

The Answer to Our Prayers

Acts 5:12-42

Mission Impossible Series

2/14/16

Welcome/intro/vision—Happy Valentine's Day!

If you're a guest with us, this is the last week 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

This is our last week in this series and what we're going to do next week is we're going to start a new series but continue working through the book of Acts

The new series is going to be called Breaking Through, and what we're going to see is as the story of Acts continues to unfold

Being on mission from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth including to US here in Chatham County required that these people take all kinds of new risks

and break through barriers that had separated people from God and from each other for centuries

If you've missed the past couple of weeks or if you're new, two weeks ago we presented a plan for both launching a 3rd 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 we'll be hosting that question and answer session across the hall after BOTH the first AND second service

And we're doing this because we believe that we're participating in this same mission and assignment

to bear witness to Jesus's love and power and resurrection to EVERYONE in our community

And in order for us to BE Chatham Community Church—a church for the whole community and not just a subset of it,
we're going to have to break through some of the same kinds of barriers that the early church had to their mission
barriers that have divided people in just about every culture for just about all of time

Acts tells this great story of very ordinary people who do extraordinary things as they follow Jesus into his mission to bring his news to the ends of the earth

And last week we looked at these ordinary people as they faced their first real crisis and opposition

And they pray this remarkable prayer together, asking at the end of it for 2 things:

29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. [that's request #1: boldness (box)]

Last week we really focused on that first request: instead of asking God to secure them from all threats, instead of pleading for safety and protection and keep watch over us and keep us all safe
they ask God to give them courage and boldness to live out their calling in the face of those threats.

And we talked last week about replacing our prayers for safety, and protection with prayers for boldness and courage
which has been a really rich prayer exercise for me this past week

30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. [there's request #2: asking for miraculous power to do wonders as proof of who Jesus is (box)]"

This week, we're going to see how God says YES! To both requests: boldness? YES! Miraculous powers? YES!

But the way that he's going to do this is again perhaps a little different from how we want it

Sometimes, whether it's outside of us or something inside of us, we think that we should pray for it and then God should just go to work say a few magic words and just do something

While we just sit back and watch God do his thing

And the trick of it is, SOMETIMES God does this, right?

Most of us who have walked with Jesus for a long period of time have had an experience where God has just done something that we know that we couldn't have done

So God does do this occasionally

But what we're ALSO going to see today is how God answers this great prayer for boldness by putting the people who are praying it on a path that will stretch them and MAKE them, shape them into bold people

And what I want to suggest to you is that most often, when we pray prayers for change

the Lord answers that prayer and says an emphatic YES to that prayer by inviting us onto the path to participating in that work that we want and that God wants to do

Which is exactly what we're going to see as we turn to Acts chapter 5. If you're new to the Bible

there are 4 biographies that we get of Jesus' life and then the next book is the book of Acts where we get the story of the adventures of the early Jesus followers as they take Jesus' mission impossible commission and fitfully and faithfully attempt to live it out

We're going to start in Acts 5:12, and here we're going to see the answer to the second part of that prayer: that God would stretch out his hand and to perform signs and wonders

12 The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. ...¹⁵ As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. ¹⁶ Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

As an iPhone user and a Microsoft Office user, I am regularly getting alerts that there are new software updates available.

And all of them promise to fix glitches that we embedded in the previous software update, which of course makes you wonder what kind of glitches are embedded in this latest software update

But sometimes I'll download a software update or a system update and when I go to open it up or go to use it, I'll clearly see "Yes, this is definitely better from what it used to be."

Back in Acts 4, the people prayed that God would give them the power to heal and perform signs and wonders on his behalf.

And here in Acts 5, we see that God has done this software update, especially on Peter.

Peter has been downloaded with this incredible, miraculous power that he couldn't cultivate or create or develop on his own

God has just empowered him to heal all kinds of people—we've said throughout this series that everywhere Jesus went there was life in his wake

Here, everywhere Peter goes, there is tangible, clear life in his wake--if people even just brush his shadow they are healed.

A street LINED with sick people, Peter walks by and you can see people coming more alive, being healed as he passes through

The people of God have prayed to God that God might stretch out his hand to empower them to be able to perform signs and wonders

God says "YES" to that request, downloads this gift and this extraordinary power on his people

This is how I would like for prayer to work most often! And maybe you've prayed a prayer like this:

God, help me to be more patient with this kid! God, help me to love my in-laws! God, give me wisdom to know who to navigate this situation!

And we'd love to get an automatic download that fixed or previous bugs or glitches and gave us miraculously an extra dose of patience or love or wisdom!

But then we get this next story, and in this next story we get the answer to the other part of their prayer—the prayer for boldness

And in this part of the story, God is going to say yes to their prayer for boldness not with an instant download that gives them supersized courage and boldness

But with a command, an invitation, to walk a path that if they will follow it will generate the boldness and courage they're asking for.

17 Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy.¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."

In the past 50 years or so, we have had the benefit of some outstanding jail-break movies: Shawshank Redemption being a favorite of mine from back in the day

And apparently this angel needed a little tutoring in what one does once one is finally sprung from one's jail cell

What you do after you escape from prison is you run AWAY from an obvious place where the authorities might capture you!

You run off to Mexico or find a hide-out to lay low for a while.

But here! Can you imagine being one of the apostles, being locked up in jail, an angel appears and miraculously lets all of you out

And then the angel gathers all 12 of you together and says, "Okay, here's the plan."

And you're totally geeked out, this is an angel getting ready to tell you the plan—this is an ANGEL telling you God's plan for your next step

Some of you have been at places in your life when you would have given ANYTHING for an angel to show up and tell you what the plan is and what you're next step is

Unless the angel had told you to do something like this!

Because the plan is for these guys to go right back to the temple and do what got them arrested in the first place!

And what I want to suggest to you is that while the previous story contained the answer to their prayer

and the miraculous download and work of the Holy Spirit that they had zero to do with, they couldn't generate it, they could just demonstrate it

I want to suggest that THIS command is the answer to their other prayer, the prayer for boldness.

Because God wasn't just going to download into their hearts and their brains boldness. He was going to cultivate boldness in them instead.

God wasn't going to put a large deposit of this character trait of courage or boldness whereby they were suddenly free from all fear

God was instead going to work like a physical therapist and lead them through boldness-increasing exercises that was going to build their boldness muscles and over time drive out fear

And what I want to suggest to you is that while God sometimes does miraculously works in our hearts or circumstances in ways that we have no part in

What he most often does is just what we're seeing here:

God answers our prayers by pointing us down a path where the thing that we want done and God wants done will be accomplished but only as we partner with the Spirit in the work.

Sometime around my freshmen year of college, I read or was introduced to this great passage in the Bible in the book of James that says this:

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. -James 1:5

And it seemed to me that this was a no-lose, sure-fire prayer that God was promising he'd answer and give to me

And so I started asking for wisdom. And for probably the past 20-plus years, this request for wisdom is one of the most frequent requests in my daily prayer journals

Now of course, what I envisioned happening when I first started praying this and what I wanted to see happen was the first story that we read this morning

That I would be downloaded with wisdom from on high.

And I would wake up one morning and realize that I'd experienced a massive system update that would make me instantaneously wise, a skinny white guy version of Yoda!

And I would be able to solve all sorts of spiritual and personal and ethical dilemmas with great ease and tremendous wisdom

And I would write books and give talks and messages all over the world that were just oozing with wisdom that would change lives forever!

I'm exaggerating a bit for effect, but you get the picture

But if I look back over the past twenty years of praying this prayer

I can see that God has been at work TRYING REALLY HARD to make me wise, and whether or not that has actually happened is still up for debate

But here's how God did it: for a number of years in college he gave me really wise men and women who met with me and poured into me and mentored me

And then that dried up for several years but then two years out of college, I stumbled upon a slightly nerdy theology book at a Christian book store, I bought it on a whim

And when I opened it, God awakened in me a massive love for reading nerdy theology books

If there was a miraculous download, it was right here:

God put in me a deep love for great books that stretched my thinking and my understanding of his love, his grace, his character, and how we are to relate to him

And for most of my 20's into my 30's I didn't have any t.v. shows that I watched, I didn't have a whole lot of hobbies, I just read and read and read and read

And that love for learning continues in me to this day

Throughout my life God has given me bosses and co-workers and college students and even people that I was supposed to be supervising who were either smarter than me

Or who just had incredible gifts that I didn't have that forced me to learn the wisdom of learning from, collaborating and partnering with other folks.

Looking back on my prayer for wisdom, part of what drove that request was so that I might not look foolish or make mistakes

I love doing things right. I love accomplishing tasks. I love getting things done and being successful at whatever it is that I put my mind to

But throughout the course of my story, what I've seen time and time again is that wisdom is not just downloaded. Often wisdom must be hard-earned

And so the prayer request for wisdom that I hoped might keep me out of the land of failures or disappointments or embarrassing mistakes

Alas, took me right through that land—making foolish mistakes, sometimes in a very public way, was the only way to actually get the wisdom that both God and I wanted me to have

I prayed an earnest, honest prayer for wisdom as an 18-year-old college student and I wanted an instant download

But what God has done instead is lead me down paths whereby I could, if I were teachable and willing to engage with him, I could potentially grow in wisdom

And some of those paths were paths that I would not have chosen and if I had known that a request for wisdom would take me there, I might not have asked for it to begin with

And it is likely that some of the huge wisdom-gaps I still have is the result of my unwillingness to walk those paths he has called me to walk

Or having walked a difficult path and experienced some level of pain, I have chosen the posture of anger or bitterness

rather than fought for a teachable spirit to cultivate the lessons I've needed to earn

The apostles pray for boldness. Then they get thrown in jail for being bold. Then an angel comes and springs them from jail

And then the angel gives them their next physical therapy assignment to help them to continue to grow into even more boldness:

Go back to the temple and proclaim this new life to all the people

There are a number of decisions we have to make and a number of forks in the road in this prayer journey that we have to navigate in order to get to the answer to our prayers

Backing up a bit, **Fork in the Road #1**: the first choice is **to pray for anything substantive at all**

To pray for God to heal a broken world, to pray for God to bring healing into our lives or marriages or families

To pray for wisdom, patience, love, wisdom—any of those things!

Even just opening up that conversation requires significant boldness

So some of us prefer NOT to pray or we stick with safe, bland prayers.

In my small group this past week all of us were half-joking about the great character traits that we'd never ask God for because we were afraid of what we'd have to go through to develop those!

If we're going to ask, God is going to answer.

His answer and his desire is always to bless you, not to hurt you, and so I want to encourage you to be BOLD and not fearful in praying for the character traits that you know you need to grow in!

But the second place where we have a choice to make is right back here with the apostles, as the angel tells them to go to the do this ridiculous thing that no one in their right mind would do otherwise:

²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."

Fork #2: the question before the apostles and before you and me this morning as we're walking this journey as well is simply this:

will we walk the path that is the answer to our prayers when that path is demanding, challenging or costly?

God is on a restoration mission in a broken world. Part of this world's brokenness is that none of us actually wants to get fully healed

All of us have these self-destructive habits, behaviors, thoughts, beliefs that actually continue to reinforce brokenness and darkness in us

And sometimes we will go to great lengths to protect our own brokenness and darkness, even after we see that it's not good for us!

You see this most clearly with addicts, but it's true for all of us—all of us at some level have this same self-destructive tendency

One definition of sin is that we consistently make destructive choices, even when we are fully informed and aware of the consequences

That's true for us individually and it's true for the people or situations where we want to make a difference and where we're called into mission

And so if we're making the shift that we talked about last week where we're praying for God to do something INSIDE of us

rather than telling him what to do with everyone else all around us

Then we've got to expect that sometimes the answer to that prayer is going to take us down a path that we wouldn't have chosen for ourselves in order for that trait to be developed and cultivated in us

The apostles here have to decide if they trust God enough that they're willing to go and do what they know will likely result in more suffering

Has this ever happened to you? Ever been at this fork? Ever felt like you had a choice to make

God's way was pretty clear but it looked much more difficult and the other way looked a lot easier but if you were honest it took you away from the direction that you really wanted and needed to go?

The suffering isn't the goal, boldness is the goal. A boldness that serves the ultimate goal which is this restoration mission—that's the goal.

There are these big redemptive, healing things happening here

But the answer to their prayers for boldness that they'll need to accomplish the mission Jesus has called them to do lies down this path that goes right through suffering

And sometimes you and I read something in scripture or get our hearts broken for an issue in the world like children of pregnant moms in jail

And we know that in all likelihood that if we walk down that path it will likely be costly and difficult

But down that path also lies the answer to our hearts cry for God to heal a broken and messed up world.

Including the answer to the prayers for our own hearts to be fully healed and restored

The apostles here are at a fork in the road: one way leads to safety—AWAY from the temple, AWAY from danger

but they don't get the boldness they just prayed for which undermines the mission they've given themselves to

The other path leads right to the temple

to the possibility of receiving the answer to their prayers, they get the boldness and they get to be a part of this huge mission, but it includes the distinct probability of some pain to get there

And let's note before we read what they do next that they do actually have a choice to make here

they could ignore the angel and run off to Mexico, if they had only known that the world wasn't flat!

OR they can walk in the path of obedience to the Lord and continue to press into the restoration mission that God is doing INSIDE of them as well as THROUGH them

The Scripture wastes no time in telling us what they do: ²¹ ***At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.***

If this is the path that God has instructed them to walk, then it is the path that leads to life, even if it involves suffering along the way

And so they will do as they are told, no matter what it costs them, and trust that on the other side of what will inevitably come as a result of what they do here

They will experience the answer to their prayers

But there's two more choices for the apostles to get to the boldness that awaits them at the end of this path, and there are two more massive forks in the road that have to be navigated.

And these are forks that we have to navigate in our own lives, too

The apostles, of course, after they show up at the temple the next morning get re-arrested, and they go in front of the authorities and are interrogated

And here they face ANOTHER key fork in the road because for most of us, **Fork #3: will we stay on this path even when we experience the pain we knew was a possibility?**

Ever come to this fork, before?

Even if we initially start down the more difficult path with courage and conviction, at some point about mid-way the actual trial happens, we experience some sort of a setback

And we are sorely tempted to give up on God in part because in that moment it looks an awful like he's not come through for us, right?

Any of you ever felt like you did what God wanted you to do and was calling you to do and you ran into massive set-backs and even opposition? What's up with that, right?

So the apostles come to that fork in the road as they again face the authorities—are they going to persevere in their commitment to follow Christ in the face of enormous pressures to give up

And in the face of a situation where it appears that God has left them?

The authorities angrily accuse them of stirring up trouble and here at this fork in the road, together they say: ***"We must obey God rather than human beings!" –Acts 5:29***

There's good, hard decision #3. They continue to persevere in the midst of the challenges

And there's a great little courtroom drama that unfolds first with the apostles and the authorities, then amongst the authorities as they try to decide what to do with these men

And we don't have time to drill down into all of that now but here's how this closes:

They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

Here's the final fork in the road: **Fork #4: will we respond to adversity by turning TOWARDS the Lord or will we withdraw in anger and bitterness?**

All of us come to this fork at some point, all of us will experience pain in this life.

For most of us, the most important question for the health of our souls is simply "what will you do with your pain?"

For some of us, we've experienced pain and we've withdrawn and retreated and collapsed back in on ourselves into bitterness, anger and hostility

Anger toward other people and towards God—sometimes even on the heels of something stupid WE did to bring that pain upon ourselves

That's one possible response

Others of us, we experience pain and we turn towards the Lord. We look to him for solace, comfort, peace, purpose in the midst of the pain
we look to God for solace and comfort, turning TOWARDS God instead of away

The apostles here walk down the path of transformation and at every fork, they turn towards the Lord and not away

They start by praying for boldness.

Then, when the angel directs them down the potentially painful path whereby they will develop boldness, they do exactly as they're told.

At the third fork, when they actually come face-to-face with what they knew the consequences could be, when many of us might wilt, they continue to obey God rather than people.

And here at the end, having suffered significantly, they choose rejoicing and turning towards the Lord and not away, in spite of the pain that they have experienced

Do you recognize any of these forks or decisions? Have you ever been at one of these before?

Are you at one of them today? Right now? This morning I've been sent here to encourage you to PRESS ON. The Lord is faithful.

And here's how this part of this story ends:

42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Several of us here have had significant surgeries or medical procedures that required physical therapy

And what you know is that the physical therapist is trying to make you better, stronger, and to heal you, but you also know that there are points when you hate them

Because that exercise, working on that machine, doing that stretch—it's good for you, but man it hurts.

God is bringing them through "boldness physical therapy" exercises to build up their boldness muscles.

But they have choices to make to do what the Great Physician is ordering or they can opt-out.

What we see here is that they're continually opting in, continuing the virtuous cycle:

They ask for boldness. God gives them opportunities to grow in boldness. They embrace those opportunities.

The Spirit blesses their obedience and multiplies their efforts so that they continue to grow ever-more bold—the boldness they need to be able to participate in this mission that they have been given

They are willing to walk down the path that is the answer to their own prayers even though it is demanding, challenging and costly

And they are able to do that with great joy in large part because they weren't the first ones to do this, were they?

These 12 apostles had spent 3 years with Jesus, the one who embraced the path that the Father called him to walk, no matter what it cost him
in order that he, too, might accomplish the mission that he and the Father had agreed upon from the beginning of time

And because of Jesus' obedience at all of his various forks in the road down his path, his mission to reconcile all things back to God was accomplished
to take away the sins of the entire world, that was done in Christ and by Christ as he walked his path

And then the 12 guys who first followed him, they make their own choices to walk that same path together
to participate in this mission impossible assignment to be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth and to change the whole world
meant that they walk kind of a similar path: it was full of joy and hope and purpose and plenty of challenges along the way

And here, today, we're called into this same mission and into this same path.

A couple of take-home questions today as we close this morning and close this series:

1. **Are you willing to walk (all the way down!) the path that is the answer to your own prayers?** Whether we're praying for God to work "out there" or if we're making the switch to pray for boldness or love or wisdom in our own hearts, God seems to delight in PROCESS

Are you willing to walk the path that is the answer to your own prayers?
Even if it's difficult or costly?

2. As we close this series, **do you have a sense of what it means for you to be a part of God's mission?**

We've interviewed four different people who are all doing it differently, there's a great book on the book table to help you, we've been looking at Acts for these past 6 weeks

Do you have a sense of what it means for YOU personally to be a part of God's mission to restore all things?

What breaks your heart? Where has God already positioned you to make a difference? Where is God calling you to enter in to make a difference to heal a broken world?

My prayer for each of us individually and for us corporately is that we'll have a fresh filling of the same Spirit that Jesus had

And that we'll have a sense of where God wants us to participate in his life-giving, restoration mission

And that we might all be filled with boldness and courage, wisdom and love, humility and perseverance

That we too might participate in this mission-impossible assignment.