

Sermon Series:

Prayers of the Bible

TO BOLDLY GO ... Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 4:23-31

Becky Douglass (07/04/2024)

“To boldly go ...” – if you have watched any of the many Star Trek series and movies, you know how this line finishes – “To boldly go where no man has gone before.” In this science fiction world, the missions of these intrepid space explorers bring them in contact with new races and civilisations and they must overcome all kinds of obstacles, all while spreading the Federation and its ideals throughout the galaxy. It is a picture of adventure, courage, inventiveness, and diplomacy.

Have you ever pictured your mission as a Christian like this? Maybe not! However, Jesus’ commission to the disciples does sound a bit like this.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:19, 20)

Jesus was sending them out into the world to spread the message of His salvation and bring many new people into the Family of God. For those first believers, it would have been in equal measures exciting and daunting. They really had no idea what it would entail. They just knew they had been given a mission to accomplish with the promise that God would be with them. Nothing has changed in the past two thousand years. God still sends us out into the world to spread His salvation and make disciples – either to unknown countries overseas or to our own needy neighbourhoods. He promises to be with us, but He doesn’t promise it will be easy, as those first believers discovered.

The Setting

As we start reading our passage in Acts, it is obvious we are jumping into the middle of a story. So, let’s start by seeing what has been happening. The Gospel of Matthew finishes with Jesus’ talking to His disciples. He delegates His authority to them and commissions them as His ambassadors to introduce people to the good news of His

death and resurrection. then Jesus ascends into heaven, but a few weeks later, the Holy Spirit is given to them at Pentecost and the church is formed.

Then we come to event which was the catalyst for the first real opposition they faced. Peter and John are in the temple when they are approached by a man who had been lame from birth. He is probably looking for some money, but Peter and John don't have any to give him. Instead, they heal him in Jesus' name. When this gets the attention of those around them, Peter starts to preach about Jesus' death and resurrection and the salvation found in Him. They are soon arrested by the religious leaders and thrown into prison where they stay overnight. The next morning, they are brought before the religious leaders and asked how they have done this miracle. Peter declares,

"It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed." (Acts 4:10)

This sends the leaders into a panic. They can't deny that the man has been healed, it is too widely known. But they also cannot acknowledge that Jesus has been raised from the dead or all they did to cover-up the resurrection of Jesus will come unravelled and belief in Jesus and His salvation will spread. All they can do is threaten Peter and John and forbid them to talk about Jesus. To which Peter and John reply,

"Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (v. 19)

Peter and John are sent away, being warned not to speak about Jesus anymore. It is at this point that our reading this morning starts.

The Prayer

The disciples have done what Jesus told them to do. Like Him, they had run up against the religious leaders. Like Him, they have been arrested and threatened. They are understandably afraid. What might happen if they keep preaching Jesus? Could they be killed like Jesus was? Instead of backing down or running away, however, they come together and pray. I can't help thinking of Jesus' admonition to them in the Garden of Gethsemane: *"Watch and pray ... The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."* (Matthew 26:41) This time, instead of falling asleep, they pray.

They begin their approach to God by acknowledging that He is their sovereign Lord. The religious leaders were seeking to assert their authority over the believers, but they reject that authority and place themselves under God. They describe God's lordship by quoting from two Psalms which explore two different aspects of God's rule.

First, God is the Creator. *"You made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them."* (v. 24) This comes from Psalm 146 which we used as our Worship Focus this morning. The verses following talk of God's care for His world,

especially the vulnerable and needy. God is our Sovereign Lord because He is the originator and sustainer of our world.

Secondly, God speaks and it happens. “*You spoke ... They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*” (v. 25,28) God prophesied through David that the kings and rulers of the earth would oppose His Anointed One, Jesus, and that is exactly what happened. They thought they were accomplishing their purposes, but actually they were only doing what God wanted them to do. God is our Sovereign Lord because His will is always accomplished.

This understanding shows remarkable growth on the part of the believers. Remember, this is only a matter of months after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Then they had run away in despair, and even denied that they were Jesus’ followers. Now they speak with absolute confidence in the work of God and especially in the purpose of Jesus’ death and resurrection. They know they are a part of the plan of God. He is in control – not themselves, and certainly not the religious leaders.

Having made this approach to God and acknowledging their position under Him, they make their petition. They ask Him to do three things. First, “*consider their threats*”. (v. 29) They are asking God to be aware of their situation. Secondly, “*enable your servants*”. (v. 29) They are saying that they are willing to do what He has asked them to do – to speak His word boldly – but also acknowledging that they need His help. The spirit is willing but they know that the flesh is weak. They don’t want to buckle under the pressure. Thirdly, “*stretch out your hand*”. (v. 30) They are asking God to become personally involved in the situation.

This is where I find their petition to be particularly interesting. They DON’T ask God to get involved by rebuking those who are persecuting them. Sometimes we find this request in the Psalms. A plea that God will punish the wicked oppressors. But that doesn’t happen here. Also, they DON’T ask God to get involved by keeping them safe or removing the persecution. I think that is the natural human reaction – “God make this difficulty go away!” But this is not what these early believers asked God to do. Instead, they asked God to get involved by validating their witness with miracles – signs and wonders. This is what had happened when the lame man was healed. His healing gave them an audience to talk about Jesus.

The Answer

And how did God answer their prayer? Immediately, God let them know that He had heard and was willing to work on their behalf. “*The place where they were meeting was shaken*”. (v. 31) They were left in no doubt of God’s presence with them! This would have reminded them of the shaking on Mount Sinai when God gave them the Commandments, and the shaking of the earth at Jesus’ death and resurrection. This was a recognised sign of the presence and working of God. And then we are told that they were “*filled with the Holy Spirit*”. (v. 31) This was not a new Pentecost. Throughout the Bible, these words are used to describe God’s preparation of people when they are approaching a particularly difficult or important event or season of

ministry. Rather than a new filling, it is more like a refreshing of the Spirit, an affirmation that God would indeed enable them as they had requested.

Should we expect the ground to shake when we pray? We have no other record of such a response to prayer in Acts. I believe that God knew that this was a crucial moment for the early church as they faced their first opposition. He knew that they needed visible affirmation that He was with them and that they would be enabled to do what He had commanded them to do. In that way it was a unique event. Of course, God can do whatever He wants to do, I just don't think it is a common experience and we should not demand that He show His presence like this whenever we want Him to.

The believers didn't sit around and bask in the presence of God. We read that they went back into the temple and spoke the word of God boldly once again. And God answered their prayers by validating their preaching with signs and wonders. Yes, this quickly got them in trouble with the religious leaders again. But that didn't stop them even though, just a few chapters later, we read of the first martyr, Stephen. These believers were serving their risen Lord, and nothing could stop them.

Again, we might ask if we should expect our witness to be accompanied by signs and wonders. I realise there is a wide variation of opinion about this in the Christian community and people I respect have differing views. All I can do is tell you what I think! The Jewish prophets had said that signs and wonders would accompany the coming of the Messiah and so the Jewish people understood them within that context. They know God was showing His approval of what was being said and done. Over the course of the book of Acts, however, the number of miracles seem to diminish as God uses different means to validate His message. One of the key ways He did this, I think, was through the witness of the love between His people in the church and the holy lives they led. There are several non-biblical accounts from this time which mention the significant impact of the love shown by the Christians to each other and to the communities in which they lived. This, more than signs and wonders, is mentioned as the cause of the spread of the gospel.

Sometimes, God does still use signs and wonders today. I have heard of many people, particularly those going into an area of the world where God's salvation has never been heard of before, who have seen God act in miraculous ways to validate what they are saying and to demonstrate the power of God over the local religious beliefs. And He could do them among us here today if He decided that was the best way to validate the message of the Gospel. However, I do not think it is a common event in our situation. Like the early church, I think it is far more common for God to use the witness of changed lives and the love of His people to validate the message of salvation. That's my belief at this time, anyway!

How should we pray?

Are we ever in a similar situation to these early believers and need to pray a prayer like this? Looking around our congregation, I can't think of any of us who have been

thrown into prison for talking about Jesus. Yes, I am sure many of us have faced misunderstanding, ridicule and even antagonism because we are Christians. We do not live in a Christian society with Christian values and morals. We are different and that is not always comfortable or easy to deal with. However, there is a difference between what we experience and the persecution and martyrdom which the early church faced – and what some of our brothers and sisters still face in other places. I have a good friend who leads a ministry in Pakistan. More than once he has heard that the authorities are coming to get him, and has had to gather his family and run into the near-by forest to hide for a day or two until things died down again. The people he works with have been arrested and had their churches bombed, killing most of the congregation. This is persecution on a level we know nothing about. One way we can stand with these brothers and sisters is to pray this prayer for them – that they will have courage to boldly proclaim the gospel in the face of persecution and that their message will be validated in whatever way God knows is best.

But what about closer to home? Are there things we can learn from this prayer to guide us as we pray for our witness and ministry? We may not face persecution like this, but we do face obstacles in fulfilling the commission Christ gave us to go and make disciples.

For instance, there is an expectation in our culture that we will keep our beliefs to ourselves and accept as valid whatever other people want to believe. It is a challenge to know how to hold fast to what we believe while still truly loving those who may hold views that seem strange or even abhorrent to us. Learning to live as a minority is something new to many of us, something which requires the guidance and grace of the Spirit to do well. Being bold witnesses of the gospel in our culture is not easy even if we don't face persecution for our faith.

Another obstacle we face in our church is that of an aging congregation. We don't ever retire from the Great Commission, so we have to learn how to continue to make disciples in this new season of our lives. We need to ask God to enable us to live with the obstacle of aging bodies and minds in ways that enable us to continue to boldly serve Him.

These are just two examples – I am sure you can think of others! So, we do need to be praying that God will enable us to continue to be His witness and make disciples in the face of our own obstacles today. That being the case, I think we can see some things in this event which are a help to us.

- We need to be united with one another in difficulties. As soon as Peter and John were released, they went back to the other Christians so that they could face this threat together. They didn't try to go it alone; they knew they needed each other.
- We need to acknowledge the sovereignty of God in what is happening. These early believers knew who God was from their study of the Scriptures and this

enabled them to trust Him to be in control. They were a part of His bigger plan and that changed their perspective.

- We need to ask for boldness to continue to proclaim the gospel, not necessarily for safety or the removal of the obstacles. God may choose to change our circumstances, but He doesn't always do this. Peter and John expected the persecution to continue, and it did – even getting worse! But they also expected God would enable them to keep going with boldness.
- We need to trust that God will validate what we are doing as He sees fit. For those believers at that time, that was at least partially through signs and wonders. However, I ask myself, what is more difficult, to heal someone, or to so change a whole community of people so that they love one another consistently and serve their community sacrificially? Both are miracles that show the work of God and prove that the gospel is true.

The religious leaders hoped that their threats would deter the early believers and limit the spread of the gospel. It did just the opposite. Those early believers were determined to be bold witnesses. They were just ordinary people, serving an extraordinary God and He gave them boldness to fulfill their commission. Today, we walk in their footsteps, continuing their mission. We may not be going boldly into the universe, discovering new civilisations and encountering weird anomalies, like the crew of the USS Enterprise. However, we are venturing into a broken world with a message of salvation and new life, in the service of the Sovereign Lord of all. The path may be full of obstacles and difficulties, but He promises to be with us and He will enable us to boldly go wherever He leads.