

With All Boldness!

Acts 4:23-31

July 1, 2001

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” The good news in today’s reading is that God keeps his promises. In Jesus Christ, God keeps his promises. This is the foundation for life. It is the basis for discipleship. It gives good hope for the future. This is good news for you and me.

The church of Jesus Christ, the gathered Christian community, as the visible expression of the kingdom of God on earth, is always under attack. We suffer under enemies from the outside, and sometimes even from the inside, agents of the forces of evil. This is true today. It was true two-thousand years ago. And they realized that it was nothing new then. The kingdom of God is always under attack. And God always preserves it.

This is the significance of the quote from Psalm 2. Peter and John had healed a lame man at the temple. Then they preached the gospel of Jesus Christ there and taught the resurrection. As a reward for their efforts, they were arrested, detained, interrogated, and threatened by the priests and elders. But when Peter and John were released and told this to their friends, their friends, instead of being horrified, lifted their voices in prayer and quoted the first two verses of Psalm 2, which we read together earlier:

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed.

Instead of being caught off guard, instead of being surprised, instead of being horrified by the mistreatment of Christ and of Christ’s disciples, they realized that God keeps his promises.

Do you see the connection? A thousand years before Christ, in the ancient writing of the Psalms, it had been acknowledged that the nations, peoples, kings, and rulers of the world would set themselves against God and against God’s Christ. But, it was also prophesied and promised that all their efforts would be in vain. They would struggle against God, but they would not win. The friends of Peter and John realized that this had come true in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

Christ. All that the enemies of Christ did against him was used to serve the hidden but prior and greater purposes of God for salvation. What the enemies did was evil. They intended it for evil. But God had predestined it for good, and God used it for good. Thus, all the efforts of the enemies of Christ were in vain, just as the Psalm said. So, God keeps his promises, even over a thousand years, or two-thousand years, or three-thousand years.

The immediate implication for the disciples was that the same thing was happening again to Peter and John. The priests and the elders were conspiring against them. The enemies of the kingdom of God were revealing themselves as enemies of the kingdom of God by aligning themselves against the disciples of Christ. And since God had kept his promise before, so that the efforts of the enemies of Christ against Christ were in vain, they had faith that God would keep his promise again, so that the efforts of the enemies of Christ against his disciples would also be in vain. This is the good news.

It continues to be true for us today. God keeps his promises. The efforts of the enemies of Christ, revealed in their efforts to destroy Christ's church, shall be in vain. God will frustrate their efforts. God will turn their evil deeds to serve his own glory. God will preserve the gospel of his Christ, the church of his Christ, and the kingdom of his Christ. Count on it! Jesus did. And so did his disciples.

Now, the next implication is even more striking. Given that God had prophesied and promised that the efforts of the enemies of his Christ would be in vain, it would have been understandable for the disciples simply to have prayed for the fulfilment of this promise and for the safety of Peter and John and they went about their ministry. But that is not what they did. They did not pray for safety. They did not ask for safety. They did not beg for personal protection. Quite the opposite. They wanted to take the whole thing to the next level. "And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

Within a few weeks of Christ's arrest and crucifixion, when Peter and John had been arrested, detained, interrogated, and threatened for their preaching, their friends asked God to grant them to speak his word "with all boldness." Name the name of Jesus Christ. Proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Teach the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Preach it on the street corners. Shout it from the roof tops. Proclaim it in the market places. This is in your face with the gospel. They did not ask for knowledge. They did not ask for wisdom. They did not ask for erudition. They did not ask for gracefulness. They asked for boldness. They asked for courage. They asked for raw conviction. And they got it. Were the authorities closing in? Preach all the more. Was the temple failing? Preach all the more. Was the enemy attacking?

Preach all the more. And so they did. No sooner had they finished their prayer than “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.”

Here we learn much about Christian faith and prayer. Christian faith is the confidence that God keeps his promises. In Jesus Christ, God keeps his promises. In this instance, God has promised that the enemies of Christ shall not prevail. This is as true today as it was then. In this, we can have confidence. The enemies of Christ shall not prevail today, either. And they shall not prevail tomorrow. From this we need to take courage. From this we need ask God to grant that his ministers today may preach his gospel “with all boldness.”

We also learn here that Christian prayer is properly grounded in the promises of God. The friends of Peter and John prayed as they did out of their realization and confidence that God keeps his promises. This leads to gratitude and thanksgiving. Moreover, their realization and confidence that God keeps his promises also led to their prayer request, their intercession for Peter and John, that God continue to keep his promises. God had protected the kingdom of God from the enemies of Christ. God had protected Peter’s proclamation of the gospel from the enemies of Christ. So did the friends pray that God would continue to protect the ministry of Peter and John from the enemies of Christ.

Not only would this be a good prayer for us, that God protect his church from the enemies of Christ, but also this prayer is a good model of prayer. That is, we have here the positive example of prayer being made to God to keep the promises God had already made. That is a good standard for us in our prayers. If we have a question as to what is appropriate in prayer, or if we should have such a question, here is an answer to it: it is appropriate to ask in prayer that God keep his promises. This will help keep us from making inappropriate prayers.

Of course, for our prayers to be grounded in the promises of God, we have to have a good, working knowledge of the promises of God. And we can receive that only through a careful study of the word of God as recorded in the scripture. Thus do I urge us all to intense, daily Bible reading and study. And this should be in addition to Sunday morning worship, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, women’s Bible circles, and so forth. I urge us all to intense, daily, personal Bible reading and study. That is how we can learn the promises of God. That is how we can learn how to pray that God keep his promises. Our best prayers are in conversation with the word of God as recorded in the scriptures.

The good news in today’s reading is that God keeps his promises. In Jesus Christ, God keeps his promises. This is the foundation for life. It is the basis for discipleship. It gives good hope for the future. This is good news for you and me. As we face our lives today, and as we face the attacks being made by the enemies of Christ upon the church of Jesus Christ, I look for the day that we join our voices

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with those of the friends of Peter and John in praying to God: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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