

Worship And Wickedness

The Early Church's Response to a Tyrannical Government

Acts 4:23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 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, ²⁵ 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?

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²⁷ 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, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Acts 4:23-31

Modern Day Acts 4

[Artur Pawlowski](#) (b. 1973) is a Polish immigrant to Canada. He migrated to Calgary, Alberta in 1995, where he subsequently became a Christian, and has started several

churches and ministries to especially help feed the poor. Pawlowski grew up under the boot of Soviet communism behind the iron curtain. He knows a thing or two about tyranny and oppression for the name of Jesus. Police would regularly break into your house at 4:00am, beat you, torture you, for no or any reason. The police had a saying in Poland, “Give me a man, and we will find something on that man.”¹ He used to work with that system, being part of the bribery schemes before converting.

Beginning in 2005, his “Street Church Ministries” of feeding the poor and telling people about the love of Christ, was increasingly on the government’s radar, mostly because he was also outspoken against the encroaching communist and fascist ideologies he saw creeping their way into that government, which he had specifically come to Canada to get away from! It resulted in him receiving 100 court cases, 300 tickets, and a dozen arrests. That’s the brief background to what transpired starting at Passover, 2021 when the Calgary police *illegally* (emphasis added) stormed into his church

¹ See him discuss it at “[Pastor Who Stood Up To Police In Viral Video Speaks Out](#),” *Fox News Primetime* (Apr 6, 2021). For a short story of him, see Adam Soos, “[Pastor Art Pawlowski Tells His Life Story: From Communism to Man of God](#),” *Rebel News* (May 20, 2021).

and sought to shut down the service for violating the government mandates.² Note, this is a whole year now after the draconian lockdowns for the Plandemic were implemented worldwide. By sheer force of his personality, he managed to get them to leave. He never closed the church's doors, even in 2020, but a couple of weeks after the first confrontation, they came back and he managed to get it on video.³

Having now humiliated the Canadian government for daring to counter their omnipotent authority, they decided to **make an example of him**. They arrested him in the middle of the street around April 24, 2021.⁴ He was then stripped naked and put in prison. He eventually spent twenty-one days in solitary confinement.⁵ Someone tried to bribe the guards to kill him (they declined). Vandals twice tried to burn his church and house. He's been physically attacked several times.

² **Cristina Laila**, "[‘Get out, Nazis!’ Calgary Pastor Shouts Down Police Interrupting Church Service During Holy Weeks \(Video\)](#)," *The Gateway Pundit* (April 3, 2021).

³ **Cassandra MacDonald**, "[WATCH: Canadian Police Bring SWAT Team to Church Where Polish Pastor Went Viral for Shaming ‘Nazi’ Police on Easter](#)," *The Gateway Pundit* (Apr 25, 2021). Of course, all those channels have been taken down by *YouTube*.

⁴ You can see it here: <https://twitter.com/NewGranada1979/status/1391359230687420417/>.

⁵ **Gerry Wagoner**, "[Meeting Artur Pawlowski, A Modern Day Martin Luther](#)," *StreetChurch* (May 3, 2024).

He was subsequently [arrested again](#) later in the year by the Calgary Gestapo at the airport by “police” which secretly hid in a custom’s building until they swooped down on the tarmac. He had been away in America for four months and was told by his attorneys that there were no warrants or pending charges, so he decided to come home. They then told him that he must preach to his congregation what the “[medical experts](#)” were saying, which he refused to do.⁶

At the great [trucker rally](#) (2022), he was invited to hold church services for those who were protesting the ongoing crippling Canadian Covid vax mandates.⁷ He held communion, sang songs, and told the people simply to stand up for their rights. Afterwards, he went to a small town where he they subsequently sent Sheriffs, Provincial Police, local police, Criminal Intelligence Service officers, Organized Crime Agency officers, and the terrorist branch of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to arrest him. He was interrogated for hours, was charged with criminal mischief for preaching at the border during the trucker blockade and was

⁶ [Jon Brown](#), “[Canadian Pastor Defiant as Judge Orders Him to Parrot ‘Medical Experts’ from Pulpit: ‘I Will Not Obey,’](#)” Fox News (Oct 16, 2021).

⁷ [Taylor Penley](#), “[Pastor Facing 10 Years in Prison for Preaching at Canada Trucker Blockade Protesting Vaccine Mandates,](#)” *Fox News* (Feb 7, 2023).

charged with inciting violence and interrupting infrastructure (all for preaching a 19-minute sermon). He was later **found guilty of every charge** and faced ten years in prison. There, the judge compared him the Rwandan Genocide, and said he was inciting murder.⁸

While out of prison, between trials, he continued to preach and would not stop. So, when they realized they couldn't shut him up with threats or force, they **offered him two million dollars to stop**. They offered him a seat in parliament. They wanted to bribe the man who used to do that for a living, until he came to Christ. At his final trial and sentencing, the judge stopped the proceedings and excused himself, saying he wasn't sure what to do. People were outside praying. Eventually, he came back and said, "**You are free to go.**"⁹

While not exactly the same circumstances as what we find in Acts 4, **the root is identical**. Both revolve around Christians being persecuted, ultimately, for being Christians, because Jesus is the living God who demands all our allegiance. Both took place in a society that outwardly claimed to be free and full of free citizens who had legal

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wagoner, *ibid.*

rights. Both involve **tyrannical governments** whose overreach is breathtaking both in its audacity and in its illegality. But when has that ever stopped dictators?

The question before us today is, **how did the early church deal with such tyranny** and what can we learn from it? In this, we are going to stick with the text. Therefore, I won't be focusing on the legal, moral, political actions you can do as citizens in the face of tyranny. It is enough to remember the words of Peter from last time here, **Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard"** (**Acts 4:19-20**). In spite of **one spirit-of-the-age** that's been hovering over our heads in the last four years in many Christian circles, I find it self-evident that Christians are in the right always to follow God, no matter what a government may say *or how they might try to coerce or entice you not to*—including the oppressive and restrictive infringements on our right to worship freely and what do to with our own bodies (the temple of the Holy Spirit) in the name of their god "science."

Acts 4:23-31 Context and Structure

Our passage is **Acts 4:23-31**. It follows on the heels of Peter and John being what I would think would be **illegally arrested** for healing a man in the name of Jesus, **the defense** they give before the beady eyes of the Sanhedrin, and the **subsequent threats**, but also eventual **release** of the disciples, because these crooked evil men, though they were most willing, were unable at that time to do anything more to them because of the people.

While many will continue the text to the end of the chapter, we will save the **last five verses as an opening** context for the amazing story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, for it seems to me to fit that story better than this, and since it is a sharp parallel to **Acts 2:42-47**, which we've already spent an entire week on, we won't need to go into that much detail with it as its own separate unit (though, of course, we could).

Our passage tells us **what the first Christians response was** to the arrest and release of Peter and John. How did they act? What did they do? What was their response? What did it consist of? In looking into this, the Holy Scripture here

can have, I believe, great power to help us today who are quickly seeing the return to the kind of dystopian corrupt governmental systems that most of the world has been unfortunately forced to be under, that attack, create fear, and mistrust among their own citizens. To any who have felt both the rage and the angst that a story such as Pastor Pawlowski's can generate because it hits so very close to home, this message from God's word is especially for you.

The text is composed of **nine verses** and has a deliberate **quotation from Psalm 2 as a prophecy** right in the middle of it. In fact, that quotation serves as the chiastic C. center with the C'. pairing being **its fulfillment**. On either side, there is **a prayer**, the first (B.) of praise, the second (B'.) of supplication. The story begins and ends with an introduction and conclusion that match one another with mention of times, places, and especially of boldness of speech.¹⁰ One can think of it as a movement from speaking, to calling out to God, to gathering against the Messiah and then back out.¹¹

¹⁰ The following chiasm is in **U. C. von Wahlde**, "[The Theological Assessment of the First Christian Persecution: The Apostle's Prayer and Its Consequences in Acts 4:24-31](#)," *Biblica* 76.4 (1995): 523-31.

¹¹ "[8] The Believers Pray for Boldness (Acts 4:23-31)," *Literary Structures of the Bible: Acts*, http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/44_Acts_pericope_e.html#8.

- A. Introduction:** ²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said,
- B. PRAYER OF PRAISE:** “Sovereign [*despota*] Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them [Ps 146:6], ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,
- C. OT PROMISE:** ““Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ [Ps 2:1-2]—
- C’. NT FULFILLMENT:** ²⁷ 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, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.
- B’. PRAYER OF SUPPLICATION:** ²⁹ And now, Lord [*kurie*], look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”
- A’. Conclusion:** ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

This begins, then, to show you how the Christians responded to the crisis of Peter and John’s imprisonment, something the people surely would never have thought would have happen simply because they healed a man. But that’s how angry the darkness gets at the light.

The Church Hears of Peter and John's Arrest

It begins, “When they were released, they went to their friends...” (Acts 4:23). This gives you the occasion for the present story. Note the “when,” because it will return again in vs. 31. “Friends” is most likely at least the other ten disciples (two of whom were their brothers Andrew and James; ten: Matthias replaced Judas), and probably as many as the 120 that were all gathered together in the upper room. What did they do when they returned back? They “reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them” (23). Reporting means that they told them, they used words. Again, this will return in vs. 31, even as it does in vs. 24.

What do you suppose happened then? They all got together and complained about how evil the government was? They all banded together to figure out how they could protect their homes and their property using the Second Amendment? They all started talking about which state they could flee to in order to avoid the persecution? Our tendency, and this includes me at the head of the list, is to do things like this. And I don't bring them up here in order to insinuate that those are bad things. Actually, if you

acknowledge that they are legitimate responses rather than evil responses, it puts what the disciples actually did into an even more profound light, for suddenly you are not going to contrast their “good” response to our “evil” response, but what seems to me to be both a better response and a **more fundamental response** to that of a knee-jerk response and a secondary response. Put another way, this is the response that *must come first*.

The Church Responds to the Crisis in Worship

“**And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said...**” (24). **Lifting their voices together** is a sign that they are **entering into worship**. Just what that worship is will become a profoundly **important theology** to unpack later. But for now, it is enough to see that they are in fact worshipping God. Their response is to join their voices together to God. That’s worship.

Worship is **the reason we were created**; it’s why we exist. I said it is the more foundational response that Christians should have to such things precisely for this reason. When we move to other, even good responses before worship, we

risk both a negative and a positive. **Positively**, we risk losing out on the very meaning and purpose of life. If we were created to worship, and suffering like this provides us with a deeply intimate and often corporate way to worship God together, and we choose to bypass that, then we've missed the best possible way to grow and become like our Savior, who suffered for us that we might have life. If I were to be arrested right now by the Boulder police, would your first response be to worship God together? **Negatively**, we risk committing idolatry, thereby worshiping our own responses (indeed, our own "freewill") to a crisis rather than **the God who is at the center of the crisis**. We need to be careful here, because it necessitates having the right theology about God here, but we aren't ready to see it yet.

Prayer of Praise

The **specific kind of worship** they engaged in was **prayer**. Contrary to the whole contemporary church movement which talks about "**praise and worship**" as the singing and then there's everything else that happens, traditional Christianity has always viewed *everything* the church does

together in around the means of grace as worship. That's why we call the whole service the *worship service*. There isn't supposed to be a pastor for "worship" and then a pastor for something other than worship (like "preaching"). I suppose you can have a pastor for music and then one for preaching, but that's not what they call him—they call him the "worship" pastor. Words matter.

Vs. 24 shows us that it was at first a **prayer of praise** to God. There are four basic kinds of prayers: Prayers of *adoration*/praise, prayers of *confession* of sin, prayers of *thanksgiving*, and prayers of *supplication* for others. Conveniently, they spell the acronym: ACTS. This is a prayer of adoration. "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them..." Two important things about this. First, this begins the B. part of structure and it starts with "sovereign Lord" (the Greek is one word: *despotēs*). When we come to the matching B'. we will see that it begins with the parallel "Lord" (*kurie*).

Second, this is actually a citation of **Psalm 146:6**. The full verse reads, "... who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever." There is

much to think about here. First, this records **their first response** together upon hearing of the events of the arrest, trial, and release of the disciples. Their first response is to acknowledge that God is their sovereign—the maker of all things. That’s *theology*. It’s very **credal** when you think about: “**Maker of heaven and earth.**” And so their first response is to dig deep into their theology and begin at the root.

The foundation of all Christian theology is that **God is sovereign**. He is over all things. He is God and all that it means to be God. The word “sovereign” means an **absolute ruler**. This shows the importance of having good theology prior to experiencing suffering, because if you don’t have that prior, then what will be your grounding when the bad things come? One isn’t going to say to pray, “Oh, pathetic God who couldn’t do anything...”

Someone might say, “**But they were only praising God because they were let go.**” But remember, **Jesus had told them what they should expect** when he left them. Now they faced their first opposition. And their reaction is to worship the sovereign God of all things, whether they were let go or

martyred, as most of them eventually would be. Acknowledging God's sovereignty is not something you do only when he gives you what you ask for. It rather presupposes the opposite. It is precisely *that* God is sovereign *over all things, no matter what happens*, that the word even makes sense. These Christians knew this and their first reaction to the evil treachery of the government of their day was to acknowledge that God is sovereign over all and to praise him for it.

But this is not merely or only a quote taken like a proof-text, out of context, to help them praise God. Rather, [the Psalm](#) is actually speaking directly to their kind of situation. “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being. *Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish*” ([Ps 146:1-4](#)). That seems obviously relevant to their circumstances. Furthermore, the sovereign God of [vs. 6](#), “*executes justice for the oppressed*” and “*sets the prisoners free*” ([7](#)). This, my friends, is the context in the Psalm of God's sovereignty. And it is precisely this which is the context in which

they sing and pray this psalm together when they hear about Peter and John’s run-in with Caiaphas and his cabal.

Psalm of Prophecy

After singing/praying this verse in the psalm, they continue. “...who through the mouth of our father David, your servant” (Acts 4:25). Keep in mind “David, your servant,” because this will return in vs. 27 with “Your holy servant Jesus.” Jesus is the Greater David—the true King of kings. This part of the passage is acting as the preface to the central teaching of the text.

Next, they acknowledge that what David said, he said “by the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit didn’t come into existence at Pentecost. Nor was their speaking on that day the first time someone spoke through the Spirit. He’s always been with God’s people. And David, living 1,000 years earlier, said something amazing as he was inspired by the 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” (25b-26).

Thing is, this is not found in Psalm 146. Instead, it comes from another psalm: Psalm 2. It's one of the most famous of all the Psalms, due in large part to Charles Jennens having it as some of the main lyrics in *Handel's Messiah*. *Vs. 7* is one of the most quoted verses from the OT in the NT, being found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and Hebrews. *Psalm 2:8-9* are found in Hebrews and Revelation. *Psalm 2:11* is in Philippians. But as far as a direct quote, this is the only place that *Psalm 2:1-2* appears.¹²

Psalm 2 is actually part of the *two-psalm introduction to the Psalter*. Read together, they form an inclusio (if not also a chiasm) that begins, “*Blessed is the man...*” (*Psalm 1:1*) and ends, “*Blessed are all who take refuge in him*” (*2:12*). This introduction begins with the law of God, but *ends at the son of God*, which is what Psalm 2 tells us all about. That is the focus of this continued prayer of the church.

“*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain*” is one of the great questions of reality. But it isn't just talking about the foolishness of governments and the things they do to their citizens. In fact, that isn't the focus at all. “*The kings*

¹² Echoes are found in *Rev 11:18, 19:19* and other places.

of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, *against the Lord and against his Anointed*” (26). At the end of the day, it is him they are waging war on, not us. They hate us because we are in him. The ESV translates the imperfect passive verb here as an English past tense (preterite): *were gathered*.¹³ The reason is clearly the context. The disciples see this verse very clearly as *having been fulfilled* in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Luke has done something *very helpful* for us here as we look at the interpretation. For the Psalm quotation is exactly inversely parallel to the “fulfillment” that follows: “*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*” (27). What do I mean by inversely parallel?

Well, the “*Gentiles and peoples*” plotting in vain is exactly parallel to the end of the fulfillment with the *Gentiles and peoples of Israel*. The *kings of the earth and rulers* is then exactly parallel to *Herod (the king) and Pontius Pilate (the ruler)*. Finally, their being gathered together against *the Lord and his Anointed* is exactly parallel to what comes right

¹³ Most translations do this. An exception is the NIV’s, “gather together,” which seems to be reading in the possible Hebrew translation, rather than Greek which is more specific here.

after it, which is being gathered against Jesus whom you [the sovereign Lord) anointed. In this way, Jesus the anointed who has died “in this city” becomes the focal point of the entire passage, which is what we probably expect given the Apostolic message which always centers upon Jesus.

- A. Gentiles and peoples plot in vain
- B. Kings of earth and rulers
- C. Gathered together Against the Lord and his Anointed
- D. In this city**
- C'. Gathered together against Jesus whom you anointed
- B'. Herod and Pontius Pilate
- A'. Gentiles and the peoples of Israel

So hear this well. What we have seen now is a prayer that acknowledges God’s absolute sovereignty now turning directly to a confident fulfillment of prophecy, which is that Jesus has died, according to the Scripture. That this was spoken as prophecy by the Holy Spirit makes this all the more true. Truly, the disciples not only had learned how to read the Scripture with Christ at its center, they had learned that in the face of persecution and trials that this theology is what alone would ground their confidence, make sense of why the suffering was at hand, while also bringing joy to their

hearts. But what do I mean by make sense of why the suffering was at hand?

Predestined Plan

Here, we are going to delve into **the problem of evil and God's sovereignty**. While the parallels in the fulfillment of Jesus' death to Psalm 2 are obvious, **vs. 27** doesn't even end a sentence. So we have to keep going. **Vs. 28** continues the thought after a comma: **"to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."** Why would they add this to their prayer?

First, remember that this is essentially the same thing **Pe-ter had proclaimed during the first sermon**. **"This man [Jesus] was given up to you according to God's *set purpose and foreknowledge*; and you, by using lawless men, nailed him to a cross and killed him"** (**2:23**; see also **3:18**). So the church is simply **affirming the same doctrine** preached during the first Christian sermon. But there's more to it than this.

I didn't go into that in great depth in ch. 2, because I cheated and **read ahead** and knew that we would have an even greater opportunity to talk about it here. One thing we did speak about there though was the idea of ***foreknowledge***.

In English (following the Greek *prognōsis*), this is a compound word that means “to know ahead of time.” The emphasis is on *when* God *knows*. But of course, God knows all things from all eternity, and therefore if that’s all the word means, it’s kind of stating the obvious. In fact, in context, it clearly means something different.

In the Hebrew, the idea of “knowing” has the emphasis on a *determination*. So for instance, God tells Israel, “You only have *I known* of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2). Obviously, God knows all the families of the earth in a generic sense. So this is a *special sense*, having a *special regard* for them as the objects of his affection. We see the same thing for example with the call of Jeremiah. “*Before* [fore] I formed you in the womb, I *knew* [knowledge] you” (Jer 1:5). “The meaning here is not that God knew *about* Jeremiah but that He had a *special regard* for the prophet before he formed him in his mother’s womb” [emphasis added].¹⁴ This means that the compound “fore-know” in English is as unhelpful in determining the meaning of the word as a *butterfly* is not a stick of butter that flies or a *honeymoon* is not

¹⁴ David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1963), 86. See also Fred Zaspel, “Election and Fore-knowledge,” *TGC*.

some beehive the astronauts found in space. Rather, it means to elect or choose or determine something beforehand (i.e. his “set purpose”).

That obviously sounds a lot like **predestination**—that great doctrine of the Reformation that almost single handedly was responsible for returning the church to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s a doctrine that every single Reformer believed whole-heartedly and the same way. As J. I. Packer once said of it, “Historically, it is a simple matter of fact that Martin Luther and John Calvin, and, for that matter, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and all the leading Protestant theologians of the first epoch of the Reformation, stood on precisely the same ground here.”¹⁵ So what is it?

Another **compound word** in both English and Greek, its compound literally means to **determine beforehand** or **pre-ordain** (same as the Greek: *proorizō* from *pro-* [“before”] and *horizō* [“determine, decide”]). So in this case, **the compound is helpful** and tells you exactly what it means. The difference between the two words is that foreknowledge always has in mind *people*, while predestination always has in mind a *plan*.

¹⁵ J. I. Packer, Introductory Essay in **Martin Luther**, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer & O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1957, 1995), 58. The exact context of this quote is both the bondage of the will and the absolute sovereignty of God, especially in salvation.

Predestination is the plan, the design, strategy, or decree that brings the foreknowledge related to people into the world of men.

Usually, predestination has as its object the salvation of the elect (i.e. **Rom 1; Eph 1**; etc.).¹⁶ But here it has in mind **the terrible event of the crucifixion**, including specifically the **cold and calculating evil actions** of Herod and Pilate. Since this is the only time the verb is used in the NT outside of Paul's letters, we should think long and hard about what Luke is trying to teach us here. Unfortunately, this is a doctrine that really bothers a lot of people, and we will try to address why that is as we try to understand it better.

First, let me say that this is **not a difficult doctrine to understand**. It's perfectly simple to understand predestination as a doctrine. What's **difficult is to believe** it. But, why? Part of that has to do with **wrong assumptions** people bring to the doctrine. For example, as it involves the realm of salvation, some, **presupposing that all people deserve God's grace**, hear

¹⁶ **Going Deeper.** Curiously, the word is never used of reprobation. Some ignore this fact and say it is meaningless, while others take it to mean that God isn't somehow in control of the reprobates' helpless spiritual condition. In my view, the reason for this is not that God isn't control. As we will see, God decrees all things. However, he doesn't need to do something necessitating a plan to "damn" the reprobate for the simple reason that they are already born that way. All that had to happen was that he predestined the fall and the rest takes care of itself through the cause of secondary means. On those, see below.

the doctrine and how it is selective of one person over another, and get angry. The wrong assumption is that everyone deserves God's grace. The reality is, no one does. Predestination is not justice, it is mercy.¹⁷ Everyone deserves justice; not one deserves mercy. If the assumption isn't there, the objection vanishes and the anger quickly dissipates.

Another wrong assumption people have is that predestination is somehow a violation of people's "freewill." I put "freewill" in quotes here, because we need to **define that term**. Biblically speaking, humans do precisely what they want to do and most of the time they are not coerced with threats of death (even there, as Jonathan Edwards argues, people ultimately do precisely what they want to do in that they choose what they believe is the best option in the given situation).¹⁸ **Doing what you want to do or choosing that which is most agreeable to you** is my definition of freewill. God gave us all wills and those wills are free to do what the mind thinks is best.

¹⁷ See the previous note.

¹⁸ For example, "The soul always wills or chooses that which, in the present view of the mind, considered in the whole of that view, and all that belongs to it, appears most agreeable." Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1860, 1754), 80.

But people bring to this notion of freewill something that is very much not biblical. That is, they bring an idea that the human will is free from any kind of evil impulses and that it is able to choose without any taint or fog or cloud, as perfectly neutral observers with perfectly clear perception, especially in the moral realm. In other words, they presuppose that humans are not slaves to sin. They presuppose that the will acts apart from the embodied nature of the human in which it resides. This is positively and patently unbiblical.

Depravity means that all people, until they are pulled out of the mire of their sin by the power of the Gospel and brought to new life by the Holy Spirit, freely choose ... death. They do not choose God, because they hate God as a thief hates the police. People run from the light, because they love the darkness. No one seeks God, not even one. But what they do seek, they do *freely* because they want to.

The will is not a neutral observer of this game of life. It is part of our fallen nature, and we are all fallen into sin. A great many people make a huge mistake in thinking that the opposite of freewill is predestination. It isn't. The opposite of freewill is the *bondage of the will*. And the opposite of predestination is postdestination, which isn't even a thing.

I say all this knowing that in some ways it has little to do with the context of the word in **Acts 4:28**. This verse is not talking about predestination *to salvation*. In this way, you might think I'm just riding a hobby horse or something. But I'm not. It was important to talk about that, because it does in fact relate to our text in this way. The prayer of these first Christians very clearly says that **what Herod** and Pontius Pilate did, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, **was predestined** to happen. So it still has in mind humans who act freely. In this case, they do something horrible.

But just **how much of it was predestined?** The end result only? **Some will say** it must be that, otherwise, God is the author of sin. But this is to confuse the creature with the Creator. God can predestine a thing, including the evil actions of a man, and not have an evil intent in mind himself. In other words, God can predestine something *for good* while the person carrying out that predetermined plan has in mind *evil*. Joseph made this clear in the first book of the Bible. “**As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today**” (**Gen 50:20**).

But [some want to say](#) that God really isn't predestining the evil. On this, we must walk very carefully. [Amos 3:6](#), "Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?" The answer is, no. [Isaiah 45:7](#), "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create woe, I am the LORD, who do all these things." [Lamentations 3:37-38](#), "Who has commanded and it came to pass, unless the Lord has ordained it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?" As John Piper says, "Noteworthy in these texts is that the calamities in view involve human hostilities and cruelties that God would disapprove of even as he wills that they be."¹⁹

And this gets to one of the other reasons why the Christians pray this here. They have [previously confessed that God is the sovereign](#) over all things. He made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. You can't get any more sovereign than that. It is into this theology of the absolute sovereignty of God that they now confess that Pilate and Herod, the Gentiles and the Jews put Jesus to

¹⁹ [John Piper](#), "[Are There Two Wills In God?](#)" *The Grace of God The Bondage of the Will* vol. 1, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 119. I can't recommend this article high enough. It's the best thing I've ever read on the subject.

death *because* that was what his hand and plan had predestined to take place.

In saying this, they are simply affirming that God is all-sovereign. He is **omnipotent**. They are **not saying** that Herod and Pilate are puppets, void of human wills. They are **not saying** that God commits evil. But they are affirming that their wills acted out the predetermined plan and that that their evil plan is precisely what God had predestined to take place, though he had foreknown (used very much in the sense we spoke of it above—concerning a person and love) a very different outcome.

And **what was that outcome?** It is **the only satisfying solution to the problem of evil**. It was that God did not spare his own son from it. It was the death of Jesus—for our sins. Then, it was his resurrection. It was the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; the proclamation of the Gospel that very day and the saving of 3,000; the healing of the lame man; the saving of 5,000. And ... the arrest and subsequent proclamation of Peter and John to the Sanhedrin of the Gospel and their release. All of it.

Beloved, God's sovereignty does not merely extend to a few items of history here or there. No. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matt 10:29). The most intricate, secret, hidden, small details of life are in the control of God every day, every hour, every second. "Out God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases" (Ps 115:3).

This is why Peter will later say, "It is better to suffer for doing right, *if that should be God's will*, than for doing wrong" (1Pet 3:17). Or "Let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (4:19). "In this context, the suffering which Peter has in mind is the suffering which comes from hostile people and therefore cannot come without sin."²⁰

Why else would they "I will return to you *if God wills*" (Acts 18:21), or "I will come to you soon, *if the Lord wills*" (1Cor 4:19), or instead of saying, "Tomorrow we will do such and such ... you ought to say, '*If the Lord wills*, we shall live and we shall do this or that'" (James 4:15). Why would Proverbs say, "The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD" (Prov 16:1), or "A

²⁰ Ibid., 120.

man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (16:9), or "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established" (19:21), or "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the LORD" (16:33), or "I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps" (Jer 10:23)?

Why It Matters?

Some people want to get **very practical** in their thinking on this subject. They want to know why they should even care about it, let alone believe it. Well, first and foremost, you believe a thing not because it is practical, but **because it is true**. Honestly, even if it didn't make a whit of difference to your practical life, if it is true, then this is the only reason you need to believe it. For, if it is biblical, then to not believe it is to believe a lie. And I believe it is quite biblical. But when you believe lies, this has nothing but bad practical implications throughout your entire life. Lies always work mischief. That's their nature.

But point in fact, we are not finished with the text. It is immediately after they have made this declaration after their reflection on Psalm 2 that they now turn to God with **the second main prayer**. This time, it is a **prayer of supplication**. That is, they are now going to **entreat God to do something**. And to state the obvious, why would they now do this? *Because* they have affirmed that he is the omnipotent sovereign of the universe and he alone has the power to grant their request.

It's been pointed out many times that you may have people who deny the sovereignty of God in their theology, but **every man prays acknowledging it**. Here is their prayer. “**And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the Name of your holy servant Jesus**” (**Acts 4:29-30**).

What are they praying for. First, they ask God (the Father) to look upon their threats. That is, **don't forget the treats** they have made. *Protect us, even as you have just had them release Peter and John*. Further, if need be, *do something to those*

making the threats that would ensure nothing is hindered of our second petition.

That petition is, grant your servants (people who serve your holy servant Jesus), to continue to **speak with all boldness**. In other words, *we've now seen that we will not be immune from the very things your suffering Servant went through for us. **Keep us from being timid and afraid**. Open our mouths, though we speak to roaring lions. Only you can give us such boldness.*

Third, as we speak, *continue to heal and do signs and wonders in the Name of Jesus that others may come to believe in him*. They recognize that the **healings and signs and wonders** are here to accompany the gospel with the end goal that people might believe that Jesus truly is the Sovereign Lord. Now, as we will see throughout this book, this was a time when God was especially pleased to have the Gospel be accompanied with such signs. And what amazing days those were. But **blessed are those who believe and do not need signs** from God to “prove” himself. They know the word itself is the power of God.

The conclusion comes in **vs. 31**. “**And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken.**” Note, **they were gathered**. This pairs with Peter

and John being released and then going to their friends at the beginning of the story. We've come full circle. And **God shook the place**. He in fact gave *them* a sign that he had heard. And why not? This was the first persecution of the church in its infancy. And God wanted the Christians to know that he was there, listening, powerful to answer. Sovereign.

“**And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness**” (31b). This final statement must not be misunderstood as if they all got saved. But rather, it was like that first Pentecost day and it has its roots in people like Samson in the OT upon whom the Spirit would come in special empowering ways, not to save, but to deliver others. They received what they asked for. **God answered them**. He emboldened them by the power of his Spirit and then went forth proclaiming the Gospel in boldness.

That's what right theology can do. That's what it should do. That's what right prayer can do. That's what it should do. Though God may not be pleased to accompany this word today with signs and wonders, he is still the same yesterday, today, and forever. You have the word made sure to

your hearts by the same spirit. Go forth from this place believing the word.

May you be emboldened anew, like Artur Pawlowski and others like him to be like those first Christians of old, to continue their mission in the places God would take you. And when persecution should come to any of us for the name of Christ, remember your foundation. Remember your God. And give praise to him before you do anything else. No matter what he brings your way.

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