

The Church Model for Engaging in Difficulty

Acts 3-4:31

It's been cool to look together at the early church community described in the book of Acts, and to imagine what it was like during that time of God's special anointing upon His people. God was moving in very unique ways as He was empowering His church to very quickly spread His message of repentance, forgiveness, and salvation through Jesus the risen Messiah. God broke the language barrier so other nations could hear of His deeds. His followers were boldly sharing with those around them. They continually devoted themselves to being taught, to fellowship, celebrating the Lord, eating together, and prayer. They helped those among them who were in need, and there was a spirit of gladness and sincerity of heart as they praised God and as He was adding to their number.

Today as we continue our study in the book of Acts, we're going to take a bit of a "zoomed out view" of a large chunk of scripture. Most often on a Sunday morning we bite off a smaller passage of scripture and go through it verse by verse, but today I'd like for us to take a bigger section of scripture and we're going to fly high and look at the events and application to us from an overarching, grander perspective. And I believe in doing this, God's going to give us some good insight for our personal lives, and our corporate lives together as One Church. We won't read the entire passage together, but I'm going to narrate the passage in my own words, yet highlight key verses and point out some observations as we go along. You can still follow along with me in your Bibles, we'll start the narrative in [Acts 3:1](#), it says...

Now the ninth hour would have been 3pm, and there's evidence that suggest this was perhaps a long-standing Jewish tradition to have set times of personal prayer three times a day- at 9am, noon, and then

3pm. And so, people would perhaps stop in the field where they were working, or in their homes- or if they were able to- they'd come to the temple courts and spend a few minutes in prayer with God. So, Peter and John are heading to the temple at 3pm and if you continue reading, you'll see that right there at the gated entrance to the temple courtyard is a man who couldn't walk, begging for money. This was his gig- everyone was accustomed to seeing him there daily- this is how he made his living. And so, the man calls out to Peter and John, and even as he is calling out perhaps he's already looking around to make sure he doesn't miss anyone else coming in that he could ask for money. So, Peter wants to make sure he has the man's full attention, so he says, "Look at us!" And the guy looks at them, expecting the coins to rattle his cup any second. But Peter says, [verse 6](#)...

Notice this wasn't a "pray for God's healing and then hope and wait for it" type moment. It was a command with instant effects. Now, as believers we pray for God's healing, and many times in His mercy He answers our prayers with healing; but at other times He doesn't heal, because He has a different plan. And there are groups today that would look at a passage like this and say "See, you don't ask God for His healing, you just speak it into existence and claim that healing and it will be yours, just like Peter did here." And then if healing doesn't happen, it means you just didn't have enough faith. I want to caution you that *God* is the only one with the power to speak things into existence. That is one of His attributes that separates Him from us. Yes, we are to aspire to be more like Him, and yes, our words are powerful, but we should be very careful in attempting to claim His attributes. As we move through the book of Acts and we see the powerful things God did, I want you to see that this was a very special time of God's power- He was inaugurating the reign of Jesus, ushering in the beginning stages of His Kingdom, confirming the holiness and message of Jesus, and fast tracking the knowledge of Himself around the world. And Peter knew this- He knew God had given Him access to this healing power for a

time. And as we see God work in and through the early church, we see that He manifested His power for specific Gospel focused reasons. But this season of extra-ordinary miracle working from the apostles didn't last permanently. In fact, we'll see later in Acts and in the other New Testament books that this season of Pentecost miracles appears to die down a bit as time went on. But in saying that, I know that God still works in similar ways, He still miraculously heals, and does things on behalf of His people and for His glory that are otherwise completely inexplicable- I just want you to recognize the specialness, the uniqueness of this super concentrated season of miracles we see at the beginning of the book of Acts.

Ok, back to the narrative- after Peter says walk in the name of Jesus, he reaches out his hand, helps up the man, and the man begins to walk and leap and praise God. Now all the people were amazed- they knew this was the same man they had seen there daily- who had been lame since birth, who needed help every day from others getting there and then back home. There was no question of "could this have been rigged?" but rather they recognized this was an impossible miracle from God. And so, as the people were looking strangely at Peter and John, Peter recognizes (in fact he was probably counting on) the opportunity to share about Jesus. Immediately Peter speaks to confirm that the miracle did not occur because of his and John's power or piety, but rather the healing occurred through Jesus, who was put to death by even some of those standing right there listening. Yet, Peter explains, God raised Him back to life, and this was all part of God's plan, as seen in the books of the prophets. And then he tells them what they should do in response to what he is sharing with them, [verses 19-20...](#)

I love the phrasing of this verse... Repent and return to God so that *times of refreshing* may come from the presence of the Lord. Isn't that what the world needs right now- a refreshing season? Isn't that what we ourselves, our friends, families, co-workers need- a time of

refreshment caused by God's presence? The Bible makes it very clear that what holds us back from that refreshment is sin in our hearts- a wandering in some way away from the Lord. Now obviously for the unbeliever, there is refreshment, peace, hope and renewal that will occur as faith and trust is placed in Jesus for the first time and His forgiveness received. But I think this verse speaks even to those of us who *have* received Jesus and his forgiveness. Even as we follow Jesus, as life goes along, it is inevitable that there will arise areas in our life in which we will need to repent and be corrected, and if we are able to recognize these areas, and confess them before the Lord- greater refreshment from the presence of the Lord will be the result.

Peter goes on to say that Moses and others from their ancestors foretold the coming of Jesus, and that Jesus was the prophet whom all must listen to or they would end up facing destruction. But God did not desire destruction for them, but He rather desired blessing for them- the blessing of Abraham. This blessing is given through Jesus, who desires to turn hearts from evil to Himself. Now, as Peter and John are interacting with the crowd and speaking these things, a bunch of formal religious leaders (the ones who crucified Jesus just two months earlier) come and arrest Peter and John. This had to have been a little shocking for them, since the last time these guys arrested someone from their group, they crucified Him (Jesus). I'm sure scary thoughts were going through their minds- "thanks for the cool miracles God, but are they going to kill us now?" So, they keep Peter and John in prison overnight, but look what [verse 4 of chapter 4](#) says...

Sweet. Obviously, there were many who responded negatively to the message of repentance through Jesus (like the crew that arrested them), but this verse 4 tells us there was still a good number of those who took the words to heart and wanted to get right with God. Meanwhile... the very next day Peter and John are put on trial before the religious leaders. And there, Peter seizes a second opportunity to talk about Jesus. He tells how it is Jesus

and Jesus alone who has the power to do this type of miracle, and that [\(verse 12\)](#) *“there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”* How’s that for boldness? He basically told them “There’s no other hope for you other than Jesus- period.”

Now the religious leaders recognized their bold audacity, yet observed also that they were “untrained.” As in, they didn’t appear to have passed Pharisee 101 in school, or they hadn’t taken the class “How to Sound Religious.” They weren’t speaking in King James English with “thees” and “thous,” yet- they spoke with confidence. Interesting. They also realized there wasn’t much they could punish them for, the story was pretty clear whether they liked it or not- the guy who was healed was right there, walking around. They couldn’t deny the miracle, so they decided they would just threaten them to never speak of or teach about Jesus again. But, [verse 19-20...](#)

What an awesome response. “You guys figure out amongst yourselves whose authority is greater- yours or God’s, but either way, we’re not going to stop.” And the religious leaders threatened them even further after this answer, but then released them. And so, Peter and John left and found the other believers and reported to them what the leaders had said. They shared with them how they had been threatened to never talk about Jesus again- or else, and after filling everyone in on this negative change to their situation, they prayed together. I’m sure they were tempted to become fearful- and I’m sure that they realized their need for God to encourage them and give them guidance on how to respond to this serious change in situation. Everything had been hunky-dory for the past 2 months- it looked like God was allowing them to experience a little bit of Heaven on earth with miracles, awesome fellowship, unity, speaking in new languages, people listening and receiving the message. They knew God to be a miracle working God, yet after what had just happened with this arrest and threat, it was obvious God

wasn't just going to miraculously make life super easy every day. I'm sure part of them was thinking, do we move away somewhere else, do we become a little more discreet in talking about Jesus- do we only talk about Him behind closed doors, or is God wanting us all to just join Jesus in being crucified? Let's read the passage together that records their prayer- this is a super critical pivot point for the early church. So, they tell the church about the threats, then in verse 24 they pray. ([verse 24-31...](#))

Not a massively long prayer by any means, but an example of a prayer that was taken very seriously by God and answered with a physical display of His power during this special season. I want us to look a little more closely at how they prayed considering their difficult situation. Again, since Jesus arose from the dead, things had become pretty awesome. But now just 2 months later, there was a serious obstacle, a serious threat, a serious source of discouragement. The tide had turned. I'm sure you've probably experienced similar situations. Things were going ok, and then all of a sudden it's like "God, what are you doing? Why did that happen? What am I supposed to do now?" Here we see the church immediately turn to God and talk to Him about it. Now, did they complain a whole bunch in their prayer? *"God, it's not fair... Why did You allow this to happen... I can't believe we have to deal with this now."* No. Did they beg him over and over to do a bunch of different things? *"Please God, just change their minds, miraculously don't let them hear us... take the bad guys out of the situation... may we never be harmed by them..."* No. Now, I'm not saying it's wrong to complain to God- God wants to hear from your heart, and he's big enough for you to voice your emotions to Him, and we have examples of David in the Psalms talking (rather singing) very candidly of his anger and frustrations- graphically voicing his concern and anger over those doing evil and over God's appearance of being slow to intervene. And it's not wrong to ask for God's protection and salvation from enemies, we have examples of those type of prayers in Psalms as well. But in this scary scenario, I want you to notice the predominate elements of this

prayer. Some might break it down differently than me, but I see 3 distinct sections in this prayer. The first section is one of praise and worship, in [verse 24](#)...

They start out praising God and addressing Him for who He is as creator of everything that exists. In praising Him they quoted scripture, describing God with the same words in which He described Himself to Moses in the book of Exodus. ([Ex. 20:11](#)) They recognized God for His authority and position as Maker and Ruler of the world. That's a good way to start out, and put into context whatever negative situation is at hand. And then after praising Him with words from scripture, they framed their situation with scripture that applied to their situation, [verses 24-26](#), quoting from Psalm 2 that foretold leaders would rise up against the Messiah; and in [verse 27-28](#) they applied that scripture to their present situation. Lastly, they asked Him to work on their behalf: To see the threats, to give them confidence despite those threats, and to continue His miraculous work through Jesus.

Their prayer consisted of scripture praise, scripture remembrance, and scripture application. In the past, I've described this pattern of prayer as Praise, Promise, and Petition. Praising God for who He is, remembering His promises in His word, and then based on His character we have just praised and the promises we have just remembered, we then form our requests- what we petition of Him. This is actually a pattern of prayer we see throughout scripture over and over again, but this time as the church prayed in this way together, during this special season- the building shook. Notice it doesn't say *they* all shook, and notice too what Luke the author notates as God's answer: "*they were all filled with the Holy Spirit*" and... began to see crazy miracles happen even more regularly. No, that's not what it says. There were more miracles and wonders that would come, but the impressive, miraculous, building-shaking, God sized answer to this prayer was that "*they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.*" The speaking with boldness was

what was emphasized, just like we saw on the day of Pentecost- it wasn't the speaking in tongues of other languages that was the end goal- the end goal was: clearly communicating the gospel. And here at a very critical moment that very realistically could have stifled the spread of the gospel, to the point in which you and I might have never even heard of the name Jesus, here in this moment the church has the wisdom to ask God for boldness no matter the threats; and God then grants them that boldness. You and I would in this situation would have also probably asked for the miraculous signs to continue in addition to that boldness, and like I said, that continued for just a little longer, then gradually began to fade- but what remained strong was a boldness in sharing so that the gospel ended up spreading through the Mediterranean, and then into Europe, eventually making its way over to you and I here in the United States. Incredible. The church triumphed and remained victorious even through the threats, the negativity, the persecution, the change from good atmosphere to bad atmosphere.

I want you to see this pattern of praise, promise, petition- this pattern was not just a form of praying- it was a lifestyle. What began this whole series of events? Peter and John were heading to express their worship- their *praise* of God- through the time of prayer with others at the temple. And along the way they had the opportunity to speak of God's *promises* of a Messiah, to share God's Word with those around them. And they then coupled God's Word with an explanation of how His Word applied directly to those there listening- *petitioning* the listeners to react as a result of what was just spoken.

This pattern was present in the early church's prayers, in their lifestyle, and even in their conversations- look at Peter's defense [chapter 4 verse 10](#)... Do you hear his *praise* of Jesus: the exalting of the work of Jesus in his death and resurrection, and the exalting of His name that alone has the power to heal and do the impossible? [Verse 11](#) Peter then quotes scripture, recalling the *promise* of God in His Word from [Psalm 118:22](#) that the Messiah would be rejected, yet would become the very foundation of the structure God

was building. And then God's promise was applied to the current situation and topic being discussed in [verse 12](#)... Here the petition was more of a declaration of truth, a rhetorical response stated to urge them to trust in Jesus alone as the Messiah and only way of salvation.

This is Christianity 101, 201, 301, 401 and 501. This is the lifestyle, this is the way we grow, stay connected to the Lord, experience His work, impact others for His Kingdom. We live a life of *praising* God- recognizing His greatness, living a life of worship, thanking God even in difficult circumstances, confessing His wisdom and rightness. We learn and recall His *promises*- we spend time in His Word, we seek to understand His ways through this record of His works, we seek understanding, we share His Word with others. And then we *petition*- we apply God's character and Word to our lives and to other's lives and then petition God to work in our lives in accordance with His character and Word, and we petition others to respond to God's character and Word in receiving Him and following His ways. Our time of worship on Sunday mornings even follows this pattern. We *praise* God through song, rehearsing again and again who He is and His attributes. We look at His *promises*, diving deep into His word, seeking understanding through what He has spoken and done. And we *petition*. We petition one another to apply the truth of God's word to our daily lives, and we petition God in prayer to work on behalf of His people.

And my specific petition to you, and to God this morning, is that you would carry this simple formula with you, and no matter what situation arises that might tempt you to fear, doubt, get angry, frustrated, discouraged... that you would be able to step back and *praise* God for His goodness- even there in that difficult moment- recognizing that He is still good, and still in control, and still loves you. May you be able to recall His *promises*, searching out His word, knowing that there is something from His word that He wants you to understand there in that moment- for yourself, AND for those around you. And as you praise God and recall His promises, may He guide you in what to *petition* of Him, and what to *petition* of others. Live a lifestyle of praise, soaking in His promises, and making petitions that are framed by His praise and His promises.