Finding Rest and Renewal in God 4 Pastor Tom
Stopping to See God's Bigness March 12, 2023
~ Acts 4:23-31

Sometimes life goes smoothly. Everything works out. We get good results. We feel safe, positive, and content. Other times, trouble comes into our lives. Our plans get interrupted or redirected. A direction we thought we were going is suddenly blocked. Or something comes along that will take much time and energy that we did not plan for.

This past Monday, I was looking at new episodes available on the podcasts I follow. One of them was with a Bible Scholar I've learned a lot from over the past 3 years. Then I noticed the podcast title. In honor of the host. He had died on February 20, 6 days past his 60th birthday from pancreatic cancer. I knew he had some sort of illness but didn't know the extent of it. Suddenly he's gone and his podcast is done. A good pastor friend of mine contacted us in early February. They've discovered his wife has cancer. Suddenly their year has turned from ordinary planning and activities to regular doctor appointments, treatments and a major surgery.

Sometimes things come into our lives that threaten us; like a health concern for you or your family member; Employment concerns like job losses, cutbacks, difficult coworkers, managers or employees; Relationship trouble with marriage, children, friends, church community, extended family. Maybe we receive destructive criticism from another – a manager, spouse, child, teacher, coworker. Maybe financial troubles come upon us because of lack of funds, a business failure, declined benefits, house or car problems. Then there are the threats we face because of our faith. "You may not mention the name of Jesus is at work or you will be discipled." You may not opt of participation in this pride celebration or you will be suspended." "You better not bring up your faith at the wedding or we will withdraw your invite." Life sometimes brings threats that cause disquiet and anxiety.

So how can we respond to these threats in life and because of your faith? That's what we're going to talk about today as we return to the series "Finding Rest and Renewal in God." To help us examine this, we're going to look at a passage where some Christians received some very tangible

threats. They were commanded to never speak about Jesus again. So they go back to their friends to talk about what to do in light of this. We're going to learn a simple 2 step response to threats that I pray will encourage and help all of us with threats today or in the future. Then we will meet the Lord at His table. So please find Acts 4 in your Bibles – page 772. Acts 4:23-31.

Acts 4:23-31 (ESV) Disciples Peter & John

[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.

To understand this account, we must go back to Acts 3. Peter and John go to the temple at the hour of prayer – 3 PM. A man, lame from birth was being carried a place where he would beg from those entering the temple. He asks Peter and John for a donation. Peter looks at him and does not give a donation. Instead, he says "I don't have silver or gold but what I do have I'll give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" Immediately the lame man's feet and ankles were made strong. He enters the temple, walking, leaping, and praising God. People see this, recognize the man, and are amazed at this great work of God. He then clings to Peter and John. People surround them in this public area of the temple.

Peter speaks and calls for them to repent in Acts 3:19, “turn back that your sins may be blotted out and the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed to you.” As they speak, the priests and captain of the temple and Sadducees come upon them – greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. They arrest Peter and John and put them in custody until the next day for it was already evening. Yet 5000 people are added to the church that one day according to Acts 4:4.

In chapter 4, verses 5-22, Peter and John face a trial in front of the High Priest and other religious rulers. They inquire “by what power and by what name do you do this?” Peter speaks filled with the Holy Spirit. “It is by the power of Jesus Christ that this man was healed. The lame man stood with them. The rulers listen a little more and then remove them from the council. They were astonished by Peter’s boldness and the lame man standing there. Yet they determine to warn them not to speak publicly anymore.

So they charge them in verse 18, not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John do not promise to obey. They say they cannot help but speak of what they have seen and heard. So the chief priests again threaten them in verse 21 and then they let them go. All the people were praising God for the healing of the lame man who had been lame for 40 years.

This brings us to our passage Peter and John are released after spending a night in custody. They could have gotten out of town before the authorities changed their minds. Instead, they go to their friends and report specifically the threats against them.

Then what do Peter, John and their friends do in verse 24? They immediately turn to the Lord in prayer. They begin their prayer by addressing God with this title; “Sovereign Lord.” Here we find the first response when threats come into our lives**. Rest in God by first Rehearsing His Sovereignty.**

To rehearse means to go over it, repeat it, practice it. You rehearse for a play by going over and over your lines until you have them memorized. You practice for a piano exam by playing the piece over and over. You rehearse for a presentation by practicing it in front of a mirror. In this prayer, we see the believers rehearse, repeat and remember God’s Sovereignty.

What is God's Sovereignty? A sovereign is a ruler who exercises absolute power either abusively or benevolently. God's Sovereignty rules for good. God's Sovereignty is His powerful control over all things. When threats come into our lives or our community, we might think God has lost control. Or we project our own discomfort and loss of control onto God. But the believers here rehearse **3 aspects of God's Sovereignty**.

1 - He is God of creation who made heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. Verse 24. We need to step back and remember that. We need to go into God's creation to remind ourselves of this. It's hard to do in the winter when we don't want to be outside. But we need to get into creation to experience and ponder the power of God. Think about a time you may have stood in the ocean or great lake. You let the waves roll past you. You see the vastness of the sea and the rhythm of the waves. Think about God who had the power to separate the waters and create dry land. Can you imagine how much power and force it took to set boundaries on a water covered planet? Yet the Lord accomplished this just with His Word.

We can experience this when we go to the mountains. We see the vast rock formations that dwarf everything around. We see God's creative power in plants and flowers; we see it in animals and people. Psalm 36:5-6 remind us "The love of God reaches to the heavens; His faithfulness reaches to the skies; His righteousness is like the highest mountains; His justice is like the great deep. When life threatens we need to rehearse that God is sovereign over all creation – over this church; over this city and province; over this planet and this universe; over the snowstorms and the seasons; over the placing of the earth in the exact location to sustain human life. God is Sovereign over heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them.

2 – He is God of revelation who spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of David in Psalm 2. Verse 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? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his Anointed." This is a quote from Psalm 2, widely regarded to be a prophecy of the Messiah. Anointed is the common Hebrew term for Messiah. So, the

Gentiles, people, kings of the earth and rulers set themselves against the Lord and His anointed – that is God the Father and Jesus.

So when did this happen? Well the people praying identify when it happened in verse 27. "For truly in this city, there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate (kings of the earth), along with the Gentiles – the Romans and the peoples of Israel." This is the exact fulfillment of the Psalm 2 prophecy. It was written 1000 years before Christ. Only a Sovereign Lord could fulfill the accuracy of such revelation. It was fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus by all these forces aligned against Him. God revealed this through King David by the Holy Spirit. And that's just one little piece of revelation from Scripture. So the people rest and find comfort in God's revelation. They trust that these vents were not random but under His hand.

Can you imagine life without the Bible? What if God had not chosen to reveal Himself and His plans through the word that we now have? Through the Bible we have more than enough revelation to life in our lifetimes. Here we can discover who God is, what He's like and the depth of His love for us. We can rehearse his Sovereignty by pondering the gift of the Scriptures along with their wisdom and truth.

3 - He is God of history, who caused his enemies to do what his power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Verse 27 and verse 28. 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 *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.* So Herod, Pilate, the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders plotted together to take Jesus down. Each likely believed that they did what was best for their interests. But in reality, all their actions worked together to accomplish God's purposes. God took the evil acts of His enemies and used them to accomplish a tremendous good – the saving of many lives. They meant it for evil. God meant it for good.

Our Sovereign God has the power to use the evil intentions of people or Satan aimed to us and turn them around for His good purposes. God has the power to bring good out of terrible situations. He is constantly at His good work for the world and our lives.

So the believers spent the first part of their prayer remembering God's Sovereignty. He is God of creation who made heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them. He is God of revelation who spoke by the Holy Spirit to inspire His Word to us. He is God of history working out His good purposes in the world and in our lives.

With this renewed picture of God's Sovereignty, the believers then take the second step or second response. When threats come, first we rest in God by rehearsing His Sovereignty. **Second, Ask for God's help.** They ask for three things. Request One - Verse 29. "Look upon their threats." They entrust their enemies to God and ask Him to consider their threats. Request Two – "Grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness." So they didn't ask to escape the situation. They asked for boldness, despite the threats, to continue to proclaim the word about Jesus. Then in verse 30, Request 3 – Stretch out your hands to heal, with signs and wonders performed in the name of Jesus."

God responds. He shakes the room in which they meet. They experience a renewed filling of the Holy Spirit. They speak the word of God with boldness. So this group of believers responded to the threats upon them by first rehearsing God's Sovereignty and then asking for His help.

No matter what threat we face in life, God is sovereign over it all and is ready to help us through it. He has faithfully brought His people through countless threats and difficulties. Yet we can resist the Sovereignty of God.

Mark Buchanan writes about two enemies to practicing the Sovereignty of God – Pride and Despair. He writes, "Pride inverts the universes' deepest truth: that we need and serve God. . . Pride convinces us that we can do things better than God. Despair is pride's twin. It is to collapse into a sense that not even God is good enough or big enough or smart enough to sort out the mess we've made or stumbled upon. So we get consumed by the lie that if God exists, he is too inept or distracted or apathetic to even notice us, let alone come to our aid."

To avoid these two enemies taking over when something threatens us, we need to follow the steps in order. First – remember God's Sovereignty. Second – Ask for His help. If we immediately jump into our problems with prayer, we might rehearse them and make them bigger than they are. Buchanan

writes – “So we start with God; survey what He has made; recite what He has done; Proclaim who He is. After we’re been with Jesus long enough and feel our courage brimming and he looks bigger, see if there’s still an “Oh by the way.”

Lord’s Supper

1 Corinthians 11:23-26