

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 5th July 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 4:23-31 'The Early Church was a Praying Church'

Introduction

'Blessings and Buffetings always go together in church life.'

As a young church-planter/pastor starting out, that was not what I expected. I suppose I had it in my head that from time to time in church life we would know times of real blessing from the Lord, people would be getting saved, the church would be growing, and everything would be just wonderful. And of course, I also thought from time to time that we would pass through barren times, when we would just have to keep plodding along, maybe facing some problems or difficulties in the church, but we'd just have to keep going until the next time of blessing came along, and then things would be OK.

Well, I wasn't too long into the pastorate in any of my previous churches until I realised that it wasn't like that. I soon realised that blessings and buffetings come together. Whenever God was pleased to step in and do amazing things, whenever God was pleased to save some individuals, whenever the church was experiencing a time of growth, or a time of great development and advance as far as the Gospel was concerned – then that was the very time that the Devil also increased his activity among us. It was then that we felt the attacks of the evil one in a more intense way. The two things always came together: ***Blessings and Buffetings always come together in church life!***

I'm sure that's exactly what these early believers were beginning to realise in Acts ch.4. They have just had the wonderful blessing of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the salvation of 3000 souls on the first day! Then they had the joy of seeing the lame man miraculously healed just outside the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, and if that wasn't enough – thousands more coming to trust in Christ as a result, until now they had 5000 men plus women and young people now part of the church in Jerusalem. It had been a remarkable time of blessing – and an amazing period of growth in the early church. They were just bursting with praise to God for all he had done among them!

But no sooner had all that happened, than the Devil was ready to strike back. His attack came in the form of Opposition from the Jewish State. It came from the chief priests and elders (v.23) who made up the Jewish Ruling Council – the Sanhedrin. The very people who should have welcomed the arrival of the Messiah – but these were the very ones who were now pawns in the Devil's hand to unleash some buffeting onto these early Christians instead.

So Peter and John spent their first night in a prison cell as a result (v.3).

Then they were dragged before the Court and told never to preach again in the name of Jesus (v.18).

And whenever they said they just couldn't keep it in – they had to go on preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus – to obey God rather than men, they were threatened further (v.21) and then released.

They had basically been bound over to keep the peace, and they knew what would happen if they didn't!

What would you have done? What would I have done in that situation?

Gone home and kept our heads down, and tried to stay out of trouble?

Would we have kept our mouths shut and said nothing, and only talked about Jesus if someone really asked us about our faith?

Or would we have gone back out into the market place to preach about Jesus more and more?

Well, whatever you think you might have done, I guarantee most of us would do the former. We'd go home, keep our heads down, keep our mouths shut, try to stay out of trouble, and only talk about Jesus if someone really wanted us to.

No, do you think not?

Well, let's face it – that's exactly what we do in this country already!

We don't live under a regime that has forbidden us to preach or teach about Jesus. We don't live in a country where we face prison or persecution or even death for preaching the Gospel. We live in a very liberal modern democracy! And yet we live, in effect, as if we are muzzled. We live in such a way that we really only share our faith, if someone actually comes to ask us a question about Jesus. Otherwise we keep quiet, we keep our heads down, and we say nothing.

Are you still not convinced?

Well ask yourself this question then:

When did you or I last initiate a conversation about Jesus in our work-place?

Or with an unsaved family member? Or with a friend at college, school or university? Or with the milkman, or the postman, or the person who serves us in the post office or the bank or the filling station or wherever?

We just don't do it, do we? Well then, we're muzzled, and we don't even realise it! And yet we don't even face any blatant opposition in this country.

So let's come back to our passage this morning, to Acts ch.4:23ff.

What *did* the early believers do when they found themselves in this situation?

1. They Returned to their own People (v.23)

Back in Acts 2:42 we learned that the early believers devoted themselves to four things:

- To the Apostles' Teaching
- To the Fellowship
- To the Breaking of Bread
- And to Prayer

We are going to see something of what that really meant for them in this passage in Acts 4:23ff. Here we see 3 of those ingredients of the early church really coming into play. (The only one that isn't mentioned in this passage is the breaking of bread.) First of all we see them depending on the fellowship that they enjoyed with each other – and really drawing strength from that fellowship. *'On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.'* (v.23).

'They went back to their own people'...

But hold on a minute - Peter and John were Jews, and they had just come from the Jewish Ruling Council – surely they had just come from *'their own people'* – Jews among Jews?

Not anymore. The early believers have not yet been thrown out of the Temple worship, but already a new line has been drawn. God's people are no longer the Jews by birth; they are those who have accepted Jesus as the Messiah; those who have experienced the New Birth. God's Old Testament people, the Jews, were now opposing the advance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, now it was time to re-group, to redefine who God's people were, and to find their fellowship and encouragement from their fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

And you know, even to this day, whenever someone trusts the Lord, it doesn't matter what religion they previously came from, or indeed sometimes what church background they came from – sometimes it's their old co-religionists that they need to redefine as no longer 'their people' and they need to find new fellowship, real fellowship, true fellowship with other believers, the true people of God – those who are truly born again. But when they do, they find they have people who can and will surround them with love and support.

When Peter and John went back to their own people, they were able to tell them all that had happened to them, and they were able to understand where they were coming from, to sympathise with them and then to seek God's face together about the matter. So having experienced true Christian Fellowship, now...

2. They Prayed to their Sovereign God (v.24)

That's exactly how they addressed God in this verse. They raised their voices together in prayer and they called him: '**Sovereign Lord**'. They were trusting in the sovereignty of God; they were cast back upon the sovereignty of God.

*'Sovereign God, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea,
and everything in them.'* (v.24)

This is in fact an echo of a prayer that Jeremiah prayed in Jer.32:17-27. At a time when God was asking Jeremiah to act in faith, to buy a piece of ground near Jerusalem in faith, even though the Babylonians were coming in to seize the land, and carry God's people off into exile. Jeremiah couldn't understand what was going on, but he trusted in the sovereignty of God, and that's exactly how he addressed God at the beginning (v.17) and at the end of his prayer (v.25). But when he did he got the very clear answer in v.26 & 27:

*"Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 'I am the LORD,
the God of all mankind. **Is anything too hard for me?**'"*

God has his own way of sometimes casting our prayers back to us. If we pray about a sovereign God, and if we pray to a sovereign God, then sometimes he challenges us – do you really believe that? Do you really believe that I am sovereign in all circumstances? Well, if so, then trust me. Believe that I can work this out; believe that nothing is too hard for me to do, or to work out.

So perhaps these early believers in Acts ch.4 were praying Jeremiah's prayer after him. They were trusting in the God who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, the sky and every creature on this planet. Their faith and trust were placed firmly in the God who had created everything. And for them at that time, as far as they were concerned, that included the men who sat on that Jewish Ruling Council, the Sanhedrin. Their God was greater than the petty rulings and limited authority of that corrupt body. Their God was in total control – He had absolute authority in this situation. And that's why they turned to him in prayer. But more than that, as part of their prayer, in confident trust...

3. They Applied Scripture to their situation (v.25-28)

Here they quote from Psalm 2:1-2. I mentioned this a few weeks ago when we were looking at this Psalm in our Wednesday night Prayer Meeting. Yet again, these new believers in Jesus, could see that this Psalm had been referring to the Messiah all along, when the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Ruling Council should have been the ones to see it, but didn't!

In fact, not only did they not see it, they had actually become the enemies of the Messiah that this Psalm had been talking about all along!

The Lord's 'Anointed One' at the end of v.26 is another name for 'Messiah'. These early believers could see that this verse had just been fulfilled in Jerusalem within the previous few weeks...

The nations had raged against the Messiah. The Peoples of the earth had plotted against him. The kings of the earth had taken their stand against him. The rulers had gathered together against the Lord and his Anointed One.

These early believers could see that: (v.27-28)

King Herod (the Jewish King) and Pontius Pilate (the local gentile ruler) had met together in Jerusalem. So the people of Israel and the gentiles had conspired together against Jesus. Or as they put it in their prayer:

'Against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.'

They could see that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.
If only the rulers of the day could have seen it too!

And yet, as they go on to say in their prayer in v.28:

'They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.'

In other words, they could see that nothing could thwart God's plans and purposes. It had been prophesied in the Old Testament that Jews and Gentiles would conspire together against the Messiah when he would come. And even though the religious leaders of the day couldn't see it, these prophecies had still been fulfilled – by those very people!

So in a strange way, the believers took comfort from that fact...

If God was in control of all that had happened to his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, their Saviour, then they could take confidence, that He was still in control of all that was happening to them now, as they faced the threats of that same Sanhedrin, the very ones who had handed Jesus over to be crucified!

So having prayed about their situation, and having applied Scripture to their situation, they could now really find a way through their problem as they continued in prayer...

4. They really Prayed about their Problem (v.29-30)

I wonder how you and I would have prayed if we were in their situation?
Would we have asked God to change the minds of the Sanhedrin?
Would we have asked God to change the Government of the day?

Would we have asked God to give us freedom of religion, or would we have asked for protection if we went on ahead to preach the Gospel in Jesus' name? Would we have asked for God to take the problem away, and to deal with those who were trying to stand in the way?

Notice that these believers don't pray for their problem to be taken away at all. Their prayer is a bit like that old song:

'Don't lighten my load, just make me stronger.'

That's how these believers prayed... Take a look at vs.29-30:

'Now Lord, consider their threats...' – It's obvious that the Lord knew all about the threats towards these believers already. But that's what prayer is – it's an opportunity to talk over with the Lord the things he is well aware of already. We're not telling him anything new, but we are casting our burdens onto the Lord. I'm sure we could translate v.29, *'Now Lord, you take care of their threats – we're giving that over to you – you deal with it, 'cause we can't!'* So Lord, you deal with these threats against us, but in the meantime...

'Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness...'

These believers were not going to be silenced, as far as preaching the Gospel was concerned! Just as Peter and John had said to the Sanhedrin (v.19-20):

'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'

The rest of the believers were very much agreed about that one. 'We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.' We're going to go on preaching the good news about Jesus Christ, his death on the cross for the sins of mankind, and the fact that he is now risen from the dead, and ready and able to be the Saviour of anyone who will put their faith and trust in Him. But they knew they couldn't do it in their own strength against such opposition. So here they were, seeking God's face in prayer: 'Don't lighten our load, Lord, just make us stronger. Help us to keep going, help us not to give in to this intimidation – help us to keep on speaking for you and preaching for you.'

I remember one of the very first times we took the **Amazing Journey around the schools in Cavan**. It was before Peter Lawther, or even Billy Young had got the job. In fact it was when Phillip Vallely was setting it up with Baptist Youth. We had it booked for a whole week taking it around 12 schools right across Co Cavan. At the beginning of the week, I got a phone call from Phillip to say that he had lost his voice, so he wouldn't be able to come. Could I do it on my own! I was also preaching at a mission each night that week in Cavan, so I was now going to have to speak for an hour 3 times each day as well! But we did it. But one of the schools we went to was Tunnyduff National School near Bailieborough. It was a Catholic School, and in fact the local priest came

to visit the school during the interval, and I personally took him around the Amazing Journey Bible Exhibition giving him the gist of the story as we went along. He was very impressed, and he wished us well for the rest of the week.

But before we got through the next presentation with the next group of children in that same school, an irate parent came through the door, and lifted his children out of the class. That was alright, he was quite entitled to do so, but before long we heard that he was coming back with some friends to chase us out of the place! Anyway, we tidied up and left as planned, before he got back, but the phone calls that I and Gerry Lynch (the other elder from the Cavan Church, who lived very near to that school) got in the couple of days that followed were unbelievable. We were being threatened and intimidated to stop going around schools, particularly Catholic schools with the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have to say that before that week was out we were in another Catholic School in Drung, Co Cavan, and we couldn't have been made more welcome – in fact the head-teacher was asking all sorts of questions, and we believe he was very close to trusting in Christ for himself!

But I can tell you, having been there, that thinking of your family and friends, and bearing in mind the threats that were being made, the temptation to stop, and not to go on speaking in Jesus' name, was very strong indeed.

But what we had to do was to re-group with our own people, and pray to our sovereign God, and he gave us the strength to go on, and not to keep quiet, and as a result, across Cavan something like 300 homes requested a Bible!

Now bearing in mind that it had been the miraculous healing of the lame man that had caused this furore, what these believers prayed for next, was even more amazing:

'Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.'

In other words, 'Don't stop, Lord! – but do it again and again!'

'Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders!'

It's interesting, but Jeremiah talks about signs and wonders in his prayer too: (See Jeremiah 31:18-23). So Lord, display your glory again in our time!

That's what these believers were praying about. Lord keep doing it, don't stop! Even though we might get hauled before the courts again for it, keep doing it! Because more than their own glory, what they wanted was for God's glory to be seen in Jerusalem. And do you know what...?

5. God answered their Prayers (v.31)

Look at how he answered them:

(i) There was a shaking: - as soon as they had finished praying, the place where they were meeting was shaken.

This was like a reminder of the Day of Pentecost. This was a physical phenomenon. God was showing them that he was still with them. They had asked for miraculous signs and wonders. Well God had just given them a sign that he was still with them, he was still for them; He had not abandoned them!

(ii) There was a filling: - Again this is a reminder of the Day of Pentecost, but here it doesn't say that they were **baptised** with the Holy Spirit again – it says that they were **filled** with the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is something that happens to us once – whether that be water baptism or whether it's being baptised by the Spirit – it happens once – it marks the start of the Christian life – that's when we are baptised by the Spirit, and believers' baptism symbolises that start – *'Believe and be baptised.'*

But we still need to be *filled* with the Holy Spirit on a regular basis thereafter.

If we have been out serving the Lord, we come in at the end of the day or the end of that week of outreach or whatever it is, and we feel empty, we feel drained, because we have been giving out to help others.

So we need to be filled again with the Holy Spirit to re-equip us, to send us out again to serve again in His strength and not in our own.

There is one baptism of the Spirit, but there should be many fillings of the Spirit – filling us again and again – equipping us to serve in His strength and not our own. Remember that this summer, you young people, who are going on several teams or camps or other outreaches. It's good to be busy in God's service, but remember, you need to be regularly re-filled by the Spirit in order to go on serving Him with His energy, not your own. (cf Ephesians 5:18).

(iii) There was the speaking: - What had they asked for back in v.29?

'Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.'

Well here's the direct answer to that prayer in v.31:

'And they were all filled with the Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.'

What they asked for, is exactly what they got.

We are filled with the Spirit, not to make us feel good, or to give us a buzz. We are filled with the Spirit to help us serve well and to speak God's Word boldly. See Acts 4:8 and 4:31. That's why the Holy Spirit was given in Acts 1:8. *'You shall be my witnesses!'*

Conclusion: So we have seen this morning that when the buffeting came, hard on the heels of God's blessing, the early believers re-grouped, they drew strength from each other in fellowship, they sought the face of their Sovereign God together in prayer, and they asked not for God to lighten their load, or take their problems away, but that he would make them stronger, filling them with His Spirit, so that they could go out and face the world all over again. And as they did, God continued to work with them (v.33). May it be so for us too!

