



PRAYER AND PERSECUTION

Acts 4

Church at Brook Hills, I would like to introduce you to four of my friends and brothers in Christ from the Sudan. This is Stephen, a headmaster in the school in one of the communities there that I was working with. This is my good friend, Bullen here, good friend Andrew, and this is Jeffery. All four of these guys are church leaders in the Sudan.

You'd be surprised what all it takes to get anybody from the Sudan into the United States. But God, by His grace has granted for these guys to be here for a couple of months, we have worked with a group, independent missions sending organization, that is hosting these guys while they are here and we had worked with them down in New Orleans and have gotten to become good friends with them. That is how I went on this trip that I did about a year and a half ago to the Sudan. And I called them up and I said, is there anyway they could get to Birmingham one Sunday. And so they worked it out, God worked it out for this to happen.

And what I want us to do is I want to hear from them in the context of a passage of Scripture that I believe is extremely important for us, particularly in an American Church. And if you've got your Bibles with you and I hope you do. Let me invite you to open with me to Acts 4.

As you are turning there, I really, I really just want to shoot straight with you. There are millions of our brothers and sisters around the world who, today, face the harsh realities of suffering and persecution for following Jesus Christ—millions of our brothers and sisters. I'm not sure if you are aware, but approximately in the next year 184,000 Christians will die because of persecution and suffering they face because of their relationship with Christ, 184,000.

Just to give you a picture, you and I know we are inundated here in our culture, particularly in this country, with news of war in Iraq. And we get updates on a daily basis and we've seen casualties, over the next five days, more Christians will die in the world for suffering and persecution than all of the people who have died from our country and Iraq combined over the last few years. This is a reality that for far too long the Christian church in America has turned a deaf ear too. And we are inundated with news from a physical war that is going on, but we are not inundated with the fact that brothers and sisters, our family around the world in chains is facing every single day.

And what I want to say to you from the very beginning of our time together is that needs to change.

Pray for the Persecuted Church

We are going to dive into today and there is a biblical truth at the top of those notes that will be the foundation for everything that we talk about. And that biblical truth is this, we have a responsibility, a God-given responsibility to pray consistently and passionately for the persecuted church around the world. We have a God-given responsibility in this room to pray consistently and passionately for the persecuted church around the world.

Now the question comes to that point, now how do we pray? Obviously, we live in a pretty different culture than the Sudan or North Korea, or China or Saudi Arabia or Laos or Eritrea where all these different places where there is such severe suffering. How do we pray? That's what I want us to look at in Acts 4 and along the way hear from these guys, as they share what it's like to live in a place where it's difficult to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Acts 4, look with me to verse 23. The context, Acts 3, a lame man is healed miraculously; Peter and John were part of that, start preaching the Word. Acts 4, people get pretty upset. They start to approach Peter and John. They pull them away from the crowds and put them in jail and they bring them before the Sanhedrin and basically they are starting to make threats against them. You can't stand up and proclaim Jesus. And so they experienced persecution and suffering on a level that they had not experienced to this point.

Now, I want you to look at what happens after they get out of jail, they are released. Look at verse 23, *"On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God"* (Acts 4:23-24). Now, I want you to hear what they prayed. This is the prayer of persecuted saints in Acts 4. *"Sovereign Lord..."* Now, imagine this, gathered together in a small group of people, knowing that you are facing risk of your life right now for what you are believing.

'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:24-31).

I want to ask four questions when it comes to the persecuted church that I think will help us understand how we can take full advantage of this responsibility that God has entrusted to us.

Why Do We Pray?

First question is: why do we pray? Why do we need to pray for the persecuted church around the world? And I believe there are two answers to that in this passage of Scripture. Number one, we pray because we are one family. We pray because we are one family.

If you look at verse 23 it says, "*Peter and John went back to their own people*" (Acts 4:23). Some translations might say to their "friends". Basically this was a picture of the New Testament church coming together, two guys who have been through a pretty difficult few days and they retreated to this time when they were around each other and it says they prayed together. They prayed in unison, it literally says in the original language of the New Testament. There they are gathered together as friends, praying as one family on behalf of each other. And that's the picture we've got here in Acts 4 and I believe it's the picture we need in the 21st century church today.

Can I remind you that calling these men, "brothers," is more than just a title or a reference to them, that is who they are. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. First Corinthians 12:26, go look at it sometime. Underline it in your Bible, particularly when it comes to the persecuted church. It's talking about the body of Christ there. And Paul says, when one part of the body suffers, who else suffers? We all suffer. When one part of the body hurts, we all hurt.

The body is hurting around the world. And we sit back like nothing is going on and that's not the New Testament picture of community that Scripture is giving us here and I remind you this morning we are one family. And when one part of the body hurts, we all hurt.

Not only are we one family, but we have one purpose. I love the picture here of these guys gathering together. This is more than just a prayer meeting on Wednesday night or on a designated time during the week where we come together, talk for about 50 minutes about what we should pray for then pray for about five minutes and have prayer meeting. That's not what they are doing here. These are the people who are on the front lines in a battle to proclaim the gospel in the first century and they gather together in a group, almost like a huddle, almost like they are coming back from the battle lines, getting together and saying, okay, we need to pray for strength going back out there. We need to pray for power to, boldness to proclaim the gospel.

The prayers of these people are more than just some domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts and help down here. It's not what prayer is about. Prayer is about, and I like what one writer calls it, a wartime walkie-talkie. Communication with the God of the universe and a battle to lead men, women, boys and girls in all nations to a relationship in Christ. That's what prayer is intended to be. And I want to remind you whether in Birmingham or Sudan the purpose is the same. We want Christ to be exalted. We want His name to be honored among the people around us. Whether it's easy or difficult to proclaim His name, the purpose is the same, so we come together with these guys, one family, one purpose. And not just these guys, but persecuted believers around the world.

Who Do We Pray To?

Second question I want us to ask, based on Acts 4, is: who do we pray too? Now, I know some of you are thinking, "Well, that's a weird question to ask, of course that's a no brainer Dave. God would be the answer. 'Who do we pray to.' Why do you ask that?"

Well, I think it's interesting. Look in Acts 4, and these believers spend five verses telling God who He is before they ask Him for anything. Now, why would they do that? As if God needed to know who He was. As if they needed to fill in God on some new information. That wasn't their point though. What Scripture is telling us here is that if we are going to pray, we need to know the God who we are praying too. We need to know who He is and that will lead us to pray the correct way.

So, I want you to see who they were praying too. They spent five verses summing up, I

believe, three characteristics of God. First of all, He is the one who is in control. He is the one who is in control. Amidst the disarray of Acts 4, they gather together as one family and they pray and what are the first words that come out of their mouths? "Sovereign Lord." The one who is in control. That is what it means for God to be sovereign. The word in the original language, the New Testament there, is "despota", which basically means, "despot", like a ruler, an absolute ruler over people. And that's what they say to God. They say, "God, we know that you are in control." And every verse that follows from that talks about how everything that happens in history happens at the hand of God and how He is in control. Not Satan. Satan is on a leash and God is in control of this thing.

And this is huge for people in the midst of it's persecution and suffering to know that amidst the questions and amidst the confusion, amidst the anxiety, amidst losing your mom or your dad or your brother or sister or your son or your daughter. Amidst all of that you can look up and see that God is still on the throne. And he's still in control of everything that is going on. Their favorite phrase in the Sudan, if I heard it once I heard it a million times. You go up to people and talk with them, "Man, I am so sorry about what has happened"—just seeing bombed villages or churches or this or that—and they look at you and they say, "Oh, God is greater. God is greater because He is always in control."

Not only the one who is in control, but number two, the one who is always faithful to His Word. I wish we had time to dive deeper into this, maybe at some point, you know, you can on your own time, but in Acts 4 when they quote here from Psalm 2, you look at the similarities there between what they were facing and what Psalm 2 is talking about, it's talking about how one day, the kings of the earth, the nations rise up against Christ, the anointed one of God. And they say, "God, you knew that was going to happen to your Son. The same is true, you knew it was going to happen to us, but you also said to your Son back in Psalm 2, that the ends of the earth would be His possession. He would come out victorious in this thing." And so they pray based on Psalm 2 and we believe the same thing. We believe that you are going to show yourself faithful to your word amidst our persecution and so they prayed based on the Word of God.

Praying to the one who is in control. The one who is always faithful to His Word and number three, they pray to the one who is familiar with suffering. I want you to see how all throughout this passage they are identifying themselves with Christ. They say, "This is supposed to happen to Christ and the persecution, the suffering, the kings of the earth, the Gentiles and the people of Israel would rise up against Him and it all happened according to your will." And what they are saying, basically, "If we are going to be identified with Christ, we know that the same thing is going to happen to us."

It's what we see throughout Scripture. We studied it a couple weeks ago when we were looking at Stephen. If we are going to show the glory of Christ, then we have to show the suffering of Christ in the world.

And they are not praying. They are not praying in Acts 4 and these guys aren't praying to a God who is out there in the distance who doesn't really have a grip on what's actually going on in the world. This is a God who is in the middle of it and who gave His life, amidst the suffering and the persecution that we see Christ endure, so that He would be familiar with it. And when we come to Him, He is the one who is familiar with suffering. Now, that's a pretty incredible God to pray to, the God who is in control, the God who is familiar with suffering and the God who is always faithful to His Word.

What Do We Pray For?

He's faithful and He's sovereign and He's familiar with our suffering. So, what do we pray

for? How do you pray for people in the Sudan or in China or North Korea or Saudi Arabia? How do you pray for them? What do you pray for?

I want you to see what they prayed for in Acts 4, three things. But I think it would be probably most appropriate for us to start with what they didn't pray for. Sometimes what the Bible doesn't show us actually shows us a lot.

Notice that in no point in Acts 4, do you see them praying for the persecution to stop, at no point in Acts 4 do you see them praying for God to bring the wrath down on those people around them. At no point do you see them lamenting for what they were going through. Instead of praying for escape from that trial, they prayed for enablement to stand up under the trial. You catch that? That's a weird way to pray for Americans. It's a weird way for us who cling to comfort to pray. Not for escape, but for enablement in the middle of it. And that's what they prayed in Acts 4. And that's what saints around the world are praying and that's what we need to pray on behalf of them. So, pray, instead of for escape, pray for enablement in three ways.

I think they prayed for three main things here in Acts 4. Number one, they prayed for the honor of Christ. They prayed for the honor of Christ. "*Now, Lord, consider their threats*" (Acts 4:29)—what were the threats? You look back in chapter 4 verse 18 and 21, you'll see the threats. The threats were they would come to Peter and John and say, said, you better stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Stop speaking about Jesus, stop proclaiming Jesus. "Now Lord, consider their threats."

Picture their prayer, "God, these people are rising up and trying to stop the proclamation of the glory of Jesus Christ. And we are praying that you would rise up and enable us to speak with great boldness so that the honor of Christ might be proclaimed through us." Notice that at the heart of their prayer was not even for their own needs. What was it for? Not for the needs of men, but the glory of Christ was at the center of their prayer. And it needs to be the center of our prayer for each other in our own lives and for these guys.

Not saying that praying for needs in our lives is not important, but that's what we pray for all the time and we miss out on the whole point. The whole point is the God will enable us in the trials, in the suffering the persecution that we or they experience, "Christ, to honor your name in the middle of it. Make your glory named in the middle of it no matter what it costs, make your glory known." Pray for the honor of Christ.

Two, pray for the boldness of the church; the boldness of the church. "*Consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness*" (Acts 4:29). Imagine the temptation that was facing them in Acts 4, when you see your son or daughter's face and you know that if you go out and proclaim the name of Jesus, you may not come back to care for them. Imagine the difficulty of being in a community like the Sudan or other places in the world where that is a reality day in and day out. You pray for boldness for the church.

Not only to pray for the honor of Christ and for boldness of the church, but I think the whole pray here is a prayer for the advancement of the kingdom, advancement of the kingdom. They continue on and they say "*stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders*" among the people (Acts 4:30). God, we don't want to just see the gospel proclaimed, we want to see it transforming lives.

And that's the picture we are hearing here about places like the Sudan. There is a great need for the gospel to be proclaimed. But there are a lot of other needs that surround that that are encompassed in that, for the gospel ought to be proclaimed just with the preaching

and with verbal proclamation, but also for people who are suffering from famine and starvation, from people who have no clothes. From children who have no schools. For people who are suffering from diseases that we don't even know, much less, know a cure for. Pray for the honor of Christ. Pray for the boldness of the church and pray for the advancement of the kingdom.

What Do You Expect?

And I would add to that, then rise church and put feet to your prayers. So, what do you expect when you pray like that? What happens in Acts 4 and what happens today when we really pray like that? And I think three main things happened in this passage. And it's pretty awesome, they all parallel what had happened just two chapters before when the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost.

Number one, expect the earth to shake. Expect the earth to shake. The place where they were meeting was shaken. Now, I am not saying that if we pray the magical prayer that all of a sudden this auditorium begins to shake and we would have a really cool worship service at that point. That's not what I'm saying, but I am saying this, when God's people get on their knees and on their faces on behalf of brothers and sisters around the world, He will shake the earth for His glory and He will make His glory known. And He will move in ways that can't be described or attributed to man. He will move in incredible ways, if we will pray and then rise and put feet to those prayers. Expect the earth to shake. God wants to make His glory known in Sudan and in Birmingham and everywhere in between. So, let's be a people that pray for it.

Expect the earth to shake, number two, expect the Spirit to fill. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They were filled with God's Spirit. Now, it wasn't that they didn't already have God's Spirit. Acts 2 tells us the Spirit had already come down on them. The Spirit was dwelling inside of them. We know that from the rest of the New Testament, but we also see that for the proclamation of the Word of God, constantly over and over again, we saw this back in February, if you were here when we studied through the book of Acts just looking at the role of the Holy Spirit, He fills us, gives us power, fresh power to proclaim the gospel, over and over and over again. That's exactly what He does here in Acts 4.

And that's why in the verses that follow, they go out and they do, they proclaim the gospel with great boldness. That's why we see what had happened with Stephen, with him standing up and proclaiming the gospel with great boldness and then them being scattered to Samaria and Judea and Samaria, the ends of the earth. The Spirit fills His people. The Spirit is filling His people in Sudan. I pray that we are longing for the Spirit to fill His people in Birmingham for the proclamation of the gospel here and in all nations.

Expect the earth to shake and expect the Spirit to fill. And finally, expect the gospel to succeed, expect the gospel to succeed. After they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the Word of God boldly. And if you will notice what happens after this, it happened back in Acts 4, it's great. Peter and John were put in jail for proclaiming the gospel, what happened was they preached to enough people where thousands of people were saved, before they got put in jail. When they get out of jail, it didn't stop the church; it only fueled the church. It's exactly what we see throughout the book of Acts. The advancement of the kingdom, the proclamation of the gospel, does not happen in spite of persecution and suffering, it happens precisely by the means of persecution and suffering. That's how the gospel is proclaimed. Expect the gospel to succeed.

We spent the last six weeks walking through a series, called, *Unstoppable*, the church that dares to take God at His word because we know we have full confidence that when we proclaim the gospel we will succeed. And when this church centers around proclamation of the gospel, it will succeed here and in all nations. Expect the earth to shake, expect the Spirit to fill, expect the gospel to succeed.

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