

Responding to Persecution Acts 4:23-31

**This week Cardinal Pell** begins his appearance in court to face charges of historical sexual offences. This has arisen out of the Royal Commission on Sexual Offences in the Catholic Church. Much has been written, a book has been sold, Current Affairs programs have been filled with the accusations of many complainants. Yet only a few have risen to his defence and pointed out the lack of evidence for these complaints.

What does the Australian church need most? Many rightly say, “We desperately need revival.” But how does revival come? Many say that a strong dose of persecution might do the trick.

**Persecution has** always made the church stronger. It burns impurity out of the church. It drives away the nominal, worldly attenders, and separates the church from the world. It drives the church to prayer. It unites the church in brotherly love. It often causes the church to expand numerically, as seen in China under Communism.

**I’m not ready** to pray for persecution, because I’m not fond of suffering! I’ll leave it to the sovereignty of God, who knows what we need. But we do need to be ready for persecution in case it comes. Our religious freedom in Australia is on thin ice. In Queensland children are being threatened if they share their belief in Jesus in the school yard. It is not inconceivable that we could face imprisonment or have our children taken from us for insisting on the moral teachings the Bible. So we need to know in advance how to respond to persecution.

I’m speaking here about something that most of us have not experienced firsthand. Sure, I’ve faced opposition as a minister; but I’ve never been imprisoned or beaten or had my property taken away because I am a Christian. But these principles also apply to the subject of how to respond to trials in general. I’ve encountered many Australian Christians who do not have an adequate theology of suffering. When trials hit, they rage at God, rather than submit to Him. They think that they have a right to prosperity and good health. So they grow bitter when trials hit.

**Our text reveals** the response of the early church to persecution. Peter and John had been

arrested, put in jail, and then threatened by the Jewish leaders because they had healed a lame man and had preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the crowd. They are released and now report back to their people about what the chief priests and elders had said to them.

How did they respond to this crisis? Their response was to pray. But as we take a closer look we see some clues as why after they prayed something dramatic and life changing happened.

**Clue 1: They** raised their voices together in prayer to God.

In this short sentence we see what they did and what we do not do. When bad news came, they lifted their voices together. They prayed to God. They did not complain or shrink because of the challenge. They knew that they were up against it but they knew who was on their side.

So they prayed but it was not a quiet prayer.

**Firstly they raised their voices.** This is not really part of our culture of praying but it needs to be. Crying out, raising the voice, speaking out loud is vital to power praying. It is not that God is deaf.

As it was coming up to Christmas a young boy is praying upstairs while his mother sits by him and his dad and grandma are downstairs. He prays "Lord I pray for a train set, a remote control car, and A NEW BICYCLE!!!" "You don't have to shout dear", says the mother "God's not deaf." "I know" said the little boy, "but grandma is."

But it is not about yelling at God, blaming God, being angry with God and having a hissy fit. The psalmist are angry at the persecutors and then appeal to God for justice. Check out psalm 64 in the prayer sheet.

The heartfelt appeal to the heart of God by people is heard by the God who loves. He discerns that we are serious about this prayer and realize how dependent we are on him.

**Secondly they raise their voices together.** Prayer becomes powerful when it is prayed in unity. In fact unity is essential to any group, any church going forward. Why is it important?

**1. Jesus prayed for unity in the church.**

John 17:23a “I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. If Jesus prayed for unity in the church then it must be important. He prayed that the church would follow the example of the God the Father and God the Son. What could the primary reason for this unity be? Point two answers that question.

**2. Unity is necessary for the most effective presentation of the gospel.**

John 17:23b “Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Notice how this kind of unity is tied to the spreading of the gospel. “Then the world will know...” I believe a church that is unified around the mission of spreading the gospel will model the kind of unity that the Father and Son have. I also believe that Satan knows the best way to keep a church from fulfilling its mission is to get people arguing over non-essentials. This kind of disharmony causes the church to become inward-focused and to lose its evangelistic passion.

**3. Unity is necessary for the power of God.**

2 Chronicles 30:12 “Also in Judah the hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD.” When God’s hand is on a church or a group of people his power rests on them. This power is necessary for the unity of mind and purpose that is needed to follow the word of the Lord. It is critical to elevate the mission of bringing God glory through our obedience to the highest level in order to have this kind of unity. In other words a church must not focus on the minor things but on the major thing! Too often we divide ourselves over things that do not matter. Don’t mistake diversity for disunity. We can be wonderfully diverse while being totally in harmony over who we are in Christ. If God created over 400,000 species of beetles why would he not want churches with unique personalities and abilities to reach people!

### 4. **Unity keeps the church body growing, maturing, and working at its fullest potential.**

1 Corinthians 12:12 "...just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ." Ephesians 4:13 "...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." While some Christians think that spiritual maturity is achieved through amassing knowledge about the Bible the Bible actually shows us that spiritual maturity is achieved through obeying what the Bible says and fulfilling the mission of telling everyone everywhere about the gospel.

### 5. **Unity flows from love and love unites the church in its mission.**

Colossians 3:14 "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Without love there is no unity whatsoever. This love must be focused on and received from Jesus Christ. There is no other way to keep harmony and stay on mission.

### 6. **Unity keeps Christ at the centre instead of us.**

Ephesians 1:10b "...to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." It is not about you but it is about Christ! My plans, my desires, my preferences, my agenda, and my feelings are nothing compared to the gospel. When we become unified around that mission it changes everything and makes our churches more effective in fulfilling God's mission for our lives.

**The Psalmist** said it well when he wrote, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" Psalm 133:1

Nothing undermines the work of God or our praying when there is disunity.

### Clue 2 They focused on God and His purposes.

*You spoke by the Holy Spirit.*

Have you ever been in a prayer meeting where all the requests seem to focus on everyone's health problems? There is nothing wrong with praying for Aunt Gertrude in the hospital. But if that is the main focus of the prayer time, it reveals that we're too focused on ourselves, not enough on God's kingdom.

**The remarkable thing** about this prayer is that there is not a word about protection from further persecution, other than the passing comment, "Lord, take note of their threats"! Jesus had taught them to pray first, "Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Only after that were they to pray for personal needs, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:9-13). Here they spend five verses hallowing the Lord's name before praying that His kingdom would come by giving them further boldness and power to proclaim the Word.

Let us look closely at what they said.

**Firstly, they addressed God as** Sovereign Lord and Creator. These two names put the situation in the right perspective.

If you were to look up the word "sovereign" in the dictionary, you would find words and phrases like "superior," "greatest," "supreme in power and authority," "ruler," and "independent of all others" in its definition. But the way I like to explain God's sovereignty best is simply to say, "God is in control."

There is absolutely nothing that happens in the universe that is outside of God's influence and authority. As King of kings and Lord of lords, God has no limitations.

.The early church because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and 5000 believers responding to Peter's two sermon, they knew first hand that God was in total control of their situation. Remember they were part of the Roman Empire and were part of a religious system that oppressed the least, the lost and the last. It was not beer and skittles living in Palestine in their day.

**You can look down on your problems or you can look up to your solution?** They chose to look up because they knew, deep in their heart and the evidence of their eyes, that this God that they worshipped was not measly and miserly but Magnificent and Mighty.

Your picture of God will determine your belief, faith and outcome to your challenges. How big is your God?

**Secondly they reminded God about what He said.**

*You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant David.* Hey God you remember what you wrote in Psalm 2:1,2. Hey God, you said, you said.

They reminded God about what He said. For many this seems a bit arrogant. But a close look of the stories in the OT, it seems that Abraham, Moses and others were not afraid to throw back to God what He said and what His purposes were on about it. They reminded God that killing everybody because they complained was not a good look despite how you felt about them.

**We need to be bold** and remind God about what He said and how important it is to back up what he said with His actions.

It is important to remind God about what He said in the scriptures about his plans and purposes for the church and for your life. You said ask of me and I will give you the nations.

**Clue 3** *Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand*

*to heal and perform miraculous sings and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.*

They asked to be part of God's plans and purposes. They asked to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. They asked for signs and wonders

The priority was to speak the word with great boldness. The Message states **fearless confidence** *in preaching your Message.*

The request of the whole church is, that they might not be intimidated by the menaces of the Sanhedrim; but go on to declare it with all freedom of expression, with all boldness, courage, and intrepidity of mind, and all openness and faithfulness, and in the most public manner. And such a petition shows that as it is gift of God to speak his word, or preach his Gospel, so it also is, to speak it freely, boldly, and faithfully, as it should be spoken.

**But they also wanted** God to demonstrate his power in the form of healing, miraculous signs and wonders.

The rural underground Church in China relies upon and even expects that when the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is declared there will be verification at times with great signs and wonders. This dependence on the Holy Spirit to move, direct, guide and verify the Gospel is Biblical and needed now more then ever in the Church. It was not unusual for healings to occur in every village that the pioneers of the house Church movement entered when they were driven all across China because of persecution.

**It must be asked** in our lives: How much do we depend and truly rely on the Holy Spirit on a daily basis? How much do we expect God to perform healings, signs and wonders as we gather to worship and pray.

I have found that unity, faith prayer and expectation that God will perform signs and wonders is the key to God to rattle the cages of people's lives and be the vehicle to grow the church.

**In my third year of** University I was taken to a healing meeting by a young NZ university secretary. I think that she wanted to be serious with me but I was a little naïve at this time. A man with a bad leg came up to the platform and was prayed for. The preacher asked the man to sit down and he took his leg. He commanded the leg to come out and be straight in Jesus' name.

I had a bird's eye view and blow me down the leg moved, came out and was straight. That had a huge impact upon me and a seed was sown that I would like to see more of that. I have been privileged to see and experience more of that even by my own hands. But the tragedy of the churches that I worked in did not want to see more of that.

The tragedy is that if they wanted more of God's signs and wonders, and wanted to speak the Word boldly, God would have given them that. They did not want it and the result was not renewal and growth but stagnation and ultimately death.

**The Church and Christians are entering** into a time of severe persecution. Many of the rights that we have enjoyed like free speech, choice of schooling and education and laws reflecting the bible imperatives will be removed.

We have a choice to see this as an opportunity to speak the word boldly about Jesus and eternal life or retreat into our caves and hide and hope it goes away.

**In a small, remote Arctic village**, Pond Inlet, drug addiction, pornography, sexual abuse, family turmoil, desperation, suicide and crime were rampant. Christians were crying out to God for deliverance. Christians began to cry out to God in prayer. At a youth gathering, the young people started to cry out together asking God to do something about their community. Suddenly a wind arose and became very loud like a fighter bomber flying real low over them. The building began to shake and God's fire ran right through them though they did not burn.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on this community and people turned to the Lord. The drugs and pornography was burnt: an estimated \$80,000 worth. Family relationships were healed and abuse dropped dramatically.



If it can happen in Pond Inlet in the Arctic circle, it can happen here in Adelaide, in Hawthorn. All it needs is a group of people hungry for God to move with signs and wonders and be part of that movement.

*Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. 30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” Amen*