

And They Prayed!

Acts 4:23-31

Shortly after Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in 1924, it almost came to the point of bankruptcy. All the creditors were going to foreclose at noon on a particular day. That morning they met in the president's office with Dr. Chafer for prayer that God would provide. In that prayer meeting was a man by the name of Harry Ironside. When it was his turn to pray, he prayed in his characteristic manner: "Lord, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are Thine. Please sell some of them and send us the money."

While they were praying, a tall Texan with boots on and an open collar stepped up to the business office and said, "I just sold two carloads of cattle in Ft. Worth. I've been trying to make a business deal but it fell through, and I feel compelled to give the money to the seminary. I don't know if you need it or not, but here's the check!"

A little secretary took the check and, knowing how critical things were financially, went to the door of the prayer meeting and timidly tapped. When she finally got a response, Dr. Chafer took the check out of her hand. It was exactly the amount of the debt! When he looked at the name, he recognized the cattleman in Ft. Worth, and turning to Dr. Ironside said, "Harry, God sold the cattle!"

God is a God of answered prayer and although my little illustration is perhaps a bit silly on one level, it does show just how powerful and how amazing prayer and the privilege of prayer is, no to mention how attentive and amazing is our heavenly father.

I have to say that I am particularly challenged this morning by our reading from Acts. You see I like to think of myself as someone who prays someone who trusts in the power of The Holy Spirit to work through the power of prayer. But as I look at and think about the passage before us this morning I realise, not for the first time, that I have so much to learn about God and about prayer and the way that God works in us as His people through prayer.

Last week we looked at the preceding passage of how Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin, and how, through the power of the Spirit they were able to both completely dumfound the learned men, and also stand up for Jesus under extreme provocation. In today's passage we receive just a glimpse of how that knowledge and power and confidence is given to the Apostles, which is through the power of prayer.

I love the way that scripture begins this segment, "Peter and John went back to their own people". Here we see the intimacy and trust that is present in the close knit believing community that was the early church. Having faced this terrible ordeal and being pretty confident I would think that they would be being watched by the authorities, after all they have form in this sort of behaviour, and the Apostles knew

only too well how long was the arm of the religious authorities, they went back to the only place they could go, to the other members of the believing community.

I would imagine that there was much joy and much laughter when the two men finally returned home from the temple. Remember they had only gone out to go and pray, the others would have been expecting them back in a couple of hours, not the best part of a day later. Word would undoubtedly have got round that the two had been arrested, the rest of the community would have known what was going on even though there were no mobiles or emails, no one could tweet the news. This was a true community and it is highly unlikely that Peter and John would have been the only ones going to prayer; no the community would have known and would have been worried.

It is with masterful understatement that Luke records that the Apostles “reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.” I suspect that the truth is that the other followers would have been dying to know what had happened and what was going on and that it would have been a very excited and apprehensive crowd that were gathered together.

Having shared the news and told the story, the people now do, what to them, seems the most obvious and natural thing in the world, they turn to the Lord in prayer! I wonder if we would have been quite so quick to do so, I wonder if instead we might have sat around talking about the situation and trying to analyse what this might mean to us as a fellowship. There is none of that in the account in Acts, the account is told and then they turn to the one who knows sees and understands all things, they turn to the “Sovereign Lord”.

I wonder how we would pray if we were going through a similar situation? Would we call for retribution on the perpetrators of such an unfair and unfriendly task? We know that just a short time earlier that two of the disciples acted in just this way when confronted with opposition, Luke records for us in Chapter 9 of his Gospel, “when the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”

Luke also records that Jesus rebuked them for this response. It seems that they have learnt their lesson, having spent that time with Jesus they now pray in a completely different way.

Just as in the court scene that we looked at last week the Apostles were informed and strengthened by their hymn book the Psalms, so we see the same strengthening, the same encouragement and the same guidance, this time in how to pray. This time they turn to Psalm 2, the Psalm that we heard at the beginning of our service. This is a royal Psalm, a Messianic Psalm a Psalm that originally spoke of an earthly king but clearly points forward to the coming king the Messiah, the one who will rule with all authority and power. The one who is truly able to rule not only the people of God but the whole of creation!

God's people begin their prayer not with a call for retribution or even protection, something I think that would have been high on my own priority list at this point, but with praise. They speak to the Sovereign Lord and by doing so speak out that they understand that He is the king and that they are the servants. In other words they put God in His rightful place as the very centre of their adoration and indeed the very centre of their entire lives.

They then remind themselves in prayer exactly why The Lord is so deserving of these titles and of this adulation, they remember that everything that exists, every rock, plant, animal, and even every person only exists because God in His limitless power chose for it to be so. They then go on to affirm that the scriptures that they have also exist because God spoke, in the case of the Psalms it was the Holy Spirit speaking through the great king David but it was without any doubt God who caused the prophetic writings of that Psalm to be recorded. The Psalm asks the question "why do people seek to oppose the will of God?" It doesn't matter who you are, or how powerful you are, even the mighty Caesar with his legions of soldiers could not stand before the might of God, and indeed verse 4 of Psalm 2 reminds us that God scoffs at those who seek to oppose Him and His plans.

The church then goes on to affirm that even the death of Jesus was totally and completely within the will and plans of God. They acknowledge that Pilot along with others met together in Jerusalem in order to come up with some clever plot to get Jesus out of the picture.

They know, however, that it was the power of God Himself that allowed for the apparent disaster of the crucifixion of Jesus, for God knew that the death of the innocent one would result in the death of death itself, and that through His sacrifice the whole of humanity could be healed, and the possibility of that wonderful relationship with the Father in heaven restored.

The people of God now having firmly established that God is control and that He knows all things and makes all things and sees all things now turn to petition. They have praised and now they ask. They don't ask for protection, they don't ask that the authorities would change their minds, instead they ask for things that are far more powerful and effective. Firstly they ask for boldness so that they can continue to speak fearlessly of the love and power of God.

This is truly a remarkable prayer; they now know in no uncertain terms what they are up against, they know the power of the religious authorities is being lined up against them and yet they still ask for boldness to speak.

Three ministers were talking about prayer in general and the appropriate and effective positions for prayer. As they were talking, a telephone repairman was working on the phone system in the background. One minister shared that he felt the key was in the hands. He always held his hands together and pointed them upward as a form of symbolic worship. The second suggested that real prayer was

conducted on your knees. The third suggested that they both had it wrong—the only position worth its salt was to pray while stretched out flat on your face.

By this time the phone man couldn't stay out of the conversation any longer. He interjected, "I found that the most powerful prayer I ever made was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended forty feet above the ground."

We can sometimes get ourselves in something of a state when we consider prayer, it has been said that the easiest way to make a congregation feel guilty is just to stand at the front and say "prayer", most of us feel inadequate when it comes to prayer, most of us don't think we do enough of it and most of suspect that we aren't very good at it! We get hung up on techniques and on methods and we forget that actually it is all about relationship it is just about talking to God as though He were just another person. Yes we are called to fear God in terms of respecting Him and giving Him the honour that He is due, but what He really wants is to spend time with us.

The early church knew this and that is why they were able to ask for boldness in their speaking but they also knew of the sovereignty of God and it was because of this that they asked Him to stretch out His hand to heal and perform miracles. The early church had worked out right at the beginning that the spread of the kingdom required two ingredients. It required that God's people were willing and empowered to speak the word of God with boldness, an empowering that, as we have seen that comes from the Holy Spirit.

Secondly they knew that it was God that did the work and that is why they asked for healings and miracles. There is no greater healing and no greater miracle than a life that is turned away from sin and death and turned to forgiveness in Jesus. The other healings and miracles are signs, and important ones at that, of the power of the kingdom, but they only point to the need of the healing of broken lives, the brokenness that is caused by sin.

If the church in this country is going to grow, if it is going to reverse the trend that we have seen over the last hundred years of church attendance reducing and church buildings being closed, then we have to rediscover what the early church seemed to know so well. We have to rediscover that boldness to speak God's word fearlessly and with passion whenever and wherever the Lord gives us opportunity. In order to do this we need to be constantly filled with the Spirit.

It is significant that Luke records that at the end of the believers' prayer that they were all filled with the Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly; also the room was shaken to confirm to the believers that God had and would answer their prayer.

We also need to rediscover the power of God, we need to remember that it is He that does all the work, it He that convicts people of their wrongdoing, it is He that has the power to heal the lame and redeem broken lives. It is vital that we rediscover this dependency on, and expectancy in, The Holy Spirit. He longs to act, He longs to heal, He longs to bring people into relationship with the Father, all He is looking for is willing partners to work with and minister through. The question is, are we going to be those partners? Are we going to declare our availability, our trust, our total dependence on the one who made the very universe that we inhabit? If we do, then I believe that we can expect to see amazing things take place both here in Bour1 ton and throughout the whole country. The Spirit is already at work both here and wider afield, are we going to join Him or are we going to quench Him?