

Acts 4:23-31

Looking to Him with Closed Eyes

**[RECORD]**

Working in the Kindergarten, I get two different perspectives on the children as they're learning. Since I am not the teacher, I spend most of my day supporting the learning of the students. Usually this means the kids are sitting on the carpet in the room, facing the teacher, with me sitting in a chair behind them, making sure they are paying attention and following the rules. This is the first of the two perspectives. Moreover, it is the more *negative* of the two perspectives, and not just because when I sit behind them, as any of the C-PREP ladies can tell you, the view I get of the children is just an unbroken horizon of tiny butt-cracks. Nothing but ill-fitting pants as far as the eye can see! As you can imagine, it's not the most favourable perspective. But it's not just the butt cracks: when I am given this perspective of the kids, I tend to have the mindset that each lovely 5 year old is a broken-rule waiting to happen. I am hyper-vigilant against speaking without raising hands, staring at shoes instead of the smartboard, poking neighbours, and (of course), picking noses. I expect the worst out of them, and I'm ready to crack down on them for each little violation. It's my job, but it's really not the best way to view a child. Or anyone, for that matter.

But there is another perspective. It's one I am fortunate to have, since not all Program Assistants get to have it. Everyday, I am lucky enough to "play teacher" and run the calendar and morning message portion of the day, reinforcing math concepts, time concepts, rhyming, spelling, reading, and other literacy concepts. It's my favourite part of the day. During this part of the daily routine, my perspective is entirely different: I am not behind them, watching anonymous butt-cracks pick their nose. Instead, I am in front of them, and the view I get is faces; tiny human faces full of smiles, wonder, and delight. I no longer expect the worst out of them; instead, I'm attentive to them at their *best*. Curious, thoughtful, proud, engaged children, watching them fill their brains with important education right before my eyes. Sure, they still call out without raising their hands, and they still get more interested in their shoes than my lesson, and they still forget about the existence of kleenex. And I still see all those things. But I am not *focused* on those things. I have a different perspective. I expect the best out of them, not the worst. I see them for who they really are; not a collection of rule-breakers and disgusting conduct, but a treasure trove of childlike wonder, who I get to laugh with, learn with, and love.

**It's all a matter of perspective. Do I see the worst in them, and expect misbehaviour and disappointment and failure? Or do I see the best in them, and expect goodness and wonder and success?**

Our passage this morning sees our heroes, the apostles, responding to a newly-fulfilled promise of Jesus, a promise that they likely wish He never would have made: the promise of persecution. True, they have been delivered from imprisonment (for now) by the Holy Spirit's words of power, as well as the goodness of the miracle performed through Peter. But they are now, like Jesus, enemies of their own people and of the state. They know how this injustice will end: with crosses. Just like their Lord and Saviour. And so it becomes a matter of perspective: How will they view their suffering? How will they view their mission? How will they view the call of the Master? What was the perspective of the early Church in the face of suffering, oppression, and hardships? Let's read Acts 4:23-31.

This is the longest prayer recorded in the Book of Acts, and there are a few important things to learn from it. First I want to talk about how the prayer is offered: it is the first glimpse as to the perspective offered by this passage.

Who is it that says this prayer? When I first read the passage I mentally assumed it was Peter praying, since it's always Peter saying everything in these early chapters of Acts. But that's not what the text says. Rather, after reporting the entirety of the account with the crippled beggar to their "companions", the entire group "raised their voices together to God". This is a beautiful distinction; a clear portrait of absolute unity. The Greek word translated "together" (you knew the Greek was coming, right?) is *homothymadon*. It is a word that Luke enjoys. It is only found 12 times in the whole NT, and Luke uses it in Acts eleven of those times. Notice the conspicuous prefix on that word: HOMO. It's a prefix that means, simply, "SAME". **They are together. They are the same. Same in belief, same in agreement, same in prayer, same in standing before God.**

To Luke, "homothymadon" strongly communicates the central identifying factor of the early church: they are absolutely, totally, dedicated... TO ITS VERY CORE.... to being of one accord. Peter and John, clearly leaders in the early movement of Jesus followers, are not recorded as the ones who prayed on this occasion. Instead, they are merely two out of a huge company of companions! Equals; partners; family. Together! Everything that happened to Peter and John (and the formerly crippled beggar) happened to those who are hearing about it for the first time. They are a BODY, and if something happens to one part of the body, the whole body feels it! And so **they raise their voice TOGETHER and seek their Father TOGETHER and are strengthened and encouraged because they are TOGETHER.** This is the one thing Jesus prayed for in regards to His followers after He is gone: unity. Togetherness. Homothymadon. And here, at the first suggestion of suffering and persecution, we are given a portrait of believers coming together in prayer. It's so easy to miss, but so crucial not to! If we seek Him, we need each other. I need you. And we need to be together in this! Now, let's get back to the perspective of the prayer.

But before we examine THIS prayer, we are going to pretend that Shane is offering a communion meditation, and we are going to recite the Lord's Prayer together. The Lord's Prayer, from Matthew 6, is called such because it is the template our Lord gave us for approaching the Father. It's not a secret handshake, or a magical combination of words: it speaks more to an attitude than a formula for seeking the will and blessing of the Almighty. The version we are all familiar with (the one that Shane awesomely gets us to recite) adds to the end of it (the "thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen" part), but it's totally True and totally Fantastic, so that's fine. But let's **SAY THE LORD'S PRAYER TOGETHER NOW.**

Again, Jesus is not instructing us to pray exactly like this every single time we pray, not that there is anything wrong with recitation of sacred words, or committing Scripture to memory as an act of obedience. However, as I mentioned, **this prayer is a template. It properly prepares our hearts for communicating with our Creator, which is as simple a definition of prayer as I can offer.** Therefore, probably not surprisingly, if you examine the prayer in Acts 4, you will find that it aligns nicely with the framework of the prayer in Matthew 6.

1. **Both begin with a proper address of the Father, describing His divine uniqueness and holy character.** "Hallowed" is just a Shakespeare-ish way to say "holy". In Acts, God is addressed as "Sovereign Lord, Who has made the heavens and earth, the sea and all that is in them". This is very OT language, spanning the Law (Exodus 19), Historical books (Nehemiah 9), Poetic books (Psalm 146, which we read this morning!), and the Prophets (Isaiah 42). "**Sovereign**", since He is in absolute control, which would have been a tremendous encouragement to those suffering in His Name. "**Lord**", because He bears authority and deserves allegiance. In fact, the word here translated Lord isn't the usual "kyrios", which is a political title. Rather, it is "despotes", which should sound familiar (the English word despot is derived from this word, and "despot" is not a nice word). Despot refers to a master/slave relationship; a "despotes" is one with absolute authority to act however he wants and treat his subjects however he wants. In other words, those who lift up their voices in prayer begin by addressing the fact that He is in control, and they are His slaves (not servants, but even lower... SLAVES), and He can treat them however He likes because He has absolute power.

To emphasize this absolute power, they extend the intro to their prayer to cover His role as Creator. Creator of what? It's the same language as Genesis 1: Creator of heaven, earth, the sea and all that is in it. Things above, things below, and the sea. Perhaps the supernatural, the natural, and even chaos, which is what the ocean represented to the Jewish people: a violent, untame-able force which God alone can subdue. You know... like Rome. Or the Sanhedrin. Or disease and death. Or being medically incurable and unable to walk for 40 years. He is Sovereign, He is Lord, and He is Creator. But, as always, even in the very beginning of all things, He wields these powerful titles in a way that brings love and redemption to His feeble, wayward Creatures. It is a treat to be a slave in the house of a "despotes" like Him. It is a comfort to have a King like Jesus reign Sovereign over our lives. It is life as life is intended for us to know our "**Creator**", who formed us (and continues to form us) with delight and love. Even in suffering. In fact, usually THROUGH suffering. This is the first level of similarity between the Lord's Prayer and the prayer of Acts 4, and it is the first glimpse into their good perspective: they ascribed unto their God titles of authority that reminded them, a) how powerful He was, b) how caring He was, and c) how small they were. Proper perspective.

2. The second similarity between the two prayers has to do with the priority of our requests. What do we want more? Good things for ourselves? Or good things for Him and His Kingdom? Before uttering a word of personal need or desire, Jesus in Matthew 6 and the church in Acts 4 first illustrate the proper perspective on why we are here in the first place. The first request made in Jesus' prayer is, tellingly, "May your Kingdom, and your will, be known and experienced in earth, just as it is in heaven." In other words, May you get what YOU deserve, before we ask for what we DON'T deserve. **May our focus be on your Kingdom and your will: not our own lives and our own desires.** In other words: May He get glory before we get bread. What a challenge!

And does Acts 4 share this perspective? Yes indeed. By connecting the opening words of Psalm 2 to the crucifixion of Jesus, the church makes a direct connection to God's guiding plan and glorious will. We see the Kerygma again, the historical nature of Jesus and the shared blame of humanity.

The church declares that here (yes, even here in this very city!), humanity gathered together (not homothymadon, but a definite direct contrast to the church nonetheless) against Jesus, the holy and anointed One. The "kings of the earth" are represented by Herod, the King of Judea. The "gathered rulers" indicates Pilate and Herod being united by their condemnation of the Christ. The peoples and the nations are represented by the Jews and the Gentiles. By the way: the "raging Gentiles" are given the image of wild horses stamping and rebelling against the reins... though even they will too be subdued by the Master. And that is the point of quoting Psalm 2, and that is how it connects to Jesus' command to seek the Kingdom and God's will before ourselves: all of the foolish, vain, rebellious planning by the enemies of Jesus just resulted in the fulfillment of His will! **They pursued their own selfish desires, out of fear or pride or ignorance, and STILL God's Kingdom came! STILL God's will was done!** That is the second crucial perspective of the early church when encountering suffering: they understood that the **most important thing was to be aligned with His will, within His Kingdom.** Seek ye first the Kingdom of Christ? NO! You vain, ignorant fool! Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His will for us, His slaves. Whether you are on His side or not; whether you are raising crosses or BEING raised on a cross; His will shall be done. So you might as well be on the winning side. Even if it means enduring trials and hardship and pain.

3. Now. **This is not to say that your desires, hopes and needs are unimportant to the Father. But notice something: we don't request bread until we request His Kingdom first.** The early church acknowledged that as well. Finally, after 94 Greek words of prayer (I counted them all), the believers finally get to their petition. And that request is still only 21 words long in the Greek, and it STILL has JESUS' GLORY as the absolute goal!

"And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word." The believers don't pray for the threats to be taken away! They don't ask to be pain-free and comfortable! They don't ask to skirt their responsibilities or dilute their sacrifice or skip over their suffering! **The only thing they ask for, as they encounter persecution for the first time, is boldness. Not boldness to endure: boldness to proclaim Him AS they endure!** They already know that God's presence is in them with the Holy Spirit. They already know that God's will is guiding them. They already know He is in control. They already know He loves them completely, and loves those to whom they are sent as witnesses. Therefore, what they ask is that God would empower them to speak boldly in their time of suffering. That they would be empowered to perform miracles; that His healing hand would perform signs and wonders in order for His Name to be praised and His people to be saved. In the face of an oppression that in 3 short chapters will claim the first life of a follower of Christ, they ask only for one selfless thing: the strength and boldness to continue making Jesus Christ known to all. What a beautiful, Christlike perspective! What a challenge for us comfy Christians who think an angry Facebook message is the definition of persecution. What a slap in the face of those who think not selling cheeseburgers to gay people is "taking a stand for truth". What a motivator for those of us who are too timid to share our hope because we might seem silly or old fashioned. The only need they had for themselves was the need for boldness and a willingness to serve Him more wholeheartedly. That was their daily bread. What a refreshing perspective for those who endure suffering. Which is, of course, every human who ever lived! Therefore, **boldly present your requests to your Father. But present your requests to Him humbly, and with a desire to see Him glorified above all other desires.**

Oh, and by the way... do you think God heard their communal prayer? Yes indeed, He heard the prayer. And He answered the prayer. He makes His presence known through an earthquake, as He did on Mt Sinai in Exodus 19, and as He did during the call and cleansing of Isaiah in Isaiah 6. Often, our God speaks in whispers, not whirlwinds or earthquakes, as Elijah the prophet found out on Sinai. And **sometimes He rocks our foundations in a way that leaves no doubt to the question of whether He has heard us.** As in the Day of Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, God confirms His presence with power, and He answers their requests. Because, as verse 31 says, they were "filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to declare the Word of God with freedom of speech." Hey... isn't that what they requested from God? Boldness to speak? Sounds like God is granting them their request. **Why? Selflessness. Selflessness, and a desire to see Jesus glorified. They had the proper perspective.**

As the title of the sermon said, the believers were united together in looking to Him. But they had to close their eyes to do so. Their prayer is a beautiful reminder to each of us on the proper perspective we need to have at all times, whether we grieve and suffer and hurt, or whether we celebrate and praise and give thanks. No matter what we go through, our **perspective is crucial.** We can either see the ugly side, the negative side, the "butt crack" side of following Jesus: the **hardships.** The **sacrifice of self.** The **denial of our own vain pursuits.**

Or we can look this beautiful gift in the face and laugh with it, and learn with it, and grow together with it. We can see those same hardships as an **opportunity to bring Him glory.** We can see the same self-sacrifice as a **down payment on a hope that surpasses all fear, doubt and pain.** We can see the denial of our own vain pursuits as a **reconfiguration of our heart, soul, mind and strength towards a truly rewarding pursuit of our Father's desires.** And through it all, we can see a **community that loves us and accepts us and lifts our voice together towards Him.** And most of all, we can see a **Sovereign Lord and Loving Creator, Who unravels His will and unveils His Kingdom for us, even as we suffer for His Holy Name.** That is, IF we're fortunate enough to suffer for His Holy Name. And that, my friends, is a bold new perspective!

SEEK YE FIRST?