

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 4:23-31 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 4:23-31 ESV

23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who 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? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed"— 27 for 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, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." 31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

STRUCTURE

- I. Release and Report (4:23)
- II. Response: Prayer (4:24-30)
 - a. They respond in prayer together (4:24a)
 - b. They address the Lord who is *sovereign over creation* (4:24b)
 - c. They address the Lord who is *sovereign over Scripture* (4:25a)
 - d. They quote Psalm 2 to the Lord who is *sovereign over history* (4:25b-28)
 - i. Psalm 2 quoted (4:25b-26)
 - ii. Psalm 2 applied (4:27-28)
 - e. They petition God to sovereignly act (4:29-30)
 - i. Petition #1: Look upon their threats (4:29a)
 - ii. Petition #2: Grant boldness (4:29b)
 - iii. Petition #3: Perform miracles (4:30)
- III. God's Response: Quaking, Filling, and Bold Preaching (4:31)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This is the longest prayer in Acts. It displays the source for power and boldness, the knee-jerk response of the church, and most importantly, the sovereignty of God.

The knee-jerk response of the church is not to fight a revolution but to bend a knee in prayer, which is the source of their power and boldness. Rarely do we feel more powerless than when we pray. We'd often rather be *doing* something, but prayer is how we plug in to our power source—the triune God.

Appealing to God the Father—"Sovereign Lord" (4:24)—they pray for boldness and miracles "through the name of your Holy Servant Jesus" (4:30), and God answers them when they are "all filled with the Holy Spirit" (4:31). Thus, we see the work of the Father, who takes the sovereign initiative; of the Son, who continues "to do and teach" (1:1) from His heavenly throne; and of the Spirit, who empowers the church to fulfill God's mission.

With the triune God as the center of this passage, it is His sovereign power that Luke most emphasizes. We see this in the opening, where they address Him as "Sovereign Lord" over creation (4:24), and then as they affirm the Spirit's sovereignty over Scripture (4:25a), and last, as they apply Psalm 2 to illuminate God's sovereignty over history. God's sovereignty, like a king's sovereignty, means His authority to rule. God rules over creation, Scripture, and history, and it is for this reason that the disciples can call on Him to sovereignly act on their behalf; on behalf of His own name.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God

—“When they were released, they went to their friends”:

- Where do we go when we experience trouble? They went to their friends. God has appointed the community of faith to support us in hard times.
- The literal translation says they went to “their own”. These “friends” are part of a broader community to which they belong. One of the fundamental human questions is, “To whom do I belong?” The church provides both a sense of belonging and support in troubled times.

—“and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them”:

- What did the chief priests and elders say to them?
 - This: “So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4:18).
 - And this: “And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened” (4:21).
- The religious leaders were fine with Christianity as long as it was a “private” devotion. They did not charge the apostles with ceasing to believe, but with ceasing to “speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” When this failed, they issued threats, probably of imprisonment and death.

—“And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God”:

- The first response of the community is not to freak out or make a plan or storm the Sanhedrin with their thousands of converts. Their first response was prayer.
- This episode began with prayer when Peter and John approached the temple for the hour of corporate prayer, at which moment a lame beggar asked for gold and instead received a healing miracle. It should not be lost on readers that Luke draws a direct line between prayer and healing power. I find it fascinating that God healed the man—not after the prayer meeting—but while they were on the way to prayer. He honors the intention of our heart. Their goal was to pray. They knew where their power came from, which is why Peter said, “why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?” (4:13).
- The miracle that began with prayer (3:1-10) led to Peter’s sermon (3:11-26) and the even greater miracle of conversion—thousands of them (4:4). This was followed by threats from the elite (4:1-22), and then (surprise!)—more prayer (4:24-30). The prayer for boldness is answered immediately (4:31), and the prayer for signs and wonders is answered soon after (4:33; 5:12-16).
- God is sovereign over creation (4:24) and even over enemies (4:27-28), yet He partners with us in prayer. As our “Sovereign Lord” (4:24), God governs the Universe through the prayers of His people. O, that we might be a praying people and a praying church!
- Schnabel: “The courage of Peter and John as they explained with Spirit-inspired boldness the significance of Jesus the Messiah for the miracle and for salvation (vv. 8, 14) links that incident with this prayer of the believers.”
- “lifted their voices together”:
 - It is not just that they prayed; they prayed together. We could probably say that corporate prayer is more powerful than individual prayer. There is strength in numbers. Where God’s people dwell together in unity, there God has commanded the blessing (Ps. 133). Luke emphasizes this repeatedly. Before the Spirit fell on Pentecost, we learn that, “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer...” (1:14) and that “they were all together in one place” (2:1). The Jerusalem church “devoted themselves to... the prayers” (2:42), with the plural form emphasizing its corporate, perhaps even liturgical, nature. They organized prayer gatherings. They also attended prayer gatherings that were already organized. Peter and John—not one but both—“were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer” (3:1), when Jesus healed the lame man. And now, they pray together in a spontaneous gathering of friends. It’s not that people never pray alone in Acts (see Acts 10), but that corporate prayer is emphasized. We should feel challenged to pray together. Together, as spouses; together, as families; together, as friends gathering; together, both formally and informally; together, for official prayer times; together, at all times. Together! If we want the power of the Jerusalem church, we must pray like the Jerusalem church.
 - We can pray in our heads like Hannah, who muttered prayers to herself (1 Sam. 1:12-17). However, it is also important that—just as the church “lifted their voices”—that we grow

comfortable praying out loud. Luke summarizes in 4:24ff what was probably more than a single prayer since they all prayed together.

- I have noticed that after any prayer meeting, a “theme” of the prayers often emerges. As we pray out loud, the Spirit guides us, and our prayers build on one another. When Luke summarizes their corporate prayer meeting with a single prayer, it seems to reflect this common experience.

“Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

—These two verses emphasize different dimensions of God’s nature.

- First, He is “sovereign,” which means He is the King of creation, “who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.”
- Second, He is truthful, inspiring the Scriptures “by the Holy Spirit,” yet “through the mouth of our father David.”
- These characteristics work harmoniously, as David’s inspired words (from Psalm 2) magnify God for His sovereignty over lesser kings—the “kings of the earth.”

—Because God created all things, He is king over all created things. Verses 25-28 clarify what it means that God is the sovereign king. It means that He is sovereign not only over “the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them” but also over history. Even His worst enemies fall into the “predestined” plan of God (4:28), which we’ll explore in upcoming verses.

—Stott: “Their first word was ‘Despotes’ (Sovereign Lord), a term used of a slave owner and of a ruler of unchallengeable power. The Sanhedrin might utter warnings, threats, and prohibitions, and try to silence the church, but their authority was subject to a higher authority still, and human rulings cannot overturn the decrees of God.”

—The language of “Sovereign Lord” is an emphasis of their prayer because they face the threat of many “sovereigns” who claim an absolute right on their lives. Their response is an appeal to the true and infinitely greater Sovereign for help.

—The Christian doctrine of inspiration (alluded to above) is different from the Islamic doctrine of dictation. While parts of Christian Scripture were dictated by God—for instance the 400+ verses where a prophet announces, “Thus says the Lord”—the Christian doctrine of inspiration is not like the Islamic claim that Allah merely dictated the entire Koran as it was given by Allah. Rather, inspiration means that, “God superintended (or carried along) the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded without error His message to mankind in the words of their original writings” (Charles Ryrie). This is precisely what we see in verse 25, where “the mouth of David” and “the Holy Spirit” are both responsible for Scripture. God did not dictate Psalm 2 to David; He inspired it, yet without error. David spoke and the Holy Spirit spoke. The Holy Spirit spoke through David’s personality and writing style and lyrical genius, all in the precise words He desired. This is the doctrine of inspiration, and it applies to all Scripture, for “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16).

—In contemporary culture there is a huge battle over the Bible—how do we interpret it? Some like Pete Enns say that, “The Bible—from back to front—is the story of God told from the limited point of view of real people living at a certain place and time... The Bible looks the way it does because ‘God lets his children tell the story,’ so to speak. Children see the world with a limited gaze.” He then gives an example of a second grader communicating “some things more or less correct, but she will also misunderstand other things, and get still other things plain wrong.” In other words, according to Pete Enns, the Bible is full of errors. This is why Enns affirms all kinds of false doctrines. He is a Harvard-educated ex-evangelical scholar who is wildly intelligent, funny, winsome, and easy to read. Don’t be deceived. Anyone who denies the historic doctrine of the church must himself be denied. His “hermeneutic” (approach to biblical interpretation) can be summarized like this: “I don’t like it; God must not have said it.”

—A better approach to interpreting the Bible is to ask how Jesus and the apostles did so. Jesus and the Apostles understood “David says” and “the Holy Spirit says” to be interchangeable; they understood “all Scripture” to be “God breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). Jesus says of a single word in the Old Testament, “Scripture cannot be broken (Jhn. 10:35), and Paul argues with the Galatians using a single letter from the Old Testament to make his case (Gal. 3:16). If I’m going to base my life on something, it’s going to be Christ’s resurrection. The risen Christ and His appointed apostles took the Bible to be God’s true, inspired, inerrant word, down to every “jot and tittle” (Matt. 5:17)—or the English equivalent—down to the “dotting of every ‘i’ and crossing of every ‘t’.” Pete Enn’s approach to Scripture adopts a novel form of interpretation that every apostle and Jesus Himself opposed. (Of course, Enns would say that Jesus and the Apostles were wrong. But if you’re willing to go there, why are you pretending to write Christian books?)

"Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed"

—The apostles apply David's song to their situation. The raging Gentiles and kings and rulers, who once opposed Yahweh and David, now in a greater way have opposed the Father and His Christ.

—So this passage applied to David, it applied generally to Israelite kings who sat on David's throne, then it applied to Jesus, and now it applies to the church of Jesus which is being attacked. Ultimately, Psalm 2 is fulfilled when Christ returns and smashes kings like pottery (Rev. 11:18; 19:15). O, how "living and active" is the Word of God (Heb. 4:12)! This is no dead or stagnant message. No matter what period of history it first applied to, it still applies today! I call this the "eternal today" of God's Word.

—Here is my commentary on these verses from Psalm 2:

- *"Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot in vain?"*
 - This opening question is rhetorical; the psalmist is making a statement. The emotional state of unbelieving nations is that of rage, and the mental state is that of vain plotting and scheming.
 - The question additionally aims to express wonder and amazement at the nations over the senseless futility of their raging and plotting. They are like a band of kindergarteners planning to attack with sticks and rocks a pack of hungry lions. That they envision success is baffling.
 - The rage of the nations is so pointless, it is amazing.
 - The rage of the nations is not just an angry temper tantrum, for it is channeled into a "plot." These unbelieving nations thus gather their collective minds, as if to funnel their rage in calculated fashion against "the LORD" and "against His anointed" (2:2). It is like the psalmist envisions a white board session full of angry unbelievers, scheming about how they can best resolve the "problem" of God's rule.
 - "rage":
 - Ross: "The verb 'rage' can be used to describe something like the raging of the sea, but here it refers to the tumultuous meeting of rebels to plan an attack..."
 - "Rage" is the natural state of unbelievers, politically speaking. This psalm is a political psalm. It would have been sung, it is believed, on the coronation day of the king of Israel. The primary figures in the psalm are "kings" and "rulers" (2:10).
 - It makes sense that, politically speaking, unbelievers rage like the sea. Anger is the emotion we feel when the world doesn't go as we wish. Nations and rulers consistently feel their impotence before a world that lies beyond their control; thus, they rage. As believers, we feel this too. But for us, there is a difference. We have responded to the warning of 2:10-12; we have found mercy and blessing in the refuge of Yahweh and His chosen Messiah. For believers to feel unceasing political rage is not a sign of holy zeal or righteous anger; it is a sign of unbelief. Of course, we will be angry sometimes, and this can be holy. But when we succumb to the "age of outrage" in which we live, it suggests that we are not finding "refuge" (2:12) in the security of Christ's Lordship over all things—including foolish, raging, plotting, politicians. As believers we know that even when the world doesn't go as we wish, "the LORD is in the heavens, and He does as He pleases" (Ps. 115:3). Furthermore, we know that "the heart of the king is in the hand of the LORD; He turns it like a river wherever He pleases" (Pr. 21:1). When you know that earth's true sovereign is sovereign over all sovereigns, your primary emotional state is not rage, but restfulness; your primary mental state is not plotting, but meditating on God's Law—a connection we now explore.
 - "plot":
 - Surprisingly, this word can also be translated as, "meditate." That's precisely how it is translated in Psalm 1:2. Given that Psalms 1 and 2 used to be a single psalm, and given that they are considered a dual-introduction to the Psalter, the employment of the exact same Hebrew word to depict the meditation of the righteous and the plotting of wicked nations must be intentional.
 - While the righteous man meditates on God's Law, the wicked man meditates—to the point of plotting it out—how he might rebel against God's Law, God Himself, and God's anointed king.
 - If Psalm 1 is about righteous versus wicked individuals, then Psalm 2 is about righteous versus wicked nations. Psalm 2 is what happens when the wicked people of Psalm 1 form a nation and exalt a ruler over themselves. The nations they form

rage, and they plot in vain. Their refusal to meditate on God's Law leads individually to a slow drift away from Him (1:1), and it leads corporately to meditation on the very opposite of God's Law: namely, how to release themselves from its supposedly binding effects (2:3). Having failed to delight in God's Law, they view it as a vice. Thus, the nations rage; the nations plot. The solution to a constantly raging nation comes down to what we meditate on: God's Law or the violation of it.

- The emphasis of the apostles' prayer in Acts 4 is God's sovereignty over the kings and rulers of the earth—including the ones that persecuted them! When the apostles are looking for a biblical explanation of their own persecution, they go to Psalm 2. Here, they see the rage of the nations, not from a mere human perspective, but from that of a Sovereign Lord, who was not the least bit surprised by the raging of nations or the plotting of the kings; far from it! Their plots actually fit within the sovereign Lord's greater plot.
- The apostles find motivation in this psalm because, despite their "successful" plot against Jesus, like hungry wolves, they are never satisfied. The nations continue to rage. They continue to persecute Jesus by jailing His apostles.
- In our day, we can find hope in this psalm also because the nations still rage and plot against the Lord and His Anointed. Any time the government infringes upon the church's freedom to worship, this is an example of nations still raging. Rather than fretting and raging in return, we should rest in the sovereignty of God—even the most anti-Christ actions fall within the sovereign plan of our God, who laughs at the schemes of the wicked. Those who trust in Him should be able to do the same. Sadly, too many Christians are fretting and raging like the nations. The church should look different. The world should look upon us as having a strange aura of peace, despite the political turmoil of our day.
- "the kings of the earth set themselves... rulers take counsel together":
 - There is an emphasis on "kings" and "rulers." This is literal. The battle against the Father and His anointed King is not just a spiritual battle over salvation. It is a political battle. The governments of the earth have always come against God and His Christ. This continues throughout the last days, as "kings" continue to take a dominant stance (Rev. 6:15; 10:11; 16:12, 14; 17:2, 10, 12, 14; 18:3, 9; 19:18-19). We should not just spiritualize this psalm as though it is all about people resisting Christ; it is, but it is more than that. It is governments infringing upon Christ's body. Psalm 2 says those who do so will pay the price.
 - This is a military posture, as if they are going to do physical battle against God and His anointed king. In David's day, this would have taken the sense of foreign nations attacking Israel. In the apostles' day, it looked like pagan kings attacking the body of Christ.
 - As Christians, we should not be surprised that the American government now (increasingly) presses back against Christian orthodoxy. This is the standard response of nations that do not submit to Christ's Lordship. I am not suggesting that we should avoid politics and let pagans run the show. I am suggesting that that insofar as pagans do run the show, they will find biblical values so intolerable as to prescribe laws that forbid them. It will be this way until Christ returns.
- "against the LORD and against His anointed":
 - The Father and the Son are a package deal. If you are against the LORD, you are against His anointed king, and vice versa.
 - "anointed" spoke originally of the king of Israel, who had been anointed by a prophet, in order that he might receive the Holy Spirit in a special way for leading God's people. The most perfect expression of the LORD's anointed is King Jesus, who was crucified as the King of the Jews, but who rose again as King of the World.
 - The Israelite king was required by Jewish law to copy the entire law by hand (Deut. 17:18). It thus makes sense, with Psalm 2 flowing out of Psalm 1, that we move from the law (which preceded the king) to the king (who was held to said law).
 - Waltke: "In ancient Near Eastern royal ideology the king represents the deity. Behind Israel's king stands the throne of heaven itself. From that perspective... the battle is a spiritual battle between the 'gods,' better 'demons,' who stand behind the pagan kings (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 10:20f). In other words, God's people are engaged in a spiritual battle against spiritual forces in heavenly places (Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:15)."
 - In other words, in the ancient near east, this was Israel's way of talking smack to foreign nations. It was as if to say, "Your king and the 'god' he represents do not stand a chance against our king (Christ!) and the God (God the Father!) He represents."

- Given the fulfillment of this psalm in Jesus, it is like saying to the political leaders of our day—particularly the ones who persecute the saints—“Your reign is backed by demonic powers that do not stand a chance against the God of heaven and the Christ who already conquered you.”
- Practically, this background should remind us that politics is spiritual warfare. Those who pass laws contradicting God’s Word, who make it hard for God’s people to gather, and who persecute the saints legally, economically, and judicially, are operating by demonic spirits. The raging of the nations is a spiritual rage. It matches the emotional state of the devil himself, who is “furious” with God’s people (Rev. 12:17). In fact, even in that context, the devil “makes war” on the saints by leveraging political power (12:17-13:18).

27 for 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, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

—This is CRAZY! When David penned Psalm 2, he no doubt had in mind the pagan persecutors of Israel. Here, however, Israel has become the persecutor! What David wrote about Gentiles came true, not only for Gentiles, but also for raging Israelites! Israel joined the raging pagans in attacking Yahweh and His Christ—their Christ!

—Schreiner: “The temple authorities have effectively become the Gentiles (kings of the earth) who assemble against the Lord’s anointed by gathering against them. Jerusalem has become Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria—nations opposed to God’s Servant. The adversary is anyone who positions themselves opposite to the Lord’s anointed.”

—So God’s house is no longer the temple, but wherever Christian’s gather; likewise, God’s people are no longer the Jews (alone), but whoever worships Jesus Christ. This prayer thus reflects a massive shift in redemptive history, where God’s people and God’s house are redefined around Jesus.

—This is a fascinating glimpse into the doctrine of inspiration (touched on above). David was inspired by God, but there’s no way he could have imagined this fulfillment. Both David and the Holy Spirit wrote Psalm 2, but only the latter really “got it.”

—“Herod and Pontius Pilate” were the “kings of the earth” who “set themselves” against Yahweh and “your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.” On the surface, it might seem that Herod and Pontius Pilate were not as direct in their attack against Christ. Herod (Herod Antipas, who was the younger son of Herod the Great—who sought to kill the infant Christ) hosted a mocking of Jesus, where soldiers placed a purple robe on Him; but Herod did not directly crucify Him. Pilate technically ordered the crucifixion, but he sought a way out of it (ultimately bowing to the peoples’ demands). Nevertheless, God still holds both rulers responsible. Pilate can wash his hands all day long, but the blood of Jesus remains—not in a way that atones but rather judges.

—“to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place”:

- God predestined the suffering of His Son.
- God predestined the evil actions that precipitated the suffering of His Son.
- This does not mean that God the Father forced sinners to sin (as if they had no choice). Rather, God arranged events in such a way that men would sin of their own volition, yet without staining His own hands.
- Remember, it was not the Holy Spirit, but Satan, who entered Judas to betray Christ (Lk. 22:3). Rebellious men and angels sinned in the crucifixion, but God did not sin, even though it was “by your hand and your plan” that these “predestined” actions occurred. How can God not be guilty of sinning even when He “predestined” that it happened?
- Jonathan Edwards says that just as the sun only produces, by its positive agency, light and heat, God can only produce by His positive agency, goodness and holiness. Nevertheless, just as the sun sets, and cold and darkness ensue, in like manner, when God permits wickedness to run its course, moral cold and darkness ensue—not as a result of His positive agency, but rather of His sovereign permission. If you want to read it in his own words (it’s a bit dense), see the excerpt below from his treatise, *Freedom of the Will*:

... there is a great difference between God’s being concerned thus, by his permission, in an event and act, which in the inherent subject and agent of it, is sin (though the event will certainly follow on his permission), and his being concerned in it by producing it and exerting the act of sin ...

There is a vast difference between the sun's being the cause of the lightsomeness and warmth of the atmosphere, and brightness of gold and diamonds, by its presence and positive influence; and its being the occasion of darkness and frost, in the night, by its motion whereby it descends below the horizon. The motion of the sun is the occasion of the latter kind of events; but it is not the propel cause, efficient or producer of them; though they are necessarily consequent on that motion, under such circumstances: no more is any action of the Divine Being the cause of the evil of men's wills.

If the sun were the proper cause of cold and darkness, it would be the fountain of these things, as it is the fountain of light and heat: and then something might be argued from the nature of cold and darkness, to a likeness of nature in the sun; and it might be justly inferred, that the sun itself is dark and cold, and that his beams are black and frosty. But from its being the cause no otherwise than by its departure, no such thing can be inferred, but the contrary; it may justly be argued, that the sun is a bright and hot body, if cold and darkness are found to be the consequence of its withdrawal; and the more constantly and necessarily these effects are connected with, and confined to its absence, the more strongly does it argue the sun to be the fountain of light and heat.

So, inasmuch as sin is not the fruit of any positive agency or influence of the Most High, but on the contrary, arises from the withholding of his action and energy, and under certain circumstances, necessarily follows on the want of his influence; this is no argument that he is sinful, or his operation evil, or has anything of the nature of evil; but on the contrary, that he, and his agency, are altogether good and holy, and that he is the fountain of all holiness.

It would be strange arguing indeed, because men never commit sin, but only when God leaves 'em to themselves, and necessarily sin, when he does so, that therefore their sin is not from themselves, but from God; and so, that God must be a sinful being: as strange as it would be to argue, because it is always dark when the sun is gone, and never dark when the sun is present, that therefore all darkness is from the sun, and that his disk and beams must needs be black.

—I have addressed God's sovereignty over creation, Scripture, and history. I first observed this three-fold connection with the help of John Stott, who says of these verses: "This, then, was the early church's understanding of God, the God of creation, revelation, and history, whose characteristic actions are summarized by the three verbs 'you made' (24), 'you spoke' (25), and 'you decided' (28)."

—"You made" (24) aligns with God's sovereignty over creation; "you spoke" (25) with God's sovereignty over Scripture; "you decided" (28) with God's sovereignty over history.

29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

—"And":

- This word connects the petition with the prelude. In light of God's sovereignty over all creation, all Scripture, and all history, the apostles feel confidence asking God to act. A high view of sovereignty motivates prayer rather than hindering it. If I say to myself, "God is sovereign, and He'll do whatever He predestined to do, so I don't need to pray"—my view of sovereignty is false. God's sovereignty accounts for human actions, as we saw even of the case of Herod and Pontius Pilate (v. 27-28); we will soon see it in the case of God's answer to the apostles' prayer (v. 31). If my view of sovereignty results in complacency, I have acted as though my actions do not matter. This is not faith, but fatalism.
- In contrast to fatalism ("whatever will be will be"), faith does not take God's actions in history for granted. Trusting that He includes human behavior within His sovereign plan, we behave in such a way that calls on Him to act in sovereign power. Believing that He is sovereign over all things, we ask Him for big things.
- Schreiner: "Luke spends more time on the preamble (23-28) than the actual request (29-30), though the request flows from the preamble. This indicates their theology of God regulates their

request to God. Many times the bulk of a prayer is simply recounting and remembering who God is (Dan. 9)."

- In this case, it is their theology of God's sovereignty that regulates their petition for Him to sovereignly act.

—The petition is threefold:

- "Look upon their threats":
 - This reminds me of God's statement about Israel's cruel enslavement under Pharaoh: *"During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew"* (Ex. 2:24-25).
 - These verses always touch my heart. One of the hardest aspects of suffering is that we feel unheard; forgotten; unseen; unknown. God contradicts these by saying He heard; He remembered; He saw; He knew.
 - In like manner, when the apostles pray for God to "look upon their threats," they are asking the all-seeing God to take special notice of their suffering. In short, they are asking Him to act.
- "grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness":
 - This prayer is remarkable. The apostles know Psalm 2 because they just quoted it. The Psalm ends with Christ's wrath annihilating His enemies. But the apostles don't ask for wrath. Implicitly, they ask for salvation.
 - I say, "implicitly," because they don't explicitly ask for people to be saved but it is probably implied by their request for help testifying to Jesus.
 - In this second petition, they specifically request help in the form of continued boldness. Rather than asking for judgment or even protection, they ask for boldness to continue testifying. They know the human tendency to cower in fear. Most of us are afraid of having a hard conversation with a boss or a parent or a friend. The apostles were praying for a next-level boldness. Boldness to testify before enemies.
 - Schnabel: "the believers do not use the wording of Psalm 2 for their petitions. They do not pray that God may laugh at the Jewish leaders (cf. Ps. 2:4), or terrify them with his wrath (Ps. 2:5), or break them with an iron rod or dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel (Ps. 2:9) so that they perish (2:12)."
 - When it comes to God's judgment on our adversaries, while it is permissible to "leave room for the wrath of God" (Rom. 12:19)—which is to say, don't exert your own vengeful wrath—we are not to pray for God to cause physical or eternal harm to our enemies. Jesus says to "pray for your enemies" (Matt. 5:44); Paul/Peter say to "bless" them (Rom. 12:14; 1 Pet. 3:9). An example of "leaving room for the wrath of God" could be Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 4:14: "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds." Paul acknowledges that God's justice will resolve the matter, but he does not ask God to harm Alexander physically or eternally.
- "while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus":
 - Some scholars say that this is not a request for healings, signs, and wonders, but rather an addendum to their request for boldness (Bock: "the prayer is not so much a request but an understanding in faith of how God can work."). To these interpreters, the prayer is something like, "Give us boldness, which just happens to sometimes come with miracles." To this, I say: nope. If God was going to perform miracles anyway, why even mention them?
 - It is better to understand this as a request for healings, signs, and wonders. This request agrees with the thesis statement of Acts: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be My witnesses..." (Acts 1:8). They are simply asking Jesus to grant the sort of power He promised them. Power for boldness, and power for miracles. These two forms of power are what the church needs to bear witness. And we should pray for them!
 - How does this request for miracle-working power square with Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees? "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Lk. 11:29).
 - Jesus had performed tons of signs, but it was never enough for the hard-hearted. Even when He fed the five thousand, they pushed back, implying this was nothing

compared to Moses, who performed this same sign every day for forty years and for way more people (Jhn. 6:32).

- The heart of the disciples is entirely different. Rather than demanding God jump through their hoops to prove Himself (as the Pharisees did), they rather ask God to bear witness to Jesus for others. The Pharisees asked for signs and wonders from a place of hard-hearted skepticism; the apostles asked for signs and wonders from a place of humble-hearted faith. The Pharisees crossed their arms and said, "Prove Yourself to me!" The apostles extended their hands and said, "Prove Yourself to them!"
- It is right to ask for signs and wonders if we ask from the right heart.
 - If our heart is for God to prove Himself to others, to humbly request He bear witness to His Kingdom Message with Kingdom Power, then our heart is right.
 - If our heart is for God to jump through our hoops—to prove Himself to us—we have tested Him like Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 17:1-7). It is not us, but God who gets to say, "Prove yourself!" He gets to test us, not we Him.

31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

—God answered their prayer by filling them with the Holy Spirit, which gave them boldness in preaching the Word. Boldness comes from the Spirit.

—As we have seen before, the filling of the Spirit is a repeatable, temporary empowerment of the Spirit for testifying to Jesus. This scene presents Peter's third time of being filled with the Spirit in only four chapters of Acts. The baptism of the Spirit is a one-time experience that occurs at conversion and incorporates us into Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), but the filling of the Spirit is a repeatable empowerment.

—The earthquake was a common way for God to testify of His presence and validation. There was an earthquake at Sinai, and they recur throughout Revelation. Other instances: Isa. 2:19, 21; 6:4; Amos 5:8-9; Hag. 2:6-7.

—"the place in which they were gathered": Schreiner remarks, "No longer is the temple the center of prayer, but it is wherever the Messiah's people gather."

—Schreiner: "After they had prayed, the place where they 'were assembled' (sunago) was 'shaken' (esaleuthe), echoing Pentecost. Pentecost was not only a past event but a continuing reality. Pentecost can never be repeated, but it is also never retractable." He adds in the footnote: "The above scene intentionally mirrors Pentecost. God is still with them despite the persecution. However, it is not a 'second blessing' or a 'second Pentecost.' They do not receive more of the Spirit than on the day of Pentecost but a renewed sense of His presence."

—Schreiner: "They do not need to fear, as the people did at Mount Sinai, for they are all filled with the Holy Spirit and speak the word of God 'boldly' (parresias). 'The place was shaken, but that made them all the more unshaken.'"—quoting John Chrysostom.