

# Acts 4:23-31 Grant to Your servants to speak Your Word with all boldness

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## Introduction:

Page 1

Last week we heard about the 1<sup>st</sup> persecution of the church. You will recall it came about because Peter and John had the audacity to pray for a crippled man who was instantly healed. The religious leaders were unhappy about this for a number of reasons,

1. most of them didn't believe in resurrection, yet Peter and John were telling everybody that Jesus had been resurrected.
2. Peter and John were outsiders, not part of the religious elite, therefore they couldn't possibly have enough knowledge and understanding to teach people.
3. they were claiming that Jesus was the Messiah, who the Jews had been waiting thousands of years for.
4. they were calling people to repentance for killing their own Messiah.
5. they were claiming that Jesus is the only source of salvation.

So the authorities threw Peter and John into prison overnight so they could discuss what to do with them. They couldn't deny that a remarkable miracle had occurred, for everyone knew that the man who was been healed had been crippled for a long, long time. So they were forced to release them, but with a stern warning to stop talking about Jesus Christ.

Acts 4:23-31 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'- 27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all

boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31 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.

One of the things that stood out to me most from this passage in Acts 4 is how the early believers responded to persecution. I suspect it may be significantly different to how we might respond, and I think there are some clues in there for us that will help us if we are ever faced with serious persecution.

Page 2

Imagine for a moment that Tony walks in here next Sunday morning to tell us that he had been arrested, held overnight and interrogated by a panel of High Court judges. And imagine that they told him that City Edge Church is still allowed to meet, but we are not allowed to sing about Jesus Christ, talk about Jesus Christ, or tell anyone else about Him. We're allowed to listen to secular music, watch videos hired from the video store, and drink tea and coffee together. But if we start talking about Jesus, we will be in serious trouble, and end up in prison, or worse.

Thankfully, the most serious persecution we normally face is lack of interest, or ridicule. Here in Australia, we don't yet face the threat of imprisonment, beatings or death for being Christians. I don't anticipate we will either, at least not in our lifetime. But who knows what will happen, and who knows which of you may migrate to a foreign country where these threats are real.

Firstly, let's consider some possible responses that we might have if Tony were to announce that next week.

1. We might decide to stop going to church, or stop hanging out with other Christians, because it is getting too risky.
2. We might tone down the message of the gospel so it keeps us out of trouble and doesn't offend anyone.
3. We might put our Bibles away until we feel a bit better, or a bit stronger, or a bit more motivated.
4. We might be a bit more spiritual, and assume that the opposition is a door closed by God.
5. We might make plans to split into smaller groups and meet together secretly in homes.
6. We might settle for poor imitations of the real presence of God, such as loud music, much hype and feel-good messages that say little or nothing about Jesus Christ.
7. We might pray for relief or protection.

8. We might get real aggressive and spiritual, and bind the devil and cast him out.

But, who amongst us would respond with enthusiasm and excitement like the disciples did here in Acts 4?

Have you ever done, or been tempted to do these things, in the face of opposition? If so, you need to look carefully at what they did way back then.

Page 3

And remember a couple of Tony's questions from last week: **Do I need to make public that I follow Jesus?** And, **Who is rubbing off on me – Jesus or the world?**

### **Exposition:**

So, let's see how they handled it.

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

Notice that the first thing Peter and John did was to go straight back to their brothers and sisters in Christ. Someone wise once said that sheep want to be with sheep. In fact, John himself reminds us of this in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter,

1 John 2:19. ... for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

It was the most natural thing in the world for them to go straight back to their Christian family for fellowship, support and encouragement, and to encourage them also. **Who do you turn to first when you are faced with opposition or problems?**

24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God...

It's not surprising really that they would go back to them, because there was a real, living unity amongst them. Not just a Sunday morning unity, but the unity of lives and their possessions shared daily.

24 ...they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them

Notice how they started their prayer, "Sovereign Lord..." Persecution held no fear for them, for they had placed themselves squarely in

the hands of the God who created the whole universe with merely a word.

The word translated here *Sovereign Lord* is not the usual word translated as Lord. Normally in the New Testament, Lord will be the Greek word *Kurios* meaning *master*. But here, a very different word is used, *Despotes*.

This is the word we get our English word *Despot* from. Now, who or what do you think of when you hear *despot*? You might think of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, or Idi Amin in Uganda, or Pol Pot in Cambodia. A despot is a corrupt, cruel, brutal ruler; one who rules with an iron fist, and will tolerate no opposition to his laws or his whims; one who might have you executed because he was in a bad mood at the time.

Page 4

Of course, God is not a corrupt and cruel *Despotes*. But he is one who rules absolutely, and whose power or plans cannot be defeated. We will come back to that later. Suffice to say here that their confidence and enthusiasm is founded on being a people of the Sovereign God, who will work out His plans and purposes in the world and in their lives, no matter what opposition they are confronted by. When we say God is *omnipotent*, it means more than just that He is *very powerful*; omnipotent means *all-powerful*. **Is your confidence placed in this Sovereign God?**

25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant,  
said by the Holy Spirit,

    “Why did the Gentiles rage,  
    and the peoples plot in vain?  
26 The kings of the earth set themselves,  
    and the rulers were gathered together,  
    against the Lord and against his Anointed’

Right throughout this passage we see the reasons why they were so excited by the persecution, and optimistic about the future. Here we see a major reason why; they viewed everything that happens to them through the lens of the Word of God.

In other words, they are proclaiming that God is simply at work fulfilling His Word. He is not doing anything strange and unusual, but only what He said He would do. Remember God said through Isaiah:

Isa 55: 11 “... my word ... shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

You may have recognised part of this passage as being a quote from Psalm 2. Why did they only quote the first two verses? I'm certain that when they quoted the first two verses of the Psalm, they had in mind what the rest of the Psalm says.

If, for example, you were struggling with guilt and fear about your relationship with Jesus Christ, I might quote Rom 8:31 "If God is for you, who can be against you?" But when I do that, I have in mind, and I hope you will also, not just that verse, but all of Romans 8, including 8:1 "There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus," 8:28 "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord," and 8:38-39 "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Page 5

If I do that, then I'm pretty confident that they had in mind much more than just the first two verses when they quoted from Psalm 2. So, it might be worth us having a look at the Psalm to see why they were so excited about it all.

Ps 2:1 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?  
2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,  
3 "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."

4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision [*He mocks them; He ridicules them*].

5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,  
6 "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill."  
7 I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you.  
8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.  
9 You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
11 Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.  
12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Let me ask you a serious question: **If you truly believed that God is so powerful that He laughs at and mocks any who try to oppose Him, and if you truly believed that there is safety and protection for those who take refuge in Him, do you think it might take some of the fear out of boldly standing up for Jesus?** It certainly did for the early disciples.

Some of you may remember the old Charles Wesley hymn that starts off,

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild  
Look upon this little child...*

What does Psalm 2 have to say about *Gentle Jesus, meek and mild...*?

12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Does that sound like a gentle and mild Jesus? What do you think the money-changers in the Temple thought about Him when He overturned their tables and took to them with a whip? "What a lovely man; He wouldn't hurt a fly." I don't think so.

Page 6

And since when do people get brutally tortured and publicly executed for being gentle and mild, and keeping their head down? Jesus was crucified because He was a troublemaker, because He called the religious rulers hypocrites and vipers, not because He was gentle and mild.

Don't ever forget that. Jesus Christ is sovereignly powerful. He came once to give His life as a ransom for sin. He is coming again to judge the nations, and all who don't willingly bow the knee to Him in this life won't just be ridiculed then, but will be eternally punished by Him. *Gentle Jesus, meek and mild...*

Christians have been their own worst enemies in this regard. We've entertained the image of gentle Jesus for so long, that we've lost the boldness that changed societies and changed the world in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.

Back to Acts 4.

27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,

As you can see from their prayer, Herod and Pontius Pilate were doing exactly what David had prophesied 1,000 years beforehand. Ever noticed how you are not taken by surprise by something you knew was going to happen? Neither were they. They may not have known the specific timing and circumstances, but they knew that it was in the context of opposition to the Messiah, and they knew that Jesus was the Messiah. So rather than feel horrified and frightened, they were excited and encouraged by persecution.

28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Another important choice of words here. *Predestined* means *predetermined, decided beforehand, fore-ordained*. Once again, what God decrees to be done, will be done. Opposition to His plan merely serves to fulfil His plan, as Bible prophecies teach us, often in astoundingly precise detail.

Ever wondered why the devil is so angry, raging against the people of God? Ever wondered why he prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour? Well, how would you feel to learn that every carefully crafted plan against your enemy, every supposed victory you had over him, was merely a move planned by your enemy, but fulfilled perfectly by you? No wonder the devil rages!

Page 7

Remember, God is a *Despotes*. His will cannot be thwarted, or overthrown. He is an absolute ruler, and one of the stunningly amazing things about God is that He is so powerful that even those who fight against Him and resist Him, not under any compulsion but of their own free will and desires, eventually learn that they were only fulfilling God's plan for humanity.

How glorious is God that He is able to orchestrate victory over His enemies by allowing His enemies to do exactly what they want to do?

This knowledge should give you confidence and boldness. That same word *predestined* we see in a couple of other important passages of Scripture that should inspire confidence and boldness in us:

Rom 8:28-30 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he *predestined* he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

1Cor 2:7 ... we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God *decreed* before the ages for our glory.

Eph 1:5 In love he *predestined* us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will

Eph 1:11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been *predestined* according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will

These people were so remarkably Word-based and Word-saturated that they had no fear of what the world could throw at them. Notice

that they didn't do any of the things we discussed earlier as possible responses to persecution. They didn't even bother trying to bind the devil and cast him out. Instead, they asked God for greater boldness to proclaim Jesus Christ, knowing full well that they were asking God to lead them straight into conflict, potentially fatal conflict, with the world.

29-31 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." 31 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.

Page 8

For these people, persecution for proclaiming Jesus Christ was confirmation that they were dead-centre in the will of God. As you will see in the next chapter of Acts, they couldn't keep their mouths shut. So they were arrested again, imprisoned, beaten and ordered again to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. We will see increasingly violent opposition to the Christians as we work through Acts. Their response in Acts 5:41 is typical of their attitude to it:

Acts 5:41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are beaten and imprisoned for preaching about Jesus Christ. While locked up in jail, they occupy their time by praying and singing hymns. They could be so bold and confident because they knew this great truth of which Peter wrote:

1Pet 4:16, 19 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name...

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Is it any wonder that a people who exhibited such confidence, such boldness, such enthusiasm, and such dependence on God in the face of opposition would have their prayer answered, and answered so dramatically?

## Conclusion

Maybe it's time to recap the major points out of this passage:

1. Their unity was a real, living, daily unity, not just a Sunday morning unity.
2. Opposition caused them to band together to help and support each other, not split apart, or go it alone.
3. They were unfazed by opposition because their confidence was anchored in God and His Word.
  - a. God is sovereign and all-powerful, therefore He won't fail to fulfil His purposes.
  - b. God had already warned them, prophetically, that they would face opposition, so persecution was merely God fulfilling His purposes.
  - c. They used the Word of God to encourage each other.
  - d. They did not ask God to end their persecution, but for strength to endure.
4. They did not fight their enemies, but rather went to God in prayer for greater boldness, knowing full-well that it would produce greater opposition.
5. They prayed with great expectancy that God would respond.
6. When they were filled with the Spirit, they didn't sit in church or at home enjoying the feeling, but immediately went out and they preached boldly and publicly.

Page 9

## Response:

So, my questions to you today are these:

1. Where do you turn for support and encouragement when you are faced by opposition? Have you consciously decided to knot your heart into your local church?
2. Are you so solidly grounded in the Word that no trouble, opposition or persecution fazes you?
3. Is your vision of God big enough to have total confidence in God's plan and purpose for your life?
4. Does Jesus Christ so fill your heart and your vision that you cannot help but speak of what you have seen and heard and experienced in Him? Is He *everything* to you?