

“Unshakeable Courage”

Acts 4:23-31

~ Delivered at DHBC on August 31, 2014 (Soli Deo Gloria)

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to Acts 4. **READ 23-31.**
 - *“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. 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. ²⁵ 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? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’ ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 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.”*
- Over and over again I am struck with the unshakeable courage of the early church in speaking about Jesus. This unshakeable courage is especially evident when they were faced with opposition.
 - For instance, right before this passage we read that Peter and John had been put in jail for preaching about Jesus. When they stood before the court they boldly proclaimed Jesus. If you look at verse 13 it says,
 - ***“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.”*** Where did they get this unshakeable courage and boldness?
- I want to know because I often feel my courage to speak about Jesus being shaken. See I know two things when I am talking to people: I know that if I just talk about the weather, sports, or the news, the conversation will be easy.
 - But I also know that if I speak about Jesus it can make a conversation turn awkward. And so my courage gets shaken in the face of potential opposition. I think every Christian knows this feeling.
- So how did the early church get such unshakeable courage? We see a major part of the answer here in Acts 4. We see that as they sought the face of God in prayer, God shook them in such a way that they became unshakeable. Look at verse 31.
 - **READ 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.”*** Notice the result of prayer was being shaken by God and

the result of being shaken by God was they were filled with the Spirit and the result of being filled was that they spoke the word boldly.

- So our thesis today is: **(SHOW SLIDE) We must pray when our courage to speak about Jesus is shaken because God makes his praying people unshakeable.** From our passage today I want to call us to prayer. To personal prayer. But also to corporate prayer in our home groups, in our GROW pods, and on Sunday mornings. Specifically I want to call us to join together prayer on next Sunday night from 6-7:15pm.
 - So in order to develop this thesis let me give four reasons why we must pray when our courage to speak about Jesus is shaken.

SHAKEN BY THE WORLD

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, we must pray because the world will shake us.
 - Look at verse 23. **READ 23-24** – *“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. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.”* What did they report that led them to pray?
 - Look back at verse 18. **READ 18, 21a** – *“Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus...After further threats they let them go.”* So they are praying and asking for boldness because their courage has been shaken by the threats of the world.
- Friends, it is universal law that where the kingdom is advancing Christians will face opposition when they speak about Jesus. This is not abnormal. It is normal.
 - Jesus said in John 15, *“if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...no servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”*
 - But notice that when this happens to these early Christians they do not bemoan how hard life is for them, hate those who oppose them, or simply try to stay positive. No. When the world shakes them they go to prayer asking for unshakeable courage to keep speaking of Jesus.
- So it must be with us. We must individually, and as a church, fall to our knees in prayer. When the world shakes you let it shake you to your knees for only there will you find the courage you need.

THE UNSHAKEABLE POWER OF GOD

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, we must pray because God is unshakeable.
 - Notice that this prayer is split in two parts. What is so striking is that the request for boldness is very short and does not even come until the end in verse 29. They spend the bulk of the prayer in verses 24-28 calling to mind God’s unshakeable power as Creator and Ruler over all.
 - This teaches us that when our courage is shaken we need to spend more time in prayer recalling God’s power as Creator and Ruler

than making requests for boldness. The reason for this is obvious. The reason we fear is because we have forgotten God's power as Creator and Ruler. The way to regain unshakeable courage is to pray your heart full of the power of the unshakeable God, specifically His power as Creator and Ruler.

- First when your courage is shaken pray your heart full of the power God as Creator. **READ 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.”*
 - Are you fearful to speak for Jesus? Then fill your mind with his power as Creator. Fill your mind with his power in creating billions of galaxies. How can you fear anyone when He who measures the Pacific Ocean in the palm of His hand, also holds you? Pray the Creative power of God deep into your fearful heart.
- In the second place when your courage is shaken pray your heart full of the power of God as the Ruler of all events, even the really bad ones.
 - **READ 25-28** – *“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? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’ 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. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”*
 - What we have in these verses is one of the Bible's greatest declarations of the sovereignty of God over all events, particularly the bad ones. These verses tell us who is responsible for the death of Jesus.
- Notice first that it was human beings who killed Jesus. **READ 27** – *“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.”* Their actions were not coerced. God holds them responsible for the murder of Jesus. But how can we say trust in the power of God if he could not even stop his Son from being crucified? It seems that human free will is the ultimate thing in the universe
 - But notice secondly, God is the ultimate cause of Jesus' death. **READ 28** – *“They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”* This verse plainly states that although their actions were free they were simply fulfilling what God ordained should come to pass. God planned the death of Jesus before he created the world.
 - So human beings planned and carried out the death of Jesus and yet they only did what God ordained for them to do. Here we have a great mystery that we cannot solve with our puny minds: God ordains whatsoever come to pass, even evil events, and yet he does this in such a way that he is not the author of sin, in such a way that human beings are never coerced in their wills, and in such a

way that human are justly held accountable for their actions. God is the sovereign ruler over all things – not humanity.

- Do you see how praying God’s sovereign rule into your heart makes you unshakeable? The logic is simple: if even the most evil event in history (the murder of the Son of God) was not outside God’s sovereign rule then neither is the present opposition you face. This is what they were praying.
 - Oh the early church, like us, may not always have understood why God brings opposition our way, but listen, knowing that God rules all events makes a believer’s courage unshakeable because nothing is out of control.
 - When their courage was shaken these early believers filled their prayers with declarations about God’s utter sovereignty over all events.

JOHN PATON’S TRUST IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

- And this works in real life. Every once and while I remind of John Paton. John Paton used his life to take the gospel to the cannibalistic tribes of the New Hebrides.
 - He went there after the islanders had killed the five previous men who tried. On the island Paton’s new wife died while giving birth. Paton buried his wife and child with his own hands. He was struck with fever 14 times, spent a night hiding in a tree, and regularly had his life threatened with guns and knives.
 - The world shook him severely for speaking about Jesus but his courage was unshakeable and after many years the entire Island came to Jesus.
- What made Paton unshakeable? It was a deep understanding of this truth, that God is the sovereign ruler over all events, even the evil ones.
 - He said of his wife’s death, ***“I felt her loss beyond all conception or description in that dark land but I felt immovably assured that my God and Father was too wise and loving to err in anything that he does or permits.”***
 - Then he said, ***“I realized that I am immortal until my Master’s work with me is done...not a musket would be fired to wound us, not a club prevail to strike us, not an arrow leave the bow, or a killing stone the fingers without the permission of Jesus Christ, whose is all power in heaven and on earth. He rules all nature, animate and inanimate. Nothing happens but by the permission of Jesus Christ whose is all power in heaven and on earth. My blessed Jesus makes no mistakes.”***
- Friends, is your courage to speak for Jesus shaken by opposition? Then go into creation and pray the power of the Creator into your soul. Then go to your Bible and pray the sovereign rule of God into your soul. When you realize that nothing is an accident, that God rules over all things including opposition, and that this God is your God who is with you and for you then you will be unshakeable.
 - So we must pray because the world will always try to shake us and secondly because God is unshakeable.

WE DESPERATELY NEED UNSHAKEABLE COURAGE

- (SHOW SLIDE) Third, we must pray because we need unshakeable courage.
 - **READ 29-30** – *“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”*
 - What a prayer. They lay their shaking lives before God and ask for Him to take away their cowardice and give them boldness. And then they ask for God to confirm their preaching with great signs and miracles. These miracles were left in the sovereign hand of God for timing. They did not expect them all the time and they did not happen all the time but in the history of church God often works miracles to confirm the message that is spoken.
- Notice what they do not request of God. They do not say, **“Lord strike down those people who oppose us.”** They simply ask God to consider their threats and they leave any injustice in God’s hands.
 - Notice also that they do not pray, as we certainly would, **“Lord protect us.”** It is not wrong to pray ‘deliver us’ but deliver us always comes after ‘hallow your name’. Oh this is where we need a wake up call for we are concerned first for our safety and comfort and second for the gospel. Not so with the early Christians or John Paton. They offered Jesus their whole lives and said, **“Use us.”**
 - Remember Paul shackled in prison for speaking about Jesus. What does he ask for? Ephesians 6:19: **“pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel...pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”**
- Oh friends, what we need today is men and women who lay their whole lives before Jesus say, **“Oh Lord use my life for your gospel. I offer it to you. But I need you to enable me. I need your power or I cannot do it.”**
 - Who knows what God could do with such a generation? Who knows what will happen as we pray. Will you lay your life before him and ask for courage and boldness?

WHEN GOD SHAKES US WE WILL SHAKE THE WORLD

- (SHOW SLIDE) Finally, we must pray because when God shakes us we will shake the world. **READ 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.”**
 - What is this shaking? This is God visiting them. When God came down at Mt. Sinai the mountain shook. This is the awesome presence of God drawing near. The result of this shaking is that they are made unshakeable in their courage to speak about Jesus.
 - Only a few years later, these men and women who had no influence, money, or power, were in dragged before the city

officials of Thessalonica it is was said of them that ***“they have turned the world upside down.”***

- What happened to change them? God came near. God visited them. This is what we call revival. When God shakes his people they shake the world.
 - This is the greatest need of our day. What we need is for God to visit us in power. We cannot work up a revival. We cannot schedule it. We cannot program it. We can only pray for it and that is why we must pray.
- This is what revival is – it is God drawing near. These early Christians had heard and read of how God had drawn near to his people in history and how that changed them. They had seen the result of such a visitation and they were pleading saying, ***“Do it again oh Lord.”*** Oh this must be our prayer today.
 - Let us pray with Isaiah, ***“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would shake before you.”*** Let us pray with Habakkuk, ***“Yahweh, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Yahweh. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known.”***

THE GREAT AWAKENING

- The reason most of us do not pray for this is because we have not heard of how God has shaken his people in the past. Let me give you one example to spark your prayers as our church moves forward in fall. J.C. Ryle writes of the spiritual conditions in America and England in the 18th century saying,
 - ***“The state of this country in a religious and moral point of view was so painfully unsatisfactory that it is difficult to convey any adequate idea of it...England seemed barren of all that is really good. How such a state of things can have arisen in a land of free Bibles...is almost beyond comprehension. Christianity seemed to lie as one dead...there was darkness in high places and darkness in low places – darkness in the court, the camp, the Parliament, and the bar – darkness in the country, and darkness in the town, darkness among the rich and darkness among poor.”***¹
 - The Archbishop in those days summed it up by saying, ***“an open and professed disregard for religion is the distinguishing character of the age.”***² Sound familiar?
 - But then something began to happen – someone happened. God came down and visited his people. It happened all over but let me give zero in on one example in Enfield, Massachusetts.
- One historian writes, ***“The inhabitants of [Enfield] were very secure, loose, and vain. A lecture had been appointed at Enfield...When the appointed time for the lecture came, a number of the neighboring ministers attended, and some from a distance. When they went into the meeting house, the appearance of the [people] was thoughtless and vain. The people hardly conducted themselves with common decency.”***

¹ JC Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, 13-14.

² Ibid. pg 15.

- The pastor appointed to preach that night was Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was not an orator. He stood motionless, used no gestures, and read his sermons.
 - What he did exceedingly well however was to clearly and succinctly lay out truth to people. On this night he chose Deuteronomy 32:35 as his text which uses the image of unrepentant Israel's foot about to slide out and they will fall and perish. In calm tones Edwards laid before the people the truth that the very God who keeps them from falling into hell is the one they had dreadfully provoked with their sins. He laid before them their awful condition and called them to flee to Jesus for salvation.
- He had preached this same sermon before without much effect but this time God drew near. His words would so grip the audience that they felt, should he cease speaking, they would immediately perish. The cries of the people even began to drown out the voice of the preacher.
 - That night in almost every house, men and women could be heard crying out for God to save them. Before the night was over 500 were saved in the community that day.
- This type of awakening soon began to happen all over England and America. George Whitfield for instance preached in the fields to people. One man writes that, "***The gospel so proclaimed was listened to and greedily received by hundreds who never dreamt of going to a place of worship...thousands came to Christ.***"³
 - By May 1740 it was reported, "***There was never such a general awakening and concern of the things of God known in America before***"⁴... "***The gospel in this day may be likened to a fire set to well dried fuel: it no sooner touches but a flame arises.***"⁵

CONCLUSION

- Is this not what we need today? Oh that God would shake his church again that his church might shake the world.
 - There is only one way to respond to this message. We need to pray. We need to come before God, admit our lack of boldness, pray for boldness, and pray for God to come in power in our midst.
 - Let us all join together next Sunday night and pray to this end.

Keywords: Evangelism, Persecution, God – sovereignty of, Prayer.

³ Ibid. pg 39.

⁴ Ibid. pg 117.

⁵ Ibid. pg 120.