



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No.
1307-9
Acts 4:23-31
Mark Mitchell
January 14, 2007

Where To Run

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

We've seen from the start that the book of Acts is the story of all that Jesus continued to do and teach. The only difference between the gospels and the book of Acts is that in the gospels Jesus worked through his physical presence, but in Acts he works from heaven through the church, which is his body.

In chs. 3-4 we have a new development in Acts. For the first time, the church is facing opposition. Peter and John were going up to the Temple to pray when they stumbled upon a 40-plus year old lame man, begging alms. Peter told him that he didn't have any money but he did have a name, and in the name of Jesus he commanded him to walk. Immediately, the man leaped up and began walking and praising God. He followed Peter and John into the Temple and by the time they came out there was a huge crowd. Everyone was amazed because they knew this guy; he always sat and begged in the same spot. So Peter seized the opportunity to tell them that this miracle was not done because of his own power but because of faith in this name of Jesus. But then, because there was such a commotion, the religious authorities in charge of the Temple arrested them. They made them spend the night in jail and the next day they brought them before the great Sanhedrin, a council of 72 priests and scribes. After Peter explained to them how this man was healed by the same Jesus they had crucified, they threatened him and told them "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."

I thought about that a lot this week. I wondered what we would do if that same threat and command came to us. We have tremendous freedom in this country to speak about Jesus. No one is stopping me from doing that this morning. But then I thought, what if I was a school teacher? As far as I know, public school teachers are given the same command, at least in the classroom. To a certain extent this is also true in the military, and there is even a movement afoot to forbid military chaplains from speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus. So what we have today is illustrated by the fourth grader who came to school and reported on the origins of the Thanksgiving holiday. He said, "The pilgrims came here seeking freedom of you know what. When they landed, they gave thanks to you know who. Because of them, we can worship each Sunday, you know where." Now I realize that the separation of church and state is there to protect our freedom of religion, but at what point do we say with Peter: "We can't stop speaking about what

we've seen and heard"?

If I were in that situation, say as a school teacher, I don't know how I would I would deal with the threat that I could lose my job if I mentioned my faith in Christ in the classroom? This is what the early church was facing with this first uprising of opposition. And the question I want to ask today is, how did they get the boldness to keep on speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus? How do we get that boldness? In other words, what would Jesus continue to do and teach through us in the midst of that kind of situation?

I. Peter and John report back to their "own".

In v.23 we read what Peter and John did. **"When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them."**

So after they're released, Peter and John run back to their own companions. Literally the text says "they went to their own." This is the same word used in John 1:11, **"Jesus came to his own and his own received him not."** It simply means family, friends, close associates, neighbors, and here it means fellow believers. How many of you would run to your fellow believers in the same situation? Maybe some of us would just go home and lock the doors. Some would run to their families. But how many of us would run to our fellow believers?

When they got there they simply reported all that the chief priests and elders had said. It strikes me that Peter and John didn't try to protect the church from the harsh realities that they were facing. I mean, I could kind of see them heading back to the house and talking about how to break the news to the church. Remember many of these folks were very new believers and this could potentially create a real crisis of faith in their lives. I would want to protect them a little bit. I would want to soften the blow. But it doesn't appear that Peter and John did that, especially as you read on. I think Peter and John knew that this would be a great opportunity for the church to grow and learn a whole new level of dependence on the Lord.

II. The church turns to God in prayer.

So look what happens next. **"And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said,..."** (v.24a). What do they do when

they're threatened? First, they run to their own. Then, they run to God in prayer. It reminds me a bit of Jesus. In his darkest hour, when he was threatened, what did he do? He got a couple of his closest friends together, went into the garden of Gethsemane, and prayed. He ran to his own and he ran to God. One of the things we often forget at times like this is that the battle we're fighting is not a human battle, therefore it must not be fought with human weapons.

By the way, that's what the book of Revelation is about. Did you know that Acts and Revelation tell the same story? In Acts it's human beings that oppose the church, but in Revelation the curtain is lifted, revealing that the enemy is the devil himself. Revelation 12 tells of a beautiful woman wearing a crown of 12 stars. The 12 stars indicates that she represents the people of God in the Old Testament. She's about to give birth to Jesus Christ. But a great red dragon with seven heads, ten horns and a swishing tail, the devil, stands over the woman, ready to devour the son at his birth. But the Christ-child is protected by heaven. His plot foiled, the dragon furiously turns on the woman's other children, the church. This antagonism of the devil is the main theme of Acts 3 and 4. That's what's going on behind the scenes here, and it's still going on.

And that's why we have to pray. You see, Satan trembles when he sees even the weakest believer upon his knees. The early church understood that. Ray Stedman writes, "That's why they didn't go out to organize a revolutionary committee to overthrow the Sanhedrin. They didn't even try to arouse a popular march or demonstration. The clear evidence of this passage is that...the people were behind them, and the high priests were afraid because the people supported the apostles. But the apostles don't rely for even one minute upon political or popular pressure. They cast themselves upon the unique resource of the church in any age.... They cast themselves wholly upon the sovereign power of God at work in history. That's the greatest force to alter a power structure that the world has ever seen. It's been ignored by the church many times and thus Christians have frittered away their efforts in relatively useless activities which make a lot of noise and smoke but never accomplishes anything." How true that is!

A. They talk to God about God: So let's look at their prayer. Whenever you see a prayer like this written out for us, you know it's there to instruct us on how to pray, especially in times of crisis like this. And one of the things we've learned over and over again is that in prayer you start with God. You don't start with your own needs. You start by talking to God about God. Look how they start out.

"...O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, "WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE

this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur'" (vv.24b-28).

There are three things they say about God here.

First, he's the creator. The key verb here is "you made..." Why is this important? Because they know that if God created everything in earth, sea and heaven, then these elders and priests are his property and he can do with them as he pleases.

Second, he's the God who speaks. The key verb here is "you said." And this is important because it reminds us that they were constantly relating their experiences back to the Scripture. The Scripture informed their prayers, as it should ours. Here they go back to Psalm 2 which we read earlier. It's what we call a Messianic psalm; it's about the coming anointed one, the Messiah. In Psalm 2 David prays about how the Gentiles and Kings rage and plan and oppose the Lord's anointed one. The idea is that it's futile for men to stand against God's anointed king. And notice how in their prayer they relate that to Christ. The kings and rulers, King Herod and Pilate, along with Gentiles and Israelites, gathered together against Jesus. And I believe what is important about this is that these believers saw what was happening to them as just an extension of what happened to Jesus. They connected the dots from Psalm 2 to Jesus to themselves.

Third, he's the sovereign God of history. When they addressed him as "Lord" they used a unique Greek word, *despotes*. We get our word "despot" from this. It's not necessarily a negative word. It just means "absolute ruler." It goes along with what they say about him in v.28: **"to do whatever your hand and your purpose predestined to occur."** The key verb here is "you predestined." This means that God rules even over the sinful deeds of men and causes them to backfire. They killed Jesus but his death accomplished our salvation. He was raised up and seated at God's right hand. All their rage and imagination has turned back on their own head. And why is that important to these praying people? Because it would be the same thing with them. It's a reminder that God is completely in control. He rules even over the evil deeds of people and causes them to backfire, using them for his own purposes. Do you realize that? Do you know that the evil things done to you will backfire and God will use those things to accomplish

his good and gracious purpose? He's the God of history. This is how they prayed. They started with God: "God, you made, you spoke, you predestined... So what do we have to worry about?"

B. They talk to God about their needs: Once they established in their minds who God is, they go on to talk to God about their needs. You see, it's not wrong to talk to God about your needs, but you have to let what you know about him inform you so that you know what your real needs are. That's why when they get around to praying for their needs they don't ask for what we think they would ask for. What would you ask for in this situation? Well, I would ask for protection, wouldn't you? "Oh God, please keep us safe. Please don't let them hurt us." And then I might even pray for retribution: "Oh gracious and loving God, would you please nail them!" Or perhaps there are some real spiritual types out there who would pray for their salvation: "Oh God, please save them." Sounds good, but they don't do that either. Look at what they ask for.

"And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus" (vv.29–30).

First, they ask him to take note of their threats. It's kind of a strange request, isn't it? The word means "to take notice of, to consider, to pay attention to, to concern oneself with." Luke has used this word before. In Luke 1:48 Mary is rejoicing in prayer over the fact that she's been blessed to carry the Messiah in her womb and she cries out, **"He has taken note of the humble state of his bondslave."** In Luke 9:38 a man approached Jesus about his demon possessed son and says, **"Teacher, I beg you to take note of my son, for he is my only boy."** In both cases, the idea is more than just seeing something, but it has to do with concerning yourself with something and responding. So they're asking God to concern himself with these threats. That leads to what they ask for next.

Second, they ask him to enable them to speak the word with all confidence (boldness). It's like "A lot is at stake here, God. You've told us to tell others about your Son and they're telling us to stay silent. Take note of that God and give us boldness to continue to speak." Notice that they're asking him to give them the boldness to continue to do what the Sanhedrin told them they aren't allowed to do. I spoke last week about the ways we feel intimidated in today's world and as a result don't have this boldness. Intellectually, we're made to feel like our faith is irrational, unscientific and historically bogus. Morally, we feel like such a minority in our convictions about the sanctity of marriage and sexuality. Religiously, people point to millions of Muslims and Hindus and make us feel like bigots if we really believe salvation is in Christ alone. Any one of

these factors can silence us. And so this is a good thing for us to pray as well. "Lord, grant that your bond-servants might speak boldly."

Third, they ask God to continue to heal and perform signs and wonders in the name of Jesus. We've seen in the book of Acts how these miracles were designed to authenticate the message of the apostles, so people would be able to see with their eyes that this message about Jesus was true. We know that God can and does do miracles today, but miracles in the Bible are normally bunched around key periods of revelation. With the passing of the foundational era of the apostles, the kind of miracles described here such as the instantaneous and complete healing of the lame man with a simple command, are rare. Perhaps the greatest miracles today are changed lives; people whom God has transformed from darkness to light.

III. God answers their prayer.

And what happens when, in the midst of threats, we run to God with our friends? What happens when we cast our cares upon him? Luke tells us in v.31. **"And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness."** We know that there are times when we pray and pray, but it seems like nothing happens. There are times when we have to wait for God's answer. But this wasn't one of those times. Here they experience an immediate, dramatic answer to prayer.

First, the place was shaken. This a little bit like Pentecost when the mighty wind shook the house. It's also like Mt. Sinai when God descended upon it and **"the whole mountain shook violently"** (Ex.19:18). It was a tangible expression that God was there.

Second, they were all filled with the Spirit and began to speak the word with boldness. This is another one of those fresh fillings that came to people already inhabited with the Spirit that resulted in a desire and willingness to speak out with boldness. This is exactly what they had prayed for. We don't know if they hit the streets right away and started sharing their faith or not, but we know that they had a new found confidence. Do you know what's so great about this? The Jewish leaders thought they could stop this whole business about Jesus if they could just get Peter and John to shut up. So they threatened them, and these threats were real because the next time they were thrown in prison and flogged (5:40). But instead of stopping the spread of the Christian faith, their threats actually resulted in accelerating it, as now more people are speaking with boldness. Now it's not just Peter and John, it's all of them! Once again, the tables are turned and their opposition backfires.

This is how God works. He takes the threats and evil deeds of men and uses them to accomplish his own good purpose. I heard a true story that illustrates this. On September 15, 1999, In Fort Worth, Texas, about 400 youth gathered in the sanctuary of Wedgwood Baptist Church for a See-You-at-the-Pole rally. As they were worshipping, suddenly a lone gunman burst in. Larry Ashbrook killed seven people, mostly teenagers. At first, many thought the gunman was part of a skit. But they soon realized the bullets weren't blanks. Many of the youth, plus 150 adults and children at Wedgwood that night must have wondered where God was. But in the weeks following the tragedy, they saw God was at work.

Although the deaths and injuries were tragic, the devastation could have been much worse. Sixty-eight bullets were fired and only 14 people were hit. And for those who were injured, a paramedic was at church that night and gave some of the victims the immediate medical attention they needed.

Fifteen thousand people attended a community-wide service at the football stadium of TCU in Fort Worth. Al Meredith, Wedgwood's pastor, challenged people to pray and fast on Monday, the 20th. The service was broadcast live on a local television station and on CNN. Because one of the victim's parents lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, that country, which is closed to the gospel, allowed the service to be broadcast there.

A DJ at a local Christian radio station was able to lead a caller to Christ. The caller had said he wanted what the church members had.

When prompted by a question from Vice President Al Gore, the pastor was able to present the gospel clearly on the television show, *Larry King Live*. In the days following the tragedy, Meredith was also able to pray with President Bill Clinton and Governor George W. Bush.

The husband of a church member professed a newfound faith in Christ shortly after the shooting. His wife, Jodi, and three-year-old daughter were at the church during the shooting as he watched the scene unfold on television. The wife had been praying, with others, for his salvation for two years. She says the shooting helped him realize he was not in control of everything around him.

CONCLUSION

You see, when we run to God with our friends, it's like he rushes to help us; he takes the threats and evil deeds of men and uses them to accomplish his work. You might say that he shakes us, and he shakes the place where we're meeting, and he shakes the world we go into. I think in many ways, that's what should happen when we meet together here on Sunday mornings and evenings. There is a sense in which the place ought to be shaken with the presence of the Lord, we should be filled anew with the Spirit, and we ought to leave this place empowered to speak the word with boldness. This is not just a social club that exists for the benefit of the members; this is a meeting of revolutionaries. This is not just some kind of group therapy session where we all hope to leave feeling a little bit better about ourselves; this is more like a trauma unit on the front lines of a war. We run here to meet with the Great Physician, let him patch us up so we can go back out to battle with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. That's how Jesus will continue to do and teach through us from heaven even today! When we run to God with our friends, he will rush to help us from heaven.