



The Prayer ... Praying as They Prayed
Acts 4:23-31

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[Video] I love comedian Jon Crist because he makes us laugh at things we do in church. Every church in America is decorated with wood panels, even ours. In past generations, the church was decorated by Michelangelo. Today, the church is decorated by Jim Bob at Home Depot. And when we think about the early church, how did Jesus start a church without a band and an LED screen?

This week, I read Francis Chan's new book *Letters to the Church*, in which he exposes the fact the American church looks very different from churches in other parts of the world, and very different from the church we read about in the book of Acts. And I want to share some things he wrote.

"God designed the Church to be more than what the majority of us experience in America."¹ "The early church didn't need energetic music, great videos, attractive leaders, or elaborate lighting to be excited about being a part of God's body. The pure gospel was enough to put them in a place of awe."²

Francis often takes church leaders through an exercise, listing all the things people expect from their church – strong children's ministry, great band to lead worship, great communicator, strong leader, convenient parking, clean restrooms, gourmet coffee, and wood panels. Then he lists the commands of the New Testament, the things God expects from the church – love one another, go and make disciples, do the work of an evangelist, devotion to prayer, generous giving, and care for the orphans and widows. Then Francis asks church leaders, "Would the people in your church be more upset if the things on the first list were missing or the things on the second list?"³ Then he said, "We must differentiate between what we want and what God commands."⁴

But under pressure to be relevant, he writes, we "think if we offer just the right services or package the gospel in just the right way so that no one gets offended, we can convince people to stay ... If the sacred is not enough, then let them walk away ... By catering our worship to the worshipers and not to the Object of our worship, I fear we have created human-centered churches."⁵

Francis says the early church was not strategizing on how to attract people or keep them interested; they were only concerned with what would please God most.⁶ Yet, he writes, "the Church in America is constantly looking for the next new thing ... and by trying to keep everyone interested and excited, we've created a cheap substitute."⁷ Francis says we've replaced "devotion" with "atmosphere."⁸

That's why we are studying the book of Acts this fall. To get back to our roots and to be the church God wants us to be.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. It is filled with stories of incredible people. And what inspired them and sparked a movement was the resurrection of Jesus Christ! They heard His teaching, they witnessed

His miracles, and they were there when He was horribly crucified. And amazingly, they saw Him alive again, proving He was the Son of God and proving that everything He said was true. They were convinced it was true, they were compelled to talk about it, and they were courageous to a take stand at great risk. These first Christians are our mentors, and we need their 1st century passion for our 21st century world. So, our prayer this fall is that their passion would revive our passion, that their courage would revive our courage. The story continues, and it's still about Jesus. The mission continues, and today, in our generation, it's up to us to take the gospel across the street and around the world.

Last week, we looked at Acts 3-4, when Peter performed a miracle on the steps of the temple. Peter declared the man was healed by the power of the name of Jesus. And we learned from these two chapters that the miracle proves the power of His name to heal, and the miracle points to the power of His name to save. As Peter said, "There is salvation in no one else, there is no other name ... by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12). Peter and John were arrested, interrogated, and warned to stop speaking about the name of Jesus. Acts 4:23 tells us what happened next.

As soon as they were released, Peter and John returned to the other believers and told them what the chief priests and elders had said. When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God. "O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them, you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our father David, your servant, saying, 'Why are the nations angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will. And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, boldness to speak your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power, may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they prayed was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:23-31, NLT).

This is an actual prayer of the early church. It's as if we were there. It's as if we were listening in. We can hear their faith. We can feel the mood in the room. This is how the early Christians prayed. May we pray as they prayed.

GOD'S AUTHORITY

How did they pray? *They prayed believing that God's authority was greater than any other.* What God said mattered more than what the religious leaders said. "As soon as they were released, Peter and John returned to the other believers and told them what the chief priests and elders had said. When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God. 'O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them' " (Acts 4:23-24).

First, look at the phrase in the middle. "All the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God." With oneness, unity, and purpose, all crying out to God together, all praising God together.

They acknowledged Him as the “Creator of heaven and earth.” The creator of the earth is certainly greater than any power on the earth. David said, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made ... He spoke, and it came to be” (Psalm 33:6, 9). Isaiah said, “For the Lord, who created the heavens and who formed the earth ... says, ‘I am the Lord, and there is no other’ ” (Isaiah 45:18, ESV). Paul said, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... and he gives life and breath and everything else ... For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:24, 25, 28, NIV).

They called Him “Sovereign Lord.” Sovereignty means that God is above and beyond everyone and everything. There is no one greater or higher or bigger or wiser. No one can question Him, challenge Him, oppose Him, compete with Him, defeat Him, or compare to Him. “God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne” (Psalm 47:8, ESV). “And His sovereignty rules over all” (Psalm 103:19, NAS). Perhaps the definitive verse on the sovereignty of God is Psalm 115:3. “God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.” He’s got the whole world in His hands. And they believed that.

They prayed believing that God was bigger than anyone else, and bigger than any problem they faced.

Let’s say this ping pong ball represents your problem, and the basketball represents God. The closer I hold the ping pong ball to my eye, I cannot see the basketball even though it’s bigger. The same is true with our problems and our fears. The more we focus on the problem or the fear or the threat, we lose sight of God. But when put our problems beside God, we see who is bigger.

How did the first believers pray? They prayed believing that God was bigger than their problems and their fears, and they prayed believing that God’s authority was greater than any other.

GOD’S PLAN

They prayed believing that God’s plan could not be hindered by anyone. The events of the last few months were all part of God’s unfolding plan. And they realized it. They prayed believing that God’s plan was unfolding before their eyes.

“You spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our father David, your servant, saying, ‘Why are the nations angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One’” (Acts 4:25-26). In their prayer, they quoted Psalm 2, a prophecy of David predicting that many would stand against the Messiah, the Christ.

“In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will” (Acts 4:27-28).

In the first sermon after the resurrection, Peter declared that the cross was God’s idea, all part of “predetermined plan” (Acts 2:23). And the first Christians believed there was more to come; that they were a part of the unfolding of God’s plan.

Perhaps they remembered Job saying, “I now know that you can do all things, that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2, ESV). Or perhaps they remembered David saying, “The plans of the Lord will stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations” (Psalm 33:11, NIV). Or perhaps they remembered Solomon saying, “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21, NIV). Or perhaps they remembered Isaiah saying, “What the Lord of hosts has planned, who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?” (Isaiah 14:27, NAS).

The events of the last few months were all part of God’s unfolding plan. And they realized it. They prayed believing that God’s plan was unfolding before their eyes. They prayed believing that God’s plan could not be hindered by anyone.

GOD’S SPIRIT

They prayed asking God’s Spirit to fill them with boldness to face any threat. “And now, O Lord, hear their threats” (Acts 4:29).

“Threats.” They knew it could get worse, and it did. Perhaps they remembered Jesus saying, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18, NIV). Yet they did not pray for safety or protection. Their prayer was true surrender. They were literally devoting their lives to the gospel. They knew it could get worse, and it did.

“And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, boldness to speak your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power, may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30).

They asked for two things. One was “boldness.”⁹ Courage in the face of intimidating circumstances, danger, threat, ridicule, and contempt. The other thing they asked was for miracles. “Stretch out your hand with healing power, may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:30). They prayed to see God’s power, to see God move in a way that would convince people that Jesus was the Son of God.

“After they prayed, the place where they prayed was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). Look at that verse. Read it again. “After they prayed, the place where they prayed was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.” Imagine being there. God showed up. He shook the place and He shook their hearts. He answered their prayer and filled them with the Holy Spirit and with boldness.

On Thursday, seventy pastors in Austin gathered for a meeting of Christ Together. Christ Together is a movement of unity of pastors now in 83 cities across country, and it started in Austin a few years ago. And when we get together, we pray for the lostness of our city. And this past Thursday, we prayed Acts 4:31. We prayed for the Holy Spirit to fill us and to fill our churches. We prayed for the people in our churches to speak with boldness. It was a great day. And, I’m not lying. While we were praying, the room started shaking. We were next to a construction site, where they were hammering rock. But still, the room shook!

When we read about the church in Acts, we read about a different kind of church, we read about a different kind of Christian. So, we have to ask ourselves two questions. What kind of church do we want to be? What kind of Christian do you want to be?

PRAYER INSTRUCTIONS

If we want more than what we're currently experiencing, if we want to be different than we currently are, if we want to be an Acts church, then we must pray as they prayed. And that's what we're going to do right now. I believe if God heard them, He will hear us. Do you believe that? I believe He will hear and delight in the collective prayer of several hundred of us.

So, here's what I ask you to do. When you came in this morning, you received a card with a Bible verse. I want you to gather in clusters of 3-4, no more than 4, and pray these verses for our church. As you pray, read the verse in your group, and then pray that verse for our church. And I believe God will hear and delight in the prayers of His children.

NOTES

¹ Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), page 26.

² Ibid., page 44.

³ Ibid., page 46.

⁴ Ibid., page 49.

⁵ Ibid., page 53.

⁶ Ibid., pages 54-55.

⁷ Ibid., page 56.

⁸ Ibid., page 67.

⁹ The Greek word for "boldness" used in Acts 4:29, 31 is *παρρησία*.