

Why is it that we've failed to look at prayer this way? Is it because our enemy has succeeded in getting us to forget that we're at war? Because of this, we tend to use God's gift of prayer primarily for selfish reasons, or we convince ourselves that we don't have the time to pray, or we doubt that prayer is effective, that God won't hear our prayer anyway. Prayer is something that costs us nothing but time (and perhaps some worn and sore knees). When we're stuck in traffic, we can pray. When we're in the waiting room for the doctor or the dentist, we can pray. When we're waiting to take the court or the field for practice, we can pray. There's no time that we cannot pray. What valid excuse can we possibly offer for not praying? Absolutely none. We're guilty. And we deserve not to have God hear and answer the prayers we do pray. How thankful we can be that we don't have to offer God any excuses for these sins. God has already offered up his Son in payment for them all. Jesus lived, suffered, and died to silence God's anger against all our failures to pray. **"The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7)**, he assures us in his Word. And now, as Jesus rules in heaven as our High Priest, God promises us, **"If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 Jn 2:1)**. As Martin Luther once said, *"Christ is our Great Intercessor, who takes every prayer we utter and lays it before his Father in heaven, insisting that he hear and answer it for his name's sake."*

My friends, because Jesus died to take away our sins, because he intercedes for us before the Father's throne in heaven, we can pray with courage, knowing that God, for Jesus' sake, hears and answers all our prayers. And we can pray for courage, so that we, like the apostles, speak God's Word boldly, or, as the Greek word really says, *"saying everything that needs to be said without fear or hesitation."*

May we never forget that we are at war with Satan and that his greatest desire is to destroy our souls and the souls of others. That's why we keep coming back here week after week. That's why we make our worship an *Easter Every Sunday* priority. It is here, in his Word and Sacrament, that the Holy Spirit strengthens us to pray. It is here that we are reminded of Jesus' powerful resurrection from the dead and that God can do and will do the impossible. It is here that Jesus teaches us to pray to our Father above—regularly, fervently, and with priority, *"Your kingdom come."* Amen.

Acts 4:23-31 – *Prayer Is Powerful* – 419, 735, 413, 431
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What do the following items have in common? 1 egg, 1 slice of bacon, 2 sausages, 1 wedge of cheese, 1 pat of butter, 1 pork chop, some liver, and a scoop of pudding. No, it's not what I ate when my kids took me out for lunch at Perkin's on Father's Day. This was the amount of food each person in Britain was allotted during World War II—per week. Most of us could eat that much food in one meal, and yet it was all the food the British were allowed to buy weekly during the war. Clothes and gasoline were also rationed. Luxury liners were turned into troop transports. All available resources were poured into the war effort. It was by no means a comfortable way to live, but folks knew what was at stake, and they were willing to put up with it to keep their troops supplied so that victory could be achieved.

Our text is a vivid reminder that we, too, are at war—as Paul the Apostle says, **"not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ep 6:12)**. In this war Satan seeks to steal our faith and rob us of our eternity in heaven. And it isn't a war being waged only on the other side of the world. It's a war being fought in our homes, where we work, where we play, and where we go to school. Has this impacted the way we pray? Has this war with Satan changed for whom and for what we pray? Our text models for us how Christians who are at war are to pray. Last week, as we began our series *Prayer Is Powerful*, we learned how we stand in the breach and pray for others, especially our children and young people. Today we note:

Big Problems but a Bigger God

- 1. Let's pray with courage.**
- 2. Let's pray for courage.**

1. Although it's easy for us to forget that we're at war, that wasn't the case with the apostles. The Jewish leaders who had conspired with Pontius Pilate to crucify Jesus kept a close eye on the apostles' activities and hauled them in for questioning on a regular basis. On one such occasion, Peter and John were arrested after they healed a crippled man and told the crowds that they had done so by the power of the name of Jesus. The Jewish leaders forbade Peter and John even to speak the name of Jesus and threatened them with great bodily harm if they did.

Intimidation is an effective weapon of war. If the enemy can be intimidated, then victory can be declared without a single shot being fired. Working through the Jewish leaders, Satan was going all out to intimidate Jesus' disciples. Did it work? Not at all. When Peter and John told the others what had happened, Luke says, *"They raised their voices together in prayer to God."* They prayed with courage and said: *"Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens 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 plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his 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, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."*

The disciples weren't intimidated because they knew and trusted God's promises. They knew from what God had said through David that the leaders of the world will rant and rage against Jesus and his followers, but they will do so in vain. Why? Because God remains in control and only allows that which will benefit his people. This was evident in the way God allowed the Jewish leaders and Pilate to crucify Jesus. What they did was sinful and wrong, but God used it to save the world. Or, as our text says, *"They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."* Later on, God used the persecution of Christians for his purposes, too. Like a stone thrown into a pool of water, the scattered Christians took with them their faith and shared it with others in an ever-increasing circle.

The challenges that we, as a congregation and as a church body, are facing should remind us that we, too, are at war with Satan. Fewer people are in church each week. Our monetary resources are shrinking. Our ability to train enough future pastors, teachers, and staff ministers is being challenged. If this weren't enough, Satan has stepped up his attacks on our families and on our own personal faith in a culture that doesn't appreciate the value of godliness and in a world that celebrates all the things that are contrary to God's will. Is it time to panic? No, it is not. It's time to pray and to pray with courage. That's why Martin Luther in his explanation to the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer, *"Your kingdom come,"* writes, *"God's kingdom certainly comes by itself even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us."* In other words, when we pray, *"Your kingdom come,"* we are asking Jesus to rule in our hearts and to come and rule in the hearts of many others.

While it may seem that things are out of control, Psalm 2, which the disciples quote in their prayer, reminds us that God is in charge. What the disciples don't quote is verse 4 of the psalm, where David says, *"The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them."* Nothing happens outside of God's will; nothing surprises him. God's promise is that he will work those things that we see as challenges—individually and collectively as a church and as a synod—for our good. It may be in making each one of us aware that we need Jesus more than Jesus needs us. It may be in helping us to see that we are St. Paul's, we are the WELS. They're not entities outside of us, things over there. In fact, we are the Church, the Body of Christ, and as such we want to support and pray for the Church with courage.

2. But let's not just pray with courage, knowing that God is in charge; let's pray for courage. That's what the apostles did. Their prayer continues: *"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your Word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."* Wow! This was a prayer for incredible courage. And it had remarkable results. Luke says, *"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."*

These men had just been arrested and threatened, but they didn't pray that God would keep them safe from their enemies. Nor did they pray that God would judge the Jewish leaders for the threats they had uttered against them. Incredibly, they prayed for courage to keep on speaking God's Word boldly, that is, without fear or hesitation.

How does that compare to the things we tend to pray for today? Do we ask God to give us opportunities to witness boldly to someone, or do we pray that God would grant us safe travel to and from our vacation? Do we pray that God would give us the courage to speak his love to an unbelieving family member or friend, or do we pray that God would keep us and our family healthy? While it's certainly not wrong to pray for any of these earthly things—that's one of the neat things about prayer: we can pray for whatever we want—if it's all we ever pray for, then we've forgotten that we're at war. Then we've turned prayer into nothing more than an in-house intercom we use to order drinks and snacks while we sit in front of our widescreen TV. Because we're at war, we need to think of prayer like a walky-talky that connects us to our heavenly headquarters. We need to use this walky-talky to call on God for help when we're engaging the enemy and to order air strikes as we move in on Satan's territory.