

Acts 4:23-31

Dear Friends in Christ,

Peter and John were in big trouble. As they entered the temple courts a crippled beggar had asked them for money. They didn't have any money to give him, but they gave him something much better than money. They healed him in the name of Jesus.

That doesn't sound like something that would get you into trouble. But when people realized what had happened a large crowd gathered and Peter and John preached to them about Jesus' suffering and resurrection. This caught the attention of the Jewish leaders, many of whom were Sadducees who denied that there was a resurrection from the dead. These were the same leaders who had conspired against Jesus and had him crucified. They arrested Peter and John and held them over night for a hearing the next morning. They would have liked to have found a way to execute Peter and John, but so many people had seen the miracle that they knew that they couldn't get away with it. So they decided to give Peter and John a strong warning. They ordered them not to **speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus**. The implication didn't have to be spoken. "If you continue speaking and teaching about Jesus your fate will be the same as his."

It's pretty hard for us to imagine being in the kind of trouble Peter and John were facing. None of us have ever faced such persecution. We have never had anyone threaten to hurt or kill us if we didn't stop talking about Jesus, or if we didn't stop going to church. It's hard for us to imagine getting into trouble for doing the right thing—we tend to think like so many of the prosperity preachers of today, that if we are trying hard to do God's will, then everything will be great. We will be happy, healthy, and rich. But the Bible often pictures the opposite. Peter and John healed a crippled man and preached about Jesus. That was doing God's will. But they were jailed and threatened because of it. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to the image Nebuchadnezzar had set up and they were thrown into the fiery furnace. Stephen delivered food to the poor and shared the good news about Jesus along the way and he was stoned to death. Jesus was perfect. He never sinned. He always did God's will perfectly and he was crucified. And the list could go on and on.

The point is that, as we are living in the last days, we need to realize that there will be times when we will get in trouble for trying to do God's will. It might be an anti-Christian professor at school. It might be a boss, or co-workers, or next door neighbors, or even family members who cause us trouble because we are trying to do God's will. When it happens, we will be tempted to compromise. We will be tempted to rationalize that it's OK to give in so that we can live to fight another day. We will be tempted to think that maybe it's not worth facing trouble in order to do God's will. We will be tempted to do whatever it takes to get out of trouble, even if it means denying our Lord and his word. But Peter and John and the members of the first Christian church show us where to find strength in troubled times.

As soon as Peter and John were released from the clutches of the Jewish leaders they gathered their fellow believers and told them everything that had happened. When they finished their report they didn't form a committee to study the ramifications of this incident. They didn't take a poll. They turned to the Lord in prayer—a prayer that showed humble confidence in the Lord and a desire to do his will.

It's very interesting to notice that the first thought expressed in their prayer is that God is the **Sovereign Lord, the maker of heaven and earth**. What a comforting thought that is in the midst of trouble. God is in charge. He is Sovereign. He created all things and he continues to rule all things, seen and unseen. Not even a sparrow falls from the sky without his knowledge.

Nothing takes him by surprise. No matter what we are facing in life, God already knows about it and God has the power to handle it. Nothing is too insignificant for him to notice. Nothing is so difficult that he can't take care of it. The Jewish leaders thought they were in power, but they were not. They could do only what God allowed; anything they planned or tried that was opposed to God's will, would fail.

Just think about how much comfort people lose who deny that God is the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth. Just think how much comfort you lose when you let whatever troubles you are facing in your life cause you to forget that God is Sovereign. If you need a refresher course on this truth of Scripture, just read the book of Daniel. No matter what happens in your life, never give up trusting that God is Sovereign, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, with whom nothing is impossible.

The second thought that these believers express in their prayer is to acknowledge that God demonstrated his sovereign power in love by seeing to it that his promises were fulfilled. As they thought about the events of Holy Week and their meeting with the Sanhedrin, Psalm 2 came to mind. **'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.'** They acknowledged that these words had been fulfilled right before their eyes as Pilate and Herod and the Jewish leaders all conspired against Jesus, the one God had anointed. And remember, the word anointed is the word for Christ, or Messiah. Yes, they were able to have Jesus arrested, beaten and crucified. But that was just what God had planned. It was just what God had foretold through Isaiah, who talked about the Messiah being **pierced for our transgressions**. It was just what God had foretold in Psalm 22, which talked about the Messiah's hands and feet being pierced and people casting lots for his clothing. They conspired against the Lord's Anointed One, but it was all in vain, because Jesus rose from the dead, just as he and Scripture said he would.

What comfort there is for us too as we read the prophecies of Scripture and see how clearly and wonderfully they are fulfilled; as we see how the Sovereign Lord uses his unlimited power in love, providing the savior he promised us. What comfort there is for us as we continue to study the Scriptures and see how he keeps his promises to turn bad into good for believers. We see Joseph sold as a slave by his brothers only to become second in command in Egypt and save his brothers lives along with millions of others. We see Daniel taken as a captive to Babylon but being promoted to be the head of the wise men, a position where he could help others who were brought as captives to Babylon, not to mention witnessing about the true God to the most powerful kings of the earth at the time and leaving information that, centuries later, likely helped the Magi recognize a star and come to worship Jesus. When we see how Scripture is fulfilled, like these early Christians, we too have confidence that God is keeping his promises to us to provide a way out of temptation and to make whatever trouble he allows to come into our lives serve our eternal good.

After they found comfort and expressed confidence in the sovereignty of God and his gracious fulfillment of his promises in Scripture, notice what they ask in their prayer. They don't ask that God would send down fire and brimstone on the Jewish leaders who had threatened them. They ask that God would consider their threats and take note of the fact that these leaders are opposing his will, but they leave it in God's hands what to do about them. They humbly acknowledge that he knows best what to do. Could he rain down fire and brimstone on them? He did on Sodom and Gomorrah. But he sent Jonah to Nineveh and withheld his judgment on the Ninevites when they repented.

The focus of their prayer was not on what God should do to their enemies. The focus of their prayer had to do with something they had some control over. They asked for help for themselves. They asked that God would give them the strength to do what they knew was God's will because it was what Jesus had specifically trained and commanded them to do. He had told them to preach the gospel to every creature. He had told them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He had told them that he would perform signs and wonders through them to back up their claim that Jesus was the Messiah and that he had indeed risen from the dead.

What a lesson for us to learn! Instead of asking God to use his power to destroy our enemies or get rid of those who have hurt us or who persecute us, we ought to ask God to give us strength to do his will. So often, by focusing on what others are doing to us, we are filled with anger or even hatred and a desire for revenge that distracts us. It keeps us from focusing on God's word and learning his will for our lives. Our prayer should never be, "Lord, help me get back at them for what they are doing to me." It ought always to be, "Lord, show me your will and then give me the strength to do your will."

God answered the prayer of these believers in a very obvious way. The earth moved, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they were given what they asked for. They were enabled to speak the word of the Lord boldly.

As you meditate on Scripture and are reminded that God is in charge and as you rejoice and praise God as you see his promises fulfilled; as you humbly pray that God will give you strength to continue to do his will; he will answer your prayer. He may not cause the ground to shake beneath your feet. He may not cause tongues of fire to appear over your head or perform miracles through you; but he will answer your prayer. He will reveal his will to you through his word. He will give you the strength to face whatever trouble he allows to enter your life. He will give you the strength to speak his word boldly and to willingly suffer whatever earthly consequences may come as a result. That's his promise, and God always keeps his promises.

In times of trouble, whatever they might be, find strength in remembering that God is in charge. He is the sovereign Lord, the almighty maker of heaven and earth; there isn't anything he can't do. Find strength in praying that he will enable you to do his will no matter what.