miraculous event, Peter preached to the crowd in the temple square. This message is recorded in Acts 3:11-26. He didn't simply explain the power behind the miracle as the crowd has expected, but instead he called for Jews to repent for their treatment of Jesus, whom they had rejected and killed. He was boldly provoking the crowd by invoking the name of the revered Jewish patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. In all reality, his message was all at once informational, exhortational, and confrontational. However, Peter wasn't interested in making the Jews mad as much as he was calling them to repentance and faith. He wanted them to turn away from their wickedness and turn toward Jesus.

The immediate context of the prayer portion of the passage finds Peter and John being questioned by the Jewish Sanhedrin, most of whom were Sadducees who had become greatly

annoyed by their preaching of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. For this, the apostles were arrested and taken into custody. Meanwhile, many of the people who witnessed the miracle and had heard Peter's preaching were convinced and believed. Acts 4:4 tells us that the believers numbered as much as 5,000 at this point, which was growth from about 3,000 at Pentecost, demonstrating the rapid advancement of the early church. While the Jewish authorities were feeling threatened by this Christian preaching and teaching, a multitude of Jewish people were becoming convinced and converted into Christians.

After the Sanhedrin had weighed their options regarding what to do with Peter and John, they decided to release them conditionally. Their condition, stated in Acts 4:18, was that the apostles discontinue preaching in the name of Jesus. We see their internal dialogue leading to this decision in Acts 4:16-17. On one hand, they didn't want them to continue preaching in Jesus' name and captivating the Jewish people with their "false" teaching. On the other hand, they recognized the seemingly miraculous nature of the healing at the temple, and they knew that the popularity the apostles had earned with the Jewish people would make it dangerously unpopular for them to prosecute Peter and John. The apostles' response to this condition was, as we might expect, to reject it on the grounds that they must answer to a greater authority – namely God. When they were released, Peter and John reconvened with their friends and reported what had happened to them in custody. This leads up to the content of the prayer.¹

Content

v.24

Just before the actual prayer begins, in Acts 4:24, we see something notable and significant. The believers "lifted their voices together to God." Quite simply, the believers prayed together. This

¹ I completed the required reading for the course. They were fantastic books!

could generally be taken one of two ways. Either they all prayed out loud in unison, or one of them prayed as a representative voice of the rest. The first option, a prayer in unison, seems like it would require a great deal of preparation or a miracle in and of itself. In this context, it seems more likely that one person offered the prayer which was a summary of the thoughts and convictions of the whole group.² The Greek verb used here, ὁμοθυμαδὸν, gives the sense that the prayer was said in unanimity, with one mind, with one purpose, and with common consent.

This first section of v.24 stresses the corporate aspect of prayer. Immediately after their release, Peter and John hurried to be back with their own people. Once they had shared the news, the first order of business was to pray together in response to the situation. Despite the difficult situation they had found themselves in, prayer was not the final recourse, but the primary one. As Kistemaker put it, the believers “find their strength and courage in intimate communion with God, for they realize that he rules in this world and will overrule the threats of the Sanhedrin.”³ That strength and courage also comes from community with each other, a blessed communion which is a glimpse of the delight we’ll have in eternity with our fellow believers. While our relationship with our Lord right now is by faith and not by sight, it is to our advantage to congregate with our fellow faithful in mutual building up and exhortation. Particularly in times of difficulty, this shows us how we should run to our community of believers in order to share in the trials and delights of life as well as to lift each other up in the most effective way – to pray with one another.

The second half of v.24 marks the beginning of the prayer. The believers address their appeal to Δέσποτα, which can be translated into English as lord, sovereign lord, or master. This initial address demonstrates the posture in which the believers sought to approach God in prayer.

² Darrel L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 203-204.

³ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1990), 166.

Especially if we are to translate the first word as “sovereign lord,” we see the prayer commence by recognizing that the God to whom they are praying is able to grant their requests. Just as a servant might speak to his master, an employee to a boss, or an obedient child to a parent, this is a sign by the believers of recognition of and submission to authority.

Acts 4:24 goes on by continuing in adoration and recognition of the powerful God to whom they are praying. The wording in this phrase, “who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them,” is almost exactly the same as Ps 146:6 and is strikingly similar to Ex 20:11, Neh 9:6, and Isa 37:16.⁴ God’s power in creation is the focus of these verses, and because he is the creator, he also maintains total sovereignty over everything that happens in the created order. Because God has full control over nature, he has full control over human affairs as well.⁵ Not only does he have total sovereignty in the lives of believers, but he controls even the lives of those who rebel against him. This is precisely why the apostles so readily and hurriedly come to the throne in prayer, because they are aware that the Lord is able to answer them according to his will. This element of prayer isn’t merely an example of paying lip service to the attributes of God, but they believed in their hearts the declarations they were making in the opening of this prayer. They believed in the power of the sovereign Lord and they fully expected him to answer their prayers. As we’ll see, they were confident that their petition lined up with God’s will, and so they approached the throne boldly. The Lord confirmed this by the rapidity of his response to the prayer.

As we reflect on this confidence in God and confidence in prayer, we must ask ourselves if we truly pray in this same manner. Do we fill our prayers with adoration for our Lord as the believers in the early church did? When we do paint some of our prayers with adoration, do we do so hoping that it might qualify the petitions and supplications of our prayers, or do we do so because we love our Lord so much that we seek to align our will with his? In a more basic manner, we should ask ourselves if our prayers are about us or if they’re about God. As we’ll continue to see, the apostles

⁴ Kistemaker, *Acts*, 166.

⁵ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 199.

and other believers depicted in Acts are praying for the interests of the Lord and not themselves. Their primary focus was on the life to come, and not on the comforts of the present.

vv.25-27

In the first half of Acts 4:25 we find a statement regarding the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the mouthpiece of David. Regarding this verse, Kistemaker noted that “the early Christians had a penchant for referring to David and quoting from the Psalter.”⁶ The book of Psalms and the story of David, really the entire Old Testament were very near and dear to the hearts of the early church. This was the Scripture they had at the time. Not surprisingly, many of the early Christian converts were former Jews who had been convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Preaching and prayers like these in Acts 3-4 are evidence of how the gospel advanced in the Jewish community. As we seek the Lord in prayer, we ought to keep in mind the way that the Lord has demonstrated he likes to work in people and in the world throughout history. We ought to pay special attention to the way in which God’s people have approached the Lord in prayer in the past. The prayers in the Bible teach us how to pray today. In a broader sense, we may see how God’s people understood him, related to him, trusted him, and loved him in the past. This teaches us how to do those very things in the present and in the future.

This passage points out one essential aspect of prayer that we must glean from the early church – it is powerful to repeat God’s word back to him in prayer. It is good to quote Scripture in prayer and it is good to pray the concepts that Scripture teaches us as well. Prayers in the Bible have a lot of both examples, and this passage contains both. In v.25b through v.26 we see a literal quotation from Ps 2. This particular quotation from the Psalter, a direct citation from the LXX version of Ps 2:1-2, is very appropriately used in the context of this passage. The believers saw this as a messianic prophecy and considered the prophecy applicable in their current

⁶ Kistemaker, *Acts*, 167.

situation. Acts 4:27 provides us with the key to understanding their interpretation of Ps 2 in this situation. In Acts 4:25b, corresponding to Psalm 2:1, the “Gentiles” refers to the Romans and their involvement in the events of the crucifixion. The “peoples” in the same verse refers to the Israelites, who conspired with the Gentiles against our Lord. In Acts 4:26, corresponding to Ps 2:2, we have reference to the “kings of the earth,” who are understood to represent Herod and Pontius Pilate. Of course, the Lord’s “Anointed” in Acts 4:26b, linked with Ps 2:2b, refers to God’s “holy servant” Jesus.

The words of the Law were written in the hearts and minds of the believers in the early church, especially the Jewish converts. As they prayed, it was natural for them to quote God’s word verbatim. It was also natural for God’s word to shape the thoughts and words of men and transform them. In this way, the words are those of God’s people, but they are informed by knowledge and love of Scripture. Believers often poured out their hearts by reminding God of his revelation, of his works, and of his covenant promises. Previously we saw that there were at least four passages that used terminology of the creation of heaven and earth and the sea and everything in it. This is essentially a hybrid of literal and conceptual recitation of Scripture in prayer. It uses words that are nearly a literal quotation of the Bible as well as a conceptual understanding God’s power in creation. Believers used Scripture in so many ways during their prayers that the bulk of most of their prayers were saying God’s word, either literally or conceptually, back to him.

Scripture penetrated every aspect of their beings and therefore it affected how they thought, spoke, acted, and prayed. What does it look like for that to be true for us? In the day we live in, where we are deluged with distractions, is it even possible for us to be as soaked in Scripture as our brothers and sisters were in the past? We must be dripping with Scripture in the same way as

those that have come before us. We mustn't just use it now and then as a reference tool, but we must internalize it and have it penetrate our souls. It is the living Word, after all, and so it has the power to impact us powerfully in this way. Practically, that means that it doesn't do us nearly as much good to flip through the Bible, pick out a seemingly appropriate passage, and include it in our prayer. While that practice can be useful in many cases, it is more powerful and significant for Scripture to flow out of our natural speech and writing as it did in this prayer and as it did over and over in the speech and writing of the God's people throughout history. Of course, this means that we must find time and make time to drench our souls with God's word. Simply reading the Bible is an indirect yet most effective way to improve our prayer lives.

v.28

We continue in our passage with Acts 4:28, which is a continuation of the thoughts of the previous verse. The believers are affirming in their prayer that the atrocities of the crucifixion were predestined by the hand and will of God. This is a powerful testament to the power of the Holy Spirit. Roughly two months prior, Jesus' disciples were completely devoid of any understanding of why Jesus had to leave and why he had to die. Now, after Pentecost, they understand the recent events to have been circumstances foreordained by God. Because of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the believers understood why God would have to use such difficult means to achieve his purposes. They were also prepared to face "whatever" the Lord willed, whether it be mockery, beatings, false accusations, unwarranted incarceration, or even execution – events such as those experienced by Jesus.

This one verse leaves us with at least two important points to consider. One point is that nothing good can be accomplished without the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the primary active agent in the unfolding of God's plan. Calvin points out that the events of things are not

only ordered by the counsel of God, but they are also seen to be by the hand of God.⁷ This speaks to his wisdom and his power. There isn't anything we can do, per se, to capitalize on that fact, except to embrace it as truth. Knowing that all good works originate from the Lord and not from our own well-intentioned efforts is a powerful and freeing piece of information. Thus, as we pray to the Lord, we should expect not only for his will to be done, but for it to be done by his Holy Spirit. Our own wills are a sort of secondary means, used to accomplish God's tasks here on earth. We should pray for our wills to be bent toward the Lord's so that the actions of our lives aren't a struggle against God's will, but are in conformity to it.

The second point is that the Lord has indeed foreordained the events of our lives. More broadly, we should understand that right theology leads to more proper and effective prayer. Specifically, this means that we ought to bear in mind the doctrine of predestination as we pray. How might this understanding affect the way we pray? In a negative way, an improper understanding of predestination might lead us to a view of prayer as a restricted endeavor. If the events of our lives are already set before us, the argument might go, then why should we pray for them? This is the over-Reformed or hyper-Calvinistic extreme to which most people don't deviate. In response, we may give an explanation of the way God uses people and their prayers as a secondary means. God's word tells us to pray, and those prayers aren't restricted to be solely prayers of adoration and confession. We must understand that our petitions and supplications are effectual, so long as our requests conform to God's will.

More often, however, the error goes in the other direction. We fail to recall that God is sovereign over the events of our lives and so we pray self-centered prayers of despair or fail to pray at all. Those that are mindful of God's sovereignty and have a general sense of God's use

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Calvin's Commentaries XVIII; trans. H. Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 187.

of prayers as a secondary means will pray most effectively. They understand that God is in control and seek to understand his will rather than merely asking for divine intervention in the difficulties of life. They recognize that God may indeed intervene in a miraculous way, but apart from any apparent intervention, they approach the throne in an attempt to understand God's will in their lives. They look at the events of their lives and ask God what they are to learn from them. They are willing to endure any hardships that God has ordained for their benefit or for his. At their best, these kinds of prayers are more about God and his kingdom rather than in self-interest. It requires a deep confidence in the goodness of God and trust in his wisdom.

v.29

The next verse in the passage, Acts 4:29, finally moves to the single specific petition of the prayer. It marks the shift from God to man, but even this isn't a self-centered petition. The request the believers make is for the sovereign Lord to acknowledge the threats directed at the church and grant them boldness to proclaim *his* word in the midst of them. They have asked the Lord for help in accomplishing the task he has set before them. Their prayer is necessary because, as we recall, the Sanhedrin had precisely commanded them *not* to preach in the name of Jesus. They were asking for the Lord's help to defy the local authorities in order to please God and not men. Note what they have not asked for: they have not asked the Lord to deliver them from the opposition. That would have been a justifiably human prayer to pray, to ask for the Lord's protection from enemies. David prayed this way numerous times in the Psalter, and it is neither sinful nor in any way improper for us to do so. However, that is simply not what we see in this passage. The believers merely want to continue in doing the Lord's work and they recognize that this required boldness in the face of powerful opposition. Their petition was right and godly.

v.30

It is difficult to know whether v.30 is a continuation of the believers' petition for boldness or recognition of the work that they are convinced the Lord is going to do anyway. Essentially, they are asking for God to authenticate the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ by continuing to perform signs and wonders. Remarkably, they acknowledge that the miracles being performed by the apostles were actually works of the Lord being done in the name of Jesus. They weren't asking for miracles to occur for their own confirmation of faith or their own demonstration of power. Instead, they were interested in the advancement of the name of Jesus. Again, their prayer was about God and not about themselves.

v.31

Acts 4:31 gives us a unique glimpse of a prayer that is immediately answered. Normally biblical prayers are not answered so immediately or in an obvious way such as this one. This verse tells us that the place in which they were gathered was visibly shaken and that they were filled with the Holy Spirit in order to continue speaking in Christ's name with boldness. By shaking the gathering place, God let them know right in that instant that he had heard their prayer. How terrifying and exciting that must have been! We also see that the Holy Spirit came to empower the believers for future ministry. Since this is a post-Pentecost event, we must not understand this in the same way as Pentecost, as if the believers went from without the Spirit to the indwelling of the Spirit. Rather, this must be understood as the believers receiving an extra measure of the power of the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish a specific task – to proceed with boldness. This they did, as ordinary believers took the opportunity to share the gospel with unbelievers wherever they went.⁸

⁸ Peterson, *Acts*, 203. Cf. Acts 8:4;11:19.

Before, we discussed the need for the Holy Spirit to act in order for any good to come from us, God's hands and feet here on earth. Now, we see that a sort of "extra dose" of the Holy Spirit can be given to accomplish certain God-ordained tasks. We may apply this concept to our prayer lives by asking the Lord to grant such an additional measure of the Spirit in order to engage in certain tasks, particularly those that are an effort to advance the kingdom of God. We can be confident that God can and will *immediately* answer such prayers if they are in accord with his will. Therefore, we should pray before we do *anything* in ministry! This is obvious and intuitive, for sure, but we must think of it not just as God granting us help or strength in order to accomplish a task, but rather as God filling us with the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish the task on our behalf. Isn't it clear that the Lord is better at ministry than we are? If so, then we ought to go to his throne in prayer in every case, asking him to lead us in our human ministry endeavors. If we see it as the Lord doing his own work *through* us, we will be much more apt to rightly view our role in his kingdom. We are his hands and feet, not his mind and his heart.

Conclusion

The recurring theme throughout this prayer is recognition of God as the hearer and object of the prayer. This prayer for boldness of the believers in Acts 4 was made with God's sovereign power in mind and with God's kingdom in their hearts. Their prayer was not centered on themselves, but instead centered on God. When we pray, we should pray not only with the recognition that God is listening and can answer our prayer, but also with focus on God's will, God's word, and God's kingdom. Our petitions should align with the things that God wants to accomplish in this world in order for their effectiveness to be maximized from our perspective. Ultimately, we should seek to know and follow God's perspective as we pray.