

Series: Invited to Ask

“When the Church Prays”

Acts 4:23-35

This morning we open God’s Word and we continue in our series called “Invited to Ask.” Throughout our study we have been studying how God invites us to come to Him to ask of Him. Because Jesus came to this earth, lived a sinless life, died for us, rose again, and ascended to heaven, He has made a way for every believer to come to Him in prayer. We have an open invitation to come and talk to our heavenly Father. **Hebrews 4:16** says, “Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” We can go to God and should go to God in prayer from anywhere, at any time, over anything. Throughout our study we have been learning primarily about our individual prayer lives and we have been studying the specific instructions and examples given directly by Jesus. This led us to a shift in our study last week. We continue to emphasize the role of prayer in the life of a believer, but we see clearly that prayer isn’t simply something that is to be done privately in our lives. It also something that should be a key characteristic of who we are as a church. We saw last week how Jesus entered the temple, which was designed to be a place for the people to worship God. However, Jesus quickly discovered that the religious leaders of His day were exploiting the temple for their own wicked purposes. Instead of it being a place to bring God glory, the religious leaders were using the temple as a plan for their own financial benefit. Jesus rebuked them and cleaned up the temple then stated loud and clear: “My Father’s house shall be called a house of prayer.” This was a powerful statement. There are many things that are important to us as a church. We honor God in many ways as a church. We praise His name through song. We express our worship through helping others, employing our spiritual gifts through service, and through giving. We honor God by studying His Word and surrendering our lives to Him. We obey Him by being equipped and called out to go make disciples of all nations. All of these things are true, but without question the chief distinctive mark of a body of believers must be that we are a people of prayer.

Today we are going to move beyond the specific instructions and examples of Jesus. For the next four weeks I believe the Lord wants us to see what this looked like in the life of the church after Jesus ascended into heaven. It is important for us to note that even after Jesus left, the apostles and the early church continued to recognize their need for prayer. In fact, the four Gospels give us the account of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry. All four Gospels combined give nearly 60 references to prayer. Then after Jesus’ earthly life and ministry we see that the early church was so devoted to prayer that there are 30 references in the book of Acts alone and nearly 60 references in the apostles’ various letters. The end of Jesus’ earthly ministry helped the early church to realize even more that they needed God’s help and His hand to be at work in their lives, so they prayed. Prayer was not an optional activity in the early church. It was their constant, consistent practice. Whether they knew what to do or not in a given situation, they prayed. Prayer was clearly a priority for them. In **Acts 1:14** after Jesus had ascended to heaven, the church met in the upper room. What did they do there? The verse says, “These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.” This practice of prayer continued in **Acts 2** where a great revival was taking place. Three thousand souls

had been saved on the day of Pentecost and then their actions were summarized in **verse 42** “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to PRAYER.” As we will see next week, when things were bad, they prayed, and when things were great, they prayed. In **Acts 12:12** while Peter was imprisoned the church was gathered at Mary’s house where the Bible says they were praying. Then in **Acts 13** the church fasted and prayed and then commissioned Paul and Silas to go out as missionaries. Prayer was not a part of what they did. It was a major focus of what they did. At every crossroads we see them consistently in prayer. Today, we look closely at one of these specific examples that we have seen before. In fact, we have looked at this passage with a focus on prayer, and we have looked at this passage with a focus on evangelism. This morning we study God’s Word to see what the early church prayed for and how God worked through them. As we do, we discover the powerful connection between prayer and reaching others for Jesus.

Show Text

As we have seen already, the church should be a place of prayer, but what are we to pray for? What are we to pray about? What are the types of requests that please God? What are the requests that move the hand of God? I believe that there is much that we can learn from this example of the early church in Acts 4.

Before we get there, we need to be reminded of the context. What was happening in this moment? In Acts 3, Peter and John were going into the temple when they met a man who had been lame his whole life. He saw them and began begging for money. Peter and John didn’t have money, but they had the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Peter said, “I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you; In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene – walk!” Instantly the Bible says the man’s feet and ankles were strengthened and he leaped up and began to walk. This was an amazing miracle. God had healed a man who had been lame since birth. Of course, this got the attention of the crowd who had seen this man lame for all forty years of his life. This provided an opportunity for Peter to preach and to tell them that this miracle had occurred because Jesus had healed the man. Peter told them that if they would believe in Jesus and repent of their sins their sins would be forgiven and they would be saved. Then in miraculous fashion the people began to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus. In fact, Acts 4:4 tells us that 5,000 men believed in Jesus and were saved and there were even more women and children. As you might imagine, the religious leaders of the day didn’t like what was going on. They had just had Jesus crucified a few months ago. They thought they had gotten rid of Him and His name. Now, however, the disciples were preaching in His name and now healing in His name. So, the leaders began to challenge and question them. Again, though, Peter gave Jesus all the credit and even declared, “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.” It was at this point that the leaders couldn’t take it. They had to find a way to silence these bold fishermen. So, first they commanded them, “You can’t speak or teach in the name of Jesus anymore.” Then Peter said, “We CAN’T STOP SPEAKING about what we have seen and heard.” Knowing that their command wasn’t enough, they then reverted to threatening. They threatened them and tried to cause them fear so that they would stop speaking in Jesus’ name. Remember, these are the same people who had crucified Jesus just a few months ago.

Well, what would you do? What do you do when you have been threatened for telling the truth? What do you do when someone says you can't talk about Jesus and what He's done in your life? The early church prayed in a way that sets a powerful example for us in how they responded. Peter and John went back to these early believers and told them what had happened. Instantly, having heard this, notice what they did. The text says, "They lifted their voices to God with one accord." They didn't immediately mope and complain. They didn't immediately give up and lose heart. They didn't immediately make a million plans. The very first thing they did is went to God in prayer. It is what they prayed for and how God moved that I believe the Lord wants us to see today. When the church prays, four things happen:

I. We Express Our Praise to God (vs. 23-25a)

Notice clearly how they started their prayer. They started their prayer by praising God for Who He is, what He has done, and what He is able to do. They prayed, "Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them." Before they asked anything of God, they were deliberate in taking time to praise Him for Who He is. We should be a people that has God's praises continually on our lips. This should be the overflow of our faith in Him and dependence upon Him. The Psalmist declared, "Seven times a day I praise You," because his mind was continually on the greatness of God. God's praise should often be expressed in our prayers. This was something that Jesus Himself taught as He taught the Lord's Prayer in **Matthew 6:9-10** saying, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' " This is how Nehemiah prayed in **Nehemiah 1:5a** saying, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God." Praising God in prayer causes us to get the right perspective of God. It brings joy and peace to consider how awesome and how great God is. It also brings a right perspective when we pray. There is no one and nothing greater than God. We know this in our heads, but so often in our hearts we get anxious, overwhelmed, worried, insecure, and afraid. In this moment it would be have been easy for the early believers to be flustered, but they weren't. They simply went to God and prayed. Getting our focus on God puts everything else into proper focus.

Recently in my devotional time I have been reading through Isaiah. Listen to the words that God spoke to His people in Isaiah. **Isaiah 44:6b**, "I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me." **Isaiah 44:8**, "Do not tremble and do not be afraid; Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none." **Isaiah 44:24b**, "I, the Lord, am the maker of all things, stretching out the heavens by Myself and spreading out the earth all alone." **Isaiah 45:5a**, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God." **Isaiah 45:21b**, "There is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me." **Isaiah 46:9-10**, "Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish My good pleasure.' "

What I am saying is that the God that we know and worship and serve, He is THE God of heaven. There is none like Him. When we pray, we aren't just throwing up words and hoping for the best. We are bringing our prayers to the One who is over all things. It is a great joy and privilege to

express our praise and adoration to God just as the early church in Acts 4 clearly did. They knew if God could create the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in it, then there was nothing too difficult for Him. With Him all things are possible. We need to remember this today and pray like it. When we pray biblically, we can't help but realize the greatness of God. When we realize His greatness and respond to His invitation to cast all of our cares upon Him, then we both please the Father and experience His peace in our lives.

II. We Explain the Problems That we Face (vs. 25b-29a)

Please understand that I am not suggesting that we only need to pray when we are facing problems in our lives. Also, I am not suggesting that our prayers need to be some whine fest where we do nothing but whine and complain to God. That is not what is going on here in the early church. What I want us to see is that they didn't ignore what they were going through. They weren't fake with God. In fact, in this case, it was their circumstance that led them to pray. Having heard that they were being threatened not to talk about Jesus, they were in trouble. They were in a position where they needed God's help, so they prayed.

None of us enjoy circumstances and difficulties, but one of the amazing benefits of them is that they cause us to draw near to the Lord. God is a very present help in our times of trouble. Nobody likes trials and circumstances; however, when we draw near to God and yield to Him through the trials, He actually uses them in our lives to mold us and transform us. This is why **James 1:2-4** instructs us, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." In every circumstance I have found myself in, God has used it to draw me closer to Himself and for that I am deeply grateful. What should we do when we are going through difficulty? What are we to do when we don't know what to do? **Philippians 4:6-7** commands us, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This is exactly what God wants us to do. When we turn to God and trust Him, He gives a peace that passes human comprehension. That's why the psalmist could say in **Psalms 119:71**, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes." He is saying, "God, in my affliction you have taught me about You, and You have comforted me and given me peace."

The early church in Acts 4 understood this, so they didn't ignore their problem. They didn't deny it and say, "That doesn't bother us. We're tough." They took it to God and were honest about it. They said, "God, in this city, the same leaders who came together against Jesus to accomplish Your divine plan are now coming against us and threatening us." Think of their amazing trust in God. They knew that God was sovereign over all things. They knew that God wasn't shocked by the attacks of the enemy. Surely even Jesus' crucifixion was no surprise to God the Father. And if the threats against Jesus were no surprise to God the Father, then neither was the adversity that they were then facing. In fact, they were so convinced of God's omniscience and His divine will that they leaned on God's will, trusting "Whatever His hand had predestined to occur." Even in the middle of persecution and circumstance they weren't worried. They were looking to the all-powerful, all-knowing God of heaven Whom they loved and trusted. They simply asked one thing

of Him, “Lord, take note of their threats.” In this request, they were giving it over to God. They weren’t going to worry about it and let it consume them, as long as they knew that God had His attention on it. As a church, we must learn from this example. We don’t have to hide or deny our pains, nor should we have a pity party. We should simply bring it to God and give it to Him.

III. We Embrace the Purpose of God (vs. 29b-30)

I love the way that these Christians prayed. They have been threatened not to talk about Jesus. They have been lied about. There is no doubt that the religious leaders were trying to destroy their character and credibility, but the threats and ridicule didn’t stop them. They were committed to pray, but notice specifically what they prayed for. They didn’t pray, “Now God please get them. Judge them now. Pour out your wrath.” No, they had already released their enemies over to God which freed them up to focus on the things that mattered to God. They prayed, “Lord, take note of their threats and grant that your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” What a statement! They knew that Jesus was alive and well and the only way to heaven. They knew that they had been commissioned to go into all the world with the Good News of the Gospel. It didn’t matter what threats, circumstances, or lies came against them because they knew they had been called by God to take the message of salvation to all. This was His purpose for them. Listen, we need to hear that this morning. They didn’t pray for deliverance from their persecution. They didn’t pray for an easier situation in life. They didn’t pray for abundant blessings and great wealth. They weren’t praying for an increase in possessions. They weren’t even praying for their physical health and protection. They prayed for God to accomplish His purposes through them. In doing so, they asked for two specific things:

A. They Prayed for Open Doors to Share the Word of God

They prayed that God would help them to share the Word with all boldness and confidence. They recognized that they were called to be witnesses of Christ. A witness is someone who simply speaks what he has seen and heard. These individuals knew the truth of Who Jesus was. Many of them had followed Him during His earthly ministry. Some of them had been eye witnesses after His resurrection. Now, there were thousands who had been recently convinced of Who Jesus is and had repented of their sins. They understood clearly that God had opened their hearts to the Gospel and now they had the responsibility of sharing the Good News with others. They were called to go into all the world, but the world was coming against them and the religious leaders were threatening them. They knew that the only way for them to fulfill God’s calling was by His help. They couldn’t do this on their own. They needed His divine intervention. They needed God to open the doors. They needed God to give them boldness to share the truth. They needed God to assure them of the saving power of the Gospel. All of these things led them to pray, not for easy lives, but for boldness to stand strong in the opportunities that God gives.

We must never forget that prayer is vital part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world. The early church knew that their mission was to take the Gospel to all. It was a job too big for such common, ordinary people, but it was their God-given mission. The only hope of

success was through the help and power of God. If they hoped to see a harvest, they knew it all began with prayer. **Any church that hopes to be an evangelistic church must first be a praying church.** Jesus Himself showed the connection between prayer and evangelism. In **Matthew 9:36-38** it says, “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.’ ” The early church clearly understood this. For them, prayer and evangelism were not planned events on the calendar. They were simply a way of life.

Paul clearly understood the need to pray for open doors. In **Colossians 4:2-4** he said, “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I also have been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.” Notice what Paul is saying. He says, “Keep praying for us that God will open up a door to share the Gospel, and please pray for me that I will be able to share the Gospel clearly.” What a profound thought! This is the greatest missionary that ever lived. He was one of the greatest scholars of his day and had preached in numerous settings and situations, yet he requests prayer so that his sharing of the Gospel would be clear and that he would have more opportunities. I am convinced that if we want to see God moving in our lives, we must learn to pray about things that matter to God. So often when we pray, we ask only for things that make our life better or easier, but God is most interested in the prayers that align our heart with His. In our prayers, we tend to be more concerned about the physical conditions of the saved than we are about the spiritual condition of the unsaved. I believe God wants to change this about us. ****ILL:** Recently I have been burdened to be intentional to pray about the spiritual conditions of people as much as I pray about the physical conditions of people. Since I began, I have been amazed how the Lord has seemed to allow me to cross paths with more people who don't know Him. I don't think it's really that the Lord is sending more people, so much as it is that He is helping me to be more aware. Church, let's pray for opportunities and let's be ready to be witness of Who Jesus is and what He has done and is doing in our lives.

B. They Prayed for Opportunities to Share in the Work of God

As the early church prayed, they were believing and trusting that God would be at work. Remember, many of these believers had been around Jesus during His earthly ministry. They knew that He had the power to make the lame walk, the blind to see, and the deaf to hear. They had seen Him cleanse the leper, heal the diseased, and the disciples had even seen Him calm the seas. Many were aware that He had even raised the dead to life. They were fully aware of His power. The early church believed that God was still capable of performing these miracles. They now had the Holy Spirit with them and in Jesus' name there was nothing that God couldn't do. So, they prayed that God would continue to work through healings and signs and wonders so that the world would be pointed to Jesus and be saved. They were praying for God to move because they were desiring to see people

come to believe in Christ as Lord. They were praying for power from heaven so that even their persecutors would be delivered from their sins.

There is something, however, that we must not miss in their request. I am saying that they wanted to share in the work of the Lord because it is important for us to realize that they aren't just saying, "God, You do this over there." They understood and were willing to be a part of what God was doing. For example, in Acts 3 when the lame man was healed, there is no doubt that God healed the man. However, did Peter and John have a part in the miracle? Absolutely! God did the work, but He used Peter and John as a vessel and an instrument to accomplish His work. We saw this with Nehemiah several weeks ago. He was burdened and He prayed for God to move, but He also made Himself available to God for His working in and through Him. We see the same here. They are praying for God to work in miraculous ways, but the rest of Acts shows that they understood their responsibility. They were asking God to move in them and through them to draw people to Jesus. In fact, in the book of Acts we see miracles occurring in chapters 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20, and 28. In nearly every case God worked the miracle, but He worked through one of the apostles. My simple point is that the early church understood that they had a role to fulfill in God's work and they took seriously their responsibility to have faith and pray.

IV. We Experience the Presence of God (vs. 31-35)

What happens when God's people pray? What happens when prayer is our priority and we pray fervently according to God's will? What happens when we pray for opportunities to share the Gospel and for boldness to do so? What happens when we ask God to allow us to join Him in His work to draw people to Jesus? I believe we see what happens in these verses. God reveals His presence and His power in amazing ways. We see God's presence manifested in two primary ways:

A. There was Conviction and Courage to Share the Gospel

The question is simple: "Do we have a conviction about the necessity and the power of the Gospel to save souls and change lives?" If we experience the presence of God in our lives and are filled with the Holy Spirit, we most certainly will. Notice what happened in Acts 4. Remember, they'd been threatened by the very same leaders who crucified Jesus. The whole situation would have been very intimidating and would've likely caused fear in the heart of everyone. However, their greatest desire was the glory of God and they prayed according to His will. The result is that God answered in a mighty way. The verse says, "The place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness." In other words, because the Holy Spirit took control of them, they had complete courage and boldness to speak the Word of God. They were now ready to take the Gospel wherever God would lead them. We see that unfold all throughout the book of Acts. Stephen boldly proclaimed the Word in the face of martyrdom in Acts 7. Philip boldly proclaimed the Word to a stranger in Acts 8. Ananias boldly proclaimed the Word to Saul the persecutor in Acts 9. Paul and Silas boldly proclaimed the Word to the jailer and his family in Acts 16. The rest of Acts records the courage that the church showed as they shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ with countless

others. Still today, this is a way that God manifests His presence in our lives. He provides opportunities and gives us boldness to be a light and share the Gospel with others.

B. There was Care and Concern for All the Saints

Another significant evidence of God's power is what He did in their hearts towards one another. This early church was unified in every way possible. In fact, they were experiencing a oneness and a unity that they could never have produced on their own. This was the fruit and evidence of the Holy Spirit's work. They had been genuinely changed by the Lord and they were continually being led by the Lord. They had supernatural unity. It wouldn't always stay that way and sadly it seems that we only find glimpses of that today, but in this moment, there was complete unity. This is what Jesus prayed for before He left the disciples in John 17. This is what Paul encouraged of the church in Philippians 2 when he wanted them to be united in spirit, maintaining love for one another. This early church in Acts 4 was so united that the Bible says they were of one heart and one soul and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own. This is great evidence of loving God and loving others. They were unified and lovingly looking out for one another.

How did Jesus demonstrate His love for us? By sacrificially giving of Himself. How do we demonstrate our love for the Lord? By sacrificially giving to bless others. **1 John 3:16-18** says, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." In order to provide for the needs of others, those who had possessions sold them and laid them at the apostles' feet so that they could distribute the money to those in need. As a result, no one lacked anything. This was an outward evidence of what God was doing in their hearts and lives. God is showing us the love and the sacrifice that will be evident when the church is unified in our calling to take the Gospel to the world and in our care for one another.

It should be no surprise, then, to see God working so mightily in the book of Acts. Not only were the people in that day hearing the message of Christ but they were seeing the evidence of the power of Christ by observing and watching the church. They were listening to the fact that Jesus was alive, and they were seeing the unarguable proof in the generous, sincere actions of the church. What is the result? I believe the context is suggesting that this powerful witness led to the salvation of many. In fact, when the summary statement of the apostles' works continued in **Acts 5:12-16, verse 14** explains, "And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number."

The same God that was working in the book of Acts is still working today. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He certainly hasn't changed. However, I wonder if we as the church have changed. Do we pray for boldness? Do we pray for opportunities? Do we surrender our lives, offering to be a part of God's plan to reach the lost and encourage the saved? If we will pray with the same heart and the same focus as the early church, I believe we will be amazed at how God works. For His glory, let's be a church that prays.