

An encounter with the real Jesus leads to bold prayers and living.

Acts 4:23-31 “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.” [31] 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.” (ESV)

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This last week Stacy and I celebrated 10 years of marriage! As a gift we traveled to where it all started for us, Washington, DC. It was fun to see friends and see how the city has changed in the seven years since we left. Just a couple of tourists enjoying the city.

But during the trip, really from the first flight through our ride home from the airport the refrain “live for something” kept being brought to mind.

We encountered a number of people that reminded us starkly that what you live for determines the flow of life. The young woman that couldn’t remember the previous night out... the young men that couldn’t keep their balance at one in the afternoon... The sites that life in suburbia shelters you from...

But it is not just debauchery that falls under the category of “living for nothing.” The mentality that preserving the “self” is priority... other people mere obstacles to our goals, our five-year plan of fame and wealth. Living for the weekend, for our retirement portfolio... ‘Take care of Yourself first and only’ is sung as the soundtrack of our lives.

When the heat rises, when things get tough, self preservation is pursued at all costs.

A slog toward... nothing.

Christianity though is not this type of living FOR something... it is living FROM something. Starkly different lives of purpose and meaning - some important, something vital happening, a call given for life and a goal already won for us.

As examples for us we see the church in its infancy living for something. To make Jesus famous.

In Acts 4 we see opposition rise out and the church respond seeking God for help - but it is the help they seek that indicates what they are living for.

We come to this place in the story, having witnessed the healing of the crippled beggar, and Peter's preaching that it was not he and John that healed, but God who raised Christ, who healed in order that Jesus would be glorified.

The miracle meant to point to Christ does, and the church is grown by a couple of thousand more people. You could not be in Jerusalem and miss what was happening, something was spreading, from the temple to the people in the streets, the atmosphere had changed.

Peter and John are arrested and brought before the powerful of the day, the religious court. These earthly "powers" then inquire by what power did the apostles heal? Now, it is important to know that if you ascribed healing power to anyone other than God in this day, it would earn for you a death sentence - it is a big deal. Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, says that it was by the name of Jesus Christ that the man was healed. Jesus, the stone rejected by them, who has become the cornerstone.

Then comes the hinge verse of chapter 4 and maybe most of the New Testament, everything swings open from this statement before the counsel.

Acts 4:11-12 "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." (ESV)

Standing before the elites in Jerusalem, those that could lawfully harm them, Peter, who days before was cursing and denying that he knew Jesus, makes a statement that would get you killed still today. Only because he has an encounter with the real Jesus, resurrected and empowering his people by the Spirit.

Acts 4:13 "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." (ESV)

That makes all the difference. Simple men proclaiming the risen Savior. Because they had been with him.

The counsel can't deny the evidence, the man that had been lame for forty years is standing among them - people have noticed. So they charge the apostles to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. Peter and John respond that they have to obey God above all others so they will go on preaching.

So they are threatened some more - probably even with death - and released. They come face-to-face with violent opposition to the gospel. And their response proves that **an encounter with the real Jesus leads to bold prayers and living.**

MLK Jr.: "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." (true of the church)

Quickly notice three things about their response, they trust in God's sovereignty, they pray for power and they live with boldness. Let's think about this response and see if we can't get in on it too.

1) Trust in God's Sovereignty

Released, they went to their friends - the church - and reported what happened and at this report the church lifts their voice together to God, declaring his control over all things, and their trust in him.

They didn't rally and determine a legal strategy or more persuasive arguments. They didn't find an escape route and they certainly didn't reject the name of Jesus and proclaiming him.

They talk about who God is to God. You are the Sovereign Lord - holding all things. The God who orchestrates even the rulers and nations and they do whatever your plan says, whatever your hand has predestined to take place.

The first response to opposition - to threats of violence for telling other people about Jesus - is to cry out in complete trust of the sovereignty of God, of his control, his providence.

There is no faint whisper of "God surely this can't be your plan..." instead they recite back Psalm 2 as proof that the Holy Spirit spoke through David saying the people would plot in vain, the rulers of the earth would gather together against the Lord and his Christ... They see the unfolding events as confirmation that God is working everything for his glory.

What a safe place to be. In the center of God's sovereignty!

And they know they are there because they are gospel-believing people. The defining truth they live by is that “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

They know this because they heard Jesus say it. **John 14:6** “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (ESV)

Even those that didn't see him know it is true by the Holy Spirit, confirmed by the radical events in Jerusalem. This is the real Jesus. The Jesus that claims exclusivity - no other way.

The religious counsel was offended by this... probably because it challenged their authority... but this is exactly the same truth that challenges so many in our day, and attempts to soften this message or exclude it from talking about Jesus or following him produce nothing but death.

A couple of weeks ago I had the chance to talk with a friend who is not a believer and I asked her to describe her view of faith - a very politically appropriate response was given - ‘don't think there is one specific way to the better place.’ ‘We live good lives and love people and we move on...’ Where did you come up with this? A self-derived ‘spirituality’ that does lead somewhere, straight to destruction.

These are the silly things we do, and come up with when we are the center of the universe, when “self” is the priority and ruler of our lives. But the church in Acts doesn't have an inkling of this because they have had an encounter with Jesus.

Some in person, most by the work of the Spirit, they know the real Jesus. The only way to God - his point really, to bring us to God. And he does this by living a perfectly obedient life, and taking on a death that our sin (our missing the mark or God's commands) deserves. The real Jesus that beat death and walked out of the tomb... that spent weeks teaching his disciples before ascending to Heaven and sending the Holy Spirit to give power to be witnesses of him.

This is no individual-specific defining of faith - this is the way, the truth and the life. They know if, they have experienced it. And they preach it without fear filled with the Spirit before the world's powers... in the face of opposition.

The church turns from self and turns to the Sovereign One for help - but it is not the type of help we might be inclined to...

2) Prayer for Power

The prayer in Acts 4 is a world-changing prayer. Frankly, we don't pray like this anymore. In the face of opposition - how might we pray. For safety, for protection, for resolution... Still believing God is sovereign, after all if he isn't why should we pray anyway!

If you are anything like me, I bet you can bring to mind the last time you prayed for a “safe-trip” or “peace” in your city, or even a whole new setting to start over in... but you can’t recall when you last prayed for boldness to talk about Jesus. These are not bad things to be praying for, but we miss the point of our lives when they turn inward on ourselves rather than get on board with what God has determined to do through us and among us. When we spend more time praying for hedges-of-protection than kingdom advance.

We rail against prosperity gospel - get rich with Jesus schemes - but we are functionally living the same way with a soft-prosperity gospel - make me comfortable, give me just enough to be respected and not have to worry about the bills... You might as well pray for the mansion and Rolls Royce...

And the further separated the church is from the prayer in Acts 4, the more impotent and lifeless we become.

Annie Dillard on preparing for church: “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, do no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god y draw us out to where we can never return.”

Instead, here is the model. “Sovereign Lord, controller of all things, even the evil rulers of the day, that commands mountains to move and hearts to melt, “look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (29-30)

Lord see the threats and give us power to proclaim Jesus. Bring miracles in the name of Jesus to draw the prodigal home, to prove your power and to glorify your name.

Grant us power - beyond our circumstance, beyond our self, to make much of you Jesus. In the busy schedules, in the neighborhoods you have placed us, among the friends you have given us, and as the church you have formed us into. Give us power to speak your word with all boldness.

This is the design for the church. The ones that have received power from the Holy Spirit to witness of Jesus. That people would be healed not as a side-show but as a declaration of who God is and as a way to meet Jesus.

Oh that we would pray like this church...

And it is a prayer the Lord is pleased to answer.

3) Lives of Boldness

“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.”

Filled to speak the word of God... not all filled with safety... or protection - but boldness. Notice, friends, it was not just the apostles filled. It was not just the preacher, not just the elders. Not just the person called to missions. “They were ALL filled...”

Having an encounter with Jesus - being saved by his work, united with him in faith. They know our efforts and good deeds don't save, but belief in Jesus does. They are justified, made right with God, by faith in Christ and are empowered by his Spirit to live.

Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (ESV)

And they lived it, continuing to speak the word of God with boldness. They cannot but speak of what they have seen and heard... as the Spirit gives them power, gives them voice. Unafraid. Seeing the gospel of grace find purchase in the hearts of people around them. Seeing miracles declaring the goodness of God and the power of the name of Jesus.

This is not meant to be merely a historical story. This is meant for the church today. Spirit-given boldness to proclaim Jesus.

Not by any planning on our part, Stacy and I were in DC at the same time as a worship and prayer gather called Awaken the Dawn. On the national mall, among the “temples to America,” there were tents, 50 plus for each state and larger tents, and a main stage for preaching and worship. From each tent, for 24 or more hours came prayer and singing of God's goodness. BOLD. Tourists walking from museum to museum, residents of the city out for a run, people from all over the world, encountering something different.

If we have eyes to see, we can say that these people praising and proclaiming the savior have been with Jesus. May it be so with us!

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Let's get in on it:

Encounter Jesus - There is no other way to the Father, no other way to be made right, to be given power for life, given purpose for eternity. To have something to live for. Know that Jesus,

the God-man came and lived in your place, faced all that you face and was faithful to God the Father. Know that he took on the judgment and execution he did for you, in your place. And Know that he lives, having walked out of the grave, giving you new life and undoing the curse of death.

Reject the self-preservation we are inclined to. Move beyond self to the Savior and find hope, power and joy. *B.B. Warfield*: "The spirit of [true] Christianity... is an attitude of exultant joy. Only this joy has its ground not in ourselves but in our Savior." And it is him we proclaim.

Pray for Power - Ask for the Spirit to move, that the Sovereign Lord would grant us to continue to speak his word with all boldness. New boldness. Unmistakeable boldness, as he stretches out his hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of Jesus.

[Lord, give us an encounter with you Jesus. That what you have done in our lives would be noticeable. And grant us power to proclaim you with all boldness. Bring healing, and signs and wonders by your name Jesus so the world may know who you are.]