

ACTS 4:23–31

Look upon Their Threats

²³ When they had been released, they went back to their own people, and told them everything that the chief priests and the elders had said. ²⁴ When they heard it, they all together lifted up their voices to God.

‘Sovereign Master,’ they said, ‘you made heaven and earth, and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ And you said through the holy spirit, by the mouth of our ancestor David, your servant,

‘Why did the nations fly into a rage,
And why did the peoples think empty thoughts?

²⁶ The kings of the earth arose
And the rulers gathered themselves together
Against the Lord and against his anointed Messiah.

²⁷ ‘It’s true: Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with the nations and the peoples of Israel, gathered themselves together in this very city against your holy child Jesus, the one you anointed, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had foreordained to take place. ²⁹ So now, Master, look on their threats; and grant that we, your servants, may speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand for healing, so that signs and wonders may come about through the name of your holy child Jesus.’

³¹ When they had prayed, the place where they were gathered was shaken. They were all filled with the holy spirit, and they boldly spoke the word of God.

In the early summer of 1989, I went to Jerusalem to teach, and to work on a couple of books, one of which was about Jesus himself. One day, sitting in my borrowed room at St George’s Cathedral, I was struggling with a few pages I was trying to write, concerning the battles Jesus had over his exorcisms—the battles, that is, both with the **demons** themselves and with the people who were accusing him of being, himself, in league with the devil. I was conscious, as I was struggling with this material, that it was not only difficult to say what had to be said historically, but that it was difficult to get it straight theologically, and that in attempting both tasks I was myself straying into a field of forces which I would have preferred to avoid.

Suddenly, just as I had got down onto the computer a few paragraphs in which I had at last said what I wanted to say, there was a loud bang. All the electric systems in the building went dead. A workman downstairs, trying to fix something else, had put a nail

straight through a main cable. He was lucky to be alive. And I had lost my morning's work.

It was such a shock, after my hours of silent struggle with the text, the history and the meanings, that I almost burst into tears. I went next door, sat down at the piano, and played for a few minutes to calm myself down and clear my head. Then I came back into my room and knelt down at the prayer desk. For some reason (perhaps I had heard them in the cathedral earlier that day, or that week) the words of [Acts 4:29](#) came straight into my head.

'Now, Lord,' I prayed, 'look upon their threats; and grant to your servant to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed in the name of your holy child [Jesus](#).' I went back to the desk and reconstructed the morning's work.

I have prayed that prayer many times, not usually in such dramatic circumstances, but often with a sense that today, just as much as in the [apostles'](#) time, there is a battle going on. Sometimes it is with actual, official authorities, as in [Acts 4](#). Sometimes it is with the spirit of the age, with the implied mood of an organization, a family or a club, where certain things are done and said and certain other things are emphatically 'not done' or 'not said'—including, it may be, a definite statement of Christian truth, which bursts upon a room in such circumstances like someone saying a rude word. Sometimes the battle is internal, where things I badly want to do, say or think conflict with what the text really is saying, and I have to recognize my own bias, repent and allow the text to re-form my outlook and behaviour. Whatever, the battle is real. I do not say it is always necessarily with actual dark powers, though I would never rule that out. I just know that when you come to speak or write about [Jesus](#), about his cross, about his **resurrection**, about the new **life** which can break chains and set people free, there seem to be powers around the place which do their best to oppose what you are doing.

The previous passage included a reference to [Psalm 118](#), and we saw just how important that Psalm was for the early church faced with opposition from the authorities. Now we find the apostles at prayer, returning to their friends after a trip to the **Temple** which, against expectations, had gone on from one afternoon to the next morning. And this time the Psalm they focus on is [Psalm 2](#). Another spectacular poem, full of meaning relevant for exactly this situation.

[Psalm 2](#) begins by questioning, before God, why the nations are in such an uproar, and the rulers scheming and plotting. This question stands within a long Jewish tradition in which God places his chosen people amidst the warring and violent nations of the earth, as a sign of his coming **kingdom**, the sovereign rule by which he will eventually bring peace and justice to the world. And on this occasion the means by which God will do this is through his anointed King, the one who will be hailed as ‘**son of God**’. To this ‘son of God’, declares the Psalm, God will give not just the promised land as his inheritance, but all the nations of the world. The promises to Abraham have been extended, rather as in [Psalm 72](#) or [Psalm 89](#), and now they embrace the whole world.

So when the apostles quote [Psalm 2](#) in their confident, exhilarated prayer in verses [25](#) and [26](#) they are not just finding a vague proof-text to help them anchor a general sense that all the world is against them. They are calling up a very specific text which speaks graphically and powerfully of the **Messiah** as the son of God, destined to rule the whole world. Woven deep into the heart of early Christian belief was exactly this note, as we find in a passage in Paul. In [Romans 1:3–5](#), where he may be drawing on an early Christian confession of **faith**, he declares that in the resurrection God demonstrated that [Jesus](#) really was his son, the Messiah from the seed of David, and that this [Jesus](#) was therefore the Lord of the whole world, claiming allegiance from all people.

Praying like this is confident praying, not because people necessarily feel more devout than at other times, but because they are rooting themselves firmly in the ancient tradition of scripture. They start their prayer by invoking God as the creator of heaven, earth, the sea and everything else—the God, in other words, of the Old Testament, the God who can be appealed to for all that takes place within his domains. Then follows the quote from the Psalm. Then the present situation is placed firmly on the map of the scriptural story which has already been celebrated. As a result, the prayer can acknowledge, as Acts already has, the strong theological point that even the apparently disastrous things that took place as [Jesus](#) went to the cross were not outside God’s will (verse [28](#)). The wickedness of rulers is held in check by, and contained within, the overall purpose of God, who makes even human wrath turn to his praise.

With the ground thus prepared, the main triple thrust of the prayer is quite straightforward. Not ‘Lord, please cause them to die horribly’ or ‘Please stop them being so unpleasant.’ Not ‘Lord, let this persecution stop,’ or even ‘Please convert the authorities,

so that your work can go forward.’ Rather, quite simply, ‘Now, Lord, look on their threats; let us go on speaking boldly; and will you please continue to work powerfully’ .’ The opposition are there, and God knows about them. We are here, and we need to be faithful, to continue to speak of Jesus boldly and confidently. And here is the power of God, which is not in our possession but which, because of Jesus, will continue to be at work to set up signposts pointing people to the new thing which is happening through him.

The church needs to learn, in every generation, what it means to pray with confidence like this. We do not go looking for persecution. But when it comes, in whatever form, it certainly concentrates the mind, sends us back to the scriptures, and casts us on God’s mercy and power. The church needs, again and again, that sense of God’s powerful presence, shaking us up, blowing away the cobwebs, filling us with the **spirit**, and giving us that same boldness.