

Courage to Witness

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[0 : 00] If you have a Bible with you, you can turn to the New Testament book of Acts, Acts chapter 4. We're going to be in verse 23 to 31.

! Acts chapter 4, verse 23 to 31. Acts is written by Luke, one of the travel companions of the Apostle Paul, a man who got a first-hand insight, a front-row seat to the growing early church.

And so he puts down the testimonies of others and his own experiences together in this book of Acts. Listen to this. This is verse 23. Acts chapter 4, verse 23.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.

Sovereign Lord, they said, You made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David.

[1 : 22] Why do the nations rage and the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one. Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in the city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. 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. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Let's ask for God's help together. Father, we constantly need to have our hearts and our minds enlightened by your truth.

[2 : 31] And so that's what we are privileged to be able to encounter as we come to your word. Not because I might teach it particularly effectively, but because it is scripture.

And that is your divinely inspired word. And so whatever truth we might derive from scripture is the word of the creator God. And so that's what we want to gain this morning.

It's what we want to experience. It's what we want to grow in our understanding of. And we want to be changed by it. So won't you please meet with us this morning. Teach us, change and transform us.

We ask this all for Christ's sake and his glory. Amen. So as I said, we continue in Acts. We'll be in Acts right up until Easter now for the next few weeks.

We're lost in the first part of this chapter, chapter 4, where we encountered Peter and John involved in this miraculous healing. They heal a man at the gates of the temple.

[3 : 37] They preach a sermon because a crowd obviously gathers when this miracle takes place. That evening they get thrown into prison. And then the next day they face a religious inquisition from the Sanhedrin, the highest religious judicial body in the land.

And the Sanhedrin throws a bunch of different threats their way, but then are not really sure what to do with them. They boldly proclaim and bear witness to Jesus Christ in front of the Sanhedrin, but they're not really sure to do with them because the crowd has turned.

The crowd seems to be on their side. And so for fear of the crowd, they then release them with some further threats. Now that's where we pick up the story here from what we read. Peter and John go back to their friends, to fellow Christians gathering somewhere in the city, and they tell them about what's just happened.

Now imagine being in that room, sitting there, listening to what's going on. Imagine sitting there. I can imagine there are a bunch of different things happening as they listen to Peter and John tell the story of what happened.

I can imagine that some of them are just relieved, super encouraged that Peter and John are safe, that they're not in prison or not being executed or something like that. I suppose some of them are really impressed with the miracle itself, the story of the miracle and the story of how Peter and John proclaim their faith so fearlessly in front of the who's who of the Jewish ruling class.

[5 : 01] But then I can imagine that some of them, having heard about these threats, were feeling pretty fearful. This is the most powerful religious body in the land.

These are not idle threats. These are threats that can radically change their lives. Dangerous threats. And so I can imagine some of them being shaken by this experience, second guessing whether or not they should be publicly witnessing to Jesus Christ.

Maybe we should just, you know what guys, maybe after this week's events, maybe we should just become a little bit more guarded in how we do church. Maybe a little bit more insular. Keep stuff to ourselves.

Put some big scary bounces at the door when we have our meetings. Why go out there in the public eye and then face the possibility of persecution? Why do that? See, at this very early point in the life of the fledgling church, they could have seen, they could have heard these threats, and they could have turned inward.

That, I think, would have been the natural thing to do. It's probably what most of us would have done. But they don't. They don't turn inward. They turn upward to God in prayer.

[6 : 16] And through that, they actually then end up emerging with incredible boldness and courage to publicly go and witness to Christ in an even more profound way than they did before that.

And so that's what we want to talk about this morning a little bit. I want us to talk about the courage to witness. We've prayed a little bit about that, but I want us to talk about it from Scripture. Where does this courage come from?

And I've got two simple points for you. Number one, the response to the threats that we see here in the text. And then number two, the reason for the courage that they have. So the response to the threats and the reason for the courage.

Here's the first one, the response to the threats. How these early Christians respond is actually really, really instructive for us. So if you look down at verse 23. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, here's the response. They raised their voices together in prayer to God. So there's no hand wringing there. They don't call for a crisis meeting.

[7 : 21] Like we've got to rethink our strategy. Let's have a board meeting. Let's figure this out. Their immediate response is to turn to prayer. Now I want you to think for a second what they're doing here, what they're really doing.

They are considering the power that they're up against. And it is a formidable power, the Sanhedrin. They're like, we're up against this power. And so they instinctively then go to a higher power, to God.

We're up against this power. We best go to this power. Now I want you to think about that. I want you to think about prayer and power, those concepts together, and how they hold together for the Christian.

Now I shared some of this with those of you who were at the prayer meeting on Wednesday night. But for the sake of everybody else, I'll share some of it again. One of the main reasons I think that we struggle to pray, and I think we all struggle to pray, one of the main reasons we struggle to pray is because I think we functionally believe that we have sufficient power within us to achieve the ends and the goals that we want for our own lives.

And we'll do that even over and against our own better intellectual judgment as Christians. So do a little thought experiment with me. I did this with a group on Wednesday night, but the rest of you guys can do it as well.

[8 : 34] If I said to you, do you think that you have enough power and resourcefulness within yourself to build a well-rounded character within you, good habits, healthy relationships, to achieve your dreams, to have a steady peace of mind all the time, contentment in life, like hit top mark in all those different areas?

Do you think that you have the power and the resourcefulness within yourself to build all of that for yourself? And you say, Stephen, only the most deluded person is going to answer yes to that question.

Because we are all intimately acquainted with our own inability in so many different areas of our life, so many different levels. We know how bad we are at being the best version of ourselves.

And that's just us we've got to deal with, never mind everybody else. Now if I then have another question and I say, do you believe that God has within himself the power to build a person with well-rounded character, with good habits, with healthy relationships, with a steady peace of mind and contentment?

Does God have the power to produce that kind of a person? And any Christian who understands something of the Bible is going to say, well yes, of course, that he's God. To which I then ask another question.

[9 : 59] Why, then, don't you spend significant portions of your waking hours praying to God, asking him to make you that kind of a person?

Because you've just said that you don't believe you have the power to make yourself that person. You've just said that you do believe that God has the power to make you that person, so why aren't you asking him?

Every day, all day, for long periods of time. I think it's because despite your intellectual conviction that God has the power, your behavior betrays a functional belief that you have.

Betrayers, that you functionally believe that you can actually do it all by yourself, with minor help from God, because we all pray a little bit. I've got this, God.

I just need you for occasional support when the wheels really come off. I think we functionally lie to ourselves all the time. I think we functionally think that we are way more powerful than we actually are.

[11 : 07] And it's for that reason that we don't then instinctively turn to prayer all the time. Now, that is not what we find in these early believers at all. In the face of these powerful threats, threats that endanger their very livelihoods, right, they don't turn to their own resourcefulness.

They don't turn to their own power. They turn to a higher power. They turn to the highest power. They turn to prayer, to God. And they have really, really, really, really good reason to do this, because they are bearing witness.

This is the story of the whole book of Acts. They are bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. So this is the same Lord Jesus who, at the very beginning of the book of Acts, you might remember this from a long time ago, in chapter 1, verse 8, he said this to his disciples.

He said, You will receive power, he says. The resurrected guy stands in front of you, who's just been dead and is now alive, and he says, You will receive power.

That's going to give you some strength. This is the same Jesus who, in Matthew chapter 17, taught us that if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, move from here to there and it will move.

[12 : 23] Nothing will be impossible for you. Prayer is the exercising of that faith. And engaging in that power, it moves mountains. That's not hyperbole.

These early Christians seem to be crystal clear, in their minds and even in their hearts, that in prayer to God, they have access to a power that far, far outstrips any earthly power.

It far outstrips any external threat to their well-being, and it far outstrips any internal inability they might be struggling with in terms of their own well-being.

Friends, we lack courage in our public and our private faith even, in testifying to Christ in our words and our behavior because we doubt the power.

It's not the only reason, but it's one of the main reasons. We doubt the power. We are overly impressed with the other powers around us. But a way too big a view of the other powers that are around us.

[13 : 35] We're overly impressed with the power that comes, for example, from being respected and having social capital. And so we won't do things that we think might diminish our ability to accumulate that particular kind of power.

Like I don't, I don't need to fly my flag, my Christian flag, that high up the pole, do I? For everyone to see. I'll just keep it personalized. I'll just keep it private. That way it won't affect how other people think about me.

And it'll preserve my social power then. Friends, we have access to a power so much, so much greater than the power of social capital.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 1 that the very power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is available to us who believe, he says. Mountain-moving, life-giving power is ours if we are in Christ.

Now how do you access that power? This is not Harry Potter or Star Wars where the power is some sort of like external entity over there that you have to learn how to harness through technique.

[14:51] The power is in God. It is his power and so we participate in the working of that power by going to God in prayer, communing with him, asking, talking to him, saying, Lord, act.

Do something. You're never ever going to develop courage in your faith, courage in your witness, courage in your obedience. You will never stare down significant opposition and look it in the eyes and boldly proclaim, I am going to choose the way of the Lord.

You're never going to do that if you're not a praying person. You're never going to overcome your own fears and insecurities and inabilities if you're not a praying person. Because if you don't give yourself to prayer, you will be powerless.

Powerless to face off against all those other powers that are out there and they're strong, those other powers. You need to go to God where the power is. So don't turn inward, turn upward.

These early Christians respond to the threats by going to God in prayer. So that's the first thing I want you to see. Then the reason for the courage. Now we find the reason for their courage in the actual content of their prayers.

[16:08] So look down the second half of verse 24. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

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

That's the prayer. There's a little end section we'll come to just now, but that's the basic prayer that they pray to God here in this moment. The Anglican preacher, the late Anglican preacher, John Stott, in his little commentary on Acts, he points out that in the prayer they really acknowledge three things about God and these three things serve as the reason for their courage and it's all in the verbs that they say that they attribute to God.

So they acknowledge that God creates, they acknowledge that God speaks and they acknowledge that God decides. He creates, he speaks and he decides. So let's think about each of those three quickly.

[17:24] The first one is he creates. It's the first thing they say about him. God made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. Verse 24. Now you think, well how does that engender courage in living out your faith and witnessing to Christ in the public sphere in this world?

Well I think what it does is this, it underlines the reality that the arena in which our witness takes place is an arena designed by God.

We are creatures in his meticulous creation. Think about it this way. This might surprise you about me a little bit if you know me because I am in one sense something of a high end extrovert.

that is I draw a lot of energy from being with people, having people around. I don't get exhausted from having lots of people around for a long time. But this part might surprise you about myself is that I'm actually quite shy and self-conscious when I'm in an unfamiliar environment, foreign environment.

Now I wouldn't quite call this social anxiety but if I go to an event or to a space that I'm not familiar with and there are very few people around that I'm totally unfamiliar with as well, I straight away feel incredibly timid and on the back foot in that sort of environment.

[18:51] Like I'm secretly being judged by everybody. They're looking there judging me. I might be in a room where humanly speaking, socially speaking, I actually exceed the people in numerous ways like in terms of maturity.

I might be older than everybody in the room. I might even be better educated than everybody in that room. I might have achieved more different life stages than everybody in that room. I might have been better looking which is actually often the case than everybody in that room.

But you might look at all of this situation. You might look at me in this room and you might say Stephen, socially you're a notch above all of these people by ordinary common standards and yet I won't feel that.

I will not feel that at all. I will feel inferior. I will feel fearful. Now there might be all sorts of psychoanalysis that you can do on me and dig up things from my childhood to explain why I have that particular experience in unfamiliar spaces.

But what's interesting to me is that I don't have that same experience with unfamiliar people on my own turf. Like when I'm in my home and there are new people coming to my home for the first time or even in a space like this, the church.

[20 : 03] I'm here all the time. I work here where everything is familiar. So for example, I have and maybe you experience, maybe you're new and you experienced it this morning but I have weird courage here in the context of church to go up and introduce myself to people in a way that I never would do in another space.

There's something about the arena in which things take place. There's something about being at ease and comfortable in the arena that engenders courage.

Friends, the arena in which we bear witness to Christ is God's world and we are His children.

Presbyterian minister by the name of Maltby Davenport Babcock wrote a hymn at the very end of the 19th century entitled This is My Father's World.

It became quite a famous hymn. But listen to the last verse of this hymn. It goes like this. This is my father's world. Oh, let me never forget that though the wrong seems off so strong, God is the ruler yet.

This is my father's world. Why should my heart be sad? The Lord is king. Let the heavens ring. God reigns. Let earth be glad.

[21 : 28] Friends, this is our father's world. He is the sovereign creator. We bear witness in His world as His children.

That is one enormously powerful source of courage for us. So we go out. We're in His domain. He designed it. It's His world. It's our turf. Now the second thing that they acknowledge is that God speaks.

He creates and He speaks. So as the group prays, they move from His sovereignty in creation to His sovereignty in revelation. That is, they actually quote the Bible in their prayer. It's a really good example of how to pray if you're not wondering what to pray.

Pray scripture. They quote the Bible in their prayer. They quote Psalm 2 to be exact. It's a part of scripture in the Old Testament that gives them explanatory power to their experience of why they're receiving these threats, why they're getting this opposition from these leaders, these religious leaders.

[22 : 32] If you go back into the Old Testament, you read Psalm 2. We actually preached on it not that long ago, but it's a messianic psalm. That is, it's a psalm looking forward to the day when God will install His anointed King, His Messiah.

And if you look in the psalm and you say, what will the response be of the people to the Messiah when the Messiah does get installed? And the psalm tells us the kings and the rulers of the world will rise up against Him in rebellion.

So do you see what these people are doing by quoting the psalm in their prayer right there?

Through their prayer, they're implicitly saying, guys, this threat shouldn't catch us of God.

This shouldn't be a big surprise. The Bible says that the rulers will rise up against Christ, against God's anointed. As His followers, why would we expect anything different?

This is just Scripture playing itself out, what we're experiencing right now. So they draw courage from the fact that what is happening to them is set down in divinely inspired Scripture.

[23 : 35] Scripture. You see, not only has God created this world, but He's told us how to live in it. He's told us how to make sense of it. He's told us what our aspirations for life in this world should be.

He's told us what our expectations should be. He's told us what unrighteousness looks like and what it produces. He's told us what righteousness looks like and what it produces. He might, we as finite, fallible human beings might not be able to comprehend the whole mind of God, but He hasn't left us in the dark as to His will for us and His will for this world.

He's given us the Bible. This is like to have access to the playbook before the play even takes place or while the play is taking place.

Those of you who spent a lot of time with me recently probably know about my affection for American football, my weird South African affection for American football. Having been a person who grew up with season tickets at the Shark Tank watching Sharks rugby, I think as any rugby watching South African, if you're ever going to appreciate American football, what you've got to do is you need to not conceive of it as some sort of stilted form of stop-start rugby.

That is just going to completely frustrate you and irritate you as you try and watch it because they're just not going to do what you think they should be doing. You need to actually rather think about it as chess. One move against one move, back and forth.

[25 : 02] That's what American football is. At the heart of the sport is one team with an intricate set of plays going on the offensive against a team that has an equally intricate set of plays is using to try and counter that offensive.

Now two years ago I actually got the chance to go and sit in the team meeting at a Division I college in the US where some of the position coaches on the offense their coaches they have a coach for every single position on the team.

Their facilities at this college were probably better than the Springboks facilities and I got to sit in a team meeting as these position coaches all watched hours of film of different plays labeled all the plays and then nuanced them made little changes to them for what they were going to use in an upcoming season.

Now to the uninitiated eye when you're watching the game you see this super quick move where you can hardly even follow the ball and what appears to just be chaos is these big bodied men just like smash against each other but in reality each of them every man in that team is moving in very precise ways according to the particular play that's been called from the playbook.

I actually think the average American football player has to be fairly intelligent to remember all those plays and their exact role in each play as it gets called but if you have access to the playbook it radically changes the way that you watch the game because you're able now to interpret all the movements why he went left instead of right why he handed the ball off instead of through it and you're even able to access each play did that play work or did it fail it significantly transforms what you're looking at because you've got the playbook now because of the Bible friends we in some sense have access to the playbook of life we get to see everything with new eyes things that look like chaos now all of a sudden have rhyme and reason things that look like tragedy suddenly are tinged with hope things that look like they are stacked overwhelmingly against us suddenly lose their ferociousness and fear threat the courage of these early believers stems not just from the fact that God created this world but also from the fact that God has revealed how life is going to go in this world he said don't be surprised this is how things are going to go for you so in the Bible we have the precious word of the creator of God available to us we're not left to flounder around in the dark we have words like this

[28 : 05] Matthew 16 Jesus on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it that's got to create courage right that means whether a hundred people turn up here on Sunday or five people turn up here on Sunday the playbook still stands John 16 I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace in this world you will have trouble but take heart I have overcome the world that's got to give you courage when you feel like you're up against it because of your faith take heart I have overcome the world Jesus says or these majestically divinely inspired words from the apostle Paul Romans 8 this is a longer section but I want to read the whole thing if God is for us who can be against us he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen it is God who justifies who then is the one who condemns no one

Christ Jesus who died more than that who was raised to life is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us who shall separate us from the love of Christ shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword as it is written for your sake we face death all day long we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered no in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us for I am convinced that neither death nor life neither angels nor demons neither the present nor the future nor any powers neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord

you can't say amen at the end of that friends we we don't just witness in our father's world we witness undergirded by the sure promises of our father's word we have to take immense courage from that we have to be roused to action by those powerful words to love and commitment for the love and the commitment that God shows to us and is undergirded in his word then the last one God decides so after quoting Psalm 2 the group pray these words in verse 27 they say indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in the city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen the violent persecution that resulted in the death of the son of God was carried out by conspiring men but Peter tells us well these people praying in their prayer they tell us these conspiring men were doing what God by his own perfect will and power had already decided beforehand would happen if you go to some more literal translations like the new American standard Bible or the English standard version they use the word predestined there to translate the original

Greek phrase now we talked about this whole issue of the interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility back when we looked at Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 that sermon is probably still on the website you can go and listen to it but it's clearly a key part of the early church's theology because they keep bringing it up that God somehow puts his perfect will into effect through the actions of ordinary people in such a way that he doesn't rob human beings of agency and responsibility I know that makes our brains hurt I don't know how to get my head around that sort of stuff I have tended to be very simple on this without trying to answer all the questions it just puts it out there and says this seems to be what the Bible says this is chapter three in the first paragraph it says God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass yet so as thereby neither

God sorry yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away but rather established God is sovereign over every single action that takes place and yet somehow he is not the author of sin and he also doesn't violate the will of his creatures in the process and secondary causes are real causes how does it work I'm not sure but that same chapter later on the last paragraph calls this doctrine the high mystery of predestination that's what it is a high and glorious mystery that somehow God works out his good and perfect purposes even in and through the sinful rebellious corruption we so freely participate in all the time isn't that amazing even in the sinful corruption that those outside of the church participate in when they come at us when a culture direct spiteful malice your way know friends know that

[33 : 59] God in his glory has predestined to work those hurtful words into an ultimate good when a friend or a colleague or even a family member someone dear to you mocks you for your quote intellectually naive faith know that God in his tender love has planned since before the foundation of the world to vindicate that faith one day in front of every mocker God decided beforehand what should happen there can be no greater source of courage than that truth and you should be particularly emboldened when you understand that the clearest example of God's high mystery of predestination that we have is the predestining of the son to face the scorn of the cross there the people did all these things there the people directed spiteful malice at the face of

Jesus and God in his glory predestined to work those cruel words into forgiveness somehow for every spiteful malice laden word that you will ever say to somebody there the people mocked God in the flesh they mocked him hail king of the Jews they said but God in his tender love planned since before the foundation of the world to vindicate that king his king so that one day every knee will bow on earth and under the earth and in heaven and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father you want courage to witness look into the face of your sovereign God as he hangs on a cross turning your rebellion into worship turning your evil into beauty turning your sin into holiness this is our

Father's world we have our Father's word to guide us through it and we have the divine decree of our Father put into effect before time began powerfully illustrated in our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross working all things to the good of those who love him that's where courage comes from look what it produced in these early Christians verse 29 here's how they conclude their prayer now Lord consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus and after they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were filled!

The ground shakes in the room and they go out and they boldly witness to Christ now bolder than before even really there's a little bit of a play on the images there that some of the commentators have noticed I don't know if you saw it verse 31 the ground shakes as they acknowledge as God acknowledges their prayer and yet they go out unshaken in their resolve to bear witness to Christ friends that's my prayer for you it's my prayer for me that God would shake up our hearts to go to him in prayer to meditate deeply upon his sovereign creating work to meditate deeply upon his sovereign revealing work to us in scripture and his sovereign predestining work so that as God through all of that shakes up our souls with those truths we might become unshaken in our resolve to be witness to our

Lord Jesus Christ it's my prayer for you it's my prayer for me let's pray now gracious God and heavenly father we we ask for courage this morning courage to respect your power over and above any other earthly!

[38 : 37] power Lord we ask for forgiveness when we invert that so often when we respect other powers above your power forgive us Lord forgive us for the sinful things we do in service of procuring power in all sorts of other ways turn us turn us to your sovereign work your sovereign creating work your sovereign revealing work your sovereign predestining work that finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ on the cross turn us to those things and stir up courage in our hearts Lord that we might be witness to Jesus give us that bold bold intention to go out there and love and serve and speak about Christ and I pray for any person who's maybe sitting here this morning and saying I'm not praying for courage yet because I'm not even sure what

I think about Jesus yet I pray that you might shake their hearts this morning with the truth of Jesus the truth of what you have predestined to do in Christ that they might repent of their sin and tum to you in faith pour that blessing upon them this morning we pray!

We ask this all for! Christ's what