

## CORPORATE PRAYER IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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**Acts 4:23-30** - "When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. [24] And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, [25] who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? [26] The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'— [27] for truly in 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, [28] to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. [29] And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, [30] while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

### 1) NOTICE FIRST THE NEED FOR A DEMONSTRATION OF THE POWER OF GOD IN THIS FALLEN WORLD

This whole story comes as a result of a miracle - a lame man healed as Peter and John are on route to the Temple back in **chapter 3:1-10**. The lame man is striking picture of the *human need, the plight of our world*. Here it becomes obvious there are needs that go beyond the reach of merely doctrinally sound religion.

Notice, all sorts of people passed him as they were going to worship at the temple. Somehow we glimpse religion unaccompanied by the living power of Jesus. Such religion will never reach this lame man and will never transform today's needy world.

### 2) THIS MANIFESTATION OF GOD'S LIVING TOUCH APPEARS RANDOM AT FIRST, BUT FLOWS OUT OF THE CHURCH'S CORPORATE PRAYER LIFE

**Verses 31-33** - "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. [32] Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. [33] And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all."

It's a sad commentary on much contemporary organized church life that this description reads like an unusual aberration from the living dynamic of what the New Testament church does.

While following the miracle, these three verses also describe the ongoing *results* of that prayer meeting. We know from other passages in Acts that this wasn't just a shot in the dark prayer meeting. The early church was constantly together to pray. This was their *first line* of resource to the situations beyond the scope of their natural ability. In other words, this kind of meeting was built-in as a habit into the ongoing life of the early church. And it is clearly set up as a model and pattern for *today's* church as well.

### 3) PETER AND JOHN GIVE THEIR ACCOUNT OF THE MEANING OF THE MIRACLE THAT HAD JUST TAKEN PLACE

This comes about in the first part of **chapter four**: Three truths stand out in **verses 10-18**:

- a) **First, the power experienced came from Jesus - 4:10-12** - "...let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. [11] This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. [12] And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

This is striking. The power of Jesus to *save* is linked with the power of Jesus to touch, deliver and *heal*. This has almost been totally erased as a point of reference for today's church. In this Acts account people would know Jesus was the "*cornerstone*"(11), not by taking the disciple's word for it, but by *seeing* the living power of Jesus for themselves.

Whatever else stands out, it's obvious the Church had better not forget about calling expectantly on the name of Jesus. Nothing else will ever substitute for His presence and touch. We are not called to know certain **truths** about Jesus (though that is very important). We're called to introduce people **to** Jesus Himself. And the prayer life of the church is the gateway to His life and presence.

- b) **Second, it was obvious to everyone these disciples had been with Jesus - 13 - "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus."**

Just allow me to try to shine up the obvious in this text. "**They had been with Jesus....**" Let those words land with a kind of **literalness** that can easily be glossed over. Praying isn't just **speech**. It **is** that, but **more**. **Prayer is being with Jesus**. It's never solitary. It's not pretending to be with Jesus. While I know Jesus isn't now **physically** present - nor was He when these disciples ministered - **these disciples were with Jesus in a way just as real as when they were with Him before His ascension.**

I feel convicted by these words. It wasn't just obvious these disciples knew something **about** Jesus. The people - people who as of yet didn't even **know** Jesus - knew these disciples had been in the **presence** of Jesus. They **carried** Jesus with them, so to speak. Such was the presence and power of the Holy Spirit with them.

What do people see about us? This question probes deeply. Do they just see that we're against divorce? - that we're against homosexuality? - that we don't swear or take the Lord's Name in vain? - that we know more about the Bible than they do? Or do they sense something else? Do they sense more than **me** in everything I do. Do they see a Life - a Power - a Presence that is beyond my own entity?

Notice, you don't see Peter and John snorting about how great their faith was. There are no **techniques** offered here - no theatrical grandstanding. "**These men have been with Jesus!**" These onlookers weren't just guessing. They **knew** these disciples had been with Jesus. "**We've seen stuff like this before! This is what Jesus does! And now He's still at work, doing the same thing through His followers!**"

Please think deeply about this. Jesus talked about the meaning of "**being with**" Him. It can't come about fully by reading books - even good books about Him. It's more than singing songs. There is a **spiritual ingrain**ing required that only the Holy Spirit can bring about. There's an **internalness** to the whole process - one Life penetrating another. Jesus said it was like a branch being with a vine. You can't just lie them down **beside** each other - even very **closely** beside each other. Only in prayer can the Holy Spirit move beyond just **your** thoughts about Jesus to the impartation of His life and presence into your being.

Remember, these onlookers weren't yet **believers**. Yet they recognized those who have been with Jesus - **people who carried His touch and power in their daily lives**. These were plain, ordinary people - people just like you and I. But none of those were important factors. They had been with Jesus.

- c) **Third, there will always be resistance to the presence and work of Jesus in this fallen world. - 17-18 - "**But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.**" [18] So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."**

Regardless of your religious beliefs these have to be some of the strangest words ever recorded. They prove the reality of the work of Satan in this dark age. "**But in order that it may spread no further....**"(17). So that **what** spreads no further? **Healing? Wholeness? Joy? Life?**

"**....In order that this may spread no further....**" Where could that attitude of heart possibly come from? There's only one reasonable answer - **Satan**. Wherever the cause of Christ is advanced there are and will be forces at work to squeeze the life of Jesus out of that situation, that individual, that marriage, that family, that church.

This, of course, is exactly what Paul was describing in **Ephesians 6:10-20** - "**Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. [11] Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. [12] For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but**

against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. [13] Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. [14] Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, [15] and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. [16] In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; [17] and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, [18] praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints. [19] and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, [20] for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”

Where did Paul get these ideas? This wasn't a concept Paul picked up in some seminary library. Paul **saw** this battle as he took the message and life of Jesus into cities and towns. This had to be reckoned with - engaged - in the prayer life of the ministering church.

#### 4) STUDY THE REACTION OF PETER AND JOHN TO THIS OPPOSITION

Verses 23-24, 29 - “When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. [24] And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them....[29] And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness....”

What did they do in the face of this situation?

- a) ***They went to their own companions*** - vs. 23 - “When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.” They were so linked with their **community of faith** it didn't even occur to them to face this situation alone. They didn't just kneel alone by their bed and quietly pray. As we'll see in the next point, the reflex reaction of these disciples was to link their situation with the prayer life of the rest of the body.

This was their **first** line of action. They didn't look for a good book on the subject of faith. They didn't get the phone number of a good counsellor. They didn't seek out a lawyer for litigation advice. And they didn't just say, "Let's grit our teeth and try to face this storm." None of that. They immediately said, ***"We need the church - they'll pray!"***

- b) ***They lifted their voices to God*** - vs. 24 - “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them....’”

We'll look more at the **content** fo their corporate intercession in the next point. But notice now that this wasn't just quiet, pious, inner meditation - ***"They lifted their voices together..."***(24). They weren't shouting so God would hear them. It wasn't to demonstrate they were charismatic or Pentecostal. And it wasn't just because some worship leader said, "Let's really raise the roof as we sing this song again!"

- i) ***They were aware of the desperateness of their need.*** They were in earnest. They were moved and impassioned about this. It was **important**. They felt the weight of what they were doing.
- ii) ***They were aware of the strength of their enemy.*** They weren't taking him lightly. They were putting all their energy into their intercession. Perhaps they remembered the way God told His people to **shout** around the walls of Jericho, not **meditate** around them.
- iii) ***Finally, they were aware of the awesome power of God.*** God was **great** in their eyes. They were calling on Him to reveal His **power**. Unlike many of us, as they prayed and called on God's Name they sensed they were on the edge of something great, something about to happen. They were **engaged** in it the way people get engaged at the World Cup or the Stanley Cup.

But in all of these points don't lose the big picture. Their **first** response in crisis wasn't to call a **committee** meeting, but a **prayer** meeting. Their **first** response wasn't **administrative**, but **spiritual**. The first thing they did upon hearing of the problems of Peter and John was to lift their

collective voice to God almighty.

5) **THEY FOCUSED ON THE POWER OF GOD IN CREATION**

**Verse 24** - "And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "**Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them....**"

The focus is God's **creational** power and majesty. They didn't just proclaim they **believed** in God the Creator. There is a knife-sharp difference between a belief in God that's **theologically accurate** (which **is** very important as a starting point for faith) and one that's **prayerfully powerful**.

These early Christians were affirming their faith by proclaiming, "**Lord, Your Power is greater than our enemies. We trust You to be greater than the nations and their leaders. You're still the Creator over all! We believe that through our prayers you can accomplish Your purpose even against this persecution!**"

Then, as they prayed, they brought everything they knew to be true about God into their **present** situation - **verse 29** - "**And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness....**" "**And now Lord....**" Those are the three important words. "Here's Your might in creation, but here's our situation today. **And now Lord**, we trust you to be the **same** God, doing the **same** things, right now!"

This is the difference between a **Bible believing** church and a **New Testament** church. A Bible believing church **agrees** that the text states truth. A Bible believing church says, "Yes, I believe that's true". A **New Testament** Church says, "Lord, not only is this text historically true, but I know this text describes something eternally relevant about the way You act **today**. And we call upon You because there are many things that are never going to happen in this world **until we link up with You in prayer!**"

That is exactly what these Christians in Acts four did. They knew what their Old Testament Scriptures said about the Creator God. Then they **applied** what they saw in their Scriptures to their **present** situation. This is the pathway charted for us in the New Testament Church.