

Responding to Threats

Acts 4:23-31

What is the biggest threat you face right now? It could be any number of different things. It could be internal or external. Internally (involving your body or soul/spirit), you may be facing:

- * A threat to your physical health due to injury or illness.
- * A threat to your spiritual and mental health due to decisions you've made or sins you've committed. Maybe your struggle has left you exhausted and demoralized.

Externally (involving circumstances or other people) you may be facing:

- * A financial threat due to loss of income or unexpected expenses.
- * A threat to a relationship that means everything to you.
- * A threat to your reputation.
- * A threat to someone you love dearly; you'd trade places with them in a second if you could, but you can't.

Once you identify a threat in your life, you need to decide how you're going to respond to it. You can respond with "an eye for an eye"; you can panic; you threaten the people who threaten you; or you can retreat into yourself and just survive. Or, you can respond the way Jesus' disciples responded in Acts 4.

These disciples of Jesus had been threatened by people who had all the religious and political power; they could imprison, beat, and kill people if they wanted. As Brian mentioned last week, this has been the norm for most Christians down through the centuries. That is certainly true of many Christians throughout the world today.

In Acts 4:23-31 we are told how these believers responded to the threats they faced. Their response is a model for us. There may or may not come the day when we are threatened with imprisonment or worse because we are followers of Jesus. But we prepare for ***potential threats*** by responding to ***actual threats*** the way that they responded in today's passage.

We will see ***two essentials*** if we want to respond the way they did and if we want God to respond to us the way he responded to them. Whatever threat you're facing, keep it in mind as we work our way through this passage. These two essentials are the place to start. There may be other things we also need to do, depending on the threat; we may need to change our lives or have tough conversations with others or ask others to help. But these two essentials are the place to start.

When responding to threats, the first thing to do is:

Know your God. (*Acts 4:23-28*) What comes through loud and clear is that these believers *knew their God*. Their knowledge of God showed up in the way they prayed. If you were with us last week, you may remember that Peter and John had healed a man lame from birth "in Jesus' name." The Jewish authorities interrogated them and commanded them "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." Peter told them that wasn't an option; they had to obey God and bear witness about Jesus because

there is “no other name by which. . . we must be saved.” Afterwards, they were threatened and released.

23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

Like us, they could have responded in many different ways, but they instinctively responded with prayer. And the first thing they did in prayer was rehearse what they knew to be true about God. The first truth about God they rehearsed was:

God alone is sovereign over creation Acts 4:24.

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,

They were acknowledging that God alone is the Creator of everything. This is a truth that is found throughout both testaments (see Exodus 20:11, Nehemiah 9:6, Acts 17:24, 28). This statement about God making everything is found almost verbatim in Psalm 146:6. There the context is that the God who created everything can be trusted when you’re being oppressed/persecuted. Listen to Psalm 146:5-7.

5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord his God,
6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever;
7 who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free;

The God who is sovereign over all creation - including all humanity - can be trusted when you’re being threatened. As Creator and Sustainer of everything, no person or situation is beyond his reach.

The tendency sometimes when we find ourselves threatened is to become incredibly self-centered, even self-absorbed. The threats become giant (in our eyes) and God becomes small (in our eyes). But if you know your God, you know that’s not the case. As the Creator of everything he is more powerful than anybody or anything that threatens our well-being. [Luke 4:31-41 is a great example of this; Jesus rebuked demons twice and a fever once. As “God in the flesh,” no threat was beyond his reach.] And he can be trusted.

The second truth that they affirmed about God was:

God alone is sovereign over history. Acts 4:25-28 Here they quote directly from Psalm 2:1-2. They are still talking to God as “Sovereign Lord” when they say:

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’ —

Psalm 2 is known as a “royal psalm” since it speaks about royalty, the king of Israel. As we see here in verse 26, the king of Israel is referred to as “the Lord’s Anointed.” That’s because the king was anointed with oil (they pour oil on his head) when he took office. This symbolized that the blessing of God was being poured out upon him.

Throughout Israel’s history the surrounding nations “raged” against Israel; their rulers banded together “against God and against his Anointed king.” But Psalm 2 tells us that none of this takes God by surprise. To the contrary, the next stanza of Psalm 2 says that God is sitting in heaven laughing at his enemies who rage and plot. And by the end of Psalm 2, the psalmist tells the rulers of the earth, “if you don’t want to experience God’s wrath, kiss the Son [God’s anointed King].” In other words, bow down and worship/serve him.

By quoting Psalm 2 back to God, they were saying, “Sovereign Lord. . . you are the God who is on record saying that the enemies of your Anointed Son/King will not have the last word.” And then they pray this:

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.

They understood that Jesus was the Anointed Son/King of Psalm 2. Herod, Pilate, the Romans, AND (here’s the shocker) the peoples of Israel (his own people) had gathered together in Jerusalem against God and Jesus. And when they crucified him, they didn’t thwart the mission of Jesus. Rather, what they did fit within the sovereign plan of God; they carried out what “your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

So basically, they said, “You are the God of Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is happening here in this city. And so we understand and believe that you are in heaven laughing at those who plotted and raged against Jesus and who are now threatening us. And we believe that unless they repent and ‘kiss the Son,’ they will experience the fury of your wrath.”

They knew their God - that ***he alone is sovereign over creation and history***. Because they knew their God, they were now ready to make a request. When you think about it, if you’re going to make a request of somebody, it’s best to know quite a bit about them. It’s best to know what they are capable of doing, what they like and what they don’t like, etc. It’s a sweet thing when you ask the right person the right thing.

As many of you know, I make Windsor chairs. And for most of the chair, you begin with a log. [PHOTO of Windsor]. The bow on the back of the chair, for example, begins as a white oak log. So when I started making Windsors about 15 years ago, I needed to find a logger to sell logs to me. Since white oaks don't really grow in Kansas I had to look for a logger in Missouri where there are lots of white oak trees. I don't know if you've ever Googled "loggers in Missouri," but there are a bunch of them.

Out of the blue, the first guy I called was a guy named Gary in northwest Missouri. "Gary, my name is Steve. I live in Manhattan, KS and I make Windsor chairs. I'm looking for a veneer-quality white oak log. I need one about six feet long and about 16 inches in diameter without any twists or knots or cat faces." "Sounds like you need a white oak that's growing on level ground in the middle of a stand of trees." "Exactly." "I can do that." "About how much would that white oak log cost me?" "Oh, about \$50." That's a steal, and he knew it, and he didn't care. My first phone call, I found a guy who was knowledgable about trees, generous with his time, and willing to help. For the last fifteen years he's been supplying me with amazing logs.

It's a sweet thing when you ask the right person the right question. When it comes to God, we don't have to guess about who he is, what he's capable of doing, what he wants, or if he's generous and willing to give us what we need. This is reason #97 why we should study the Bible and internalize what it teaches. The Bible is fundamentally about God. It addresses many different topics, but always in the context of who God is and what God wants and what he's doing in this world.

The better we know God, the better we'll pray. The better we know God, the better we'll know WHAT to pray (specifically what to ask). This is true whether you're praying in response to some threat you're facing or praying about a decision or praying about a relationship. The better you know God, the better you'll know what to pray.

Here in Acts 4, we see that since these disciples knew their God, they prayed accordingly. First, know your God. Second:

Pray accordingly. (Acts 4:29-31) In other words, pray in light of what you know to be true about God. That's what the disciples did in Acts 4. After saying to God, "God, you are sovereign over all creation and sovereign over all of history," they made two very simple requests.

29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness,

First, they simply prayed, "And now, Lord, look upon their threats. . ." In other words, "Since you are the God of Psalm 2, notice their threats and act accordingly." When you believe that God has authority over his creation and over history, you can pray that sort of prayer and leave the situation in God's hands. You don't have to demand a specific outcome.

It's significant that they didn't pray, "God, wipe out your enemies so that we are never threatened again." They knew that wasn't God's will, so they didn't pray that. Jesus had

told them, “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:2). They expected persecution. Like Jesus, they were content to entrust themselves to God (see 1 Peter 2:21-25). When Peter was imprisoned again and then beaten and released (Acts 5), when Stephen was executed by stoning (Acts 7) or when James was executed by the sword (Acts 12), they keep entrusting themselves to God. They didn’t give up or give in. Knowing that God knew exactly what threats they faced was enough.

Second, they prayed, “grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.” Their main concern wasn’t their comfort or security; their main concern was being loyal to Jesus. He had told them, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,” and so their prayer was that God would give them the grace to be faithful to that calling/ assignment, “to speak your word with all boldness.” The dominant idea of “boldness” is not the attitude, “I’m gonna get in your face and tell you about Jesus whether you want to hear it or not.” Rather, boldness means confidence and openness. Instead of being timid or ashamed of what you believe about Jesus, you are confident and so you share it openly.

Notice what they add (v. 30):

30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

They weren’t backing down one bit when it came to teaching and healing in the name of Jesus. As they told the council (vv. 8-12, 19-20), “there is no other name” by which people are saved and healed. So they prayed that God would continue to stretch out his hand and heal and perform signs and wonders “through the name . . . of Jesus.” We’ll see in chapter 5 that that’s exactly what happened.

Again, don’t miss the fact that they prayed for the grace and power to do something that would make their lives more difficult and less comfortable. They understood that because rulers and nations raged against Jesus, they also raged against them. They understood that God was sovereign over it all. Because they knew their God, they prayed accordingly.

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.

“. . .the place. . . was shaken. . .” There was some type of physical manifestation of God in that place. “. . .and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” In other words, God gave them exactly what they wanted: a fresh filling/empowering of the Holy Spirit so that they could speak the word with boldness. They asked the right thing to the right Person!

If we want to be like these disciples in Acts 4 and respond to the things that threaten us the way they responded to their threats: **We need to *know our God and pray accordingly*.**

I want to encourage us to follow the example of the believers in Acts 4 in two ways:

First, ***Pray for boldness***: “. . . grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness. . .” Even though we have incredible freedom in this country to talk about our faith openly, at times we may feel threatened or intimidated when it comes to speaking about Jesus. But I’d encourage you to begin praying like they prayed in Acts 4. “God, give me the grace to be transparent about my faith. Fill me with your Spirit so I can live out my calling to be a witness for Jesus. You are sovereign over everything, so I trust you!”

I realize it may have never occurred to you to pray for boldness/openness in talking about Jesus. But why not take a risk and pray since we know that Jesus his followers to be his witnesses? I’ve got a friend who told me that he prays all the time for opportunities to talk about his faith. Guess what? God gives him opportunities week after week to talk about his faith. When we ask God to do things that he already wants to do, he is glad to give us those requests.

Second, ***Consider the biggest threat you face***. Ask two questions: What is true about God that is relevant to this threat? How should I pray accordingly? You might need some help answering these questions; you might need to talk with a friend who knows God really well. If you don’t have a friend like that, let us know and we’ll connect you with somebody like that.

Let me give just one example of how this might work. Let’s say your biggest threat is some sin that is dominating your life. There are many, many things that are true about God that are relevant to this threat. The Bible makes clear that God is infinitely holy and that he therefore ***hates*** sin (Proverbs 6:16). Sin dishonors God and devastates the person who sins. Sin keeps us enslaved and weak and lethargic, whereas God wants us to be free and strong and full of life. What’s true about God? He hates sin.

I’m glad to say that God is also more gracious than we can fathom. He gives freedom and strength and life to people who don’t deserve it. “God gives grace to the humble” - to people who admit that they’ve sinned and who bow in submission to him and his Son Jesus.

If some sin is dominating your life and you’re clear that God hates sin but gives grace to the humble, pray accordingly. It might go something like this: “God, I admit that I am enslaved by a sin that you hate. Instead of fleeing from temptation, I have walked right into the jaws of temptation time after time. I humble myself before you in repentance. Give me a hatred for this sin. Keep me from temptation. Fill me with your Holy Spirit. Empower me to walk in obedience.” As I mentioned at the beginning, praying is often the first step in facing a threat. In this case, you will almost certainly need to find a brother/sister who can walk with you and give you advice and courage to walk in

obedience. Hopefully this gives you an idea of how to face a threat by knowing your God and praying accordingly.

The Lord's Table. The Lord's Table is an opportunity to remember some of the core things that are true about God. Through the bread and the cup we remember that God loved the world - including us - so much that he sent his Son to die for our sins. His body was broken for us; his blood was shed for us.

In light of what we've been talking about today, it would be appropriate for us to remember what Paul wrote in Romans 8:32.

32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Today at the Lord's Table, remember that God loves to give us what we need to do his will here on earth.