

Sovereign Lord

Acts 4:24-31

Introduction

Even after being put on trial, Peter and John were so courageous and bold that they could not be silenced. They were told not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, but they refused to be quiet. **We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard** (Acts 4:20). The authorities warned them and released them. They dare not act further because the people could see for themselves and were praising God for it.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people, reported what had happened, and they held a prayer meeting. This is the first recorded prayer meeting in the Bible. This is an interesting and instructive feature. We see how the early church is so united in the face of adversity. This unity is expressed in united prayer.

We are going to examine their prayer. The contents express basic conviction about God. He is sovereign of this world and of the whole universe. He made the world. He rules in world history and is carrying out His saving purposes for the world. Ultimate power belongs to Him and to no one else.

Many people ask the question, is there a controlling hand, or is the world just mad and meaningless. As Christians we ask whether all things really do work together for good. Is there a sovereign hand in my life working out a purpose? Is a higher power in control? We are going to note how God is addressed and the various spheres over which He rules.

Sovereign Lord

“Sovereign Lord” they said (Acts 4:24). Greek word δεσποτα is used of God only six times in the New Testament. From it, our word “despot” comes. To us, this is an unpleasant word, almost like a tyrant. But in the best sense, it is saying something very important about God. God is dictator. He alone has absolute power. He has irresistible strength, and unchallengeable justice. He controls the wheels of history. Early Christians and men of the Bible generally were sure of that. Else they would have given up long ago.

How we need to recover this basic Bible conviction because it is true in itself and makes an enormous difference if we believe it. Christians are so man-centred in their thinking and outlook. This is seen in hosts of ways. Everything is subjective. Main interest is me, my needs, my feelings, my experience. Experience-centred rather than truth-centred. Man-centred rather than God-centred. Christianity is not presented as bringing people into right relationship with God and preparing man for eternity. Instead it is presented as an answer to problems of modern society, to make us feel better, and Jesus is presented as a friend not a Saviour.

We need to get back to God, His person, power, purposes, will and glory. God is sovereign Lord, the Bible thunders from beginning to end.

God is sovereign over creation

You made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them (Acts 4:24). The people were facing the threats of the officials in Jerusalem. So they lift up their eyes from the immediate circumstances to the God who made the whole universe, the God of the ends of the earth, the one who made them and to whom they owed their existence.

We must never forget that the God with whom we have to do is our maker and creator, as the Bible constantly reminds us. Never prize redemption at the expense of creation. **The God who said “Let light shine out of darkness” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ** (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The God who called these disciples, and sent them to preach, was the God of the ends of the earth. This truth helps us to see opposition in true perspective. Men plead his work as creator when they plead with God, because creation shows nothing is too hard for Him. And God points to His work as Creator when He asks His people to trust Him. Faith is fed as we feed on the great truths of Scripture, especially the truths about God Himself. Confidence in God grows as we consider His mighty works. It lifts us out of despondency and defensiveness when we see God in His glory.

God is sovereign over revelation

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David (Acts 2:25). There is a direct line from creation to revelation. The Creator is the authority behind Scripture. In prayer, the church quotes Psalm 2. The human author of the psalm was David, but it was through the lips of David that God Himself spoke by His Holy Spirit in David.

The Lord of creation is Lord of Scripture. His general revelation is in creation. But His saving revelation is in Scripture. Creation turns atheists to theists, but only Scripture turns unbelievers into Christians.

We may prefer to say that Christ is our authority, not the Bible, in other words, a person and not a book. But who is this Christ and what do we know about Him and how does He reveal His truth but in Scripture? The only authentic Jesus is the Jesus of Scripture. We cannot separate the two. The only place where God speaks savingly about salvation is in the Scriptures. There is no other Christ but the Christ of the Scriptures.

God is sovereign over history

In prayer, the Christians quote from Psalm 2. Initial reference may be to new king's accession in Israel. But, as the New Testament shows, it has deeper reference to the Lord Jesus Himself. **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. The One enthroned in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them** (Psalm 2:2,4,5).

They were wasting time plotting against God and His Christ. No hope of ever frustrating God's purposes and plans. The sooner they recognise that, the better, and submit to Him. Or else their end can only be destruction and utter ruin.

God is in control of history. In the story of Joseph, taken into Egypt as a prisoner, then becoming Prime Minister of Egypt, Joseph tells his brothers, **You meant evil against me. But God meant it for good** (Genesis 50:20). God's call of Abraham, the rescue of Israel from Egypt, taking them to the Promised Land, raising up enemies to chastise them, punishing them by exile. None of these things were chance events. Behind the history was God Himself. **His mighty hand and outstretched arm** (Deuteronomy 4:34).

At the present moment, God is building Christ's church and preparing for Christ's return in glory. All world history is contributing to that end. The Christian church is the focus of world history. The rest of history is background to that. The church will remain when history ends.

Many times in the Bible we read of men who, in prayer, remind God of what He has done in history. And God speaks of history when He urges them to trust Him. **I am the God of Israel... I took you from Egypt** (Judges 6:8). We see God in His great and glorious power in the story of man. If He is in charge of world history, He is also in charge of our personal history.

Martin Luther was warned by papal envoy that he would lose all his supporters if he persisted, and "Where will you be then?" Luther replied, "Then, as now, in the hands of God". God is sovereign over creation, revelation and history.

God is sovereign over redemption

Then we come to the greatest example of God's rule over historical events, which also demonstrates His achieving His saving purposes. **Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and Jews to conspire against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen** (Acts 2:27,28).

Note how Christ is described – "God's Anointed". He was the promised Messiah and deliverer. Also the servant $\pi\alpha\upsilon\varsigma$, same word used to describe David in v25. Is Christ brought down to David's level? A servant is one who does the will of another, and David did that. But Christ's work for the Father was far greater than David's. He was raised up for special purpose. Note also that the use of "Holy" means perfection, sinlessness. There is a direct line from this phrase to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, the man of sorrows, wounded for our transgressions, on whom the Lord laid our sins.

Now that work of salvation was planned in eternity. **The Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world** (Revelation 13:8). So the actions of Pilate and Herod in causing Christ's death were already described and planned by God. The means whereby the Lord Jesus would carry out His servant work as our Saviour was pre-determined, it did not just chance to turn out that way.

It is a great mystery. Pilate, Herod and Judas were fully responsible for what they did. Yet all the time they were being used by God, and did as God decided for the salvation of men through the atoning death of the Lord Jesus. **Pilate said, “Don’t you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you. Jesus answered “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above”** (John 19:10,11).

So in the worst crime in history, God was not defeated, but He was working out His purposes. He was always in sovereign control. And if He was in control of those awful events of the first Good Friday, He is in control of every day affairs. His redeeming grace is sovereign grace.

God is sovereign over present circumstances

So here they faced the present situation. They were a tiny group, threatened by the highest power in the land. What was their reaction? They reviewed their great convictions about God – that He was sovereign over creation, revelation, history and salvation. Rather than getting depressed and wishing to escape the trouble or go to an easier situation – they gathered strength and courage from conviction.

They took their situation to God with great confidence. In trial, they turned from time to eternity, from weakness to almighty power. In fact, the threats they faced just made them ask for the power of God to help them preach with more boldness. They asked God to stretch out His hand and display His power. And as a result there was the sign of God’s presence – the place shook, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the Word of God boldly. Their convictions about God affected their attitude to the situation and the way they prayed.

Conclusion

Three lessons from this passage. Firstly we need to get a grip of the passage’s teaching about God. He is the sovereign Lord over creation, revelation, history and redemption. He is still the same God today. If He was able to turn the events of the first Good Friday into a spectacular victory, arguing from the greater to the lesser, we can be sure he is in control of every other situation. No set back can hinder His purposes. Let that give you confidence, courage and fearlessness.

Secondly, if power belongs to Him, we need to get our priorities right. We need to be God-centred in our thinking, living and working. We must give ourselves to prayer. Keep in touch with the source of power. Knowing Him in the secret place is the priority. Prayer is the work, not praying for the work. No use being orthodox if we are powerless. Prayer is fundamental, not supplemental.

Thirdly, they were all filled. This was mentioned earlier in Acts 2:4. It was a continuous process. **Be continually filled** (Ephesians 5:18). This is vital. We need fresh filling every day. We urgently need that power.