

Church Re-Envisioned

It would have been good to be in the room, when Peter and John turned up. They had just been released, after being put into custody and being grilled by the Sanhedrin. (Acts 4:3) God had used Peter and John to heal a lame beggar and after Peter preached to the crowd, over 5000 people had become believers. The Sanhedrin wanted to shut them up and shut down this new movement of Jesus followers, but, at the same time, the Jewish leaders were nervous about how the crowd might respond if they punished Peter and John. Peter and John – and all the other disciples – knew that it was as good as a miracle, that Peter and John had walked free. They knew that they were uniquely equipped, both as witnesses of Jesus's death and resurrection and by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to share this message. Their release signalled that that they had lived to fight another day and that they needed to 'seize the day', to get their message out. They were also very aware that the religious authorities were angry – and that persecution wasn't a matter of 'if' it happened, but 'when' the leaders would unleash their wrath.

GETTING STARTED: Steve asked us to think about 'how' we pray, when we are in difficult times. We can tend to pray for protection, healing and provision, when we possibly should be praying for courage and strength, to face up to the situation and to fulfil the tasks and responsibilities at hand. What is your 'go to' prayer, when you are struggling? Is it wrong to pray for protection, healing and/ or provision?

READ: ACTS 4:23-31

🗨️ What did you notice/ what things stood out, as you just read the passage?

🗨️ What things did you take away from the sermon this week?

❗ Our prayers – and the way that we face life – is shaped by the way we understand the character, nature and attributes of God. We won't get a full understanding of who God is, this side of eternity, but it is important for us to be growing in our understanding of who God is, so that we can relate to God better. As the disciples started praying, we immediately hear some of the things that they believed about God: 1/ God is the "sovereign Lord", 2/ God created everything, 3/ God speaks, 4/ God sends his Holy Spirit to speak through people, 5/ God has human servants, and 6/ God has human enemies who rebel against his reign and rule. (Acts 4:24-26)

🗨️ How do you relate to God? eg what words / names for God do you normally use when you start praying? Do you relate to God as 'father'? 'lord'? or something else? What does your prayer life suggest about your relationship with God?

❗ Acts 4:25-26 recite the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Ps 2:1-2. David Stern writes: "Jewish writings often call attention to a text by citing its beginning; therefore the reader should understand the believers' prayer of vv24-26 is permeated by all of Psalm 2, not just its initial verses. Jewish as well as Christian expositors have seen Psalm 2 as Messianic. ... The theme of Ps 2 is that while men may devise plans according to their own purposes, it is God who will have his way. This is why the *talmidim* addressed God as "Master" (v24) and reminded themselves in the prayer that he created ... This gives them the necessary assurance that despite the Sanhedrin's warning (v17) and opposition, God will vindicate his Messiah and those who proclaim his message."¹

🗨️ Read 2 Tim 1:8-14 (below) What do we learn about how Paul understood his 'calling'? What does it say about how Paul viewed his future? How did his understanding of who Jesus is and his view of eternity, change the way he viewed his ministry and how he endured suffering?

⁸ Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. ¹¹ For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher,^[a] ¹² and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. ¹³ Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

¹ Stern, D. (1992) Jewish New Testament Commentary. (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications), p234-5.

❗ As the disciples prayed Scripture, “Why did the Gentiles rage ... The kings of the earth took their stand and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah”, they may not have realised how powerful these words are. In each generation, the people of God had had enemies. Kings of countries including Egypt, Syria, Moab, Tyre, Sidon, Babylon and Assyria had waged war on the people of God. These people often believed that, this wasn't just a war for land and political dominance, but also to demonstrate that their 'god' was the most powerful. By their actions, the Sanhedrin and Jewish leaders were also waging war on the Almighty God that they claimed to serve – and were, in effect, acting no differently to pagan warlords. Their actions were rebellion against the reign and rule of God.

💬 We often talk about the need for obedience and submission to God. However, we do not often talk about disobedience, being the sin of rebellion against the reign and rule of God in our own lives. If you have children (or know a child), think about an incident when a child was wilfully rebellious. What happened in that situation? And how did the parent respond? Then think about a time, recently, when you have been wilfully disobedient and said “no” to God? Why did you do that?

❗ Steve talked about the need to continually seek the perspective of God's sovereignty, including reminding each other that God is in control. He recommended meditating on passages such as Rom 8:28, Job, Ps 73 and Ps 47. He also encouraged us, that the more we seek God's sovereignty, the more we'll find it.

💬 In Rom 8:28, we read: “*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*” What are your thoughts about this verse? Is this a verse that provides encouragement and comfort to you? Or do you feel that these words are a long way from your current situation and the way you are feeling? Why?

❗ Steve talked about the value of community, especially in doing life and faith together. In Acts 2:43-47, we read that the believers did life together, including sharing their possessions. They were committed to each other, each other's wellbeing and providing for each other. This was probably more “*communitas*” than “*community*”, ie: “*A strong sense of solidarity and bonding that develops among people experiencing a ritual, rite of passage, or other transitional state together.*”²

💬 Think about the nature of relationships in your life group. Do you think you can rely on each other, in this way? How much do you rely on and share with each other, when you are going through tough times?

💬 Steve talked about “praying different prayers”. What do you think about the following quotes about prayer? Do you agree or disagree with these comments?

*“Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be the miracle.”*³

*“Prayer is not telling God what we want and then selfishly enjoying it. Prayer is asking God to use us to accomplish what He wants so that His name is glorified, His kingdom is extended and strengthened, and His will is done. I must test all of my personal requests by these overruling concerns if I expect God to hear and answer my prayers.”*⁴

💬 As the disciples started praying, they acknowledged that God had spoken by the Holy Spirit, through King David. In Acts 4:31, we read that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness”. In John 1, we read that Jesus is the ‘word’. God has given us the word, both in ‘flesh’ and in the message. He also empowers us by his Spirit, to communicate that in word and deed. What is one way that God has used you, to share his message with others?

REFLECTION: “the first request that the disciples made was for boldness in being obedient to Christ's command. This is because in any time of crisis, the supreme battle we have is the battle for obedience. No evil power can thwart God's marvelous plan. The only way this can happen is by our disobedience - by our not doing what we should do or not saying what we should say. Our obedience depends on availing ourselves of God's enablement for living the Christian life. If we do that, God will give us victory. The biggest enemy is not our circumstances or the wickedness and injustice of the world; rather, it is our own proneness to disobedience.”⁵

² <https://www.lexico.com/definition/communitas>

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/180411-do-not-pray-for-easy-lives-pray-to-be-stronger>

⁴ https://www.preceptaustin.org/prayer_quotes

⁵ Fernando, A. (1998). *Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. p177.