

Acts 4:23-33

*“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?”* That’s a good **question**, isn’t it? It was a question which King **David** had asked some 1,000 years **prior** to our text, when the Ammonites had formed a senseless coalition with the Arameans **against** Israel. It was a question which was asked by the friends of **Peter** and **John** in our **text**, when the priests, the temple guard, and the Sadducees collaborated **against** the early Christian Church. It is a question which would **later** become a part of George Frederick Handel’s musical masterpiece, The Messiah, and it’s a question which could easily be raised again and again. **Why** do nations or individuals get all worked up; and scheme, and plot, and plan; in regard to things over which they have **no control**? What do they hope to **accomplish**? The Bible tells us, *“Our God is in heaven. He does whatever pleases Him.”* If the plans of others don’t match up with **God’s** plans, all they can hope to receive is a huge helping of **frustration**.

Instead of trying to **dictate** and **control** every situation ourselves, it is far **better** to put our trust and confidence in **God**, who controls **all** things. It’s just a matter of turning to Him in humble Christian **prayer**. This morning we will be looking at **Three Elements Of Christian Prayer** - the **when**, the **what**, and the **why**.

What do I mean by the **when** of Christian prayer? It might be helpful if we would investigate the circumstances which surrounded the prayer in our **text**. Peter and John had just spent the night in prison. They were being hassled more and more every day, because the chief priests and elders didn’t want them talking about **Jesus**, and especially about His **resurrection** from the dead. However, personal **prejudice** makes for some pretty shaky charges, and for that reason, these leaders were not able to **hold** the disciples in jail for very **long**. Nevertheless, arrests of this kind, along with a multitude of other threats, were becoming more frequent and more troublesome. The disciples’ work was continually being interrupted. The disciples began to wonder if they should **continue** preaching in Jerusalem, or **move on** to somewhere else, or perhaps even **give up** what they were doing all together. But instead of **worrying** about it, or trying to make the decision **on their own**, the disciples felt it was time to find out exactly what **God** had in mind for them. So, when they had been released, the disciples gathered together with their own people, and they **prayed**.

In doing this they were following the command and invitation of the Lord:

*“Call upon Me in the day of **trouble**. I will deliver you, and you will honor Me.”* Not only were the disciples praying **in** troublesome **times**, but they were also praying **to** the Lord **Jesus**. Here they address Him as the *“**Sovereign Lord - the one who made the heaven, and the earth, and the sea, and everything in them.**”* Jesus is the Creator - the **powerful** God who made **men** - not one of the helpless **false** gods which **men** had made for **themselves**. I think it is significant that the disciples had not forgotten about God’s work of **creation**, not even at a time when their hearts were filled to overflowing with joy because of His work of **redemption** - a work which He had so recently brought to **completion** through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The disciples were concerned about **all** of God’s works.

Notice also that *“They raised their voices **together** in prayer.”* I rather doubt that this was a prayer out loud in unison, although considering the words which were used here it certainly **could** have been. I think it is much more likely that Peter or John **led** this group of Christians in prayer, and that all the other believers **silently** spoke the words too. That’s quite often the way **we** pray in our worship services. The pastor **verbally speaks** the words of the prayers, but we are all **silently** offering the **same** prayer. Our **thoughts** are just as meaningful as **words** to God. As another example of silent prayer, you might remember **Moses** as he was leading the Israelites out of Egypt. He had run into some very serious trouble. In front of him was the Red Sea, and behind him was the Pharaoh and his army. It was a very tense time - a seemingly no-win situation. The Bible tells us that at that moment God said to Moses, *“Why are you calling out to Me? Tell the people to go forward!”* Now, Moses hadn’t **said** anything, but it is very obvious that he had been **praying** - silently calling out to God for a **solution** to their problem. And as you know, God heard and answered the prayer of Moses, allowing the Israelites to pass through the Red Sea on dry ground while **drowning** the pursuing Egyptian army. But, let’s get back now to the believers in our **text**, who had gathered in **Jerusalem**.

Although we have no proof for it, we can well imagine that these people had called a meeting in order to see what they could do on behalf of Peter and John, who had just been **arrested**. Imagine their surprise when Peter and John **showed up** for the meeting **themselves!** The gathering became an occasion for **prayer** - not only because of their great joy and thankfulness, but also because they needed new **direction** from the Lord. The disciples now realized that all the preaching they would do in the future would be in direct **opposition** to the will of the local **authorities** - including the **religious** authorities. So, they turned in prayer to an

even **greater** authority - and this is **what** they said, “*Lord, consider their threats, and enable Your servants to speak Your Word with great **boldness**. Stretch out Your right hand to heal, and perform miraculous signs and wonders, through the name of Your holy servant, Jesus.*”

I find that to be a **remarkable** prayer. They did **not** say what **we** would probably have said. They didn’t ask for God’s enemies to be **punished**. They didn’t ask God to **drive away** those wicked people. They didn’t even ask God to remove the threats of possible **imprisonment** and **death** for themselves. But rather, they prayed, “*Lord, recognize the evil things which are now confronting us, and **strengthen** our spirits. Give us the **courage** to cheerfully **continue** our work for Your kingdom, no matter what kind of **opposition** we may encounter.*”

These believers recognized that the persecutions which confronted them were actually **beneficial**. Paul later told the Philippians, “*Because of my **chains**, most of the brothers in the Lord have been **encouraged** to speak the Word of God more **courageously** and **fearlessly**.*” It seems that when people are given a “cause” to rally around, they will join together and **do** whatever needs to be done. As the old cliché says, “*When the going gets tough, the tough get going.*” What **we** need to remember is that we have the **greatest** “cause” in the world! Jesus has commanded us to “*Go, and **make disciples** (for Him) of all nations.*” So, let’s **rally** around that cause, and **do** what needs to be done.

Obviously, we will be faced with some **difficulties**. For one thing, **costs** have skyrocketed. There’s no doubt about it. When it costs you the most to put food on your table and clothes on your back, it also costs you the most to spread God’s Word. Another problem is the **shadow** which has been cast over **all** organized religion by the foolish indiscretions of many well-known TV evangelists. What people like Jim Baker or Jimmy Swaggart do, should have **no effect** whatsoever on how people view the programs and ministry of **our** congregation. Yet, many people group all religions **together**, and they say, “If **that’s** the way **Christians** act, and if that’s what **religion** is all about, then I don’t want **anything** to do with it!” And yet **another** problem, one which is confronting our **own** church body to an even **greater** degree, is that fewer and fewer young people are entering into full-time service in the Lord’s kingdom as **pastors** and **teachers**. While the amount of work in the Lord’s kingdom continues to **grow**, the number of workers continues to **fall short**.

Now, even with these and many **more** problems, I really don’t think it’s any

more difficult to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the world **today**, than it was in the **past**. The disciples in our text had **their** problems too, but let's learn a **lesson** from them. What did they **do** when the **authorities** were against them? What did they **do** when they were being **misunderstood**? What did they **do** when their **workers** were thrown into prison? What did they **do** - they **prayed** - and they **prayed** because **God** was the **only** one who could really **help** them. The Bible says, "*Unless the **Lord** builds a house, they labor in **vain**.*" It also says, "*If God is **for** us, who can be **against** us?*" That's **why** we pray. We pray because it **works**!

Our text concludes by saying that God **united** those early Christians, giving them all the strength and abilities they needed to preach and to witness, so that many more would receive the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus. The Lord will unite **our** hearts and minds too. Our differences can be put to the side and **forgotten**. We can turn **away** from all the things which get in the way, and **hinder** us from doing the **Lord's** work. Let us, like those **early** disciples, **pray** for God's guidance - in our **personal** lives, and in our **congregational** actions. Let us pray for the **wisdom** we will need to understand exactly what God would have us to do. And finally, let us sincerely **thank** our God for all His blessings - of the past, the present, and the future. We ask it in Jesus' name, and may **His** grace be upon us all. Amen.