

A First-Century Prayer Meeting

An exposition of Acts iv. 23-31

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I. THE OCCASION OF THE MEETING

EVER since our Lord's Ascension prayer had become a fixed habit with His disciples. They spent most of the ten-days between the Ascension and Pentecost in prayer (Acts ii. 14), either as a company in the upper room, or in the temple at the fixed hours of prayer. It is said of the three thousand converts on the Day of Pentecost that they "continued steadfastly . . . in prayers" (Acts ii. 42. Better "*the prayers*", for the reference is probably to prayer in the temple three times a day). It was as Peter and John entered the Beautiful Gate of the temple for the afternoon hour of prayer (Acts iii. 1) that the incident happened which culminated in the prayer meeting here described. Like the seven miracles recorded in St. John's Gospel, the healing of the lame man was a "sign" (Acts iv. 22), an outward indication of the spiritual truth that there was no other name but the Name of Jesus whereby men could be saved, and given the same "perfect soundness" spiritually that the invocation of the Name had given to the lame man physically (Acts iii. 6, and iv. 12).

No wonder that such preaching as Peter's in Acts iii. 12-26 provoked an immediate reaction on the part of Christ's enemies and murderers (Acts iv. 1-3). Peter and John spent the night in prison, not knowing of the further harvest that was being reaped—the increase of the believers from 3,000 to 5,000 (iv. 4). Called before an official meeting of the Council on the next day, Peter was "filled with the Holy Ghost" as he gave his testimony (iv. 8). The fire burned more brightly than ever after the first experience of suffering "for the sake of the Name", and the immediate purpose of the Jewish Council was to see "that it spread no further" (iv. 17).

It is worth noting that this is always the adversary's strategy. If his first line is breached, i.e. if men hear the Gospel and believe, he falls back on the second line of defence—"that it spread no further". The offensive must be "contained". The boldness of Peter and John made the Council uneasy, but doubtless they recalled how these same men had abandoned their Master in the hour of His need, and they hoped that peremptory language accompanied by repeated threats (iv. 21), would suffice to silence them. For the present more drastic action was impossible in view of the attitude of the people, and as the two men, "uneducated, common men" (iv. 13, R.S.V.), left the Council, its members must have wondered whether threats would achieve their object.

If they had followed Peter and John back "to their own company" (iv. 23), they would certainly have been disconcerted. The Christian group heard the apostles' report, and doubtless recognized the gravity

of the situation which confronted them. Did they embark on a long discussion as to whether the injunction of the Council must be obeyed? Or did they appoint a Committee to examine the report? No. A common impulse drove them "with one accord" to prayer. From the Council's judgment they must appeal without a moment's delay to the courts of heaven.

II. THE MEETING ITSELF

"They lifted up their voice to God with one accord," but while all prayed, it must be presumed that only one voiced the petitions that were in the hearts of all. In China of recent years a practice has grown up whereby, in revival meetings, the whole congregation prays aloud. It can be chaotic, but it may be orderly enough, the leader announcing a subject for prayer, and then all together praying in their own words. After a few moments the volume of sound dies down, and the leader announces another subject. At least all are praying, whereas, when one voice alone is heard, there is always the danger that some, through failure to concentrate, will not actually be taking part.

What was the substance of the prayer on this occasion?

1. *The Invocation.* It was to God that they spoke, and they called Him—Despot! I do not suggest that the word had the same connotation in New Testament Greek as it has to-day, but it certainly means a master and owner of slaves. These early Christians recognized the absoluteness of His authority—over them personally, over all their circumstances, and also over their enemies. It is the word that Simeon uses in the "Nunc Dimittis" (Luke ii. 29), and we find it again in 2 Timothy ii. 21, 2 Peter ii. 1, and—in a setting somewhat similar to that in the passage before us—in Revelation vi. 10. How strong, how solid, is the comfort of the fact that God is sovereign, that He Who "made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is" still controls them. His never-failing Providence orders all things in the heaven and earth of which He is the Creator.

A sovereign Protector I have,
Unseen, yet for ever at hand,
Unchangeably faithful to save,
Almighty to rule and command.

2. *The Scripture Quotation.* All through the ages believers have delighted to look back to the experiences of those who have gone before, especially the saints of the Old Testament, in order to discover parallels with their own circumstances. What did Abraham do, or Moses, or David, when they found themselves in impossible situations? Nay, rather, *what did God do* for Abraham, or Moses, or David? "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" cried the man on whom his mantle fell. So at this prayer meeting someone recalled the words of the second Psalm. Evidently they were accepted as the words of God, put into the mouth of His servant David by the Holy Spirit. The verbal parallel is clearer in the original, for of course "heathen" and "Gentiles" (in A.V. of verses 25 and 27) are the same word, and the word "Christ" of verse 26 is the Anointed One referred to in verse 27 as "Jesus, Whom Thou didst *anoint*". As David spoke of a

confederacy of nations and peoples, with their kings and rulers, challenging the authority of Jehovah, so in Jerusalem there had indeed been a strange and powerful confederacy of mutually hostile forces, allied only for a brief moment through the machinations of the Devil himself in order to destroy "Thy holy Child (or, better, Servant) Jesus".

So the quotation was an apt one, and as the early believers recalled it, the glorious fact which heartened the psalmist encouraged them also. It was this—that all their enemies, powerful singly, and still more powerful leagued together, were actually impotent. Who were they to pit their puny might against Jehovah, sitting in the heavens? Their purpose could never be accomplished. "Yet have I set My king upon My holy hill of Zion." Is not this exactly what happened at Calvary? "He was crucified through weakness"? Yes, indeed, no one who had witnessed the event would question that. But what was the result? Was it merely, as with John the Baptist, that they did to Him "whatsoever they listed" (Matthew xvii. 12)? The early Church knew that it was not so. From the lips of the risen Lord they had learned the fact, to which they had been bearing witness ever since Pentecost, that the result of Calvary was far other than a victory for Satan, that the whole ungodly confederacy accomplished only "whatsoever Thy Hand and Thy counsel determined before to be done" (iv. 28). This was the triumph foreseen by David; God's King had not been overwhelmed by human rulers, but highly exalted to His Own right Hand.

Weak to the scornful gaze of those
Who mocked His failing powers—
Yet by the might of God He rose,
And now His strength is ours,
His risen Life is ours.

This was a company of believers, not a "huddle" of cowed men and women, whose Leader had been ignominiously done to death a few months earlier, and who were now threatened with the same fate by His murderers. By His glorious resurrection, and by the coming of the Holy Ghost, our Lord had so transformed the men who failed Him in His darkest hour, that they could almost laugh at the danger which now confronted them.

Are we equally convinced that the purpose of God for His world must be accomplished? In a time when men's hearts are failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth, are we affected by the atmosphere of uncertainty, confusion, apprehension, or, with our feet set firmly upon the rock of God's immutable decrees, do we make it clear, by our attitude and our words, that we know what the end is going to be, and are fully persuaded that what God has promised, He is able also to perform? When a brother Bishop said to me with a sigh, "I don't know what the end of it will be," I ventured—not unkindly I hope—to remonstrate with him. "Surely we know what *the end* will be—it is only the immediate future that may be in doubt."

God's Word, for all their fraud and force,
 One moment shall not linger.
 But, spite of hell, shall have its course—
 'Tis written by His finger.

3. *The Petition.* "And now, Lord. . . ." From their vision of God and His sovereign purposes, His final victory—back to the grim present! Theirs was no mere conventional profession of faith, belied by the petitions which followed it. For did they, as one might expect, cry to God for mercy, for deliverance from the Jewish authorities, so determined to snuff out their testimony, to crush this feeble group of untutored men and women? There is not a word of appeal for protection, there is no "whine" in their praying. They simply remind God of what their enemies have threatened to do—"Behold their threatenings"—and then, of all things, they ask for BOLDNESS to continue doing what they had been strictly forbidden to do.

The word for "boldness", or outspokenness—for it means especially freedom, or courage, in speaking—is worth following through the New Testament. But, in our limited space, note that this is the very characteristic which so astonished the Council (Acts iv. 13). Such outspokenness was not to be expected of men in danger of imprisonment or death. Council members recognized Peter and John as having been amongst the disciples of Jesus. Was this unnatural courage derived from association with Him? This word is the last but one (in the Greek) in the Acts of the Apostles, used there of Paul in his first imprisonment at Rome. While there he wrote his Epistle to the Ephesians, and in the famous passage on the Christian's armour in chapter vi, virtually speaks of prayer as one great weapon in the armoury (vi. 18) and, in asking prayer for himself, desires above all things (vi. 19, 20) "that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth *boldly*" (or, with boldness), "to make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds, that therein I may *speak boldly*" (the verb is used here) "as I ought to speak". Here again Paul's request is not for release from confinement, but for boldness to speak the word.

Is not this an urgent need in our own day? Have we, who are called to preach, learned from Billy Graham not to apologize for the Gospel, but to be the Lord's messengers, speaking in the Lord's message unto the people (Haggai i. 13)? Are we so fearful of giving offence, so eager to "please men", that the note of authority is absent from our preaching? About God, about Christ, about sin, about judgment to come, we do well to pray for boldness, to be outspoken.

But this was not all. They prayed that as they spoke boldly, bearing their testimony to Jesus, Saviour and Lord, God Himself would confirm that testimony by stretching out His Hand to heal, and that signs and wonders would be accomplished through that very Name which they had been forbidden to mention—"Thy holy Servant Jesus". For themselves personally they asked only for boldness, but they expected a working of God not only in their own hearts, giving them the courage they needed, but also in the hearts and lives of others. As they preached the Name, they asked that through the power of that Name others might be healed like the lame man of chapter iii. It is

good indeed if in difficult circumstances I am kept from losing heart, given courage to hold on and to preach the Name. My earnest expectation and my hope is that Christ may be magnified in me. But, more than that, I expect to see transformations in the lives of those to whom I preach, "signs and wonders" which will indeed be my credentials, but will glorify God's holy Servant Jesus.

4. *Prayer Answered.* Something happened before the meeting closed. "When they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the Word of God with boldness" (iv. 31). They asked for boldness and boldness was given. But how? By a fresh infilling with the Holy Spirit. Boldness is an abstract quality. If we ask for it, it cannot be wrapped up in a parcel and delivered at our doors. God does not answer our prayers in that way. He could not give these Christians boldness without giving Himself. If we learn nothing else from this first century prayer meeting, let us learn that ultimately our need is God, God Himself, and it cannot be satisfied except as He imparts Himself to us. "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God," said the psalmist (Psalm xlii. 2). How we grieve Him by asking so often for His gifts, and forgetting that we need *Him*, that His best gifts, at least, cannot be given apart from Him. Surely we are right in interpreting 2 Corinthians ix. 15 as a reference to our Lord Himself. He is God's "unspeakable gift". Do we need power? Like boldness, it is not something which God hands over to us, for us to use as we please. That would be dangerous indeed. But "ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you" (Acts i. 8). Receive the Holy Spirit, and you have power. Or do we need love? Is that our greatest lack? Well, "the fruit of the Spirit is love" (Galatians v. 22), "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Romans v. 5). Receive the Holy Spirit, and you have love. Do you need joy? The disciples at Antioch in Pisidia "were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost" (Acts xiii. 52). True joy and the Holy Spirit are inseparable. You cannot have one without the other.

Should it not be a source of unending wonder and delight that God has ordered it so? That He entrusts His best gifts to no other emissary, but comes Himself, saying, "Here I am. You asked for boldness, and I come to give it. You asked for joy, or peace, or power. Will you have Me? Truly your need is met as you welcome Me into your heart." None but Christ can satisfy. Is not a visit from your closest friend better even than a letter?

So ended the prayer meeting. God had given them "exceeding abundantly", as He is wont to do, beyond their asking or conceiving, according to the power of His Holy Spirit that was at work in their hearts. "To Him be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end."