**Acts 4:23-31** January 24, 2016

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*Acts 4:23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. 25 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?*

*26 The kings of the earth take their stand*

*and the rulers gather together*

*against the Lord*

*and against his Anointed One.’*

*27 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. 29 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.”*

*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.*

**Where Are You Going to Go?**

Dear Fellow Christians,

I know that it is winter. Even when there is no snow on the ground, even before I walk out the door, something every morning tells me it is winter. You see, I can be a little impatient. So when I wake up I just don’t want to wait for the hot water to get to the upstairs bathroom. Instead, I cup my hands and splash frigid tap water on my face—and dry it off as quickly as I can. It is winter!

Two of Jesus’ closest followers got an unwelcome splash of cold water. It happened in Acts chapter four. But first, let’s go back a few weeks earlier. Just after Jesus left his disciples, things were going great. At that point the Christians were a group of a little over a hundred people—about the size of this congregation. Ten days after Jesus had left them, the day of Pentecost happened. Three thousand people put their faith in Jesus on that day. They were baptized. No longer was their cozy congregation a small group where everyone knew everyone else. Which in a way was sad, but mostly it was good because the church isn’t a club. It is a way that people are saved for eternal life. Day after day, people were added to their number (Acts 2:47).

Then in Acts, chapter four, came the cold water. Peter and John, Jesus’ two closest disciples, performed a miracle in Jesus’ name. They healed a lame man in Jesus’ name, and the early Christian church was getting even more press time. Then, what had gone on so swimmingly, ran into a brick wall. Peter and John were hauled off to the jail to wait trial. In court the biggest of the big-wigs called them in and ordered then to cease and desist with this Jesus of Nazareth thing—or else there would be consequences!

Acts, chapter four, is the first public opposition the Christian Church ever faced. It is also the first response to opposition. So now, Peter and John, just released from custody, standing on the sidewalk outside the courthouse, where are they going to go? Yes, let us ask ourselves that question.

**Facing Opposition, Where Are You Going to Go?**

**I. Go Back to Your Own**

Just released from custody, Peter and John decided to go ***“back to their own people”*** (23). It makes sense. In the moment of distress, we go to the people we trust. As youngsters, after falling and skinning a knee, we turn to Mom for a bandage and sympathy. We get a little older and we turn to our friends after an insult from schoolmates. But as we age, we more and more bottle these things up inside of us, for a variety of reasons. Some of the reasons are good. We are supposed to be more independent as we get older. But there are times we keep it bottled up for not-so-good reasons. Perhaps it is pride—or shame. Maybe we have been betrayed in the past and now we trust no one. Maybe we think that as adults we are just supposed to be able to suck it up and keep moving. But take it to the point of breaking and we eventually need to reach out to someone for help.

These apostles had stood before the powers of their day. And those powerful men had told them to sit down and shut up. You’ve been there, right? When the power-brokers of this world tell you to stand down, you know how you feel. Even when you are convinced you are in the right, it’s still a body blow to self-confidence. We try to put on a bold face, but that’s not how we feel inside.

Peter and John, having been reprimanded for doing what they knew was right—they knew where to go. They ***“went back to their own people.”*** They went directly to their fellow Christians. That group shared the foundation of their life, a faith in Jesus. These people would support them in a time of soul-searching. Most people of the world, would not have understood. Most would not have had the time to listen. But Peter and John knew they could count on the believers in their congregation.

This is one thing this family of faith should be: a place we can turn in difficulty. Galatians 6:10 tells us, *“Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”* Reach out to the world, yes. But keep on building up the family, the family of faith.

As these apostles came out of the jailhouse and first went to their fellow Christians, let us go to our fellow Christians. There we find people who share our world-view. We find people who give solid advice and encouragement, not the pop-psychology of the day. They give solid advice and encouragement from the Word of Life.

On the other side of that coin, may each of us have the time, the patience, the willingness, to put our work to the side and listen. Let us be the encouragement that our fellow Christians need in those times.

This is the message of Jesus the Christ. Jesus had the salvation of the world on his plate, and he still had time for all the people who entered his life. He gave. He gave his life to remove the guilt of their and our sins. He also gave them his time, his power, his prayers. No one was ever turned away. The only time anyone was turned away from Jesus—it did happen once—it was no his doing, but his disciples’ doing. And that was one of the few times that Jesus actually got upset. He promptly overruled his disciples and gathered those people to himself. You can read about that in Mark chapter 10.

May this family of believers be one of the first places, if not the first place you go in your time of facing opposition.

**II. Go Back to God’s Word in Prayer**

So Peter and John get to their fellow Christians, then what? ***“Peter and John… reported all that the chief priests and 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 heaven 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 take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One”’”*** (24-26). They all joined in prayer. In that prayer, they did something else. It isn’t obvious, but they did something even better than praying: they based their prayer on God’s Word. In their prayer, they said, ***“Sovereign Lord… you spoke by the Holy Spirit… ‘Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain….’”*** In saying that they were quoting the Bible from Psalm 2. They based their prayer, on God’s word.

Now someone might say, “I don’t know my Bible that well. I really couldn’t pick out Bible passages like that.” Fair enough. People have lives, careers and families. We have to shovel the drive, prepare the meals, do the dishes. Few people enjoy the privilege of a pastor who has the privilege of spending many hours every week in Bible study.

And yet there is this. When we pray on the basis only of our own thoughts, we are basing our prayers on shifting sands. Human emotion and speculation will certainly confuse us. How often do I hear people’s spiritual outlooks which are at some points in line with God’s Word, and at other points clearly not. Clearly not because they just don’t know what God’s Word says. And why not? Because they don’t bother much with God’s Word. Sure, once or twice a month they come to church. But what is an hour or two a month in the face of a 24/7 barrage of worldly thinking from godless people. You get all sort of input from well-meaning people with their homebrew religion based on something they heard years ago on the Oprah Winfrey Show.

No, these Christians in Acts 4, in their time of need turned to the bare word of God itself. They went down to the bedrock, shoveling off the drifts of silly human opinion. And when they got to the bedrock, they found these words: ***“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?”*** God’s word reminded them that the world’s opposition was not against them, puny people easily rubbed out with earthly violence, but the world’s opposition was against the one who stood behind them, the Almighty God. And that is how they could leave their problems in God’s hands.

These Christians in their prayer acknowledge the faults and sins of their oppressors, but they leave that in the hands of God. They did not pray for revenge. In fact, they didn’t even pray for deliverance from their troubles. (Now that is amazing isn’t it!) *This* was their prayer for themselves: ***“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”*** Leaving the threats in God’s hands, they simply pray that they God would make them his faithful servants. Fleshed out a bit, their prayer might sound something like this, “Lord, you know the people who oppose your church. We leave that in your hands. But Lord, we pray that you make us brave enough to speak about Jesus to these people. We pray that someday these people who oppose you will not suffer in hell, but actually be people of our own number.”

Can you imagine that? Who is it that causes you the most frustration and trouble in life? Put a name to my question. Now imagine a fulfillment of what the Christians in Jerusalem prayed when they faced the first persecution of the Christian church. Imagine sitting in that church pew where you sit right now. Imagine sitting there, shoulder to shoulder with that very person, singing the hymns, receiving Holy Communion. That was their prayer. That is a God-pleasing prayer.

How do I know it was a God-pleasing prayer? ***“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.”*** (31). God’s answer was a confirmation that what they spoke and prayed was pleasing to his ears. He said, “Well said, my children.” He gave them exactly what they asked for, because what they asked for was exactly what he wanted to hear.

Now this is probably going to put me over my allotted time today. I hope you will forgive me. But I want to share an excerpt of what Acts 4:26-29 in one man’s life when he faced opposition for being a Christian.

Christian Reger, [a Christian pastor,] spent four years as a prisoner in [a concentration camp.]

Each prisoner was allowed only one letter a month, and exactly one month from the date of his incarceration Christian Reger received the first news from his wife. In the fragments of the letter, which had been carefully clipped into pieces by a censor, she chatted about the family and assured him of her love. At the very bottom Reger’s wife printed a Bible reference: Acts 4:26-29.

That afternoon Reger was to undergo interrogation. He would be called on to name other Christians. If he succumbed, those Christians would be captured. But if he refused to cooperate, there was a good chance he would be beaten with clubs. He knew firsthand about “rulers gathering together against the Lord.”

Reger moved to the waiting area outside the interrogation room. He was trembling. The door opened, and a fellow minister whom Reger had never met came out. Without looking at Reger or changing the expression on his face, he walked over to him, slipped something into Reger’s coat pocket, and walked away. Seconds later guards appeared and ushered Reger inside the room. The interrogations were surprisingly easy and involved no violence.

When Reger arrived back at the barracks, he remembered the odd encounter with the other minister. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a matchbox. *Oh,* he thought, *what a kind gesture. Matches are priceless in the barracks.* He found no matches inside, however, just a folded slip of paper. Reger unfolded the paper, and his heart beat hard against his chest. Neatly printed on the paper was this reference: Acts 4:26-29.

It was a miracle, a message from God. That minister could not possibly have seen the letter from Reger’s wife—the man was a stranger.

It was a small miracle, as miracles go, but sufficient to anchor his faith in bedrock that could not be shaken, not even by the atrocities he would witness over the next four years.

[Reger testifies,] “God did not rescue me and make my suffering easier. He simply assured me that he was alive, and knew I was here. We Christians drew together. We formed a church here, among other convicted pastors and priests—We found our identity as one flesh, as part of Christ’s body.”1[[1]](#footnote-1)

Where are you going to go in the face of opposition or trouble? Go to your brothers and sisters in faith. And with them, go to the great promises of God in his word, and in your prayers. Amen.

1. Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, 157-160, condensed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)