

THE VOLUNTEER STATE

ACTS 4:23-31 OCTOBER 16, 2019

Who in their right mind would *volunteer* to be imprisoned in the Auschwitz concentration camp? Anyone with an interest in self-preservation would do whatever they could to *avoid* such a mission. Because, from our perspective, it would be a *suicide* mission.

And yet, that's exactly what one man did. Witold Pilecki, a captain in the Polish cavalry, became *the Auschwitz volunteer*.¹ He would spend 2 1/2 years there before making a daring escape, bringing two other prisoners out with him and giving the first official report of exactly what the Nazis were doing. He is recognized as the *only* known volunteer to be imprisoned in the camp.²

His courage and sacrifice are dramatic and extraordinary. He is rightly remembered as a hero and, as one Polish leader said, "an example of inexplicable goodness at a time of inexplicable evil."³ In our hearts, we hope that *we* would've had the strength of character and boldness to do what he did. Knowing that, despite the long odds, what looked to some like a suicide mission was actually an essential mission of mercy.

In Acts 4 we find a scene not so different than the one I've described. The Christians of Jerusalem realize that the governments around them have declared war on God and His people. What would they do now that their powerful enemies had their sights set on them?

When we left off, Peter and John had narrowly avoided execution or imprisonment. They'd only spent a night in jail, not 2 1/2 years like Witold did, but walking out of the court that day, it was obvious that this wasn't over - it was just the beginning of persecution and opposition.

When they get back home we don't see them celebrating that they had somehow dodged a bullet. And we don't see them preparing a counter-suit for having their rights infringed. We don't see them trying to leverage their 15 minutes of fame. Instead, they gather with the Church and go to prayer and there they ask God to not only help them but to actively send them *back* out, into enemy territory, on what must've looked like a suicide mission. Because, they were going to head right back out to do what they had been doing. Not covertly, but *openly*, despite the dangers ahead.

Remarkably, in our text, there wasn't just *one* volunteer, but *thousands* who were of 1 mind and heart, who asked God to make the extraordinary ordinary for all of them. And, we'll see, the Lord was happy to oblige.

We get a look at this dramatic prayer meeting, starting in verse 23.

Acts 4:23 - ²³ After they were released, they went to their own people and reported everything the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

What a great descriptor of the church they were a part of. Luke calls them "their own people." The way God has organized Christians is a wonderful thing. We're not just a crowd. We're not just fellow share-holders. We're put together as a *family*. Peter and John didn't go looking for other fishermen

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witold_Pilecki

² <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/witold-pilecki>

³ *ibid*.

that day. They didn't go looking for other Galileans. They went to their *Christian* brothers and sisters. Those were *their people*. Many of them they'd only known a few days or weeks, but they understood that God had made them a family unit. Now, of course, back then there was only 1 church in the world. It was there in Jerusalem. Today, even a small town like Hanford has *many* different options of where one could potentially be in a community with other Christians. And, while we share a universal brotherhood, God's plan is that you be actually, personally connected to a *certain* local church. The New Testament talks about us being knitted together and fitting perfectly. As a living stone, you're meant to be mortared next to *specific* other stones in God's building. And so, to that end, we each want to be sure that we are part of a local fellowship and part of *the* local fellowship that God has for us. Let *Him* decide. Let's not make the decision ourselves based on likes and dislikes of certain styles or programs.

Acts 4:24 - ²⁴ When they heard this, they all raised their voices to God and said, "Master, You are the One who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them.

The situation had been made clear to the group. To continue as a church member meant to be a law breaker as far as the Sanhedrin was concerned. Their first response was to pray, not fearfully but *confidently*. Throughout this short prayer we'll see no knocking of the knees, just a *bowing* of the knee to their God and Father, who they address at the start as "Master." It's the word we get the term "despot" from. "One who possesses supreme authority."⁴ The prayer as a whole acknowledges God's absolute supremacy. He is supreme over all creation, over the flow of history and, they, in their *freedom*, choose to give Him supremacy over their own lives.

Acts 4:25-26 - ²⁵ You said through the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David Your servant: Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot futile things? ²⁶ The kings of the earth took their stand and the rulers assembled together against the Lord and against His Messiah.

We've seen already that the early church was *full* of the Psalms. They keep cropping up in sermons and now in their prayers. Here we have the opening lines of Psalm 2, which was and is prophetic concerning the Messiah and His ultimate establishment of a Kingdom on the earth after the Great Tribulation. But the Church recognized that David's words also had application to what was going on at the moment. We talk about how Bible prophecy will often have multiple phases of application. Sometimes, when it comes to a prophecy like this, there was the *immediate* application, which had something to do with David's reign. Then there was the *partial* fulfillment, identified here in Acts 4. And then there is the *ultimate* fulfillment, which will take place after Armageddon. Not *every* prophecy works that way, but sometimes they do, particularly (it seems) when it comes to end times prophecies.

What was happening to the Church was a specific fulfillment of Psalm 2, but the scene also helps us to recognize the importance of having a *Biblical worldview*. Not just in general, but when it comes to *your* life and *your* circumstances. We can trust God's word to help adjust our perspective so that we're looking at things spiritually, according to the truth that God has revealed. Of course, we're not *always* going to be able to find a chapter and verse that deals specifically with every situation we're in, but God's word contains all we need for life and Godliness. We are supposed to use the Scriptures as a lamp and a light and use it to *understand* what is going on in our own lives and in the world around us. The Christians in Acts used the Bible as the lens through which they viewed life.

⁴ Vines Complete Expository Dictionary

They didn't go the other way around and re-interpret the Scriptures according to their own culture or their own desires or anything like that.

Instead, when this thing happened with the Sanhedrin, it's as if they said, "Huh. What has God revealed in the Bible that explains what we should think about this situation and what we should do about it?"

And because that was their approach, they knew that this run-in with the Sanhedrin wasn't some misunderstanding or something that would just blow over in a day or two. They understood by the Word of God that this was part of the furious war that the unbelieving world was waging against God. And that would inform them concerning how they should react and respond.

Acts 4:27 - ²⁷ "For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, assembled together against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed

The entire world is here represented. As these believers had come together as an assembly who love and serve Jesus Christ, this other, *much larger* assembly had come together in violent opposition against Him. The Christians knew that the pressures and difficulty they were facing were not really about *them*, but about Jesus. And so, their response should not be to defend themselves, but to serve their King.

Acts 4:28 - ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your plan had predestined to take place.

Does this verse teach that God has meticulously determined every action, event and movement of each molecule in His universe? Or, using our text here, did God *force* Herod, Pilate and the others to do the things they did in regard to Jesus Christ?

Christians divide over the issue of predestination and sovereignty. But the implications of our view of these doctrines are significant. On one extreme you have those who believe in what we would call meticulous determinism. That, yes, God does not only allow but *cause* all things to happen throughout history, be they good or bad from our perspective. Of course, the problem there is that God must, by default, be the Author of evil. And if this is your understanding of sovereignty, one wonders what purpose there even is in praying, evangelizing or seeking the Lord.

On the other hand there are those who believe that God has *no* such meticulous control, but instead has given *so much* freedom to the universe that the future is yet undetermined. God is simply *responding* to choices we make. This is called open theism. Of course, the problem with this view is that God cannot truly be omnipotent or all-knowing. And it is difficult to make a case that He is truly Sovereign under open theism. If this is your understanding, it's hard to trust that God can do any of the things He's promised. And it makes His prophetic pronouncements highly suspect.

There is a third way, one which doesn't discount Scriptures like this one which declare God's sovereignty. Nor does it jettison those passages which *clearly* reveal the free will God has given to mankind.

Rather it acknowledges that God is in charge of this universe and all of history. He is absolutely absolutely all-powerful, omnipotent, all-knowing, and sovereign. But, as Dr. Roger Olsen says, "God is sovereign *over* His sovereignty."⁵ The Bible reveals that three other variables are true when it

⁵ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/a-non-calvinist-relational-view-of-gods-sovereignty/>

comes to God accomplishing His plan for this world: First, He has given mankind a free will and it is *genuinely* free. Second, God has decided to *include* us in the accomplishing of His will as instruments and participants. Even, sometimes, as collaborators. Third, God allows Himself to be *impacted* by our choices and behaviors. Not *changed*, but *impacted*. If that sounds strange, consider passages like Isaiah 63 and Ephesians 4 which say we can *grieve* the Holy Spirit, impacting the emotions of God. Consider stories like the wilderness wanderings of Israel, where God postponed the accomplishing of His will for 40 years due to their unbelief. Consider the fact that Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, will live forever in a glorified body as the GodMan, bearing the scars of His crucifixion. Concerning our participation in God's work, consider the way, in both Testaments, where God allows men to collaborate with Him in His work. Abraham barter with God concerning Sodom. Jesus told His disciples they could give or withhold blessing from houses they visited and that whatever they bound on earth would be bound in heaven. The building of the permanent Temple was a man's idea, not God's.⁶

This freedom does not allow for the possibility that God will not accomplish His will. God *is* in charge and what He has said will happen *will* happen. Esther is the clearest example of this. Mordecai told her: "If you keep silent at this time, liberation and deliverance *will come* to the Jewish people from another place." God's will *would* be done. One theologian puts it this way:

*"The plan of God is predetermined, but the way in which He realizes it is dependent partly on the free cooperation of His subjects. This does not detract from His omnipotence, for it means that He is so powerful that He is willing to attain His objectives by allowing a certain room for freedom of action on the part of man."*⁷

Acts 4:29 - ²⁹ And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that Your slaves may speak Your message with complete boldness

Warren Wiersbe points out that they prayed for power, not protection. Enablement, not escape. They encourage themselves by remembering God is all-powerful and that He has a perfect, loving plan for them. In that plan, they saw themselves as *slaves*. It's a strong word. One that stresses dependence on the master and being compelled to serve him. But they were not captured or stolen away by God. Rather, they *volunteered* to bind themselves to Him. In contrast, we're told that raging nations in Psalm 2 say this: "Let us tear off [the] chains [of the Lord and His Anointed One] and free ourselves from their restraints." That's the verse that comes immediately after the ones they quoted earlier.

So, these volunteer slaves ask their Master for something, and that is "complete boldness." The term means assurance and outspokenness. But, ironically, it also means "freedom of speech."⁸ So, these slaves asked the Lord to empower them to speak *freely* the message they had received. That's the kind of God we have - One who gives trust and freedom to His slaves. One who gives individuals who He blood bought the *option* of whether they will faithfully serve Him or not. Will we volunteer to step into His will and into the mission of mercy that He's called us to be a part of? In Acts 4, the Christians said yes.

Acts 4:30 - ³⁰ while You stretch out Your hand for healing, signs, and wonders to be performed through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus."

⁶ 1 Chronicles 17:6

⁷ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/a-non-calvinist-relational-view-of-gods-sovereignty/>

⁸ NASB Dictionary / Vines Dictionary

This verse encouraged me to pray big prayers. R.A Torrey once said, “Pray for great things, expect great things, work for great things, but above all - pray.”⁹ The God of the Bible is the same yesterday, today and forever. And, while He does not *always* respond miraculously, He still can and He still does. So let’s make it a habit of praying for *big* things while making ourselves available to whatever small part He may want us to play.

Acts 4:31 - ³¹ When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God’s message with boldness.

They were filled again. We’ve noticed before that the Christians in Acts apparently “leaked” and, therefore, were filled anew multiple times. We’re told in the New Testament to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ We don’t want to consider our communion with God as a one-and-done thing. But we’re to continually pursue that nearness and filling and relationship day by day.

What I love about this verse is that, not only did God respond, He *immediately* set them to doing that thing which they asked about. They said, “Lord, please let us speak with boldness.” And, as verse 31 ends, it’s as if God says, “Ok. Let’s start *right now!*” And they began to speak His message. The message of the Gospel, which is the power of God for salvation.

Peter and John’s ordeal with the Sanhedrin hadn’t scared the Christians off. Rather, it stirred them up to recommit themselves to the work of God. It’s similar to what Paul would later write in Philippians 1:14. “Most of the brothers in the Lord have *gained confidence* from my imprisonment and dare even more to speak the message fearlessly.”

The Church understood that they were a part of a necessary mission, the work of God, and that they, *individually*, had the chance to volunteer to join in, not a *fight*, but a *rescue* mission. Like Witold Pilecki, their objective wasn’t to go in and kill their enemies, but to bring captives out alive.

Remarkably, even in Psalm 2, the prophetic, Messianic Psalm which reveals the violent hatred that mankind has for God and His Christ, *even there* the song ends with a plea that the kings of the earth would turn to the Lord and serve Him, so that they would *not* perish. They’re told there how they can take refuge in the Son and find joy, blessing and happiness.

The Church realized that they were being sent with that same message to the kings and peoples who were coming against them. Centuries before, the Holy Spirit had spoken through God’s servant David. And in Acts 4, the Holy Spirit was speaking through God’s sons and daughters, the same message of salvation. And now we are the ones who have volunteered for the Lord’s service. Now we can choose to step into this dramatic mission of mercy. As we do, we’ll need God’s supernatural enabling. We can’t live the Christian life without it. But *with* it, we can live with understanding, we can live without fear, and we, too, can be sources of inexplicable *heavenly* good in a time of inexplicable evil. May God give us the heart and fortitude and filling to do it.

⁹ Warren Wiersbe *Be Dynamic*

¹⁰ Ephesians 5:18