

**“A prayer for boldness in witness” Acts 4:23-33**

WCP

**Intro**

When Jules Naudet headed out that morning at approx. 08:30h, to continue filming his documentary about the experience of probationary firefighter, Tony Benetatos – newly assigned to Engine 7/Battalion 1 in lower Manhattan – he had no idea what the day was about to hold. One moment, he was filming the crew as they investigated a suspected gas leak, the next, he was filming one of only three known recordings of the first plane flying into Tower 1 of the World Trade Centre.

As Jules followed the events of the day and interviewed surviving firefighters, one of the many chilling accounts recorded, is from one firefighter describing the calls of, “Turn back! Why would you go back up there?” from men and women fleeing the tower through the stairwells; b/c, of course, as those men and women were hurriedly descending the stairwells, these firefighters were climbing up.

It’s a well-worn debate still, as people try to decide whether it’s either bravery or insanity that enables the men and women who serve in emergency services professions – Fire, Police, Ambulance – to run *towards* situations that most other people are running away from. I think it’s telling that many who serve in those jobs don’t even use those categories to describe what they do; they just see it as an understood part of doing their job. And yet, there’s no denying that the action is counterintuitive in the face of our natural, inborn tendency towards self-preservation; avoiding danger whenever possible as opposed to moving intentionally towards it.

We’re continuing in our series this morning through the book of Acts: Pioneer Church. And in our passage today, I think we see a similarly counterintuitive action from Peter and John and the other apostles, as firefighters running up the stairs of the World Trade centre as everyone else was running down them. B/c – as we saw last week – Peter and John have just narrowly escaped the clutches of the religious leaders as they were brought to trial for preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus. But, although they are warned and threatened to no longer preach and teach in Jesus’ name and then miraculously released – rather than just laying low/backing off/vacationing in Mexico for a few months – they meet together with the other apostles to pray; and out of that prayer meeting, not only are they ignoring the commands of the religious leaders not to witness any longer in the name of Jesus, they’re asking God for even greater boldness in doing it! Basically, running right back into the danger they had just narrowly escaped from.

And I don’t know about you, but that feels like the exact opposite of how I’d naturally respond if someone was threatening me with heavy fines/prison/worse if I didn’t stop witnessing for Jesus. I mean, if you were praying at all, wouldn’t you just be praying that God would deliver you from the people threatening you/keep you safe from that persecution?

Would you really be asking God to help you be even more bold in doing the very thing that was putting you in harm's way?

And yet, if you remember from last week what Peter and John said near the end of their trial before the Sanhedrin, as they were being commanded not to speak or teach any longer in the name of Jesus; they'd said (**READ vs. 19-20**). Which means that, for Peter and John, being witnesses for Jesus or not, wasn't even a question for them; they'd had such a captivating, inspiring experience of Jesus in their lives, they couldn't help speaking about Him.

So, clearly, there seems to be something about this prayer we read about them having together after their trial, that enabled/empowered the apostles to seek to be even more bold in their witness that they couldn't help but give, even as they were still facing tremendous danger for giving it.

And if we want to have anything like that same kind of boldness in our witness today – and, BTW, by “boldness” I certainly do *not* mean arrogance or badgering people; I'm talking about a humble confidence that is willing to be a witness for Jesus even when it's unpopular/potentially dangerous to do so - I think it's worth looking more deeply into their prayer, and seeing if there is anything we can learn in order to grow in the boldness of our own witness as well.

And in order to do that, I want to look at our passage in just two ways this morning: I want to show you **The foundation of their prayer** and then **The focus of their prayer (x2)**.

So, if you've closed your bibles, please open them again to Acts 4:23 and we'll look together at the apostles' prayer for boldness in witness.

Okay, so let's look first of all at:

**1. The foundation of their prayer – vs. 23-28**

So, **vs. 23** tells us that, upon their release, Peter and John return to the other apostles, and they tell them all about everything that has just happened; including, it would seem, about the parting threats from the religious leaders about speaking/teaching any longer in Jesus' name.

And if you look at **vs. 24**, we see that their very first response to what they've just heard, is to pray. Now - before we even begin to investigate what their prayer is founded on - I think that, in itself, is already instructive for us; b/c, think about your own life for a second: how often are we faced with danger or a crisis of some kind, and our immediate response is to either shift into some kind of MacGyver/Bear Grylls problem-solving mode *or* we just collapse in on ourselves in panic mode? A lot of times, for many of us, prayer is one of the very *last* steps we take once we've exhausted every other strategy/plan; like, “We'll, we've tried every other possible way to get out of this and failed **\*sigh\*** I guess the only thing we can do now is to pray.” And yet, that's not at all what we see here, as well as in countless other places in the bible.

No question, none of us are going to get this perfectly, and we'll need the encouragement of others alongside our conviction to do so; but may it be our increasingly trained, disciplined pattern to follow this example we see here; to make going to God in prayer our *first* plan of action rather than our last-ditch/break glass in case all else fails option.

And I think as we look now at the foundation of the apostles' prayer, it will help us to see even more how/why we should try to do this every time.

If you look at the second half of **vs. 24** we see that the first foundation upon which the apostles grow in their boldness in God through prayer; it's in seeing Him as **the Creator**. Look with me at vs. 24. They say (**READ vs. 24**).

Now, I've made no secret over the years of the fact that I struggle with Ikea furniture; love the price, hate the assembly stage with a passion and by now, my wife and kids know it's probably better to go for a walk or something if dad's trying to put together something from Ikea. And when faced with that sea of boards, screws, and tiny wooden pegs that can overwhelm the best of us at times, the wisest course of action is generally to look at those sometimes helpful/sometimes not helpful at all instructions they give you or call the help-line at the store to find out what to do. Why? Well b/c they made it all, so they are the best/most efficient people to go to in order to help you figure out how to fix your problem.

Well, in the same way here: when faced with the threats and intimidation of the religious leaders, the first place the apostles go to, is remembering that God is the One who made the earth and everything in it, *including* the religious leaders who were just threatening them; He made it all! Which means it all belongs to Him and is under His sovereign rule/authority as the Creator if it.

And can you see how, even in that one simple step: just acknowledging the greatness/big-ness of God as compared to these creations of His, it just immediately frames the whole situation in a totally different light? That those things/people/whatever that seemed so big/scary/intimidating before, all of a sudden, start to look a great deal smaller?

It's like king David wrote in **Ps. 8:3 (READ Ps. 8:3)**. Now sure, yes, that's a Psalm where David is marvelling that this great, sovereign, creator God of the universe actually knows about him and cares for him. But do you see how it could also provide a great deal of comfort/whole new perspective to someone facing persecution/intimidation; to consider them, in relation to this same big, Creator God? Total game-changer.

So, that's the first foundation upon which they grow in their boldness through prayer: remembering God as the Creator of all things. The second foundation – which that first foundation actually grows out of – is their **knowledge of God's word**.

If you look at **vs. 25** you see – first of all - that they look to the whole bible as the very words of God spoken to them by the Holy Spirit, in this case, through the mouth of king David; and then – secondly – you'll see they quote one of the Psalms of David (vss. 25b-26); here, specifically, quoting **Psalm 2**. So, they quote this part of the Psalm from memory which is, basically, talking about the foolishness of people and nations trying to stand against the power of God and His Anointed One. And what is really interesting about this now, is that what we

see them doing here is they're quoting this Psalm back to God in their prayer. And then, they immediately apply those verses to their situation that they're facing. Look at **vss. 27-28 (READ vss. 27-28)**. So, you see how, in vs. 27, they compare Herod, Pilate, and all the crowds who cried out for Jesus' death, with these nations/rulers foolishly raging against God. Which leads them to the amazing conclusion in vs. 28, that – even though these individuals/groups all *thought* they were accomplishing their own ends by crucifying Jesus – they were actually only accomplishing what God had already willed/decreed should happen! Surely, this is a big reason why they begin their prayer, referring to God in **vs. 24** as "Sovereign Lord"; they do that b/c what they now understand from their knowledge of God in His word is that – even the circumstances/events of life that *seem* random/senseless/like defeat – are, actually, only accomplishing a larger plan that God has to bring about His good and perfect will. This is also what the apostle Paul states so clearly in **Rom. 8:28** "*And we know that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His good purpose.*"

Do you see how *this* foundation in their prayer, could also take these threats/ worries that had seemed so big/intimidating and turn them instead into boldness in their witness?

B/c – think about it: when you see God as the Creator of all things as well as the One sovereignly controlling all the events in our world – past, present, and future – shouldn't that give you a much greater sense of boldness/confidence in your witness; *particularly* when you know that *He* is the One you're being a witness for?

## App

And maybe you'd hear that this morning and say, "Yeah! Yeah, I suppose that should absolutely cause me to have a great deal more boldness in my witness." But then you'd almost immediately want to add, "But I sure don't feel that boldness; almost never."

And if that's you – and listen, at one time or another, that's *all* of us, myself included – I'd just want to invite you to consider that maybe a big reason for that lack of boldness, particularly as it relates to these foundational elements of the apostles' prayer we just looked at, is due to the fact that:

1) We still have too small a picture of God

2) We retain that too-small picture of God b/c we don't know our bibles all that well which is, actually, where He reveals Himself most explicitly as big; in fact, as uncontainably big!

I've found in my own life that almost every single time I'm feeling afraid/anxious/intimidated/whatever I can almost invariably trace it back to forgetting the bigness of God. And then, it's so amazing/humbling: I'll be feeling all stressed/anxious, and then I'll walk outside and look up at the stars/think about the vast universe He made; I'll walk down to the beach and look out over the ocean/consider the vastness of the oceans and everything in them that God has made; or I'll be reading in His word and come across a passage like Psalm 2/Red Sea crossing/Jesus calming the storm and I'll almost immediately feel my shoulders coming down/breath returning.

And lest we're too down on ourselves, you see this exact same kind of forgetfulness/small view of God all through the bible. In the NT alone, do you know how many times people are with Jesus Himself – God in human flesh – and are still doubtful/afraid?

- Woman at the well – Jesus offers her living water; she asks, “How could you get me water, you have nothing to draw with?”
- Disciples in the boat with Jesus during the storm – Jesus don't you care if we drown?
- Man with the demons possessed son – “*IF* you can do anything to help, please heal my son.” Jesus is like, “*IF?!? Seriously?*”

The point is, this is a forgetfulness we are *all* prone towards, and which I believe a disciplined study of God's word, as well as regular reflection on His sovereign, creative power, can help any of us to overcome, and, consequently, bring about greater boldness in our witness.

So, that's **the foundation of their prayer**. Those two things, viz. seeing God a Creator of all things as well as a growing knowledge of God as He is revealed in His word, now form the basis upon which the apostles focus their prayer to God. So, let's look now at:

## **2. The focus of their prayer**

I see three requests here in this prayer from the apostles in the face of all that they're facing. They ask God to:

- 1) Consider these threats made against them
- 2) Enable them to speak His word with great boldness
- 3) Continue to perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus.

Firstly, in **vs. 29a** when – out of their rekindled understanding of God's sovereign, creative power over all things – they ask God to “consider their threats” i.e. the threats of the religious leaders against them. Now, they're not saying, “Hey God, would You give those threats some thought and tell us whether you think we should obey them or not?” No, the Greek word there for “consider” ***Epeidon*** means to look at/acknowledge something and then respond accordingly with action. And this is, actually, very telling that they would ask God to do this, particularly considering the Psalm, **Psalm 2**, that they just quoted. B/c, after David poses the question as to why the nations/peoples of the earth would plot in vain and against God and His Anointed One, listen to God's considered response to their plotting; David writes (**READ Ps. 2:4-5**). So, in a very real sense, in asking God to consider these threats made against them – in light of their very big view of God – they're basically saying, “God, could you just deal with these guys for us, so that we can get on with witnessing for You?”

And with that part covered, secondly, they ask God to enable them to continue to speak His word boldly. That word, “boldness” that they're asking for in their witness, in the Greek, is ***parrēsia*** which has the sense of someone being willing to undertake activities that involve great



risk/danger. A related word to this might be “courage” which, as some have said, is not about the absence of fear but the ability to continue forward despite it.

I love what C. S. Lewis had to say about courage: he wrote, “**Courage is not simply one of the virtues, it is the form of every virtue at its testing point.**”

And, on one level, what they’re praying for is that God would continue to fill them with His Spirit as He did for Peter and John when they were “tested” before the Sanhedrin and they were enabled to speak with such power; but on another level - in a very real sense, - what they’re asking God to do is empower them as they defy the religious ruler’s command; to help them as they break the law!

Now, no, that doesn’t mean when you leave here today and are trying to get to White Spot before the other church-folk get there, you can speed and ask God to empower you to break the law w/o consequence.

But where the laws/edicts of the land come into conflict with God’s moral law, then we *must*, as Peter said in **Acts 4:19**, judge for ourselves whether it is right to obey God or the laws of the land. And from Daniel: told not to pray, to Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego: told to bow to a golden statue, to all those faithful martyrs we read about in Hebrews 11, we have a cloud of witnesses in the bible that demonstrate civil disobedience both sanctioned and empowered by God in the face of unjust laws. And as we read on in the book of Acts, and things go from bad to worse in some cases for this pioneer church; they have no idea in this moment just how much they’re going to need this empowering of God to still proclaim His word boldly in the weeks and months to come.

And as societal pressures on God’s church today progress from subtle to overt, and we are tested in a variety of different ways, we too will need that big picture of God clearly in our minds as well; and we will be in no less need of His empowering to continue to be His witnesses in a culture increasingly hostile to the exclusive claims of Jesus in the bible.

Finally, in **vs. 30**, they ask God to continue to perform these signs and miracles through the name of Jesus. Do you see, once again, how Jesus-centric their focus is? That at no time do they ask God to just make them these amazing miracle workers/tongues speakers/etc. They simply ask that, as they are faithful to be witnesses to Jesus, the God would continue to perform these witness-authenticating signs through His name. For we saw in **Acts 3:6** it was in Jesus’ name that Peter raised up the man who’d been crippled for 40 years; and in **4:14**, we saw that the religious leaders were silenced in their condemnation of Peter and John’s witness by the indisputable fact of this crippled man’s healing. So really, in the end, what the apostles are praying for is that God would just continue to clear the path ahead of them; that He would continue to do these signs/miracles that authenticate their witness wherever they give it, and silence all who would seek to oppose it.

And I don’t know when/why it is that we ever stopped asking for this, but please – if you know Jesus and desire to be a witness for Him – would you pray this same prayer? That God would do these amazing God-things that only He could do in Jesus’ name and in a way that

would demonstrate to people His superior power as well as the reality of His transforming power in you?

### App

All of this flows out of the foundation of the apostles' prayer, and I pray that that same foundation would enable/empower you to ask big things of your big God, and expect Him to consider and act according to His perfect will. That He would enable you to also act in this seemingly counter-intuitive way and run back into the flames you feel like you've just escaped, b/c you're so convinced that God will give you this same boldness in your witness, when you come to Him in prayer like this.

### Conclusion

And the pattern of prayer we're seeing here - and which I believe we should absolutely strive to copy - is that the apostles are reflecting on these foundational truths about the big-ness/greatness of God, and then praying them back to Him. They're saying, "God, this is who You have revealed Yourself to be in your creation and Your word; I'm trusting you to be that same God here in these big/scary/intimidating circumstances I'm facing." And as they do that, just look at how God shows up; **vs. 31** the whole place where they are meeting and praying is shaken - do you know what that is? As God shows up in this prayerful context, in the very same way that something weaker begins to shake as something of greater weight and power rests upon it, so does the church begin to shake/tremble as the superior weight/glory of God himself comes to rest in power upon His church

And in doing so, their boldness in their witness is being built up and grown, even though - at this point - look, none of the difficulties they were facing have changed in the least; nothing had changed at all! And yet, if you look at **vs. 33** you see they're just simply filled up now with a forward-looking boldness and hopefulness that their big God can handle whatever difficulties/opposition they may face from here, and that they can trust in His empowering of their witness in light of His demonstrable answer to their prayer.

And, as a church family, that's what I'd like us to do right now. To consider the greatness of our Creator God as He's revealed Himself to us in His word, and then to ask Him to empower our witness to the people that He has called us to witness to. For some of us those are people still outside of God's family; for others, this is a call to be a witness to your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ; to call them back to that same big picture of God and His ability to handle whatever it is that they are facing right now. To come together here, just as we saw the apostles doing here, and praying for God to give us boldness in our witness through His Spirit; empowering us in whatever way He wants to; even through signs and miracles done in the name of His Son Jesus Christ; with the hope that this church, as well as our city and world, might be shaken under the weight of God's glorious presence coming upon us.

**PSALM 90:1-4 on screen - read together** Let's pray.