

Place: Lurgan Baptist 16:1:2007

Reading: Acts: 4: 23-35

## THE CHURCH ABLAZE

### 9. A PRAYING CHURCH IN A PAGAN WORLD

During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century God sent a mighty spiritual awakening to Wales. In a matter of months, thousands were miraculously converted, churches were packed with standing room only, and the moral character of village after village was transformed. News of the happenings spread throughout the world, and many travelled to Wales to observe God at work. One night in one of the churches, Evan Roberts, the unofficial leader of the revival, called for testimonies from the congregation. A man stood and identified himself as an evangelist from another country. He said, “*I have come to Wales to glean the secret of the Welsh revival.*” Instantly, Roberts, thrust his finger at the visitor and shouted, “***There is no secret, ask and you shall receive.***” I wonder if the visitor was disappointed with that answer ! I think I would have been. After all, prayer is no secret. It’s certainly not anything new. I pray every day and this church has prayer meetings every week but nothing like that ever happens.

There must be something else, a program, a formula, a secret ! My .... we would agree that prayer is important, but we would quickly add, “*Besides prayer, what else did you do ?*” Yet, Evan Roberts was right. There is no secret. It is “*ask and you shall receive.*” My .... what could we expect to happen if the church returned to its kneeling posture and recovered its praying power ? Well, look at ( Acts Ch 4 ) Now remember that the background to this prayer meeting was that the extermination of Christianity was at stake. The apostles have just had their first head-on collision with the Sanhedrin, a confrontation brought about by the healing of a lame man. When the people saw the former cripple walking, leaping, and praising God, they mobbed Peter and John, and Peter seized the opportunity to preach Christ to them.

He told the people that Christ had been crucified, had been raised from the dead, and was truly both Lord and Christ. In ( Acts Ch 4 ) we saw that the priests and Sadducees, angered by Peter’s talk of resurrection, grabbed Peter, along with John, and threw them both into jail. The next day the Sanhedrin, after threatening Peter and John, commanded them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, and they released them from custody. Immediately, the two apostles returned to the gathered believers. “*They went to their own company.*”

( 4:23 ) That was normal. People have a tendency to go where they naturally feel at home. Vance Havner used to say, “*Where do you go when you’re let go ?*” This was the **Normal thing** for them to do. To go to the prayer meeting.

It was also the **Needful thing** for them to do. My .... these two apostles had been in hostile territory. I mean for several hours, all they believed had been attacked. Now they needed to be in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. Many of you have a real battle in your job. You may be the only Christian, and you may encounter a constant barrage of ridicule with people making fun of your faith. Isn't it wonderful to walk out of that atmosphere and to come into your place of worship on Sunday and through the week and be with your own company ? “ *And being let go, they went to their own company.* ” ( 4:23 ) They returned to the gathered believers and related the story. What was the church's reaction ? Did they picket the council ? Did they write nasty letters to the leaders of the Sanhedrin ? Did they organise a protest march against religious discrimination ?

No, they turned to the living God in prayer. Like Hezekiah the early church spread its trouble before the Lord in prayer. ( Is 37:14 ) Now they didn't pray for revenge, rather with minds saturated with Scripture and memories still stirred by the Cross they called upon God to act and God did ! Someone has said, “ *Christians are like tea their real strength comes out when they are in hot water.* ” Now if that's true then the church of Christ ought to be praying with fervency. Look around and see what we've got, false cults are abounding on every hand, within our land there's moral corruption, the slaughter of innocent unborn babies, drug epidemic, alcoholism, people who don't know the Lord and only prayer can hold back the flood

tide of sin and judgment and only powerful praying can send a move of God.

Now its not just any kind of praying we need but praying with power. My .... its not the *Rhetoric* of prayer we need how *Eloquent* they are, its not the *Music* of prayer we need how *Beautiful* they are, its not the *Logic* of prayer we need how *argumentative* they are, its not the *Method* of prayer we need how *Methodical* they are. Its the Power of Prayer that counts. I read in ( 4:31) There was power there such power that it literally shook the place. God said Amen with an earthquake. Now I want to talk to you about this .... **about A Praying Church in a Pagan World.**

### (1) THE CONTENT OF THIS PRAYER

Isn't it lovely to notice in ( 4:24) that these believers, “ *lifted up their voice to God,* ” That is they turned their eyes from man to God, from the problems on hand to the God who can solve every problem and is in control of every situation. They were quite in line with the psalmist who said, “ *my soul wait thou only upon God for my expectation is from Him.* ” ( Ps 62:5 ) My .... the outlook may be bad but its the uplook that counts !

Now look as they came to the Lord in prayer they recognised God as,

#### (a) THE ALMIGHTY CREATOR:

The word translated “ *Lord,* ” is rare. It is not the same

word rendered “*Lord*,” in ( 4:29 ) In ( 4:24 ) its an extremely strong word meaning “*despot*.” The word “*despot*,” usually has a negative connotation, but here it indicates God's omnipotence, His rule with absolute and unrestrained authority.

This is where they started. Not with the threats of the enemy but with the absolute authority of God. For the church victory always begins with the recognition that God is our Sovereign Lord. The ( Ps 146 ) talks about the Creator. ( Ps 145:5-6 ) Now when they prayed they were quoting from this psalm and they recognised that the God who created everything is the God who can take care of everything for He is (a) Now think of their situation for a moment. Here were a seemingly helpless band of believers against the power, might, influence of the Jewish Sanhedrin who told them “*not to speak ....*,” ( 4:18 ) What hope had they against such an august body ? What chance was their that the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus would continue to be preached ? From mans viewpoint very little, but faith has a different viewpoint, for it comes to God in prayer believing that with God no problem is too great: no mountain is too big: no matter is too difficult for He is the Almighty Creator !

Do you recall when you went to school and you fell out ? Do you remember what you used to say ? “*I'm going to tell on you.*” That's what these believers did, they told on the Sanhedrin ! They said, “*Lord You are the Creator and they are the Created and Lord we don't have to be intimidated by them for the forces of nature at Your disposal.*” Now when trouble comes

and we're opposed we need to step back and get the right perspective. We need to look beyond the visible to the invisible, beyond the creation to the Creator ! Is that what you need to do this ..... ? Have you come with a burden, fear, worry, concerning the future ? Are you facing a crisis in your home or business ? Is there an unsaved relative who's causing you deep concern ? Is your outlook gloomy ? My .... look upward to the Lord and ask yourself, “*is anything to hard for the Lord ?*”

( Gen 18:14 ) (a)

### **(b) THE SOVEREIGN CONTROLLER:**

They said “*Who by the mouth of thy servants ....*,” ( 4:25-28 ) These persecuted believers looked back to the darkest day of their lives, the day when all of their hopes aspirations dreams disintegrated with the death of Christ, and they saw *God in charge of it all !* They said, “*nothing has gotten out of hand, God is still in contro.*” Again they quote from Scripture for their praying is based on the Word of God. They did not separate the Word of God and prayer ( 6:4 ) This time they quote from ( Ps 2 ) And they understood that 700 years before Christ was born that David said this was exactly what was going to happen ( 4:28 ) You see what God was showing to His people was that He was not only (a) (b) that nothing had gotten out of the control of God, that God foresaw it all and God knew exactly what was going to happen !

Sometimes we get all worked up and say, “*well maybe the devil has taken over: maybe things are not going to*

*turn as the Bible says they are going to turn out.”* But my .... nothing has happened that God has not already foreseen and that God does not know ! We need to learn afresh, God is still in control, God is still running the show, “***God is still on the Throne.***” Corrie Ten Boom was a Christian lady who suffered greatly in Hitler's concentration camp. Many of you have seen the film,

“**The Hiding Place.**” Corrie said this on one occasion, “***There is no panic in Heaven only plans.***” Isn't that wonderful ? I mean the Holy Trinity never meets in emergency. Praise God, this is what God before ordained. God knew it was all going to take place. Now are you beginning to see the exalted view they had of their God ? They saw God (a) (b)

### (c) ***THE FUTURE CONQUEROR:***

Because if you read on in ( Ps 2) that psalm will tell you how the kings would crucify the Lord Jesus and then it says, “*Yet have I set My King upon my holy hill of Zion.*” ( 2:6 ) It tell how the Lord Jesus is going to rule and reign. It tells us that God is on the throne, that sin cannot sin, that faith cannot fail and that our God is our conquering God ! My .... do you see how the early church prayed ? Their praying centred in God. They were not looking at themselves or at their circumstances. They were looking at God. Too often our praying centres on ourselves when it ought to focus on God. My .... our God is the Creator of all things, the Controller of all things, the Conqueror of all things !

I heard about a little boy who was up late one night reading one of those “***Murder Mystery,***” books. There was a dastardly villain in the story and he was plotting all sorts of mayhem to the heroin of the story. The little boy was feeling sorry for the heroin and almost afraid of the villain himself. Indeed he got so concerned about things that he couldn't wait to see how the story would end, so he decided to turn from the middle chapters of the book to the last chapter. There he read how the villain got it in the neck, how he was defeated and how the heroin was delivered. Then he went back and began to read the book where he had left off, and every time the villain would plan to do some dirty thing, the little boy would smile and say to himself, “*if you knew what I knew you wouldn't be so proud and cocksure right now.*” You see, he had read the last chapter. My .... God's people have read the last chapter, we know how its going to end and therefore we can pray with confidence for our God is the Creator of all things, the Controller of all things and the Conqueror of all things.

Bless God for that, and when you pray you need to get your prayer in perspective ! So many are whining and grovelling in prayer, that when they're finished, you're filled with despair. My .... we ought to be thanking God for the victory ! (1)

### (2) **THE INTENT OF THIS PRAYER**

What was the purpose of this prayer ? What did these early believers want God to do in the midst of these difficult circumstances ? Look at ( 4:29 ) The word,

“ *servants,* ” means bondsmen or bondslaves. Do you see now why many of our prayers are not answered ? We haven't made this commitment to the Lord ! Some business man wants to open a business and he says, “ ***I want God to be partner.*** ” My ... you are His slave and He is your Sovereign Lord ! Many times we want to use God, but God is not going to be used. Do you want God to answer your prayers ? Then submit yourself totally to Him as Lord ! I mean why should God increase your strength to give you more power to serve the devil ! Why should God answer your prayer unless you are committed to Him ! Here were a people who had a right concept of themselves. “ **Thy servants.** ” Now what did Gods servants want the Lord to do ? They wanted God,

**(a) TO EXPRESS HIS WORD:**

Look at ( 4:29 ) Is that your desire ? To spread the gospel ? To obey the great commission ? “ *Lord grant.* ”

My ... it was the proclamation of Gods Word that got them into trouble in the first place. ( 4:2 ) Yet they didn't say, “ *Lord move us to more favourable circumstances.* ” Here they were being criticised, pressurised, ostracised. What way would you have prayed in such circumstances ? “ *Sovereign Lord send fire from heaven and destroy them.* ” Do you know what they prayed ? “ *Lord we're in trouble for preaching your Word, now give us boldness to preach it some more,.. Lord give us more of what got us into trouble in the first place.* ” We want to express your Word !

Now Fear would have asked for protection. Passion would have us asked for revenge, but Devotion asks for boldness in the Word ! What Word ? God's Word that Word that centred on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus ! My ... is it your desire to make Christ known ? Are you making every effort not only to *organise and agonise but also to evangelise* ? Are you seeking to get souls out of darkness into light ? (a)

**(b) TO EXTEND HIS HAND:**

“ *By stretching forth Thy hand to heal.* ” ( 4:30 ) Now how was the Lord going to stretch forth His hand ? After all Christ had gone back to Heaven ( 1:11 ) How was He going to stretch forth His hand ? Their hands were to become His hands ! They were saying, “ *Lord, take our hands and do through our hands what you would do if you were here in the flesh.* ” Now watch how their prayer was answered. ( 5:12 ) My ... do you understand that we are now the body of Christ ? Do you realise that God wants to do His work in and through you ? Are you available to Him ? Are you saying, “ *these hands are your hands* ? ”

There's a great Cathedral in Europe that was bombed in World War 2. Some of the Americans were over there and they wanted to rebuild it and they did. Now in that cathedral there was a large statue of Christ with arms outstretched and underneath the words, “ *Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.* ” ( Matt 11:28 ) The statue had been

broken to pieces. They searched through the rubble and put it all together again, but when they came to the hands, they discovered they had been destroyed. They didn't know what to do until someone with an idea and they wrote these words beneath that statue, " *He has no hands but our hands.*" How true that is. " *Lord we're your bondslaves,*" They wanted to (a) (b)

**(c) TO EXALT HIS SON:**

Look if will at ( 4:30 ) As we study the Scriptures we discover that there were ***Temporary Sign Gifts in the Early Church.*** These temporary sign gifts included miracles and healings and were especially relevant when the church was still in its infancy. Now these sign gifts had a unique purpose, to give the apostles credentials, that is to let the people know that these men all spoke the truth of God. By the end of the apostolic age, and with the completion of the New Testament, the sign gifts were no longer needed and they ceased. That does not mean, of course, that God no longer heals in answer to prayer or that God no longer works miracles when His people seek His face. Such an assertion would be foolish. ( Heb 13:8 ) My .... it is not that healing and miracles have ceased, it is that the **gift of healing**, and the **gift of performing miracles** has ceased.

" *Lord that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.*" ( 4:30 ) It was His name that gave them power to preach the Word and to perform the Miracles ( 3:16 ) and His Name alone deserved the glory ! Do you see what they were about ?

" *Lord that signs and wonders might be done with your authority, in your name, for your glory.*" My .... are we concerned about the glory of Christ in our prayers ? So many of our prayers are selfish. James says, " *ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss that ye may consume it upon your lusts.*" ( James 4:3 ) My .... God is not some glorified bell boy running up and down the corridors of Heaven find things to bring to you to satisfy your every whim, God is not some sanctified Santa Claus, God is not some grocery clerk that runs around when I come with my shopping list. Many of us need to understand what prayer is. Prayer is a means of bringing the power of heaven into our lives and when we are interested in (a) (b) (c) and glorifying the Lord Jesus *then* we'll see our prayers answered.

I heard about a woman in Miami, who did not believe in anything and they had a storm there and she wrote this to the Miami Herald, " *I've never believed in God or prayer I thought it was all superstition but the storm was coming and I asked God to protect my house from the storm, and nothing happened, my house got damaged so what you sat about that ?*" Well, she wrote that to the editor and he replied in the newspaper.

" *Madam, I don't much about prayer either but it must have been that God was taking care of His regular customers.*" My .... can't our prayers be so selfish ? The question is are you committed to Him ? Are you " *His servant ?*" (1)(2)

**(3) THE POTENT OF THIS PRAYER**

Look if will at ( 4:31-33 ) That word “ *shaken*,” is interesting. Its used ( esaleuthee ) to express the effects of a mighty rushing wind. Its used in ( 16:36 ) to describe the after effects of the earthquake at Phillipi ! “ *The place was shaken.*” There was power there. Nowadays you have to shake the people to wake them up when the prayer meeting is over. But not here. Look at (4:31 ) and notice there was,

***(a) A FRESH ENDUEMENT: There was Fullness:***

“ *And they all filled with the Holy Ghost.*” ( 4:31 ) This was not a second Pentecost. There will not be a second Pentecost any more than there will be a second Calvary. The Holy Spirit has already come. There is one baptism, but there are many fillings. Now they had already been filled with the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost but the church can't run on the fumes of a previous fill-up. My .... there must be a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit day by day. Now the interesting thing is this. These believers were not seeking an experience. They weren't after the “ **thrill of the fill.**” It used to be that Christians wanted to be filled with the Spirit to have *power in serving* not they want to be filled to have *pleasure in living* ! Are you more interested in the “ *feeling of the Spirit*,” than the filling of the Spirit ? My .... why is God going to fill us with the Spirit ? To make you feel good ? No ! To soothe you ? No ! To comfort you ? No ! To empower you ? Yes ! “ *And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and spake the word of God with boldness.*”

“ *Lord fill me for I want to have a subjective experience and the Lord says I am not interested. Lord fill me for I want to be a great Bible student and the Lord says I am not interested. Lord fill me for I want to Express your Word, Extend your Hand, Exalt Your Son and the Lord says, Yes.*” Are you committed to be a witness for Christ ? (a) My .... the difference in the 1<sup>st</sup> century church and the 21<sup>st</sup> century church is in two words, influence and power. While the church of our day prides itself in influence, it has little power. The early church did not have enough influence to keep Peter out of prison, but it had enough to pray him out. (a)

***(b) A FRESH ENABLEMENT: There was Fearlessness:***

Look at ( 4:31 ) “ *And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*” ( 4:33 ) These were *empowered witnesses*. The word translated “ *gave*,” in ( 4:33 ) means “ *to give back, to return, it conveys the idea of repaying a debt or fulfilling an obligation*” Do you know something ? We are not doing God a favour when we share Christ with others. We are paying a debt. It is something we are obligated to do. God makes a person honest, and an honest person always pays his debts. Paul expressed this same sense of obligation when he said, “ *I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians, both to the wise, and to the unwise.*” ( Rom 1:13 ) What do we owe the world ? The gospel. We are witnesses unto Christ. We are not recruiters trying to induce people to join our club. We are not salesmen trying to sell people our products. We are not marketers trying

to brand our product. We are witnesses of Jesus Christ. The mark of a carnal church is that it talks about itself and invites people to come and hear its preacher. The mark of a spiritual church is that it talks about Christ and is a witness unto Him. (a) (b)

***(c) A FRESH ENJOYMENT: There was Fellowship:***

Look if you will at (4:32 ) Many believers but one body, beating with one heart, thinking with one mind, feeding with one soul. Did you notice the outworking of this unity in ( 4:34-35 ) ? These believers had a new sense of responsibility toward one another, and they saw their possessions as a trust given by God to be used as needed among the family. A generous, giving spirit, permeated this early church and the overall atmosphere was one of care for one another. Would it not be great to be in a church like this ? Among believers who genuinely want to bear one another's burdens and pray for one another. ( Matt 5:24 Titus 2:9 ) No doubt these early believers differed on some things, but they were united as to who Christ was, that He was Lord of all, and all of them recognised the necessity of living for Him. They were founded and established on Christ. No one has explained this better than A.W. Tozer. He writes, "***Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other ? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could be possibly be were they to***

***become "unity," conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship."***

Do you see what Tozer is saying ? He's saying that the nearer we are to Christ, the closer we will be to each other. Are you out of step with your brother or sister ? Could it be that is because you are out of step with Christ ? The apostle John puts it this way, "*if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.*" ( 1:7 ) (a) (b) (c)

***(d) A FRESH ENLARGEMENT: There was fruitfulness***

Look at ( 4:33 ) The very thing they were told not to do ( 4:2, 18 ) they did even better because God told them to do it. They witnessed that the Resurrected Christ was King of Kings, Lord of Lords and Saviour of sinners ! The result ? "*The number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly.*" ( 6:7 ) Campbell Morgan says, "*there were about 250,000 souls in 6 months.*" And Earle Cairns writes in his Christianity through the Centuries, "*Christians could be found in all parts of the empire by 200.*" My ... whenever the preaching of the gospel is accompanied by a praying church souls will be saved !

The Early Church had no great cathedrals in which to meet: ( Rom 16:5 1 Cor 16:19 ) no elaborate service, no ritual, no Bible colleges, hardly any New Testament but the early church had *Power the power of God that came through prayer ! Here was A Praying Church*

**in a Pagan World.** One church had bought a new organ and had invited a noted musician to play on the organ and have a dedication recital for the organ. The noted musician sat down at the organ, but as he touched the keys of the organ there was not a sound. The caretaker was aware of the fact that he had not turned the organ on. Prayer was called for, and someone began to pray. And as they prayed the caretaker jotted down a note, slipped it into the hands of the organist, and here's what it said, “**After the prayer, the power will come on.**” Do you believe that ? My .... could it be said of this church that we are *A Praying Church in a Pagan World ?*