Prayer Under Persecution

Acts 4:23-31
Key Verse: 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.”

Next week we will be participating in the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church. It will be a time for us to pray for and remember our fellow Christians who are facing persecution, simply because they believe in Jesus Christ as Lord. Prayer is one of the most important aspects of our Christian lives, and it is also one of the most important things we can do for others. There was an interesting article that came out this past Tuesday, which said that the North Korean underground church is praying for America. Shouldn’t it be the other way around? North Korea is currently the number one nation with the most extreme persecution of Christians. And I do not want to understate the amount of suffering. Christians there are classified as hostile, and are subject to being arrested, tortured, put into labor camps and even publicly executed. Yet the article concludes by saying that the North Korean Christian’s example may help America better prepare for the persecution that may be coming soon to the USA. That is a scary thought for us. In 2008, five Virginia State police chaplains (Christian ministers) were forced to resign because they prayed publicly “in Jesus’ name,” and refused to deny Jesus or water down their prayers. Last year, in North Carolina, volunteer chaplains of a certain police department were told not to pray in Jesus’ name.

Although some of us may not face persecution now, if it comes, it should not surprise us, because 2 Tim 3:12 says, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Why? It’s because the world holds hatred toward God. It’s because this world is sinful and from Adam’s fall has been at war with God. But Christians can take comfort because God cannot be defeated. In fact, God has already won the victory, through Jesus Christ, and he is establishing Christ’s kingdom through his people, and nothing can stop him. The reason evil still exists now is that God is patient with sinners, and when the full number he has chosen has come into the kingdom, Jesus will come again and do away with evil. So we pray for North Korea Christians to stand firm. We pray for America Christians to remain faithful. We pray for the advancement of God’s kingdom here on earth through the spread of the gospel. We can learn how to handle persecution by learning how the early Christians prayed, as they began to be persecuted. And let us be encouraged, because they will show us the glory of God, and how we might also glorify him.

Remember from last week we saw the apostles Peter and John under trial. These were two unschooled ordinary men, standing in the midst of 70 of the most powerful and influential men in the nation. They were being questioned because they healed a man lame from birth, and were teaching about the resurrection of Jesus. The Sanhedrin asked them, “By what power or what name did you do this?” And they boldly confessed: “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.”

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The Jewish leaders were speechless, but they wanted to stop the apostles from gaining any more influence, so they commanded them to no longer speak or teach in the name of Jesus. They could not punish them because all the people were praising God for the miracle, but they warned them and made many threats, and let them go.

Look at v.23-24a, “On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.” Here again we see the unity of the believers as one in the body of Christ. They shared their lives together. They shared meals, they shared fellowship, and here they are sharing their trials. Now what is the first reaction you see after they heard this? V.24 says that they prayed. They did not give in to terror or fear. They did not say, “Those guys were pretty intimidating, they were threatening to take away our jobs, throw us in jail or publicly punish us, maybe we should just keep quiet with this Jesus thing.” Notice the work of the Holy Spirit that had changed these disciples. Before being changed, some might quietly sneak away for fear of their lives. Some might try to fight back with worldly methods. “To arms! Grab your swords, shields, bo-staffs and nunchucks! I know some pretty tough guys in the streets of Jerusalem that could rough these fellas up.” But we see none of that here. The Holy Spirit was working in them and gave them one heart and one mind, and they prayed all together. They did not seek the help of the world but they sought the help of God.

Now let’s look at the very first part of their prayer. Again in v.24, they said, “Sovereign Lord.” Let’s pause right there. In the original languages there are two words for Lord, one definition is a general term for Lord. It means master of anything. God is Lord of the universe, Lord of heaven and earth. Michael Flatley is Lord of the Dance. I’ve never seen the movies for the Lord of the Rings. You get the idea. Most of the time we see Lord in the Bible, it’s this definition. Now, when the apostles address the Lord in prayer, it’s usually the second definition, and you will usually see it in the Bible if the word “Sovereign” is put in front of it. So whenever you see “Sovereign Lord (in the NIV),” it means slave-master. Owner of a slave. One who has absolute ownership and power over that person. And usually, you will see this when they address God. So, just like how we say “Heavenly Father,” before we start our prayers, the apostles here are saying, “Owner of my life, my master, my Sovereign Lord.” They recognized God had complete ownership of them, and that he had every right to use them in any way he pleased. They committed themselves completely to the Lord. Does God own you? Have you given your life to the Lord? Do you just say, “Lord, Lord,” with your lips, but in your heart, you go and do as you please? God owns us. He created us. More than that, he purchased us with the precious blood of his very own Son. If you hold back any part of your life from God, you are stealing from him what rightfully belongs to him. We may be afraid, we do not want to be a slave to anyone, not even to God. But this may help us: to know that God is holy, he is righteous and he is just. He does what is good, and for his own glory, and that might not always mean comfort, ease and pleasure for us, all the time. But as he is just, if he uses us for his glory, he will not fail to reward us. But in the same way that he is just, he will not fail to punish those who rebel.

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Let's move on to the second part of their prayer, still in v.24, "you made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything in them." They acknowledged God as the creator of the universe! Acknowledging God as creator acknowledges his infinite power and wisdom. Do you know what infinite power looks like? Consider Hurricane Sandy from last year, a storm that was up to 1,000 miles in diameter. That's about 1/3 the size of the US – and God can command that storm. Consider the earth. God moves the earth around the sun in a constant orbit that is 93 million miles away. Now consider the sun. 1.3 million earths can fit into the sun, and God is the one who sustains the sun, as well as billions and billions of stars in the sky. So who is man to question God? What is man, that God is mindful of him? But God sustains all things. He sustains life on earth, giving food to every animal, from the king of the jungle to the worms in the ground. Consider how the flowers of the field grow, and how beautifully he clothes them. Will he not much more clothe you, oh you of little faith? To acknowledge God as the creator gives us comfort, because we know he is more than able to take care of us – but it should also give his enemies dread, because he is more than able to take care of them.

Next, we see that the apostles pray according to the word of God. This is important, because the word of God teaches us about God. We can only come to really know God through his word. Psalm 138:2 says, "I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. (NIV 84)" God has exalted his word. Even Jesus prayed in John 17:17, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." Pilate once asked (John 18:38), "What is truth?" *The* truth, not "*a*" truth, but *the* truth, is found in God's word. God's word is living and active, as surely as God lives. It is the way in which God speaks to us. God speaks to us through his word. The disciples prayed according to God's word because it helped them to understand their situation. They would not be surprised at persecution, because the whole world came against God. They would also come to know the true God, and pray to the true God, and they would learn God's will. Have you ever experienced reading or studying the Bible, and sometimes found that it was just what you needed to hear at that time? Or even consider today, this month, for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and we are studying this passage. Maybe it's a coincidence, but maybe God, in his providence, orchestrates all things according to his good purpose.

The word of God was written by men, but inspired by God. God uses people for his glory. Look at v.25, "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David." The Holy Spirit inspired David to write Psalm 2, can we please read the Psalm, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one." This might have been David's experience when he first became king, and he experienced victories over a divided kingdom, and over God's enemies. But if you read on in the Psalm 2, it begins to sound like it's talking about God's chosen one – the Christ, Jesus. So this Psalm is also a prophecy, predicting the coming of the Son of God. From this quote, we see that the Scriptures are the very words of God, and that God will carry out and fulfill everything he has said and promised, exactly as he said it. God does not change, and he is the same yesterday, today and forever.

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Let's look at what this Psalm means. First, it says, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" The nations do rage at the people of God. As mentioned in the beginning, in North Korea Christians are considered hostile. They can be arrested, tortured, sent to labor camps, and even be publicly executed. It has been the worst place to be a Christian for 11 years in a row. Yet despite the severe persecution, the underground church is estimated to be 400,000 Christians. While we praise God that the church is growing, let us also remember and pray for those who suffering that they may stand firm in the faith. All those who plot against the Lord plot in vain. Their plans are useless. The Lord will frustrate their plans, and they cannot succeed over him.

Verse 26 says, "The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one." Nations like China and North Korea have teamed up in small ways to stop the spread of Christianity. They targeted a Christian radio broadcast produced by North Korean Christians, but they were unsuccessful in trying to block it. From what I see in the news lately, I don't know if the US and UK have teamed up, but both are heavily pushing same sex marriages and abortion laws in their countries. We see the same thing going on as the Bible says – today, Presidents and Prime Ministers work together against God.

Now let's look at how these Psalms were actually fulfilled. Look at v.27, "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." Herod was the Tetrarch of Galilee (ruler of ¼ of the kingdom), and Pilate was the governor of Judea, both rulers of their respective territories. They were both enemies, until Jesus came to trial before them. Pilate first found no charge against him, and sent him to Herod. Herod asked him many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer, so he ridiculed, mocked Jesus, dressing him in a find robe and sending him back to Pilate. Herod did not set Jesus free, but sent him back to Pilate. After that day, they became friends. There was a mob there, perhaps consisting of both Gentiles and Israelites, who demanded to crucify Jesus. Pilate gave in to their demands, and he handed Jesus over to be crucified. The fulfillment of this prophecy proves that Jesus is the one that David wrote about. Jesus is the holy servant of God, the chosen one of God. Jesus is the Christ, the suffering servant sent to give his life for the sins of the world. The disciples didn't believe who Jesus was until he rose from the dead. When he died, they lost all hope, and scattered. But having seen the risen Jesus, they testify, yes, Jesus is the Christ, the chosen one of God, who was foretold more than 1,000 years ago through by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of David.

God is the sovereign ruler of the universe. He has control over all his creation, and even control over all events. He has the power to carry out his will and see them through. Look at v.28, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." God's will will be done. The disciples testified to this fact. So what was God's will? God's will was to send his one and only Son into the world to be a sacrifice for our sins, in order to save us from our sins. God did this for us, without our help, so that he alone may have the glory. God's will was to establish a kingdom for his Son, and he has done that, and he continues to build his kingdom, for his own glory. When did God decide this? He decided it beforehand. When is beforehand? From eternity

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past, from before time, God had decided that if his creation should fall from sin, he would rescue them through his Son.

But how about the evil? Did God then also make the nations, the peoples, the kings of earth and the rulers do evil? No, I don't believe God makes us do evil, but evil exists because his creation turned from him. So what does this mean? It means that no evil or no wickedness can hinder God's plans. In fact, God can often turn the evil and use it for his good purposes. Joseph in Gen 50:20 told his brothers, who had sold him into slavery many years ago, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." God used their evil for his purposes. So does that make Judas, Herod, Pilate, and the mob innocent? No, it doesn't, they are still guilty for their sins, but God used even their evil intentions for his own good. Their attempts at evil backfired. Remember the time when Jesus died, and he was put in the grave. The Pharisees tried their best to suppress the resurrection. They put a seal and guards at the tomb. But when Jesus rose again from the dead, they actually created for themselves more witnesses who could not deny the resurrection! They were probably better off putting nobody by the tomb so they might deny Jesus' resurrection, but now they had to acknowledge that Jesus did rise from the dead. So you see, nothing can be done outside of the will of God, he has the power to overrule the universe to carry out his will. He is God.

Someone asked me a good question though. So if God determines all things, and he will do his will, then what do I have to do? This is a fair and honest question. Now consider this: if it is God's will to use you for his glory, and he commands you to love your neighbor, and make disciples of all nations, what will be your response? Will you say, God predetermined it, it's gonna be done, and return to your video games, Cheetos and Mountain Dew (snacks which I love by the way)? Would that be irresponsible, and disobedient to the Spirit that God has put in you? Our response should instead be, Sovereign Lord, enable me to be your servant, to testify boldly to the truth. Help me to live according to your will, to humble myself so that you may be glorified. God, who is the Sovereign Lord, maker of heaven and earth, will provide everything we need for a godly life (2 Pet 1:3).

What did the disciples ask for? Look at v.29, "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." They asked the Lord, "consider their threats." God knows what's going on. He knows they've just been threatened by the Jewish leaders, but they say, "consider their threats," as a way of saying, "Lord, take notice of what they're doing, and remember them, do them what you will, repay them for what they deserve." That's all they said – they left the vengeance to the Lord. They did not say, "Lord, shall we call down fire to rain down on them?" They did not say, "Lord, neutralize their craftiness and cunning, paralyze them, or make them crippled or something." Rather they said, "enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." Wow. Their great desire was to be enabled to continue to speak God's words. They did not so much want to live without troubles, more importantly they wanted the liberty to speak. They wanted to proclaim the truth, to share the gospel. They wanted to share the good news, I don't know if they had it in their mind, that should God choose to save someone on the

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Sanhedrin he would. They only wanted to speak God's word and teach all that they had received from Jesus. We have the words of God today, and they have been completed, packaged in our Bibles. We can know God, we can know his will by studying the pages of Scripture. And they asked not just to speak with *some* more boldness, but with *great* boldness! They wanted to finish the task they were given, as Jesus said, "Go and make disciples," and "You will be my witnesses," they wanted more strength to finish that task.

They wanted to see God glorified, so they asked for proof so that God would confirm the truth of their message. Look at v.30, "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." The New Testament was not written yet, and the light of God's word, the teachings of the apostles has just broken out into the world. They asked God for these wonders not for their own glory, but for the sake of the work. God would bear witness to the apostles by the miracles, both to confirm the teachings of the gospel and to inspire the messengers. When they would work miracles, it was Jesus, granting them power and sending it down from heaven. The world would see that Jesus is actively working at the right hand of God to bring people in to his kingdom, and the people would give glory, praise and honor to Him.

That was the end of their prayer. They were one in heart and mind. They acknowledged the Sovereignty of God, that he is the creator of the universe. They prayed according to his word, and they asked for power to speak with great boldness, and signs to accompany their message. What was God's response? Can we all please read v.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." God said a hearty "Amen!" and shook the place! It was a visible sign of his acceptance of their prayer. There was a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and they were all filled again. This should be our daily practice – as David Guzik says, "continually be filled with the Spirit, make our immersion in him a constant experience." We can be filled with his Spirit when we fill our minds with his word, when we fill our hearts and our lungs with songs praising God, and praying to him continually, with private prayer, with public prayer, with short prayers and any requests. The disciples spoke the word of God boldly – it was God's answer to their prayer, and he gave them courage and clarity of speech. Their boldness is not something they tried to work up in themselves. It was a gift from God, received through prayer.

Most of us might not be experiencing persecution now, but we still need boldness to preach the gospel here at IIT. Perhaps some of us are scared, so we might pray, Lord, embolden us to share the gospel. Perhaps some of us aren't interested, so we might pray, Lord, give us a heart and desire to see you glorified. We simply share the message, the Lord will bring about salvation, and we all will praise the Lord. I pray that we would also pray together more often, and devote ourselves to God's word so that we may truly know God, who is the source of our power. May the Holy Spirit work in each of our hearts to pray for the lost, and practice sharing the gospel boldly – so that if a time of persecution comes, we may be able to pray and stand firm.

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