

# The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it – but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

*Vance Havner*

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Text

Acts 4:23-31

Topic

The disciples approach God as the absolute authority in the universe to request boldness as His servants

Title

*Despotly Seeking Servants*

**Acts 4:23** And being let go, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

**Acts 4:24** So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You *are* God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them,

**Acts 4:25** who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'WHY DID THE NATIONS RAGE, AND THE PEOPLE PLOT VAIN THINGS?

**Acts 4:26** THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.'

**Acts 4:27** "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together

**Acts 4:28** to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.

**Acts 4:29** Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word,

**Acts 4:30** by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus."

**Acts 4:31** And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

## Introduction

**Servant** is the repeated word that jumps out at you when reading these verses:

1. Jesus Christ is twice called **Your holy Servant Jesus**.
2. King David is called **your servant David**.
3. The disciples called themselves **Your servants**.

It's obvious that the first Christians considered themselves servants in a long line of servants.

There is another word in these verses that is not so obvious. In verse twenty-four they began their prayer by addressing God as **Lord**. It is not the usual word for Lord. It is the Greek word *despotēs*. It is where we get the word *despot* from.

We use the word *despot* mostly in a derogatory manner to describe a ruler with absolute authority and power. The first Christians used it for God as a term of endearment.

Peter, John, and the rest of the believers were thrilled to be the servants of their Despot. Because God's rule and authority were absolute, they could be certain He was in total control of their circumstances – even their persecution. It freed them to go on serving Him in the power of the Holy Spirit.

These first Christians thought like servants of a despot. Then they joyfully submitted to Him. I believe it to be one of the keys to their spiritual success.

I serve God; so do you, or at least so do most of you. Serving, however, does not make us servants:

1. We are serving but not servants when we think we are volunteers who serve at our own convenience.

2. We are servants and not just serving when we go on submitting ourselves to the circumstances our benevolent Despot has designed for us.

Our text can help us determine if we are merely serving or if we are servants. I'll organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 Do You Think Like A Servant?, and #2 Do You Submit Like A servant?

### #1 Do You Think Like A Servant? (v23-28)

Peter and John had been used by God to heal the lame man at the gate of the Temple. The healing gathered a crowd to which Peter preached about Jesus. Many were saved.

The religious authorities took Peter and John into custody overnight. It was the beginning of the official persecution of the Church. Finding nothing they could charge them with, the religious authorities nevertheless warned Peter and John to quit preaching about Jesus.

Would they quit? **Of course not!** But why not? What was it about them that made quitting impossible?

One thing at least that made quitting impossible was that they thought like servants. Let's see what it means to think like servants.

First, they thought of themselves as being part of the Lord's Church:

[Acts 4:23](#) And being let go, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

The first thing Peter and John did was go to a meeting of the Church to give their testimony. The Church was not just a voluntary gathering of people. [They went to their own](#) is strong phrasing. They belonged to one another; they were part of one another; they were connected with one another.

Implied is that this was the Lord's Church. He was the one building it on the earth. It existed for Him, to bring Him glory. We should remind ourselves of these things. It's easy to begin thinking of

Church as something that exists for me, to meet my needs or satisfy my desires.

You are not thinking like a servant unless you are vitally involved in the life of a local Church.

Next, they thought of God as their Despot:

**Acts 4:24** So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You *are* God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them,

They had just been incarcerated, interrogated, and severely threatened. The first word out of their mouths was *Despotēs*. Despite their trouble and persecution they acknowledged that God had absolute authority. Nothing could happen to them that caught God off-guard.

They referred to special creation. It was God **who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them**. He has not abandoned His creation. He is working within it to accomplish His eternal purposes.

Trouble and persecution seem strange to us. This is where we can start to have trouble thinking like servants. Some have even come to the conclusion that God cannot be the absolute authority over His creation if His people can suffer.

If God has the absolute authority of a Despot over His creation, then why not deliver us from trouble? **Because He sometimes chooses to deliver us *through* trouble.**

It is nothing for God to deliver you from trouble. It is through your trouble that you experience the greatest grace and growth. God sees the big picture. He's looking ahead while we are looking around.

You're not thinking like a servant unless you acknowledge God is your benevolent Despot.

The next four verses give additional depth to the idea God is a Despot with absolute authority despite your troubling circumstances.

**Acts 4:25** who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'WHY DID THE NATIONS RAGE, AND THE PEOPLE PLOT VAIN THINGS?

**Acts 4:26** THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.'

This is taken from Psalm two. It was a prophecy of how the promised Messiah would be resisted by earthly authorities. They applied it to the recent rejection of Jesus Christ in His first coming:

**Acts 4:27** "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together

**Herod and Pontius Pilate** represented earthly civil authority. **Gentiles** are all non-Jews. They were against Jesus, as were **the people of Israel**. All earthly authorities were against Jesus.

God is Despot with absolute authority. Jesus was His **holy servant, anointed** in His first coming. How could Jesus be rejected by mere earthly authorities?

Verse twenty-eight answers the question:

**Acts 4:28** to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. - *being changed to bring change* -

Jesus' rejection was within the **purpose determined before** by God. While the Lord was being crucified, God was in control, exercising absolute authority over His creation.

The technical word for God's control over creation is sovereignty. One definition of sovereignty reads, "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter III).

Since God is before all things, created all things, upholds all things, is above all things, and owns all things, He is the rightful ruler of all

things. Since God is all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing, and all-wise, He both knows the best thing to do and has the power to do it.

The companion doctrine to God's sovereignty is God's providence. Providence comes from the Latin *pro* and *video*, meaning *foresight*. A good definition of providence is "that continuous agency of God by which He makes all the events of the physical and moral universe fulfill the original design with which He created it" (A. H. Strong, quoted by Geisler).

God's sovereignty and providence should never be thought of as fatalism, which cancels out human freedom. But neither does providence deny certainty, as if God is surprised by your freely chosen actions.

When we mention sovereignty and providence we enter the realm of systematic theology. Brilliant and scholarly men wrestle with the concepts and the Scriptures to try to argue for their explanation of exactly how God's sovereignty and providence work.

The verses we're studying do not *argue* about God's sovereignty and providence. They *assume* God's sovereignty and providence. So must we, whether we can understand it or not.

In other words, the Bible teaches that God is sovereign and exercises providence over His creation. It doesn't explain, to our satisfaction, exactly how these things work. We try to explain them through our systems of theology – all of which fall short.

Peter, John and the first Christians assumed and accepted these truths. So must we.

That's the point. The circumstances of your life are no less within God's sovereignty. It means God knows you are being persecuted at work or at school. He could easily deliver you from it. If He does not deliver you from it, then He intends to deliver you through it – with grace for growth. Your part is to think like a servant in your circumstances.

Let's use an example closer to home. Maybe you are struggling in your marriage. Quite frankly, you want out of it – but you do not have the biblical grounds of adultery. Your part is to think like a servant. God intends to give you grace for growth to go through it. God is the *Despotēs*. You are the servant. Based on that appraisal, the first Christians did not ask to be delivered from trouble. They did not ask for their enemies to be overcome. **They asked only for the enabling to continue as servants in the very circumstances that were troublesome.**

Which brings us to our second question:

## #2 Do You Submit Like A Servant?

(v29-31)

Their prayer request catches you off-guard:

**Acts 4:29** Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word,

They knew it was God's will for them to **speak the word**. Knowing God's will, there was only one way to pray. They wanted **boldness** to continue doing the very thing that had gotten them into trouble.

God's word reveals His will in most of the circumstances we find ourselves in. We can waste a lot of breath praying for things that are outside of God's will for us. We are certainly not submitting like servants when we want to be out of God's will.

Again I must use marriage as the example. Most divorces among Christians do not have the biblical grounds of adultery. Couples divorce despite the revealed will of God. They are not therefore submitting like servants. Is it any wonder that they do not receive the grace they need to remain in their marriage when they've already determined they do not need to submit to God?

The first Christians submitted like servants and expected miracles:

**Acts 4:30** by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus."

If they had quit speaking God's word then God would have had no opportunity to **heal** others or do **signs and wonders through the name of Jesus**.

We can become so selfish about getting out of our circumstances that we miss the opportunity to glorify God within and through our circumstances. God can literally do miracles if we will submit to Him. He can heal your marriage. He can do wonderful things at your work or at your school. But He won't have the opportunity if you won't submit as His servant within your circumstances.

**Acts 4:31** And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

I submit that God was excited about their perspective. He shook the place as an outward display of His excitement.

Whether or not we experience God-quakes, it's precious to think that our prayers can excite God. They will when they have the perspective that we are His servants submitted to His will.

God could not help but fill them with the Holy Spirit because they were willing to do what He wanted. If we are not experiencing the filling of the Holy Spirit, perhaps it is because we are not yet willing to do what God wants.

In their case it was to **speak the word of God with boldness**. In your case it will be whatever God has called you to do as His submitted servant.

## Conclusion

It's up to you. You can serve at your own convenience. Or you can think like a servant and submit to God.

If you serve at your own convenience, you might avoid some troublesome circumstances. But you will not experience the filling of the Holy Spirit to serve the Lord with boldness.

If instead you think like a servant and submit to the Lord, He will give you grace to grow within your circumstances.

You just might experience a God-quake as He is excited by your prayers.

