

## 8. By prayer to the Sovereign God

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to the passage we read there in Acts chapter 4, and we're looking particularly this morning at the section from verse 23 to 31.

Last week we looked at the first part of this chapter in some detail as we faced up to the unavoidable reality that the people of faith and the cause of faith in Christ in this world will always face opposition.

Because we have an enemy. And so just like Paul experienced in Ephesus, wherever a wide and effective door opens to us and to the gospel, there will be many adversaries.

If you remember nothing else that I say, then please remember that I told you that. Please remember it when our church doors in Buchanan Street reopen, whenever that is, and when new doors for witness, therefore, do open to us.

And we will find ourselves facing struggles of many kinds. I want you to remember that that's not abnormal, but rather, in fact, it's inevitable, so that you won't despair, so that we'll be encouraged together.

[ 1 : 1 9 ] And by the way, you might have to remind me of that as well. You might need to say to me, listen to the teaching of your own sermons, and don't despair when struggles come. Well, we learn from this chapter how it is that the church of Jesus Christ should face such adversity and remain true to Jesus and true to her calling in the world.

And we saw last time that, first of all, faith faces hostility by proclaiming, by proclaiming boldly the sovereign gospel of God. Never by being silenced, that's the aim of the devil, but rather by speaking words in Jesus' name.

But today we're going to give equal focus to the other side of what it means to do this, because faith faces hostility not only by proclaiming the sovereign gospel, but also by praying to the sovereign God.

And it's vital, vital that we see these two things as inseparable. They're just two sides of the same coin. And there are some people you see, some Christians, who have a near obsession with prayer for revival.

They're always having special meetings, special conferences, special events about prayer for revival and so on. But, they never do anything. There's never any impact, along with that, of the gospel on the world.

[ 2 : 4 6 ] There's no attempt to ensure that people will hear the sovereign gospel of Jesus, which alone can save. So often those kind of people are talking to one another in all sorts of little huddles, but they're totally removed from the world outside.

Well, what use is that? But on the other hand, you see, there are those at the opposite extreme who are obsessed with events, and with strategy, and with activism, and with conferences, and conventions, and new initiatives, and all kinds of things like that.

But they, by contrast, have no time for just praying. Well, you see, both of these attitudes are totally flawed.

Because the pattern in Scripture is that prayer to the sovereign God and proclamation of the sovereign gospel are absolutely inseparable. They go together, always.

And Acts is a book that's absolutely full of examples of that. Just a couple of pages on, in chapter 6, verse 4, the apostles say, we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

[ 3 : 54 ] They see it as one thing that goes together. It's the same all through the epistles. Remember, in Ephesians chapter 6, where Paul is speaking famously of the armour of God, and he says, take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times.

Take the sword of the Spirit, praying. The word of God and prayer. Two sides of the same coin. Two sides of the same sword, according to Paul.

And that is precisely what we see here in Acts chapter 6. You see, verse 5, at the beginning tells us that the enemies of God are gathered together, inspired by Satan. But the answer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is a double-edged sword.

And verses 8 to 22 show the apostles spirit-inspired proclamation. And now, in verses 23 to 31, we see similarly the spirit-inspired prayer.

And the result of that is that the enemies who tried to silence the gospel are in fact themselves silenced. Verse 14, do you see? They had nothing to say in opposition.

[ 5 : 04 ] Silenced. And the church that they were trying to silence is in fact emboldened all the more to speak the word of the gospel. Verse 31, do you see?

They continued to speak the word of God with boldness. Well, we've seen already what the apostles' proclamation teaches us. We don't meet violent threats or even subtle threats with being intimidated or even accommodating the message into silence.

No, we proclaim the sovereign gospel of God. But I want this morning to look at the prayer in verses 23 to 31 and to see what that teaches us too. Because we must be just as clear that the faith that overcomes threats is also a faith that faces that hostility by bold prayer to the sovereign God.

By praying boldly in Jesus' name. And if we look at these verses we'll see it's not just any old kind of prayer. This passage wants us to learn and to emulate the church that we see at prayer here.

I want to think of three things. It was prayer that was instinctive, informed, and instrumental. To first look at verses 23 and 24 and we see clearly, don't we, that this prayer is instinctive prayer.

[ 6 : 26 ] It's the prayer of a people who enjoy a real relationship with God and therefore they know His worth. It's a prayer of people who are close to the person of God's Savior.

Verse 23 tells us that as soon as they were released from prison they went back to their friends, to the other believers and they reported. What did they report? Was it the awful experience they had in prison?

Was it the injustice perpetrated upon them? Well, no it wasn't. Verse 23, they reported what the priests and elders had said to them. What did they say to them?

Well, look back to verse 17 and 18. They said to them not to speak in Jesus' name. Not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

That's what they reported to their friends. And when they heard it, verse 24, their immediate instinctive action as a fellowship of believers was to pray.

[ 7 : 31 ] Was to pray together. They lifted their voices together to God. So the gathering together in opposition to God and the gospel is met by a gathering together to pray.

It's instinctive, isn't it? Just as it was in chapter 1, verse 14. When Jesus had commanded them to stay together, to wait for the promised Holy Spirit, instinctively, what did they do when they were together?

They devoted themselves to prayer together. Well, I wonder if that's what we would do faced with that kind of threat. I'm not sure it is.

Although, of course, we do gather together for prayer often and we will be this week. But I think that probably when problems like that arise, we're more likely first, aren't we, instinctively, to meet, to discuss, to think of strategy, to think of a way through it all.

Certainly that's what happens, isn't it, on a wider scale in the churches and denominations. people will set up a committee and they'll hold conferences and all that sort of thing. They're much, much more likely to do all kinds of things like that than to say, let's have a gathering to pray to God.

[ 8 : 46 ] But no, you see, because this church's relationship with God is real and alive, because they're close to the person of the Savior, they know He's real.

They know He's near. So, as the psalmist says, they call on Him in truth. But notice also that it's not, it's not just a closeness of over-familiarity that breeds contempt.

Not the prayer of someone to God Almighty, the kind of prayer that we often have today. Hey Lord, I need a bit of a help over here. Can you do something for me? No.

It's the prayer of a people who know that God is near, but they also know that He's the transcendent Lord of glory. They know His worth. So, they accord Him reverence and awe, don't they?

Verse 24. Sovereign Lord is how they address Him. The word there, actually, in the Greek is the word from which we get our word despot. Not a very common address to God in the New Testament.

[ 9 : 48 ] It means a ruler and master of unchallengeable power. But it's very appropriate here, isn't it? Because they're faced, aren't they, with powerful rulers. a raid against them.

And what they pray, rather, is this. You, literally what it says is, you are the sovereign Lord. You're the true master who rules, who made all things.

Not them. You're the creator, the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. He's recalling, isn't he, some of the great passages of prayer from the Old Testament.

For example, Psalm 102. Of old, you laid the foundation of the earth. All the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain.

They will wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe and they will pass away, but you are the same and your years have no end. That's the God they're praying to.

[ 10 : 50 ] And in time of need, they instinctively know that he alone has the power to intervene. It's rather like the prayer of Hezekiah, isn't it, back in the Old Testament.

Do you remember? You read about it in Isaiah 37. Sennacherib, the ruler of Assyria, the fiercest of all the leaders and the armies of the ancient world were arrayed against Jerusalem.

I was in the British Museum not long ago in London and if you go there you can see vast stone carvings about Sennacherib and his armies and all their victories and their absolute brutality. And they were arrayed against Jerusalem and he sent a threatening letter, do you remember, to King Hezekiah intimidating the people and to surrender.

And what did Hezekiah do? Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it. And Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord and spread it before the Lord.

And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel who is enthroned above the cherubim, You are the God, You alone of all the kingdoms of the earth.

[ 11 : 56 ] You have made heaven and earth. Incline Your ear, O Lord, and open Your eyes, O Lord, and see and hear all the words of Sennacherib which he has sent to mock the living God.

Truly, O God, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire for they were no gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone.

Therefore, they were destroyed. So now, O Lord, our God, save us from His hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone are the Lord.

You see, that was Hezekiah's instinct to pray to the true sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. And that's the same instinct here in Acts chapter 4, isn't it? And you see, if that's not our instinct in time of trial, then it must be, mustn't it, that we don't really believe that our God is the only true and sovereign Lord.

It must mean that we think, I guess sometimes it may just be unconscious, but it must mean that deep down we think other powers are greater. Maybe our own power in our minds to conceive strategy to get around these things or perhaps our trust in the power of money to solve problems or the power of other people that we trust in and we want to follow.

[ 13 : 29 ] And that also probably means most likely that other Lords and other objects of affection command our true loyalty in life. Probably means that really deep down we have more meaningful relations relationships with these things than we have with the true sovereign Lord because instinctively that's where we turn in time of trouble.

My dictionary says instinct is the characteristic inborn pattern of behavior. But you see, prayer is a characteristic inborn pattern of the new birth, isn't it?

It's the inborn instinct of the true believer. You read on in Acts chapter 9, it's the mark of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, isn't it? God says, behold, he's praying. But you see, our instincts very often seem to be all wrong, don't they?

Because our fallen human hearts constantly drift back, don't they, to our natural instincts. Our natural instinct is idolatry. to think that it's not we who are made to serve God, but God who is there to serve us.

To act as though God's not our creator, but in fact, he's the creation of our minds to do our bidding. And that's why in prayer so often, you see, people treat God not as the sovereign Lord, but as the genie in Aladdin's lamp.

[ 15 : 00 ] To pop out and answer us when we feel like asking him to do something. That's what the atheist in a tight spot is doing, isn't it? When he suddenly discovers prayer.

Not an instinct for honouring God, though, is it? It's an instinct for self-preservation. But you know, it's easy, isn't it, for us as Christians to actually behave the same way. For our prayer to be terribly me-focused.

It's all about me. There's so many modern worship songs that are all about me. It's not God-worship, it's me-worship. That's why lots of Christians have a great instinct to rush to ask the church prayer meeting, for example, to pray for them when some difficulty arises in their life, like illness or whatever it might be.

But they don't seem to have any instinct at all to be committed regularly to join with that prayer meeting at fellowship to pray for the concerns of God or for God's mission in the world. I always find that rather a telling thing, don't you?

Well, you see, the church that faces hostility and yet overcomes, like the church in Acts, is a church whose instinct is to respond to every situation, first of all, with prayer and with prayer together.

[ 16 : 21 ] Because it's a church of people who know that their relationship with God is real and therefore they know his true worth as the sovereign Lord. There are people who are close to the person of the Savior.

That's why their prayer is instinctive. But it's more than that, isn't it? And verses 25 to 28 tell us that their prayer is also informed prayer.

It's the prayer who know that they have also a true revelation of God. In other words, they know his ways. It's the prayer of a people who take comfort, therefore, in the pattern of God's scriptures.

See, these verses reveal, don't they, that they know that God is not only a God of sovereign power, they don't just know his worth, but they know that he's a God of sovereign plan and purpose and they know his ways, they know how he works.

They know, verse 25, that he's the speaking God and that he's revealed a pattern for his Messiah and also a pattern for the people of the Messiah. Now, you see, their instinct is to turn to prayer but also it's to turn to the scriptures to inform their prayer.

[ 17 : 37 ] They know that the answers to the experiences that they're having in life are to be found in one place alone and that is in God's word. And it's interesting, isn't it, that it's not to some new fresh word of revelation from the apostles that they have to turn.

No, the answer's all in the Bible. It's not a fatuous turning to some sort of text that gives them a word for the situation. People sometimes do that, don't they?

They open the word of God randomly and rather hope that a verse will jump out and give them something. And that's not biblical Christianity, that's pagan divination. That's mumbo-jumbo.

That's no different to opening your horoscope and looking for something for the day. They mustn't use the Bible as a horoscope. Now, this is not what they're doing at all. What they're doing is intelligently assimilating the whole message of Scripture from beginning to end.

Because the whole message of Scripture is of a great cosmic conflict always between God's people, the people of the seed of promise, the Messiah, and his people's enemy, the serpent and the devil and all his minions.

[ 18 : 46 ] And that's a constant thing, isn't it, all the way from Genesis chapter 3. God graciously plants his seed of faith in his own people.

And God therefore puts his people at enmity with the serpent and his seed forever. And that's why the whole of our Christian life is always a struggle, isn't it?

Because it's a struggle that God has put into our hearts. God has put a struggle into our hearts against the world and the flesh and the devil. struggle therefore is a cardinal symptom of what it means to be a believer.

If you've stopped struggling, that's a great warning sign, isn't it? So when somebody says to me, I'm really struggling in my Christian faith, I say, praise the Lord. That tells me you're still a true believer. And so God's chosen ones will always face enmity in the world.

Always. It's a pattern from beginning to end in Scripture. Read Revelation chapter 12. Later on when you go home, you'll see it's a vivid description of that all through human history. The seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.

[ 19 : 57 ] And there always has been and there always will be until Jesus comes to reign a gathering against the Lord and his anointed. And all Scripture testifies to that.

And here the believers, you see, turn to one very apt example that we sang at the beginning of our service, Psalm 2, where David spoke of the whole world gathering together against the Lord and his anointed one, his Christ, his king.

See, in verse 25, David said by the Spirit, why do the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, the rulers gather together against the Lord and his anointed.

See, that's the pattern of history. And these believers see that. And they see that its starkest manifestation of all in human history was in the ultimate expression of hostility to God, in the coalition of enemies against Jesus, God's Son.

So you see, verse 27, there were in this city gathered together against your holy servant Jesus. Herod, that's a king, Pontius Pilate, a ruler, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel.

[ 21 : 13 ] Very, very strange bedfellows, aren't they? A Jewish king and a Roman ruler, the people of Israel and the despised Gentiles, and yet they're all united in hatred against God's Christ.

You see, we see those very same strange coalitions today, don't we? It's extraordinary sometimes when you read in the newspaper columnists of the liberal left who have absolutely nothing in common, for example, with extreme Muslims, except when they're attacking a common enemy, the Lord Jesus Christ and his church.

You see, these Christians recognized the patterns of the scriptures, and they understood that that pattern was what explained their current experience in life. But crucially, they understood not just the pattern of hostility against God's Messiah and his people, but also the pattern of God's wonderful, effortless victory.

All that the hostile raging of the world against him can achieve, verse 28, do you see, is to do all that your hand and your plan had decided beforehand, had predestined to take place.

Isn't that marvelous? No wonder that the next verse in Psalm 2 says, he who sits in the heavens laughs. Because you see, the enemies, in doing their very worst, can only succeed in achieving the redemption, the victory of God that they're so raging against.

[ 22 : 51 ] It's the way God planned it all along, says Peter. To utterly humiliate, to destroy the mass ranks of evil, through a display of redeeming power in the abject weakness of human flesh.

The weakness of mortal man that is so despised by our adversary, the devil, God has made to triumph, even in the weakness of death itself. So that in the man, Christ Jesus, he destroyed the one who had power over the death, the devil himself.

You see, that's God's pattern of victory. And what comfort there is in knowing the pattern of God's scriptures. There's no fantasy in the Bible, there's no escapism.

It's full, isn't it, of absolute reality. It's absolutely true to our experience. There are always enemies, there are always hostilities in the spiritual realm and in the earthly realm for God's people.

But there is also always great joy for those whose understanding is informed by the pattern of the scriptures. Because we know that it's all under God's sovereign, predestining hand.

[ 24 : 11 ] And it's all always, therefore, working together for the good of those who are his. However different it may seem in the present time in our experience. And notice, by the way, notice how this doctrine of predestination is such a wonderful assurance.

It's such a wonderful comfort to hard-pressed Christians, to struggling believers. Some people get the heebie-jeebies when you even mention that word predestination. But look at it here.

It's the source of comfort, isn't it, for the saints in Acts chapter 4. It's just another way of saying what they say in verse 24, that you are the sovereign Lord. Just another way of saying that God really is God.

That he is the sovereign creator and the Lord of all. That he is in charge. And that therefore his will, his will will certainly triumph. That he will certainly do everything that he's promised for his people.

That he's able to overcome the powers of hell. Nothing can stop him. So don't be worried about the doctrine of a predestining God.

[ 25 : 20 ] Think how terrible it would be if God wasn't a sovereign God. If he wasn't in control of all things, really and truly. That would mean somebody else was. It would mean the devil was.

But he isn't. God is. Notice, of course, that there's no question of God denying human responsibility in all of this, nonetheless. Look back to verse 10.

They were responsible for killing Jesus, whom you crucified. So they needed to repent and be saved from their sin. But God is sovereign.

And they couldn't possibly, even in their worst designs, do anything other than God's sovereign will. That's why Martin Luther's hymn that we sang last week is so true.

God's word and plan, which they pretend is subject to their pleasure, will bind their wills to serve God's end, which we who love him treasure.

[ 26 : 21 ] What wonderful comfort there is in knowing the pattern of God's ways. That's why Luther goes on in the hymn to say, Then let them take our lives, our goods, children, husbands, wives, and carry all away.

Theirs is the short-lived day, ours, the everlasting kingdom. There's real comfort in that truth, isn't there?

It's not pretending away reality, not escapism, but the realism that comes from understanding the ways of God, how he works, and what it looks like when he is at work, and what it means for us.

Last Sunday evening, Edward was quoting from 1 Thessalonians 3 when Paul speaks to the church there and their struggles and persecution. And he says, Let no one be moved by this affliction, for you yourselves know that we are destined for this.

And we were telling you about this beforehand. He says the same thing to the Philippians. It's been granted to you not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for Jesus' sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and I still have.

[ 27 : 32 ] The same conflict. But it's all part of God's sovereign plan and purpose. And that means that all of that hostility and any hostility we face against the gospel can only serve the purpose of his blessing for the world and blessing for our lives too.

It's his pattern. He's the God who chose the weak things in the world to shame the strong. And he still works that way. It's his style.

You see, that's the thinking, isn't it, that informs the prayer of the church that faces hostility and hardship and struggle and overcomes it. It finds wonderful comfort in the pattern of the scriptures.

I wonder if it is that sort of thinking that informs our prayers, our personal prayer, our corporate prayer together about the hard things that we face in life, about the problems that we face together as a church, the struggles we face at times in the building development.

It's all part of God's plan and purpose for his greater glory and for greater blessing in the world. It's not part of the natural instinct of our human hearts to think that way though, is it?

[ 28 : 51 ] But it was the instinct of the apostolic church because it was informed by the great truths of the scriptures about who God really is, about what he's doing through history and eternity, about how he does it, about how he's making all the powers of darkness to serve his plan and purpose, to serve our destiny and glory.

That's what he's doing. That's what the Bible teaches us. That's why, you see, when we gather together weekly as we do on Sundays, we gather to dig deep into the scriptures, to grasp these things more and more.

It's hard work, isn't it? It's relentless. It calls for effort from you as well as from me. But you see, it's the only way to strengthen our minds and our hearts so that we'll be true to our calling.

Because naturally, all the time, our human hearts are drifting away from the reality of scripture. And constantly, we need to be brought back to right thinking. You see, the Bible and its constant message is God's cognitive therapy for his people.

It's the way he brings our minds back to reality. And we need it because that's the only way that our minds can be transformed. Be transformed, says Paul, by the renewing of your minds.

[ 30 : 15 ] That's how we begin to understand and make sense of our lives, the will of God in our lives. It's how he says we come to understand that his will in our life, whatever seems to be happening to us, is his good and perfect and acceptable will.

And that he works for our blessing but in no other way. And that's what drives believers and churches to real prayer.

Prayer that God answers wonderfully and powerfully. That's what we see here. Well, all of this really, so far, is their preparation for prayer, isn't it?

Their instinct for prayer is informed by a real understanding of God's ways from the pattern of scripture. But what actually is their prayer? Well, verses 29 to 31 show us that, don't they?

They show us that it's instrumental prayer. It's the prayer of people who know not just that they have a real relationship with God and a true revelation of God but also that they bear a true responsibility to God.

[ 31 : 21 ] It's the prayer of a people who are clear about the purpose of God's servants. They not only know his worth and his ways but they know that they share his work. And so their prayer, you see, is all focused, isn't it, on their responsibilities in partnership with God in his great saving mission for the world.

Because just as the enemies are responsible for their conduct against God and his Christ, even though God is holy sovereign, they know that they too are responsible to God in their call to serve with him.

They know that God overcomes his enemies through their faithfulness in sharing the task of witness that God has charged them with. And that's obvious, isn't it? If we look at their prayer, what is it that fills their prayer?

Well, it's not their predicament, is it? But it's the threat to stop the gospel being proclaimed and heard. And it's fearless they should fail in their calling and succumb to silence.

So you see in verse 29, what they pray for is not better safety for themselves, but bolder speech. It's not for defense of their lives, but it's for defiance of the threats that are against them.

[ 32 : 37 ] It's for a demonstration of the gospel's power. Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue 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.

It's instrumental prayer. It's prayer that understands that the prayers also play a role in the answer to their prayers. It's prayer that understands that the evidence that God is at work in the midst will also be that God's people are still at work in the midst rising to the challenge of their calling to witness.



You will be my witnesses, says Jesus. So they pray, help us to be witnesses. Grant us voices. Grant us boldness to proclaim the message without fear.

They didn't pray, did they, for the removal of the threats? And they didn't pray that because there was no indication in the scriptures or in the teaching of Jesus that that is something that God would do.

In fact, they had clear teaching, hadn't they, that God would not do that. In the world, you will have tribulation. So their prayer was not for the cessation of the adversity, the troubles, the persecution, the hardships, but for its conversion.

[ 34 : 03 ] That under God's sovereign hand, it becomes the vehicle for his greater glory to adorn the gospel of Jesus Christ, to advance the cause of his kingdom. kingdom. Well, again, let me ask, is that how we pray?

Do we pray instrumentally like that? Pleading with God not to remove our struggles, but to use them rather for God's glory, for his kingdom. You'll remember a year or ago, there was that book by the Chinese house church leader, Brother Yun, called The Heavenly Man.

It was a controversial book, yes, but it was an important one nonetheless. There's a part in it where he speaks about meeting somebody in the West who said to him, meaning very well, we're praying all the time for the collapse of communism in China so that the believers may know peace and freedom.

And what did he say in response? Don't pray for the persecution to stop, he said. We shouldn't pray for a lighter load to carry, but for a stronger back to endure.

Then the world will see, that God is with us, empowering us to live in a way that reflects his love and power. That's true freedom. That's real instrumental prayer, isn't it?

[ 35 : 23 ] Prayer that's clear about the purpose of God's servants, to be the instruments that he uses, and often, above all, instruments that he uses in the crucible of suffering and trial to share his wonderful mission of mercy to the world.

But I think it's rather strikingly different, isn't it, to the way that we tend to pray in the West today, which I guess is no doubt why the church in the West today is declining and the church in China is advancing at a great rate, wouldn't you think?

we need to face up to that challenge, don't we? We often pray, don't we, for opportunities to witness, for opportunities for God to work through us in our own lives and as a church.

We need to grasp what we're asking for, don't we? Jesus said in Luke 21 that our opportunities for witness will be above all when hardship and opposition come our way.

When we're persecuted, when we're delivered up to kings and governors, when we're thrown into prison, that will be your opportunity for witness, says Jesus. Rather focuses the mind, doesn't it, when we're praying for opportunities to witness.

[ 36 : 40 ] I wonder if you know this hymn by John Newton. I ask the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace, might more of his salvation know and seek more earnestly his face.

It was he who taught me thus to pray and he I trust has answered prayer, but it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair. I hoped that in some favoured hour at once he'd answer my request and by his love's constraining power subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart and that the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part. Yes, more.

With his own hand he seemed intent to aggravate my woe, crossed all the fair designs I schemed, blasted my gourds and laid me low.

Lord, why is this? I trembling cried. Will you pursue this worm to death? It is in this way, the Lord replied.

[ 37 : 46 ] I answer prayer for grace and faith. These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set you free and break your schemes of earthly joy that you may seek your all in me.

It's a man discovering the meaning, you see, of instrumental prayer. prayer. But that is the kind of prayer that God always, always answers.

And answers with fire. Verse 31, when they prayed, the place in which they were gathered was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

You see, the gathering of the enemies, the synagogue of Satan arrayed against God's church, is overwhelmed by a gathering together of believers, ordinary Christian people just like us, but filled with the Holy Spirit of God and made into powerful instruments in his hand for the furtherance of the gospel of the kingdom.

God's answer to their prayer did not guarantee their safety. Read on a few pages, you'll see Stephen being martyred. But he did enable their speech.

[ 39 : 08 ] He gave them utterance. He gave them witness. And he enabled them to have bold defiance against every threat. By the way, it's just important, isn't it, to notice that boldness is not the same as belligerence.

That faithfulness to our witness and defiance doesn't mean offensiveness. One writer puts it like this, there is such a thing as the offense of the cross, but that must not be confused with the offensiveness of some Christians.

The fire in these men was a fire that warmed as well as burned. A spirituality that repels is not real and true. The spirit of the Lord is a fragrant spirit, and the beauty of the Lord rests upon all those who are truly yielded to him.

It's important to remember, isn't it? These believers were bold in defiance of threats, but if you look down to verse 33, we're also told that great grace was upon them all.

It's often true, isn't it? There's often a tangible fragrance that surrounds believers who have undergone great suffering, great struggles for the sake of Christ, and yet have stood firm.

[ 40 : 21 ] That's verse 33, isn't it? Great power in testimony and great grace in their lives. And those two things always really go together, don't they?

A truly bold witness isn't ugly, it's not aggressive, it's not the bawling and the shouting of a heckler or a protester. We cringe, don't we, when we see Christians behaving like that?

But it is steadfast, it is defiant against the world that's against it, but it's serene, it's steady, it's graciously firm. You see somebody like that, you know they've learned the cost of sharing the pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ and yet rejoicing at the same time because they know it makes them an instrument in the Master's hands.

Well, that's what Buchanan Street needs to see and hear, isn't it? It's what the whole of our city needs to see and hear, your friends, your workmates, your family, your neighbours.

So I guess the question for us this morning is, will they see it from us, from our lives, from our church? Well, friends, they'll only see it from us if we likewise are a people of instinctive prayer who know that our relationship with God is real and therefore we really do live close to the person of the Saviour.

[ 41 : 48 ] We know that He is the sovereign God, we know His worth. And if we're a people of informed prayer who know that the revelation of God that we have is true and therefore we really do find comfort in the pattern of the scriptures, we know that He's the saving God, we understand His ways.

And if also we are a people of instrumental prayer who know that our responsibility from God is great, so we really do have clarity on our purpose as God's servants, we know that He's the servant Messiah, we know that we share His work the same way.

But if we are willing to pray like that, then there is power and there is great grace to work wonders in this city in the name of Jesus.

So let's pray that we'll be a praying people who overcomes like that.