

The passage that we are going to focus on this afternoon/evening is a continuation of the story that began in chapter 3. Peter and John had healed a lame man in Jesus' name. That miracle drew a crowd. Peter preached the message about Jesus and his resurrection to that crowd. The authorities arrested Peter and John for preaching about Jesus. Peter and John spend the night in prison. The next day they were brought before the authorities who demanded that they stop preaching about Jesus. Peter and John declared that they would not stop preaching the message of Jesus because Jesus had told them to be his witnesses and Jesus' authority was higher than the authority of any human authority. The verses that we are going to consider this evening tell us what happened next.

Peter and John were released. They immediately met with some of their fellow believers. They reported what the authorities had said to them – that the chief priests and the elders had forbidden them from preaching the message that Jesus had told them to preach. And the first thing that this group of Jesus-followers did was pray for boldness to continue to speak God's word and asked that Jesus would continue to heal people and do signs and wonders through them. This text is about boldness and how this group of believers prayed for boldness in the face of the threat of jail or even death. Jesus had been crucified by these same authorities because of his preaching and so the possibility of the same thing happening to those who continued to preach Jesus' message was very real.

Jesus had warned his disciples that they would be persecuted. Jesus' message has parts to it that are offensive to those who do not believe it. Jesus' message calls people to submit to him as Lord. Jesus' message confronts people with their sins and calls them to repentance. Jesus claims to be the only way of salvation. The Jewish authorities rejected Jesus and his message because it called them to a radical change in their understanding of OT promises. Jesus claimed to be the promised Messiah, but he was very different from what they expected and they rejected him and eventually saw him as a threat and had him eliminated. So while Jesus' message is truly good news there are parts of it that are offensive to those who don't believe it and so Jesus had told his followers that they could expect to be persecuted just as he had been persecuted. And that is exactly what was happening to Peter and John in this story.

That means that some degree of boldness is necessary for followers of Jesus because we are all called to confess Jesus before men. Jesus tells us in Luke 12:8-9 that if we deny him before men, he will deny us before the angels of God. Jesus requires that we acknowledge him before men. That means that we are not to hide the fact that we are followers of Jesus. One of the core requirements of being a follower of Jesus is that we publicly acknowledge him before men. Also the church as a whole has been given the great commission. Our calling is to be witnesses for Jesus and that will mean speaking about Jesus as we have opportunity to do so. And that requires boldness. It requires boldness because not everyone wants to hear about Jesus. The story that we are looking at is just one example in the Bible of the persecution of the followers of Jesus. But even if there is not that degree of persecution, Jesus does tell his followers that they can expect to be mocked and falsely accused as he was mocked and falsely accused. And it takes boldness to face that kind of opposition.

But it is not easy to be bold in our witness for Jesus. I suspect that most of us feel guilty about our lack of boldness. And thankfully there is forgiveness in Christ for that. But part of Christian growth is growth in boldness and the passage before us is an example of how the early Christians prayed for boldness in the situation where they had been told by the authorities not to preach about Jesus.

The first thing that we must understand is that the fact that they prayed to the Lord to give them boldness shows us that being bold in their witness did not come easily for them. As soon as Peter and John reported that the chief priests and elders had forbidden them to preach that Jesus had risen from the dead, they began to pray. They knew that they needed help from the Lord. We may look back at them and think that somehow it was easy for them, but their prayer shows us that it was not easy for them. They were crying out to God for help. They felt as weak as we do and so they prayed. And their example is an encouragement for us to pray as well that the Lord will strengthen us and give us courage to be witnesses for Jesus.

The next thing that I want to point out from this passage is that they prayed for boldness rather than praying that the persecution would go away. That does not mean that we should never pray for religious freedom. Paul in 1 Timothy 2:2-3 tells the church to pray “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life....” There is nothing wrong in wanting to live a peaceful and quiet life and praying for that. But it is interesting that in the story told in our text, the prayer is for boldness rather than for a peaceful and quiet life. And that tells us that these early Christians were more concerned about the message of Jesus being proclaimed than they were about living a peaceful and quiet life. They were in a situation where they were being forbidden to preach Christ and their great desire was that God would give them the boldness to continue to preach Christ in spite of the fact that they were being forbidden to do so.

And that is a convicting thought. Their example encourages us to consider our priorities. These early believers must have been very enthusiastic about spreading the message of Jesus! When they were faced with the command forbidding them to preach about Jesus, their first prayer was not for religious freedom, but for boldness to continue to preach Jesus in spite of the ruling of the authorities. How different would our lives look if we were as passionate about the great commission as these early believers! How different would our lives look if we had such zeal for spreading the message of the gospel that we were more concerned with being bold than with being comfortable! The passion of these early Christians for the proclamation of the gospel is convicting for most of us at least to consider.

But the passage is meant to be an encouragement. It certainly is convicting, but at the same time it gives us insight into how the Lord gave these early Christians the courage to speak the word of God with boldness. Notice how they address God in their prayer. Their way to boldness began with worshipping God as they addressed him in prayer.

Listen to how they begin their prayer, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them....” They feel the need for boldness and the first thing they do is address God in this way.

Sovereign Lord. The Greek word means literally “master of the house” and when it is used of a political ruler it means “absolute ruler.” When this term is used of a human ruler it often has a negative connotation because a human being with absolute power is usually a tyrant. But with God, the combination of absolute power and absolute goodness means that the fact that God is the one who has absolute power and authority is a very good thing because it means that goodness must prevail.

The name “Sovereign Lord” is filled out with reference to God as the creator. “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.” God made all things. Everything and everyone exists because God created it or them. There is no being that exists independently of God. And God rules over all that he has made. And that means a lot more than any human rule because God’s power and authority are infinite. There is no power that can overwhelm him. Even if all the power and authority on earth was organized against him, it would not be the slightest threat to God.

Just think of how Isaiah makes this point in Isaiah 40:15 & 17, “Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales.... All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing.” I read one sermon where the preacher spoke of the vastness of the universe referring to the fact that there are billions of galaxies. The vastness of the universe is mindboggling. And then this preacher said, “He is the God of the universe. It’s big to us, and it’s small to him.

Now the language of the opening words of this prayer sounds OT-ish and that it because they are. Israel often reminded herself that God was the God who “made heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them” in contexts where they were celebrating God’s care for his people when they were being oppressed. Psalm 146:5-7 is an example of this. ⁵Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free;"

So, in the situation where these early believers in Jesus were being told to stop preaching Jesus they turn to God in prayer and they remind themselves, by the way that they address him, of how great and powerful God is and the implication is that they were reminding themselves of how great and powerful God is compared to their enemies. The comparison is mind boggling. If all the nations are like a drop from a bucket or a piece of dust, how tiny and weak were that group of Jewish leaders who had told Peter and John to stop preaching Jesus compared to the God who had told them to witness to Jesus beginning in Jerusalem and going out from there to the ends of the earth.

Now reminding ourselves of this and addressing God in this way will not automatically give us boldness, but it certainly part of the way that the Holy Spirit gave boldness to these early believers. We can think thoughts like this and still be timid, but it is thoughts like this that God uses to give his people boldness when they are facing opposition. It puts things into perspective. If our God is the “Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the

earth and the sea and everything in them,” and he has told us to preach the gospel we have no reason to fear the opposition and have every reason to be bold.

Now as these persecuted believers prayed for boldness they also put their situation in the light of Psalm 2. Verses 25-27, “²⁵who 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? ²⁶The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ — ²⁷for 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....”

Psalm 2 is a Psalm of David and it is about how the Gentiles and the peoples and the kings of the earth and the rulers plotted and set themselves against the Lord and against his Anointed. In its original context it is about how the enemies of Israel plotted against them. David was the Lord’s anointed. He had been anointed king of Israel. And when the enemies of Israel were plotting against them they were plotting against the Lord and the Lord’s anointed. And David was saying that they were plotting in vain. Those who plot against God and his anointed king do so in vain.

And the rest of Psalm 2 says why. Psalm 2:3 says, “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.” And in verse 8-9 God says to his anointed Son, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

Now this Psalm is a messianic Psalm in that it ultimately refers to Jesus as the Lord’s anointed. The term “Christ” means “anointed” in Greek. “Jesus Christ means “Saviour, the anointed one.”

So, in their prayer for boldness, the prayer that we are looking at, they view the opposition against Jesus and against them as a fulfillment of Psalm 2. They are looking at the opposition they are experiencing in the light of the whole of Psalm 2 even though they only quote part of it. The plots against the Lord and against his Christ are in vain. “He who sits in the heavens laughs....” And God has promised to make the ends of the earth Christ’s possession. That is the significance of the gospel going out to all the world claiming that Jesus is Lord of the whole world and offering salvation to those who repent and believe in him.

So, the prayer of these early believers for boldness in the face of persecution interprets the opposition in terms of Psalm 2. It puts the opposition in biblical perspective. The opposition is no surprise. Psalm 2 and many other places in the OT speak of the opposition of the world against God and his people. And they put that opposition in God’s perspective. God laughs at it, it is so pathetic and useless. And the victory is certain. It is not even a contest because the sides are so uneven. And the time is coming when Christ will dash his enemies in pieces like a potter’s vessel.

Next the prayer for boldness mentions that those who had persecuted and ultimately crucified Jesus ended up doing “whatever [God’s] hand and [God’s] plan had predestined to take place.” The opposition against God and his people is part of God’s plan. The persecution and crucifixion of Jesus was part of God’s plan. And by implication the persecution and opposition that Peter and John had experienced was also part of God’s plan. God’s plan for the salvation of the world includes overcoming the opposition of God’s enemies. God’s plan for the salvation of the world included Jesus’ suffering and death at the hands of his enemies. And God’s plan for the spread of the gospel includes the suffering of his people at the hands of their enemies.

So this suffering is not something that just happens. When God’s people are persecuted it is not because God’s attention was somewhere else for a moment and the enemies slipped through God’s fence around his people. Nothing just happens. Everything is part of God’s plan. If we think of how great God is, it is inconceivable that anything could happen to his people that he did not allow to happen. If it happens it is part of God’s plan.

That does not mean that evil people are not responsible for their actions. We are all responsible for our actions. This is one of the mysteries of the biblical worldview. Nothing happens apart from God’s plan. And we are responsible for our actions. We can’t understand how those two facets of biblical teaching fit together, but we don’t have to. They are both precious truths. Everything that happens to us is part of God’s plan and neither we nor our enemies are puppets. We make choices and those choices matter and so our lives matter.

But when it comes to Jesus’ followers suffering persecution it is comforting to know that that suffering is part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world. God has ordained that our salvation be accomplished through Jesus’ suffering and death and that the spreading of the news of salvation in Jesus be accomplished through the suffering and death of Jesus’ followers. Not that the suffering is always the same and not that every single Christian is martyred, but suffering and dying are involved in the spread of the gospel according to God’s plan.

The apostle Paul has taught us this principle in his letters. Philippians 1:29, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.” Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in my suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” This does not mean that Christ’s suffering was somehow insufficient to accomplish our salvation, but rather that in the plan of God, Christ’s suffer accomplished salvation and the church’s suffering is involved in spreading the message throughout the world. Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:8, “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.” And 2 Timothy 2:3, “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

Now this does not mean that all Christians will have to suffer in the same way and to the same degree. But it does mean that the way the gospel is spread is through sacrifice, through dying to self, through hardship and

against opposition. It means that the more vocal we are in testifying of Christ, the more opposition we will attract.

But the fact that this is part of God's plan for the spread of the gospel is an important part of the picture when it comes to being bold in the face of opposition. The reason we are not bold is because we do not want to suffer discomfort or embarrassment or mockery. But boldness involves embracing the calling to suffer for the sake of the gospel even if it is the lesser forms of suffering compared to what some believers are called to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

Now we might wonder why God's plan for the spread of the gospel involves so much suffering. Probably it has something to do with the fact that God's whole plan of salvation is about overcoming evil and that the history of salvation is about the conflict between God and the forces of evil. We are in a battle. Suffering goes with the territory.

But there is another insight that comes from the suffering and death of Jesus. The suffering and death of Jesus are the ultimate example of how God can use suffering for good ends. Jesus suffered more than any human being ever suffered. And yet God used that suffering for our salvation. Believers will go to heaven instead of hell because of Jesus' suffering. God is able to use suffering for good ends. We do not always understand how that works, but we know that God is good and that nothing happens apart from his plan and so we can be confident that he will use all the suffering of his people for good ends.

So back to boldness. What we have covered about God and his plan are encouragements for boldness in being witnesses for Jesus. The one who calls us to witness is the Sovereign Lord who made heaven and earth. All opposition to him is futile. And yet it is part of his plan for the building of his church and the coming of his kingdom. These early Christians facing persecution mentioned these things in their prayer for boldness.

But they did not stop there. They needed God to enable them to bring their actions in line with these great truths about God. It is possible to think of all of these truths about God and still not be bold as I'm sure that we all know from our own experience.

And so they continued to pray, "And now, 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." So they asked the Lord to make them bold so that their behaviour was consistent with these powerful truths about God and his purposes.

And their prayer was heard. Verse 31, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." So the Lord answered their prayer and gave them the boldness that they were asking for.

And certainly the Lord wants to encourage us by this. I'm sure that we all feel we should be more bold than we are. Our situations and gifts and callings are very different. There are those who like Peter and John boldly

proclaim the word of God in public places. There are those who are bold in their witness for Jesus in their work places and neighborhoods. And there are those who are naturally more timid for whom speaking up is very difficult. God has created us with different gifts and abilities and those gifts and abilities tell us where the focus of our service should be. But no matter who we are and how we are wired, we can pray that God will give us more boldness so that we grow from where we are to greater boldness in our witness to Jesus.

And this passage shows us how the Lord gave these early Christians boldness in the face of opposition. The truths that they expressed in their prayer was part of that. So was the prayer itself and God's answer to their prayer. "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." May the Lord use this passage to encourage us to pray for boldness in a similar way.

But as we do so let us not forget the message that we are to proclaim. It is about spiritual growth in Jesus, but it is also about forgiveness for Jesus' sake. We will always come short. But Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins and through believing in him, all our sins are forgiven and we are right with God. Let us pray that we may grow in boldness knowing that we do not earn salvation by boldness, but we receive it through faith in Jesus Christ.