

PRAYERS THAT GET RESPONSE

Acts 4:23-31

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I suspect that all of us at one time or another, if not most of the time, wonder about prayer:

Is prayer really just wishful thinking?

Does prayer really make a difference in anything?

What should prayers include?

Is there actually anyone there who hears and responds?

Why is it that I pray sometimes and nothing happens - and other times I pray and things do happen?

Are there certain kinds of prayers that get responses and others that are ignored?

Some people don't pray at all because they don't believe it actually accomplishes anything.

Other people have given up on praying because they've tried it and it "didn't work."

Some others still pray but only out of a sense of spiritual obligation - they know they're supposed to but aren't very optimistic about it accomplishing anything.

Still others don't pray very often because, frankly, they just don't think to do it very often - it's never made much difference.

Then in contrast to all of those I've already mentioned there are some who pray regularly, actively, believingly, and speak of the responses to their prayers.

Why the differences? Are some people realistic and others just incurably naive?

ARE THERE PRAYERS THAT GET RESPONSES AND IF SO WHAT KIND ARE THEY?

In Acts 2 several weeks ago we saw that a church started in Jerusalem and mushroomed in size with over 3000 added to it on the Pentecost Holiday.

The followers of Jesus had been charged with getting the message out about who Jesus is and how people could know forgiveness of sins and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives if they would repent and believe.

Charged with that mission, those first believers went to work and not only did 3000 become part of the church but just days later another 3 or 4 thousand were added.

That church was on fire - it was growing by leaps and bounds and the lives of people were being changed.

Please remember that this is just the kind of response that the Jerusalem political and religious leaders did not want.

They thought they had snuffed out this radical band of Jesus followers when they crucified Jesus but here it is again and growing stronger every day.

If you were going to stop the church what would you do?

The Bible teaches that there is a person called Satan who is very interested in stopping the church.

In ACTS 4 and 5, and the beginning of 6 we see three different methods that he used to attempt to cripple and stop this movement:

In Acts 4 we see the authorities using the threat of physical punishment if those Jesus-followers don't stop.

In Acts 5 we see Satan attempting to influence the followers of Jesus to compromise their commitment.

And in Acts 6 we see Satan stirring up strife among the people of the church and distracting the leaders from their mission.

The first of those attempts to stop the church is recorded in the passage we are studying today.

And the response of the people to the attempt is what focuses our attention on prayer today.

Acts 4:23 says that "on their release Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that" had been said.

To get the picture in mind, please remember with me the incident of Acts 3 and the first part of 4:

One evening Peter and John were going to the Temple area to pray. As they entered the temple area through one of the gates, a crippled beggar saw them and asked for money. Peter replied that they had no money but they offered him physical healing. The man responded and though he had been crippled since birth, now over 40 years, he stood, walked and began to jump with enthusiasm. As you can imagine, a crowd gathered, and Peter began to tell the people how this had happened - namely that it was in Jesus' name that this healing had taken place. This public demonstration about Jesus angered the authorities who promptly arrested Peter and John. Being too late in the day to interrogate them, they put them in prison until the next day.

Acts 4:5 and following tell us what happened that next day:

Peter and John were brought before a court composed of the most powerful and deadly men of the city. They were asked to give an account of their actions and were threatened with harm if they continued their teaching in the name of Jesus.

What I want you to consider is how serious those threats were.

These men who threatened Peter and John were the same men who just a couple of months before had convinced the Romans to kill Jesus.

These are threatened, angry, powerful men with full authority to arrest, imprison, beat, and maybe even kill Peter and John.

Because of the mood of the crowd, the authorities just warn them and let them go. But the implication is very clear: Don't let it happen again!

In Acts 4:23 we see Peter and John going to their own people - meaning the other Christians (most of who are new believers) and reporting all that has been said.

At this point I want you to consider that you are Peter or John or that you are one of the people there who love Peter and John.

You gather together to discuss what has happened and what to do now. Someone suggests that you pray. For what would you pray? Seriously, what would be the content of your prayer?

Would it be, "Oh, God, please don't let them do anything to hurt us. God, protect us please. Oh, Lord, keep us out of that prison."

I think for most of us the prayers would be very "us" or "me" centered. Because of the threat to our "person" we would want God to intervene and protect us - and that would be the focus of our prayers.

I introduced this sermon by saying that there is a lot of confusion about prayer - the necessity of it, the effectiveness of it; and I wanted today to speak to **what kinds of prayers get responses**.

Maybe our prayers are not answered because we pray the wrong way. God, in the Book of James, tells us that there are a lot of prayers that are unanswered because the prayers are for the wrong things or for the wrong reasons.

Do you remember that earlier I said that in these chapters of Acts we see Satan at work trying to stop the church?

I said that first here in Acts 4 he tries to stop it by threatening it. In Acts 5 he tries to stop it by compromising it. In Acts 6 he tries to stop it by overloading it.

Here in Acts 4 when the church was threatened we see in the prayer of these people how they counteracted the threat.

There are few things Satan would rather do than stop you from growing in your relationship to Jesus. There are few things Satan would rather do than stop you from being effective in service to others.

One of the most effective ways is to get you so focused on yourself that your thoughts and even your prayers are largely useless - because they are misdirected.

The prayer of Acts 4:24-30 is very helpful, insightful, and instructive for us; it shows us the kinds of prayers that get response.

First of all notice briefly **what** they ask for: Acts 4:29-30 “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

1. Lord consider their threats
2. enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness
3. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders.

Now notice the response from God: Acts 4:31 “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

1. The place where they were meeting was shaken
2. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit
3. They all spoke the Word of God boldly.

I would say that their prayers got answered! If they needed assurance that God was going to continue to work in miraculous ways they sure had it when the place they were in was shaken.

If they needed internal stability in the face of the threats, they sure got it when again they were all filled with the Holy Spirit; there was a powerful sense of the presence of God.

If they needed help in being bold they sure got it for the text says that they all spoke the word boldly.

Now what kind of prayer gets that kind of response? That's what I want us to focus on today.

What's the nature, the character, the tenor of this prayer? I can learn from this about my own prayers.

Now here is what I most want you to remember today: Prayers that get response are: Prayers of faith and focus.

Now of course, I want to show you what I mean by that:

In the first and longest part of the prayer these people center their attention on their God. That's the FAITH. And in the second part they focus their attention on the mission. That's the FOCUS.

Look at the first part of the prayer in verse 24: "Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth, and the sea, and everything in them."

That doesn't strike me as the first thing I would pray if I was as seriously threatened as they were.

As I said earlier, I would ask God to protect us and then I would ask for his help in the plans we are about to develop as to how to protect ourselves.

But even though their lives were on the line and these people start rehearsing the character and acts of God.

What is going on?

I believe that these people fully understood the necessity of being reoriented to reality, to truth.

The authorities of the country, the men with apparently all the power, and all the authority had threatened them.

If they were human at all, when Peter and John walked out of that courtroom they were frightened.

And certainly when the others heard of the the threats - they were tempted to fear.

Those religious and political leaders had set the stage to communicate clearly that they were the most powerful beings around.

The courtroom was arranged to say "power"

The robes they wore said "power"

The armed guards said "power"

These two little uneducated fishermen in the face of all of that would obviously tend to be threatened.

I can easily hear me or some of you in the face of all that saying to each other: "Now I don't see any reason to antagonize the authorities. Couldn't we go easy for a while? Maybe we can just live righteously and then later when things cool down we can say a word or two. After all there is certainly no advantage in getting ourselves crucified."

If they had talked like that it would have been clear that they had been led to believe that truly the authorities were the most powerful figures they had to contend with.

But that is not true. That is only what the authorities wanted them to think.

The political and religious leaders of Israel were **not** the most powerful beings - God is.

In their prayer - these believers reorient their thinking to the truth - they begin with "Sovereign Lord".

This word Sovereign is the word from which we get the word "despot" - it means unquestioned, unequaled, all powerful, absolute ruler.

In that opening word of their prayer what had they done?

They had affirmed the truth.

They reoriented themselves.

They snapped out of their look at the power display of the authorities and looked instead at the true authority of Jesus.

They didn't need to fear the political kings or the religious lords if they belonged to the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Look at how they spend time making sure this reorientation is firmly fixed in their minds:

They go on to recount that their Lord is the God of creation - vs. 24 you made everything. Then they recount that their Lord is the God of revelation - vs. 25 "Lord, you spoke... Then they recount that their Lord is the God of history: Acts 4:27-28 "Indeed Herod and Pontius

Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.
²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”

They took the time to get their minds firmly fixed on who their God truly is. He is Lord - Lord over all.

Now if that is true then the threats of those petty authorities is put is very proper perspective.

Now some of what I'm about to say I don't say from experience but from the authority of the Bible:

When your spouse walks out,
 when your boss hands you a termination notice,
 when the doctor says "cancer",
 when the house is being foreclosed,
 when your child breaks your heart,
 when your best friend betrays you,
 when the pressure of life seems more than you can bear, the temptation is to think that this time the circumstances are overwhelming - this time there is no way out.

And what is needed in those moments more than anything else is a reorientation - a mental adjustment - a new look at God.

Prayers that get response are those prayers that begin with a proper perspective on God

There is a little acrostic that helps people remember the content of prayer - it is A C T S:

adoration
 confession
 thanksgiving
 and supplication or requests

Does it start with “adoration” because God needs to be buttered up?
 NO. because we need to reorient our thinking to who He is - our God - the Sovereign One.

It is when the threats are the greatest, it is when the pressure is the highest, or it is when there is more apparent reason than

ever before to bail out, to give up, that we need most to reorient our minds by praying about the character and acts of God.

Do your prayers begin as prayers of FAITH? Do you center your mind on who God is - your Sovereign Lord?

Now earlier I said that I most want you to remember today that the PRAYERS THAT GET RESPONSE are the PRAYERS OF FAITH AND FOCUS.

From the first part of this prayer in Acts 4 we see that these people oriented their minds to God - they exercised FAITH in Him.

II. Now from the last part of the prayer we will see that their prayers were not only of Faith in God but were of proper FOCUS.

I could not help but be impressed with the content of their requests! Acts 4:29-30 "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

I thought how unlike me.

I would have, as I said earlier, prayed for me.

I would have focused on my safety, my security.

But what is the focus of their prayers? It is the mission Jesus had given them.

In the midst of this very real threat to their own personal safety - they do not become self-centered but rather they remain mission-centered.

Satan is foiled!

As I said earlier, there is nothing Satan would like more than to influence us to focus our attention on our own personal security to begin to believe the lie that our safety is paramount, to begin to believe the lie that our comfort is crucial, to begin to believe the lie that health, money, happiness, and even life itself are so important that we must protect them at all costs.

I believe that these followers of Jesus remembered the words of Jesus when He said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all of these other things will be added unto you." Not as a promise of all of the other things but as a reminder of where the focus should be."

A person who has faith in the TRUE GOD can afford to FOCUS on the proper mission.

How about your prayers?

Are they more influenced by the threats of the world or faith in the Sovereign God?

Do your prayers tend to center on the problem or on the God of solutions?

Are your prayers, prayers of FAITH in GOD that begin by reorienting yourself to who He is and what He has done?

How about your prayers?

Are they focused on your security, safety, and desires or on the mission that Jesus has given you.

If Satan can get you to believe that your own survival is more important than the mission then he has stopped you.

It is indicting to realize that our prayers can be long and fervent when we are praying for health or a job and yet when we are praying for the church or the advancement of the Gospel our prayers are short and insipid.

God help us learn from the prayer of these believers in Acts 4 so that our prayers will be prayers of FAITH and FOCUS.

THOSE ARE THE KIND OF PRAYERS THAT GET RESPONSE.