

ACTS PART 8 – BOLDNESS TO FACE OPPOSITION – KENNY INNES

INTRO

Do you sense that God is doing something special in our church right now? If you're just new today, or just joined us the last few weeks, we have been allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal to us, through the book of Acts, the template for what the church should be like. We want to be a church who looks at Acts and recognises ourselves! Right now, in Falkirk Vineyard, God is stirring up the hearts of His people. He is calling us to be a faithful people who declare and demonstrate the good news of His Kingdom to a world that is hurting and lost. He is looking for those who will seek His face, surrender their lives, obey his command, and be the ones who say, "we cannot stop talking about the thing we have seen and heard!" His powerful presence and his perfect word are stirring our hearts to move beyond church-as-normal, and actually live out our calling as Jesus' representatives.

But whenever we set our hearts on faithfully proclaiming the truth of Jesus, we will face opposition. The enemy does not want the message of the gospel to spread and take root, and so he attempts to work against us through intimidation and fear. In Acts, as the church gets off to a flyer, we see an immediate response from the powers around them to put a stop to the whole thing.

Last week, Pastor Andrew unpacked Peter and John's appearance before the religious council after they had healed the lame man and preached in Jesus name. The temple leaders couldn't challenge their message, or the miraculous work they saw. Their only option was to resort to threats in the hope that Peter and John would feel intimidated by their authority. They tell Peter and John to stop preaching in the name of Jesus – to which Peter and John say, "nah. We'll keep going. Thanks for the offer though."

Do you know that there are cultural and spiritual powers that are hell bent on intimidating Christians into silence? If they can't keep us quiet, they will intimidate us into watering down our message so that all of its power is lost. This is the situation the early church faced. Today we are going to discover the source of their strength to stay faithful to the task Jesus had given them.

We pick up the story in Acts 4:23...

Acts 4:23 As soon as they were freed, Peter and John returned to the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. 24 When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God: "O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them— 25 you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying,

'Why were the nations so angry?

Why did they waste their time with futile plans?

26 The kings of the earth prepared for battle;

the rulers gathered together

against the Lord

and against his Messiah.'

27 "In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. 28 But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will. 29 And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. 30 Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

31 After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.

PETER AND JOHN TELL THEIR STORY

After their showdown with the temple police, P&J head straight to the church to fill them in on what has happened. I imagine their report went something like this – “Guys, we need to be aware that the authorities are not liking this at all – they’ve just tried to stop us from preaching in Jesus’ name – but they couldn’t answer our message because we had healed a lame guy – you know the guy at the gate beautiful? Yes, him!!! And they hauled us up for it, but we spoke the truth and they couldn’t really do anything. They told us to stop preaching in Jesus’ name, but that’s never going to happen.”

THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH

So, how did the church respond? Did they give advice? Did they sit down to devise a new witnessing strategy? Did they organise a petition to voice their concerns? Did they post their outrage on Facebook? Did they modify the gospel to make it “more acceptable”? Did they decide that this whole thing was a bit too dangerous and they should stop speaking publicly?

No. Their response was to immediately take it to God in prayer. Do you ever feel overwhelmed by circumstances? I do, and it seems like prayer is often the LAST thing I do. I end up feeling hopeless and drained. But when we take our issues to God in prayer, we are reminded of where our strength comes from. The disciples had learned this lesson on the night of Jesus betrayal. Let me show you...

Do you remember that Acts is the sequel to Luke? So that means Luke often invites us to reach back into his gospel to see how the Holy Spirit has changed and matured these followers of Jesus that we’re tracking into the book of Acts. Just 2 months before, the disciples faced a huge crisis as they accompanied Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane. Betrayal and death were in the air, but Jesus gave them a chance to respond with faith. It’s found in Luke 22 -

Luke 22:39 Then, accompanied by the disciples, Jesus left the upstairs room and went as usual to the Mount of Olives. 40 There he told them, “Pray that you will not give in to temptation.”

41 He walked away, about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, 42 “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.” 43 Then an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened him. 44 He prayed more fervently, and he was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood.

45 At last he stood up again and returned to the disciples, only to find them asleep, exhausted from grief. 46 “Why are you sleeping?” he asked them. “Get up and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation.”

So the disciples failed to take their worries and fears to God. But Jesus prayed, surrendered to God’s will, and received the strength to go through the worst scenario, enduring false accusation, mocking, condemnation, beating and ultimately crucifixion. God didn’t pluck Jesus out of the trouble, but strengthened Him to fulfil his mission. And in the end, Jesus was vindicated, he rose again victorious over his enemies, and God was glorified. With that in mind, perhaps the disciples are ready now to respond to the crisis and opposition the way Jesus did – by praying to His Father.

Understanding this is part of growing up into Christ. Jesus' ministry was bathed in prayer. Jesus drew his strength from His relationship with the Father and the presence of the Spirit. Jesus' prayer life enabled him to endure hardship and persevere in the face of persecution. We want to follow Jesus' example of living from a relationship of prayer with His Father. This section of Acts shows that the early church was beginning to recognise the power of prayer - they pray in the upper room and receive the Spirit. At the heart of their community is a devotion to prayer. Peter and John call on the name of the Lord for the lame man and he is healed. And now that they are facing opposing powers, their immediate response is to pray.

Prayer is the way we communicate with our Father, present our requests to Him, and receive power and direction from Him. Now, if I was the enemy of the church, where would I attack them? Is it any coincidence that church prayer meetings are the worst attended meetings? Is it any wonder that many Christians report feeling unable to pray out loud around other people? Is it not the case that the most uncomfortable moment of any service or meeting is the moment when prayer is offered? Do all of these barriers sound like God's will? No! Of course not!

Imagine what would happen if we were determined to be a praying people? What if we devoted ourselves to prayer? Imagine if we presented all of our requests to God! Imagine if we humbly asked for and received prayer from one another because we prioritised our spiritual health? Imagine if we gathered together to unite our hearts and voices in praying to the God who is faithful to answer. Imagine if we were so bathed in prayer that we saw even more of God's power and love flowing through us! Imagine!

The prayer we are about to look at shows us just what's possible, particularly when we are facing opposition.

THE CHURCH PRAYS IN UNITY

Acts 4:24 When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God: "O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—

The first thing to note about the prayer is in v24... ***ALL the believers lifted their voices TOGETHER in prayer to God...*** Their prayer was characterised by unity. Pastor Andrew is going to speak more about the power of unity in a couple of weeks, but this shows us that, in prayer, agreement is powerful. And you know, unity brings blessing. When there is discord, grumbling, power plays, gossip, accusation, and selfish ambition, we cannot receive God's blessing. You can feel the ceiling when we pray. But when we are unified together around the cause of Christ, the doors of heaven open and His blessing pours out on us. I believe that the Holy Spirit is blessing the sense of unity that has been especially apparent in this church in the last few months. We need to press into that through prayer.

THE CHURCH RECOGNISES GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

As they pray, (v24) they address God as "*Sovereign Lord...*" The word translated as 'Sovereign Lord' here means 'Master,' or 'Supreme authority'. They also call Him 'Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them.' In doing this, they are echoing Psalm 146. Psalm 146 contrasts the temporary power of earthly rulers with the everlasting power of God. It concludes that God is the King of kings, the true and final authority over all things, including earthly powers. In Psalm 146:6 it says:

***Psalm 146:6 He made heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them.***

He keeps every promise forever.

We need to realise that the One we are praying to, the God who is on our side, is the Master who is more powerful than all earthly rulers or powers. In fact, He established the world with His creative power, which shows His absolute power over it all. So, as they're coming to pray about a situation concerning local people who have attained power and are attempting to exercise it in their immediate context, they remind themselves that their God is the sovereign ruler over ALL things.

God is also powerful over all spiritual powers and principalities. Anyone who has grown up in my generation was likely given a steady diet of Star Wars. Even if you weren't, the themes of those movies have seeped deeply into popular culture and have genuinely affected the way we view huge concepts like power, good, and evil. The idea of a 'force' that has a light and dark side, locked in an eternal battle for balance has actually become an accepted understanding of good and evil. It's the concept of ying and yang, and of a scale being weighed upon by two equal powers. But biblical Christians reject this idea, because the Scriptures clearly show us that God is sovereign, and His power is unparalleled and unmatched. Jesus has won the decisive victory over sin and death, and in the end evil will be utterly humiliated and destroyed.

When we pray in situations of opposition, we must understand that no power can stand against the power of our Sovereign Lord. No weapon formed against us will prosper. Now, you may say, "I feel like a few weapons formed against me have prospered," and as a church leader, I can say I've definitely felt the sharp slice of a few swords. And if you've read ahead, it wasn't all sweetness and light for the disciples. But nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Our place in Christ is secure. Our hope is not in this life alone, but in the eternal Kingdom that God is establishing on the earth. Nothing that befalls us or comes against us in this life can stop God's kingdom from spreading, or prevent us from taking our place in it.

THE PROMISE OF THE PSALMS

Next, they pray the words of another Psalm that was written by David. Ultimately though, they attribute it to God, who spoke these words through David.

Acts 4:25 you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying,

The early church keeps talking about David. Why?

For the Jews, David was a Messianic figure. 'Messiah' means 'chosen', or 'anointed one'. David was God's chosen King, and His reign was the golden era for Israel. Under David's Kingship they were more powerful than their enemies, experienced prosperity and peace, and established an era of pure worship before God. However, David's kingdom ultimately failed. But his monarchy was a prophetic look forward to what life under God's true, chosen King would be like. God promised David that one of his descendants would establish a kingdom that would never end. This Messiah, God's true chosen King, was Jesus, who was in the line of David.

Many of the Psalms were written by David about his experience, but because David's life was a prophetic picture of the future King to come, many of the Psalms about or by David were also prophetic pictures of Jesus.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter quotes the Psalms to show that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for. And here we see the church putting the pieces together and understanding the Psalms in light of who Jesus was and what He had done.

So, in their prayer, they pray Psalm 2.

Acts 4:25 you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying,

'Why were the nations so angry?

Why did they waste their time with futile plans?

26 The kings of the earth prepared for battle;

the rulers gathered together

against the Lord

and against his Messiah.'

And then they interpret this Psalm as being about their current situation – watch:

Acts 4:27 "In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed.

They took the prophecy of the Psalm and applied it to their day. The 'nations' in Psalm 2 were the Romans, the Gentiles, and Israel. The kings were Pilate, Herod and the religious rulers. They were able to place their current experience in the scope of God's plan.

They were acknowledging that the opposition coming their way *was to be expected*. They realised that, just as God had established David's Kingdom as a light to the hostile nations that surrounded Israel, the church too was being established, in the midst of hostile opposition, to be the bearers of God's truth and light.

You see, God had foretold this opposition, and therefore, it wasn't a surprise. They could be confident that God knew this would happen, and the fulfilling of these prophecies gave them courage that they were doing the right thing.

In fact, look what they say next:

Acts 4:28 But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will.

Amazingly, they say that the actions of those who persecuted Jesus, and now His church, had been determined by God beforehand. Even when these powers were conspiring against God, He used them to work all things together for good for those who love Him. God will never be defeated by human attempts!

Biblical scholar Craig Keener says, *"Given the Biblical precedent, the believers had no reason to be discouraged by persecution; the rulers' opposition fulfilled Scripture... Jesus' followers could be assured that all had happened according to God's plan, for they found opposition to God's anointed in Scripture."*

Psalm 2 goes on to talk about God's superiority over the opposing nations and His favour on His chosen King. The church are drawing strength, not only from the prophetic promise of opposition, but also from the prophetic promise of victory! There is joy for all who take refuge in God and his anointed King! God will set

things right and will overthrow the powers and principalities of this world that rise up against Him and His people.

Also, the church recognised that the mistreatment they are experiencing is the same mistreatment that Jesus faced. If the powers had raged against the anointed one, they would also rage against His servants. The disciples would have known this well, because JESUS PROMISED THEM IT WOULD HAPPEN. Only months before the incident with Peter and John and the religious leaders in the temple, Jesus gave His disciples a pep talk. As we read it, I want you to see how it spoke exactly into their situation, and also gave them the inspiration for what they pray next:

John 15:18 “If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. 19 The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you. 20 Do you remember what I told you? ‘A slave is not greater than the master.’ Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you. 21 They will do all this to you because of me, for they have rejected the one who sent me. 22 They would not be guilty if I had not come and spoken to them. But now they have no excuse for their sin. 23 Anyone who hates me also hates my Father. 24 If I hadn’t done such miraculous signs among them that no one else could do, they would not be guilty. But as it is, they have seen everything I did, yet they still hate me and my Father. 25 This fulfills what is written in their Scriptures: ‘They hated me without cause.’ (I’ll give you one guess where this is written! – yes, the Psalms!) 26 “But I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me. 27 And you must also testify about me because you have been with me from the beginning of my ministry.

John 16:1 “I have told you these things so that you won’t abandon your faith. 2 For you will be expelled from the synagogues, and the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing a holy service for God. 3 This is because they have never known the Father or me. 4 Yes, I’m telling you these things now, so that when they happen, you will remember my warning. I didn’t tell you earlier because I was going to be with you for a while longer.

Jesus came as God in the flesh, and they opposed and persecuted Him. But through their persecution, and ultimately His death at their hands, God brought about the salvation that ushered in His Kingdom and would save the world. Now, as Jesus’ representatives, preaching Jesus’ message, they are experiencing opposition and persecution. So, based on the prophecies being fulfilled, based on the example of Jesus, based on the promises that Jesus Himself gave them, what should they be expecting to happen? That’s right! God’s Kingdom and salvation power are going to spread, not in spite of, but somehow BECAUSE of the opposition they are facing.

Why is the greatest explosion of salvation through Christ happening in the countries with the most extreme persecution? And why is it, when we face opposition, we think God has abandoned us? It seems that, according to what happened to our Master and to the heroes of our faith, it’s when everything is hunky-dory and we are cosy in the world that we ought to be worried!

THEIR REQUESTS

Acts 4:29 And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word.

So what does the church ask for? An end to persecution? That God would give them an easier time? That God would crush their enemies? Nope. They ask for boldness in preaching the word of God, ie the message of the Kingdom. You see, Jesus promised them that they would face opposition, but He told them that they had to continue testifying about Him. Just because opposition had risen up against them doesn't mean their mission has changed.

We live in a consumer culture where we are sold the dream of convenience and ease of life. This cultural idea has crept into the way the gospel is presented. Consequently, many Christians have been sold the idea that faith in Jesus means an easier life without difficulty or danger. This corrupted gospel has as its god, not Jesus, but my comfort and convenience. Sure Jesus is still the mascot, but only insofar as he makes things easy for me. The result is that I hold loosely to Jesus, and I hold tightly to all of the things that I believe will bring me ease, comfort and happiness – money, possessions, jobs, status, entertainment, self-care, family, etc.

And if we follow this corrupt gospel, we quickly realise that speaking about truth, sin, righteousness, Jesus as the only way to salvation, and the need to surrender our lives to God, will bring swift opposition into our lives. This causes a conflict within us because we have falsely believed that Jesus wouldn't lead us into uncomfortable conflicts with the culture or powers around us. Consequently, to protect the false god of convenience and ease, we will abandon the call to speak the truth about the true God, Jesus.

The true reason why many of us don't speak openly about Jesus is that we have held more tightly our need to be comfortable than we have the command of Jesus to testify to his gracious, saving power in our lives.

The early church had determined that the cause of Christ was worth the trouble. If Jesus had faced persecution to bring about their salvation, then they too would stand against opposition so that people could hear the message of the gospel and be saved.

Acts 4:30 Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

Next, they ask that God accompany their bold preaching with signs and wonders done in the name of His son Jesus to confirm the message. So, in the face of opposition and persecution they asked for boldness and signs & wonders. Why would they ask for those two things? Perhaps it's as a result of the story they had been told by Peter and John:

Acts 4:13 The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. 14 But since they could see the man who had been healed standing right there among them, there was nothing the council could say.

They had identified a pattern in Peter and John's experience – declaration and demonstration had left the powers that be powerless against the message. This echoed the way Jesus had ministered, and would become the future pattern for how the gospel would spread throughout the rest of Acts.

Acts 4:31 After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.

The whole place where they are praying is shaken. What is the Holy Spirit doing? Firstly, everything around them is shaken. God is promising that He will keep them steady in the centre of the turmoil. Secondly, God is filling them with the Holy Spirit. Now, you may be thinking, "I thought they already got filled with the Spirit?" You're right – they did. But it appears that Christians can continue being filled with the Holy Spirit. They were filled on the day of Pentecost, Peter was filled when he addressed the council, and here they are filled again. We can experience the filling of the Holy Spirit as we walk into situations where we need a fresh sense of His power.

END

So what will we do when opposition comes?

God is calling us to be a people of prayer, who depend on the strength of God to carry out the mission He has given us collectively as a church and individually as we go about our daily lives. God is challenging us to speak the truth of the gospel into every situation we walk into. We don't want to shirk back from the calling God has placed on our lives because we are worried about what people might think about us. In the balance, I have a Saviour who has given His very life for us. We have a message that can transform the lives of the people we come into contact with. We have the power of the Holy Spirit to demonstrate this Kingdom that's unlike the world, where people are healed and released, and set free, finding hope for the future. Is that worth facing opposition? Is it worth being embarrassed? Is it worth people turning their back on you? I think it is, because this life is ultimately not about how comfortable I can be, but about affecting as many people as possible with the good news of the Kingdom. With God's strength, we want to see Falkirk transformed, even if we face opposition to the amazing message of salvation through Jesus.