

1 PP Acts: To the End of the Earth

Part 8-Acts 4:23-31 *The Response to Persecution*

11/21-22/2020

Just how much control does God exercise over His creation?

Persecution had visited the church by Acts 4, and Peter and John show us how to be mighty witnesses of Jesus in the face of hostility and threats

They were interrogated, threatened, then released after being told to stop witnessing of Jesus But we'll see, as Paul Harvey used to say on his radio show, 'The rest of the story'

But before we do, let me remind you what it means to be a witness of Jesus

It is actually defined in **Acts 4:20**, "***we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.***"

2PP A witness is *one who speaks of what they have seen and heard*

Christian, we are not told to be theologians, toastmaster-trained speakers, debaters...but we are commanded to witness, to speak of what we have seen and heard of Jesus Christ

And when we do, and are persecuted for it, we will see how we ought to respond

3PP 1-Find your strength in Christian Community

I love what **4:23** tells us: '***When they were released, they went to their friends***'

Let's take just a moment to reflect on that

Do you have godly friends that come around you in times of trouble and difficulty?

Have you found your way to a Growth Group here at Cornerstone?

Even the mighty Apostles, who had been with Jesus, immediately went to their friends when difficulty came, to report, to find strength with each other, yet for so many, this is difficult

I don't know if for some of you, you don't yet realize, it's okay if you aren't perfect, if you struggle, if you don't have your act together

Christian community is more a hospital than a club; more an AA meeting than an awards ceremony; more a half-time locker room adjustment than a post-game celebration

If you don't have it all together in life, welcome to Cornerstone Church where that is okay

If you present yourself to others as if you have it all together, first you are just plain deceptive, but second, even worse, you are robbing our church of the power of true community

Peter and John '***went to their friends***' when they were persecuted and what did this godly group of believers do...?

4PP 2-Find your grit in scripture-filled prayer

When persecution came to the early church, the people of God came together to pray

There is a world of difference between praying *with* someone, and telling someone you will pray

They held an impromptu prayer service: '***they lifted their voices together to God***'

They prayed together, with one accord, lifting their voices to God

Peter and John and '***their friends...lifted their voices together to God***', and what a prayer service it was

5PP-i. *They affirmed the sovereignty of God: "Sovereign Lord, Who made the heaven and the*

earth and the sea and everything in them... 4:24b

The Pope sent an envoy to Martin Luther with threats should Luther continue in what he was preaching that salvation was by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone

The envoy told him that all his supporters would desert him, then where would he be

Luther's response was, *'Then and now, in the hands of God'*

Christian, you are in the infinitely mighty grip, of the hand of God

Think on that for a moment with me...Our heavenly Father is the ***'Sovereign Lord'***

This is a title that ascribes absolute authority and rule to God, His rightful dominion over all

His power cannot be challenged, opposed, threatened, or even delayed

6PP ***'Sovereign Lord'*** is a title that speaks of God's right and power to do all He decides

God reigns in absolute, unopposable power, so listen to David as He describes our God in the face of those persecuting him

7PP ***"The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes at him with his teeth but the Lord laughs at the wicked for He sees that his day is coming."*** Psalm 37:12-13

What David said of his enemies who came against him is what these believers said of theirs

8PP ii. *They affirmed the providence of God*

These praying saints knew their scriptures, and they prayed them back to God

Friends, the bible is the major way God speaks to us, and prayer is the way we speak to God

There is no more better way than pray scripturally, and the early church prayed a portion from Psalm 2, which was a prophecy of the anointed One, Jesus Christ

'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against His Anointed' 4:25-26

Here is the fulfillment of that prophecy: ***"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"*** Acts 4:27

A powerful group certainly, but the praying believers knew that these enemies gathered, ***"to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."*** 4:28

Friends, this is called the *providence of God*

9PP God's providence is His continuous involvement in His creation, directing it all to fulfill His purposes

They believed that the rulers who crucified Jesus were unwittingly fulfilling the plan of God Christian, every persecution that will ever come against you as you desire to live a godly life witnessing of Jesus, has been predestined to fulfill God's purposes

There is nothing you will ever face that God is not only sovereignly in authority over, but also is using everything to fulfill His perfect plan not only for you, but for the very ones who persecute you

That confidence led them to the final part of their prayer

10PP iii. *They affirmed mission over comfort*

The first Protestant pastor to be killed in a Nazi concentration camp was Paul Robert Schneider Alfred Leikam, a fellow prisoner, later said of Schneider, *"Wholly without fear, he bore witness*

of his Christian faith to the SS. Throughout this witness, in which he presented the grace of Christ together with a call to repentance, Schneider was exposed alternately to severe bodily tortures, humiliations, and agonies.”

He was ordered to stop speaking of Jesus Christ, but he would not, and paid the ultimate price
Schneider understood that the mission of Jesus was greater than any comfort here on earth
“And now, Lord, 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.” 4:29-30

Did you notice that there are only two requests in the prayer of these believers?

They prayed that God would give them boldness to speak the gospel, to testify and witness
And they asked God to confirm their witness by signs, wonders and miracles

The purpose of signs, wonders and miracles is to confirm the Word, the gospel, the good news

They didn't pray that God would punish their persecutors, or to deliver them from evil people

They prayed for power to boldly witness to the end of the earth, the mission Jesus gave them

Would this prayer be answered?

“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.” 4:31

11PP 3-Find your boldness in the Holy Spirit

How did the early believers respond to persecution?...by gathering together to pray

And when they prayed they affirmed what God's Word said about His sovereignty, providence,
and the priority of mission over comfort

Then, for the 3rd time, they were filled with the Spirit, empowered to be bold witnesses of Jesus

They didn't pray to be filled with the Spirit, they prayed and affirmed the greatness of God,

humbly asking for His power to help them stay on mission, and God answered

Friends, if you lack boldness and confidence in telling others of Jesus Christ, the answer, more
than taking a class, or reading a book, is to be filled with the Holy Spirit

In fact, if you do not often talk to unbelievers of Jesus, it is very likely you do not often talk to
Jesus about unbelievers

If you lack the power of the Spirit, then likely you lack a rich, humble, prayer life

Christian, do you want power to respond with boldness to persecution?

Find your strength in Christian community and you

Find your determination in scripture-filled prayer and put mission over comfort

Find your boldness in the Holy Spirit and witness well of Jesus even in persecution

Amen? Pray