

CONSIDER THEIR THREATS AND ENABLE YOUR SERVANTS

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

We are going to consider a prayer in Acts 4 in this message. Though this passage was chosen months ago, it is especially timely given the events of last Tuesday (September 11). This passage records believers' asking God for the courage to enter a dangerous world with ministry as their goal. I hope we will be inspired to follow their example.

Before we get to the text, I want to make some observations about the events of the last six days. We will shortly be talking about what unique opportunities and responsibilities are ours in Christ. But if we are going to care about the world we live in, we will do well to recognize how much we have in common with everyone else in the world. The events of September 11 and the days following have made that point in some compelling ways to me.

The first observation I would make is that it is difficult for any human being to do anything important without reference to God. We can live shallow and self-centered lives in ordinary times, but when profound and unsettling things happen, most people require the language of faith to express themselves. This week we've seen how many people, even the most unlikely, have found themselves turning to religious language and seeking divine reassurance. We were made for God, and that is true of those who have living faith and those who do not. We were created to live with a divine Authority to thank for miracles, a heavenly Listener to hear our lament, a profound Majesty who can be trusted amidst confusion and mystery, a Savior who is strong enough and loving enough for us to lean on for an uncertain future.

Second, it is common to humanity that suffering and loss have an overpowering emotional content. Watching desperate people jump from a hundredth-story window evoked anger, shock, disbelief, and horror in everyone. Observing rescue workers rush to care for others with no reference to their own safety brings gratitude to every heart. It doesn't require Christian faith to respond with appropriate emotions in remarkable circumstances.

Third, everyone seeks community and the comfort of other people when things become extraordinarily difficult. Americans have drawn near to one another this week. On Wednesday through Friday we held day-long prayer meetings in this building. People came from all over, held hands, and prayed together, though many were not members of the congregation and participants often didn't know each other. One of the great sorrows of human sin is loneliness, mistrust, and isolation. Human souls were made for community, and we rediscover this truth under pressure.

On Friday September 14, President Bush called for a day of prayer and remembrance. In the neighborhood where Leslie and I live, some junior-high kids knocked on doors in the evening and invited us out into the street. Everybody lit candles, and we began to make our way around the block. Some on our block speak English well, some do not. We were of all ages and both genders. We've had different experiences in life. Yet there was a remarkable sense of togetherness among us. The leader of this little parade was a boy wearing in-line skates and a helmet with an American flag stuck in the top. Others were playing drums, and when we finished circling our block, we all sang *America the Beautiful* very badly. But the occasion was lovely, and it made us realize how much we value being together.

Fourth, it is common to humanity to cry for justice. There is a visceral insistence that evil and wickedness be dealt with severely for the sake of justice. The apostle Paul wrote these important words: “For [the one in authority] is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:4). There is no righteous government on earth—not ours or any other. There is none that will perfectly do justice, whose choices will not be mixed with selfishness and pride. But the anarchy of terrorism is more to be feared than inadequate government. God establishes rulers of nations with the responsibility of bearing the sword, of advancing justice, of punishing wrongdoers.

We need to pray for the leaders of America. Many of them are our brothers and sisters in Christ. I heard Condoleeza Rice speak well of this congregation last fall. She thanked God for PBC and its witness. And now as National Security Advisor she is one of those who are making some of the hardest decisions anyone will have to make. Our national leaders are making the decisions of sword-bearing, and we should pray that they will fight well against evil and succeed in bringing about justice, that they will be humble and stalwart. Pray for them to accept the pain and second-guessing that come with prosecuting war. Pray for them to avoid blood lust, personal vendettas, and compromises made to save face.

Fifth, it is common to humanity to fear that evil will triumph in times like these. Billy Graham said in his message at the service in the National Cathedral on Friday that after speaking for more than fifty years all over the world, in every culture, in large groups and small groups, he still couldn’t answer the question of why God allowed certain terrible events. There is something about evil and its awful outcomes that is too difficult for us to understand or control. And so we all fear it. There’s an underlying anxiety that maybe death will triumph. Maybe we’ve been permitted only a short time of some light, and the light will eventually go out. Maybe violence will beget violence, and the crazed and hateful will gain the upper hand. Maybe safety is an illusion. We are afraid that the only options for our children are to hide or to suffer.

Cowardice in the midst of war

Now I want to turn to Acts 4 and talk about what is true of Christians that is not common to other people. We have a unique testimony, especially in the face of the fear that evil will triumph.

We do well to enter into this prayer text through the life and personality of the apostle Peter. Let’s begin by remembering Peter in the darkest day of his life.

Two awesome steel and glass towers came crashing to earth in New York on September 11, but I would remind you of another tower—a small one made of wood that stood on a hill outside Jerusalem about two thousand years ago. It was a Roman cross, and raised up on it, only one man suffered and bled and gave up his life. But the violence of that tower was in some ways more terrible than what happened in New York City. Jesus was a good, kind man, but much more than that, he was the only righteous Man. He was God’s spokesman, and in fact God’s Son. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Jesus’ death was an act of war as surely as the events of September 11 were. It was the ultimate aggression by the forces of eternal death and darkness. Jesus was killed in order for life itself to be snuffed out. He was killed to leave in place a chasm between human beings and God, so that we would be forever the victims of the failure of the head of our race and the death that ensued, so that there would be no reason to hope, no answer from God, no place to turn.

Peter stood by the wooden tower when that act of war took place outside Jerusalem. However much he understood of the eternal issues at stake, Peter knew he had abandoned Jesus, his beloved friend. Jesus was executed unjustly and Peter hated himself for his cowardice.

The message of the resurrection

But consider now the congregational prayer Peter and other apostles led. Acts 4:23-37:

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. 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.”**

“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. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

The tragedy of Passover Friday and Saturday had been reversed on Easter Sunday, and the world had changed. Jesus had been raised from the dead. His followers would never be the same. The church was born in Jerusalem and began to grow with a kind of beauty that has rarely been seen since.

At this time Peter and John healed a man who had been lame all of his life. He was a well-known beggar who sat by one of the gates of the temple. He began to leap and dance and praise God. The healing led to further ministry,

more preaching, and more conviction of sin as the hope and warnings of the gospel went forward. Then in 4:1-2 the healing led to these events: “The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.”

The message of the resurrection was dangerous for those who loved the status quo, and it was life-giving to all who believed it. It was what changed Peter and the other apostles. The word of the resurrection is not a vague hope in positive thinking. It is not trying to change one’s feelings without reason. The message of the resurrection is that life comes out of death. The destructive wooden tower, the Roman cross outside Jerusalem, when accomplishing its worst did not win. We will see Christ again. We will see one another again. The life of faith will be rewarded. Wickedness will be punished. “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54b).

Praying together to the sovereign Lord

For preaching these things, the apostles Peter and John were called to account before the same tribunal that had called for Jesus to die. But Peter, instead of cowering as he had the night Jesus was executed, stood and boldly spoke of Christ. Threatened, he said, “I’m going to keep speaking about what I’ve seen and heard. I’m going to obey God rather than you.” This tribunal was flummoxed. Verse 21 says they couldn’t figure out what to do, so they let them go with further threats.

Peter and John went to be with their friends, and they prayed. Our goal in this series has been to learn to pray and to be changed by prayer. Let’s examine the content of their prayer.

Notice, to begin, that this prayer took place in a community. If you pray alone, your heart expresses itself to God and receives his expression to you. But if you pray together with others, you benefit not only from God’s reception of your prayers and answers to them, but also from others’ drawing near to the Lord.

Next, observe how God is addressed in verse 24: “sovereign Lord.” That title for God is not frequently used in the prayers of Scripture, especially not in the New Testament. The Greek word translated “sovereign Lord” is *despotes*, from which our word “despot” is derived. It speaks of absolute, unrivaled power and authority. The sovereign Lord is the one who rules all. Verse 28 expands the point: “They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” Nothing is out of control. Events do not surprise God. Evil is not going to triumph by destabilizing the plans of God, so that we can’t be sure he will keep his promises.

God’s rule has two spheres. One is the created earth. The sovereign Lord made the heaven and the earth and all the things that are in them. Sometimes danger comes to us from the created world—earthquakes, floods, lightning storms, tornadoes—a seemingly out-of-control natural world that could make us wonder, “Can we be safe? Can we be hopeful?” But he is the Lord of the created world.

He is also the Lord of the nations. The specific reference is to the conspiracy that brought about the tragedy of Jesus’ death. The nations raged and plotted. Specifically, leaders of Rome and Israel, and all the rest—Gentiles, Jews, everybody—conspired in Jesus’ death. The fear was that God had lost control, but he had not. Jesus’ death ends up being our source of hope.

Verses 29 and 30 have four requests that this Sovereign hears from his beloved ones.

Bold voices, open hearts

The first request is at the beginning of verse 29: “Consider their threats.” Note that they didn’t say, “Forbid their threats.” In this life we’re not going to escape threats—voices that attack us personally, hurtful problems that are directed our way, or international terrorists who can use planes to kill innocent people. But “Consider their threats” strikes a hopeful note. They were saying, “Lord, we assume threats, but give us the right to talk to you about them.” We might pray, “Consider Bin Laden,” or, “Consider my hateful neighbor.” We can say to the Sovereign Lord, “Let me tell you how unsettling it feels to me to hear their threats.” We are invited to speak to God about our fears.

The second request is, “Enable your servants to speak your word with boldness.” They had just come from a trial before those who had arranged Jesus’ execution, and who made direct threats against them. In the chapters immediately following, these foes will incite the stoning of Stephen for speaking God’s word. Nevertheless the prayer here was, “Don’t let us back down. Give us a voice of boldness.”

What doors are open that you lack the boldness to go through? Where might you and I speak if only we had Spirit-empowered boldness? Don’t confuse boldness with pushiness. This is not about being domineering, pushing people around with our lingo, pounding on them with Scripture when they have no interest in it. Boldness, rather, goes into dangerous, dark places where hurting people have burdens too hard for them to bear. We would prefer not to be there, but we go anyway. Boldness is taking the gospel blessings we have received and passing them on to those who long to hear.

The third request is in verse 30: “Stretch out your hand to heal.” Healing certainly concerns the banishment of disease and sickness, but it is also about relationships. Healing restores marriages. It melts crippling fears. The Greek word *martureo*, from which we get our word “martyr,” means witness. The word “martyr” is being used by Islamic fundamentalists now for those who give up their own lives in order to kill people. But martyrs in the Biblical sense are those who are willing to give their own life to bless others, who so long for others to be healed that they are willing to pay a price, even the ultimate price.

The fourth request is that miracles, signs, and wonders take place. These are things that only God can do, life changes that only he can bring about. In order for something to be a sign, it not only has to be a work of God that can’t be accounted for any other way, but it also has to be received as such by the observer. There were people who saw the empty tomb Easter morning and decided that someone had stolen the body. They didn’t see a miracle. We talked in a previous message (Discovery Paper #4715) about Queen Jezebel after the miraculous defeat of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, and how that event only enraged her and fueled further resistance (1 Kings 18:16-19:2). She was not persuaded by that display of the power of God. So this request also means, “Lord, persuade hearts. Let them see the healing of a lame man in Jerusalem as a message of hope, not something to fear.”

Verse 31 says, “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” These early Christians had once cowered in fear and felt that all was lost. They saw the tragedy of the cross and withdrew in panic and pain. But a short time afterward, because Jesus was raised, they had a message of resurrection to offer others. They boldly began to serve, to minister, to put themselves at risk for the sake of other people.

The older of our two sons was in Boston last weekend. He had been there for a wedding. Early in the morning at Logan International Airport, he got on a plane bound for the West Coast, filled with jet fuel. It filled the bill exactly for the M.O. used by the terrorists to destroy thousands, except the flight was Monday, September 10, instead of Tuesday, September 11. Thinking of how narrowly our family escaped a personal connection to the

terrible events of September 11 has added to the burden I feel to shake off complacency. The prayer of Acts 4 is surely right: “Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”

For me the best metaphor for what this prayer describes is a rough, desperately tired firefighter in New York who runs into a burning building when others are running out. Firefighters put on a uniform and hat and forget themselves, going with courage to save people in need. That is exactly what Peter and the other apostles prayed about, and that is the call of Scripture to us—to not protect ourselves and run scared, but to be witnesses. We are called to be willing, like New York City firefighters, to go with spiritual tools and spiritual opportunity where people are afraid and offer them what we’ve been given—life.

If you were to pray as Peter did, “Give me courage to speak,” what would it look like? Where is there opportunity for you, with the Spirit of God filling you, his arms stretched out, to honor the name of Christ in bold proclamation?

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