

Praying Through the Problems • Acts 4:23-31

Winston Churchill once said that there is nothing quite as exhilarating as being shot at and missed. Perhaps that was the feeling of Peter and John when they were arrested, thrown into jail and then released. Their GET OUT OF JAIL FREE story is told in Acts 4:23-31: “*On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all the chief priests and elders had said to them.*”

Let me pause long enough to wonder where they went. Where would you go first if you were just released from jail? Since we’re not told in this part of the story I peeked ahead in the book of Acts and found another time when Peter ended up in jail and broke out in the middle of the night. Acts 12:12 tells us that Peter “*went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many other people had gathered and were praying.*”

You may never have heard of this mother named Mary but you have probably heard of her son. His name was John Mark although he is usually known simply as Mark. He was the author of the second book of the New Testament called “The Gospel According to Mark”. His mother raised him in a home that was famous for prayer. This mom named Mary had the go-to house in Jerusalem for Christians who had problems and needed prayer. What a marvelous Christian mother!

But, let’s go back to the earlier story in Acts 4:23-31:

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. “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 (Jerusalem) 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.

Peter and John had a problem. The rich and powerful leaders of Israel were out to get them. They had been arrested once, warned never again to teach in the name of Jesus and set-up for further persecution. They were no match for religious leaders who were backed up by the full force of the Roman government and army.

When you lose your job, are diagnosed with cancer, lose a family member or face a disaster is not the time to start shopping around for those who will pray for you.

Think how much easier their lives would have been if they had stuck to fishing up north! Their decision to follow Jesus got them into more trouble than they could have dreamed. Being a Christian was not an easier life; it was harder.

Sometimes it’s that same for us. Deciding to

follow Jesus can make life more difficult. True, most of us aren’t arrested for our faith. But we all have problems—jobs; school; money; friends; family; health; relationships. I’ve never met anyone with a problem-free life. Some problems we can handle. Some are totally beyond our control and resources. That’s when we really need the help and prayers of others. The question is, “Who do you go to when your problem is huge?”

We are told in Acts 4:23, “*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.*” They knew exactly where to go when they faced their problem. They went back to their own people. In other words, they went straight to the community of Christians they knew would understand, stand by them and pray for them.

The words “went back” especially impress me because that means that the relationships were established before the big crisis came. I’ve spent a lifetime in ministry watching people with problems in crisis. Those who have Christian friends, are connected to the church and have a team who will pray for them do far better than those who don’t. When you lose your job, are diagnosed with cancer, lose a family member or face a disaster is not the time to start shopping around for those who will pray for you. Peter and John had their “own people” to whom they could return when the crisis came.

So here’s the question for us all: “If you get slammed this week with the biggest problem of your life so far, who will you ask to pray?” Who are your godly friends? Who will pray to God on your behalf? Who will understand? Blessed are those who have praying Christians to whom they can always turn.

When asked to pray, the friends of Peter and John knew exactly what they were doing. They were experienced veterans who knew to acknowledge God before asking God. Listen to what they prayed in Acts 4:24-25: “*Sovereign Lord, 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.*”

They started out acknowledging God before asking God for what they wanted. They acknowledged that he is the Sovereign Lord who created the universe. They acknowledged that he is the God who had revealed himself in the Bible. They acknowledged that he is the God of all history and that even when nations, kings and rulers oppose him . . . God always wins! They even cited a specific recent historical event where God prevailed. We read about this in Acts 4:27-28:

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.

In other words, God is behind what happens in history and even turns bad things into good. King Herod of Israel and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate conspired to kill Jesus but God was in the background using their decisions to accomplish human salvation through Jesus’ death on the cross.

What’s the point of all this? Their prayers acknowledged that God is the Lord of creation, revelation and history. God is the Big Boss; he is sovereign. God can do absolutely anything. This declaration bolstered their faith that God could handle the problem Peter and John were having with the court and persecution. God had done it before; God could do it again!

Then in Acts 4:29-30 they asked:

“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.”

Once they acknowledged the greatness and power of God they prayed, “Now, Lord. . . .” They had three requests: consider the threats; speak with boldness; and perform miracles of mercy.

We can learn a lot from the way they prayed through the problem. Amazingly, they didn’t pray for the problem to go away. I think I would have been inclined to ask God to zap the Sanhedrin or Teflon-coat the Christians to exempt them from further persecution, but they didn’t ask to be excused from the problems they faced.

Their first request was for God to consider the threats. They wanted God to check out what was happening. It wasn’t that God was ignorant of what was happening; it just helped to request God to read the file of what was going on. There is enormous comfort in knowing that God knows.

Their second request was that Peter and John and others be able to speak with boldness. They weren’t asking for the problem to be solved; they were asking God for boldness in talking about Jesus in the midst of their problem—which would actually defy the law and get them into more trouble! Translating that into our experience today it would be like us praying that God will help us speak for Jesus when we are unemployed, facing illness, in

the midst of a broken relationship or during some other problem of life.

Their third request was for help to perform miracles of mercy. I don't know if I would have prayed the way they did. They prayed for God to perform healing and other miracles. Their prayer wasn't to defeat their enemies but to do acts of compassion and kindness. They were not vindictive. They didn't seek retribution. They prayed for God to spectacularly triumph over opposition with expressions of love.

This is a great example of how we should pray for ourselves and others who are facing problems. Start out acknowledging, not asking. This is just common sense. When you go into your boss's office to ask for a raise you don't walk in the door and say, "Gimme money!" You start out by telling him what a great boss he is. Even more so with God! Speak to God with respect. We certainly do that with other people who are in a superior position to us. Remember who God is and what he has already done. Ask for strength more than solution. Sure, ask for the problem to go away; but, more important than God eliminating all our problems, ask God to make us bold and strong and to do good through how we handle the problems we face.

Peter and John picked the right place and the right people to pray. And the results were quick and powerful. We find those results in Acts 4:31: "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."

First, the place shook. I don't know if it was an earthquake or a collective sense of the presence and power of God. Sometimes a couple will tell you that their first kiss made them spin and shook their world. They were in love. Well, it was that way and more when God responded to the prayers at Mother Mary's house. It was evident that God was there in power.

Second, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches us that this had happened before. The Bible likens the filling of the Holy Spirit to getting drunk only it's not alcohol that takes over your body; it's the Spirit of God. The filling of the Spirit is all about who is in charge of our lives. When we're full of love we act like lovers. When we're full of helium we talk like Donald Duck. When we're full of the Holy Spirit we behave like God.

Third, they spoke the word of God boldly. They exuded a courage and confidence when telling the truth of Jesus.

Have you ever picked someone up at the airport who has just returned from an exciting trip and they just can't stop talking about it? They're so excited, so full of their subject and so talkative that they gush like a fire hydrant telling you all about it. That's how those Christians were after they prayed.

That was a great day at Mother Mary's house in Jerusalem. It started with a problem, brought people together in prayer to God and ended with great results. But, the problem didn't go away. The threats of the political and religious leaders were just as real. In fact, af-

ter the prayer meeting the problem got worse. Those for whom they prayed ended up right back in jail again. And the next time they were flogged and threatened with death.

All this raises a lot of issues in my mind. When Christians face really big problems, what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to ask God for a miracle to fix whatever is wrong? Can God really heal Stage 4? Can God actually reconcile a marriage that's been wasted? Can God really provide a job with a good salary for someone who's been chronically unemployed? Can God change the outcome of an election or end a war? Because if he can, why doesn't he? And if he can't, what's the point in believing in him?

We pray for miracles and sometimes God says yes. We pray for miracles and sometimes God says no. Since God is the Sovereign Boss, we trust him to give the right answer whether we like that answer or not.

I believe that God is sovereign, just like Acts 4:24 says he is. I believe God created the universe, revealed himself in the Bible and is the God of history. I believe he can do absolutely anything. But I also believe that God created an ordered universe with laws of science that were his idea. Miracles are exceptions, not the norm. If he did that all the time in every instance then there would be no normal and all of God's brilliantly created laws of science and nature would be abandoned. So, we pray for miracles and sometimes God says yes. We pray for miracles and sometimes God says no. Since God is the Sovereign Boss, we trust him to give the right answer whether we like that answer or not.

When God chooses to perform a miracle and solve our problem we are deeply grateful. When God says no we may be disappointed but we must also be deeply faithful. We pray that when problems don't disappear God will give us the strength to make it through, to make him look good and to be bold in our words for Jesus.

The great lesson from the prayer meeting at Mother Mary's house was that God does not guarantee to make all our problems disappear. But God will turn our problems into ultimate supernatural victory through Jesus Christ and he will be with us and give us the strength and all we need through every problem we face.

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