

Sermon File # 890

Scripture Text: Acts 4:23-31

Sermon Title: *An Invincible Church*

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An Invincible Church

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Acts 4:23-31, as we continue our series through The Acts of the Apostles, or perhaps better, *The Acts of the Risen Jesus through His Spirit-Empowered Followers*.

Last Sunday we noted the example of Peter and John as invincible Christians, who gave a powerful and courageous witness before the Sanhedrin high court of the Jews. These religious authorities were totally baffled by the evidence of the healed cripple and by the likeness of these disciples to their Lord Jesus, whom his disciples declared to be alive. All that these religious authorities could do was threaten them with a subsequent arrest and then send them on their way (verse 21).

Today, on this Easter Sunday when we particularly celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, we will note how and why the church of the risen Jesus is an invincible church.

Follow as I read **Acts 4:23-31**

The Christian's conversion is intensely personal but the Christian life is anything but private. It must be shared, beginning with the testimony of baptism (which we witnessed this morning) in the context of the church, the body of Christ on earth. The necessity of the fellowship of the church is clearly portrayed in our text. Upon their release from the Sanhedrin, Peter and John returned to their church fellowship to

receive the encouragement and support that would be necessary for them to continue to be invincible Christians.

I have heard many lamentations over the fact that Easter, the celebration of Christ's resurrection, receives only a small fraction of the attention and emphasis placed on Christmas, the celebration of Christ's birth. Of course, we realize that Christmas has a greater market appeal, and coupled with the secular features of Santa Claus and gift exchanging, presents a better opportunity for commercial enterprises. And the celebration of the birth of the Baby Jesus seems to lend itself to a more innocuous and less threatening acknowledgment of even the so-called religious significance of Christmas. On the other hand, to acknowledge the Christian message of Easter means to accept the critical message of the death and resurrection of Christ, an event that was necessary to save sinners.

While I can share in this jeremiad over the imbalance between Easter and Christmas, agreeing that far too much emphasis is given to the secular side of Christmas, I can accept the fact that for the Christian Easter in some ways is no more special than every Sunday. I even objected to the expression given by one of my former staff associates to Easter as "Resurrection Sunday." Every Sunday is Resurrection Sunday, in my opinion. In fact, this is the reason for the earliest Christians, who were Jews devoted to worship on Saturday, changing their day of worship to Sunday. In the earliest church, every Sunday was a day to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, who overcame death, the power of sin and the sentence of hell on Easter Sunday morning. My advice is, not that we de-emphasize Easter, but that we place greater emphasis on every Lord's Day as Resurrection Sunday.

Although we do not know what day of the week it was when Peter and John returned to the church fellowship (at least a portion of the 5,000 new believers by this time in Jerusalem) to receive encouragement and support, we know that they returned to a fellowship that was centered around the risen Lord Jesus and continually celebrating his resurrection. Peter and John were invincible Christians because they were connected to and received encouragement from an invincible church. They received the strength of the church's fellowship and what we see in our text, according to John Stott, is "koinonia (fellowship) in action" (See page 99, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts*).

I invite you to join me in considering the elements in our text that describe for us an invincible church of the risen Lord Jesus, a fellowship that enables and encourages us to be invincible Christians. First, an invincible church...

➤ **Knows to pray**

Our text tells us that Peter and John returned to the other disciples and at least a representative portion of the church, which knew exactly what to do upon hearing their report. They began a great prayer meeting and did so...

- *With a sense of need*

These disciples were very much aware of the threat they faced because their Lord and Master had been arrested, just as they had been, and had been put to death following an unjust trial. They surely remembered the words of the Lord Jesus that they too would be hated, opposed, persecuted and even killed for his sake (John 15:18-16:4). The remainder of the Book of Acts is a story of a church under the fire of opposition and persecution. Thus the church turned to prayer in the context of a deep sense of need for and total dependence on God. The church that is aware of its total need for God is a more powerful church than one that enjoys the accolades of the world and thus easily accommodates itself to and compromises with the world. A suffering church is of necessity a praying church.

I recall during my seminary days a visit from a Dr. Culpepper, a medical missionary who had been thrown out of China during the Cultural (Communist) Revolution. His related his conviction that there was more hope for the church in China than the church in the USA because Christians in China realized their absolute need for God to empower them to share the gospel. Since he said those words the gospel has spread rapidly in that country where there are still many restrictions on religious freedom, and many have been and are being persecuted for their faith. But in China the church prays with a sense of total dependence on God to empower them to be faithful in a land of spiritual need.

Last week pundits were saying that America is now undergoing its greatest financial crisis since World War II. It seems that crises will give a momentary jolt to a country and people may become a bit more “religious” until the crisis abates. The Attack on America created a spike in church attendance for about two Sundays but then we were soon back to apathy as usual.

I recall when I was in high school, coming home from football practice and joining my family for a midweek prayer service on a Wednesday night, when attendance was usually quite meager. But this particular night the church worship center was almost full and the prayers were more frequent and fervent. This was a Wednesday around October 14, 1962, the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the USA to the brink of nuclear war. But in a few weeks, it was back to business as usual.

What the church needs is not a crisis but a sense of our critical need for God and our total dependence on him, whatever our circumstances. As someone has said, our biggest problem is not our circumstances, which may be very adverse, but rather our disobedience and our prayerlessness. Just as much as the earliest church we must realize our need to all on God in our weakness and total dependence on him as we face the enemy, not of a political nation, but the prince of the kingdom of darkness (Colossians 1:13).

An invincible church knows to pray also...

- *With gratitude for the gift*

This church was a people who realized that prayer was a precious gift and a singular opportunity to relate to and receive blessings from a gracious God. Prayer is a gift that we dare not neglect, and yet some regard it as a duty to be perfunctorily performed. These first century believers sought every means of prayer, joining in the temple hours of prayer as well as their times of prayer in synagogues, temple courts and house gatherings.

We will never become an invincible church of prayer until we realize the privilege we enjoy of communicating with God and calling upon him for his mercy, grace and guidance.

I'm particularly thankful for modern communication, such as Internet "skyping." Without cost I can talk with our daughter, son-in-law and with Nancy, who is visiting with them these past weeks. And with the web camera I can see our four week old grandson as well; all for free!

But do we realize that prayer means we can connect free of charge with the God of heaven and our Lord and Savior and the Friend who stays closer than a brother? (Proverbs 18:24; John 15:13f)

And if we would be an invincible church we must pray with urgency and gratitude,

- *Giving prayer a priority*

Obviously this earliest church turned to prayer first of all, rather than organizing committees to appeal for their civil and religious freedom rights. They seemed to instinctively know the need to pray first of all. Peter and John, after all, were among the disciples who had asked Jesus to teach them to pray—not just how to pray but also that he teach them that they ought to pray, to make prayer a priority in their lives (Luke 11:1).

My desire is that prayer receives the priority it needs in my life. Do I realize the precious gift of prayer is like spiritual oxygen upon which I depend? Prayer is about a relationship with God and is the means by which we fellowship with him and also receive his guidance in joining him on mission. I believe that God will use and bless IBC Brussels to the extent that we become a praying people, giving prayer a priority in our monthly prayer meetings, our worship services, our home groups, and our men's and women's gatherings for prayer. I'm pleased to say that our elders are giving prayer a priority in our fortnight meetings as well as before our worship services as we seek to lead our church in becoming a praying people.

An invincible church knows to pray and also...

➤ **Knows how to pray**

We don't know who voiced this prayer in behalf of the church, but it's the longest recorded one in Acts and one of the great prayers in the Bible. We can say with confidence that whoever prayed it prayed in behalf of the entire church and shows that this earliest church certainly knew how to pray. This church knew how to pray...

- *In unity*

We do not know how many from the apostles and the larger church were in this meeting, but we know that they "raised their voices together" (verse 24). Although one person was the spokesperson, the others were in agreement, probably voicing their unity with "amens" said at regular intervals (See Ajith Fernando, *NIV Application Commentary: Acts*, pages 167f).

The invincible church is a united church. Followers of Jesus realize their dependence on the fellowship of the church. Although the church is made up of imperfect individuals, we absolutely need one another. God made us that way and he made the church for that purpose. And because each one of us has the Holy Spirit, we enjoy a mystical union and a unity that is sacred and that must be maintained at all costs (Ephesians 4:3).

And individualism is no good, especially in a time of crisis. It's good that we have a spiritual family to turn to when we are attacked by the world, the flesh and the devil. Invincible churches are like a mighty army that is bound together and that can stand together against the Enemy and his forces.

I certainly was encouraged and strengthened last Sunday, for example, when I came before you in my weakness and concern and you gathered around me in prayer, which God answered wonderfully in Nancy's life. I have never felt weaker in myself and yet, because of your prayers for us, I have never had such peace and confidence that God is in control.

The invincible church knows how to pray also...

- *To God in his sovereignty*

Peter and John had just been threatened by the Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jews. But when they reported to the church, the church then approached a higher court—the court of heaven, presided over by the God who is creator and Lord of "heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them" (verse 24).

Note how this prayer is based on the sovereignty of God, the Creator of all who is sovereign over all (verses 24ff). This is the way Jesus taught us to begin our prayers, with an acknowledgement of "our Father, who is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9).

When we focus on the greatness and power of God, our challenges appear much less formidable. God, who created this unimaginably vast, complex and glorious universe, can certainly heal a sickness or give direction and wisdom in our perplexity. And God, who was sovereign even over the arrest and crucifixion of his Son and who raised Jesus from the dead, is certainly over our circumstances and is able to give us new life (Romans 8:32; Ephesians 1:19-20).

The word used in our text and in this prayer for sovereign Lord is the Greek word “despota,” from which we get the word “despot.” Although in English this word has a negative connotation of a tyrannical dictator, it referred to a Lord who has ownership and control of his servants, who owe him their life and allegiance (See Darrell L Bock, *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary*, pages 204-205). And we do not lose our freedom under our sovereign Lord but rather find true freedom in surrender to his loving lordship and sovereign control over our lives.

We know that the Lord is sovereign, based on the witness of Scripture, which this prayer quotes from the 2nd Psalm (verses 25f). It’s worthy of note that the church prayed using Scripture, which is how our praying should be shaped. Our public and corporate prayers should be shaped by Scripture, using the Model Prayer that Jesus gave us, but also the model giving by the many prayers we find in Scripture, especially in the Psalms. But also, in our daily personal worship we need experience daily listening prayer, reading portions of Scripture and seeking to hear from God as we write prayer thoughts in our journal or daily agendas.

Scripture gives us great encouragement and hope, as it did this earliest church (Romans 15:4). Here the church found encouragement in focusing on the greatness and sovereign power of God. The quote from the 2nd Psalm speaks of the heathen nations that *raged* against God (verse 25, quoting Psalm 2:1f), using the word that is used to describe war horses that are stamping and snorting, but are subject to the bridle held by the rider. They may stamp and snort, but they’re going nowhere without the master’s permission. And the sovereign, loving and wise God of our Lord Jesus has Satan on his tether (For this word picture see William Barclay, *Acts: Daily Study Bible Series*, page 39).

Scripture gives us hope and encouragement, just as the Lord and his angel appeared to Paul to reassure and to encourage him (Acts 18:9-10; 23:11; 27:24). I know that in my experience God has been faithful, through my daily reading through passages of Scripture, to give me a strengthening, sustaining, encouraging and directing word.

This prayer in the invincible church not only uses Scripture but also makes the application of God’s sovereignty to the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Even the cross, though it was carried out by the scheming and cowardice of evil men, was according to the eternal plan of God for the salvation of all who would believe. Although wicked men like Herod, Pilate and the accusing high priest all were responsible for their actions, they were doing what God had foreknown from before the creation of the world (verse 28 and Revelation 13:8).

And we too, if we would be invincible, will trust in the sovereignty of God and that his eternal purposes for us will prevail. We are never victims but through Jesus we are “more than conquerors (Romans 8:37). As Paul writes earlier in that same 8th Chapter of Romans,

“What shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:31f).

Thus we need to realize and to remember that because of Jesus and because we are in Christ Jesus and he in us, we are never “under the circumstances” or vulnerable to the attacks of the Enemy. If Jesus’ cross, the ultimate defeat, became the ultimate victory for him and for all who believe, then we need never fear any harm that could come to us, not even death itself. We are safe under the care of our sovereign, loving God.

The great leader of the Reformation, Martin Luther, was approached by an emissary from the pope who sought his acquiescence to the demands of the pope to cease his efforts to reform the church. When Luther politely refused to submit, the emissary asked, “Where will you be, Martin, when all of your friends desert you?” Luther answered, “Then as now, in the hands of God” (quoted by William Barclay, above citation).

This and every invincible church knows how to pray to God in his sovereignty...

- *For our enabling and God’s kingdom and glory*

Biblical scholars note the similarity of this prayer to the prayer of King Hezekiah in Isaiah 37:16-20. But there is a notable difference. Whereas Hezekiah prayed for deliverance from the Assyrians, the church prayed only for God’s grace to enable them to face the enemy with courage and to continue proclaiming the gospel, whatever the cost might prove to be. It’s notable that the church did not pray for safety and personal protection but only that the apostles would continue to boldly declare the message of Jesus (verse 29). They also asked for God to continue to reveal his power through signs and miracles that would serve to advance the gospel and the glory of God.

We should not limit how God wants to work among us and I certainly think we should not hesitate to ask for miracles, such as physical healings. But our primary motive should not be that the healing of sickness, which is important but temporary (since we are mortals); but rather, our motive should be for the everlasting praise and glory of God. Our desire must be that God display his glory through his works in our lives and in his church.

An invincible church knows to pray, how to pray and also...

➤ **Knows how long to pray**

We don't know how long this prayer lasted, but we do know the people prayed long enough to hear from God. And we might say that the church continually prayed and this particular prayer was but one excerpt of the praying that took place in the temple courts and in the homes of the people (Acts 2:42). They had become a praying people in obedience to the command of the risen Lord (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4f). This invincible church was a congregation that was...

- *Persistently seeking*

What we see in our text is another great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, much like the one at Pentecost. This time, instead of the miracle of languages there is the earthquake-like shaking of the place where they were meeting together (verse 31). This seems to have been a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit, who came in fullness to minister to them with new encouragement and fresh power for their Great Commission task.

What is true for the church is also true for each one of us: we are always in need for the continual filling of the Holy Spirit. Paul's command that we be filled with the Holy Spirit is in the present continuous sense (Ephesians 5:18). I do not believe God honors just a ritualistic or perfunctory prayer that is simply a polite preface to our meetings. Sometimes I think we think of our opening prayers as mantras or magic formulas that God is duty-bound to honor, regardless of how far our hearts may be from him.

I am becoming increasingly convinced that when Jesus teaches us persistence and that we should keep on asking, seeking and knocking, he is telling us that the greatest gift for which we can pray is the Holy Spirit. We know, of course, that every Christian has the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9), but every Christian must keep on asking and seeking and knocking for God to fill us every day and throughout the day. This best of all gifts is one that comes at the price of perseverance (See the connection between Matthew 7:7-11 and Luke 11:9-13, and the parallel between "good gifts" in Matthew's account and "the Holy Spirit" in Luke's).

I know that I must learn to seek God every morning and throughout the day if I am to live in his fullness. And this must inform and characterize my personal daily worship time and also must become the agenda for our church meetings. God is waiting to see if we value the full measure of his power and blessing or are we content to remain as we are.

We need to seek God's fullness and wait upon him...

- *Until God's shaking*

Of course this was a unique phenomenon, this shaking of the meeting place, which was a tangible sign of God's presence and power. We all need this reminder from God of his power, and whatever threats we face from the world around us, including threats from the supernatural world, we have the power of the Almighty, the Holy Spirit within us.

I like what one of the early Church Fathers, John Chrysostom, said about this phenomenon of the shaking of the prayer meeting room:

"The place was shaken and that made them (the apostles and the church) all the more unshaken" (from *Homilies in the Acts of the Apostles* II, quoted in NT volume V, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Acts*, page 54).

An invincible church has this holy fear and awe of God, which obviates all other fears that might threaten us (Luke 12:5). When we are aware that the Almighty is with us, nothing on earth can cause us to be shaken with fear.

Let's be aware that God has different ways of assuring us of his presence, power and answer to our prayers for his fullness. Not always does he give a great "shaking" with spectacular signs. For Elijah, the Lord did not appear to him in the wind, earthquake or fire, but rather the Lord spoke to him with a "gentle whisper" (1 Kings 19:11f). And so with us, when we call out to God for his help and power, our assurance may be simply from his gently whispering voice through words from Scripture. Sometimes we gain assurance from a sense of settled-ness and peace, which Paul says is the peace of Christ that should rule in our hearts (Colossians 3:15).

The invincible, God-shaken church is unshaken by the world...

- *And prepared for God's sending*

The main concern of this prayer of the invincible church was that the servants, the apostles and all who proclaimed Jesus, might be enabled to speak the message of Jesus with boldness (verse 29). They asked that God might punctuate the preaching with "miraculous signs and wonders" (verse 30). It seems that the use of miracles took a lesser role, a trend we can note throughout Acts, the epistles and also the writings of the early church. But this is not to say that God no longer uses miracles to punctuate his message. But we need to see that miracles, including those of physical healings, are not an end in themselves but are to point people to the message of Jesus and are to glorify God.

God's purpose is to glorify himself through though his Son, Jesus. And this is the reason that he makes his church invincible—that the word of Jesus might go forward and that God's kingdom might come as more and more worshipers are recruited (John 4:23).

God makes his church unshakable and invincible that we might be better prepared to share him with a lost and dying world. Thus we do not pray that God will make our lives or our mission easier, but that he will strengthen us with his resurrection power that we might live transformed lives and proclaim a transforming message. We do well to follow the example of this earliest church to pray, not for God to remove our challenges but rather to make us stronger and more courageous people to face and overcome the challenges.

Conclusion:

On this Easter Day, I invite you to commit with me and with these who were baptized before us today, to be invincible Christians who are vitally connected to an invincible church. To make this possible we must commit to be a people of prayer, in our personal lives but also in our corporate life as a church.

Our praying also must be with a focus of honoring the Lord Jesus Christ by being faithful and bold witnesses for him. Whether or not God chooses to give phenomenal signs is strictly up to his sovereign will. But we know that he is doing some phenomenal converting of lives, as we have heard this morning (from those baptized). And I believe this is but a beginning of what he wants to do among us, through us and for us. God may be ready to send an awakening to this unlikely, post-Christian, secular nation. We also know that awakening historically never comes without a people who are committed to extraordinary prayer for such an awakening.

Again, Dr Culpepper might have been right. The church in lands of persecution might have more hope, not just for survival, but for revival and for kingdom conquest because they are aware of their daily need for the Lord. There is some powerful praying going on in China today, and in other places where believers and churches face threats and experience suffering. These people realize that they desperately need the Lord. Our need may not be as apparent and as urgently felt, but it's just as real. We desperately need the Lord and a working of his power to enable us to be his faithful witnesses and servants in this place of great spiritual need.

Let's begin to pray that we might be the invincible church that the risen Jesus has called us to be.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Do you agree that conversion to Christ is very personal but the Christian life is not private? Why or why not?
2. Why is our being a part of the life of the church essential to our Christian life?
3. How does a church demonstrate its commitment to prayer as a priority?
4. Why is our understanding of God and his attributes important for the effectiveness of our prayers?
5. How should the Scriptures influence our prayers?
6. What is the primary goal, objective and motivation of a church's praying?
7. What assurance do we have that God has heard and is answering our prayers as a church?

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