

Text: Acts 4:23-31 (Pew Bible, pg.1081)

Title: “Courageous Witnesses”

INTRODUCTION

We look back on the last year and rejoice in what God enabled us to do:

- Launch our new small group ministry called A2C with over 500 people participating in 40-50 groups
- Launch of our new Hispanic congregation where we have seen at least 50 professions of faith, many of which have been baptized. Their attendance is now up over 60 each Sunday.
- The answer to a long-standing prayer in the purchase of the Texaco property on the corner for about \$450,000, which we paid for in cash!
- Our Global Impact Conference about a year ago set the stage for one of strongest World Missions Offerings in several years ... over \$163,000 given through Dec.
- Budget giving through the end of December was over \$60,000 ahead of last year
- Adoption of our new Master Plan that, when it is accomplished, will have our campus completely fit for the future generations here at our church

Just think for a moment what can happen among us in the next 12 months:

- In November we will celebrate our church’s centennial. We will rejoice in 100 years of ministry as a church, and recommit to the Lord’s purpose for the future.
- This Spring we will unveil the plans for the next phase of our master plan, the construction of a new building to the west of the sanctuary for a new dining room, education space for senior adults, new music rehearsal space and the expansion of our young adult education space in the lower sanctuary. This next phase will cost around \$4 million. Our goal is to have half of that amount on hand before we begin construction. Wouldn’t it be great if we could reach that point by the end of this year?
- 12 partnership mission trips are planned for 2011. We could have 300 people who will participate in one of these life-changing experiences here in the US and around the world.

But as I think about the areas where we need to be challenged the most in 2011 there are two: evangelism and a stronger discipleship ministry through the Sunday School.

We *reach* people through evangelism, and we *retain* them through a strong discipleship ministry through the Sunday School. This year I am calling our church to recommit ourselves to these two very vital areas.

For today and the next three Sundays I want to take us back to the Word of God to remind us of the importance of the task of evangelism ... of sharing Jesus Christ with others. It has to do with our identity as the people of God, and what we are to do as Christ-followers.

Acts 1:8 (NIV) - But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Note: As Jesus spoke His last words to His church He told them what they would be in the future. Stop to think about what a crucial moment this was. What will we be? “You’ll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be ... a country club ... a university ... a hospital ... an entertainment destination? No, Jesus set it straight: “You’ll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and ... you will be my witnesses...”

It’s like when Jesus said to the disciples, “Follow me and I will make you....” What? Make you moral people? Make you more disciplined? Make you a better wife? Make you a better dad? Make you a theologian? All of those things are certainly within the lifestyle of follower of Jesus. But what did Jesus say? “Follow me and I will make you ... fishers of men.”

That probably wasn’t on the disciples’ list, and it’s generally not on our list either. But that’s our basic identity as a church of Christ-followers.

This is the reason we have put this in our Blueprint for Spiritual Formation. As a church we are joining God in developing passionate followers of Jesus Christ. We envision a church filled with passionate followers of Christ who, among other things, will...

SHARE JESUS CHRIST WITH OTHERS

This means we will...

- Understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ and clearly communicate the message in the power of the Holy Spirit in the course of everyday life
- Cross cultural and geographical barriers to develop relationships with people far from God, helping them to respond to God’s love and to follow Jesus Christ
- Possess a biblical worldview energizing them as Christian citizens to impact their culture

And in just about a month we will have our first big opportunity to do this a grand scale. Sunday, February 6 is Welcome Friends! Day. It’s a Sunday where we encourage one another to invite our loved ones and friends to come to church with us. Now that Sunday just happens to be Super Bowl Sunday, which will be held just a short distance from us in Cowboy Stadium. So we have invited Bob Lilly to be our special guest that day. Bob was an All-American football player at TCU, then went on to play for 14 years with the Dallas Cowboys, including one Super Bowl championship. The most important thing about Bob Lilly, however, is his faith in Jesus Christ. He has a powerful testimony and we’ll have the opportunity to hear him talk about that on that day. We have invitation cards available today at the exits. Take a handful and use them to invite your friends to church that day.

Open your Bibles to Acts 4:23 (Pew Bible, pg.1081). So for the next few weeks we’re going to talk about who we are as believers and as a church. The series is entitled “Witnesses.” That’s who we are. Over the next four Sundays we’ll talk about the fact that we are courageous witnesses (because we will face opposition), compassionate witnesses (because the lost are perishing), capable witnesses

(because there is a skill to be learned) and compelling witnesses (because there's power that doesn't come from us that draws others to Christ). Let's read Acts 4:23-31.

Now let me give you the context of the verses we've just read.

Acts 4:23 (NIV) - On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

Release from what? Earlier in Acts 4 we're told that two the apostles, Peter and John were speaking the Gospel to the people of Jerusalem and the religious leaders were greatly disturbed by it. So they had the apostles arrested and put in jail. Later they bring them out and command them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Well, Peter and John won't stand for this. They said, "We can't help speaking what we have seen and heard." They were threatened further, then released, then they returned to the church gathering, where they reported everything.

Now what was the response of the church at this matter? Did they protest at City Hall? Did they call the State Department? Did they hire an attorney? I'm not saying that any of those things would be necessarily inappropriate. But the church was convinced they're great resource was God; so they prayed.

Acts 4:24a (NIV) - When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.

Now the prayer that Luke has recorded for us in the next verses gives us great insight into the faith of these believers. The prayer includes *praise* for the activity of God and *petition* for the activity of God.

First, they offered praise for the activity of God. Their faith is great. The opposition is great, but God is greater still. Look at their praise.

Acts 4:24b (NIV) - "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.

They addressed God as "Sovereign Lord," the God who is in control of all things. It's good to know the Sovereign Lord when you are experiencing persecution. And they also approached Him as the One who made the heaven and the earth and the sea ... Creator. Now if your Father is Lord of heaven and earth, your options are great. You don't have to be afraid.

Acts 4:25 (NIV) - You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: " 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

Acts 4:26 (NIV) - The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.'

This is a quote from Psalms 2. I'm impressed that their praying was anchored in the Scriptures. And this psalm is important because it talks about how God responds to those who reject His king. He laughs at them, because He knows there attacks are futile.

And the same thing is true about how they dealt with Jesus.

Acts 4:27 (NIV) - Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

These enemies had ganged up on Jesus Christ and crucified Him, but God raised Him from the dead and enthroned Him in heaven.

All of this was a part of God's perfect plan, so there was no need to fear.

Acts 4:28 (NIV) - They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

So no opposition can stop what God is doing in bringing the Gospel to the lost. In fact, it fits right into His plans.

So there was *praise* for the activity of God, but there is also *petition* for the activity of God. Now they get down to asking God for what they need to face this situation.

Acts 4:29 (NIV) - Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

There are some important words in this prayer:

- **LORD**

“Now, Lord...” = This all starts with the understanding that God is Lord, as is His Son Jesus Christ. He is Lord, and we are to obey Him. We are men and women under authority. We are not free to live our lives according to our own wishes. He is Lord and we are to obey Him.

- **THREATS**

“consider their threats...” = Lord, take care of the opposition. The battle belongs to the Lord. He is more than capable of taking care of any opposition. Opposition has no bearing in the ultimate results of the witness. We should expect opposition; it's part of the reason we need courage.

Maybe you've been reading about the escalation of persecution in places like Egypt in recent weeks.

- **SERVANTS**

“enable your servants...” = They understood their roles as servants of the Lord. The word for “servants” actually means slaves. Now our Master is not abusive; He is loving ... but He is Lord and we are His servant slaves.

- **ENABLE**

“enable your servants to speak your word...” = They understood their own weaknesses and the necessity for God to give them something that didn’t come naturally to them ... the power of God to make them effective in their witness. Acts 1:8 tells us that we’ll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us and we will be witnesses. And the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon God’s obedient servants in response to our praying.

- **SPEAK**

“speak your word with great boldness...” = This is the assignment they have been given. They are to speak God’s word. The word for “speak” is not the word that is usually translated “preach” or “proclaim.” It’s the word for common speech. It’s not just preaching the Gospel from the pulpit, it is gossiping the Gospel in everyday life.

Note: They were praying for the very thing that got them into trouble to begin with.

- **BOLDNESS**

They were asking for boldness because they understood our natural tendency to not be bold in our witness. Timidity is like gravity that holds us down and holds us back. We need boldness to break the grip of our human timidity and fear, and to be courageous in our witness.

So what was the church most concerned about ... what did they ask God for? Comfort, convenience? No they were consumed with the passion to get the Word of God out to others. They asked for divine enabling, not escape; and God gave them the power that they needed.

So they prayed that God would give them the ability to do what they could do. And then they were asking God to do what only He could do ... perform the miraculous.

- **HAND**

Acts 4:30 (NIV) - Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

We can’t change anyone’s life. It’s the hand and the power of God that alone can accomplish that. And along with the hand of God there is the name of Jesus.

- **NAME**

“through the name of your holy servant Jesus” = this is the banner under which we march ... the precious, powerful name of Jesus Christ.

And the results were amazing and immediate...

Acts 4:31 (NIV) - 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.

God answered their prayer by filling them fresh and new with His Holy Spirit giving them the ability to speak the word of God boldly.

I've said this before, but the pattern is the same today. The prayer goes up, the power comes down and the proclamation goes forth.

ILLUSTRATION – I'm always encouraged when I remember something that happened to a missionary from the 1800's, a man by the name of John Hyde, sometimes called Praying Hyde. He was one of the first English speaking missionaries to go to India. His biography tells of how he was getting ready to board a ship in London to travel to make the long journey to India, when a friend came up to him and handed him an envelope. After he was on board and the ship was setting out to sea John Hyde opened the envelope that contained a letter inside. His friend wrote to him to say, "John, I am praying that God will do a fresh work in your life to fit you for India." Well this struck John Hyde wrong. He felt resentment welling up inside; after all, he was the one leaving his family and everything else behind to go to India. "How dare he say I need a fresh work of God in my life." He wadded up the letter and threw it to the deck. That night in his bed below John Hyde couldn't sleep. The Spirit of God was working in his heart. He got up from his berth and went upstairs and retrieved the letter and returned to his bunk where he knelt down and prayed, "O God, I do need this fresh work of God in my life to fit me for the work in India." John Hyde went on to accomplish amazing things in India in the decades ahead through the power of God.