

Prayers

Opening prayer

In gentleness, Lord Jesus Christ, You came to earth and gave Yourself to the task given You by the Father. Thank You for Your obedience and for the faithfulness You showed both to the Father and to us. As we receive the benefits of all You have done for us, may we be inspired to do the same, and be obedient to the Father in everything, and all the time. We ask this in Your name Lord Jesus; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: SCHOOLS

1. For yourself

Give thanks to God for the schools you have attended and the teachers who taught you what you know. Ask God to help you be positive about yourself and what you know

2. For your friends and family

Give thanks to God for the schooling of your friends and family, especially the teachers who have given of themselves so that they can learn

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the work of the church amongst schools, and seek the Lord's blessing on any in your neighbourhood

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those who work in the schools in your neighbourhood, and ask the Lord's protection for those who work there

Meditation

The things of God are immense and immeasurable:

His love is more precious to us than any gift we can receive;
His support is more steadfast than the foundations of the world;
His grace is more awesome than any experience we may have;
His faithfulness is more consistent than the seasons of the earth;
His promises are more assured than the due processes of law;
His future is more certain than the science of an atomic clock;
His healing is more complete than the passing of the seasons;
His salvation is more secure than any vault within a bank;

And in the midst of life's problems, these things are what we depend upon.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 4:1-12

¹ While Peter and John were talking to the people, they were approached by priests, together with the chief temple guard and the Sadducees. ² They were infuriated because they were teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection of the dead, through Jesus. ³ They seized Peter and John, and detained them in custody until the next day, because it was already late. ⁴ However, many who heard the Word believed, and the number of men came to around five thousand.

⁵ On the following day, the leaders, elders and scribes met in Jerusalem. ⁶ Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and everyone from the family of the

high priest. ⁷ When they had placed Peter and John in the middle, they began to question them, asking,

‘By what power or in whose name have you done this?’

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them:

‘Leaders and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being tried today because of an act of kindness shown to a sick man and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then let all of you, and all the people of Israel, know this: This man stands before you healed, by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God has raised from the dead! ¹¹ He is

“the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the keystone.”

¹² Salvation is found in no other, for under heaven, no other name has been given to men by which we must be saved.’

Review

By speaking out and preaching in the Temple, Peter and John have raised the wrath of the Temple authorities, who arrested Peter and John. But once arrested, the prisoners must face the charges, and at this point, things begin to get interesting!

It was one thing for Peter and John to heal a man in Jesus’ name within the Temple courtyard, but quite another to face the consequences! A lame man had been healed and a crowd had gathered at the sight of him leaping and praising God, and people wanted to hear from the man who had apparently healed him. Peter had then spoken out boldly to say that the power behind the miracle was not himself, but Jesus Christ, the man who had recently been crucified in Jerusalem! Instinctively, we know that a backlash will come from the authorities who killed Jesus in the first place, so we are not surprised to read that the two apostles are detained. They will have to answer to the authorities for everything that had happened!

The story is intriguing, and something powerful was beginning to happen. During the first few days of the life of God’s church, the believers had lived in community and worshipped together, growing in number. Moreover, what they did threaten no one, indeed, Luke reports that the church met with general approval (2:47). But this could not last. When Peter and John healed a lame man, and the Holy Spirit was so publicly at work, the Temple authorities were alarmed. Formalised religion has always been troubled by enthusiasm and the uncontrollable liberties of the Holy Spirit.

So it was that Peter and John were arrested and detained (4:1). Luke then tells us exactly what the authorities were bothered about; they did not like them proclaiming *‘the resurrection of the dead’* (4:2). This is rather curious. We might think that the authorities would want to question them over the rumpus when the lame man was healed. But the hand of the Holy Spirit was on all this for more important things, and Peter used the occasion to preach about Jesus’ resurrection, and God’s salvation plan for all humanity. The healing was a sign pointing to the eternal truth of the resurrection, and this was what annoyed the authorities.

In an aside, after the arrest of Peter and John, Luke gives us a wonderful report on the progress of the young church; *‘many who heard the Word believed, and the number of men came to around 5000’* (4:4). It seems that after the Holy Spirit came on the first day of Pentecost, God did not stop blessing people. Growth to 5,000 people in just a few days is phenomenal! Scholars have argued about the accuracy of this figure, but we should not get sidetracked by the debate. Estimates of Jerusalem’s population vary enormously, because it was a festive city, swelling in size month by month, according to the seasons and festivals. We just do not know how many people were in Jerusalem, and what size crowd was in the Temple. Also, we would still be amazed if the figure was 500. Surely God knows those whom He has saved, and the growth of the early church fulfils the prophecy of Jesus in the parable of the Sower (Matt 13:8f.)

Not the first time in history, those detained wait were kept in prison overnight before their arraignment (4:5). Luke then describes the scene as the Sanhedrin gathered and the accused were placed in the middle (4:7), typically of a Jewish court. It was important for the early church to have a record of who was present, for these were crucial days, and Luke obliges. The high priestly family were there, but notably, the old man Annas, the father of the High priestly family, was present with his sons. After what happened when Caiaphas had dealt with Jesus, did he want to oversee proceeding himself this time? We cannot be sure, but the other Sanhedrin members present were those responsible for Temple security, the *‘chief temple guard’* (4:1), the elders of the community, and lastly the legal experts, called scribes (4:6). Nothing was to be left to chance.

Then came a moment of high drama as the indictment was read out to the accused; *'by what power or in whose name has he done this?'* (4:7). No one was ready for Peter's reply, for the Holy Spirit came to him once again, in fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy that at such times a prepared defence would not be necessary (Luke 12:11f., 21:14f.). Peter reminded his accusers that their arrest had come after little more than doing good to a sick man (4:8,9); it was a powerful rebuttal of the charge. But Peter could stand tall on the subject of the resurrection, because his accusers were divided. The Sadducees, including the High Priestly family, hated the idea, whereas many scribes and elders were Pharisees who accepted that the soul could live with God after death. Emboldened by the Spirit, and using a quote from Psalm 118, Peter spoke boldly to declare that the man had been healed *'by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth'*, the man they claimed had risen from the dead and was now God's means of salvation (4:10)!

Every word of what Peter said went to the heart of the accusations against himself and John, and made the arrest appear flimsy, to say the least. But every word Peter said cut to the heart of the Gospel; this was the power of the Spirit at work in the man. The words of Peter in this passage now stand as a witness to the power of God to release the truth of the Gospel in the midst of a crisis, something that would happen time and time again in the story of the Acts of the apostles.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The strange coincidence of this story and what is found in Acts 5:17
- 'Authorities, elders and scribes' (4:5)
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Notes on the translation of the passage

V1 'chief Temple guard'

Other translations:

'captain of the Temple guard' (NIV)

'captain of the Temple' (NRSV)

The Greek word is 'strategos', meaning 'the person in charge', and usually referring to a civil institution; but the Temple was not a civil institution! There is not much known about this person or his role in Judea, but it is possible that this was the man in charge of the 'civil' Temple guards, who were not a part of the formal contingent of the Roman army residing in Jerusalem. We might think of him as 'head of security'.

V5 'leaders'

Other translations:

'rulers' (NIV, NRSV, and all others)

The Greek word 'archontas' is mostly translated 'rulers', but it is not a word we readily use for those in charge or those with authority today, which is what the word means. I have thought it wise to break from the consensus and use the term 'leaders', because this makes more sense to people today. For further comments on this verse, see below

V7 'when they had placed Peter and John in the middle ...'

Other translations:

'They had Peter and John brought before them ...' (XX)

'when they had made the prisoners stand in their midst ...' (XX)

Different Bible versions certainly translate this very differently, though the Greek is entirely straightforward. It does not mention Peter or John, though most translators, including myself, prefer to add their names because they are clearly the subject of the sentence; this is not a matter of being strict or not to the original text, it is a matter of decent grammar in the language of the translation.

Now, most of the differences in translation can be accounted for firstly by whether or not Peter and John are named, and secondly, by how the translator deals with the fact that the Greek says the two were placed 'in their midst'. In most modern countries, we speak of prisoners being brought 'before' a court, but in Israel, the accused were placed in the middle of a group of their accusers. I have retained the sense of the original Greek because although it may not be what we do today, it is

specifically descriptive of what happened. It is a detail which may be necessary for our understanding of what went on.

V11 'which has become the keystone'

Other translations:

'which has become the capstone' (NIV)

'it has become the cornerstone' (NRSV)

The Greek word for the stone is 'kephale', meaning 'headstone'. The term was used either for the first stone laid in a building against which every other stone was successively placed, and thereby defined a building and its place on the land. It was also used for what is called the 'capstone', the final stone in a building, which if every other stone has been set correctly, will fit perfectly, and 'prove' the entire design.

Personally, I prefer the theology of the first suggestion, but we do not know what was in Peter's mind and must allow the Holy Spirit to interpret this to us for today. For this reason, I use the term 'keystone', which suggests to the reader in general that this stone is 'essential' to the whole.

The strange coincidence of this story and what is found in Acts 5:17

If we read on in Acts, we will find that in chapter 5, Luke reports that the Christian community gathered in Solomon's Portico in the Temple, and that '*many signs and wonders*' were done (5:12f.). As a consequence, the High Priest decided to take action and arrested the apostles, but during the night an angel released them and they continued their teaching (5:17f.). In the ensuing meeting of the Sanhedrin, the debate ran fierce (5:33), but it resulted in the famous 'wisdom of Gamaliel'. Gamaliel was a famous teacher of those days, who said, in brief, that if the Council did nothing, the church would either die out or grow, but if it grew, then it was a work of God that could not be stopped (5:34-39).

Some scholars reckon that the story line in Acts 5 is so similar to that in Acts 2-4, that they may be two different accounts of the same event. Of course, such a thing is impossible to prove, though personally, I doubt it. The story we have read today has the vivacity of a first rate account of what happened; it has the excitement of a story that does not need to be made up. In Acts 5, Luke is clearly giving a general report of the early days of the church, and it is not therefore surprising that we see connections between what he says here with our reading today.

'Authorities, elders and scribes' (4:5)

This is a typical New Testament phrase describing those in authority. In the Gospels, those arresting and dealing with Jesus after His arrest are sometimes described as the '*scribes and elders*' (Matt 26:57) and sometimes the '*chief priests and elders*' (Matt 26:47), but surprisingly, this is the only place in Scripture where these three words are used together.

The word 'leaders' refers to those who had responsibility in the Temple, meaning the High Priestly family of Annas and his sons, who variously held the office of High Priest in the first half of the first century AD. Caiaphas, the son of Annas was famously High Priest at Jesus' death, and he was there with his father (4:6).

The term 'elders' refers to the lay leaders of the community in Jerusalem, most likely the heads of the large and influential Jerusalem families, who were mostly of conservative outlook, and Sadducees by conviction. Remember that Sadducees strongly opposed belief in the resurrection

The term 'scribes' means lawyers, people responsible for making sure that Jewish law was upheld, most likely Pharisees by conviction. Remember that Pharisees, despite their opposition to Jesus, did in fact believe in the resurrection. This may be one reason why Paul was able to take his training as a Pharisee and use it as a Christian missionary.

All these people were involved in the running of the Temple, but notice how the group was inherently split over the resurrection, the key issue in their assessment of what Peter and John said about Jesus. Peter and John would have known this and been aware of these niceties, and would have felt able to use this split against their accusers. They did not take the opportunity on this occasion, but later on, they would (5:17f.).

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Discipleship

Application

Trusting God for speaking the Word

There is often furious debate amongst Bible College students about whether the true preacher of the Word must prepare before hand and preach 'from notes', or not. Some insist that the preacher must always prepare notes beforehand, and argue that the Scriptural advice to be reliant on the Spirit is one that applies to primary mission events, not merely preaching in church on Sunday. Others say that there is no difference between the different occasions we are called to preach the Gospel, and we must always be ready in pray, but trust God alone for what we say, on the day. It is an interesting debate but one that I have never heard anyone win.

It is my own opinion that the Christian preacher should regard all life as the training ground for preaching on Sunday, including a careful study of the text to be preached upon, and some careful reflection on what God might want you to say. However, I would be the first to say that what happens in the pupil is always rather different and often chaotically unplanned. I say this because although I sometimes have notes to help me, I rarely preach from them. I allow the Holy Spirit to lead me in what I do and the process by which this happens is a mystery to me. Suffice to say that some people welcome my sermons and tell me that God speaks through them, and that is all I am trying to achieve, if that is really the truth.

Peter's example of preaching here is based on firstly his prior knowledge of Scripture, secondly God's blessing of his personal characteristics, i.e. his courage, and thirdly the direct inspiration of the Spirit for the moment. I also think that in the moments not recorded by Luke in Acts, Peter and John would most likely have prayed a great deal, and asked the Lord for help. I suggest that some combination of all these things is good advice for any preacher of the Gospel, in any circumstance.

Salvation, resurrection, and healing

There is a wonderful interplay in this passage between salvation, resurrection and healing. The healing miracle is the sign that sets of the train of events, a man is saved and the church grows as people believe the Gospel of salvation preached by the early church, and the proclamation of the resurrection becomes the 'hot potato' issue that gives Peter and John the opportunity to declare the Gospel to yet others.

You can also enmesh the three in other ways, for the ultimate healing is salvation, and our salvation assures us that we will be raised, and that we will live, healed and saved, with God for ever in heaven! Try thinking about these three, and you will find your mind will find all sorts of connections, and some will be personal to you. Remember, God is a God who longs to heal us, and to save us, and to bring us through death to be with Him in glory. This is our God.

Questions for groups

1. What does this passage teach us about the priorities of God's church for mission? Is it too naive to say that the entire purpose of the church is to deliver the Gospel?
2. Share with each other in the group your own experiences of declaring the Gospel. What is common about these experiences, and how do they tally with this passage?
3. What does this passage tell us about the Gospel, and what parts of the Gospel message are not found here, but elsewhere in Scripture, if any?

Discipleship challenges

- *Think of occasions when you either should have spoken out the Gospel, or you actually did speak out the Gospel? What do you feel about these events, and especially whether you spoke about Jesus or not? Pray hard about whether you are indeed free to be used by God's Spirit to declare the Gospel, and what this means for you.*
- *Look ahead and try to spot occasions when you might open up about your faith, and perhaps speak to people you would not otherwise tell about Jesus. Pray and ask the Lord for the resolve to welcome such times, and the heart to trust Him for the words you use.*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You came on the early disciples with power to enable them to do incredible things. Stop us from marvelling at this for the sake of personal interest, or for imagining that if we have this power we can do what we want. Help us to see that if we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit of God, then wonderful things will happen, and God's purposes will be done through us. Then, whatever happens to us, God's name will be glorified! Alleluia! AMEN
