

# Acts 4:23-31

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[ 0 : 00 ] Acts chapter 4, it really is from verses 23 onwards, I think it's the first prayer recorded in Acts.

! It's the first major crisis certainly. Peter and John have been imprisoned, they've been threatened, they've been warned to stop preaching in the name of Christ.

And then verse 23, when they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them, and when they heard it, they lifted up their voices together to God.

And the substance of this prayer, as someone has described, really is the basic conviction of the whole Bible. I think it is probably the central theme of the whole Bible, and that is the conviction that God is sovereign.

And that he reigns, and he rules as king and as lord over the whole universe that he's created. And that he sits today on the throne.

[ 1 : 07 ] And that God exercises absolute sovereign control over the whole created order, and over the whole historical process. And that is the conviction that underlies this prayer, and I want to argue truly undergirds the whole teaching of the Bible.

It is indeed, in many ways, the central Christian conviction. That God our Saviour reigns enthroned in glory. And so the prayer begins, doesn't it, in verse 24, sovereign Lord.

That is the conviction that God is on the throne, and that he is overruling even the wrath of his enemies that we've seen at the start of chapter 4.

He's overruling even the wrath of his enemies to his own purpose. And that was vital, wasn't it, for the apostles to understand at that particular stage. But it's equally vital for you and I to understand it.

It is the answer, isn't it, to one of the basic questions of the human heart. Francis Schaeffer says that this question grumbles under the skin of every thinking man.

[ 2 : 16 ] The question of to whom does ultimate power belong. Is there any controlling hand on the apparent madness of the world in which we live? When you look at history with all the seeming chaos and confusion and foolishness.

Is it possible that there is a sovereign hand controlling everything? In the history of this world. Or personally, is this the answer to the question that burns in all our hearts, sometimes more acutely than at other times.

Is it really true that God is working all things together for good to those who love him? Is God really sovereign over my personal circumstances today, right now?

And they are crucial questions. And they are answered by two questions addressed to God in verse 24. Sovereign Lord, they call him. And the rest of this prayer in Acts 4 is really an extension of that conviction.

The apostles take everything that is contained in those two words, sovereign Lord, and they unpack it. And they do so in four ways.

[ 3 : 27 ] First of all, do you see the sovereign Lord of creation? Look at verse 24. Sovereign Lord who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything through them.

And then they address God as the sovereign Lord of history. Verse 25. Who through the mouth of our father David said by the Holy Spirit, Why did the Gentiles rage and the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth have set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed. They are speaking of God's sovereign rule in history. And thirdly, they address God as the sovereign Lord of redemption.

Look at verses 27 and 28. For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, among the Gentiles and the people of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan would have predestined to take place. And finally in verses 29 to 30, you see the sovereign Lord of the contemporary scene. And now Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants and continue to speak your word with all boldness while you stretch out your hand to heal.

[ 4 : 36 ] And signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. God is the sovereign Lord above all things. And that is the conviction that lies behind all true Christian prayer.

And when we come to God and we wait on him and we pray to him and cry to him as these men did in Acts 4, the basic conviction we have is as we plead with God in such a situation or in any situation, it's that God reigns sovereignly over all the affairs of men and of nations, of heaven and earth and hell.

And we come to him on that basis. As the sovereign Lord so that we might think aright and live aright and pray aright. So first of all, the sovereign Lord of creation, verse 24.

Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them. That's the first thing that persuades these apostles of God's unlimited power and sovereignty.

They are persuaded of his sovereignty when they look at God's acts in creation. Here they are in the midst of a situation where fear is entered into their hearts.

[ 5 : 54 ] Obviously by reason of the opposition that they've experienced. The threats are still sounding in their ears. And what they're saying now as they come to plead with God, they are reminding themselves that God is sovereign in creation.

They say you are the Lord who's formed this universe in which we live. You've given life and breath to these very men that are our enemies. You are the Lord who keeps them alive.

You are the Lord who's made all that is and that enables them to plead with God. And to press him concerning their particular need. It's one of the great basis of our thinking about God.

That he is the sovereign Lord of creation. And if he has the power to create the heavens and earth, then he is able to act in your situation.

And you are able to go and say to him, look upon us now Lord. You see creation is presented in the Bible as a sovereign act of God.

[ 7 : 03 ] He speaks as kingly creator. And he brings into being out of nothing all that is made. That's why the doctrine of creation is so vital for us in our understanding of God, in our thinking about the world, and in our thinking about prayer.

The whole doctrine of creation is fundamental in its importance for us. Because again and again, this is the argument that people in the Bible use when they come into God's presence.

To plead with him again and again. So let's go to Jeremiah chapter 32. We're going to go to a couple of passages tonight. As I said, I haven't got page numbers.

So Jeremiah 32. It's a big book right in the middle of the Bible. Don't be embarrassed if you can't find it. Jeremiah chapter 32. Okay?

Jeremiah 32. And they come to God and they plead with God. As for God who is first sovereign in creation.

[ 8 : 11 ] And so Jeremiah, this great prophet, he cries to the Lord in 32 and verses 16 to 20. He says, Our pride given the deed of purchase to Barak the son of Neriah, I prayed to the Lord saying, Our Lord God, it is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm.

Nothing is too hard for you. You should steadfast love to thousands, but you repay the guilt of fathers, their children after them. O great and mighty God, whose name is the Lord of hosts, great in counsel, and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds.

You have shown signs and wonders in the land of Egypt to this day in Israel and among all mankind and have made a name for yourself as this day. Now do you see how this vision of God that he has as the sovereign Lord who has called creation into being, it makes such a difference, doesn't it, to people thinking.

But it's not only used by people as an argument as they plead with God, it is used by God as an argument to persuade his people to trust him. So if you remember in Isaiah, the prophecy of Isaiah,

God comes to his people who are, they are wilting in the midst of all the difficulties and tribulations through which he passed and he says to them, lift up your eyes on high and see.

What is it that they're to see? It's Isaiah chapter 40. Isaiah chapter 40. What vision is it that Isaiah longs that they might have?

[ 9 : 58 ] It's Isaiah 40 verses 25 to 28. To whom will you compare me?

That I should be like him, says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see who created these. He who brings out their hosts by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might. And because he is strong in power, not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, my way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God?

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. Now do you see what God is doing? He's using the doctrine of creation and his sovereignty in creation to persuade his people to trust him.

Now here's what the apostles are doing when they come into God's presence and you'll see how immensely relevant all of this is to the mood of so many of us today. We're so easily, secretly despondent and discouraged.

[ 11 : 21 ] So many of us are bowed down and weighed down. And in a sense, we're always on the defensive. And so we greatly need in our generation an opening of our eyes to see the great glory and the majesty of God as the creator.

There's an awesomeness, isn't there, to creation that does us good. And so go to the lake district and stand on the hills and look at them.

Go to South Wales. See the valleys. Stand on the beach and look at the sea. I don't know what it is that does it for you. That's what does it for me.

You stand and you look at the power of the sea. And there will be times when you will feel your soul exalted. And God means us to do that. To find our hearts lifted up with a sense of the sheer majesty of God who by his word has called all of this into being.

And I tell you what I think that the kingly Lord who created that infinite beauty is the same God who is setting about his purpose of creating in me, of creating Christ in me.

[ 12 : 39 ] Well that is a great encouragement, isn't it? Francis Schaeffer again said our generation has a unique capacity of thinking great thoughts of men and petty thoughts of God.

And so we need to see him as the sovereign Lord of creation. Secondly in verses 25 and 26 of Acts 4 we need to see him as the sovereign Lord of history.

And these two verses they are a quotation from Psalm 2. It's one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament. And one commentator writes this.

He says this psalm bears witness to a God who is present and active in world history. And who knows how to make himself respected by those who don't want to give it.

And he accomplishes his purpose even though men rebel against him. The immediate picture of Psalm 2 is there's a king and there's a king who is in his accession to the throne.

[ 13 : 40 ] An anointing of a new king. A king whom God has chosen as much property and David himself. And there's the rebellion of kings and the rulers of the earth against this earthly king. And that rebellion the psalmist sees actually is a rebellion against the Lord and against his anointment.

And so the apostles they recollect this psalm and they interpret it correctly. The idea of the rage in nations and the vaunting of human beings against God is ludicrous.

Because he who sits in the heavens will laugh at them. He will hold them in derision. The idea of man rebelling against the king of kings and lord of glories is ludicrous.

Because the Lord is the one who reigns and whose government over the affairs of men and nations will be vindicated. Whatever the scene in the world whatever the rage of men against God however men choose to ignore him he who sits in the heavens will have the last word.

And so to whom does ultimate power belong? I really hope you're clear on this. It does not reside in Washington or in London or in Moscow or in Beijing.

[ 15 : 02 ] It resides on the throne of the Lord God omnipotent on whose shoulders the government has been placed. Let me quote again from another commentator on the psalm.

What the psalmist sees is that the centre of history is no longer the struggle of the great powers but God whose relationship with the earthly powers will determine their destiny. His vision of history is theocentric.

And that's an unfamiliar word so we don't use that word very much but all it means is this that God is at the centre of history. How do you see that? And when you read at the BBC online when you watch the news and the chaos of Brexit do you see at all that God is at the centre of history of history God's this conviction of God's lordship of history in these two similar ways it is used by the people of God as a source of strength and a bullhook to their confidence in God so in 2 Chronicles 20 I won't make you go there but Jehoshaphat the king he had news of the impending disaster that was about to come upon his people and as he saw the Moabites and the Ammonites coming upon them he heard words that there was a great multitude coming against you from Edom and Jehoshaphat feared and set himself to seek the Lord and Judah assembles to seek help from the Lord and Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem and he cried out this he said O Lord God of our fathers are you not God in heaven you rule of the kingdoms of the nations in your hand are power and might so that none is able to withstand you and that is the conviction of a man who has come to see that ultimate power belongs to God not to men but again it's also used by God to persuade men and women to trust him and so you find again and again don't you when you read the Old Testament that God recalls history it's a significant thing and you find God doing that again and again and again God will say I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery and into the land of promise and he goes on to recount doesn't he to them how he has ordered their circumstances and how he has knocked aside their enemies and how he has cast down kings and men who rebel against him and opened a way for his people what's he doing he's not merely giving them a history lesson he's giving them a lesson in God's sovereignty in history and so therefore he appeals to them that now in this situation they will trust and obey him because he's the sovereign lord of history that's true in our personal history isn't it no one in the bible speaks as clearly or powerfully about this than Joseph does so his brothers come to him don't they when he's in Egypt right at the end of Genesis with their sorry story of treachery and cruelty and that begins to be poured out and they find out don't they that their sin well has been found out and Joseph looks at them and even as he speaks of that kind of experience in his life he says in

Genesis 50 you meant it for evil to me but God meant it for good do you see the point he had seen that God was not just the sovereign lord of history I can level up the hair in general but he is the sovereign lord of history personally and that leads us to the third way they address God he's not only sovereign lord of creation and of history but he's also the sovereign lord of redemption look at verses 27 and 28 because the apostle looks at Psalm 2 and he sees that it's a messianic psalm that it's about Christ they believed that the psalmist sang better than he knew and more than he thought but what was he singing about he was really singing about the exalted king of kings and lord of lords the lord Jesus Christ against whom the nations of the earth still rage and they would plot and divide his downfall and so we move from history in general to the history of redemption in particular and here above everywhere else they see

[19 : 49] God turning the wrath of men to praise him and to bless us verse 27 for truly in this city this place where we are they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus whom they anointed whom you anointed and both Herod and Pontius Pilate along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel to do whatever your hand and your plan are predestined to take place he shuts the scene he says this is the stage of where it happened where the lord Jesus was brought to trial and judgment now what was really happening there this is what the apostles are grasping and they are leading us into the sovereignty of God in our redemption what was happening in Jerusalem when Jesus died is it to be explained by Herod and Pontius Pilate and the people of Israel and the Gentiles and the raging of men and the gnashing of teeth and the anger of the crowd and the cruelty of the Roman soldiers is that how it's all to be explained just a tragic miscarriage justice knowing Jesus listen he says verse 27 he says to do whatever your hand and your plan predestined to take place doesn't mean that God was the author of wickedness and evil what it means is this that God rules in the midst of his enemies and when they do their wicked will they are fulfilling his purpose when they do their wicked worst they are mere tools for his high and blessed purpose and that's what's happening at Calvary it's not that men have done this it's that

God gave him up and the initiative in all that was happening there on Calvary was God's they are saying aren't they Lord it was you sovereign Lord who was presiding at Golgotha the real king was Jesus and Jesus brings this home doesn't he to Pilate do you remember how little Pontius find us full of his own self importance and full of his own authority he trots around in front of Jesus and he

says do you not know I have power to release you and power to crucify you I would love to have seen his face wouldn't you when Jesus says to him you have no power over me except it was given you by God and Pilate and Herod and the people of Israel and the Gentiles and the Roman soldiers they are instruments of God's infinite grace in the glorious plan of redemption but it encompassed some of the darkest hours of human history and I guess that's what these apostles are saying it is out of that infinite darkness that God could bring our full salvation and what might he not bring out of this hour and our struggles at this time and that speaks to us of

God's sovereignty in accomplishing our redemption scripture also tells us that God is sovereign in applying redemption as well and that is a glorious kind of authority and motivation we have in evangelism that it is God who is drawing people to Christ that it is God who is the author of salvation that it is God who prepares people's hearts and I'm sure it was a new vision of that that gave these men heart to go out and with great power we read in verse 33 great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all sovereign lord over creation over history over redemption and finally let's see sovereign lord over the contemporary scene it's not merely true of the past is it it's not something they look back on as a kind of curious freak of history it's the most relevant reality for the contemporary situation in which they find themselves and it is for us this evening and so they say now lord look upon our present situation and on account of your sovereign lordship in creation and history and redemption look upon our present situation and grant your servants boldness to speak your word and stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders because the character of

God does not change they may now appeal to him for their present situation this is the God who is not the great I was but the great I am he is the unchanging God who is in sovereign control who is able to touch the present situation of his children's lives and to bring them into that glorious assurance that here is a God who does all things well and so what I want to do is I want to close and I want to give you three words this week which I think are the application of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God that help us in our own lives three words that we need to ask God to write on our hearts from this passage and from this doctrine the first is rest do you see the significant thing is that because

God reigns we may rest in him and we may rest in his wisdom and in his power and in his sovereignty Jeremiah says in his prayer doesn't he there is nothing too hard for you and so we may therefore rest in God the sovereignty of God is the doctrine above all else which brings rest into the hearts and minds of believers I was at a minister's conference once and he said to me he was berating ministers that don't take a day off and he says it's an extraordinary thing how we have the view that the almighty is incapable of looking after his cause while we take a day off and it's an amazing thing isn't it how we can find a lack of rest and what is behind that is because we have a lack of confidence in God's absolute sovereign control it's like when you go on holiday and you say to the person who's driving do you mind if I sleep while you watch the road while you drive it's like we imagine

[ 27 : 12 ] God needs us to kind of help us to keep our eye on things for him in all kind of circumstances we need to learn what it is to rest in the Lord because he is the sovereign one second word is hope hope and this is what transformed the attitude of the apostles in the early church and they were overwhelmed they were outnumbered certainly and it seemed that there was nothing but despair it's precisely the same sense in the modern world secular society and secular men and women and boys and girls are obsessed with despair for all the nonsense of believing in yourself there's very very little hope in our world why is that well it's because they do not know God and it's because they're blind to the fact that our God reigns in glory and ultimate power belongs to him and you and

I need to live in the light of that solid glorious hope it's not the kind of hope that has doubt attached to it I hope it's a sunny day next Saturday for the barbecue but we know full well it might not be but the confidence of the hope of the gospel is certain and there's this is true of personal life too isn't it because the sovereign control of God upon the lives of his people too is such that all things work together for the good of those who love him so do you believe that this evening do you believe that there's not an area of your life not an atom of your experience which God is not controlling altogether for your good and his glory there may be very difficult things in your life and there may be a family situation which you're finding very difficult there may be enormous health concerns you may be very very unhappy in work at the moment but there's not an area of your life not an atom of

your experience which God is not controlling together for your good and his glory that's what this doctrine implies rest hope and then the last thing is obedience  
God's kingly rule is always personal and the sovereignty of God is not a doctrine to be held in isolation from a servant's obedience we may not claim in a kind of critical abstract clinical theoretical sense the primary aim of this doctrine is upon the glad bowing of every area of life before him as king of lord crown him the lord of life and if rest and hope are the comfort of this doctrine obedience is the challenge of it the lord is king is he really is he king over every area of your life this evening or are you among those who rebel against the lord you conspire against him thinking he can't see you thinking he doesn't know against his anointed in some area of your life  
god give us obedience god give us hope god give us rest let's pray a