

Acts 4:23-31

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[0 : 0 0] Well, hi. If we've not met before, my name's Andrew. I'm one of the leaders here in Harvest Church. And it's my privilege to be preaching this morning.

But actually, I'm also having somebody else join me in the preach this morning. So we're doing a bit of a tag team job. Ruth will be joining me in a few minutes and developing one particular point. Can we have the PowerPoint on, please?

And we're going to be continuing in our series devoted, devoted to God, devoted to each other, devoted to mission. As we explore the book of Acts, if you've got your Bible with you, you may want to turn to Acts 4.23.

But it's also going to come up on the screen so you can read it with me here. And so Acts 4.23 to 31. 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.

When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens 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.

[1 : 1 0] Why do the nations rage and the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and his anointed one. 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.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Stretch out your hand to heal. Perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. And after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

And if you've been with us over the last few weeks, we've been working through a section of Acts which has been linked to or starts with the healing of a crippled man, a crippled beggar.

And this is the continuation of the story. Peter and John get arrested at one point and have a night in prison. And this is when they come out of prison. This is where we've got to in this passage now.

[2 : 2 3] So they've been released. And what an amazing thing has happened. All as a result of a simple step of obedience to pray for somebody who's sick to be healed.

And you can go, wow, wouldn't have expected all this to happen. The cities have been uproar. There's been people complaining about them. The gospel's going forward. Others have got saved. It's a wonderful scenario.

And yet within that we've got this moment of what could be called persecution has happened. And as they come out of this and they come and gather with the believers, Peter and John come and gather with the believers, we read this passage.

And I want to draw three very simple points from it. The first was this. I'm going to use this phrase. When times are hard, what do they do? They turn to God in prayer. When times are hard, they turn to God in prayer.

And, you know, prayer isn't an optional thing. It's not an optional extra, well, I pray when I feel like it. Prayer reinforces our dependence on God.

[3 : 2 9] It says, hey, God, you're God, not me. It's so much more. It's essential. It is, you know, how can we know someone if we don't talk with them?

I don't know if you've ever tried to have a relationship with someone and you don't talk with them or you even ignore them. And yet prayer is, that's fundamental to a Christian, to a believer. Prayer is so important.

And God loves us to talk with him, not just to him. Because I think too easily we can come with a shopping list of, God, I want you to do this, this, this, this. And in that order, please, buy this date, please.

No, no, no. We want to come and talk with God. Prayer is part of it. It's that working and part of our worship to God. And I'm going to pause there and actually hand over to Ruth at this point and ask Ruth to come and share some of the things she's been learning about prayer.

And I'm just going to get her a chair. Okay, Ruth, go for it.

[4 : 38] I was wondering how my bit would fit in with the sermon. I haven't quite worked that out, but there we go.

I want to say something about breath prayer or active prayer, as some people call it. And basically what it is, it's a one-sentence prayer that can be said in one breath.

Therefore, breath prayer. And it's something I've discovered over the last few years. And it's just a treasure to have.

The beauty of this kind of prayer is that you can say it at any time you want. And it gives you a constant connection with God. No need to think what you want to pray.

You have something already that you want to say to God at any time. It also makes you more open to hearing back from God. And after time, we internalize the prayer because we've repeated it so many times.

[5 : 48] Say it again and again and again. So many times a day, so many times a week. It sinks in, I think, into our subconscious.

And after a year or so, it prays itself. It's quite amazing. So these little prayers that we can discover for ourselves.

You can either... I'm already sitting down. It can be a phrase, a sentence from the Psalms. Like I know somebody who always prays, Lord, make haste to help me.

I thought, that's a great prayer. It can be from the Lord's Prayer. I often pray, may your kingdom come. When I meet a very difficult situation, I pray, oh, let your kingdom come.

It could be from a hymn, a line that you've sung when you were little at assembly. And you learned and it stayed with you. And it can come back as a prayer.

[6 : 55] Or it can express your own desires. So it could be something like, Jesus, fill me with your peace.

Father, hold me close. Holy Spirit, baptize me with fire. God, I surrender to your ways.

It can be anything that is important to you at the moment. And as I said, the prayer is more discovered rather than created.

We ask God to show us his will, his way, his truth for our present need. So now you may have something like that already, that you pray repeatedly, and that's great.

If you don't, you may want to give it a go. And you can join me in this little exercise and discover your own personal breath prayer.

[7 : 57] So if you're up for this, I will give some instructions along the way.

There will be bits of silence where we can think and listen to God. And who knows, at the end you may have your own personal breath prayer.

So if you're up for it, relax, sit. Quietly in God's presence. Some people find it helpful to close their eyes.

Some don't. Take a couple of deep breaths and become aware of God's presence. Now allow God to call you by name.

Jane. Nathan. Diana. Andrew. And allow this question to surface.

[9 : 15] What do you want? What do you want? Answer this question simply and directly.

Maybe a single word will come to mind. Peace. Faith. Comfort.

Strength. Perhaps a phrase. To feel your love. To understand your truth. Now we'll just take a couple of moments to be quiet and answer that question.

What do you want? Thank you.

Now connect this phrase, if you've come up with one or a word, with the most comfortable way you have of speaking about God. So you might say Jesus or Abba or Heavenly Father.

[10 : 44] And if you can, if you have pen and paper with you, it might be a good idea to write it down.

Okay, so come back to me again.

Then, you may have a phrase or a sentence or a word that you want to use as your breath prayer. Over the next few days, allow God to adjust this prayer ever so slightly. For instance, you may realize that you might have said, oh, I want to understand God's truth.

But then tomorrow or the day after, you might think, oh, no, I really want to do and walk in God's truth. So just make slight adjustments that will help you to be expressing exactly what you mean.

[12:04] Then prayer, breath prayer, as often as possible. So when you wake up, when you put the kettle on, when you walk to the car, when you wait for the traffic lights to change, when you wait for an appointment at the doctor's, when you wait at the checkout, when you wait for an appointment at the checkout, when you wait for an appointment at the checkout, as I said, it becomes internalized or almost prays itself.

It comes up from the subconscious when you least expect it. My breath prayer often brings a smile to my face, especially when I'm miles away in my thoughts.

I think about something completely different and then suddenly this bubbles up. And like an old friend, I think, yes, this is what I want.

This is what I do. This is who I am. This instant connection with God gets initiated by the deep place in me where God dwells.

And I find, over time, it brings a degree of contentment and pleasure. Wonderful. Thank you so much.

[13:51] Yes, let's applause. Thank you so much.

Thank you so much. I had got planned. I found myself using this prayer. I surrender all. And that's become very much part of me.

If I wake in the night and I'm concerned about something, I surrender it to you, Lord. Because you're my God. That's the implication. You're the Lord. You're the one who's in control. I don't need to fear.

I don't need to be anxious. I don't need to worry. And so, for me, it's just become part of my everyday life. And when we then shared about it, I thought, oh, that's what it is. Which was just so helpful.

But prayer is outworked in lots of different ways. That's just one way. We pray together as a church. First Thursday of the month for what we call an hour of prayer. We individually pray.

[15:05] We have our prayer 25 bookmarks. Don't worry if you've got one. If you haven't, you can pick them up. They're on the table there. Three things we want to pray for our deepening relationship with God. Three things we want to pray for each other.

Three things we want to pray about mission and how we bring the love of God to others. Really helpful bookmark for 2025. If you haven't got one, I appreciate some people don't have books any longer. You have Kindles. I don't know how you get this done to your Kindle.

But maybe stick it on your fridge door or something instead. Do use that. We have a new Friday prayer time coming soon. Hannah will tell us more about that in a few weeks' time.

Lifeproof prayer. Let's be a community of people who pray together. Prayer is so important. It's a way of expressing our dependence on God, our love for God.

Can I encourage us? Let's be a people who pray more together. And there you go. Pick up a prayer card. Sorry, I'm running a bit behind on the PowerPoint. The second one I want to draw from this passage.

[16:01] When times are hard, let's remind ourselves what the Bible has to say about what's going on. The disciples here, they pray and then they remind themselves in Scripture what's going on.

They're not surprised that they're suffering persecution. They're not surprised because they find it in Scripture. They've read about it in Scripture. And, you know, the Bible has lots to speak to us about, both about who God is.

That's the first thing. And, you know, so turning to the Word of God is so important because it reveals something about who God is. But also it reveals something about, or it speaks into our circumstances.

And so, you know, you can look at those passages another time where it talks about hardship. John 16, 33, Romans 5, 2 to 4, which reminds us that we will have hardship and trouble, but we're to take heart.

God's with us. And so this is why Scripture is so important to us, why it's so important that the Word shapes our experience. Rather than experience shaping us, the Word needs to shape our

experience.

[17:10] And so we grab hold of the Bible. We see who God is. We get hold of the big picture of who God is. And in that context, then, we gaze on our circumstances and we're able to go, oh, okay, it's okay.

I can trust God. And fundamentally, that's what they do here. They say, yeah, okay, we, yeah, this is tough, but we can trust God.

And you may be facing tough circumstances today. There may be hard times at the moment going on in your life. It may be something to do with sickness and health, maybe for you or for a loved one, a parent, a son, a spouse, a child, whatever it may well be.

It may be it's hardship at work. It may be it feels like it's hardship on every account. And God wants to meet us in it. And so we start by praying and focusing on who God, we start by praying and talking with God and surrendering ourselves to God in prayer.

And then we remind ourselves, we strengthen ourselves through the Word. If you're ever in a circumstance where you want to find a way of expressing your hardship to God, what you're going through to God, but you don't know how, turn to the Psalms.

[18:17] The Psalms are full of accounts of hardship and difficulty. I remember somebody once saying to me, if you haven't found a way of expressing your heart's desire and what's going on in your hardship in your life, by the time you get to about Psalm 25, they'd be amazed.

Because there's so much in there. Psalm 23, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear not. Why? Because you are with me. Okay, I can surrender to God.

I can trust God. I'm reminded, God is with me. He doesn't leave us or forsake us. So when times are tough, turn to God in prayer. By the way, that isn't the only time to turn to God in prayer.

Let's make sure we are a people of prayer. Remind ourselves what the Scriptures have to say. And then thirdly, they sought God for boldness and courage. And God loves to do this.

And, you know, asking is important. I think sometimes we haven't, or James says it, you have not because you haven't asked. You know, we need to actually ask. And most importantly, we need to receive empowering from the Holy Spirit.

[19:27] We had the Alpha Holy Spirit Day yesterday. It was a precious tender time of God's Spirit, I think, encountering virtually everybody in the room. Such a precious time. And yet too often in our busyness, we forget to stop and pause and ask God to come and fill us with his Holy Spirit.

And, you know, courage isn't one of those things where you just say, oh, I've got courage and it's all okay. But courage basically allows us to confront fear.

We actually have it as one of our values in our Harvest Church family. That actually, courage isn't about the absence of fear. It's taking steps of faith in the presence of fear.

And that's what these guys do. Basically, they say, hey, they get filled. You know, after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God. What? Boldly.

And Graham developed that thought as well last week. If you weren't here for Graham's Preach, I was downstairs on the membership course. If you weren't here for Graham's Preach, I would encourage you to listen to it. I was listening to it on Thursday morning on the recording.

[20:30] You can get it on our website. It's so important. We need to know that God gives us courage. He enables us to be bold. And how does he do that? He does it by his Holy Spirit.

And therefore, we can then make choices to exercise our faith. To put our faith into practice. To put our trust in God into practice.

And so when times are hard, we start with turn to God in prayer. Turn to God in prayer. And if you have something like that breath prayer, which Reed's talking about, that can be so helpful. When you, it sort of just wells up within you.

Oh God, I surrender myself to you. You're God, I am not. Or whatever your breath prayer would be. Don't be encouraged from the word. Let the word come and strengthen you.

And then receive the Holy Spirit. Ask for the Holy Spirit. Receive him. Welcome him into your heart. And ask him to give you courage and boldness for whatever you're facing. Or whatever else you need. For he gives lots of other things too.

[21:32] Great grace, boldness, courage. Sure, but he also produces his fruit in us. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. Goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. Wow. And why do we do all that?

So we can see God glorified. And his kingdom come. Here on earth. In our lives. And because it's in our lives.

Through our lives. To those that God puts around us. John 16.33 says this. In this world you will have trouble. Now you could stop there.

And it would be true. I'm accurate and right. But Jesus is recorded as going on and saying this. But. Take heart. I love that. What?

Take heart. Stiff and straightens the back. Take heart. I have overcome the world. That's Jesus' invitation for us.

[22 : 33] We can know God's power. God's presence in our lives. That when we face hardship. When times are tough. God with us. Helping us. Empowering us.

Helping us to live this out. So I'm going to conclude at this point. God's great. He loves us. He loves each of us. His children. He delights over us. We have a loving heavenly father. Who is aware and attentive.

Of each and every one of our situations. And scenarios. He doesn't say we won't go through troubles. In fact he tells us we will go through trouble. We will have hard times.

But he's given us three great tools. To journey through hard times. First thing. Turn to God. In prayer. However you do that. Turn to God in prayer.

[23 : 29] Secondly. Be strengthened. Be encouraged through his word. That's why it's important to be reading the word on a regular basis. Because actually then. The spirit of God can remind you of something. That you read a few days ago.

When you were in that situation. Or even speak to you as you're reading it. And then thirdly. Receive. Welcome the Holy Spirit. Receive him. For his grace. His mercy.

His power. His courage. And boldness. So we need to ask. And be filled. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. Now. What I'd love us to do.

By the way. Just to remind you. If you've got questions on this preach. Or any of our preaches. There's a number. You can text there. There's an email address. Send in a message. And we will respond. In a subsequent preach. To those questions.

Now. What I'd love us to do though. Is this. I'd like us to turn to God. And. This is going to be our response. Or I hope it will be our response. Today. And I'd love us to pray.

[24 : 24] And where I'd like us to go to. And sorry. I didn't warn you. Sandy. If you're able to find this. It'd be really helpful. But don't worry if you can't. Is I'd like us to turn to the gospel of Luke. Chapter 11. And in Luke.

Chapter 11. We find right at the beginning. The disciples. To see Jesus praying. And they turn to him and say. Teach us to pray. Just as John taught his disciples.

And Jesus said this. When you pray. Say. Now I'm going to read it from. This passage. I appreciate many of us in school.

Or whatever. Would have learned. In quotes. The Lord's Prayer. And it's not quite the same. But we're going to work from scripture. And what I'd like to encourage us to do. Is we read through this. And you may actually find it easy to close your eyes.

I'm going to read it. Is to encounter God. At this moment. And particularly if you're struggling with a hardship. If you're struggling. With something. I want to encourage you.

[25 : 24] Use this prayer. As a way. Of surrendering yourself to God. Of fixing your heart on God. Of communicating with God. And trusting him to give you. His strength.

Through the circumstances you're in. So Jesus said this. Father. We come. To a father. Daddy. A good father. In fact a great father. Perfect. In all his ways. Father. Hallowed be your name. I worship you. How do I worship you? I come and I sit at your feet. And say you are God. God. You're my God. I worship you.

I remind myself of who you are. You're the great I am. The Lord of Lords. The King of all kings. Mighty God who saves. I surrender myself to you.

[26 : 24] And I'm even going to surrender myself to you now. With this next phrase. Your kingdom come. In this situation I'm in. Your kingdom come.

In these circumstances. I want you to be glorified Lord. I want to see your kingdom come. The love and grace and mercy of God to be extended through these circumstances I'm in. Your kingdom come.

Provide for us. Give us each day our daily bread. Oh God. Give me what I need for my circumstances. All that I need. Father. Would you give me all I need for my circumstances. And then there's a reminder. Forgive us our sins. Oh. Yeah. Lord. If there's anything in me which is about me. I want.

I ask for your forgiveness Lord. I want to surrender myself to you. Abandon myself to your grace and mercy. But also. You say here. Forgive.

[27 : 28] For we also forgive everyone who sins against us. God. If there's somebody who's sinning against me. Maybe that's even part of this hardship. I want to release them. I want to forgive them. I don't want to hold it against them.

Even if they've done it 50 times. I'm still not going to hold it against them.