

# FOUR

## A MISSION SOAKED IN PRAYER

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WHEN HAVE YOU BEEN PART OF A GROUP EFFORT THAT WAS SUCCESSFUL?

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

A report from the Pew Research Center indicates that more than forty-four percent of Americans report praying at least once a day. An additional twenty-three percent say they pray weekly or a few times a month. Roughly one in three American adults rarely or never engages in prayer. For Christians, those numbers vary slightly—sixty percent say they pray once a day, twenty-five percent once a week or month, and ten percent seldom or never.<sup>1</sup> As believers, we must always maintain a dependence on God through prayer. Jesus’s followers modeled this for us in Acts 4.

## THE POINT

**God \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ us to share the gospel.**

Peter and John were brought into the Sanhedrin for a hearing. The Jewish leaders were angry at them for preaching Christ in the temple. Taken aback by the boldness and knowledge of Peter and John, all the Sanhedrin could do was command them not to speak in the name of Jesus (vv. 13-18). The men explained that they were obeying God and couldn’t help but speak, and it was up to the Sanhedrin to decide whether forcing people to obey men instead of God was the right thing to do. The Sanhedrin let them go, mostly because “the people were all giving glory to God over what had been done” (v. 21).

**Acts 4:23-26** <sup>23</sup> After they were released, they went to their own people and reported everything the chief priests and the elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup> When they heard this, they raised their voices together to God and said, “Master, you are the one who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You said through the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David your servant: Why do the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot futile things? <sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers assemble together against the Lord and against his Messiah.

**1) Recognize the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of God.**

As soon as Peter and John were released, they gathered with the other believers and told them about their experience. Hearing about the legal injustice and the persecution and jailing of their brothers, how did the other believers respond? Rather than obtaining the services of an attorney, organizing a protest, or fleeing the city in fear, the believers prayed. They acknowledged realities about God that reveal our dependence on Him in every situation and circumstance of life. If God is the glorious and all-powerful Creator, surely He had the authority to overcome the challenges they faced.

**Acts 4:27-28** <sup>27</sup> “For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, assembled together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your will had predestined to take place.

**2) Acknowledge that God is at work even in the face of \_\_\_\_\_.**

Continuing in their prayer, the believers again acknowledged that God’s power isn’t only overwhelming but also without limits. The people and their leaders, including King Herod himself, had exercised no power over God the Father or His Son, Jesus. They’d merely carried out God’s plan, doing “whatever your hand and your will had predestined to take place” (v. 28). God’s sovereign power was on display. Through the sacrifice of His own Son, God atoned for humanity’s sin and, in raising Jesus from the dead, showed His power over death itself.

**Acts 4:29-31** <sup>29</sup> And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that your servants may speak your word with all boldness, <sup>30</sup> while you stretch out your hand for healing, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” <sup>31</sup> When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly.

**3) Ask for \_\_\_\_\_ in sharing the gospel.**

The believers concluded their prayer by asking for God’s help. They didn’t ask Him to rescue them. Instead, they prayed for boldness to proclaim the message of Christ. God had used the healing of the lame man to open the door for Peter to preach the gospel. They expected God to continue to open doors for them to preach. They asked for boldness to teach about Christ at every opportunity. God’s answer to their prayer seems to have been immediate. The place shook as if they were experiencing an earthquake. The Holy Spirit filled all who were present. And, rather than the followers of Jesus being silent, as the Sanhedrin had hoped, the word of God spread more quickly.

## ENGAGE

In the margin, create a pie chart representing how your prayer time is spent. Include the following areas: praise, thanksgiving, confession, yourself, and others. Is your prayer time well-balanced? If not, commit to spending more time on the neglected areas this week.

1. Pew Research Center, Religious Landscape Study and “Prayer and Other Religious Practices,” [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org).

## LIVE IT OUT

What actions will you take in response to today's study?

- **Pray for dependence.** Our culture values independence, but God calls us to depend on Him. Confess any areas where you're trying to do things in your own strength. Acknowledge that God alone is your strength, and ask Him to help you depend on Him alone.
- **Pray God's Word.** Scripture is filled with God's promises. Select a verse or passage and incorporate that promise into your prayer. Allow this to remind you of God's sovereignty in the face of difficulty and spur you toward praise. A good place to start is Psalm 62.
- **Pray together.** Host a prayer gathering. Consider an evening or morning coffee time and invite several friends to join you to pray for a specific concern in your church, community, or world. Include prayer that the message of the gospel would go to the areas you're concerned about.

## TALK IT OUT

**Want to go a step further? Gather with two or three Christ-followers of the same gender. Read Acts 4:23-31, then use the following summary and questions for a deeper discussion.**

After being freed by the Sanhedrin, Peter and John returned to their Christian friends. They reported the threats the Sanhedrin had made to keep them from teaching about Jesus. The church responded to the threats with prayer. They acknowledged God's power over the situation and prayed for boldness. God filled them with His Spirit and gave them supernatural boldness. God still empowers His people to make Jesus known.

- ? **How can prayer strengthen us when we face opposition?**
- ? **What does trusting in God's power look like in the life of a believer facing opposition?**
- ? **When have you experienced the Holy Spirit's power in sharing your faith?**

**DAY 1: There's power in unified prayer.****Read Acts 4:21-24.**

Here's where we are in the story: A man had been lame since birth, "over forty years" (v. 22). God used Peter and John to heal the man in Jesus's name. The healing created a stir in the temple and opened the door for Peter to preach the gospel. This attracted the attention of religious leaders who were angered at the message. They jailed the disciples and put them on trial before the Sanhedrin. "Because the people were all giving glory to God over what had been done" (v. 21), the religious leaders saw no way to punish the disciples. They threatened them not to teach in the name of Jesus. The disciples boldly asserted that they would continue to speak as God compelled them. This brought further threats from the religious leaders, but they ultimately released Peter and John.

No doubt, the church was aware that Peter and John had been held by the temple guard. Many of them were likely gathered together, praying and awaiting news of what had happened. When Peter and John were released, they immediately found their friends to report what they had experienced.

The message was scary. The religious leaders who had crucified Jesus were threatening punishment for His followers. Luke doesn't tell us the specific threats the religious leaders made. To continue to proclaim Jesus could mean imprisonment or worse for the followers of Christ. How would the believers, many of them new to faith in Jesus, respond to such threats? "They raised their voices together to God" (v. 24). They prayed with one mind, united in purpose and trust.

- 🎯 **Get together with a Christian friend and share about a time when you stood for your faith despite pressure or fear. Talk about how God showed up and what you learned. Pray together for continued boldness and courage.**

## DAY 2: God is sovereign.

### Read Acts 4:24-28.

Simply put, God is sovereign over the universe He has made and over those who dwell in His universe. Recognizing God's sovereignty surely brought comfort and courage to the believers as they gathered for prayer that day. Recognition of God's sovereignty should also bring comfort and courage to Jesus's disciples today, because God still holds absolute authority over His creation and all who dwell in it. His plans for the universe and for each of our lives unfold without interruption. Not only is it futile to stand against God, but it is also self-defeating, since our purpose, meaning, and hope are found in Him.

Acknowledging the reality of God's rule, the believers could rest assured that even the religious leaders and government authorities ultimately had no control over them. In a jail cell, Peter and John could be comforted by the fact that God was their Master; the jailkeeper wasn't. And they could have the courage to continue to share their faith, trusting God with the outcome, regardless of the threats of the leaders. Whether people believed or rejected their message was in the hands of God. Whether they were celebrated as messengers of hope or cast into prison, that too was in the hands of God. And God's purposes are to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Believers today, like those who prayed in response to Peter and John's report, can have the courage to obey God when we find ourselves in conflict with people's opinions or even human laws. Acknowledging God's sovereignty over the affairs of the world means we should also acknowledge and submit to God's sovereign rule over our lives. From answering a call to missions to everyday decisions like gathering regularly with other believers for worship, being generous givers, or readily sharing the gospel, our belief in God's sovereignty should be on display in the courageous ways we obey God's Word.

- 🕒 **Spend some time today in individual prayer, praising God for His power, sovereignty, and faithfulness in your life.**

# DISPLAY

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### **DAY 3: Sharing the gospel requires boldness.**

#### **Read Acts 4:29-30.**

Not wavering in their commitment to testify about Jesus as the Messiah, regardless of personal cost, the believers asked God to “grant that your servants may speak your word with all boldness” (v. 29). Rather than asking God to keep them safe or to punish those who were persecuting them, the believers asked for boldness.

Whether under threat of persecution by authorities or fear of personal rejection from a friend or family member, sharing the gospel requires boldness. The gospel confronts us with our wrongdoing resulting from our sin. The gospel puts us on notice of our weakness and insufficiency. The gospel is the best news a person could ever hear, but that news is only good news when we recognize how deeply we fall short in comparison to the holiness and perfection of our Creator. Communicating the need of every person for a Savior requires boldness. The believers understood that, so they prayed for that boldness.

The believers also understood they were inadequate to convince anyone of the truth of the gospel they shared. Only God, through the Holy Spirit, can convict a person of their sin, convince them of the truth of the gospel, and save them. That’s where prayer comes in. Through prayer, we can acknowledge God’s sovereignty over the affairs of the world and petition for the redemption of those who haven’t yet believed, knowing that God alone has the power to save. In prayer, we find the courage to proclaim the good news about Jesus, and we find comfort when that news is rejected or even results in persecution. Prayers for people far from God remind us of our utter dependence on the One who has called us to witness to the lost and has sovereignly determined that He will use our witness to bring salvation.

- 🕒 **Get together with several other Christian friends and spend time praying for opportunities to share the gospel and boldness for when the time comes.**

**DAY 4: God answers prayer.****Read Acts 4:31.**

After the gathered Christians prayed, asking God for boldness to speak, God answered in three specific ways:

- **The place was shaken.** I live in California. We often experience shaking. The seminary where I teach is next to a train track with freight trains carrying goods in and out of Los Angeles. When my office starts shaking, it's hard to know whether a train is passing or we're experiencing an earthquake. In this verse, "place" probably refers to the room they occupied. The shaking seems to have been experienced only by those who were praying. It was a supernatural response from the Spirit, assuring them that God hears and answers.
- **They were filled with the Spirit.** The people asked for boldness. The Spirit filled the entire group that had gathered to pray. Throughout the book of Acts, God filled His people with His Holy Spirit and then led them to go, speak, and act in the power of God. In other words, when they prayed for boldness, God gave them His presence in a powerful way.
- **They began to speak.** The believers began to speak the message of Christ powerfully, and they kept speaking. Of course, this is the opposite of what the Sanhedrin wanted to accomplish. They tried to shut down the message of Christ. Yet, the church preached Christ all the more.

Through the prayers of His people, God would carry out His plan. He would use the believers "to speak the word of God boldly" (v. 31), and the gospel would continue to be proclaimed regardless of persecution, just as Luke reported.

- 🕒 **The Holy Spirit equips, emboldens, and sends us out to make Jesus known. Talk to a Christian mentor about how he or she has experienced being emboldened by the Spirit to share the gospel. You can learn much from those further along in their walk with the Lord.**

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Prayer is the key that gives us access to experiencing His work in our lives and is always designed to set the stage for Him to be seen more clearly and more fully.

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Priscilla Shirer

## DAY 5: God's power grows the church.

### Read Acts 5:12-14.

Luke summed up the early days in the Jerusalem church in these verses. The church saw miracles. Through “the hands of the apostles,” wondrous signs were common (v. 12). Some people would even carry their sick relatives into the street. They hoped that the shadow of Peter might fall on them as he walked by. The Jewish people saw the apostles favorably and were open to their message.

The church was meeting together at Solomon’s Colonnade in the temple. This was the same place Peter preached to the crowd after healing the lame beggar. The Bible doesn’t clearly specify who was meeting. Some scholars believe “they” only referred to the apostles and that other Christians were afraid to meet with them. It seems more likely that “they” referred to all Christians in the city. After all, the church had prayed for boldness to speak, and God granted that. Surely they wouldn’t be so timid as to avoid meeting with the apostles. Most likely, Luke meant that all Christians in the city were meeting at Solomon’s Colonnade. They were together, seeking God in prayer, teaching, witnessing, and sharing testimonies.

Despite the positive regard of the people in Jerusalem for the Christians, they wouldn’t meet with them in the colonnade. Perhaps the common people were afraid of being associated with the church because of the threats of the Sanhedrin. Even so, the church grew. Crowds of people were turning to Christ. The message of Christ was having an impact on the Jews.

There was a dynamic community of faith in Jerusalem. They were connected. They preached the gospel and saw many come to faith in Christ. They were empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. Sounds powerful, doesn’t it?

- 🕒 **Close out your week of study with a focused prayer time. Praise God for His power. Confess areas where you’ve treated His presence too casually. Ask for boldness and integrity like that of the apostles. Pray that your church will be bold in reaching people for Christ.**