

“THE BOLD PRAYER OF BELIEVERS.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 4:23-31

Introduction.

Let me ask a really safe question, a question where we will all have the same answer. Have you ever been scared, afraid, fearful, nervous, worried, anxious, stressed, wrapped around the axle? Of course, you have. It is what all humans do at some level. We all feel our finiteness, our helplessness, our sense of being out of control.

Our big family wedding on Catalina Island produced a bit of anxiety for me. I did all the transportation planning to get 21 family members on planes that would get to LAX in time to get various shuttle vans and Uber cars to the Catalina Ferry terminal in time for the 2 pm crossing a week ago Thursday.

Phama's brother and wife came from Ohio via Houston, her sister and husband from Kansas via Denver, Zach and my brother's daughter came from Minneapolis, and 13 of us from Seattle on four different flights. And two aunts drove down from central California.

I asked my brother's wife to text me from the ferry terminal on everyone's arrival since they would be the first one's there. Over the next two hours I got four texts announcing each groups arrival until the best text of all, “the gang's all here.”

What an answer to countless prayers prayed over the past several months.

Now that's a small thing compared to what Sade Noteboom is facing at UW or a person who just got laid off work or someone with a cancer diagnosis. What do you do in a scary situation? What do you do when you are afraid? If you know something ahead is dangerous, how do you react?

We have before us a model of what to do and how to pray. This is the longest recorded prayer in the book of Acts, and it serves as a model, an example for us, to help us in how to pray, especially in times of trouble.

Let's consider how a prayer prayed two thousand years ago still speaks into our lives today in twenty-first century post-modern America.

Retreat to pray.

The apostles have been issued a serious threat by the religious and political authorities. This would be like being ordered to do something by the Supreme Court or the Pentagon. These people had real authority to do some pretty harsh things. This is not just blowing smoke, this is not trivial. To disobey them would invite severe consequences.

The very first thing they did in the face of this trial and trouble was not to run, hide or complain, but to pray. The real test of our Christianity is our prayer life and the priority we give to it.

What is prayer? In simplest terms it is communication with God. But drill down a bit and consider how radical prayer is.

This world of ours is ruled by Satan and filled with demons, it's a world where darkness and wickedness reigns, a world where kings and rulers and godless people plot against God.

In this world prayer becomes a subversive act, an act of military aggression. It is a declaration of allegiance with the other side in this great spiritual warfare on earth.

Satan hates prayer because it humiliates him, it says he isn't winning, his will isn't being done.

Have you ever had the experience of someone going over your head to get what they want? It's humiliating, it's embarrassing, it's demeaning.

Prayer is going over Satan's head, prayer is calling in superior fire power, prayer is going nuclear. Every single prayer is another humiliating defeat for the enemy of our souls.

Satan is defeated every time Christians pray, every time husbands and wives pray together, every time parents pray with their children, every time a meeting or appointment is opened in prayer.

Prayer is acknowledging that the God of the universe is still on His throne and very much in control. Prayer says He who is in us is greater than Him who is in the world.

Notice the apostles met with their friends. We need the fellowship of believers in times of need. We need at least one other person in our life to talk to and pray with, someone who will pray for us, who will hold our arms up in prayer.

Don't miss the effect trials and troubles have on our lives. They drive us closer together with a community of support and they drive us to our knees in prayer. Don't despise times of difficulty and don't think God isn't in them. (Man in Damascus, Syria).

Pray to the Sovereign God.

Let's look more closely at this model prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit. Notice they spend five verses praying about who God is and only the last two verses about what they wanted.

They don't pray a general or generic prayer. Each word applies specifically to their present situation. When you are praying in the midst of a situation that is fearful or out of control, how do you want to come before God? What do you want to most emphasize?

Sovereign Lord, the one who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them out of nothing. Sovereign Lord, God of absolute power and supreme authority. The one who created the world is more powerful than those who are created, Satan, rulers, all people.

If God created the entire world and everything in it, then it is subject to Him, ruled over by Him, under His complete control. Nothing can happen that He has not first decreed. He is the potter and we are the clay, the entire world and everyone in it is clay in His hands.

How can clay say no to the potter, how can the clay say to the potter do this and not that?

Think about the utter futility of those who are scheming against God, when God is watching every step they are taking. How do you get an upper hand on the God who knew before the world was made exactly what you would be up to?

It is the most absurd folly when the world tries to hinder or invade or restrict the kingdom of God. The very gates of hell cannot and will not succeed in any way to hinder the purposes of God.

Look what the principalities and powers, spiritual and earthly did to Jesus. They raged and plotted and killed God's holy servant Jesus, but to what effect? None, they utterly failed. God exposed the futility of man's and Satan's rebellion. Jesus suffered greatly and He triumphed greatly. This was the source of their great courage, boldness and confidence to pray as they did.

Notice what they don't ask for. They didn't pray for safety, security, protection. They didn't call down fire on their enemies. They don't ask that they may lead quiet and peaceful lives without any trouble. They don't ask for favor from the authorities. Not that any of those kinds of prayer are necessarily bad or wrong. But they aim higher, faithful obedience to the Lord's command.

Notice the assumption is that the threats will come to pass, that trouble is coming, what they ask for is obedience and boldness, strength and courage in the midst of the trouble.

The sober truth of this prayer and the Psalm 2 passage they quote, is there will never be peace on earth between God's kingdom and the kingdom of this world. So, conflict and hostility and hatred and violence are not strange or unusual, they have always been around and always will be.

They pray for more divine manifestations, the kind that got them in trouble in the first place. One miracle caused this much trouble, now they ask for more. They don't care about themselves, they care about the building of God's kingdom. They want the power of God to be on full display.

Notice they only make one very brief comment on the actual problem, "Lord, look upon their threats." That's all the more they dwell on the problem. Before God it's not a problem.

When we are facing a serious problem, do we focus more on the problem than on God Himself and on our obedience?

This prayer is needed today because of the increasing threats and obstacles to the proclaiming and living out of our faith in our country and around the world. Our freedoms are slowing narrowing and being taken away. And we face an even greater threat.

The threat is not persecution but comfort, ease, entertainment, lack of interest in spiritual things. We are being amused to death. We are filling our souls with mindless entertainment from Netflix, YouTube, and cable TV. We are saturated with the junk food of our culture we no longer have any appetite for truth and God's Word.

All Christians need this prayer, those in countries where physical and spiritual persecution is great, and those in countries where there is affluence, comfort and ease.

Advance in boldness.

Acts 4:31 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.

God confirms that He heard their prayer and gives a visible sign from heaven. In the OT when the temple or ground shook, it was a sign that God was there, with them, in that place. What an encouragement to the faithful, to continue to be faithful. The presence of the Lord is with them.

This is not the only way God shows His presence. God speaks to our troubled souls by many means, signs of grace, simple answers to prayer, a peace that passes common understanding.

A word of encouragement at just the right moment; a financial gift just in time for a need; God lets us see how He is using us when we feel useless. How has God met you in a time of need?

God loves prayer, because when He responds, it glorifies Him. His answers to prayer come back to Him with thanks, gratitude, worship. God is glorified by our asking and by His answering.

This prayer is completely relevant to our need here today. Too many of us are just drifting along, complacent, content with the status quo, comfortable, at ease with the world.

Some question this filling of the Holy Spirit, asking weren't they filled at Pentecost? Yes, but we all leak. We need a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit, we need an awakening, a revival, a new commitment to faithfulness and obedience. We need a profound sense of God's presence with us and His on-going purposes for us, a greater sense of God-appointedness about our lives.

How many of us wake up each day thinking about God's purpose for us in that day? How does God want to use me, what does He want to accomplish through me? How can I build or extend His kingdom today?

We need this outpouring of the Spirit in our church and community and our country more now than ever. Will you pray for this?

Implications and application.

Let's take to heart this model prayer and apply it to our own prayers lives.

First, in any need or trial or temptation, turn quickly to pray. Pray in all situations.

Second, pray more vertically, acknowledging who God is, what He is like, what He has done. Put depth into your prayers, pray doctrine, pray truth.

Third, pray Scripture and saturate your prayers with Scripture. Pray the Scriptures you read in our devotions. Find in Scripture a text that fits your situation.

Fourth, pray with and for others.

Fifth, pray more about God and His reputation and the advance of His Gospel and His kingdom. Pray against all threats and hindrances to God's purposes. Pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

Sixth, pray for more of the Holy Spirit to be evident in more of your life. Pray for the salvation of sinners, pray for the glory of God to be spread.

We all need a greater, more well-developed vision of God's sovereignty to strengthen and sustain us in times of trial and trouble.

Psalm 42:5-6 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you.

Horatio Spafford learned how to apply God's sovereignty to every situation and circumstance of his life, even the death of his four children:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."

Does God's sovereignty mean we will never be anxious or have fear? No, such is our lot as humans. In the presence of danger, fear is a normal response. But when fear comes, we respond to it with faith in the sovereignty of God. And we pray for faith and faithfulness and obedience.

A settled sense of the sovereignty of God will help us to respond better in times of stress and pressure. Can God help you in your situation? Is God small in your mind? He created the universe out of nothing, what can He not do for you? He planned the crucifixion of His Son for your benefit? What can He not do for you? His hands guide human history and your history. What can He not do for you?

God is not scared, He is never wringing His hands or shaking in His boots. He never breaks a sweat. And He never gets surprised. He never says, "I didn't see that coming."

The implication of the prayer is that just as Jesus suffered at the hands of evil men and was delivered, so God will use and deliver them. And just as God knew in advance all that would happen and even allowed and planned it, so God was in control of their situation and had everything well in hand.

When life feels out of control, when you feel helpless, when things don't make sense, God is big and not scared and surprised. This is cause for worship, for trust, for rest, for comfort.

Let us pray and sing God's sovereignty.