

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

1st Century Christianity

Acts 4:23-37

Intro: From time to time we receive letters at the church from the missionaries we support around the world. It's always good to hear from them and it's also encouraging to learn what God is doing there where they are serving. These letters are a blessing because they provide us a glimpse into a church that exists somewhere else in the world. The second half of **ch4** is also like a missionary letter. It opens a window into another church but this one existed over 2000 years ago; populated by people from a culture unlike our own. This church had its problems. It had sins and failings much like churches do today. But here in **ch4**, we find a picture of a church that is meant to be both encouraging and a model for believing church today.

This is the second picture Luke has given us of life in the early church. The first was at the end of **ch2**, just after the Spirit descended on the church for the first time on the Day of Pentecost. The background for our current picture is a miracle of healing by Peter and John followed by their arrest and appearance before the Sanhedrin. This picture reveals 2 specific aspects of the early church: their worship: the Apostles return and lead the church in an exciting prayer meeting; and their work: we see the church operating as a true fellowship of born-again believers.

Now, after all the run-around the religious leaders gave Peter and John, after the night in jail, the Spanish Inquisition – the threats and “further” threats (**21a**); you would think that they would go back and tell everybody how terrible it all was, how unfairly they had been treated, how dangerous it was becoming just to be a follower of Jesus. But, they didn't. In fact, as we will see, there was not a discouraging word to be heard from either of them. In fact, despite the difficulties they had just faced, they seemed to be more excited than ever of the work that God was doing in their midst and they prayed for more of the same!

23-31 – Last week we noted Luke's emphasis of the power that was on display against the Apostles. He mentioned no less than 11 entities, representing everybody who was anybody in Israel, arrayed in opposition to

them. But, it's obvious from our text today that the greatest concentration of power in Jerusalem on that day was in the prayer meeting that followed the trial. We might have considered this a serious situation but it appears Peter and John saw it as a wonderful opportunity! It was from their report of the proceedings that this prayer meeting was born. They began to thank God for the outcome of this first significant encounter with the rulers of this dark world.

Before we dive into the meat of this prayer I want us to notice 2 important things about it. First, notice what they *didn't* pray for. They didn't pray to have their circumstances changed. They didn't ask God to remove their enemies from office. Instead, they asked God to empower them to make the best use of their circumstances and accomplish what He had already determined (28). They placed their faith squarely in the Lord of history who has a perfect plan and is always victorious. They asked for divine enablement, not escape; and God gave them the power they needed.

19th century theologian Phillips Brooks wrote this, "Do not pray for easy lives, pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks." That's how the 1st century church prayed and God was faithful to answer their prayers. Can we learn anything from their success?

The 2nd thing we should notice is the emphasis given to Ps 2 in this prayer. When God's people worship, they always do 2 things: 1) pray and 2) reflect on Scripture. Prayer is us talking to God and the Scriptures are God talking to us and the 2 always go together. You pray in a right way when you pray scripturally. You study the Scriptures in a right way when you study prayerfully. This was what the early church was doing. They had been reflecting on Scripture and now, as they began to pray, the Scriptures came to mind and they started talking to God in His own words.

I only point this out because there was a time not long before this when the disciples didn't even understand the OT. Jesus had taught them that He would fulfill the Scriptures by being arrested, delivered up to the Gentiles, tried, beaten, crucified, and resurrected. He was the greatest teacher that ever lived. He was expounding the Scriptures to them daily and the Scriptures were clear, but they didn't get it because it didn't fit their preconceived notions. Once, Peter even rebuked Jesus for saying He had

to die and Jesus explained it all to them again but they still didn't get it. Now though, they understood the need for His death and resurrection and could instinctively explain it from the OT.

In fact, we've seen Peter refer to the OT in every chapter so far in Acts. In [ch1](#), when they needed to choose a replacement for Judas they did so on the basis of 2 Psalms. In [ch2](#), when Peter preached at Pentecost, he based his sermon on 3 OT texts. In [ch3](#), he connects Jesus to the Prophet Moses said would come after him in [Deut 18](#). In [ch4](#), as he stands before the Sanhedrin, Peter quotes from [Ps 118:22](#). Do you see what's happening? The minds of these early Christians are being transformed by Scripture. They were Jews, they were already familiar with the OT to a certain degree; but before now, they didn't understand it. It was only after Jesus died and rose again and the Holy Spirit came upon them that their eyes were opened and they saw the OT in its true light.

How did this transformation occur? It was actually a process. Consider how Jesus opened the minds of the disciples on that first Resurrection Sunday. Luke tells the story of His appearance to the 2 disciples walking on the road to Emmaus in [ch24](#). Jesus comes alongside them with their grumpy faces and says, "Hey, what's up? Why the long faces?" They say, "Haven't you heard?" He says, "Do tell!" They go through their sob story in some detail and Jesus responds with an, "Oy-Vey! You guys are lost!" Then [vs27](#) says He opened the Scriptures. This opening is important because Jesus could have just pointed to His nail-scarred hands and wounded body but He didn't point to Himself. Instead, He pointed them to the Scriptures and taught what the Bible had to say about the resurrection.

Next, [vs31](#) says He opened their eyes. They sat right next to Him at the table and didn't even recognize Him; their eyes had been blinded by sorrow and unbelief. Jesus remedied that but that's not all He did. Later, [vs45](#) says that He opened their understanding (minds). For the first time in their lives they understood the OT. When they turned to Genesis, they found Jesus there. When they turned to Exodus, they found Jesus there. When they turned to the Psalms, Jesus was there. Because of this entirely new way of understanding the Bible, here in [ch4](#) when the early Christians talked about Jesus in their prayer to God, the words of Scripture just naturally came tumbling out. The Bible had so thoroughly saturated their hearts that when something happened, they could connect it to Scripture.

Does this happen when you pray? Does it happen in your daily life? Are you able to see the circumstances of your life, good or bad, in light of God's word? If you know your Bible, this is a natural occurrence. If you don't know your Bible then there is a great deficiency in your life that seriously needs to be corrected.

Let's take a few minutes and look at this great prayer. They began by reminding themselves Who they were praying to: the Lord of all Creation, the God of all power. The word used for Lord is not the usual word found in the NT. It is the Greek word despotes, which gives us the English word despot. That word carries a negative connotation today because it refers to a ruler who exercises absolute power, whether for good or evil. Humanly speaking, this is always a negative because: absolute power corrupts absolutely. But, when the God you serve possesses power that cannot be questioned; that's good to know when you are experiencing persecution. They prayed with confidence because they knew God was in control. He wasn't only the Sovereign over Creation, He was the Creator Himself!

The Scripture that came to mind while they prayed was [Ps 2](#); a messianic psalm that records determined human rebellion against God and God's response to it. In this prayer, the early Christians are relating the kings of the earth to the religious leaders of their own nation. These kings are saying exactly what the religious leaders said concerning Jesus – “We will not have this man to rule over us!” They may as well be saying, as the religious leaders did, “We have no king but Caesar!” Understand, this is the very essence of sin. Sin is telling God, “I won't have You to be my Lord or my God. You can be Lord and God for somebody else, but not for me. I want to be my own god and lord.” In [Ps2](#) we have the classic expression of the essential basis for all other sin.

Why did they quote this psalm here? What the kings of the earth did in [Ps2](#) is exactly what the Sanhedrin had been doing. They had done it with Jesus. Now they were doing the same thing with the disciples. Peter and John were instrumental in healing of a lame man and gave the glory to Jesus. The Sanhedrin should have been sensitive to spiritual things. They should have searched out the cause of the miracle and given God the glory if it was of God. That was their duty as the spiritual leaders of the Jewish nation. But instead, they prohibited preaching the gospel.

What is God's response to the determined human rebellion in **Ps2**? God laughs! It's the only place in the Bible we are told that God laughs. The Sanhedrin killed Jesus. But God raised Him from the dead, brought Him to heaven and seated Him on His holy hill of Zion. He made Jesus King of Kings and Lord of all the earth. These rulers were now starting down the same path with the disciples. They forbade them to preach in Jesus' name. But the disciples knew that God would exalt Jesus on earth just as He had in heaven and the leaders couldn't do anything about it.

God is sovereign. So, it doesn't make any difference whether or not people like His decisions. God doesn't ask our opinion. God is God. He's in charge, and exalting Jesus is His deepest determination. These early Christians knew they were on the winning side. "But they put them in jail. They put them in chains. They threatened to kill them." Yes, and they eventually did kill some of them. But Jesus was on the throne then and He is still on the throne of heaven now. He is the King; the ruler in Zion. You can bind servants, but you can't bind the Word of God. And it was this unbound, powerful Gospel that reached out from Jerusalem to permeate and eventually transform the entire world

These believers didn't ask for protection, they asked for power. They didn't ask for fire from heaven to destroy their enemies, they asked for power from heaven to preach the Word and heal the sick. Their great desire and fervent request was for boldness in the face of opposition. They were literally praying for the power to do exactly what the Sanhedrin warned them not to do! They were asking for trouble! Not because they wanted to pick a fight but because they wanted Jesus to be glorified. Their emphasis was on the hand of God at work in the life of the church.

Did God answer their prayer? In a BIG way! They were given an earthquake as a unique emblem of God's pleasure. But more than that, they were filled with the Holy Spirit again! This wasn't a 2nd Pentecost; it was a new filling of the Spirit to equip and enable the believers to serve the Lord and minister to the people. They spoke the Word with boldness! Believing prayer releases God's power and enables God's hand to move. Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside of God's will.

32-37- Luke gives us a picture here of the daily life and work of the church.

These people were not perfect but this had to be a wonderful season in that church. Luke tells us 3 things about them.

1) They were of one heart and one soul. Meaning not only were they one in their emotional bonds – being committed to the same things; but, they were also thinking along the same lines – had the same theology. This is the proper foundation for any Christian work: to be in unity. This unity is not conformity, where everybody is exactly alike. It's not organizational, where everyone is forced into the same denomination. The worst times in the history of the church have been when everyone has been part of one large organization. This is not that kind of a unity. This is a unity patterned after the unity of the Father and the Son - a unity of mind, will, love, and purpose. That unity is what the church should have today and what the church seemed to have achieved in these early days. There's nothing wrong with having differences. God made us all different but there must be a basic unity among believers.

2) They had all things in common. Not only were they unified in their work, they were generous in it. In those days it was truly a dog-eat-dog world. If you didn't have money, you didn't eat. There were no soup kitchens or food pantries available to the less fortunate. These things weren't a secular invention, they were started by churches. It wasn't until Christianity that something new and truly generous came into the world. This is because Christians are people who have come to know God, and God is gracious.

We know God didn't have to do anything for us. He could simply let us go to hell and He would be just in doing so. But God sent Jesus, His greatest gift, to die for us so we could be saved. Anyone who comes to know that God has been so gracious can never be the same as they were before. If somebody says they believe the gospel but lives exactly as before, that person is not really born again. When you realize what God has done for you, your nature is changed. These early Christians realized God had been generous with them, so they easily shared what they had.

This overwhelming generosity was necessary at this time on account of the great crowd of people who responded to the Gospel message on Pentecost. A large number of these new converts were from outside of Israel and apparently they stayed in Jerusalem to learn more about Christianity. But, since they were away from home, away from their jobs – their income – they

needed this assistance as long as they stayed in Jerusalem. It's clear that the local believers saw the value in their continued stay and went to great lengths to help them stay as long as they could.

While this is not the case in very many churches today, generosity is still a characteristic of a believer's knowledge of and submission to God. Giving is a part of discipleship. There are several reasons why Christians don't give to their church but they all boil down to a lack of knowledge or a lack of trust. Either they don't know what biblical giving is or they don't know how or why they should give OR they know and just choose not to. Giving is a part of discipleship so if you are currently not giving to your own church, your also not growing in your walk with the Lord.

3) They testified "to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." Not only did they have a solid foundation for their work in their basic unity of heart and mind and not only did they have a verification of it in their changed lives, being made generous, but they also had the work itself. Their work was to testify "to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus," which they did. Notice also that as they testified, "great grace was upon them all." In fact, **vs33** says there was both great power and great grace on this church. I would say that those are 2 characteristics of a great church!

As these early believers worshipped, they prayed that God would stay with them and do great works and we can see that God answered that prayer: The place was shaken, they were filled with the Spirit and this filling enabled them to speak the Word with boldness! It's an echo of Pentecost. We also see them accomplish the work of God: speaking of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit and watching God, by His Spirit, uses that witness to draw souls to Himself.

It's wonderful to see the results that come from the filling of the spirit and the moving of God but too often, we focus on the results and fail to consider how they got to those results. These believers filled their hearts and minds with Scripture and allowed it to transform the way they think about things – circumstances – and people. Eventually, the will of God and the winning of souls began to take precedents over every other aspect in their lives.

Are we willing to allow God's Word to have that much control over our own lives? 😊