

Shaken Not Stirred

Acts 4:23-37

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I have a friend who started this church in the lower 48 that was so successful that they had a difficult time finding a place to meet for Sunday services. They had so many people showing up on Sunday they were literally standing in the parking lot waiting for a seat in the next service.

The church is located in an area where land prices are just out of sight and so it became increasingly difficult to find a place to either rent or buy for the church to meet in.

Finally the perfect piece of property came up for sale, in the perfect location (right next to a Costco) and for a price they could afford. When they approached the owner of the building to make an offer the owner told them, "There is no way in blankety blank that I will ever sell this property to a bunch of Christians."

OK.....So the church moved on and kept on looking for property. Two months went by, then four months, and then six months - and there wasn't anything on the market remotely viable for the church to meet in. Their search was then hampered even more when the city that they were located in created a number of zoning codes that made it almost impossible to build a new church.

People were receiving parking tickets on Sunday, the city was not happy about the heavy traffic and the fire department came out on Sundays to make sure the building they were meeting in was not overcrowded.

In spite of all the obstacles against them - the church grew at a fast pace.

Still, as they grew, neighbors filed complaints against the church because of too much traffic and city officials continued to threaten to take action against the church. The very thing that created success in the church became its greatest liability, loads of people. The church leaders were at a loss of what to do next - so of course, they prayed.

Then came the phone call.

Remember the building next to the Costco? That's who was on the line. "Circumstances had changed" for the building's owner and the man who would never sell to a bunch of blankety blank Christians, was now offering the building to the church at a price reduced at over 40%. He even offered to help with the financing.

Imagine that.

Who saw that coming?

Here in our Scripture this morning we have a similar situation. The Apostle's are directing a new church plant in the city of Jerusalem, this church plant is wildly successful. In a short time span of a few weeks their numbers have risen from 120 to over 10,000 people. At that time the believers met at the Temple in Jerusalem. I would venture to say that there may have been times where there were more believers in Jesus Christ worshipping at the Temple than there were people who did not follow Jesus Christ. But, the success of the church becomes a liability, the public actions the church takes in the city create tremendous growth in the church, but the public actions the church takes also create problems for the church. We saw last week that Peter and John create an incident where they, by the power of the Holy Spirit, heal a man and a large number of people gather to hear the Gospel. Peter and John are arrested because they have caused the ancient equivalent of parking problems at the Temple.

So we see the officials in charge threaten the Apostles. The religious officials tell them to stop talking about Jesus - or else. (We saw that last week) It is kind of funny, but that is their threat - Stop talking about Jesus or, or....or else.

What do the Apostles do? They go talk to other believers about the situation. They talk to God about their troubles. They acknowledge that God is in control in spite of the current difficult circumstances. Then, they ask God to fix the situation.

Actually, I made up that last part, didn't I? They don't ask God to fix the situation do they?

I confess that, that is what I do many times when I pray about a situation that comes up in my life, I ask God to just fix it. Do you do this too? Whatever we say to God in our prayer, and however we say it, somehow as Americans, we always seem to end up asking God to fix the situation for us.

"Lord, please just fix this whole mess."

Are we praying the wrong prayer?

Take a look at verses 29 and 30. What do they ask for? This certainly doesn't sound like how we might pray, does it?

They ask God to enabled them, which means that they want the Holy Spirit to work through them. They ask for courage to listen to the Holy Spirit and then, they ask that God continues to do exactly what made the religious officials threaten them - to do more miracles and wonders.

Did you see that?

It is incredible! Instead of asking for God to remove the situation, they ask God for more of the same. It is as if they dare God to make things worse. It is like Oliver Twist asking for more gruel, knowing he is going to get the beating of his life for asking for more food, "Sir, could I please have some more."

Doesn't that sound crazy?

"Heavenly Father, I have neighbors threatening me, people gossiping about me, and life really is the pits. Please give me your courage and by the way, keep on doing the things that make everyone angry with me, Amen."

Yet, this is what they do.

Not a word about fixing things, only a prayer to ask for empowerment and courage. Why is that? Well, you should know the answer by now. Every chapter in Acts we see the same thing, the book of Acts is about Jesus Christ, it has very little to do with the Apostles, it has very little to do with the church, it has very little to do with the growing number of believers - it has everything to do with Jesus Christ.

The short prayer found here from verses 25-29 is so different from what we would pray if we were in the same situation because the believers in the new church know that the problems that are coming their way, are coming their way because of Jesus Christ, not because of who they are. Because of this, they pray a prayer, not for themselves, but for the kingdom of God.

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Do you see that? They pray not for their own life situation; They pray not for their own comfort; They pray with one thing in mind - advancement of the kingdom of God. And, as a result God responds with the meeting room shaking and a powerful blessing of the Holy Spirit.

Let's take a closer look at what is going on here so we can understand and apply what we read here today.

If we go back to verse 23 we see that Peter and John report to the church what has happened, they keep the people informed. Now, take notice that their report to the church isn't just to express themselves, it is so that the information can be used in prayer.

You know, how this verse is put together, don't you sense that Peter and John are excited about what has just recently happened at the Temple? Can you imagine with what enthusiasm these two tell their story? These guys are pumped. They were arrested, they were jailed, they were brought before the most powerful men in all of Judaism and threatened over and over again. But, so what! Standing with them has to be the man that was healed. For over 40 years this man could not walk, then in an instant Peter pulls the man up by the hand proclaiming him to be healed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth - this man stands among the believers.

You know what must be going through the minds of Peter and John as they pray this prayer? If God can heal a man who was in an impossible situation, He will certainly take care of the religious leaders of the day.

What brought many more believers into the church? The healing of the lame man.

How many people left the church because of threats? Zero.

So of course they are going to pray for more healing and for more miracles and ignore the threats: These acts of God grow the church, threats against the church do nothing.

So they pray.....

They address their prayer to God, and first and foremost acknowledge that God is sovereign, they acknowledge that God is the ultimate power, "Sovereign Lord," they said,

“you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.” This is very significant, and this is something that you should take note of for your life.

See, even before they say anything, they say a whole lot. By acknowledging God as the ultimate power first, they are living a spiritual worldview that says, “In spite of my current circumstances, in spite of things that are going wrong, in the end Lord you have it all in the palm of your hand.” You know, there is something freeing about that.

Really, what they are doing is releasing their burden of control to God with such a statement. For us, we need to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord of our lives - no matter what the circumstances are in our lives. That is a very healthy thing. You know, for each of us here in this room at one point or another, tragedy will strike our lives, something bad will happen. We don't like to think about it, but that is how life is. As pastor I see people react in one of two ways to tragedy, either they reach out to God or they turn away. Turning away from God doesn't have to be an angry emotional thing, a person can turn away from God by just going numb.

Next, in verses 25 and 26 they quote the opening words of psalm 2 in their prayer. Again, they acknowledge, on a different level, that God is in control, so much so, that those who move against God, move against Him in vain.

Be careful here, these folks are not saying that people plot against them in vain, it is against God they plot in vain. The folks praying this prayer are very aware that their own lives are at risk. They are not claiming that because they now are believers, they are untouchable - what they are claiming as they quote psalm 2 is that no human can prevail against the plans of God, however, they themselves can be harmed.

Remember, this prayer isn't about their life, their comfort and their success - this prayer is about the all encompassing dominion of Jesus Christ.

When they quote psalm 2 they also claim that the psalm is not just literature. See there in the verse, when they say that God spoke through the mouth of David, this phrase is constructed in the Greek text as “David is the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit” which means that the words of David were the words of the Holy Spirit.

We saw this just last week when we read about Peter speaking before the Sanhedrin. Peter delivered a theological construct to the Sanhedrin about Jesus that was way beyond Peter's theological education level. The Sanhedrin, we saw, were so blown away by Peter's argument, and the fact that Peter had so little education that they had absolutely no response to his argument. They were dumbfounded. What happened was that the words Peter spoke were the words of the Holy Spirit - the exact the same thing that happens to Peter, happened to David, the Holy Spirit speaks through him.

They say this about David because they believe, and rightly so, that even those who Satan used to kill Jesus, these people and their actions were not only known a head of time, but decided by God that they should happen. (verse 28) These men who acted against Jesus, acted on their own free will, yes, but God knew it was going to happen (He's God after all) and further, God had planned it this way.

This quick sentence in verse 28 is an extraordinary verse for our lives: "28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." Please take a look at that verse in your bible this morning and consider this: Perhaps the difficult circumstances you are in ARE the will of God and are in God's plan for your life. Have you ever considered that? Just because it is a difficult thing or even a bad thing, does not automatically mean God does not want it in your life.

Look, was it a good thing for Peter and John to be locked up in jail overnight? Ancient prisons were death traps: No ventilation, no plumbing, the places were crawling with disease, insects, and rodents. They were dark, they were usually wet, they smelled to high heaven and yet this was in God's plan. Prison was not a good thing, yet, God allowed it to happen. Why? Because, this is not about the Apostles.....This is about Jesus Christ. This is not about their comfort, it is about advancing the Gospel.

Now this does not mean that God thinks these things that cause us such grief are good in themselves or even that God approves of such things, however, think about this: For you personally, when do you grow closer to God the most, in difficult times, or in happy and carefree times?

I thought so.

Stop thinking it is all about you. Start thinking, "Hey, my life is really all about Jesus."

Again as we saw earlier, their prayer is not about themselves, their prayer is about God. See, when they ask for enablement and courage (29) it is not so they will be built up, or that they will somehow feel better, it has very little to do with themselves, they ask for these things so they can serve God better.

I also want to point out once again that they end their prayer by asking for more of the same. Again take note that not only do they not ask for the situation to be removed, but they ask for the situation to intensify. Why would they do this? Why would they ask for the situation to intensify?

They ask this, because they believe that if the situation does intensify the Gospel will spread and more people will believe. They see what works and ask for more of it.

Before you dismiss this type of prayer as a kind of prayer not well suited for you, take a look at verse 31, "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. "

The assurance of divine favor came in the shaking. God was so pleased with who they had become the whole place shook and the power of the Holy Spirit came upon all those gathered.

The shaking was not an earthquake, see look, the only place that shook, was the place they were in. The rest of the city remains still, only the place they are in shakes. This is no seismic coincidence, this is God showing his favor upon these people. They pray this powerful prayer and God responds with favor.

Clearly God likes what he is hearing these people pray.

So - you and I, how do we apply this section of the Word of God to our lives?

Well, each of us should start by asking ourselves: Could it be that we praying the wrong kind of prayers?

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My guess is, that odds are, when you pray, you are like me and tend to ask God to fix the situation, or make it go away, to just make the situation stop. But what we see here is a prayer where just the opposite is presented

They don't pray to end the situation, they pray to continue the situation, but to have the power and courage of the Holy Spirit with them.

A shorthand way of looking at it, it that they, place themselves last in their prayer, rather than first. The prayer of these people is absolutely selfless. Ours should be too.

Here we see in Acts a very simple yet very powerful principle we can apply to our lives today: Don't ask God to change the situation, ask God to give you the courage to make it through the situation AND ask for the Holy Spirit to work through you.

As you pray this week, consider simply asking for the ability to make it through your current circumstances, simply ask the Holy Spirit to be with you - rather than asking God to change your circumstances - THAT my friends may be the real change you are seeking.