

February 9, 2020

POWER, PREACHING, PERSECUTION, AND PRAYER

Acts 3:1-4:31

(3 of 17 in a series through Acts)

I'm going to go ahead and tell you my hoped for application of this text up front. My prayer is that as a church we might find ourselves individually more earnest in being on our faces before the Lord, asking him for greater empowerment by his Spirit and more earnest in our pursuit of our God, his mission, and our obedience to him. As we find ourselves in conversations about difficulties, or challenges, or the like, I want us to find ourselves more often, stopping and saying, "Well, let's pray, then." What we see in this text is that a people with overwhelming odds led them to expectant prayer for Spirit empowerment, which is what I long for us as a church body to emulate as well. So this morning I'm simply going to walk through the sections of our text this morning, explaining what's going on, and then drawing some application from it, praying along the way that the Spirit will stir our hearts to cry out to for more of his presence and power in our lives. The text breaks down nicely (sorry for the alliteration) in the categories of power, preaching, persecution, and prayer. So, let's look at each of those. First, we see the Lord's power.

The Lord's power

Acts 3 begins with an amazing display of the Lord's power. Luke tells us that Peter and John were going up to the temple to pray when they approached a man who was lame, lying near the temple entrance, and the man asked them for money (which would have been his only way to provide for himself in that setting, since he was unable to walk). And it seems that the man even lowered his head as he asked, perhaps showing the humility and even shame he felt in needing to beg. I say that because Peter's first words to him were, "Look at us." And so, of course, the man looks up, thinking he's about to receive something, but Peter says to him, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" (3:6). And Luke tells us that Peter took the man by his hand, raised him up, and immediately the man's legs were made strong so that he entered the temple with Peter and John, walking, and leaping, and praising God. And so we see a display of the Lord's power, as we have already seen in Acts 2, and as we'll see again in Acts 5 and other places in Acts.

Now, this makes sense in light of the Lord's words in Acts 1:8 when Jesus told his followers that they would "receive power" when the Holy Spirit had come upon this. Here, they're demonstrating it. But my guess is that when we see this we do not need to be convinced that God is able to do such things or that this was done by the power of Christ. After all, we gloriously confess this morning that our God made the world out of nothing, raised Christ from the dead, and will one day raise us as well. Rather, we're probably asking a question like, "Should we expect this kind of thing in our own lives?" That is, is this more of a prescriptive moment—showing what our interaction with the sick should look like—or a descriptive

moment—simply telling us what happened in that extraordinary moment in the life of the early church? So, let me try to tackle that question.

I do think that what we're seeing in the early church is extraordinary. The phrase "signs and wonders" appears here in these chapters of Acts but don't resurface in the New Testament hereafter. The miraculous healings are of an extraordinary nature, their evangelistic preaching results in 3,000 people being saved at one setting and (as we'll see in our text this morning) 5,000 people being saved in another, Peter will speak and people will fall dead (as we'll see next week), and on and on. So I do think it's right to see this as an extraordinary demonstration of power in an extraordinary moment. It seems that the Spirit was validating the witness and work of the apostles in these early days.

But I think just as we could make an error in thinking these extraordinary displays must fill our lives, so I think we could make an opposite error as well. Let me give an example by focusing on the evangelism of the early church. As I mentioned, in just two settings in which Peter preached, 8,000 were converted, and that happened in the midst of people coming to Christ and being added to the church daily. Obviously I think we would all agree that's extraordinary. But if someone were to say, "Because we can't expect that extraordinary result, we shouldn't seek to preach the gospel or if we do expect many if any to believe," I think we'd rightly recognize that would be making an equal error in the opposite direction as the one who might claim we should expect precisely the same thing we see with the apostles.

I think we just want to apply the same reasoning to the Lord's work of healing here. Should we expect this to characterize our lives day-in and day-out? I don't think so. This seems extraordinary. However, it would be foolish, unloving, and presumptuous not to pause and lay hands on our brothers and sisters, pray for them, and ask God to heal them when they're sick, right? And in our history as a church, we've seen the Lord answer such prayers in some pretty amazing ways. Moreover, Paul makes very clear in 1 Corinthians 12-14 that believers are to pursue love, and in that pursuit of love, we're to earnestly desire the Spirit to gift us in order to edify our brothers and sisters. The Spirit worked in an extraordinary way in these early days. That's beyond argument. But he hasn't left, and he is pleased to gift us so that we might serve and edify one another in love. So, in our pursuit of love, let's pray he might empower us and gift us to serve one another. Second, we see the apostles' preaching.

The apostles' preaching

As soon as Peter had everyone's attention—since the man was walking and jumping—he used it as an opportunity to preach Christ. Now, it's important that we realize that he is in the temple, addressing Jews, which is why he begins his sermon, saying, "Men of Israel" (3:12). But the other impact this has is in how it shapes his sermon. Throughout his preaching, he shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of what the OT Scriptures promised. He mentions that God glorified Jesus as his servant (v. 13—i.e. the very one spoken of in Isaiah 53), that Christ's suffering and resurrection was foretold by the prophets (v. 18), and that Jesus is the glorious prophet Moses spoke of in Deuteronomy 18 (v. 22-23). Then he calls them to repentance, saying to them in verse 26, "God,

having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.”

And it is here I want us to pause and think. I don't think it's surprising to you this morning to consider that Jesus is the suffering servant, the glorious prophet (who is much more than a prophet), or that his death and resurrection were prophesied. But what we may not often think about is that repentance is a *blessing*. Don't you find this in one sense odd that Peter says that God raised up his servant to bless you *by turning every one of you from your wickedness*? Typically we don't think of repentance as a blessed proclamation.

If I were to say to you, “I'm sending you to go to that person, tell him he's wicked, and command him to repent,” you probably aren't thinking, “What an exciting mission to bring such a *blessing* to this person.” Rather, you might be filled with dread. But here is an area where we need to conform our minds to the Bible. Coming to someone with the gospel message and calling them to repent is calling them out of slavery to sin, out of condemnation before the Lord, and into a place where they have forgiveness and eternal life. We can look at Peter's boldness—the man who just weeks prior was scared of a little girl now boldly standing and saying, “You killed the Author of life” (3:15)—and understand that the Spirit has enabled him to see the blessing of this message. The gospel is called “good news” for a reason.

Let us not lose sight of this in the midst of a culture that tells us we are being intolerant or unloving to command all men everywhere to turn from their rebellion against Jesus and repent. We are not being intolerant or unloving. We are doing the most loving thing imaginable, bringing the blessing of a message and call that will turn them from their wickedness. Let us then keep preaching, even as we see the apostles doing here, not missing a chance when we have an audience to proclaim the good news. Third, we see the enemy's attacks.

The enemy's attacks

In 4:1-22 we see the early church facing persecution. Jesus had told them this would come. He'd said, “I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves . . . you will be hated by all for my name's sake. . . . A discipline is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. . . . If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matt 10:16-25). We now see this fulfilled. As Peter is preaching and about 5,000 are believing, the Jewish leaders of the temple arrest Peter and John.

The arrest is predictable. These leaders were charged with keeping order in the temple and with this man's healing, there has been a great jolt of seeming disorderliness take place. Moreover, Peter was preaching that Jesus is the risen *Lord*—the same Jesus whom these temple leaders condemned and turned over for crucifixion. Peter was preaching that he was the *risen* Lord, and the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection period. Moreover, the crowds were believing and being converted. So, there were all kinds of reasons to shut them up.

As they are tried, Peter is asked, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” And Peter’s boldness comes right through, as he first clarifies that they’re being arrested for doing a good deed—which makes no sense. But then he answers their question in no uncertain terms, declaring that it is by the name of Jesus, whom these men and crucified and whom God had raised from the dead. Jesus is like the stone that certain builders thought they had no use for and tossed aside when another builder came along, found that stone, and used it as the most important stone in his building.

At this point, the temple leaders are in a bind. Peter and John aren’t backing down. There was a formerly lame man outside walking and jumping. And 5,000 of the people had just been converted. So they simply decide to threaten them, telling them not to preach anymore in Jesus’ name. And Peter answers, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (3:19-20).

But what I want us to see this morning is that the opposition that the early believers faced is to be expected. It certainly won’t be Jewish temple leaders, but there will always be opposition. And one reason there will always be opposition is because we aren’t at war with flesh and blood but against evil forces and Satan himself. Paul tells us our enemies are “rulers . . . authorities . . . cosmic powers over this present darkness . . . spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). When the book of Revelation pictures the people of God persecuted, it is pictured in terms of a beast, who manifests his opposition in every generation, coming against the people of God.

So, I want this to be clear. We have an enemy. Opposition and persecution are to be expected. To say in the last point that we must go out, preach the gospel, command repentance, and teach people to obey all the commands of Jesus—from the way they handle their bodies to all things regarding sexual morality to their marriages to their beliefs—is going to invite persecution. To be sure, we are bringing good news, but it will be met with opposition. And I’m saying that it is okay. It is part of God’s design. He sends us out as sheep in the midst of wolves.

So when the culture at large isn’t applauding us for holding to and preaching the beliefs of Scripture, we don’t have to get our feathers all ruffled up and think, “How could this be happening?” Rather, we can say, “This is what we were told would happen. We are at war with cosmic powers, spiritual forces of evil, and the devil himself.” How could it be different?

But the gates of hell will not prevail. Greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world. So we need not fear. And faithful gospel proclamation in the midst of persecution will only result in the growth of the church. Keep reading the book of Acts, and we’ll see it again and again. We’ll see a pattern of persecution, preaching, and growth over and over. So let us be faithful in the power of the Spirit to preach the good news to a people who may well persecute us for the sake of Jesus’ name. And this brings us to our final point: the believers’ prayer

The believers’ prayer

What did Peter and John do after this threatening experience? Luke tells us that “they went to their friends” (4:23), told them what had happened, and they prayed. And there are so many things here that I want to note. Let me point out a few of them. First, they prayed—as we saw last week—with an understanding that their God was in control of the world. They begin their prayer, saying, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.” They continue on, noting that even when Herod and Pilate and the Jews and Gentiles crucified Jesus, they were merely doing “whatever [God’s] hand and [God’s] plan had predestined to take place” (4:24, 28). In other words, they’re acknowledging the foolishness of God’s enemies to think they can thwart his plans. They asked God to demonstrate his power, continuing to grant signs and wonders, and giving them boldness to keep preaching (4:29-30).

There is so much here to keep in mind as we pray as well. But I want to note two more things. The first is merely that their response was to pray. So many times prayer can serve as a last resort in our lives. We encounter an issue, and we try to figure it out. We see a problem, and we gather with others to see if we might think our way through it. Do we forget that we serve a sovereign God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them?

Why don’t we make our first response prayer? Shouldn’t we be a people who encounter issues and then answer them with prayer? That’s what the early church did. I mean, do you know how easy it would have been for them to say, “Peter, I hear what you’re saying, but I’ve seen you work powerfully and preach more boldly than I’ve ever seen. Don’t worry about it. Get back out there.” But that would be self-reliance. So they prayed, asking for more power and more boldness. May we spend as much time praying for our children as we do trying to figure out how best to raise them. May we spend as much time praying for our lost family and friends as we do lying awake concerned about them. Let us spend as much time praying for God to provide for us as a church as we do scheming and trying to figure out how we can get one more seat in this space. We serve the sovereign Lord who made everything and owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Let us be a people who respond like the early church and find ourselves interrupting our own conversations with the words, “Let’s just stop and pray.”

And I also want to focus on verse 31. Luke says, “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.” Do you see that language about them being “filled with the Holy Spirit”? We’ve seen that before. Back in Acts 2:4 Luke had told us that at Pentecost they “were all filled with the Holy Spirit,” and now they’re being filled with the Holy Spirit again. What’s going on?

Well, first, I want us to understand that something about Pentecost is unrepeatable. Prior to Pentecost very few believers had the Spirit, on the day of Pentecost the Lord poured out his Spirit on all his people, and now there are no believers who have failed to receive the Holy Spirit. Paul will say in Romans 8:9, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

Therefore, Pentecost need not be repeated. It is a unique event in redemptive history—like the resurrection of Christ, for example. There is no second-blessing theology that all believers need. Pentecost was a picture of people standing at a unique moment in redemptive history so that they were believers without the Spirit one moment and received the Spirit the next; but now there are no believers without the Spirit (Romans 8:9).

However, here we are in Acts 4, and these believers who were filled with the Spirit in chapter 2 are now being filled with the Spirit again. What do we do with that? Here's how I think we understand it. In Acts 2 you have the reception of the Spirit or the baptism of the Spirit that believers experience at conversion. If you and I know Christ, we've likewise received the Spirit. That happens once, at the moment of conversion, and let's label that "A." However, the Lord is also pleased to pour out his Spirit repeatedly on his children, filling them with the Spirit, and empowering them in fresh ways. This is what we see happening in Acts 4. Let's label this "B." On the day of Pentecost, I think the disciples experienced both "A" and "B"—both the one-time baptism of the Spirit and the first of a soon-to-be-repeated filling of the Spirit. It may well be that in Acts 4:8 (when Peter addressed the temple leaders), he received this outpouring of the Spirit we're labeling "B" again, and he definitely experienced that with the group at the end of Acts 4. D. A. Carson has summed it up well, saying, "I see biblical support for the thesis that although all true believers have received the Holy Spirit and have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, nevertheless the Holy Spirit is not necessarily poured out on each individual Christ in precisely equivalent quantities. . . . Although I find no biblical support for a second-blessing theology, I do find support for a second-, third-, fourth-, fifth-blessing theology."¹ I think he's basically right.

And historically this is how the church has seen this reality and urged believers to go about the ordinary means of obedience and growth before the Lord while also simultaneously praying for the Lord to pour out the Spirit on them or fill them with the Spirit afresh again and again. Let me give us some testimony of the church throughout the ages on this:

John Calvin – "It becomes us to be instant in prayer, and to beg at God's hands that he will increase in us his Holy Spirit."²

Then, referring to the anointing of the Spirit:

John Owen – "It is [our] duty to pray continually for its increase and farther manifestation of its power in [us]: yea, it is [our] duty to labor that [our] prayers for it may be both fervent and effectual."³

¹D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 160.

²Quoted by Iain Murray in *Pentecost Today?* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 1998), 130-31.

³John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 4 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 398.

Jonathan Edwards – “The state of the times extremely requires a fullness of the divine Spirit in ministers, and we ought to give ourselves no rest till we have obtained it.”⁴

J. I. Packer – “If God is sovereign in revival and we cannot extort it from him by any endeavor or technique, what should those who long for revival do? . . . There are three things to do. First, preach and teach God’s truth; second, prepare Christ’s way [by which Packer means repent of sin]; third, pray for the Spirit’s outpouring.”⁵

Sinclair Ferguson – “The inaugural outpouring of the Spirit creates ripples throughout the world as the Spirit continues to come in power. Pentecost is the epicentre; but the earthquake gives forth further after-shocks. Those rumbles continue through the ages. Pentecost itself is not repeated; but a theology of the Spirit which did not give rise to prayer for his coming in power would not be a theology of [the Spirit]!”⁶

Brothers and sisters, in light of our need for the power of God and the call to preach the gospel boldly in the midst of a world where our enemy seeks our harm, doesn’t it befit us to keep doing what we’re doing *and* to be earnest in prayer, crying out for the Lord to fill us again and again with his Holy Spirit so that we might find power and boldness to walk in obedience to Christ? Let that be our prayer now as we come to the table. Amen.

⁴Quoted by Murray, *Pentecost Today?*, 131-32.

⁵J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1984), 257.

⁶Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 91.