

PERSECUTION PRAYER

Acts 4:23-31

INTRO

As the early church witnessed to the resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ, persecution followed quickly behind. In our passage last week, Peter and John were arrested and threatened “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4:18). Today we witness the church’s immediate response to persecution: prayer.

[READ Acts 4:23-31]

While the kind of persecution we see in Acts may feel foreign to us today in Birmingham, Alabama, it is normal for many of our brothers and sisters around the world.

In over 30 countries, talking about Jesus with a friend or neighbor is putting your freedom and perhaps even your life at risk.¹

According to Open Doors, a ministry supporting the global persecuted church, 2023 saw an explosion of “attacks on churches, Christian-run schools, hospitals and cemeteries..., up seven-fold compared to 2022.”² An average of thirteen Christians a day were killed for their faith.³

What about us? While our persecution is lighter, we live in a country where it is becoming increasingly difficult to truly follow Jesus. The threats we face are more indirect and subtle, living in the midst of a culture that is hostile to God, where the false gods of this world are exalted through media and social media. The veiled threat behind these false gods is clear: “Don’t speak of one true God who has ultimate authority and majesty and dominion because when you do, my control and autonomy feels threatened.” How should we respond to such threats?

The story of a 2nd century martyr is helpful. Born into a noble family, Perpetua’s conversion to Christianity as a young woman was recognized as a threat to the state. Under Emperor Severus, converting to Christianity was illegal. So, Perpetua, newly married with an infant son, was arrested and sentenced to death in the arena. Gerald Sittser comments that she made a decision, not between life and death, but between Christ and Rome.”⁴

¹ The Voice of the Martyrs prayer map

² <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/>

³ Same source

⁴ Gerald Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well*, p. 39.

This is really what it comes down to. Whether our faith in Christ leads us to physical death or the daily dying to self of following Jesus, the decision is between Christ and Rome. Christ and the American Dream. Proclaiming Christ threatens the false gods, and they threaten back.

The response of the early church models for us a path forward in the face of threats and persecution – prayer to a Sovereign God.

I. Their Habit of Prayer

(v 23) “When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.”

What had the chief priests said to them? They threatened them never to speak about Jesus again (4:18).

(v 24) “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God...” – they prayed. Their knee-jerk reaction to persecution was prayer. Not to armor up. Not to strategize. To pray.

This was not random. It was a Spirit-formed habit. In 1:14, before Pentecost, the believers were “devoting themselves to prayer,” and after Pentecost in 2:42, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread *and the prayers*.”

Communal prayer was baked into their life together as a body of believers, so much so that when crisis came, prayer was their first instinct.

Much could be asked here of the church in our day.

Within this habit of prayer, we see another habit:

Praying God’s Character – Notice how they address God in v 25 – “Sovereign Lord” – literally “Master”⁵ – this title conveyed God’s powerful control over all that was happening.⁶

In fact, they come back to this in v. 28 – **God’s sovereignty is the main theme of their prayer.**

As they pray, we see God’s sovereign control in two spheres: big and small.

⁵ William Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 87.

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, p. 105.

- a) Big: Sovereign over creation: (v 24) “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them” – direct quote of Psalm 146:6. This is God’s control on a macro level, a cosmic level, control over things far bigger than us and our understanding.
- b) Small: Sovereign over the suffering of Jesus: (v 25) quotes Psalm 2: “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers gather together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.”

That word “rage” is used elsewhere to describe the prancing and whinnying of high-spirited horses⁷ - an arrogant, rebellious snorting against authority as if to say, “you will never put a bridle in my mouth.”⁸

Who are these rulers raging against? “against the Lord and his Anointed” – lit. “his Christos” – the anointed King – the Messiah.

Their prayer ties Psalm 2 to the events surrounding Jesus’ death – (v 27) “for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate (the “rulers” of Psalm 2), along with the Gentiles (the Romans) and the peoples of Israel (calling “crucify him!”), (v 28) to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

“Predestined” here means “foreordained.”⁹ In other words, all the raging and hostility Jesus experienced at the hands of these various groups was part of God’s plan. Knowing this encouraged the early church that if Jesus’ suffering was part of God’s plan, their suffering too was not random.

God’s sovereignty over the bigness of the creation of the universe extends down to the smallness of individual suffering.

Praying God’s character reframes our suffering through eternal lenses. It moves us out of our depth and ability to control a situation and reminds us that God is already there, having orchestrated what will take place before it happens.

⁷ Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the Greek NT*, p. 362.

⁸ Danker, p. 376.

⁹ Zerwick, p. 362.

If we're honest, the truth of the sovereignty of God can often feel like cold comfort – like saying to someone suffering immense pain, “Don't despair, God is in control of your situation.”

These early believers did not see it that way. The sovereignty of God over their persecution brought them great comfort and confidence.

It is possible both to affirm that a situation is horrible or evil and also to remember that God is not aloof to it – that he in fact is working in the midst of it.

Is there a situation of chaos or pain in your life where it would bring comfort to address your prayer, “Sovereign Lord”?

We not only see their habit of prayer, but we get to hear their prayer requests:

II. **The Prayer Requests** (vv 29-30)

They ask God for three things – we're going to mention the first and third but focus on the second one.

- 1) First Request (look in v 29): “And now, Lord, look upon their threats” – “consider them, see them. Notice they did not ask God to diminish the threats or to counteract them. “God, just look upon them. See them.”

Like in Exodus 3 when Israel suffered horribly as slaves in Egypt: “And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. **God saw the people of Israel – and God knew**” (Ex 3:24).

- 2) Third Request: (v 30) that God would continue to “stretch out [his] hand to heal,” and allow them to perform signs and wonders in Jesus' name. We'll go in depth on why they prayed this and how this prayer was answered on Children's Ministry Sunday.
- 3) Middle Request: “grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness”

This is striking. Instead of praying for protection from the threats, they prayed for boldness in the face of them.

Do we pray for this? If not, why not? Why is speaking the word with boldness not a felt need for us?

I'm not sure if this is a Southern thing but a lot of prayers in my own life and circles I'm in are not for gospel boldness but for things that boil down to safety and comfort.

The result is that, rather than finding comfort in God's sovereignty, we perceive it as a threat. If God is in control, that means I am not. And if I am not in control, who will take care of me?

Perpetua felt this inner struggle when her unbelieving father pleaded with her as her execution loomed: "Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us!"¹⁰

Perpetua's reply showed how deeply she clung to the sovereignty of God: "Father, it will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills, for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves, but are all in his power."¹¹

She knew the secret of going deep into God's sovereignty. As Gordon Bals puts it: "Faith is living freely in the care of a sovereign God."¹²

The writers of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 of knew this too:

Q 1: What is our only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I am not my own, but belong — body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ....

He ...watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven;

*in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.*¹³

This word translated "boldness" literally means to speak "with complete freedom and confidence,"¹⁴ an "unguardedness – no constraint to watch one's words."¹⁵

¹⁰ Sittser, p. 37.

¹¹ Christianity Today article on Perpetua

¹² Gordon Bals, *The Surprise of Surrender*, Daymark Pastoral Counseling Article, Fall 2002.

¹³ crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions

¹⁴ Zerwick, p. 360.

¹⁵ Danker, p. 273.

Much like Paul's prayer in Ephesians 6: "[pray] also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, *that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.*"

They desired not to shrink back, not to cater their words based on their audience, not to dilute the message of the gospel to avoid suffering.

Y'all, this is massive. They prayed that they would not take away the sting of the gospel, the scandal of the gospel, the perceived folly of the gospel, for the sake of cultural acceptance or comfort.

We all feel it: the hesitance to say the name "Jesus" or bring up spiritual things in public. The way we're tempted to keep to ourselves when it comes to our unsaved friends and neighbors. The chameleon-work we do when we're around various groups of people.

As Paul would later say to the church in Corinth, "We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (II Cor 4:2).

I can tell you as a pastor that the temptation to tamper with God's word is real. The temptation to soften the blow, to focus on the parts that speak of God's love and to avoid the parts that mention the devastation of our sin, the reality of hell and the judgment to come.

The gospel says simply: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand; the King has come to give himself for us so that we might lose all to find all in him."

The early church felt the pressure to shift from this, so they prayed to hold to it with clarity and boldness. And their prayer was answered:

III. Their Prayer Answered

V 31 reveals the answer to their prayers: "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness."

The fact that the place shook was a sign of God's presence,¹⁶ as if to say, "I see their threats, and I will grant your requests."

The sovereignty of God brought comfort and fueled courage in these early believers in the face of the hatred of the world.

Brothers and sisters, it is not enough to simply know about the sovereignty of God. It has to go deep, deeper than you ever thought possible. And the only way for this to happen is to first behold the man who subjected himself to the rage of his enemies, who perfectly submitted himself to the sovereign will of his Father, even to death, who left all in the hands of his Father, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit."

And look at what has come of it.

¹⁶ Clinton Arnold, *Bible Background Commentary: Acts*, p. 250.