

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
September 6, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 4:23-31
Lesson Title: Praying for One Another

Introduction

The book of Acts is the first volume of church history covering the period between the four gospels and the later epistles. It records the history of the church from its beginning on the Day of Pentecost to the imprisonment of the Apostle Paul in Rome. This historical record covers a period of about three decades and gives us insight into the expansion of the church from a small group of Jewish believers in Jerusalem to dozens of congregations throughout the Roman world.

Luke, the author of the gospel of Luke, is also the author of Acts. He was a physician and the historian of the early church. The book of Acts was apparently written around A.D. 63, since it ends with Paul's two-year imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:30). Luke's purpose for writing Acts is to bear record of what Jesus did and taught (Acts 1:1). The church sprang out of the life of Christ, not organized religion. Luke wanted the Roman world to see the reality of Christianity, empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

The scene of our lesson text in Acts 4 takes place in Jerusalem just after Pentecost. The backdrop for our lesson occurs in Acts 3 where Luke records the story of the healing of the lame man at the temple. You would think such a miraculous event would have pleased everyone. That was not the case. The miraculous healing of the lame had three basic results for Peter, the apostles, and the early church. First, it gave a mighty witness to the power of Jesus Christ and Christianity throughout the city of Jerusalem (Acts 4:16). No one could deny what had happened to the lame man. A man who had been lame from his birth is now able to walk, leap, and praise the Lord (Acts 3:8). Second, it resulted in the detainment and interrogation of Peter and John by the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:5-22). The Jewish leaders were furious, not because a man was healed, but because the name of Christ was being spread (Acts 4:17-18). They attempted to intimidate Peter and John hoping to silence the message of the cross. Third, the apostles and the church must decide how to respond to the circumstances and intimidating atmosphere. How would Peter, John, the apostles, and the church react to this first wave of persecution? The apostles had been involved in healings before (Luke 6:9). They had witnessed opposition to Jesus and His mighty power. What was different now, however, was that Jesus was no longer with them. Or was He?

The Release (Acts 4:23)

Verse 23

“And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them.”

“And being let go, they...” is a reference to the providential release of Peter and John from the hands of their persecutors. Upon release, they immediately “went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them.” “Reported” means “to announce or declare.” Their “own company” was most likely the original group that met in the upper room (Acts 1:13-15). Obviously, there was no one place where all the thousands of new believers in Christ could meet at one time.

The “chief priests and elders” had “*commanded them not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus*” (Acts 4:18). The boldness of Peter and John and the lame man standing beside them was more than the religious establishment could handle. But make no mistake, this issue was and is about “*the name of Jesus.*” The Sanhedrin had executed Jesus for claiming to be the Messiah. Now, His followers were preaching and ministering in His name. The Sanhedrin wanted it stopped!

“And being let go, they went...” Think of all the places they could have gone, “went.” They could have “went” and hid somewhere and never preached Jesus again or helped anyone in need. They could have “went” and organized a protest against their persecutors or signed petitions demanding their right to preach in Jesus’ name. But they did none of those things. They “went to their own company, and reported” what had happened. No resistance. No struggle. As followers of Christ, they knew God had allowed this.

Note: Do you have a “company” where you can go? Today, many professing Christians seem to have no use for the church. They see church attendance and meeting with God’s people for prayer, worship and strength as traditional and non-essential. It is incomprehensible to imagine the apostles ever felt that way!

The Bible says, “*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching*” (Hebrews 10:25). These apostles and believers in Acts 4 needed each other. Christians need each other today more than ever. We need to be in fellowship with each other. We need to pray with and for each other, as we mutually strengthen and encourage each other.

The Reaction (Acts 4:24-28)

Verse 24

“And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is:”

“They” is the company of believers to whom Peter and John reported. “They” did not react with anger or protest in the street. “They lifted up their voice to God with one accord” means they prayed. The word “lifted” means “to take away, to raise, and to sail away.” What a beautiful thought of all their voices sailing upward to the Lord in prayer.

They said, “Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is...” “Lord” is the Greek word *despotes* {des-pot-ace}. It is a word those in Jerusalem would have quickly associated with a slave owner. It carries the meaning of “absolute owner or ruler.” Peter and John and the “company” of believers did not need therapy! They called on their “Lord” who was absolutely in control of everything, including the Sanhedrin. Their “Lord” is our “Lord!”

Faced with persecution and a command not to preach in Jesus’ name, the apostles and believers magnified the Lord’s sovereignty in their prayer as they recounted His creative work in making “heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is...” The God who made everything out of nothing and spoke everything in existence by His word was there for the apostles and first believers and He is here for us.

Verse 25-28

“Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.”

The apostles were further comforted by the fact that the opposition they now faced had been prophesied in the Old Testament. They were praying the Second Psalm, “*Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us*” (Psalm 2:1-3). The Holy Spirit, speaking “by the mouth of David” spoke of the opposition of the “kings of the earth...and the rulers” against “Christ” and His followers.

Those who oppose Christ and His followers come from different locations, but they are united in their opposition against the “holy child Jesus.” That is exactly what the apostles are seeing in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin is “against Christ.” “Herod” and “Pontius Pilate” were not good friends. If Facebook had been around “Herod” would have blocked “Pontius Pilate!” Both, along with the “Gentiles” worked together against Christ and opposed God’s purposes.

“For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done” means everything happening to Peter, John, the apostles and these believers were the plans of God set in motion by God Himself. For these early Christians, what was happening was not just events caused by man or uncontrollable circumstances. Every event, every detail, all the bad things, all the good things, was “determined before to be done.”

The word “determined before” is the Greek word *proorizo* {pro-or-id-zo} meaning “to predetermine or decide before hand.” You may be a Christian who says, “I do not believe anything in life is determined before it happens.” If that is your belief, nothing in life will ever make sense. Know this, Peter, John, and these early believers believed and embraced the predetermined purpose and will of God. That is how they survived and their survival resulted in the world receiving the message of the cross.

The cross of Jesus Christ was not simply the doings of evil people such as the Jews, the Sanhedrin, Pontius Pilate, or Herod. It was God’s doing. That is the paradox and the glory of it. The persecution of Peter and John and the early believers was also God’s doing. Evil men such as those in the Sanhedrin and others were guilty of their rejection of Christ and persecution of Christians, but ultimately God’s purpose for spreading the gospel was being fulfilled.

Knowing and believing everything that was happening through the persecution and brutality of the Sanhedrin was all under the control of a sovereign God, meant victory for these early believers. It means victory for Christians today who are facing a rapidly growing opposition and persecution to Jesus Christ and the message of the cross. There is more at work here than just the evil intentions of unsaved people.

The Request (Acts 4:29-30)

Verse 29-30

“And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.”

After beginning their prayer and speaking of God as Lord, Creator, quoting the second Psalm, and reminding themselves of God's sovereignty, they make a specific request of the "Lord." The word "Lord" used here is the Greek word *kurios* {koo-ree-os}, meaning "Master." They ask the "Lord" to "behold" or "look on their threatenings." They are saying, "Master, the Sanhedrin is trying to make us afraid to continue to preach and minister in the name of Jesus."

Peter, John, the apostles and the believers identified themselves as "servants." The Greek word for "servants" is *doulos* {doo-los}. They were bond-servants of the Lord. Bond-servants do their master's will. They could not hide from persecution or wait for a more convenient time. They are "servants."

The heart of their request is for "boldness to speak God's Word." Most of us would have asked the Lord to remove this persecution from our lives and bring peace to the city of Jerusalem. They asked God to "grant them boldness." With the threat of beatings, imprisonment, and possible death staring them in the face, they ask for "boldness to speak God's Word."

They also requested God's hand would continue "to heal" and work "signs and wonders" in the "name of thy holy child Jesus." These continual acts of healing and signs and wonders would help confirm the message of the cross and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Results (Acts 4:31)

Verse 31

"And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness."

God's answer to their prayer was dramatic. The house where they were praying "was shaken." Literally, the building moved. Figuratively, the people knew the Lord had heard their prayer. The "Holy Ghost filled" them, which means he gave them specifically what they had asked for: "boldness" to speak the word of God. The Holy Ghost had filled them on Pentecost and they spoke in many different languages and three thousand people were saved that day. After the healing of the lame man, five thousand men were converted (Acts 4:4). Now the Holy Ghost once again "filled" them for further preaching of the word of God.

The prayers of these believers brought heaven to earth. Now, to be sure, there are aspects of the results of their praying that are signs of the apostolic age, healing and signs and wonders, which do not occur today. However, the "fullness" of the Holy Ghost and "boldness" to preach and teach God's Word is necessary for every generation and dispensation.

Conclusion

Persecution is already happening in many parts of the world. According to Scripture, it will increase as we near the rapture of the church, the Tribulation, and the Second Coming of Christ.

What will you do when persecution comes? Are you willing to pray like these New Testament believers prayed? If you are, it will change you forever. Let us pray with one another and for one another.

Amen.