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## Introduction

Last week we looked at our response to the call of Jesus; we looked at some of the things we need to do which demonstrate that not only have we heard the call of Jesus, but that we're prepared to do something about it.

One thing we touched on very briefly was that many of us have tried to follow Jesus and have found that there are all kinds of obstacles and things that would seek to limit how closely we seem to be able to follow Jesus.

Things like a lack of time, a feeling of never being good enough, family and work commitments, poor health, lack of skill, intimidation, financial restrictions; all kinds of things in our situations and circumstances can make following Jesus incredibly difficult.

The thing is, though, that Jesus knows all that and yet He *still* calls us to follow Him and commands us to go.

This morning, we're going to look at one example of how two followers of Jesus encountered difficulties in following Him and what they did about it.

What we're going to do is come up with one model for overcoming the things that hinder our walk with Jesus.

## Scripture

**NIV Acts 4:23** *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. <sup>24</sup> When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' <sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. <sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." <sup>31</sup> After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

## Scripture Setting

Immediately preceding this passage we are given the account of Peter and John being imprisoned and threatened by the priests and the Sanhedrin against speaking in the name of Jesus.

The Sanhedrin were effectively the ruling Jewish Council and had authority from Rome – the occupying power – to enforce a number of different areas of rule. Basically, they were the police, courts and pseudo-government of Israel at this time, but Rome had the right to interfere in any way it chose.

The Sanhedrin were able to try and convict in criminal cases that did not involve capital punishment – that right was reserved by Rome, although, if the verdict was death then, with the approval of the Roman procurator, the death penalty could be issued.<sup>1</sup>

They could order arrests by their own soldiers and officers of justice

The warning given by the Sanhedrin to Peter and John effectively provided a legal basis for further action against them should they be accused again.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, Millard, Packer, Wiseman, *New Bible Dictionary*

<sup>2</sup> Barker, Kohlenberger III, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*

## Scripture Overview

We pick up the story with Peter and John being released with the knowledge that Jesus called them to follow Him and then commanded them to go and tell others about Him, to imitate Him, to heal the sick and proclaim God's Kingdom, but also with the knowledge that doing so meant imprisonment, beatings, and perhaps even death.

So what do they do?

We're going to go through this passage and develop a model, based on their response, that we can use when we face opposition, intimidation, or difficulty in following Jesus.

Following Jesus requires us to be active in our faith, so we need to discover, from the Bible, tools and methods which will enable us to face them and overcome the things that hinder us from following Jesus with our entire lives.

A few months ago we went through *40 Days of Purpose* and explored five Biblical purposes which God has created us for. Through fulfilling these purposes we can be effective for God and accomplish things which are of eternal significance.

These purposes that we looked at were:

Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry, and Evangelism.

This passage can be broken up under these five headings – which is useful for remembering them and also reflects the fact that an effective model is a model that balances all five purposes.

Following Jesus means that we need to seek to have balance in all the five purposes that God has created us for.

## Fellowship

**NIV Acts 4:23** *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.*

**NLT Acts 4:23** *As soon as they were freed, Peter and John found the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said.*

**RSV Acts 4:23** *When they were released they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.*

There are a couple of key things to be gleaned from this verse.

Peter and John had experienced some significant opposition to following Jesus. What could we have expected them to do?

Go home, dejected, seeing no way forward, depressed, scolded, burnt, fearful.

You wouldn't blame them for that, after all, not only had the local government censored them, but the religious leaders – supposedly, the 'men of God' – had rebuked them.

But no, Peter and John went and met with the Church. When faced with difficulty in following Jesus, they turned to the Church.

In those different translations we looked at there were three different words used to describe the church:

1. Their own people
2. The other believers
3. Their friends

In these three translations of this verse we are given a simple picture of what fellowship is all about.

The NIV Bible uses the phrase "their own people." It is the Greek word *idioj* (idios) and means, among other things, 'one's own, distinct.'

We can best understand it as a nationality, race, or culture. Peter and John recognised that being part of the Church meant much more than belonging to a local religious club, being in the Church meant their identity came, in part, from the group of people that met with them to worship.

The Living Bible uses the words "other believer's" to describe this same group. The Church was a community where Peter and John were welcomed and were a part of because of their belief and faith in Jesus.

The fellowship of the Church revolved around the fact that they shared a common faith and this bound them together in obedience to Jesus' commands and Jesus' desire for unity among His followers.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible describes the Church as "their friends"

Fellowship has a number of different facets, but at the core of all of them is love, friendship, concern for one another.

This doesn't mean we necessarily have to hang out with and be friends with *everyone* in the Church, but that love for one another, and those friendships developed over time within the Church really are the things that make all the other areas possible.

Peter and John immediately went to the Church, the people they identified with, those that they are united with because of their faith in Jesus, and their friends.

Fellowship means we need to share with those in the Church the things that we find difficult, our set-backs. We don't need to go into detail and most times we don't need to tell the whole church – but we do need to have a group, like our small group or our friends within the Church with whom to go for support.

Peter and John's first response was to seek out the fellowship of the Church.

## Worship

**NIV Acts 4:24** *When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' <sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*

What was the response of the Church?

Worship.

No pity party, no period of despair and consoling one another, no hopelessness; the Church "raised their voices together in prayer".

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<sup>3</sup> John 17:20-23

What an awesome thing it is when the Church joins together in prayer!

There are several main elements of this prayer and worship:

1. They acknowledged God as “*Sovereign Lord*.” It is the Greek word *despōtḗj* (despotes), from it we get the word ‘despot’ as in the form of government known as ‘despotism.’ It means ‘master’ and was used of slave-owner’s, or absolute rulers with unchallengeable authority<sup>4</sup>. The first thing the Church does, when it’s faced with a seemingly impossible situation where they can’t see how they can follow Jesus fully is to turn to God and proclaim that He is Lord over all and His power is unchallengeable. They put God first.
2. They recognized that God made everything and therefore has power over everything. “*You made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.*” The situation looked impossible, but God is almighty and He is the Creator. It’s easy to try and work out how God can manipulate circumstances to fix whatever issue we’re facing, but God is the Creator – He doesn’t need to find a way naturally, He spoke the world into being, He can supernaturally alter circumstances if He chooses to.
3. The Church then takes hold of Scripture and speaks the words of King David. There are three elements of this proclamation:
  - a. The Church describes King David as “*our father*.” In doing so they tie themselves to the Scripture and directly involve themselves in God’s Word. They decide to relate to it personally.
  - b. They used a common Jewish method of interpreting Scripture, which we still use today, and interpreted their situation through the words of Scripture. For example, the Church saw “*the nations*” as the Roman authorities, “*the peoples*” as the people of Israel, “*the kings of the earth*” correspond to King Herod, and “*the rulers*” represent Governor Pontius Pilate. So the Church took God’s Word and applied it to their circumstances.
  - c. Lastly, by quoting this Scripture which was written about the sufferings of God’s people in the Old Testament, more specifically about King David, and by recognizing its prophetic nature in describing the sufferings of Jesus, and then by using it in prayer at a time of their own suffering the link themselves to the sufferings of God’s people throughout history. What the church was proclaiming was their union with God’s chosen people.
4. The final line is an affirmation of belief in God’s control of the situation. In all the situations they face, Jesus faced, and God’s people in the Old Testament faced, God was fully in control of the situation.

The Church refocused their vision, the worshipped God and regained His perspective of the situation.

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<sup>4</sup> Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today* – *The Message of Acts*

This prayer goes through three main descriptions of God:

1. "You made"
2. "You spoke"
3. "You decided"

Having realigned their perspective with God's vision, the Church is, finally, ready to begin praying.

## Discipleship

How would we pray?

Faced with social pressure, political pressure, legal pressure, religious pressure, the threat of physical harm, how would we pray?

'Dear God, please take away all those mean people, dear God please rescue me from all these hard situations, dear God please smite all those that oppose me, please God, please take away all this trouble.'

**NIV Acts 4:29** *Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.*

I've called this element of the prayer *Discipleship* because discipleship is about imitating Jesus, it's about learning to grow closer to God through the situations we face in our lives, it's about allowing God to teach us and to respond to that teaching with maturity.

This is what this part of the prayer is about.

The Church didn't pray for God to rescue them or to take the difficulty away. They prayed that God would strengthen them for the task.

The prayer is for God to "*consider their threats*". It means to 'look upon' or 'regard' the difficulty facing them.

'Dear God, in light of what I'm facing, please strengthen me to overcome.'

Not only do they ask for enabling, but the enabling is not merely to survive the opposition, but to fulfil God's purpose despite it.

The Church prays for enabling to speak God's Word – to fulfil the Great Commission.

Surely this kind of prayer pleases God! The prayer is that even though what they're facing will be hard to push through, their desire for God's Word prompts them to pray that His purposes will be fulfilled through them anyway.

'Dear God, what I'm facing seems so hard, but I want to serve you and obey you and follow you so please, give me all I need to overcome.'

## Ministry

The Church had at the forefront of their priorities bringing glory and honour to Jesus. This is reflected in their desire to follow Him regardless of opposition and in this next part of the prayer.

**NIV Acts 4:30** *Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*

I want us to think about what they prayed for in this section.

The prayed for healings and miraculous signs and wonders.

Despite the opposition they're facing, the Church demonstrates love for others and asks God to use them to do miracles of mercy in order to bring glory and honour to the Name of Jesus.

The Church prays for miracles of mercy to reinforce and to aid their mission of proclaiming God's Word. Their prayer is solely focused on God enabling them to fulfil His purposes through them, even in the face of opposition and difficulty.

## Evangelism

Let's look at what happened next; we can read this last verse as God's response to prayer that pleased Him.

**NIV Acts 4:31** *After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

They went and continued the work of the Great Commission, the reason that Jesus gave for the Church to exist. They went and evangelised.



I only want to highlight two points in this verse.

1. The Church asked God for the enabling to fulfil His will by proclaiming His Word. Their prayer was for the empowerment to fulfil God's purposes through their lives. That's a good thing to pray, if you pray that then you can rest assured that it's a prayer that puts a huge grin on God's face.
2. When they prayed this, God responded and they received the enabling and the Church got busy using it. If we ask God for the enabling we'd better be prepared to use it when He gives it.

Just briefly, what was the enabling that God gave to the Church?

The Holy Spirit.

What is the enabling that Jesus promised those who would follow Him?

The Holy Spirit.

Have you received the enabling that Jesus promised?

## Summary

We looked at this example of prayer in Acts to determine a Biblical model that we can follow and apply to our lives when we encounter difficulties in following Jesus.

Let's go through the process:

1. Fellowship: The first thing that Peter & John did when they faced difficulty was to go to the Church. This doesn't just mean 'attending' a Church meeting, the 'Church' is the group of Christians we belong to, who are in unity with one another and who are striving to follow Jesus, united in vision and purpose. 'Yes', this does mean deciding to be a part of our Church gatherings on Sunday – how can we be united in purpose and vision unless we meet together to allow God to speak these things to us? But it also means building relationships with people in the Church, like in Small Groups, so that we can be supported when times are tough.
2. Worship: The next thing the Church did together, was to worship God. They turned to the Scriptures to realign their vision and perspective with God's and refocused their lives in light of God's Word. Worship brings Godly perspective and puts us in a proper posture before God.

3. Discipleship: The Church didn't shirk back from trouble or difficulty; God's Word clearly shows that these are the times when we most grow and that regardless of how things may appear – God is in control. The Church decided to grow despite their circumstances. Their prayer was for the enabling to follow Jesus.
4. Ministry: Their desire was to see lives changed and to bring glory to Jesus. This is what ministry accomplishes. It costs us, it's not always easy, it requires the hand of God to be effective, but it's the thing that characterises the followers of Jesus.
5. Evangelism: Having prayed and believed and received the Holy Spirit – God's enabling – the Church went and continued following Jesus; they reached out to those around them and proclaimed God's truth and hope to the world.

Following Jesus mean imitating Him. These five purposes completely encapsulate Jesus' life, living them out is following Jesus.

Jesus has called us to follow Him, that means that He believes this is something that we can do. He has given us the Holy Spirit which enables us to follow Him completely, even when we can't see how it could be possible or when our situations and the obstacles we face seem insurmountable.

Have you received the Holy Spirit?  
What are you doing with that enabling?