When life feels threatened

Acts 4:23-31

For reasons that will become obvious, I'm calling this talk, 'When Life Feels Threatened'. But to begin I want to put this passage in context, because these are heady, exciting days for these early Christians. Within the space of a few weeks, they have watched as Jesus, the one they thought was the Messiah, who they thought would liberate them from the power of the Romans, and the power of their own corrupt leadership, was crucified by those same Romans and Jewish leaders, and they saw their hopes die with him. But then they were left dumbfounded as this same Jesus appeared to them and proved that he was very much alive again. And they had sat and listened to him as he showed them from the scriptures how this was always meant to be, and that they were now to take God's message of grace and forgiveness out into the world.

But before they were to do that, Jesus told them to wait for the Spirit to come and empower them. And the Spirit came upon them and filled them at Pentecost. And after the Spirit came, they began this task of spreading the fame of Jesus' name. And thousands in the city of Jerusalem believed their message and joined the church. And overnight the church grew from about 120 to 3000 people.

Then on one of those early days, two of the disciples, Peter and John were walking to the temple and were stopped by a beggar, asking for money. But instead of giving him money, which they didn't have, they gave him what they did have, and in the name of Jesus, they healed him. Now, this guy had been crippled from birth, a man who everyone who walked through that gate into the temple knew. And as a result, a wonderful uproar in the city followed, which Peter used as a platform to tell people about Jesus, and even more people believed and joined the church.

But the authorities – the authorities who had so recently crucified Jesus - were not so impressed. They had crucified Jesus to get rid of him, but now his followers won't stop talking about him, telling people he had been raised from the dead and was the Messiah, and healing people like Jesus had healed people as proof of that, and thousands were believing them.

So what do the ruling elite do? Well, sadly they do what people often do when their power is being threatened, they threaten. And they tell Peter and John, as Luke puts it in v18, that they must not 'speak or teach *at all* in the name of Jesus.' We don't want anymore talk about Jesus! It's over – or else.

Now, it's easy to read that and pass that off as a bit of hyperbole. But these are no idle threats on behalf of the leadership. They have already demonstrated their willingness to eliminate opposition by crucifying Jesus in a rigged trial. Within just a few weeks, they will have Stephen stoned to death, and use that to launch an all-out assault on the church, which will include having James, one of the other apostles, beheaded. So this threat is very real.

But the way the apostles and the church respond to this threat is remarkable. And that's what this passage is about, and it has lots to teach us.

You see, as you go through life you inevitably face situations where you feel threatened. Now, first off, you can feel threatened as a Christian, and I'll explain that, because it's not immediately obvious why we Christians living in the safe West could ever claim to feeling threatened. But just think about the prevailing culture. Sadly, it is increasingly hostile to Christianity. Now, that's not about physical threats, but there are those, both in positions of authority and not, who are increasingly ready to dismiss what as Christians we might take for granted as being true. And that kind of environment can leave you feeling wary about putting your head above the parapet as a Christian. So the threats we as Christians in the West face are more to do with, do I speak up in this situation? When it is no longer culturally acceptable to believe what I believe, when people will think worse of me if they knew what I believe and think on this issue, should I stay quiet, or should I speak? What will happen if I do?

Now, of course many of our brothers and sisters around the world are facing much worse than we face, where the threats are very much physical and more pointed. But still, whether at school, or on campus, or in the workplace, we can face this kind of low-grade opposition and hostility: when how our friends or family think of us, or maybe even our job prospects, are threatened, because of what we think and say about Jesus.

But in life, you will also face other circumstances that will leave you feeling threatened, that will leave you feeling like the ground is shifting under you, and you are losing your grip on the control of your life, and you feel at the mercy of events. And that might be because either you, or someone you love, falls ill, or you lose your job, or a key relationship crumbles, and suddenly life does not feel so secure any more. In fact, life as you know it, feels threatened.

So, how are you supposed to handle that? How can you navigate your way through life, when it seems like you are having to handle outside threats, and how can you help those who are facing such times? Well, these guys give us a wonderful example.

Knowing Where You Belong

Look at v23: 'When they [Peter and John] were released, they went to their friends'. So these two men have just been threatened by the same men who killed Jesus, they're under pressure, but now they're freed and free to go anywhere they want. So, where do they go? I mean, they could have gone to the bar, couldn't they? I don't know about you Pete, but I need a drink. Or the beach, or skiing, or the golf-club, but they don't, they go to church.

Why? Why is the first place they turn their Christian friends? Because they know that it's amongst their friends that they are going to find the kind of encouragement they need to face what they are facing. In fact, literally, it says, 'they went to their own.' They went where they knew they belonged. And when life is uncertain, and things feel threatened, that sense of belonging, of having a community who loves you and knows you and is looking out for you is crucial, isn't it?

But notice what they do when they get together with their friends. Because they do two things, firstly they talk about the problem: v23, 'they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.' But that talk does not descend into a pity party. It doesn't spiral down into talk about the injustice of it all, and how unfair it is that things have turned out this way. Instead, the reality of their situation leads them to rise up in united prayer: v24, 'And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God.'

Now, when you're going through times of uncertainty, or when life as you know it feels threatened by circumstances, or when you are struggling to know how to handle the environment you're in as a Christian, you need other Christians around you, because times of threat and change and stress can distort your perception. It can distort our perception of what is right and wrong, of what life is all about, of how we should live when life is shifting. And we need one another to keep us steady and to strengthen us, and to speak truth to us. And in particular we need others to be praying with us, to be helping us to take our eyes off of us, and our situation, and onto God.

So where can you find that community where you know you belong, where your friends will keep you grounded but at the same time help lift your gaze upward? Well, by this stage, the church in Jerusalem is likely to have been at least 10,000 strong. So I don't think Peter and John went back to the 10,000 and tried to get everyone together and explain it all to them. I reckon they went back to one of their home gatherings we saw developing at the end of Acts 2, they went to their home group and told them and got them praying.

You see, the big gatherings, like Sunday mornings, matter. But it's in home groups that we can encourage and advise and pray for one another when we need it. It's in the home groups that we can help one another to fix our eyes upon God, whatever threats we are facing, and pray together. And so if you're not yet in a group, at the risk of sounding like a stuck record, please join one, not just so that when you face stuff you've got friends you can go to, but so that when others face stuff they've got friends they can go to – so when they are free and go to their own, you'll be there for them.

But if, having talked their situation through, these guys prayed, what a prayer they prayed!

Knowing Who's in Control

Verse 24 'And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them."'

So the first thing they do as they pray is they remind themselves of who God is, and specifically of who it is that is in control. You see, when you're facing a situation that leaves you feeling threatened and uncertain, you can find yourself looking at the situation and how much bigger than you it is, and wondering how you will ever cope. But these guys don't do that. They remind themselves of how great and sovereign God is. Of how much greater God is than their situation. And

that tells them that at the moment when they are tempted to give way to fear, they have no reason to fear. When they feel powerless, they remind themselves of who has all the power.

And this wasn't just abstract theology, they make this very personal. You see what our Bibles translate here as *Sovereign Lord*, is the word *despotes*, from which we get our English word *Despot*: The one with unquestioned power. It was the word used for the master in a master- slave relationship. This is the one who has the power of life and death over you. This is the one who holds your life in the power of his hand. Now, that is chilling and frightening if your master is a cruel tyrant. But if he is the God of all mercy and grace, the one who says he is a father to the fatherless and the defender of widows, the one who says his steadfast love to you will never falter or fail, if he is the one who would come as a man, to give his own life for you, and if he's the one who holds your life in his hand then you have nothing fear.

Because look how they describe him: "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and *everything in them*." Everything. Nothing left out. Every blood cell in our body, every baby in the womb, every friend or foe in our lives. Everything. Including these religious leaders. It all lies in his sovereign control. He's the one in absolute, total control, not the guys in the Sanhedrin, not the ones who seemingly have the power, not your boss, or anyone or anything else that seems to threaten you.

And knowing that God is in total control gives you solid ground on which you can plant your feet and trust and pray and live when everything else around you is shifting.

But then they pray something else extraordinary.

Knowing the Whole Story

Look what they pray next, v25-28: Sovereign Lord, 'who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed' – for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

So, they start by reminding themselves that it's God who's in control, but they also realize that what they're going through is simply another scene in God's unfolding story of Jesus, and they draw a direct line from what Jesus experienced at the hands of these same leaders and what they are experiencing. So they see all that is happening to them, these threats that they're facing, in the light of the gospel, in the light of what God is doing in Jesus.

Now, on the flight to and from Burma, I must have watched people in the rows around me watching the movie *Captain Philips* I don't know how many times. But

the first time I watched it over someone's shoulder it only caught my attention towards the end, so the only thing I knew of the film was the ending. So, the next time someone in front of me was watching it, I could watch it over their shoulder, but I already knew how things were going to end up, which meant all that emotional tension you get in a film like that was gone… what I wanted to know was how do they get from there to the ending.

And by seeing what they're going through in the light of the gospel, these men already know how things are going to end-up. You see, as they pray they're quoting from Psalm 2, which talks about how the kings and rulers plot and set themselves against the Lord's anointed, against the Messiah. But that same Psalm, which Peter and John would have known very well, goes on to say of the Messiah, to say of Jesus, 'Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession' (Ps 2:8), and that he will rule over his enemies with a rod of iron.

So, the moment they see that what they are facing is part of God's unfolding story of winning the nations to himself through Jesus, they know things are going to work out ok. It doesn't matter how bad things look in the short or medium term, it doesn't matter whether or not the rulers carry through on their threats, they know that God is up to something far greater and no little rulers can stand in the way of that. They know how this is going to end, because ultimately the story they find themselves in is not about them, and their lives, its about Jesus. It's the story of God loving us so much that in Jesus he would give himself over to the threats of others, and how the all-powerful one would make himself powerless in the hands of the seemingly powerful, to redeem us from the power of sin and death.

And because they see what they are going through in the light of the good news of Jesus, they know that ultimately the enemy will not triumph, but that just as God did at the seeming defeat of the cross, which these rulers brought about, God will work all things for their good and for Jesus' glory.

But how is that supposed to help you when life as you know it feels threatened? Well, I think it's this: If we think that life is all about us, and God's objective and purpose is for us to be comfortable in this life, then it really is very difficult to see any purpose in our suffering. But when you see that the story of your life is not about you at all, but about glorifying Christ, and that he is most glorified in his suffering and dying and losing everything for you because he loves you, then firstly it puts your own suffering and loss in a very different light, you are following in his steps; but secondly it tells you that whatever you face, however huge the circumstances you face seem, it is nowhere near as great as your heavenly Father's steadfast, never ending love for you in Jesus. And that as you face what you face, you can glorify Jesus by holding fast to him, showing that he is of infinitely greater value to you than whatever you might be at risk of losing.

And it's this, that these men see their trials in the light of the gospel, that explains why they end their prayer the way they do, and why they don't end it the way we might have.

Bold Obedience

You see what's remarkable here is what they *don't* pray for. They don't pray for protection, or against their persecutors, or for an easing up of the persecution, or for everything to calm down a bit. In fact, there's no sense of complaint or 'why us, Lord?' Rather, they simply ask God, v29, to 'look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.'

So they don't ask for the problem to be removed, though it's not necessarily wrong to do so, after all, Jesus prayed, 'Father, if its your will take this cup from me', rather they want to keep walking in obedience to Jesus in the trial that he has allowed them to go through. They see this suffering and this threat as another opportunity to witness that Jesus is greater.

But why pray for boldness? Why do they pray, "Lord, hear what they're saying, now make us bold'? Probably because they didn't feel very bold. Because they aren't superheroes, they're just normal men and women like us, and probably they don't want to experience pain anymore than we do, so they pray 'Lord, give us the courage and the strength to stay in the fight, because above everything else, we want to glorify Jesus.'

You see, alongside them speaking about Jesus with boldness, they're also praying for something else: v30, 'while you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' Now just think for a moment. What was it that got them into this trouble in the first place? Why are they facing the threats they are facing? It was this healing of this crippled man in the name of Jesus. And here they are asking, 'Lord, would you do more of the same please'. Not miracles of judgment or vengeance, they're not calling fire and judgment down on their persecutors, they are praying that God would multiply the miracles of mercy and grace, that Jesus would get even more glory.

And in response God shakes the house where they are meeting. And as John Chrysostum the famous 4th century preacher said, that made them even more unshakeable.

Now, when I think about what these guys faced, it's not a huge jump for me to think about what some of you are facing or will face in the future. Threats to health, threats to loved ones, threats to your financial security, threats to your life as you now know it and wish it to be. And how can you and I face those times like these men did, and walk in continuing obedience to Jesus, seeking to glorify him by the way we handle them? By finding a place to belong amongst God's people, by knowing that it's him who is in absolute total control, and by seeing what you are going through in the light of the gospel of God's love and redeeming grace to you in Jesus.