

**Mission Impossible Prayers**  
Mission Impossible Series Week 5: Acts 4:23-31  
February 7, 2016

Welcome/intro/vision

If you're a guest with us, we're heading into the last couple of weeks of a series we've been doing here at the start of 2016 called Mission Impossible

The idea for this series is that at the very beginning of the church which we get the history of in the book of Acts

Jesus gave his first followers what looked like a mission-impossible assignment:

***"you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."***                      **-Acts 1:8**

And then the rest of the book unpacks how this seemingly ridiculously over-their-head assignment gets accomplished

And last week we rolled out our own mission-impossible dream for 2016 and beyond

If you weren't here last week, our leadership team presented a plan for both launching a 3<sup>rd</sup> service in Pittsboro in August

while at the same time we start the process of looking for land, likely here in the Northern part of the county, that would lead to a building project.

If you've got questions about all that or want to know more, web site

And I'll be hosting that question and answer session across the hall after the second service

The book of Acts tells this great story of God working improbably through very normal, broken people to accomplish incredible things

Now today we're going to talk about prayer. Few things will drive even the least religious person to pray like a mission impossible assignment or experience

Especially when we're facing crisis

And today, we're going to see the early Christians face really their FIRST big crisis/opposition

And what they pray for is the complete OPPOSITE of what most of us would pray if we were them.

And my hope is for all of us that we might listen in and be willing to at least test-drive this completely different track of prayer

But before we get into what *they* pray, let's pause here a second and take quick inventory.

Think back to the last time you've prayed, for some of you that's going to require a little bit more of a stretch or reach than for others, that's fine: start simple!

How many of you have asked God to bless something that you were eating? Ok, here's the praying omnivores dilemma:

Whether you're eating mineral, plant, or animal, that thing is ALREADY dead! it's too late for that thing to be blessed!

How many of you can remember the last time you prayed or the last couple of times you prayed

that you asked God to "protect" someone or something or keep someone safe?

How many of you have prayed something like "keep watch over" someone or something? Kind of the same thing

Those are all great prayers and we need to keep praying them

but what we're going to see from the first followers of Jesus is a different kind of prayer

especially as they face danger and adversity, that I think is going to challenge us today—and I want to invite us to consider how this kind of prayer might re-shape our prayer lives individually

And in this season as we're taking new risks this coming year with a new service in a new location and the start of a building process

I want to invite us together to see if we can adopt this prayer for our church for 2016

And after this morning if you'd like to hear someone else's great take on this prayer that I'm riffing off of a bit this morning

you should google "Andy Stanley Big Prayers"—he gave a great message on this passage that I'm stealing a chunk of today and remixing for our purposes here.

For now, if you've got a Bible turn with me to Acts chapter 4, and we're skipping a bit here on Sunday mornings that we covered in small groups this week

So let me get everyone up to speed. In Acts chapter 3 we get a story of Peter and John, two of the core leaders in the early church healing a man who was lame from birth

And a great crowd gathers around them and they start proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth

who had been crucified about 6-9 weeks earlier right there in Jerusalem and had been witnessed by some of the people who were in that crowd

That he had been raised from the dead!

And to prove it, Peter and John pointed to this man who was dancing and jumping for joy and they said,

“here’s how you can know this is true: we just healed this man in Jesus’ name”

And as they’re proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the authorities who are tied to a Jewish religious sect called the Sadducees come up and they’re concerned.

Background: In the New Testament, there are two primary Jewish religious “parties” authorities: the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Pharisees are a little more conservative in their practices and more tied to the law in the Old Testament

The Sadducees, however, are the larger and more powerful group.

And one of the distinguishing beliefs of the Sadducees was that they didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead.

When I was a kid, I had a Sunday school teacher explain to me that the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead, THEREFORE they were Sad, You See!

So when Peter and John are proclaiming the resurrection of the dead coupled with the culpability of the religious powers for putting Jesus to death, they are very disturbed and they arrest them

And the next morning the Sadducees bring Peter and John in for questioning and Peter gives a very bold and eloquent speech that basically repeats what he told everyone in the temple the day before:

Jesus, whom you guys crucified, has been raised from the dead and that changes everything

And it’s in his name and by HIS resurrection power that we had the power to heal this man whom everyone knows was crippled, including you guys!

And here’s how Luke describes the reaction of the men of the ruling council:

***13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. -Acts 4:13***

And I want to pause here and I want to plant a big flag here as we’re talking about God’s mission to restore all things

This is NOT Peter's first time in the general vicinity of a trial involving the high priest and these same elders!

Just about 8-10 weeks ago, Peter was outside the courtyard while Jesus was getting tried in this exact same space!

What did Peter DO last time he was here? He DENIED JESUS. 3 TIMES! And he wasn't even in front of the high priest on trial then,

Peter denied that he knew anything about Jesus to the maid and the janitor outside in the courtyard!

Peter here is a totally different guy than he was last time he was here and I want to suggest that there are 3 key events that have driven this:

1. **He's met the resurrected Jesus:** if you met someone who had risen from the dead, and he said that YOU would too, it might make an impact on you, too. Death is no longer the enemy to be feared!
2. **He's been RESTORED by that resurrected Jesus.** Someone in my small group this week pointed this out—it was brilliant and it's huge, small groups change lives you should see if you can find your way into one.

Peter denied Jesus 3 times.

And then after the resurrection we get this great story where Jesus asks Peter 3 times if he loves him

three times giving him the opportunity to confess his love for him and to know and experience forgiveness, reinstating Peter fully and restoring their relationship

Jesus is launching his church to be the restoration agent into the world

And he does so by FIRST restoring the *people* who are going to do this work.

Peter is NOT courageous here in this passage because he's working off some shame, trying to dig out of his huge pit, he's not working off some debt

Peter is NOT feeling like "I owe it to Jesus because I dropped the ball 10 weeks ago, I'm going to do it right this time"

There is NO SHAME left in Peter because Jesus has taken all that shame away, forgiven him, restored him into right relationship with him—Peter's courage is motivated by GRACE, not SHAME

It's a way better, healthier, cleaner fuel to be driven by

The restoration project to heal a broken world is going to be initiated by people who themselves have experienced the grace of restoration

and it's not perfect, it's still a work in progress, but Jesus restores Peter FIRST, pours out grace FIRST, before he is sent to serve

And this is how it is with us. Good news this morning: Grace always comes first—before mission. Grace fuels us into mission

Jesus gives us new names and restores our relationship with God first, then he calls us into mission as people who have had the first tastes of what it means to be restored and healed people to go and be restorers and healers!

And of course **3. Peter has experienced the Holy Spirit**, been filled with the Holy Spirit. That animates all of them and gives them courage in the face of opposition

These three experiences: meeting Jesus, being restored by Jesus, and being filled by the Spirit are what has made the difference in Peter's before and after picture, it's why he's a totally different man here than he was 10 weeks or so earlier.

I want us to also note along with the high priest and the Sadducees and the elders of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago that these are unschooled, ordinary people.

And I want all of us together to hear that God delights to change the world through ordinary people.

You do not have to have a degree in world-changing to bring have life in your wake like it was with Jesus

Some of us have grown up in churches where it was the religious professionals job to be a part of God's mission to restore all things

But ordinary, unschooled people weren't really invited into the party

And for some of us, that was frustrating, we wanted to be a part of this work but weren't quite sure how we fit in

But for others it was a bit relieving!

We didn't really have to DO anything with this stuff!

We could just show up, try to stay awake during the message, sing a few songs, say a few prayers and then leave all that behind at church and get on with the rest of our lives

So I've got good news for some and bad news for others.

From the beginning, this whole project of God restoring all things and healing all things and making all things new

Was carried out and delivered by ordinary, unschooled, regular people

It is not education or gifting that makes the difference here, what is it that makes the difference in these men's lives?

They had been with Jesus. Met the resurrected Jesus. Been restored by Jesus. Received the Spirit by the power of Jesus.

The people who started this church 9 years ago were not schooled in church-planting

they were wonderfully ordinary men and women who had been with and were continuing to walk with Jesus

You and I, in all of our ordinariness, are not only invited, we are called into this extraordinary mission of restoring all the broken things in the world

My prayer for this church as we take new steps into our community this year is that our neighbors might say what the Sadducees say:

“This can’t be happening because those people are so great! I mean, I know Alex! He’s not all that special!”

And my prayer is that as we aim to pour out blessing and love and favor onto Chatham County

that they might see that we are wonderfully, beautifully, ordinary folks, and take note that we have been with Jesus

After this, the authorities threaten Peter and John but they don’t do anything else because they’re not exactly sure what to do with them since the miracle clearly happened—so they release them

And here’s what happens next as we pick up the story in Acts 4:23

***23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.***

I just finished reading an excellent and very disturbing book called Just Mercy,

It’s written by a Christian lawyer who does nothing but investigate people who are on death row

who are there under suspicious or questionable charges or who’s trials have significant question marks around them

Many of them are too poor to hire a lawyer to work through the arduous and expensive appeals process so he takes on their cases. Grueling work.

I was dizzied and wow’d by this man’s deep commitment to God’s Restoration Project

as he tells stories of corruption and fights against the clock and often a broken system to rescue innocent people who are sitting on death row waiting to be killed

The stories he tells of freedom and release of wrongfully imprisoned people are moving and heart-wrenching at the same time

I mean, can you imagine what you would be feeling if your son or daughter or husband or wife had been on death row for 20 years for a crime that they didn't even commit?

And for many of these families, having their loved ones returned to them after years, sometimes decades of incarceration is a moment of tremendous joy and relief and an answer to many, many prayers

Here, Peter and John are wrongfully imprisoned in a system that is much more arbitrary and less empowered than our own—remember, these guys had conspired to kill Jesus just a couple months before!

And so when they get out, they're reunited with people who love them and I'm sure there's great rejoicing and a sense that this is an answer to prayer

And so the text here says that they lift their voices in prayer and it's going to give us one specific prayer that they prayed

And before we read their prayer, I want to pause and ask you: if you were there praying in this moment, what would you be praying?

If this was you and you were in this room, greeting John and Peter, two of the most important guys in this new little church movement who were just delivered from the very hands that had put Jesus to death a couple months earlier

What kinds of things would you be praying for for them AND for yourself?

I tell you what I'd be praying:

I'm praying prayers of PROTECTION AND SAFETY: God, PROTECT THEM from these men who killed your son

God, PROTECT THEM for the sake of this community and this community that you told us to start!

And God, by the way, PROTECT ME from those evil men, too! Protect me because I don't want to end up in a miserable middle-eastern cell and I don't want to die!

Protect ALL OF US, I mean we've got work here to do, right? And a family to care for and I really want to watch the Superbowl tonight!

And I can't do any of that if I'm in jail or dead!

PROTECTION and SAFETY: that's what I would be praying, but here's what these crazy, wonderful, unschooled, normal, ordinary people who have been with Jesus pray:

***“Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.***

They don't start with themselves and they don't start with the problems or bad guys—who do they start with?

God! They start with what they know to be true about God! They don't start with their problems and ask God to fit into their problems and fix them

They start with God and fit their problems around God!

God is the primary actor in history, God is the sovereign, almighty king over this situation, he's the center of the cosmos, and he's going to be at the center of how we think about THIS situation

In my own prayer life, where I typically go wrong is right here at the very beginning. I start with me or my problems, and I enthrone them at the center

And God is way off in the distance, kind of off in the sky, and I'm not really sure if he can do anything about all this mess, but I sure hope so and I kind of wish he would

I've made the main thing a distant secondary thing, and made my problems or simply myself the main thing

Which then sets me up to be a slave to myself or my problems

rather than free in God to know that the one who is bigger than my problems is the real king on the throne.

With this as a starting point, the pray-ers continue:

***<sup>5</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:***

***“Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?***

***<sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth rise up  
and the rulers band together  
against the Lord  
and against his anointed one.***

***27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.***

So after starting with God, they move to God's Scripture--they anchor themselves in a text that helps them to interpret and understand the world through God's lens  
All kinds of opposition has arisen and conspired against them!

In all of this, God's got this. God is not surprised, he's not shocked, he's not taken aback, he's not caught off guard!

So they start with God and they cling to God's authority and power over all things  
and they move to some Scripture to continue to root their understanding of what's happened in light of God's authority over all things

When you and I are in trouble, it is helpful to start with what we know to be true about God  
and then it's helpful to have some Scriptures that we cling to, that we recite, that help us to re-frame the situation in light of this bigger story and this big God

This in and of itself is probably enough for most of us to take home and start to apply to our prayer lives, especially in times of crisis and difficulty

And if this was me, and even if I'd made it this far in my prayer  
HERE is where I would swoop in with my plea for God to leverage all his authority and all his power to keep me safe

God, you created everything and you've got all the authority and power here in this situation

SO how about YOU make sure that those people who are threatening us don't mess with us!

How about you PROTECT us! Save us!

That's what I would say, but here's where they go from here:

***29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. [AGAIN]***

Not consider their threats and strike them with a lightning rod or a piano falling from the sky

Not consider their threats and keep us safe from their threats

Not keep watch over us and deliver us from the authorities and from smelly jails or from the possibility of execution

Consider their threats and in light of what we're up against and in light of what they're threatening to do to us

do something IN US, NOT DO SOMETHING TO THEM

Give us BOLDNESS to DO what we KNOW we're supposed to do

Give us BOLDNESS to follow-through on this mission impossible assignment you've given to us

Give us BOLDNESS to follow your lead and to do your work, no matter where it takes us, no matter what it costs us, no matter what we might come against

*We're not praying that you secure us from all threats, we're praying that you would shore up our internal deficiencies in the face of these threats*

We hear their threats, we hear what they're saying to us, and you hear it too, Lord. And you know that we're weak and that we're easily rattled and that we're easily intimidated

And the only way that this work goes forward in light of what we've been threatened with is that we press FORWARD with boldness

Which we know we might not have much of, we're just ordinary, unschooled men and women. But would you give us BOLDNESS to do what we need to do in this place

My friends, prayer is a wonderful thing. And asking for God's help is a wonderful thing.

And asking God to protect you and the people that you love is a perfectly reasonable and wonderful thing

But sometimes we're asking for all the wrong things.

And sometimes we're asking God to do something and he's not going to do it because there's a different kind of thing he wants to do INSIDE of us, instead of AROUND of us

If the disciples here had prayed for God to stop the threats of the authorities, do you know what kind of answer they would have gotten from God?

NO! God would not and did not stop the threats of the authorities.

In fact, the persecution is going to get MUCH worse and not any better for the rest of the book of Acts

But every time God says no, what is his no there to do? God's no always serves his larger yes!

If you're new here, that's a regular refrain we come back to!

The disciples here they skip right to the YES prayer: give us the character we need to endure the challenges we're facing in order to do the mission and the work you have called us to

It is a prayer for equipping to actually tackle the situation, to engage with the problems they're facing

it is not a prayer to be magically transported OUT of the situation

As much as they might want God to meddle with their circumstances and change everything and everyone around them, God is not going to do that.

What he IS going to do is something INSIDE of them that is going to propel them into a work that will literally change the world for the next 2,000 years plus.

Which messes with me in some significant ways.

Because I pray a whole lot for God to FIX my circumstances

and I pray much less often for the *boldness* from God to tackle those circumstances with the courage, faith, hope and love that I might need to actually handle whatever's in front of me.

I have been praying for 3 years that we might be able do something in PBO in 2016.

And as we went into the process this summer, I had to let go of that and trust that if God wanted to do it, the rest of the team would agree and the other pieces would fall into place

And now that we're moving that direction and we're about 6-months out, there are going to be obstacles and challenges to seeing this thing get off the ground

Am I praying for God to remove all the obstacles?

Or am I praying for the boldness and the courage and the faith and the creativity to solve problems and find solutions as we walk down the road that he's invited us to walk?

That's what this passage has been doing to me this week.

You haven't been praying for us start a new service in PBO for 3 years, but you've likely been praying for something. Maybe for a long time.

And there's likely parts of what you're praying about that have to do with God changing the circumstances around you rather than doing something inside of you

But sometimes those of us who are Christians can get the wrong idea and think that all we have to do is pray and then sit back and eat bon-bons and watch what God does—and then we get mad when God doesn't do it!

If we end up ONLY praying prayers for God to change our circumstances, particularly if we only pray for protection it can habituate a fearful, self-protective life.

Sometimes, not always, but sometimes my prayers for protection are simply an expression of my neurosis, anxiety and fear, and have nothing at all to do with faith, hope, or love.

Those kinds of prayers for some of us can actually reinforce the idea that God ISN'T sovereign, that he's not good, that life is nothing but random chance and threats and life is essentially all about scurrying for cover wherever you can get it.

Money, relationships, secure job, sure, throw in God, too—I'm just looking for safety somewhere, anywhere  
That's how I live and that's reflected in how I pray

But these first believers are holding onto something much bigger, much deeper, and much more eternal.

***If we are united with Christ*** (that's one definition of what it means to be a Christian) ***who stands outside of time and if we're involved in a mission who's goal is an eternal, perfect restoration***  
***then we do not need protection nearly as much as we need boldness to do whatever work God would have for us to do***  
***and to press toward that eternal destiny with all our hearts, soul, mind, and strength***

As one famous missionary once put it: ***"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."***

*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep*—he's talking about your life, none of us gets to keep it forever—he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep

*To gain what he cannot lose*—that is, an inheritance that cannot be taken away from us, an eternity with the God who sovereignly created all things and is Lord over all things and who will some day RESTORE all things

These first disciples ask for boldness to face their circumstances, not for God to change their circumstances

And then they close with this request:

***30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”***

In other words, give us the power and the ability to accomplish the task that you’ve given to us.

***31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.***

Wonderful People, praying for God to change the circumstances is a fine request, we should keep asking God to do stuff around us where things are broken and we are longing for restoration

But at some point we’ve got to ask the question:

**Is this a situation where I could be praying for boldness instead of safety?**

This week, when you find yourself praying safety and protection prayers, pause and ask this question.

Not every situation needs us to switch to praying for boldness, but a few might.

How would it shift my heart, vision, and spirit if I were thinking about pressing IN courageously rather than ducking and covering?

More broadly: **am I praying for circumstantial change when God might want to do heart change instead?**

Give that a shot this week and see if that might shift your perspective

But before we leave this place, there’s a work that Jesus wants to do in all of us first—remember, grace comes first!

The restoration mission is accomplished by grace-experiencing, restored people.

It’s not about shame or guilt or merely duty or obligation—all of that is how religion motivates people.

But what Jesus is doing is much better than religion. It’s a relationship of grace, it’s mercy and not check-boxes.

It’s love, not because you’ve earned it or deserve it but precisely because you can’t and he loves you anyway.

That’s what we celebrate here today at the Lord’s supper.

The Scriptures say that when we were alienated from God and before we could do anything to make him happy with us

He in his grace and mercy moves towards us and gives up his life for us. His life for ours, to rescue us from an eternal death and bring us into a relationship with him

But the good news is God's not waiting for you to be good enough to like you or bless you or save you.

He's already come to rescue you from a life that is consigned to having our problems or even ourselves at the center of our worlds

In order to usher us into an eternal kingdom that is far richer, far more real, and far more glorious than anything we can ask or imagine

On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took ordinary bread and broke it and gave it to ordinary people, his disciples and said 'take this and eat it in remembrance of me.'

And he took an ordinary cup and he said this is my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins  
drink this in remembrance of me.

To a group of ordinary, unschooled people, he gave ordinary elements and made the elements and the people extraordinary—because it is what he does

And it's this grace, this power, and this restoration that we celebrate together.

The cup is grape juice and the bread is gluten free, the grace and mercy is free as well. We're going to move into a time of worship and I invite you to come and get the elements whenever you're ready

Prayer ministers in the back, if you haven't met the resurrected Jesus yet, he's here. Ready to restore/forgive/heal you. Go and get some prayer, and then come and join the celebration.

Prayer Room  
Connection Celebration/Happy Anniversary  
Q&A with me post-2<sup>nd</sup> service