

Adventures in the Land of Authority

Acts 4:1-31

2/28/99

A few months ago, Andrew Trawick returned from an EPI board meeting. EPI is a mission of this church; it is one of the missions that we support. I am going with EPI to Mozambique in the spring. I went to Brazil with them a few years ago. Andrew, who is one of my best friends and he is also one of our elders, you have probably heard him preach. A few months ago when he got back from this board meeting in May, he told me about a fellow that he had met there named Sundar Thapa from Nepal. Sundar was about 30 years old. He was married; he had children of his own. He also ran an orphanage in Nepal, connected to his house. He spent time doing itinerant evangelism among the villages of Nepal. And Andrew spent 1 ½ days with him before their meetings began, getting to know him.

During that time, Sundar shared about of his life with Andrew. Traveling between villages, he was routinely chased by tigers in Nepal. He spent three days, one time, in tree with a tiger down below him. He wrestled snakes. He lived with persecution, primarily from militant Hindus in the area. And Andrew said, "Peter, Sundar was just a great guy. I really enjoyed hanging out with him, being with him. He was fun. However, during that time, it was like only one thing seemed to bother him. He confided in me and told me, 'I've been staying with people in your country, Andrew, and they confuse me. I stay in their homes. I go into their pantry. I open their pantry door and inside I see more food than there is in my entire village. And they complain. I go with them to these huge stores full of food, and they complain because they have to walk across the parking lot to get inside. And when they get out of their car, they complain because it was too hot. It was air-conditioned in their car. And then when they get in the store, they complain because it is too cold. The air conditioning is on too high. You Americans, you have everything and you complain.'"

Andrew told me, "I looked for signs of envy or jealousy in Sundar, but that just wasn't it." While they were there, Sundar had been trying to reach his family in Nepal. It had been three days, and he was unable to reach them. It was the morning of one of their board meetings. Finally he had made a connection with a man from his village. He was in Phil Eyster's office talking to the man. The board members were out in Phil's living room waiting for Sundar when Sundar walked out and informed them of what he had just found out. He had been speaking to this man from his village who told him he had just fled the village and been in the jungle for three days and found his way to this phone. Because three days prior to this time, militant Hindus had crashed one of their worship services. They took Sundar's friend, the pastor, and killed him. Many of the people in the church were now dead. The rest had fled into the jungle where they were hiding. The man also informed Sundar that after they burned the church down, they went to Sundar's house and the orphanage and they burned it down too, in the process killing several of the orphans. Then he said, "Sundar, I don't know where your family is. They are either dead or in the jungle hiding."

Sundar walked out having just learned this and informed the board. Well shocked, immediately they said, "Sundar, we have to pray." So they formed a circle and they began to pray. Andrew said the prayers were really good, compassionate prayers, shared anguish. "Lord, help us. Deliver us." He said there were a few godly men there that realized that Satan had a strategy against that church in Nepal, and they began praying spiritual warfare prayers like, "Lord, send your angels. We rebuke the enemy. We bind the enemy." Really, Sundar and his church, through EPI, are a mission of this church. And we need to pray too. So how do we pray.

Andrew said that as he sat there, he remembers thinking, "Oh, Lord, how do I pray? In a time like this, a tragedy like this . . . what do I say?"

How do we pray. Last week in Acts 3, you remember we read how Peter and John were going up the steps of the temple. And as they were going up the steps of the temple, they made eye contact with a crippled beggar. And they said to him, "Silver and gold we don't have, but what we have we will give you. Walk!" And the guy walked, and everyone was amazed and came running together. And Peter started preaching the gospel of our Lord with boldness.

Acts 4:1. "The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand. The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

"Why gave you guys permission to go around healing cripples. What authority designated you? Where are your papers? In some ways, this was rather funny, but I'm sure this wasn't funny for them. Because you will remember that just a few weeks before this, Peter and John had stood in the very courtyard of this same high priest as the high priest and the temple guards interrogated Jesus. Peter was so frightened, so terrified, that three times he denied his Lord, whom he said he would never deny, and he ran in shame and in terror into the night.

John, however, stayed there, and so he must have watched as they beat Jesus. And in the morning, how they flogged Jesus, and how they took Jesus out to a hill and crucified Him. . . . The greatest evil, when men took the Son of God and pounded spikes through his hands and his feet in order to torture Him before he died. And the prince of darkness raged upon Him, covered with spit and bruises and blood.

And the only sinless man that ever lived, the Lord of Glory, cried from that cross, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?" And the very creation shook as if with horror, and He died.

The pinnacle of Satan's devices. The - most - evil day that this world has ever seen. Good Friday. . . . Good.

We call it good because on Easter, Jesus rose from the dead, revealing that the most evil day that this world has ever seen is also the very best day, goodest day, that this world has ever seen. And although Satan had plans, God always has bigger and better plans. Light - shines - in the darkness. And there, it's brilliance is most beautifully portrayed. And on that day of burning, bright darkness, God's love shines most glorious for all eternity. That dark day transformed to brilliance by the Risen Christ, just as that cripples body was transformed to a brilliant testimony of our Lord's grace by the very same Christ.

Acts 4:8, "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this: you and all the people of Israel. It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone." Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' 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."

"These guys, they . . . they remind me of someone. I thought we got rid of him. We can't find His body, but gosh, it feels like we are talking to His Spirit."

It must have been kind of unsettling for those guys, don't you think? Not only that, what has gotten into Peter? Because, you know, the resurrection revealed to Peter the truth, God's sovereign purpose in Christ -- to his mind, that is. And so in the end of the gospels, you find out that Peter is still afraid. He is still ashamed. This is after the resurrection.

At the start of the book Acts, at the session meeting, he is not all that impressive either. However, by Acts 3 and 4, the guy is acting like Jesus: so bold, so free. It is like the authority of the high priest and the Roman guard have no jurisdiction over his soul.

Well, Jesus said "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." In Acts 2, the very spirit of truth that Jesus told them about, filled Peter and shined its light, not only on Peter's mind but into the depths of his soul.

And so the high priest, the guards, "they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. 'What are we going to do with these

men?" they asked. 'Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it.'" "What are we going to do with them?" Now that is interesting because these are the very same guys who a few weeks before were demanding a sign from Jesus. Remember? Well, now they have lost His body - that's a good one - and they have this lame man, whom they have all seen for forty years, standing there whole before them. They have a pretty good soon, but do they repent. No. Because a lack of signs isn't their problem. It is arrogance.

"We cannot deny it," they say. "But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name. Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'"

Emperical evidence. "We can't help speaking about it. What's right, for us to obey you? or to obey God?" They said, "We are going to obey God. He is our Sovereign. He is our Authority. He has jurisdiction over our souls." And you see, that obedience set them free.

Just as news of the resurrection didn't seem to penetrate their souls before pentecost, now threats of death cannot penetrate their souls after pentecost. . . . Free . . . For the light had shown in the very depths, the darkest depths of their souls, and now the darkness could not undo the light.

"After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them." They told them about the threats, and the people knew that these were not simply idle threats. "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. 'Sovereign Lord,'"

"Why is it that the nations raise, why do the heathen plot together and imagine vain things," they pray. "Why does this happen, Lord? Why have you forsaken me? Why do we suffer so much? What's going on here? Lord God, we cry out to you. We complain unto thee, oh, Lord."

No that isn't really what they pray. They pray, "Lord, why do the nations rage?" It is because we sinned. It is because we sinned. It is because we have fallen away from you. It is our fault. It is Satan's fault. Satan rebelled. Oh, God, his evil plans, they are so immense and so powerful. Oh, God, we rebuke him. We bind him in Jesus' name." Did they pray that? No.

Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep? No.

They prayed this: "Oh Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against this Anointed One. 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.'" Why did they do that? Why did they conspire against the one whom You anointed? "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." They did what You predestined. What You for-ordained, pro-ordained, and now their request. "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretching out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." 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."

Now, I don't know about you, but to me that is quite a prayer. In a moment like that, no complaining. No anxiety. No grumbling. No fear. Scripture tells us "fear not." Have no anxiety about anything. Rejoice in the Lord always. Paul says this, "let there be no grumbling or complaining among you." No whining. Because Jesus cried, "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me," you see, you will never have to. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Now these folks as they prayed, they seemed to be filled with such wonder, such amazement, such praise even in a time like this. In fact, they basically recite the doctrine of predestination. It seems like a strange time to do it, to me. But they recite the doctrine of predestination, and it's not just stodgy, orthodox theology. It is like the greatest story ever told, and they have just gotten to the chapter entitled, "Them." So they pray, "In the beginning, God, you made the heavens and the earth. Lord God, through David you spoke. You spoke saying that the nations would rage, the leaders against your anointed one. Now check this out, God. It's happened in Herod and in Pilate. They killed the anointed one like You said. And now us. God, we're part of the story. So, Lord God, help us to speak with boldness."

You see, God is sovereign. That means there can be no loose ends. Like Paul wrote, all things -- do you believe the Bible; then you have to deal with this verse -- "all things work together for the good with those who love God and are called according to His purpose." When were you called? Before the foundation of the world. Forknown. Predestined in love. To be conformed to the image of His Son and live for the praise of His glory.

God is telling His story of grace. And you see, I am and you are, if you are a believer, part of that story.

Let me tell you a story. Frank Brown slid into the front seat of his old truck. As always, he slammed the door on the blue Ford, and as he did, he glanced over his shoulder. So . . . So what about that? I mean what I just said was boring. Right? Completely mundane. But

you sat there as if you were interested. Why? Because I told you it was a . . . story. And you see, in a story every detail is meaning-ful. It is meaningful. Why? Because the author of the story doesn't include details unless they have meaning.

Who is the Author of life? Jesus. He is also the Word. Logos. Do you know what that word means in Greek? It means meaning. He is "the meaning." And so you are a story God tells in Jesus. Your story is a part of His story. And His story is history. You, the Bible says now, are hidden in him, crucified with Christ and resurrected with Christ.

GK Chesterton wrote this, "The despair of modern philosophy (or thinking) is this, it does not really believe that there is any meaning [logos] in the universe; therefore it cannot hope to find any romance; its romances will have no plots. A man cannot expect any adventures in the land of anarchy. But a man can expect any number of adventures if he goes travelling in the land of authority. One can find no meanings in a jungle of skepticism; but the man will find more and more meanings who walks through a forest of doctrine and design. Here everything has a story tied to its tail, like the tools or pictures . . ." And he speaks of when he was a young child, in a amazement and wonder over the shovel, the rake, the hoe, and how his father would use them: "like the tools or pictures in my father's house; for it is my father's house."

You see, every story is Jesus, that He might be all things to all men. And I am in my Father's house under His authority because I was chosen in Jesus before the foundations of the world. When I was redeemed, then, He redeemed all of me: my past, my present, my future. The Eternal Lord of reality. I have been adopted by "I am that I am," eternally present, who spoke "Let light shine out of darkness," who created space and time out of themselves.

Predestined.

But now I must not really believe that. I must not totally believe that orthodox doctrine. Why? Because I complain . . . about my past. I gripe about the weather, and any storm that may come along. And when people tell me about Y2K and all that stuff, I kind of get nervous. I must not believe that He is the Author of the story, my story.

When I'm reading an adventure novel, for instance, and a bad storm blows in over the mountains of Mordor, over Gandalf and the riders of Rohan and the men of Rohan, I don't take the book throw it down and say, "Oh Tolkien, great Tolkien! How could you allow such evil?!" No. I get excited. . . And I cherish . . . I love every word that precedes from the pen of the great author J. R. R. Tolkien. But I do not cherish every word from the mouth of my Sovereign God. Every time I complain. Every time I am afraid. Every time, you see, that I think I'm a victim, what am I saying? My God is not sovereign.

Like Peter, I need big help, and it is the Holy Spirit, you see, that does that: applies light to our souls. It was God who said let light shine out of darkness, that has made -- He made -- His light shine in our hearts to give us the Light of the Knowledge of the Glory of God in the face of Christ. You see, Peter had been afraid before pentecost, even though

he had seen the resurrection. Why was that? He had been afraid because all of his past experiences deep within his soul had taught him this: that when people in power in this world -- like the scribes and the priests and the Roman guards -- when they set out to kill somebody, they generally do a pretty good job of it. His experience had taught him that those men are in authority. Even though Jesus had told him for three years they are not in authority. Even though He stood before Pilate and said, "You wouldn't have any authority unless my Father in Heaven gave it you." And even rose from the dead, showing that they had no authority.

But you see, it wasn't until the Spirit made light shine in the darkest corners of Peter's soul that he was no longer afraid. That the lie was completely exposed.

Now all of that may seem rather esoteric and all, but it is about as practical and pedestrian as this. A few years ago, I became my son's assistant soccer coach. I remember the very first day at practice, just kind of confused because the strangest feelings started welling up in me. I am 6' 1" about 200 pounds, but I can take any 8 year old in a game of soccer. I could beat any 8 year old. I really could, but I just felt incredibly insecure. And when my son would miss a ball or fall down, I remember feeling kind of angry at him. I thought in my mind that these feelings are just stupid, their nuts. And yet, I couldn't seem to help feeling them. I remember driving in the car one day, praying to God saying, "What is going on here, God? Would you just help me?" I realized that the problem wasn't my son. It was me. And I saw myself. I realized. I thought of myself at 8 years old. It was a really hard time for me. I was a PK and uncoordinated, kind of chubby. My legs were slow. My soccer team always last. Not necessarily true of my son's, but my soccer team always lost. And kids used to tease me on the bus and call me a loser. Every day I would come home from school and just cry. And I realized that at some level, I despised myself at 8 years old. You see, that was a sin. And so I said, "God, would you forgive me? Would you help me to see me at 8 years old the way you see me?" I began to realize that Jesus is absolutely nuts about little 8-year-old Peter Hiett. I remember even saying something like this: "Peter, 8 years old, you're great. I love you."

You see, I surrendered and I'm still surrendering, I think, that me to the Lord's authority because He is sovereign. He is sovereign there in time as He is sovereign here. He made my legs for His purposes, and He was shaping my heart for His purposes. So now I look at my son, and I tell him, "You know buddy, you are just like me when I was your age. And I am crazy about you." He may not be a soccer star, but I see this: God is shaping in him a tender heart that will glorify Him for all eternity. Now I can say, "Thank you, Jesus," and, "Buddy, let's go kick the soccer ball with boldness." Not afraid of soccer.

You see, Christian, Satan's only power that He has over you now is lies. And he has ingrained lies in you very deeply through your past. Now modern psychology will tell you stuff like that. It will teach you about your inner child and repression and transference and all that kind of stuff. They can see the process that what is real in your imagination is real in its consequence. They can diagnose; however, they can't prescribe meaning.

Logos. Light. And Life.

Neither can you. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. So I found that one of the most effective that we can do for each other in prayer -- you can do this with a small group, the prayer time, whatever -- is to pray for someone over sinful emotions in them, like anxiety and fear and shame. And to say, "Lord, would you reveal to this person, to us, what is the source of those feelings that they are having? Where does this lie come from?" That may be very traumatic for an individual because you may find that the lie was based in an experience of rape or incest or abuse. And the lies are things like this, "You are forsaken. You are unlovable. You will never amount to anything."

Well then, pray this, "Lord, would You shine Your light on this lie. Would You apply Your meaning, Your logos, Your truth to this experience. Jesus, would you show yourself in this memory." Maybe even say this. I think you can say this to the person. "Can you imagine Jesus there? Well, what does He say to you? What does He do?" If they hear lies, that is either their flesh or the enemy. Rebuke enemy. Bind the enemy.

But you see, believe me. You can say, "Can you see, can you imagine Jesus there?" Now listen, Christian. That is not magic. That is not you trying to create reality. That is you getting in touch with reality. Why? Because He was there. They have been imagining a lie, and that is that he wasn't there. If in fact they have been adopted by "I am that I am," predestined for His glory, he was there.

You say, "What about Satan's plans?" Take a look at Good Friday. Did you know you were crucified in Him? Whenever Satan has a plan, oh believe me, Sovereign God -- your God -- has a much greater and more glorious plan. He wants to shine Easter on every Friday, every one of your Fridays and reveal that it's Good Friday. For a Christian's darkest memory exposed to His light becomes brilliant. Why was the gospel so beautifully portrayed for Peter? Because on the day Jesus was crucified, on Friday early that morning, Peter denied him three times and ran in shame. But Jesus appeared to Peter and He took him back to that moment by asking him three times, "Peter, do you love me?" Each time, He said "Then feed my sheep." He reinstated him, or He just reaffirmed what He had said at the very beginning, "You are the rock and on this rock I will build my church." And it is because of Peter's life, because of Jesus and His grace over Peter's life, that the gospel has shown so beautifully through him for 2,000 years.

My most glorious pictures of Jesus outside of scripture have come from a few moments praying with people through painful memories, when somehow Jesus has revealed to them in their minds or their thoughts or their imagination or pictures or a vision, He has revealed to them that "I was there." He was there in their sufferings. That was their Good Friday. And that He wept their tears. And that their pain was His pain. And that their blood was on His robes. And that He covers them with His cloak of righteousness. And that they are hidden in Him. That their sufferings are His sufferings, and therefore His glory is their glory. And His Friday, they are hidden in His Friday, which has become Good Friday . . . because of the resurrection.

I tell you I am filled with wonder, and I realize that our Christian life is an incredible adventure spoken by the author of life. Our Sovereign God.

So you see, these guys, they return from the temple. They return from the very guys who had filled them with fear just a few weeks before, who had killed their best friend Jesus. They return to the church. They tell them about it. They just start praising. They break out into spontaneous praises, words of wonder. They pray, "God, you made the heavens and the earth. You were the one that prophesied about all this through David. And God, we saw it happen: Herod, Pilate, and now us. They are threatening to kill these guys. Wow! We are a part of the story! So God, fill us with your Spirit and cause us to speak Your Words with boldness." And they did. And He did. In fact, next chapter we are going to find out they speak the Word with boldness, and the Scribes and Pharisees, what do they do? They flog them like Jesus. You can die from that. But they leave the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be part of the story.

Wow! Some of them were martyred. Some of them were miraculously delivered. But all of them lived with adventure in the land of authority. That is called the kingdom of God.

So in Maine, they prayed around the circle. Andrew said, "I was sitting there wondering what on earth I could pray. Four or five prayed, and then Sundar prayed. Peter, it wasn't fake. It was real. He prayed, 'Thank you, God, for the privilege of being able to die for you. Thank you for the privilege and honor to serve you in this way. Thank you for my pastor. I pray he died professing your love. Now please, Lord, give strength to my church. Give strength to my family, my wife, my children. That they would profess Your love with boldness before those that are killing them.' After Sundar prayed, nobody else would pray. It was absolutely silent."

You see, I think they realized that was far more than Sundar praying. That was the Spirit of Jesus.

The light shines so very brightly in the darkest places. That is not only true in Nepal, but that is true in you, who were chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world by our Sovereign God, predestined . . . in love . . . to live . . . to the praise of His glorious grace in the beloved.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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