

## The Prayer Meeting

In the year 713 B.C., the Assyrian King Sennacherib invaded the land of Judah. Eight years earlier, the Assyrians had conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel under Shalmaneser. Shalmaneser captured Samaria, deported the surviving population and imprisoned Hoshea, Israel's last king. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had effectively ceased to exist.

Now the Assyrians had returned under a new king, Sennacherib, with their sights set on Judah and Jerusalem in the south.

Judah's king at that time was Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a godly man who had restored the worship of Yahweh. He destroyed the places where idols were worshiped and smashed their images to pieces. The records tell us: "Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him" (2 Kings 18:5).

And now the vast armies of Sennacherib were perched on his doorstep. Assyria had already captured the other fortified cities of Judah. They stood outside the gates of Jerusalem and mocked godly King Hezekiah, and they mocked God: "Has the god of any other nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the King of Assyria? ...How then can the YAHWEH deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"

Sennacherib's emissaries stood outside the city wall and shouted their taunts to the entire population of the city. They also sent their message to Hezekiah in a diplomatic dispatch—a letter. Turn with me to Isaiah 37:14-20.

Notice the pattern in Hezekiah's prayer. He begins by affirming God's greatness. Then he asks God to take note of the situation. Finally, he asks God to act—to deliver his people "...so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God."

Hezekiah's prayer is concerned for the nation, but the larger issue was God's glory. At Bethel we put it this way: "It's not about us."

And God's response? Jump down to verses 36-37: "Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there" (Isaiah 37:36-37).

Have you ever prayed like this? I have received more than one letter that I have literally spread out before the LORD. Hezekiah left us a powerful example of how to pray when confronted by overwhelming situations.

When the early church faced the threat of persecution, they did exactly what Hezekiah had done. They must have read their Hebrew Bibles. They affirmed God's greatness. They asked God to take note of the situation. And they asked God to intervene—to act on their behalf.

Turn with me to Acts 4:23-31. Remember what has just happened. The Apostles Peter and John had, in Jesus' name, healed a forty year old man who had been lame from birth. It was a very public miracle that drew a huge crowd to Solomon's portico in the temple.

When Peter preached the power of the risen Christ, temple authorities arrested them and brought them before Israel's supreme court, the Sanhedrin, for trial. Peter's bold testimony turned the tables and put the rulers on trial for the crucifixion of their Messiah, the Christ.

Perplexed by their courage, and unable to deny the very obvious miracle, the Sanhedrin warned them "...not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."

Peter left with this parting shot: “Sorry guys, we must obey God. We can’t not talk about what we have personally witnessed!”

Let’s read what happened next—Acts 4:23-31.

Wouldn’t you love to have been in that prayer meeting!? Prayer was their instinctive, first response to crisis. If we had been arrested for publically talking about Jesus, we would have hired lawyers and filed suite to protect our First Amendment rights under the constitution. The early church didn’t have First Amendment rights. All they had was God, poor souls!

So they prayed! My translation says they “...raised their voices together in prayer to God.” It sounds like they all prayed at the same time. We might more accurately translate the phrase: “...they raised their voice with one mind in prayer to God.” Luke emphasizes their solidarity. More than likely, only one person prayed out loud. But everyone in the room was locked onto what was said. Whoever prayed spoke with one voice for the whole church.

Notice how they began. They framed up their request in the light of God’s glory. First of all, they addressed God by giving him an unusual title. Our translation reads “Sovereign Lord.” Nothing unusual about that, right? The word they used was *Despota*. We get our word ‘despot’ from this.

To us, despot is not a good word. It has terrible connotations. A despot is a dictator who uses power ruthlessly, viciously . Despots are people like Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein.

The early church would not have had the same negative associations with the word. It was a strong title describing a ruler with absolute, unchallenged authority. Against all the rulers and authorities of this world, they appealed to the God who was supreme over all: Sovereign Lord!

Then they rehearsed God’s acts. God *made* everything that is. God *spoke* by the Holy Spirit through David, predicting precisely the very kinds of spiritual opposition they were facing. And in spite of the fact that Herod and Pilate, the Gentiles and even the people of Israel had raged against Jesus, conspiring together to have him crucified, they merely succeeded in accomplishing what God had sovereignly *decided* beforehand should happen: that Jesus should die for the sins of all.

These gathered believers had a clear sense God’s authority, God’s power, and God’s sovereign control of all the circumstances of life. They weren’t informing God about his greatness. They were affirming their own confidence in God’s greatness.

So they “spread out” the threat before the LORD, and they asked God to intervene on their behalf: “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

Is this what you might have asked God for? Imagine some bully at school daring you to say one more word about Jesus. Imagine a neighbor who hates Christians and Christianity and has just delivered a vicious tirade against you.

When you go to your believing friends with your said story, and when you get around to asking for prayer, what do you ask for? We want God to protect us, right? To frustrate the plans of those who are against us. It is characteristic of our therapeutic culture to frame up our responses in terms of our own safety and well-being.

What did they ask for? Boldness! Why? Because Jesus had charged them with the responsibility of being his witnesses: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses...” (Acts 1:8). They were simply living out of their desire to obey Jesus.

They also asked God to perform miracles, signs and wonders through the name of Jesus. Why? Because these acts of divine power authenticated the gospel message among the Jewish people.

Remember the passage we looked at from Hebrews: “This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Hebrews 2:3-4).

As time went on, the frequency of miracles gradually diminished. By the time the New Testament was completed the gospel had been established.

Miracles in the Bible are relatively rare. They came in micro-bursts throughout biblical history, showing up principally when God did something fresh. We see clusters of miracles surrounding the Exodus under Moses. The prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha was marked by notable miracles. Then Jesus came with his Messianic work. He appointed his apostles and gave them authority to do what he did as founding agents of his church. The Apostle Paul stated: “The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance” (2 Cor.12:12).

Should we expect God to verify our witness today with miracles? Jesus taught that if people won’t listen to God’s *words*, not even a resurrection would convince them. God may do surprising things in our days—God can do whatever he chooses! But the time when miracles were necessary and frequent is largely past. We have God’s powerful word in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The Bible says the gospel “...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...” (Rom. 1:16).

We may not need to ask for miraculous works of divine power, but we certainly do own the most significant part of God’s response to their prayer: “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all *filled with the Holy Spirit* and spoke the word of God boldly.”

We have the same Spirit. The Spirit fills us just like he filled them. This is in our DNA as Christ-followers. And the energizing work of the Spirit in us is just a vital for our boldness as it was for them.

Which presents us with two questions. First, do we believe this? Do we believe that God’s Spirit can fill us in such a way that we can overcome our own fears over the threats that keep us silent about Jesus? And second, do we want him to?

Both questions matter. The first challenges our faith. The second our obedience. As the old song reminds us: Trust and obey.

When do you feel a threat to talking about Jesus? What keeps you silent? Can you name the fears that work against your bold witness? We’re afraid that we don’t know enough to convince a skeptic that Christianity is true. Maybe we’re secretly afraid our faith doesn’t work. Maybe we’re not convinced it’s really true. We’re mostly afraid that people will ridicule us, shame us publically, reject us, write us off!

What’s your threat? Can you isolate it—name it?

Are you willing to do what Hezekiah did—what these early believers did? Affirm your confidence in God’s sovereignty and power and say to God: “Behold the threats. Here’s what I’m afraid of. Enable your servant to speak with great boldness!”

Understand something here. Great boldness does not mean obnoxious arrogance. The boldness given by God’s Spirit fuels humility, wisdom, love and gentleness and fortifies these

graces with godly courage. The boldness God gives enables straightforward clarity and simplicity.

When opportunities to talk about our faith in Jesus come, we may be shaking, but we need not be shaken.

Do you believe this? Then are you willing to pray: “Sovereign Lord, behold the threats. Enable me to speak for you with great boldness”?