

Video of Popeye song. “I yam what I yam and that all that I yam”.

Well friends, we are nearing the end of our sermon series, “Lettuce Pray, a Spiritual Salad”. Today we turn our attention to a type of prayer that I’ve prayed at difficult times in my life. Prayers for strength. Spinach prayers of strength. Take a moment and think about a time when you really needed God’s strength to get through something.

Today we overhear a prayer of strength offered up by Jesus’ disciples in the Book of Acts. Acts is the story of the birth of the church. And as with any birth, it wasn’t without pain. News flash, there is pain in childbirth.

Before we talk about this prayer, wouldn’t you like to know the events that led up to it?

Turn back in your bibles to Acts 3. It’s after Pentecost. Jesus’ disciples settled into a regular routine. Every day they would go to the temple to prayer. Every day there were three specific times for prayer. The third hour of the day, which would be 9:00 am. The sixth hour of the day, which would be noon. And finally the 9th hour of the day which would be around 3:00 pm. It was during the 9th hour prayer time that Peter and John were headed to the temple to pray. Luke, the author of Acts, says they enter through a gate called the Beautiful gate. Luke is the only one who mentions this gate in the entire Bible and no other historical sources mention a Gate by this name. No one is sure of where this gate sat in the temple.

Here’s what we know. The Beautiful gate was an entrance into the temple where people with illnesses and disabilities gathered to beg. This is how Peter and John met a man who would cause quite a commotion for them. But not intentionally. He isn’t named in Acts, so let’s give him one. Let’s go with Ezra. It says in Acts that Ezra was born lame. He didn’t know what walking was like. He’d never done it. Because he could not walk, he could not work. Couldn’t earn a wage.

Ezra did to Peter and John what he would do to anyone who passed through this gate, Ezra asked them for money. Peter and John stopped to look at Ezra. Peter says to him “Look at us”. Ezra is excited! Yes! He’s going to get money! He just knows it! What would he buy? Maybe some raisin cakes!

But money wasn’t what Peter and John had to offer. They make their offer through one of the most beautiful statements in Acts. 3:6. “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

Peter grabs Ezra by the hand and pulls him up. Ezra...he can walk! He can walk! He can walk! Ezra couldn’t contain himself. He didn’t just walk. He leaped for joy! Over and over and over again.

People came running over when they heard the commotion. Ezra wasn’t quiet about this. Everyone knew Ezra. He’d begged at this gate for years. They couldn’t believe what happened. How it happened. These were just a couple of regular guys, right?

Peter and John seized on this opportunity. They led the crowd to a portico called Solomon’s Porch. This was a public place where large crowds could gather to discuss things they’ve learned from temple and synagogue gatherings. Anyone could gather here.

Peter and John used this time to talk to Ezra and the gathering crowd. They talked about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. They talked about how the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus and condemned him to death. They told of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Then, they called the crowd to repentance and acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. 5,000 people became believers that day.

With all of this commotion, it was bound to happen. Those nosy Sadducees and Pharisees noticed, and they gathered to listen. So did the priests and even the captain of the temple. And they were annoyed. Not just because these uneducated men were teaching, but because of what they were teaching. Jesus...raised from the dead. And these disciples were blaming them. When will this story go away? The Jewish leaders did the only thing they knew to do. Arrest Peter and John.

Since it was now late in the day, Peter and John would have to wait in jail until the next morning. Then they would appear before the high priest. The first thing they are asked is. "By what power or by what name did you do this?" They had no idea what they were stepping into.

Peter laid it on them. Peter asks why they are being arrested for this good deed. Then he makes it clear that it is because of Jesus of Nazareth...who they crucified that this healing was possible. Peter loved throwing the crucifixion thing in their face.

The Jewish leaders did not know what to do with these 2. They were in a pickle. You see, far too many people saw what happened. They all believed it was a sign from God. If the leaders punished these guys, the crowd...they might riot! And Rome wouldn't be too happy about that. But can't we just get them to shut up? That is what they do. They warn Peter and John not once, but twice to stop talking about this.

Does it work? Listen to what Peter says in chapter 4:20. "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard". But the Jewish leaders had no choice. There was nothing to accuse them of. So, they released Peter and John.

This brings us to our prayer. I can't even fathom how Peter and John were feeling in this moment. I've never experienced being in jail, prison, or any other involuntary custody, unless being sent to my room counts.

I've never been publicly beaten, or even experienced any real threat to my well-being. I mean, yes I've been frightened by this or that. In fact I've been quite scared at times. You can be sure that when I lived in the Midwest, a tornado warning would send me to the basement no matter how dank and dirty it was. But none I've been frightened of or scared by were significant in the end.

I don't know about you, but I'd say my life has been pretty easy, a cushy existence. Peter and John couldn't say that. They faced clear and present danger and that is what they prayed about. They have just been released from the Sanhedrin. This arrest could have easily led to their deaths. After all, these same people instigated Jesus' death just a few months earlier.

The people who raged against the apostles weren't bluffing or making idle threats. When the apostles offer up this prayer we heard today, they do so, knowing that they are confronting the same hostile forces that nailed Jesus to the cross.

It's not that surprising, given the circumstances, that the apostles wanted to pray. But it is the content of this prayer that is surprising. They do not pray to be delivered from danger. They do not ask for removal of the threat. They ask God to look at their situation and give them courage to face it.

The apostles' extraordinary prayer asks God to give them boldness and courage to match the threats they faced. They ask God to equip them to do more signs and wonders.

Why would they want this? Why would the apostles ask for this? Don't they know? Signs and wonders would draw more attention to them, not less. The more attention they drew, the more likely the chance that they would be persecuted and victimized. It made no sense!

Except...these apostles were grateful for the opportunity to be persecuted for the cause of Christ. They just needed the courage and the capacity to face those persecutions.

Look around our church for a moment. This church that we sit in today has been handed down to us at a high price. A very high price. Tertullian, one of the early church fathers said this. "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church." Think about how many saints have sacrificed life and limb literally, so we could hear the words of Jesus.

Stephen, stoned to death. James, executed by Herod with a sword. Paul was beheaded. Peter was crucified upside down. 2nd century Christian women like Felicity and Perpetua were killed by a gladiator in Carthage Africa. Thecla was a disciple of Paul's. She was sentenced to be burned at the stake, and a storm saved her from that. But later she was thrown to the lions. Ignatius of Antioch (not Loyola) was also thrown to the lions.

The emperor Nero takes the cake on Christian persecution. And this will be graphic. When Nero found Christian who refused to worship him, he would have their tongues cut out and their teeth broken. He even covered a believer in tar and burned him alive in front of his dinner guests. Terrified dinner guests.

Friend, this faith. It's come to us at a great price. We have no idea what suffering of this magnitude is like. And I will not dishonor them by comparing myself to them. I will ask for this. Could you have the courage to ask for this too. Let us pray. Let us pray for that Spinach of Strength. Perhaps we might find a small parcel of the courage needed to speak the gospel boldly. No matter the minor inconveniences and annoyances we might encounter for the cause of Christ. What if our prayers for strength ended the way the apostles' prayer did? Wherever we happen to offer that prayer of strength, might that place be shaken.

Let us pray.

