

Prayers

Opening prayer

We come to You in prayer, Lord God, with joy and thanks. With joy because our salvation has been secured for us by Jesus Christ and we know that we have a place in heaven with You; and with thanks, because our sins have been forgiven and we have received many blessing through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Keep us close by Your side through all the ups and downs of this life, we pray, so that our lives may show to others the joy and thanks that is within us. We praise You Lord God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: SCHOOLS

1. For yourself

Pray quietly, and give the Lord time to speak His Word to you. Let the Lord your God be your teacher

2. For your friends and family

Be still before the Lord, and lift up to Him those you love. Ask the Lord to bless you all with His love and His compassion

3. For the church and its work

Off to the Lord the work of the church amongst young people, remembering that the Lord loves children, and loves to see them taught well. Ask Him to give His people a heart for children.

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

Lift up to the Lord the countless children who do not have decent schooling, and without it, can take few steps in life to improve their lot

Meditation

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.

Serve Him by living the life of a servant:
And loving others, with all of your heart.

Serve the Lord by giving Him your worship:
By joining with the praise of all His people!

Serve Him by fulfilling His Great Commission:
To take the Good News to the ends of the earth.

Serve Him by being His priests in the world:
Praying for others, and meeting their needs.

Serve the Lord by being an honest disciple:
Living every day by the touch of His presence.

Serve the Lord by fighting against all evil:
Wherever you find it, in yourself or in others.

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.
There is no reward, except true peace with God.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 4:23-31

²³ After they were released, they went to their friends and told them what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ On hearing this, they raised their voices together to God and said,

‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them,
²⁵ through our ancestor David, your servant, You have said this by the Holy Spirit:

“Why did the Gentiles become furious, and the nations plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.”

²⁷ For in truth, both Herod and Pontius Pilate have gathered together with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, ²⁸ to do whatever Your strength and your plan had predestined to take place.

²⁹ And now, Lord, take notice of their threats, and help your servants speak Your word with all confidence, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

³¹ When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Review

Peter and John return to the rest of the disciples unharmed, and they give glory to God for their deliverance. They all unite in prayer, clearly perceiving that they are taking part in a spiritual battle in which they have the victory in Christ.

On the surface, our reading today tells the simple story of the return of Peter and John to their friends, after standing trial before the Sanhedrin (4:1-21). They were clearly delighted to be freed, and we are not surprised to discover that as soon as they were reunited with their friends, they began to pray in thanksgiving to God. As we now look at this passage further, however, we will find much encouragement in reading about how they prayed and worshipped. The apostles were being led powerfully by the Holy Spirit, and their words and deeds can now teach us about how we might react to various trials and persecution.

Firstly, as soon as they all met up, the believers submitted everything to God in prayer (4:24-30). Luke has just reported that the number of believers was around 5000 (4:4), but Peter and John can hardly have met all these! The friends referred to by Luke here may be the original group of disciples at Pentecost plus some of the first converts; this core group of believers would eventually become leaders of the early Christian church in Jerusalem and beyond. It was this small group who welcomed Peter and John and who immediately burst into prayer when they arrived back from the Sanhedrin.

As they prayed, the believers worshipped God, recognising His sovereign power over all creation (4:24). Their prayer was a united effort, and verse 24 does not really suggest that they everyone spoke at once. Rather, it suggests that all the prayers had this common theme of thanksgiving. The believers were united in what they thought and felt about what had happened, and their unity came from the presence of the Holy Spirit among them.

The prayer lasts for most of this passage (4:24-30), and it is about more than thanksgiving, it praises God for His deliverance. More than that, it gives thanks to God that He delivers His people from those who oppose God's will. Now today, we might be tempted to think that an attack on God's work of the kind Peter and John had just endured, was the work of an enemy, Satan. That may have been the case, but Peter and John trumped all the powers of evil with the sovereign power of God, and according to Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles, they did this time and time again as God expanded their ministry, because of the work of the Holy Spirit within them. In this instance, however, they were led to pray using a well known Scripture that God had placed on their minds. It comes from the first two verses of Psalm 2, quoted below, which Luke reports very closely;

Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against His anointed,

One of the marks of the work of God's Holy Spirit is the way He places Scriptures in the minds of the faithful, and this passage proved to be perfect for the disciples who met Peter and John. In Israel, it had previously been used for part of a regular ceremony in which the people celebrated the power and authority God had

given their king, and ancestor of David. But now, the early Christians perceived that it spoke even more fully of the how people had plotted the evil downfall of Jesus, their King, who had been placed on a Cross. The disciples first recite the psalm (4:25,26), and then they declare its interpretation (4:27,28). They interpret 'the Lord' as being God, and 'His anointed' as being Jesus, and they believed that the Romans conspired with the Jewish leaders to have Jesus crucified.

The strongest trump card of the believers prayer is found in verse 28, where they prayed in faith that everything had happened according to God's predetermined plan (4:28). We are used to believing this today because it stands at the heart of our Christian faith, but it came fresh and new to the early disciples. For the first time since Jesus began to speak about this to them, they truly believed that Jesus had defeated evil on the Cross. The powers of evil had been unable to do more than achieve God's purposes, and so it could not harm them now they moved in the power of God's Holy Spirit! This is a profound truth, and if we can take hold of it together with the early Christians, then we will be able to reflect this victory in our own lives.

In this passage, the believers had faith in God and expressed confidence in His authority over all Creation, confidence in interpreting Scripture, confidence in God's power to defeat the powers of evil, confidence in the salvation won for us by Jesus, and confidence in God's eternal plan and their eternal destiny. They were therefore blessed with further 'signs and wonders', and the presence of God in all its impressive power and might (4:31).

These things were marks of the first Christian community and they can be the marks of the Christian community today, wherever it meets.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Earthly and heavenly battles
- Predestination
- Other Scriptures similar to Psalm 2
- The blessing of God in signs and wonders

Notes on the translation of the passage

V23 'friends'

Other translations:

'own people' (NIV)

'own companions' (New American

Each translator is trying to help the reader get the right sense of what the Greek says here, which says that the released apostles went to 'their own'. The phrase indicates the closeness of the first disciples of Jesus in the community of the church. I feel that the best phrase is 'friends', because Jesus called the disciples his 'friends' (John 15:13f.)

V24 'Sovereign Lord'

Other translations:

'Lord' (New King James)

'O Lord' (New American Standard))

The Greek word here is 'despotes', the same word used for modern dictators, or 'despots'! Nevertheless, the word was used in Bible times to refer to dictators and monarchs who had absolute power and authority over every aspect of life. We tend to use the word negatively, but the Bible uses it fully absolute power and authority of God Almighty.

V24 'together'

Other translations:

'with one accord' (New American)

Most translations have 'together', but this English word does not help us understand exactly what the original text says here. The Greek word means 'with common consent', and contains the idea of agreement; the believers were held together by their common mind to praise God.

V28 'your strength and plan'

Other translations:

'your power and will' (NIV)

'your hand and purpose' (New Authorised)

The Greek of this phrase reads 'your hand and purpose', and each translation attempts to express this as clearly as possible. In ancient times, the hand was a symbol of power and strength, hence my translation 'strength'; I also translate the second word as 'plan' because this idea encapsulates God's will and purpose both for the Messiah and for creation.

Earthly and heavenly battles

One of the significant features of this passage is that fact the disciples clearly interpret what has happened to them as some kind of spiritual battle. The words they use to pray (4:27f.) make Psalm 2 out to be a description of a spiritual and heavenly battle over the salvation of the world, which is won by Jesus.

We should be cautious about reading the Old Testament Scripture in this way, for we can become too quick to read spiritual things into what we read when we do not understand it. Sometimes the Old testament yields a simple message if we take the time to explore the truth about what is going on. For example, we can read the story of Jonah as a parable of salvation before we have come to terms with what the story means as a prophecy to Israel. But this does not mean that we must not find the spiritual implications of for example, the many stories of battle to be found in the Old Testament, especially the prophet Isaiah.

In this instance, it was quite natural for the disciples to see in Psalm 2 a description of the heavenly battle over Jesus' work of salvation. They did this because the man believed to be the author of the psalm, King David, was an ancestor of Jesus, and a man whose whole life illustrated God's plan of salvation plan.

Predestination

In verse 28, the believer's prayers proclaim the belief that what had taken place was according to God's 'predetermined plan'. By using the word 'predetermined', the disciples were not siding themselves with current theological debates about 'predestination'! All that is meant here is that God has predetermined His plan of salvation to take place at a certain times and places in history, supremely in send Jesus as the Messiah in the first century AD.

Some believe that the idea of predestination cuts across the basic concept of free choice in the human world. God cannot surely account, they say, for the things of this world that are human 'free choice', and this free choice colours everything! The fact of the matter is that the Bible speaks clearly about a predetermined history of salvation, just as it also speaks of God's people being 'chosen beforehand' for glory.

In a way that we cannot fully comprehend (e.g. just a Jesus is both human and divine), it must be that God can predetermine some things on the one hand, but give free choice to people on the other. We may not know how these things come together until we meet with or Lord in glory, but Scripture does seem to hold the two ideas side by side and we cannot ignore this (see Romans 8:29,30). The idea therefore that God has a predetermined salvation plan for the whole world should not therefore make us imagine that there is nothing for us to do to build God's Kingdom, for He has already predetermined it. The Bible is full of encouragement for us to grow God's Kingdom by preaching the Gospel so that people might responds (Matt 28:19, etc.)

Other Scriptures similar to Psalm 2

One of the reasons why we should accept that Psalm 2 is indeed indicative of spiritual warfare is this. There are other places in Scripture where the same ideas are found, and they are critical Scriptures for God's plan of salvation. Below is a quote from Isaiah 37:16-20, and if you read it carefully, you can see the same elements of what we find in Psalm 2. After King Hezekiah has praised God as the Creator of the world and all that is, he appeals for help from God because the land is about to be overrun by the Assyrians. This event is recorded twice in Scripture, once in Isaiah 37 and also in 2 Kings 19, and it is one of only a few times in late Israelite history that God save His people after a prayer by a King.

'O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you alone are the God of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; hear all the words Sennacherib has sent in order to mock the living God. It is true, O LORD, that the Kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have thrown their gods into the fire. They were not gods but the work of human hands, made of wood and stone, so they were destroyed. So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you are the LORD; You alone.' (Isaiah 37:16-20)

It is essential to our understanding of God's salvation plan in the Bible to spot those times when God breaks through into human history to save His people. These events (here, God's salvation of Jerusalem from the

Assyrians, and elsewhere, God's saving of His people from Egypt – Exodus 12f.) reflect the spiritual battles God wages in heavenly places so that His will is done on earth.

The blessing of God in signs and wonders

God does works of power amongst His people in response to the threats against them (4:31). Surely this fact should make the church willing to stand for God's will against the prevailing attitudes of the day? Churches can either walk in human liberty and see no works of power in their midst, or become slaves to the Gospel, receive rejection from the world, and see the almighty power of God at work.

I do not write this to suggest that those in the church court rejection by the world. No, this will happen without our seeking it if we keep close to God's ways. Some like to think that the church does its job by protecting people from the world, and giving them a 'safe haven'. Rather, I suggest that the church only does its job only when it proclaims Christ distinct within the world, and enables God's people to praise Him in the midst of persecution, trouble and distress. These things simply do not make sense to those who are comfortable in their religion, or who seek comfortable religion. It makes complete sense only to all those who seek God's Kingdom according to His Word, and know from Scripture what to expect.

Discipleship

Application

Confidence in signs and wonders

There is something powerful about the way the disciples approach their predicament here. They are on the verge of being a persecuted people, but instead of trying to batten down the hatches and seek a safe place, they resolve to speak God's word with confidence (4:29). The result is that they see signs and wonders taking place (4:30); surely God is able to work where He is given the space to do so. Unfortunately, many of the churches I know have long since battened down their spiritual and practical hatches. They attempt to keep things so disciplined and orderly that there is little space for any sings and wonders, indeed, if such things were testified to in church then a majority would raise complaints.

The time is coming again where God's people as a whole are being asked by the Lord to fly with Him, against the prevailing cultural winds, and take the risks of the early church once again. If we are indeed entering times akin to the early church, then it may be that the Lord will come soon, and we should be ready for this! Sings and wonders sometimes happen when people pray for others; but the most remarkable simply happen, out of God's pure generosity. Those who recognise them and delight in them will be the people who are following the Spirit in our day.

Being filled again with the Holy Spirit!

In the last verse of our passage, we read that the disciples were 'filled with the Holy Spirit (4:31). But surely, they were already filled on the day of Pentecost! In truth, the way that the Holy Spirit works is this; he must pour into us continually so that He can flow out of us into the world and into other people! For this to be so, we need regular 'top ups', and it seems that in this passage, the top up for the disciples comes as the result of their blessed prayer of praise.

The trouble we face today is that far too many Christians do not have any idea of this spiritual reality. For them, it is almost threatening to speak about being filled with the Holy Spirit, again! Praise God for the many Christians who are being filled for God's work and witness each day, but pray for those who are not, and who feel threatened by such ideas. Pray that God will break down the stultifying deadness that had encrusted many, and pray that you will be agents of God's true 'salvation'.

Questions for groups

1. What can we learn from this passage about prayer, and how can we implement this in our lives or the lives of our churches?
2. Read Psalm 2, and discuss what you think it means as a whole; then turn back to today's reading and see whether your focus on Psalm 2 can teach you anything about this text?
3. Share in your group the most recent example of 'signs and wonders' that you have witnessed; give the date.

Discipleship challenges

- *Think for a moment about how you pray each day. What do you do? Now think about whether you praise God in any way that is similar to our story today. What therefore does this passage teach you about prayer? In your prayers today, make sure that you praise God for Creation and for saving You, and place some emphasis on it!*
 - *Pray about your reaction to the last verse in our reading, for how long has it been since you witnessed a work of God's power? In the coming days, make sure that you are on the lookout for God's works of power, especially those that point us towards His saving power.*
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Final Prayer

We thank You Lord Jesus Christ, for the many signs and wonders You have done amongst us. We do not always see them, and we do not always have the opportunity to testify about them, but we nevertheless praise You for what You do to show us Your power. May we keep close to You and be always ready to both receive Your signs and wonders, and see in them the hope of salvation, in any situation. AMEN
