

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

A Kingdom-Sized Prayer

(Acts 4:24-31)

Study #6

Introduction: After the honeymoon...

It is a term with which we are all very familiar. The term itself makes us “feel” warm and cozy.

Most every presidential term has one. The successful start-up of a new business venture can be described by the term. Typically, grooms and brides schedule them at the front end of their marriage.

The term? Honeymoon.

The honeymoon is that season in a new administration or a new marriage when all is sweetness and light. No problems. No breakdowns.

Over the course of the first three chapters of the book of Acts we have observed the wonderful honeymoon that the church of Jesus Christ enjoyed following its inception.

The church was formed on the Day of Pentecost when it grew from dozens to thousands in one day. Christians, filled with the Holy Spirit’s power, filled Jerusalem with the Good News of a risen Savior.

For weeks afterward Christians from *“every nation under heaven”* (2:5) enjoyed true community and the church was *“having favor with all the people.”* (2:47)

But, honeymoons, by definition, are temporary things. Life happens. It happens in politics and in business. It certainly happens in marriages. (By the way, have you seen the recent book by Paul David Tripp, *What Did You Expect??* ? It is a book about marriage that purports to dispel the never-ending-honeymoon myth. Looks like a helpful read...) And it happened to the church.

After an undeniable miracle of healing, the apostles Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish authorities and spent a night in jail before having to stand trial before the Sanhedrin.¹ The overnight in jail spelled the end of the honeymoon for the church.

Shaking their fingers in the face of the apostles, the Sanhedrin commanded that they speak no more in the name of Jesus.

As they left, the apostles assured the Sanhedrin that they had no intention of obeying that command and promised that they would certainly continue to speak about Jesus as they retreated to their “companions” (v. 23), the first century equivalent of a Care Group.

They knew that their fellow followers of Jesus would listen well, would support them, and would remind them that no matter how hard life might be, living for Jesus is the most important things there is.

But the story doesn’t end with us thinking warm thoughts about the help we find in community.

After Peter and John enjoyed the cathartic experience of sharing with friends, they did not retreat to a safe approach to life.

NO! The report of Peter and John led to something even more powerful than problem-sharing and burden-bearing. It led to PRAYER. These Christians allowed their cares to turn to prayers.

It’s not surprising that we find these early Christians praying together. In fact, this is the third reference to corporate prayer we already read about in Acts.

¹ The formerly lame man stood with them (v. 14), perhaps having spent the night with them in jail.

The first time it was to a pre-Day of Pentecost season of prayer (Acts 1). During the days leading up to Pentecost the disciples were praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The second was a reference to prayer as one of the distinguishing marks of the church's fellowship/*koinonia*. It was just a natural thing for these brothers and sisters in Christ to pray to their Father, together.

Now, they are retreating to prayer because of the challenges they face as a result of speaking out for Jesus.

Worshipfully Retreating to God (vv. 24-30)

When the Foundations of Our World are Shaken

We are told that they were together in one place, although we have no idea where that place was. I like to think that they might have been in the place we call "the upper room" where so much has already happened.² But it could have been anywhere in or around Jerusalem.

We also don't know how many were gathered together. Some think it may have been the whole group of thousands. I think it is much more likely a much smaller sized group, maybe even Care Group sized.

But they have come together to pray. And the Bible says that **[4:24] they lifted their voices WITH ONE ACCORD** as they prayed.

This doesn't mean that they prayed in unison, but that they were all in agreement with what was being prayed. It is likely that one person led in prayer, with the rest agreeing with what was being prayed.³

They have come together to pray because life as bold witnesses for Jesus has just taken on a whole new set of challenges.

² The disciples and Jesus had the Last Supper; Jesus appeared to them on the first Easter evening and again eight days later; the early church had times of prayer here prior to Pentecost.

³ The Greek word we translate "**with one accord**" is *homothumadon*. This is a relatively common word in the New Testament whenever there is a stress on unity among Christians. Interestingly, the word is used outside of the New Testament to describe groups of people who are united in anger or in fear, too.

Their world had rattled out of control

The safe, secure world they had known ever since the coming of the Holy Spirit has vanished.

For weeks - maybe even a few months - they had enjoyed a honeymoon-type season of unimpeded growth, super-abounding success, and great receptivity to the message about Jesus.

Up to this point they had been experiencing the deep respect and admiration of the people of Jerusalem.

No more. It was a great honeymoon. But the honeymoon is over. The same opposition that had resulted in Jesus' death was now leveled against them. There was no more freedom to speak out about Jesus. Jail likely awaited them all.

The foundations for a safe and stable life have undergone quite a shaking. And when the foundations shake, where else is there to go but God?⁴

Have you ever felt, or do you feel now, that the foundations for your safe and stable life have undergone a bit of a shaking?

Our world has rattled out of control

These are unsettling days.

New of gulf oil spills and imploding Euros and border violence and wildly gyrating financial markets and unemployment fill our minds. On this Memorial Day weekend, we are mindful that our nation is involved in military action on several fronts.

All of these des-stabilizing issues impact each of us to some degree, of course.

⁴ **[Psalm 82:5] They do not know nor do they understand; They walk about in darkness; All the foundations of the earth are shaken.**

But there are other issues that are more personal. There are home and family concerns. What about the health - or lack of health - in close relationships. There is your retirement, your physical health, your children, and your aging parents.

And if you are a worrier (some of us are), you know that even if there are no howling storms right now, there could be. You know that the things in life you care most about are beyond your control.

Perhaps, on many levels, you are feeling right now the way the believers in Jerusalem felt. Like secure things have come unhinged. Like lots of stuff is up for grabs. Like nothing is nailed down.

And then, to place ourselves more squarely in the flow of the Bible's story, wouldn't most of us admit that there are things in our lives that are making it a challenge to live like the bold witness Jesus wants us to be?

Any of us might be limited by our own shyness and fears and weakness. Or we might be facing actual opposition from others who would really prefer that we not talk about Jesus so much.

If, after looking at life and the world, we find ourselves admitting that things are in a mess; and if, after looking at ourselves, we're admitting that we are not living like the bold witnesses for Jesus we really want to be, then maybe we are poised to take the same step they took in Jerusalem.

We're ready to pray.

When God is the Foundation of Our World (vv. 24-28)

"O Lord"

[24] And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord..."

The word that a Greek author would normally use to refer to a "lord" is *kurios*. The word they used in prayer here is not *kurios*. It is *despota*.

Despota is the word from which we get our English word "despot."

When you and I hear "despot" today we think all kinds of negative thoughts about an all-powerful dictator - A Hitler or a Stalin or a Polpot.

Two thousand years ago, there were no negative connotations associated with the word. But *despota* still spoke of someone with absolute authority, power, and sovereignty.

These Christians, who are being opposed by the authorities, are praying to the One who has ALL AUTHORITY.

And they continued to rehearse the theme of God's great and awesome power.

"You are great and awesome..."

[24] And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them"

When life's dangers or life's pain drives us to prayer, it is tempting to begin our prayers with our problems. That would be a mistake.

Jesus taught us to start off our prayers by reminding ourselves that we are speaking to God - ***"Our Father, who art in Heaven..."***

No matter what our most pressing need might *seem* to be, our greatest need is always *actually* to see God for who He is.

These guys in Jerusalem got it right and we need to follow their lead.

So, only after clearing their minds by remembering God were they ready to get specific with God about what was going on in their world.

As they pray, they get specific about the disruption that has come their way. To ease into their own story, they prayed the second Psalm.

History is “His story”

[24] And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, [25] who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, And the peoples devise futile things? [26] ‘The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the Lord and against His Christ.’”

Giving God a current events update in Psalm 2

In that Old Testament psalm, the psalmist prayed to God about the challenging things that were going on in his world.

Nations were raging against God’s rule. Kings of the earth had rejected God and His anointed.⁵

As he prays David is telling God what is happening in his world. As if God didn’t already know. Silly David!

But then, that is exactly what the Christians in Jerusalem do, too. They move from quoting the second psalm to describing events that had happened in Jerusalem a few weeks earlier.

Giving God a current events update in Acts 4

[27] “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [28] to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”⁶

⁵ In this case, David was probably thinking about himself, as God’s anointed King of Israel.

⁶ There are grammatical oddities in these verses, but the message is clear. The people are arrayed against God’s Messiah in Jerusalem as they had been in the days of David. Only now, the opposition is not primarily from the nations. It comes primarily from God’s own people, the Jews.

The opposition that Jesus faced is now faced by the community that formed in His Name. Opposition comes from Gentiles and Jews. And, while praying, they told God about it. Again, as if God didn’t know what had happened to Jesus. Sheesh!!

If it seems pointless to tell an omniscient God the news of the day, note this. It turns out that giving God a current events update is a time-honored practice among God’s people.

Giving God a current events update in 2010

The prayers in Scripture are filled with this kind of recounting of the events that people were experiencing.

- Abraham told God of his childlessness and of his desire for an heir. (God already knew Abraham was childless.)
- King Hezekiah prayed for the safety of Jerusalem, rolling out the scroll-formed letter that the Assyrian General, Rabshakeh, had written before the Lord. (God already knew what the letter said.)
- Nehemiah prayed about the bad situation Jerusalem was in, giving details about the burned down walls (God knew that the walls were down.)

Evidently, God enjoys hearing His people tell Him about their lives. Even though He knows all about it, He is as eager to hear it straight from our lips and our hearts as a loving mom or dad is eager to hear it straight from their child.

God is not bored when you tell Him what is going on in your life. He likes to hear us tell Him what is happening. He even likes it when we tell Him how challenging things are in our lives.

The prayers of the Bible are models for us to imitate as we come to God in prayer. They told God about their lives. If you were to go to God right now and tell Him about your life, what would you tell Him? If you had confidence that Almighty God really cared about your life (and He does!!), what challenges would you tell Him about? What difficulties would you tell God you are facing when it comes to living for Jesus?

This is where you may get more honest with God than you ever dare getting with anybody else.

Has disruption occurred recently in your life? Are there circumstances or people who threaten to derail you from following Jesus and speaking out boldly for Him?

Are you willing to follow the lead of Peter and John and the rest and honestly, openly tell God about it? He cares. He wants to hear from you!

Of course we don't recount what is going on in our lives to inform God of anything. It is because God loves to hear from us. And it is for one more thing.

When we say out loud how desperate things are we deny ourselves the option of living in denial. We remind ourselves that we are helpless and hopeless - unless He intervenes.

And the realization that if God doesn't do something we're sunk paves the way for us to ask God for something.

And that is where this prayer is heading. These Christians intend to ask God for something. What do you think they are going to ask Him?

They have just been imprisoned, publicly humiliated and threatened with bodily harm if they keep on talking about Jesus.

If that had just happened to you, what would you have asked of God? Let's listen to their prayer.

...Please HELP! (vv. 29-30)

"Take note, Lord!" (v. 29)

[29] "And now, Lord, take note of their threats..."

We can hardly fault them for asking that God would take note of the threats against them. So, they drew attention to the threats against them. But, they did not pray for vengeance from God against their persecutors. They left the matter with God.

They didn't pray that God would crush their opponents - even after what must have been a very uncomfortable and embarrassing night in jail.

They didn't ask God to "GET" those who opposed them. They simply asked that God would take note.

As they continue to pray, though, their prayer fascinates me for its total lack of self-concern. They didn't pray for protection. They didn't pray for safety. Nor do they pray to be spared future opposition.

They understood that if Jesus was threatened and reviled and attacked, they would be, too. So, the fact that they were being distracted by opposition neither SURPRISED nor DERAILED them.

What did they ask? In the face of opposition, and with the likelihood of more opposition to come, they asked for one thing: the strength and the grace to confidently keep proclaiming the Gospel.

"Grant us boldness!" (v. 29)

[29] "And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence..."

In the Greek world the right to speak freely was reserved for free men. Slaves could certainly not speak freely. But these bond-servants (slaves) of God ask their Master for the grace to speak freely for Him.

Clearly it never even entered their minds that they might obey the Sanhedrin and stop talking about Jesus. No way were they going to do that!

They were determined to remain faithful to tell others about Jesus. Jesus' words kept echoing - **"You shall be My witnesses"** (Acts 1:8) - and they heard those words as both prophecy and invitation.

So, perhaps knowing that the temptation might arise at any moment to NOT be bold, they asked God to please open their mouths. Open their eyes to open doors, and remind them IN THE MOMENT to speak. Fill them with confidence to share the Good News!

And the prayer ends with a non-request. It is not an ask, but an assumption. They state their confidence that God will continue to go before them and to work powerfully, just as He has been doing.

“Keep doing what You have been doing, Lord!” (v. 30)

[30]...while You extend Your hand to heal,⁷ and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”⁸

If the Gospel was going to continue to make progress, it’s going to take more than disciples sharing the Good News! It’s going to take the wonder-working power of God.

They mention healings and signs and wonders. But regardless of the form the wonder-working power of God takes - in my own experience, it has usually been the testimony of a life transformed by the grace of God - the order still holds. God works; we speak.

So, they have prayed. What’s next? Well, the answer to their prayer follows immediately.

Lovingly Advancing Into the World (v. 31)

[31] And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit⁹ and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

In response to their prayer, God gave a resounding, three-fold “YES!”

⁷ They especially mention the miracle of healing. Isn’t it fascinating that they prayed, not for miracles of **vengeance** in light of the threats, but for miracles of **mercy** in light of peoples’ needs?

⁸ It should be noted that technically, the apostles didn’t pray for miracles and healings. They prayed for boldness and assumed that God would continue to show Himself mighty through works of power.

⁹ What happened at verse 31 was not a fresh baptism, but a fresh filling. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was a one-time event that occurred at Pentecost. For believers today, the baptism of the Spirit is a one-time event that happens the moment we place our trust in Jesus for salvation (see 1 Cor. 12:13). By contrast, the filling of the Spirit is a ministry He performs in our lives over and over again to equip us for ministry. Notice that this filling is not accompanied by any phenomenon other than the capacity for boldness. Predominantly, the purpose of the filling of the Spirit is to equip us to speak with boldness and clarity about the mighty works of God.

First, the place where they had gathered was physically shaken.

There has been a whole lot of shaking going on throughout this narrative. And the Bible talks a lot about shaking things up.

The earth shook at Sinai when God gave the Law. Prison doors swung open to set Paul and Silas free in Philippi. Today, we’ve seen the foundations of a safe and stable life were shaken by persecution. And now God shakes the building where the early church is praying.

He is the God who makes solid things shake and He is the God who can solidify shaky believers!

Then, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. This is God’s answer to their prayer for an internal work. It is the Holy Spirit’s filling that will give them the strength to be the bold witnesses Jesus called them to be.

And as the passage closes, the final glimpse we get of these disciples is of them speaking the Word of God with all boldness, just as they had prayed!

Conclusion:

It is so important to keep our expectations realistic. Realistic expectations safeguard our hearts from devastating surprises. If we expect that honeymoons will last forever, we’ll likely be disappointed in marriage.

If we expect that living as a bold witness for Jesus will be a piece of cake, we’ll be surprised and disappointed and resentful when the inevitable challenges come our way!

When those challenges to faith come your way, how will you respond? The early Christians point the way!

They went to their companions and found strength. And then, together, they went to the Lord in prayer.

So, you long to be a bold and loving witness for Jesus, right? Why not ask some Christian friends to join you in prayer for that boldness - and then watch Him shake things up!