

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH PRAYER TO A SOVEREIGN GOD

Acts 4:23-31

INTRODUCTION

I first heard of Dr. John Piper, preaching pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN in 1990. A friend gave me a copy of a sermon given by Pastor Piper at the national conference of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. The sermon was titled, "Prayer, the work of missions." I was stunned by the vision of God and of the place of prayer in God's rule over his universe that I heard in that sermon. I was ashamed at how little I understood of this God about whom Dr. Piper preached and more ashamed at how little I sought him and trusted him. It was that sermon that was the beginning of God's work in my life to transform me from being a man-centered, self-dependent person to a God-centered, Christ-dependent person. One of the most obvious things I realized about prayer from that sermon is that what you believe about God will determine how you pray, what you pray and how much you pray. In other words, if you'll permit me to use a technical word, your theology determines how you relate to God in prayer. This is always true whether your theology is true and biblical or not. Your praying, perhaps more than any other activity you engage in reveals your theology.

Our text today, except for the first and last verses is the prayer that the first church of Jerusalem prayed after John and Peter left the Sanhedrin where they had been commanded by the governing authorities to stop preaching about Jesus. Their command was accompanied by threats of what would happen to them if they did not cease. Peter and John leave the Jewish ruling council and go immediately into the company of their own people, the church. After reporting the commands and threats of the Sanhedrin the Christians who heard the report join together in one voice and pray. This prayer proves the truth of what I heard from Dr. Piper: what you believe about God determines the effectiveness of your prayer life. Luke does not merely record an example of prayer but shows how faith in the true God forms our prayer. This prayer is packed with theology. I want to pray more effectively and I want our church to pray more effectively and so we are going to see this morning truth that will promote effective praying. I mean by effective praying, prayer that pleases God and prayer that God answers.

MAIN POINT

Effective prayer arises from faith in the true God who...

I. Is master of the universe (v. 24)

The gathered church addresses God with a title that is not often used in the Bible. It is the word from which we get the term "despot." In English "despot" is a word with negative connotations. It means a ruler who is a tyrant and who uses his authority to rule over people harshly. However, in the biblical use of the word it simply emphasizes the absolute authority of a person over others. It is used for the master of slaves or for governing authorities. The point is that the "despot" has absolute authority which must be obeyed. Then the church uses a very common OT description of God. They tell this Sovereign Lord that he is the one who made the heavens and earth and the seas and all that inhabits these three spheres. In other words, they declare to God that he is the creator of all things. These two ideas go together. God is the sovereign Lord because he is the creator of all things. The entire universe belongs to him and must answer to him as its sovereign Lord because he is the creator of all things.

The church recalls together and out loud that the God to whom they pray is the absolute ruler of all things because he is the creator of all things. Why would they do this? God knows who he is and so why is it necessary to tell God who he is? This declaration is first for the benefit of the praying people. They have just been threatened by the rulers of this world with harm if they do not submit so what more important thing must they remember than that the God to whom they pray made these rulers and rules over the rulers. The rulers are

not in charge, the sovereign creator is in charge. If you are going to pray in faith, then you must recall in your praying to whom you are speaking. Our faith is fed by and sustained by the truth of God that we confess. However, not only is our faith strengthened by the truth we confess but also this is praise to God. It is an expression of our joy in God when we declare his greatness and worth, especially in the face of contrary circumstances. We please God as we worship him in the face of overwhelming threat and thus show our confidence is in him, not ourselves or our circumstances.

There are a number of places in the OT where this phrase regarding God's creating all things is used in exactly the same way in prayers addressed to God. There are several notable examples from which these Jewish Christians are most certainly drawing. In 2 Kings 19 (parallel Isaiah 37) king Hezekiah receives a letter from the Assyrian King Sennacherib in which this pagan king threatens Hezekiah with destruction. In the letter he reminds Hezekiah of all the other nations that he has already destroyed and tells Hezekiah that Israel is next. After he receives the letter Hezekiah prayed, "O LORD, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God... Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God." There is a great irony in the church's prayer in that the rulers who are threatening God's people are not pagan kings but the appointed leaders of Israel. The disciples know that their security does not rest in what human rulers do or do not do. They know that their safety is not determined by kings but rather by the Sovereign Lord who made all things and thus controls all things, including these rulers who have threatened them.

I watched one of those police/detective shows the other night. There had been a couple of murders among the men who were unloading cargo ships. But when the police showed up to interview the other longshoreman nobody would say anything because they were afraid of losing their job or worse if they talked to the authorities. They had no confidence that the police would be able to protect them from being harmed by their bosses and so they refused to do the right thing. They believed that those who threatened them were more powerful than the police. They were silenced by their fear of men. When the church is threatened by the rulers of this world we do not fear them, we do not refuse to do the right thing, rather we go the one who is king over all other kings. We remember and declare in our prayers that he is the master of the universe and there is no human authority over which he does not rule.

Let me encourage you to follow this example in your own praying. Begin your prayer by declaring to the Lord the truth you know about him. Begin your praying with rejoicing in the greatness and the glory of God. Especially you should begin prayer in this way when you are fearful. Your faith will be helped and you will please God as you declare what it is that you believe about him.

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- *Is master of the universe*
- *And who...*

II. Has a plan that cannot be thwarted (vv. 23 & 25-28)

Notice that the next thing that the gathered church does is to remember together a portion of Scripture. They tell God that he spoke by his Spirit through the mouth of David his servant the opening two verses of Psalm 2. Why do they do this? They are interpreting their experience in the light of Scripture. The facts are that the Jewish religious leaders, the very ones who killed Jesus are now threatening to harm the apostles for preaching about Jesus. What do these facts mean? We are confronted with this same problem time and again in our lives. Your spouse doesn't love you the way you want. Your supposed friends ignore you or make fun of you. You lose your job. Your candidate lost the election. Your father abused you. All these are facts in our lives. But what do these facts mean? How should you pray in light of these facts? The only way to find out what these

facts mean and therefore how you should pray about them is on the basis of what God has said. He has given the final and authoritative interpretation of what these facts mean.

In the case of these Christians the opposition of the Jewish rulers to their preaching is the foolish and vain opposition of human rulers to the rule of God and of his Messiah. When this group of 70 Jewish men commanded Peter and John to stop preaching and threatened them; they were joining in the ranks of all those human beings who rage against God and seek to throw off his rule. By attacking the church they were attacking God and Christ. God has anointed Jesus as his Messiah, his king over all kings. He has set Christ at his right hand and given him the name that is above every name. This exalted Christ is now at work in and through every local church seeking to extend his rule over increasing numbers of human beings through the proclamation of his gospel. Just as certainly as these same Jewish leaders opposed God and his Christ when they handed Jesus over to Pilate to be killed so they are opposing God and his Christ by commanding the apostles to stop preaching the gospel. When the church is criticized and threatened and harmed because we are preaching the gospel, you can be sure that those who oppose us do so because they hate God and his Messiah, Jesus. I need to sound a word of caution at this point. Not every criticism leveled at the church is opposition to God. When the church is opposed for her politics, whether they be liberal or conservative, this is not the same thing as being opposed for declaring that Jesus alone saves sinners. When the city opposes a church's plan to build because of zoning regulations, this is not the same thing as being opposed for preaching the gospel.

Psalms 2 clearly states, as is seen in v.25 that the opposition of humanity to God is vain opposition. It is useless and ineffective to oppose God. As the rest of Psalm 2 makes clear, God simply laughs at human beings who rebel against him and against the Lord Jesus Christ. He sets up his king on Mt. Zion in spite of human effort to thwart him. His Messiah is the judge to whom all must answer and so if people persist in rebelling against him they will most certainly come to ruin. Jesus is going to rule over all nations with an iron scepter and he is going to pour out his wrath on all who refuse to make peace with him. All who refuse to “kiss the Son” will be crushed by him. All who refuse to take refuge in him will be cursed while all who take refuge in him will be blessed. The church, in prayer, remembers that all human opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ is futile opposition. They may threaten us, they may throw us into prison, they may mock us, they may kill us but they cannot stop the gospel of Jesus from going out to all the earth and they cannot stop his final return to establish God's kingdom on this earth.

But the church is not simply recognizing that the hostility they are experiencing is man's hostility towards God, nor are they only recalling that God's plan to install Jesus as king over the universe cannot be thwarted but also they are recognizing that this hostility is part of God's plan for them just as it was God's plan for Jesus. They are reminding themselves that the suffering of Jesus at the hands of these kings and rulers and nations and peoples was God's plan and was the means by which God's plan to exalt Christ as King and Savior was actually accomplished. The relationship between God's will and human will is not simple. You cannot say that the people who performed the most evil act in human history, the killing of Jesus, did so as an act of their free will which was beyond the control of God. They did exactly what God determined in advance that they each would do. But you also cannot say that God did evil by determining that they do what they did. No, these people did evil by doing exactly what they wanted to do. And God ruled over their evil wills and actions in such a way that their evil accomplished his good and perfect will of having his son killed for the sins of his people.

Many people when they hear the claim that God is sovereign, that he has predestined whatsoever comes to pass immediately declare that prayer and evangelism are useless acts because God is going to do what he wants to do without my prayers and God is going to save whom he will save whether I share my faith or not. This is the exact opposite response we see here of the church to the fact of God's absolute sovereignty. The fact that God determines in advance whatsoever comes to pass stimulates prayer and evangelism. I can tell you why it does. Prayer offered to a God who is not sovereign is a waste of time because he cannot do anything. If God does not sovereignly rule over human hearts, then about the only thing you can ask God to do is to control the weather and keep asteroids from crashing into earth and heal people of diseases. Any prayer that you offer that requires any human cooperation cannot be prayed because God cannot interfere with human wills—if he is not

sovereign. In the same way, if God is not sovereign then evangelism is a waste of time. Humans hate God and hate his law. Humans believe that the Messiah dying on the cross to forgive sins is foolishness. No one can trust and love a person they hate. No one can depend upon a message they believe is foolish. Therefore, if God is not sovereign over human wills then you cannot expect anyone to ever respond to the gospel.

You can ask a sovereign God to do anything that is in accord with his will because, as the prophet Jeremiah said in prayer to the Lord, "Nothing is too hard for you." The only limit to what God can do is what accords with his will and plan. Everything that furthers his purposes in the world that is in accord with his revealed will to glorify himself in the salvation of his people can be asked of God. Our prayers, like the preaching of the gospel, are the means that God has appointed for the accomplishment of his will in this world. This is what we will see in the next point.

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III. Aims to glorify Christ through his church (vv. 29-31)

Notice that the first two-thirds of the prayer are taken up with declaring truth about God and his ways in the world. It is only the last third of the prayer that is taken up with asking God for anything. What do they ask God for? In light of the threats of men and in light of the fact that God is the master of the universe and his plan to exalt Christ in the salvation of his people cannot be thwarted they ask God three things. First, they ask God to "gaze upon", or as the NIV has it, "take note of", the threats of the Sanhedrin. What exactly are they asking God to do? The only other use of this verb (literally: "gaze upon") in the NT is in Luke 1:26 where Elizabeth describes her pregnancy with John the Baptist in her old age as the result of God "looking upon her." In other words, God was gracious to her and gave her John. In the OT most of the time it has this sort of positive connotation. God looked upon Abel's offering but he did not look upon Cain's offering. In Exodus 2 God looked upon Israel in their distress and decided to act to save them. However, there are a few times when God's looking on someone is for the purpose of harm. Psalm 118:7 records the Messiah praying: "The Lord is to me a helper and I will gaze upon my enemies." Again the Messiah prays in Psalm 92:11, "My eyes gazed upon my enemies and my ears heard of the downfall of those who rose up against me." Clearly here the idea is to gaze in triumph over enemies. Given the ambiguity of this word it seems to me that they are leaving what happens to these authorities in the hands of God. Essentially they are saying to God, "It is not our business to decide what happens to these men and their threats. You deal with them according to your own purposes and will. You might save them or you might crush them; you might overthrow their plans to harm us or you might let them do what they want to do to accomplish your good purposes. We trust you to do what is right."

The main thing they ask is that God would make them bold and confident in proclaiming his word. Here is their chief concern. They know that Jesus has sent the HS in order that they might bear witness to Christ and so they simply ask God to do what God has said he wants to do. Give us courage so that we can declare the glory of Christ, no matter what the authorities do. You must remember that this is what the whole church wants. They prayed in one accord with one voice. The chief concern of the entire church is that Jesus be revealed and recognized and trusted and loved as a great and glorious savior from sin and as God's appointed king through the proclamation of God's word, the gospel. They want from God that boldness that would enable them to declare the greatness of Jesus in the face of opposition and the threat of harm.

Frankly I think this verse right here is a major rebuke to us, to our church. All of us feel the hostility of the world around us to this gospel. We may not have directly experienced it but we know that if we were to talk with our friends and family and neighbors about Christ that we would encounter opposition and threats. While there are a few of us who do share the gospel with others, most of us are not praying with one voice, in one

accord that God would enable us to speak his word with great boldness. We do share in common with this church a vision of the greatness of Jesus as our king and savior. What we lack is a sense of urgency that Jesus' fame would be spread through us into our community. I want to challenge you and I want to challenge me to pray this prayer daily in our homes and in our small groups and in our personal prayer and in our church wide prayer. We need to ask the Sovereign Lord to enable us to speak his word with boldness because we yearn to have Jesus' fame be spread throughout our community. Let me also say that this bold speaking needs to begin in our own homes. Every parent needs to pray this prayer in relation to their own children; "God give me boldness to preach the gospel to my children even if their eyes glaze over and they whine about how boring it is and they threaten to ignore me."

This church not only prays for boldness of speech but also that God would "stretch out his hand for healing and signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." Here we are again faced by the question I posed a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Peter's healing of the crippled man. Does God intend to perform acts of healing and other miraculous signs and wonders through the church? If we answer no to that question than on what grounds can we say that we should pray for boldness in our proclamation of the gospel but we should not pray for God to do signs and wonders through us? Let me draw your attention to four things. First, I think it is important to note that what is being prayed for here is not the same thing as the gifts of the Spirit that are described in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In the NT letters while there is a gift of healing there are not gifts for doing signs and wonders. In addition, all of the gifts listed in the letters are for the purpose of edifying the church and not evangelism. Clearly the church here views these signs as important for establishing the authority and veracity of the gospel to non-Christians.

Second, what is being asked for is the ability to do what Peter did with the crippled man. They are asking that God enable at least some among them to be able to speak and touch and pray and people are instantly healed and often in very public ways. Third, look at what happens following this prayer. There is an earthquake that is felt in the house where they were praying. Clearly this is a sign from God that he has heard their prayer. On two occasions in the OT earthquakes happened when God showed up, on Mt. Sinai and in Isaiah's vision of the Lord in Isaiah 6. Numerous times in the poetic books and in the prophets the shaking of the earth is said to accompany the coming of God in salvation and judgment. So God let his people know that he has come to them in answer to their prayer. God lets the church know he will take note of the threats and as we see next he will give them boldness to speak by a renewed filling of the HS for that purpose. The priority is clearly on the proclamation of the gospel and clearly everyone who was present at that prayer meeting received a positive answer to the prayer in that they were all filled with the HS and all preached with boldness. The next mention of signs and wonders is in Acts 5:12 where we read, "The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people." We again discover that it is the apostles only who are able to do signs and wonders. So while all the people are filled with the Spirit and speak the word of God boldly it is only through the apostles that God has stretched forth his hand to perform signs and wonders. The fourth thing to note is that the performance of these miraculous signs will be through the name of God's holy servant Jesus. We need to remember that anything done in the name of Jesus means it is done not only by his power but also according to his will. It is God who stretches out his hand to perform these miracles, not men. There is therefore, a recognition in the prayer that the performance of these wonders is going to be determined by God and not by man. The church asks and then acts in accord with God's will, in accord with the name of Jesus.

So, should we pray that signs and wonders accompany our bold proclamation of the gospel? Should we expect that there will be some among us whom God will enable to perform the kinds of signs and wonders that we see the apostles performing in these early chapters of Acts? Will you permit me to say that at this point in our study of Acts, I'm not sure. I don't think it is accidental that the apostles are the only ones performing these signs at this time. I don't think it is accidental that the phrase "signs and wonders" is used to describe the signs and wonders performed by Moses in the OT and by Jesus and his apostles in the NT. It is noteworthy that in the 2000 years of recorded biblical history from Abraham to the apostles there are only two periods of time in which "signs and wonders" are performed. We ought all to daily cry out to God that he would enable us to speak the gospel with boldness. We can also pray that God would validate that preaching of the gospel by the

manifestation of his presence and power in ways that accords with his will and purpose. All of us ought to have as the chief passion of our hearts that the name of Jesus be exalted in our community through the bold proclamation of his gospel and so this end we also should pray in one accord with one voice.

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