

Why Do the Nations Rage?

Acts 4:23-31

It's not too hard to figure out some of my favorite Bible verses or passages, since you are likely to hear them more often, not only as I preach and teach but also in the passages we read and the psalms we sing in worship services. They tend to be repeated more often than others. And to express that more descriptively than simply to say that they might be my favorite passages, the reality is that they are the most influential in my understanding and thinking about all that is revealed to us in the Bible. The same is certainly true of the Psalms, and one of my favorite and most often quoted Psalms is Psalm 2. I don't apologize for that at all, as Psalm 2 is also quoted multiple times in the New Testament. Psalm 110 is quoted the most, by far. Psalm 8, Psalm 22, Psalm 69, and Psalm 118 all make that list of repeated quotations New Testament, along with Psalm 2. With good reason!

Not surprisingly, most of those Psalms I mentioned have direct reference to Jesus, and Psalm 2 stands out, to me especially, not simply because of its reference to Jesus, but because it asks such a penetrating and relevant question about Jesus. Specially, a question of amazement and bewilderment that the world would so fully reject and despise Jesus. Why? Why is that? Why is Jesus rejected by so many? That is the question of Psalm 2.

That is the question you might ask, and feel deeply, as you read news reports every day. That is the question you might ask when you read about the partisan, political stalemate and frequent foolishness in our national government. That is the question you might ask when you hear reports of war, war in Iran and war in Ukraine. That is the question you might ask when you read news reports of the all-too-frequent mass shootings and

even political assassinations, or when you read of the devastating consequences of drug addiction or drunkenness or heinous sexual abuse.

Ps. 2:1 "Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 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 break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us."

The apostles confronted that very relevant question in Acts 4. "The kings of the earth set themselves...Against the LORD." The Jewish leaders and the Roman leaders "took counsel together," they conspired, to attempt to silence the apostles. We studied last week what they decided to do about the bold preaching of Peter and John.

Acts 4:17 "But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name. 18 So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus."

That brings us to our text this morning, and the question posed by Psalm 2, quoted in Acts 4,

v.25 "Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? 26 The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the LORD and against His Christ."

Why? Why such rebellion, such rage against God? They have just seen the power of God displayed through this great miracle of healing. Why, then, do they reject Jesus? Why have they set themselves against Jesus, so intentionally, so deliberately? So maliciously? It is a cry of anguish. A cry of frustration. It is a cry everyone one of you will likely understand in your own experience. Your logic, your reasonableness just

doesn't work. It feels like the desperation you experience when you try to convince a stubborn and self-willed two-year old to submit and obey. Why did the nations rage against Jesus?

Ultimately, it is a cry that expresses the deeper desire of our hearts for the work of the gospel in salvation, the work of God to save and to rescue desperate sinners from the guilt and consequences of their rebellion against God. And that, of course, is the context for our text today in the book of Acts. Peter and John were threatened, warned not to preach in Jesus' name. Their response is recorded in,

v.20 "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."

We come, then, to,

v.23 "And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them."

We begin there this morning with,

I. A DECLARATION OF THE NATURE OF GOD.

v.24 "So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them."

Why did they start there? Why is that their first response to the opposition they have encountered? The answer very simply is to note this great, fundamental, foundational and even presuppositional truth, that,

A. God alone is the creator of heaven and earth.

To believe in God is to believe in the creator, your creator. It is to acknowledge and admit that you have a creator, and that you

are, therefore, a creature. That identity, and that distinction, is essential to the very nature of religious faith—the acknowledgement of a creator, the recognition of our identity as creatures. That's the first foundation point of true faith and any true religion.

Heb. 11:3 "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible."

If you don't believe that, you don't have true faith, you don't have true religion. "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible."

Thus you believe this, the very starting point of our written Bible,

Gen. 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light."

And it is worth emphasizing at this point that this great creator God exists as a father, a son, and a holy spirit. And so we read of the son,

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made."

So that's where true religion begins. That's the foundation upon which true religion is built. And that is where the proclamation of the gospel starts, with the declaration that God alone is the creator of heaven and earth. In that context, I can

also note that that is where rebellion starts, with the rejection of God the creator.

B. God is rejected by fallen men.

It is a rejection for which unbelievers will be eternally condemned, unless they repent. The apostle Paul puts it this way,

Rom. 1:18 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.”

That rejection is why we find the reference to Psalm 2 in our text. God alone is the creator of heaven and earth, verse 24, but fallen creatures suppress that truth in their rebellion. And that is what the apostles note in regarding God,

v.25 “...who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? 26 The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the LORD and against His Christ.”

That’s reality, our reality. We live in a fallen world with fallen creatures who suppress the truth of a sovereign creator God. The anguish that Psalm is the anguish of our existence, as it was for the apostles in the book of Acts. And it is that reality that

makes obvious the need of the gospel, and the call for boldness for the which the apostles prayed. But before we look at that petition for boldness, notice what else is emphasized here in Acts. Not just the declaration of God the creator, but also,

II. A DECLARATION OF THE SOVEREIGN PURPOSE OF GOD.

v.27-28

This is not a secondary point and certainly not something which would be up for debate among the apostles. Rather, this is included here to emphasize how central the idea of God’s sovereignty is for the thinking of the apostles. Note how central a place this idea of God’s sovereignty has in relation to the proclamation of the identity of God himself! We read first of Jesus, that...

A. Jesus is the servant whom God has chosen.

Verse 27 refers to “Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed.”

We saw the same reference twice in chapter 3,

Acts 3:13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go.”

And,

Acts 3:26 “To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.”

The word for servant in those verses is actually the word for child. Even with reference to a small child. And that child was

clearly proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets.

Is. 9:6 “For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And the message of the gospel is that those Old Testament prophecies tell us about Jesus, which is so obvious in our text this morning.

v.27 “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together...”

Your holy Servant Jesus, then note, whom you anointed. The Greek word for anointed is the name Christ. Jesus the anointed is the same as Jesus the Christ. And in Hebrew, the anointed one is identified by the name Messiah! And that is the central hope of the whole of the Old Testament, the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the Christ, the coming of Anointed One. And the apostles make that clear in their preaching. Jesus is the Christ, which is why there is the reference in our text in Acts 4 to Psalm 2. For in that Psalm we read,

Ps. 2:1 “Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed.”

His Christ! And the point of this sermon in Acts 4 is the same as that declaration of Psalm 2, namely that rebellious and sinful men reject Jesus the Messiah! And they are held responsible for that rejection. That’s what this sermon is all about. Again, listen to the full impact of,

v.27 “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and

the people of Israel, were gathered together.”

You have rejected the Lord’s Messiah, Christ the anointed one, and...

B. Those who reject Jesus are responsible for their sin.

Again, that’s the point. Peter and John are preaching to the Jewish leaders, along with the Jewish leaders and all the people of Israel, and the message is plain. You are responsible for putting to death the anointed Messiah promised by God to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. You conspired together, proclaiming your own independence from God, your own autonomy. You have proclaimed in your own stubborn rebellion against the authority of God as creator,

Ps. 2:3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.”

Peter preached the same message on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— 23 Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.”

That reference, along with verse 28 in our text today, emphasize another important point, namely that,

C. God accomplishes his sovereign purpose despite the sinful actions of men.

Look at how verse 28 follows right along after verse 27.

v.27 “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together 28 to do whatever

Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.”

As I said just a minute ago, note just how central the idea of God’s sovereignty is for the thinking of the apostles. Note how central a place this idea of God’s sovereignty has in relation to the proclamation of the identity of God himself! It’s not an afterthought. It’s not a theological debate relegated to those who are more intellectual and academically minded. It’s not just for people who want to be “reformed” in their theology. It is so significant a part of the message of the gospel itself that the apostles include it here in the early days of New Testament preaching after Pentecost.

The point is that although the nations rage and the people plot vain things, although there is a great worldwide rejection of the authority of God by unbelievers, although there are even conspiracies that abound in opposition to the revelation of God himself such that the wicked suppress the obvious truth of God in their unrighteousness, despite all of those things which emphasizes the responsibility of the wicked for their sinfulness, still, God accomplishes his sovereign purpose.

You killed Jesus, you put him to death—that is what was preached by the apostles. But this is preached as well—that all of your sins accomplished whatever the hand of God and the eternal purpose of God determined before to be done. Back to Acts 2, speaking of Jesus,

Acts 2: 23 “...Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.”

So God’s determined purpose, his predetermined purpose, what God determined before to be done, was that Jesus would die for our sins! That he would be crucified in his full humanity, as

the atoning sacrifice for our sins. That was God’s eternal purpose. That is what predetermined, predestined. And the whole emphasis of that idea of God’s sovereignty is so that we might realize that we are saved by grace. By grace alone. Our salvation is all of grace, not of works, lest any of us should boast. Paul puts all of that together in his letter to the Ephesians.

Eph. 1:7 “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, 9 having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, 10 that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. 11 In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, 12 that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”

So the doctrine of God’s predetermined purpose is not to be relegated a theological debate of secondary importance. Rather, it is part and parcel of the evangelistic invitation of the gospel, at least it was for the apostles. And with that realization, with that realization, just look at what the apostles prayed for.

v.29 “Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word.”

It was nothing less than,

III. A PETITION FOR BOLDNESS.

Specifically,

A. A boldness to proclaim God’s word.

This whole passage is a prayer a crying out to God, and I want to be sure you keep the whole idea and flow of the passage in

your mind. They are talking to God, acknowledging that he is the creator of heaven and earth. Then they invoke the words of Psalm 2, noting the inexcusable rebellion of the wicked in a deliberate rejection of God, conspired with others to rage against the authority of God. And thus brought opposition and persecution to the apostles. Yet those apostles note with full confidence that all that is happening to them comes about according to God's own predetermined purpose. And so they prayed for boldness.

v.29 "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word."

Just as an aside, let me comment that anyone who thinks that the doctrine of God's sovereignty and God's eternal decree somehow reduces or even removes the impulse and motivation for evangelism, doesn't understand the apostles! Anyone who thinks even that predestination somehow hinders the imperative of evangelism, doesn't understand the apostles! Here in Acts 4, at the very moment when the apostles recognize that God's predetermined purpose is being accomplished by those who rebel against Jesus, they pray for boldness.

v.29 "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word."

The apostles, in laying the foundation of the church, went further, of course, than we can do as we build upon that apostolic foundation. In other words, apostolic power was unique to the apostles, and for them that meant the power to perform miracles. And so when they prayed for boldness to proclaim God's word, they also prayed with,

B. A confidence in spiritual power.

v.29 "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, 30 by

stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus."

The power to perform signs and wonders was given by God to the apostles, power which was an attestation of the supernatural identity of Jesus as the son of God. Those signs would continue to be a vital part of the apostolic ministry as we will see throughout this book of Acts. And the explanation of all that is expressed in Hebrews 2, which refers to the gospel...

Heb. 2:3 "...which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, 4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will."

We will see much more of that spiritual power as we continue through this great book. Notice then, how this passage ends, with words of great encouragement even to us today. It is,

C. A demonstration of God's response.

v.31 "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness."

They prayed for boldness and God fulfilled that desire! And God added his own encouragement. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, in a very special and particular way, and we see a tangible, observable demonstration of such power.

v.31 "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken."

I don't expect a literal, physical repeat of that experience in our own day, in the post-apostolic age. I think it is a manifestation of God's power to the apostles in their foundational ministry within the church, but I don't want any of that to diminish the sense of

God's blessing upon his people when they pray together! And though I might not expect a literal fulfillment in our day, I would still use this language in the anticipation and expectation of God's presence among us when we pray. I would still pray that God would shake the place where we assemble to pray. I pray that believing that God's power is so often poured out upon his people when we pray. And that power is real. Even if the bricks and mortar of our building might not shake as if there were a real earthquake, still those words express well what God is able to do, and what God does, in fact, still do.

Don't think any less of the importance of praying together as God's people. And don't be hesitant to expect, and pray, that God would so answer our prayers that we, too, would have reason to exclaim, "the place where they were assembled together was shaken."

These verses so well describe the life and activity of the early church, and we will continue that focus next week in the very practical aspects of our horizontal relationships, as we say today, our relationships with one another. But for today, for this morning, in a world where the presence of wicked unbelievers would cause us to exclaim,

Ps. 2:1 "Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed..."

...Let this prayer for boldness be of great encouragement to you. May it be your prayer, our prayer. And as we pray, when we pray, may "the place where [we are] assembled together [be] shaken" by the overpowering presence of God himself.