

Do Your Prayers Shake the Place?
Acts 4:23-32a

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(Special Sermon before 2008 Presidential Election)

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Text Introduction: I take the title of my message this morning from the text as you will read with me in just a moment. The background to our passage of reflection is a threat against Peter and John. Peter and John have been arrested for preaching that “Salvation is found in no one else {except Jesus}. The authorities kept Peter and John overnight. They released them only after warning them not to speak “at all in the name of Jesus.”

What did Peter and John do upon their release. Our text tells us.

Text: 23 And being let go, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. **24** So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: “Lord, You *are* God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, **25** who by the mouth of Your servant David have said:

*‘ Why did the nations rage,
And the people plot vain things?
26 The kings of the earth took their stand,
And the rulers were gathered together
Against the LORD and against His Christ.’*

27 “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together **28** to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. **29** Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, **30** by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.”

31 And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. **32** Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul;

Introduction: In his book, *Your God is Too Safe*, Mark Buchanan talks about going to a dinner party where his hosts do not know that he is a minister. Upon learning that he is a minister, his hostess says, “That’s nice. I think that the church serves an important role in our society. Everyone needs a safe haven—a place to escape reality.” Buchanan writes that he could not resist, so he said, “You know, somehow I missed that about the church the last time I read the book of Acts.”

Buchanan went on to write about a lady who approached him after a funeral. “Thank you,” she said, “What you said was so nice. You know, I’m quite religious myself. My family always asks me to pray for good weather when we have a golf game.”

Now, we might chuckle at such a low thinking mindset about prayer, but I promise you that is how most folks think about prayer. For way too many, prayer is our means of asking God for good weather and what we want.

When I read Acts 4, I see another picture of prayer.

Our country is in crisis. Now, hang on with me just a moment. Our country was in crisis long before this Presidential Campaign, and the election alone of either John McCain or Barack Obama will not by that action alone get us out of crisis. Our country was in crisis long before some declared that we were in a financial crisis, perhaps recession, perhaps headed toward depression. Our country was in crisis long before September 11, 2001, and this generation's new war with terrorists. Our country's crisis is not primarily political, economic, or military, but rather the overriding crisis of our country is spiritual and moral. For that reason, a particular President will not lead us out of crisis. The power of a particular political party will not lead us out of crisis. A change on the Supreme Court will not lead us out of this crisis. Only a spiritual awakening will allow us to be out of this kind of crisis.

For that reason, it is my conviction that our greatest hope is not in politics, but in prayer—the kind of prayer that we read about in Acts 4. When the early church encountered a crisis from the outside influences of those in control of their government, they did not panic, pout, circulate a petition, or have a protest! They prayed!

Consider their example of prayer with me.

Prayers that Shake the Place will be marked by ...

The Reason for Prayer (Verse 23): Why did the church pray?

Because of the current crisis!—Peter and John shared with them the crisis. Their crisis was the result of preaching that Jesus was the only way of salvation. I remind you this morning that any individual, church, or group that proclaims that Jesus is the only way of salvation will always find themselves in conflict with the culture around them. The culture cannot accept such truth. Upon learning of their crisis the church knew to pray. John Bunyan wrote, “You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”

Because of their character!--They prayed because it was their natural reaction. Prayer was the habit of their life. Prayer was the natural reaction to any crisis. Prayer is what they did in any crisis. No one had to call them to prayer. The need just had to be expressed. “So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God.”

Two things are most surprising about prayer. First is that God invites us to pray in the first place. The second is that even with this invitation, how seldom we actually pray.

The Requests that are Made (Verses 24-29): How did the early church pray?

We must pray....

According to the Power of God. “LORD, you are God.” This is the same way Jeremiah prayed when God told him to purchase a field when at the same time he saw the Babylonian army gathering in the distance. Jeremiah went on to pray, “There is nothing too hard for you.” (Jeremiah 32:17) This is the way Daniel prayed when God began to show him that the land of Israel was going to be restored.

According to the Past Activity of God. “who made Heaven and earth...”

According to the current problem. “Now, LORD, look on their threats.”

Asking for God’s priority.—Notice what they did not pray? They did not pray for the LORD to keep them safe. They did not ask for the threats to cease. Instead they prayed for boldness in the face of the threats. A preacher of another generation, E. Stanley Jones, said, “Prayer is surrender--surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.”

Prayer does not change God so much as it changes us.

Asking God to perform miracles. (Verse 30) As I have told you many times before, our prayer ought to be that God do something in our church, in our community, and in our country that can only be explained by His power.

The Results of Praying (Verses 31-32a)

Greater Awareness of God’s glory! This business of the place shaking is hard to fathom isn’t it? At its most basic level, here is God saying, “I am here. I have heard.”

Greater Boldness to share God’s story! They prayed for greater boldness, and they were filled with greater boldness.

Greater Togetherness for life’s journey! I’m sure you know the trite saying, “The family that prays together stays together.” Isn’t it amazing, though, how true even though so trite? It is hard to be at odds with a person that is a prayer partner.

Some might say, “Do our prayers really matter?” A rather theologically liberal pastor travelled to Russia in the 1970’s to assess for his organization the state of the church in what was those days the USSR. His report was something to the effect of “All I saw was little old ladies praying.” He made the remark with mockery. In light of the fall of the Soviet Union, again to quote Mark Buchanan, who wrote, “Beware of little old ladies praying. Secretly they are revolutionaries who make Bolsheviks look like kindergartners. They comprise a veritable bomb-making factory.”¹

What does God have in store for us after next Tuesday, November 4? I don’t know, but I do know this—He wants us to pray.

¹ Both illustrations from Buchanan were taken from an audio sermon by Pastor John Sartelle, Tates Creek Presbyterian Church, Lexington, KY, from February 13, 2005.