

Voices Lifted

Series Overview: Hands Lifted, Eyes Open, Stomach's Empty....

Last week we asked the question. Jesus asking..."Are you sure you want more of me?" We learned about how fasting prepares our heart for desperate prayer. Today's sermon is titled "Voices Lifted", We are going to look at one of the most amazing prayers I have ever studied. They lifted their voices in unity together and what they asked for is unbelievable...It leaves me desperate to be more like them....To have their faith...their total selfless surrender to the mission....I look at their faith...their prayers....and just don't fully get it....I want desperately to see Jesus and our life the way they saw it. I am challenged by them

I am also challenged by things that are drawn or designed in 3D.

I have a complete inability to see diagrams in 3D I just can't look at diagrams...that are drawn in 3D and see what I am supposed to see...Are any of you guys 3D challenged?...Those box photos where you can see them in 2 ways.....Really messed me up- Do you know what 3D designers call this...a Frustrum.

I realized it in my 7th grade Drafting Class...It started out great...until we starting looking at objects in 3 dimensions and then they started rotating...inverting.... I got so confused...what I thought was up...was down..sort of like the vertigo I get once in a while. I remember my drafting teacher offering to help, but I couldn't see what he was seeing.What I thought was right...was wrong..He couldn't really help me...because I was so confused by what I was seeing

When I was in medical school....Plastic surgery was totally out of the question....I could never reconstruct something in 3D. Not good to not know how something goes back together.

To this day...I can't assemble anything that involves a 3D diagram. Tammy tries to help me but she can't...so usually she does it for me...It is somewhat emasculating....to my ego...But I just can't see it. Every time I think I know what to do...I discover that they guy who designed the whole thing wanted me to do something completely different.

We are going to look at a story in Acts 4. The first Christ followers get to a point...where they realize that they had no idea what was going on.... What they thought God wanted...was not what He wanted. What they thought they were seeing....was not what they were seeing.

They discovered that the God who was sovereign- who designed everything wanted them to do something completely different.How do you pray....when you don't have any idea what to pray for? When everything you thought was right....was wrong. We are going to look at their amazing prayer in that moment. But first we need a bit more context to understand how they got there.

Disciples were Jewish

They were first and foremost Jewish People...Just like Jesus.They grew up in the Synagogue...followed all the feasts...attended faithfully the Jewish Celebrations....Observed the laws and fasts.

The first Christians however added to that background their belief that Jesus was the Messiah. So early in this movement...they synagogues had two groups of people...Jews surrendered to Jesus and Jews who were not. At first they seemed to be able to get along...but over time the Jewish leaders changed....They were constantly telling these new believers to chill on the Jesus stuff. Just stop stirring everyone up about Jesus

Add to this story that they were an occupied nation. They were under Roman control and authority. The Romans embraced all kinds of religions of those nations that they occupied...They just didn't want to deal with uprisings or problems. But in order to maintain peace...they did not allow NEW religions in occupied lands.

Early on...and in the story that we study today...The tension is building at the temple between the Jews and the new Christ followers....It continued to escalate...because the Christians could not keep quiet about what they had seen in Jesus. Eventually we will see that the first Christians were shunned by the Jewish people...No longer allowed status in the temple....No longer allowed to share in the feasts...No longer able to buy, sell, trade or work in the Jewish Communities...These first century believers could not work, worship or find food. They were outcasts. In fact, Paul had to go around and collect money for them so that they could survive.

Within a few years...the Romans noted that these New Christians....this growing movement....Sometimes called "The Way" Was not the Jewish Religion of their occupied land...But a new religion that had no status under Roman law and thus must be stopped and its followers prosecuted.

These Christ Followers were seriously struggling....Rejected by their families, their culture, their communities. Unable to operate business as usual in Jerusalem....Shunned by the Synagogues and Religious Leaders...Hunted down by the Pharisees...like Saul...They drew close together....began sharing everything in order to survive...They gathered together every day for prayer....They shared their belongings...to meet the needs of others....they sold property and shared the money with others...They met together each day to share their meals...share a meal...so everyone could eat...They were desperate for God...the needed Him to survive...and they knew it.

They didn't always know who to trust...The ichthys...Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter, i.e. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. The fish symbol was a common symbol in the First Century...The fish...unlike the cross...raised little suspicion...Christians used the fish to mark meeting locations ...And to distinguish friends from enemies....If two men met...one would draw half the fish in the ground with a stick If the other man was a Christ follower..He would draw complete the drawing....Fortunately it was a 2D diagram

They desperate for the presence and power of God to complete their mission... A mission they knew they were likely not going to survive...Every day...God was adding to their numbers. Every day...some were taken from their numbers...Many to jail...many to be flogged and beaten...some to be martyred.They were living in a time when their faith in Jesus separated them from their culture....Religiously, economically, socially, politically, and legally. They developed desperation and dependence upon God for everything...They were being persecuted...and they needed God

So they prayed constantly, but at times their prayers didn't seem to work

We learn about Stephen...Stephen was full of grace and Power doing great things...Thank you God...Protect Stephen....They prayed...then Stephen is Martyred

They prayed that God would protect them...Let's see how that prayer was going....

Acts 8:2-3 (ESV) 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

While they prayed for protection....Saul is ravaging the church

They prayed for James the brother of John ...He was one of Jesus' inner circle...He was now the Leader of the Jerusalem Church....They needed James....Herod arrested him and killed him with the sword

They prayed for Peter....Walk on water Peter...Peter the Rock....that Peter. He was one of their leaders....Herod...who killed John the Baptist....Killed Jesus...Just Killed James.....Now Herod has put Peter in Prison...And most likely planned to kill him

So let's review their prayer journal...Prayed for Stephen today.....dead. Prayed for protection....many in our church family are now in prison...Prayed for James...The leader of our church...dead...Prayed for Peter....now on death row. I wonder if I would have kept praying...

Let me see if I can bring this home. Suppose.....Our culture and nation turned against us...Our faith was outlawed. Being together put us at risk...People were searching for us to try to imprison us. Every time we gathered together...we learned about each other. Where are Howard and Lori?...in prison...Bill and Lisa?...missing...we think in prison...maybe dead...David and Steve? On trial for making and distributing underground pamphlets...Tammy? They seized her praying in her cafe....Natalie?...she was singing to herself and they heard the words...she is in prison. Frank...the leader of the church....they killed him last night. Pastor Ed... in prison.

None of us could hold jobs without being discovered...Our resources are running out.... we are sharing everything....because we may not need it tomorrow. Because we are all facing an uncertain tomorrow. We don't know who to trust So we whisper to new people.."Messed Up People..Waiting for the quiet response...."changed by the truth of God" To see if we are with friend or enemy

We no longer meet in the church but in underground small groups...Our building long ago seized...Suppose if every week...some people couldn't get to church- their small group because they were being killed or arrested...It is hard to imagine...and yet....I just described the situation not only for the First Century Church....but for many churches around the world today. Just not the ones in North America. North American churches will stop meeting for almost any reason.

So let me ask you this question....If those things were happening to us...each week...Would you still be here? Really? Are you sure?...What if the risk was 100X greater than Covid? Lets say you knew if you went to church today that you would have a 10% chance of not surviving....would you really be here? They were. .

We tend to glamorize the First Century Church...I hear pastors and churches say things like...We just need to be more like the First Century Church. I always think...be careful what you ask for. Are you sure that you want more of Jesus?

We tend to focus on the Miracles, the Gifts of the Spirit, and the spreading of the Gospel...But there are two words that seem to characterize Gods' people throughout History....2 Words that Characterized the First Church...1)Remnant-A group of people totally sold out to Him. Those whose hearts are truly His and 2)Persecution

Let me frame this a bit....There are 2 Billion Christians Worldwide...In the US 79% (247 Million) of People identify themselves as Christian...Worldwide each year 160,000 of our Brothers and Sisters in Christ are Martyred for Jesus. 160,000 per year....438 per day....6 of them since I started this sermon....One every 4 minutes.

26 Million Christians martyred in the last century.Today...200 million of our brothers and sisters in Christ...In 60 Nations face persecution each day...60% are children..

Literally hundreds of thousands of people today are being killed, brutalized, sold as slaves, imprisoned, tortured, threatened, discriminated against and arrested solely because they refuse to renounce or hide their faith in Jesus Christ.

If we have any chance of understanding the First Church, we are going to have to get past our western...comfortable... protected...view of what following Christ really means. A western view that is in no way based on reality or the Scriptures

Noted Bible Teacher Dr. M. R. DeHaann said it this way...“To come to Christ costs nothing, to follow Christ costs something, but to serve Christ costs everything.”

Jesus said it this way “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” – Matthew 10:39.

John 16:1–4 (ESV) 1 “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. 3 And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you. “I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.

Which begs the question once again...Do you really want more of me? Really?

Luke 14:27–28 (ESV) 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?

So with that context...lets look at our story today.

Peter and John had healed a lame man on their way into the Temple....The lame man caused quite a stir as he danced and ran around the outer courts of the Temple...Peter preaches in Solomon's Portico...tells them it is Jesus that healed the man...He tells them to repent and turn to Jesus.... The Jewish leaders are upset because they were proclaiming Jesus was raised from the dead....So they arrested Peter and John

Acts 4:7–12 (ESV) 7 And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. 11 This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. 12 And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Acts 4:13–14 (ESV) 13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

These were ordinary men with an extraordinary God. Somehow the preaching and power of these two men...Reminded them of Jesus...That is what the Holy Spirit does....He always reminds everyone of Jesus

Acts 4:16–18 (ESV) 16 saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." 18 So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Don't teach in the name of Jesus...Do that Jesus stuff in private...The name of Jesus stirs everyone up...You can teach...just leave out Jesus... You can teach about religion....religion is ok...Teach about God....God is ok....Teach about the Law...The Scriptures...they are ok...Tell them about Abraham...Or Isaac or JacobBut when you are at the Temple.....Don't mention Jesus....

Acts 4:19–21 (ESV) 19 But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, 20 for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." 21 And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened.

Peter tells them we can't help but tell what we have seen...You see this is not just what we believe...It is not a new philosophy...not a new series of rules to follow....This is something we have seen and heard....We have been witnesses to something ...Something that happened....A historical fact....We are part of an event...it is bigger than us....

This isn't a way of thinking or living....we have witnessed God...God came to us...we know Him...and we can't shut up about it.God has done something unique... It is now a part of who we are.... Everyone sees it..No one can deny it. We can't stop talking any more than we can't stop breathing. Then they were released.....

I wonder what they discussed...Here is how mine might go. Man, we almost lost Peter and John.....Peter and John....they have books of the Bible to write...We can't lose Peter and John....we need them. We let them get arrested....That was a huge mistake...we never should have let them be so visible. We need them to be safe... we have to keep them out of the temple....We thought they were going to be killed...We cannot make that mistake again.Wow God...that was too close. We need to be more careful...We have to go somewhere more receptive to our message...God probably wants us to go somewhere safer...

My prayer would go something like this... Protect me....bless me...guard me.. Bless us...guard us.. protect us. God did I mention protecting us...did you hear me? Keep us safe..guard us...surround us with angels....Give us a hedge of protection....on second thought give us a big honking massive wall of protection...Because my safety is the most important thing...This mission is about me.... And my safety comes first....right? Right God?...we are good on that point?

But that is not how they prayed...What they pray for is absolutely stunning....I look at the First Christ Followers... The way they prayed...And is it like a 3D diagram to me.They see so many things...that I miss.

Their Prayer

Acts 4:23–24 (ESV) 23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God

They lifted their voices together...Each of them had an ordinary voice..they were just ordinary people...But as they prayed together they became more united.They lifted their voices together in prayer...In that moment....God revealed to them...Something they had not previously seen

They are about to have a huge Ah Ha moment. They are going to realize something that will change their entire perspective. Like me if I ever can understand a 3D Diagram... I think it will change everything

They were looking at the world as if it was all about them, but their Ah Ha moment comes when they realize....This mission is more important than me. Something much bigger is going on...God is involving them in something huge

This new perspective changes their prayer. Not protect me because it is not about me. Once I can embrace that my life....this mission...is not about me....I can begin to see God the way He intended. Let's look at this incredible prayer.

Acts 4:24–31 (ESV) 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “ ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ — 27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

“Sovereign Lord,”

Their first words are about the greatness of God. A praying church worships God for His greatness regardless of our circumstances... God....those first followers are beginning to understand...You are sovereign Lord

We had the wrong perspective. I thought everything revolved around me....but it has always revolved around you. You have always been in charge. Even when I didn't understand what you were doing...You never lost control

Acts 4:24 (ESV) “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them,

They are connecting the dots. Beginning to see how big God is and how small they are. You are not just sovereign over us....you created it all..

Acts 4:25 (ESV) 25 Who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, We remember what we have been taught. David wrote it 1000 years ago...A Psalm we memorized as children...Now we realize it is happening right now...we are living out the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Acts 4:25–26 (ESV) 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “ ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ —

It talked about the coming Messiah. The Gentiles would stand against Him. Kings..Rulers of the earth...All against the anointed One...It would not work as they plot in vain...We have been witnesses to this....David spoke of it long ago...that is exactly what happened....Everyone turned against Jesus...We are living in Prophecy!

Acts 4:27–28 (ESV) 27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Truly...this really happened....in this city... in Jerusalem....we saw it happen...Herod, Pilate, Gentiles, Jews...they all turned against Jesus...That Psalm ...quoted by Jews ...Generation after Generation. Psalm that pointed to the Messiah...We wondered how that would happen...Now we know!

We have been eyewitnesses to major league prophecy...We thought you had lost control God....But you were in control the whole time...You had a plan! They could only do what you had predestined they could do...We didn't understand you God... Since it didn't make sense to us...We thought it couldn't make sense.

That means we have been praying for the wrong things 1) We prayed that they wouldn't crucify Jesus...But they did 2) We prayed our people wouldn't be arrested...But they were 3)We prayed that James would be released... But he was martyred 4) We prayed that Peter would not be arrested... But he was... We doubted you....You have been here the whole time....You planned all of this....None of this caught you by surprise....Pilate and Herod thought they were in control... But you were the One calling all the shots. You are Sovereign God

God how do we pray now? What do you ask for when you realize that....What you have been asking for was not God's plan.....When what you have been praying for is against God's will? Protect me...guard me...Don't let them arrest him, crucify Him...Don't let them get arrested.... But that was all against God's will....What do you ask for when all your previous prayers have been wrong?

Our prayers tend to go like this... God thank you for today...now ...give me...help me..provide for me..Their prayer is still focused on who sovereign Lord is in control...God you are amazing...God you are so big....God nothing surprises you....

They still haven't got to their request....They can't stop worshiping Him because they are beginning to understand who He really is...They are seeing Him in 3D if you will...They don't know what to ask for...

They realize their lives are at risk...They could arrest all of us. They know they are in danger...But what if?..Our arrest is God's will? Our persecution is His plan? Our sacrifice is what He needs? Our lives are expendable for the mission? God is to be glorified through our suffering...just like Jesus was? Let's see what they prayed for....

Acts 4:29 (ESV) 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats

Please consider their threats...They don't pray...Do away with our enemies... Don't let us be arrested...Don't let us be persecuted...Above all else protect us...keep us safe...Those sound like my prayers...but here is what they prayed....God...About those people who could kill us..At least consider their threats

We don't know.....Maybe it is your will that they kill us...But we want to make sure that you know what is going on... We are aware of them and we just want to know that you are too...Would you just consider their threats? We want to make sure.....That whatever happens to us....Has gone through you first...

Then they ask for IT...This is so incredible....So contrary to what we normally ask for...But once you realize that God is Sovereign...Once you realize that He is working out His plan...That what is happening.....has been foretold... That we have a role in God's plan.. That the mission is more important than me...Then there is really only one thing left to pray for

They understand their situation....They are scare... Lives are in jeopardy....but that it may not be God's Will to protect them...To deliver them.....God may not desire to remove their enemies. So they ask.....God if you don't do anything else...Please do this one thing...So powerful.... I pray that we all get this...please don't miss it.

Acts 4:29 (ESV) grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness,

Boom. Have you ever prayed that? Our prayer. Help, bless, heal protect....If you don't help....If you don't protect... If you don't heal...At least do this...Enable me to speak your word with boldness....Don't let me waste my life...If I am to be martyred for you.... Let me glorify you in the process.

This prayer blows my mind. It is absolutely incredible. It represents a heart that is totally surrendered...The people are being persecuted! Tomorrow is not guaranteed... People are out searching for them...throwing them in prison. Leaders are being killed...martyred for their faith.

Their prayer was essentially this....God I don't know what will happen to me...I don't know what tomorrow holds...but the forecast is not good. God please....please....when that moment comes....if you give me nothing else as along as I live. If you don't protect me... If you don't rescue me...If you don't destroy them...Let me...give me....the power...to speak...not my words...but your word...with boldness. No matter what happens after that.

Because.....in my 3D reveal...my AH HA moment...I realized...The Mission is more important than me.No matter what happens to me....the Gospel message must go forward... I have already died for this mission....It is no longer I who live...but Christ lives in me. So Holy Spirit...I need your power....So that when the opportunity arises....I beg you to allow me to speak your word with boldness.

You will never be able to pray that prayer until you embrace that the mission...God's plan...is more important than you

I believe that this prayer is critical for our church right now. I believe that our future looks more like the First Century Church than we want to admit. Our society is changing...Many of us are realizing that our nation is not a Christian Nation...We are beginning to realize that we are not in the majority....In the US 79% claim to be Christians- but if you use the gun to the head test probably closer to.....5-%

The prevailing force in our society is not a Biblically Based Christian one...The message of our society is the same one Peter and John heard...Talk about God...talk about religion...talk about coexisting....talk about Buddah or Mohammed....talk about Oprah or one of her gurus.....But do not speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Any name but that one...Because if you speak in that name.....You are intolerant. Satan wants to silence the voices of Christ Followers

I think we are only a decade away from it being illegal to...Preach God's truth about Homosexuality.....Preach God's truth about Abortion.....Preach God's truth about Same Sex Marriages....Preach God's truth about sex outside of marriage...I believe they will not be protected as free speech but rather prosecuted as hate crimes.

I believe churches in the future will be pressured to become more Unitarian...Open to all beliefs...And sadly I think some Christian churches will succumb to that pressure....One day God may ask us to Sacrifice Remnant for His Mission...I would rather see this building destroyed...and we all go underground....to prison...or martyred...Than to see us ever compromise the Word of God...even once.

It seems from studying the Word...God uses a persecuted remnant...to move the Gospel forward.A remnant of true believers.....Full of the Holy Spirit.....Surrendered to the mission...Praying people....Desperate for the presence and power of God...Thus speaking boldly without fear for Jesus...Surrendering to God no matter what happens... Living their lives as living sacrifices or surrendering their lives as Martyrs

Then God allows that remnant to be persecuted Christ followers....sacrificing, serving, and surrendered...Laying down their lives for others. There is no greater love than that. That is why Jesus did it. That is why those who follow Him.....May be asked to do the same.

Persecution clarifies your situation... It makes the most important thing....living for Christ's glory...the only thing. It makes you decide if the mission is more important than you Those of us in the West have the luxury of debating if real persecution will ever happen here....But for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the World...the debate is over...they are living it. But there are 12 fewer of them than when I started this sermon...5 were children....

We are going to spend a few moments praying. Do you know what happened when they prayed for boldness?

Acts 4:31 (ESV) 31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

The place they were praying was shaken. They prayed an earthquake prayer..I am not suggesting that you pray for an earthquake...But some here need to be shaken up...so we can wake up.... Some need to pray...God if you are going to shake something....God shake my foundation...so I know my foundation is You.

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit...There it is again....And once they were filled with the Holy Spirit....God gave them the power to speak the Word of God with boldness. God please replicate that miracle in this room today.

Maybe you realize that you need Jesus. You thought you were the most important thing...But something in you is telling you that you need to run to Sovereign God...That Jesus is waiting for you to run to Him...Yes you will have to confess you sins....Yes you will feel His disappointment...Yes you will need to surrender to Him, turn from being God of your life, and allow Him to be God...The first step of your new life starts at this altar....you need to surrender to Jesus...come..Don't wait...you come

Perhaps....you need to confess.That you have never really surrendered to God's Plan for your life...It cost you nothing to come to Christ...It cost you something to follow Christ... But now God is telling you it is time to serve Christ....and that will cost you everything...God is crying out to you...To go all in... Come to the altar and surrender it all.

Maybe God is prompting you to pray for the now 15 that have been martyred.That their sacrifice was not in vain...that they spoke with boldness...And while you are praying...add the one who dies during the time you are at the altar

Maybe you need to confess...That your view of Following Christ was comfortable....sterile....Safe...guarded..and protected...and you realize you haven't been following Christ at all....just yourself. That the mission you have been on was not His but yours.

Some here are completely surrendered and we need.... with voices..... lifted to pray.... Sovereign Lord, grant to your servants at Remnant to continue to speak your word with boldness, because this mission is more important than me.