

Acts 4:23-37

What does God's power look like? Think of some images of God's power... perhaps you imaging thunderbolts or bright lights or earthquakes.

"What does it look like when God shows up?" HT publicity.

Here's a passage all about God's POWER:

V24: "**Sovereign Lord**," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. DESPOTES. Benevolent Dictator. Sovereign

v28: [Your enemies] did what your **power** and will had decided beforehand should happen.

V30 Stretch out your **hand** to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. (Exodus – the HAND of God stretched out parted the Red Sea)

v31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken.

v33 With great **power** the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's grace was so **powerfully** at work in them all

GOD'S POWER!

BUT... if we think we know what God's power is all about this passage will have some real surprises for us.

The power of God is actually shaped by three events which the people of Acts 4 had just lived through within the last couple of months.

2 months previously– **Easter**. The worst and the greatest weekend of their lives. Death and resurrection. Their LORD was crucified and everything looked lost. Then He was raised again and nothing could stay the same.

Then for 40 days Jesus was with them. But then just a couple of Thursdays ago, **Jesus left** – Luke tells the story of how Jesus **ascended** up into heaven, blessing the people. And He hasn't stopped blessing us since. Jesus is our ascended High Priest, praying for us now and granting us access to heaven...

For the people of Acts 4, that had happened just a fortnight ago. Many of them there had seen Jesus ascend – their own Brother and Priest had gone up to God in heaven, it must have given them such confidence.

Then 10 days after that, it was the day of **Pentecost**. On that Sunday – just a few days earlier, the Spirit was poured out in a special way – on *all* flesh, from *all* nations to unite Christ's people into one body. And filled with the Spirit, Peter got up and preached Jesus boldly – 3000 people come to believe.

These three events – Easter, Ascension and Pentecost have shaped these people and now in Acts 3 and 4 we see how these three events shape their response to trouble.

Because in Acts 3 and 4, there is trouble. Peter and John healed a man, it drew a crowd and so they preached about Jesus. Another 2000 people believed in Jesus. But they get in trouble with the authorities, they're arrested and commanded not to teach in the name of Jesus.

Peter and John essentially say "No can do!" Verse 20: "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." So they are warned some more and released.

Now depending on how you look at it, Peter, John and the other disciples are EITHER in a REALLY weak position or a really strong position. From the world's point of view – they are REALLY weak.

Their leader has just been executed as an enemy of both the Jews and the Gentiles. They've been keeping their heads down for most of the last 2 months because it's just too dangerous. And the minute they stick their head above the parapet, their spokesperson – Peter – is arrested, laughed at for being an unschooled fisherman, he gets roughed up and commanded never to preach again. That's a very weak position to be in. But the disciples don't focus on their weakness, they focus on God's power.

Verse 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. ²⁴When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.

What do you do in a crisis? What do you do when your weaknesses are exposed? What do you do when your plans collapse in a heap? Comfort eat? Comfort shop? Go into a sulk?

Peter and John go to the *people* of God and to the Sovereign Lord in prayer. Can we learn from them? I know I struggle on alone and prayerlessly far too often. Peter and John show the way – they take their troubles to God's people and God's throne room.

And through this prayer they model to us four truths about God's power that put our weaknesses in their proper light.

God's power

Enters Easter

Prompts prayer

Makes Missionaries

Creates community

When we face trouble and persecution we will feel weak. We will need to know God's power, but this is the shape of God's power: it enters Easter; it prompts prayer; it makes missionaries and it creates community.

As we look at these truths from Acts 4 it will challenge the way we think about God's power.

It enters Easter. That's a surprise because we think God's power means we won't suffer. Actually God's power embraces Easter. God's power was expressed at THE Cross and it is experienced in our little crosses. God's power does not avoid suffering, God's power takes us THROUGH suffering.

It prompts prayer. That's a surprise because we think God's power eliminates prayer. If God is all powerful, then He'll do what He wants. No need to pray right? Actually if we understand God's power rightly, it's the greatest incentive TO pray.

It makes missionaries. That's a surprise because you might think a powerful God could get His mission without having to use such weak people as ourselves. But no, God's power is exercised precisely in sweeping up weak Christians INTO His mission.

It creates community. That's a surprise because we often think of God's power as something I grasp for myself and enjoy by myself. Actually God's power is only really enjoyed in community and for the sake of community.

Let's dive into the passage and learn more about God's power here.

V23-28:

‘Sovereign Lord,’ they said, ‘you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.’²⁵ 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?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord

and against his anointed one.^{[b]”[c]}

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.

In the midst of crisis, the disciples remind themselves in v24 that our God is the God of the universe. Do you forget that when trouble hits?

There is a Sovereign LORD who made heaven and earth – and He is your Father. The whole point of the ascension was for Jesus – our Brother – to go up to His Father in heaven and to carry us up there in Him. In John 20, Jesus said to Mary “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” So now, in Jesus’ name, the disciples are calling on their Father IN HEAVEN. And it’s the IN HEAVEN bit that they’re clinging onto here. They might feel outgunned by the Jewish authorities, but there is an authority far above Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. There is a Sovereign LORD. And He really is behind all the happenings of this world.

We think the world runs by clockwork....

We know the manager. Because of the ascension, we can go direct to Him and He will listen to us, just as He listens to His eternal Son, Jesus.

They remind themselves that their God is the God of the universe, they also, in v25, remind themselves that He is the God of Scripture. You see it’s the Bible that gives them their bearings here.

It would be really easy to think “Hang on, the high priest ought to know what he’s talking about. The whole temple, the priests, the Sanhedrin, the rulers, all the Bible scholars even – they’re all against us. Maybe they’re right? Maybe we’re wrong. Maybe we should shut up.

What do they do? They go back to their Bibles and get their bearings again. Psalm 2 had predicted all of this 1000 years ago.

For a millennium, Jews had been singing about how the nations would rage and conspire against God's Anointed One – His Messiah / Christ. The Bible gives them their point of reference.

And with their Bible knowledge straight they realise that Easter was not a mistake. Easter was precisely the way that God's power operated.

So, v27, when Herod and Pilate conspired to kill Jesus all they were doing was FULFILLING the ancient prophecies about Christ. As they did their worst against God, it was only actually fulfilled God's purposes:

²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

You have to be very powerful to get your enemy to do your own bidding. Easter – Good Friday – was, from one perspective, the worst event in history. From another perspective that was God turning the greatest evil into the greatest good.

God's power embraces Easter. And Easter is not just an *example* of God turning evil to good, it's the *engine* for what God is doing in the world. God is in the business of turning crosses into resurrections. In fact He is taking the whole world through death and judgement and out into a resurrection future. That is the PATH of God's power.

When we think of God's power we think of bright shiny lights up there. When the disciples went to their Bibles they realised, No, God's power embraces Easter. God's power is expressed AS WE go through our suffering.

Sometimes we can suffer and think – God's power and presence has left us. No, pick up your Bible, look to the cross – suffering is precisely where God's power and presence is at work. God is UP TO SOMETHING in our suffering – it's actually where He works. It's actually how He works.

Therefore in our trouble, God's power meets us in suffering and it prompts prayer.

PROMPTS PRAYER

When you read that God is the Sovereign LORD, does that produce prayerfulness in you? It really should, shouldn't it? But often it doesn't. I wonder what the disciples are seeing that we're not seeing that prompts them to pray. Perhaps the answer, again, is found in the Bible passage they turn to. Let's turn to it – Psalm 2: (Actually the way to refer to Psalms was by quoting the first line of them. They may well have sung the entire Psalm together....)

PSALM 2

Notice verse 8: The Father says to Christ: “Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance.” Isn’t that interesting? The Father doesn’t say “Sit back and watch me give you an inheritance.” He tells His Son to ASK. PRAYER is going to be part of this. That’s fascinating.

If there’s anyone who doesn’t need to pray, surely, you’d think it’s Jesus. But even the Son of the Father is told to ASK. In fact, ESPECIALLY because He’s the Son of the Father, He asks. That’s how children relate to parents, they ask. So Jesus asks His Father for the nations – that’s Psalm 2:8.

And when Jesus came in the flesh, He continued to ASK His Father for everything, but now He was asking as our Brother. In the ascension, Jesus goes up to the Father and He continues to ASK His Father. He ASKS His Father for the fruits of His death and resurrection to be given – for the nations to be won, for millions more to come into the kingdom. He ASKS His Father for us to be kept safe. Isn’t that amazing?

If you knew Jesus was praying for you in the next room, would it make a difference? Well distance is irrelevant, Jesus IS Praying for you. And He’s praying for the nations. We get to join Him and in His name we can be part of the gospel going global.

God’s power does not side-step prayer. It includes prayer. God’s power is all about the Father-Son relationship that we’re brought in on. To be caught up in this power means being caught up in praying.

And did you notice what they prayed for? Verse 29: Boldness to speak more! They pray for MORE of what got them into trouble in the first place: witnessing to Jesus:

²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’

Those two things are precisely what got Peter and John into trouble and it’s precisely what they pray for. Why? God’s power **makes missionaries**

Verse 31

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.

Here we have another mini-Pentecost – an after-shock if you like. The Spirit fills them again so that they can speak God’s word boldly, just as happened in Acts 2.

But notice that the signs and wonders that happen are not abstract demonstrations of God's power. They are signs, pointing to the name of Jesus.

In the Bible, miracles are not that common actually. Times of miracles are clustered around three points.

Moses and his successor Joshua; Elijah and his successor Elisha; Jesus and His successors the church in Acts. In these three places some quite extraordinary things happen, because these signs are authenticating the new burst of revelation. With Moses came the law, with Elijah came the prophets, with Jesus came the Gospel events – and at each point there are signs and wonders that accompany those revelations.

Of course the odd miracle happened in between Moses and Elijah and in between Elijah and Jesus. And the odd miracle happens today – just last week I heard of one in a friend's church in Worthing – so we pray boldly for such miracles today. But the signs and wonders unleashed in Acts are for a quite deliberate purpose – see verse 33:

³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all

This is what God's power does – it makes missionaries. Sometimes God's power looks like signs and wonders. Mostly God's power takes the Easter path – through death and only then into a resurrection future beyond the grave. That is the normal way God's power is expressed, on that cosmic level that goes down before it comes back up. Sometimes God's power means miracles – ALWAYS God's power makes missionaries. That's something we can all count on. We can all count on the power of God's Spirit to give us words to speak and to give us the boldness to speak them.

But interestingly, that's not where this passage ends. The passage ends with this fourth point about God's power: it creates community.

Creates Community.

³²All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all

³⁴that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

Think of a Spirit-filled person experiencing God’s power in a profound way. Often we think about private experiences of personal piety. The New Testament pictures a community pouring itself out in love. THAT’S how you experience God’s power.

Pentecost taught us that God is a Poured-Out God. The Father has given us His Son at Easter, He has given us His Spirit at Pentecost. God IS a community poured out in love. What does it look like to manifest God’s power in the world? Be a community poured out in love. That’s not just a groovy idea, it involves costly sacrifice – sacrifice of time and money and possessions

DO you want to experience God’s power? Serve you brothers and sisters at church in practical ways – that IS God’s power at work. Don’t look at your time or money and possessions and think “That’s MINE! I worked hard for that, why should I give it up.” God the Father didn’t even say that about His Son OR His Spirit. He didn’t say “That’s MINE, why should I give it up.” No God’s power is demonstrated in self-giving – so it is with God, and so it will be with us.

And it is a tremendous witness, notice v33:

³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all

The apostles were preaching up a storm but the whole church was demonstrating God’s grace in their life together. The church community bound together in love is the context for the apostles to preach.

Car broken down. £400. Sign and wonder / church community => witness

God’s power

Enters Easter

You can know God’s power IN your suffering – that’s where it shows up strongest.

Prompts prayer

Jesus has ascended to heaven and in His name you have full access to the Sovereign LORD of the universe.

Makes Missionaries

The Spirit is able to make you a BOLD proclaimer of Jesus.

Creates community

You will experience God's power and presence AS you commit to THIS community and serve your brothers and sisters.

It would be easy to get disheartened by Acts 4. You look at their faith in the midst of suffering, their wonderful prayer lives, their bold evangelism, their selfless community and you wonder "Am I even a Christian!? Does this look ANYTHING like me?" Actually Christianity is not about looking to these guys. It's about looking to the same God that these guys looked to. And as we do that we might start looking a bit more LIKE them. So as we finish, let's look TO the God they looked to and know some things.

Let's look to the God of Easter and KNOW – Jesus has taken ALL our faithlessness, prayerlessness, cowardice and selfishness onto Himself on the cross. He has died for it all and His blood purifies us from ALL sin. He has risen again to give us new life beyond sin, death and judgement. A life we can live NOW.

Let's look to the God of the Ascension and KNOW – Jesus our Brother has ascended into heaven as our High Priest and He's praying for us now. A prayer life we can join NOW.

Let's look to the God of Pentecost and KNOW – The Spirit has been given to us – the same Spirit that empowered Jesus, the same Spirit that has united the Father and the Son together forever: He is IN you to live His self-giving life THROUGH you. A life that is yours to live right now.

If you're a Christian, this is the life that's yours to live. Why *wouldn't* you **trust** Him in suffering, **pray** to Him with boldness, **speak** of Him with gladness and join Him in self-giving with your brothers and sisters in the church. This is the good life, and it's yours to live in Christ.