

Crying Out to the God of Providence

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Psalter 311

Scripture reading and text: Acts 4:23–37

Psalter 401

Psalter 200:1–2

Psalter 112

And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas,

(which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. —Acts 4:23–37

For several decades, our nation has been pushing God, prayer, and righteousness out of the public square. Powerful forces have made Christianity unwelcome in the natural sciences, public schools, and the seats of government. This was supposedly done to promote tolerance. But the veneer of that lie is cracking, and underneath we are discovering a brutal intolerance for the things of God and the name of Christ.

We now face the very real possibility that as Christians we will be forced to choose between obedience to our God and obedience to our government. We want to be obedient to our government and serve it as good citizens, for the governing powers are ordained by God (Rom. 13:1). But Christians may soon have to choose between remaining silent about the perversion of homosexuality and going to jail. Christian preachers may have to choose between proclaiming that Christ is the only way to God and being charged with a hate crime. Christian organizations may have to choose between paying tax dollars for abortions and other services that are contrary to their consciences and paying large fines. And when we face such choices, we must say with the apostles, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

We can act with courage because our God is in control. Our God is the God of providence. The Belgic Confession teaches us to believe that “God, after He had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment; nevertheless, God is neither the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed.”¹

1. Belgic Confession, Article 13, “Of Divine Providence.”

Let us consider what the doctrine of divine providence teaches us to do when we are threatened with opposition and suffering for our witness of Christ. What difference does it make for us to know that our God governs the heaven and the earth and all that is in them by His eternal counsel and providence?²

The Book of Acts tells about the apostolic church in just such a situation. The apostles were carrying out their commission to preach Christ and to work miracles of healing in His name. They healed a man born without the ability to walk, opening a door for them to preach to thousands of people (Acts 3). The priests and rulers had the apostles arrested and brought before them. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly declared that all they had done was done in the name of Jesus Christ: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The council commanded Peter and John to stop preaching in the name of Christ and threatened them with dire consequences. They were then released, and they returned to report to the church all that had happened that day.

What did the apostolic church do in response to the threats of the authorities? What should we do? Acts 4:23–37 gives us the answer: we must cry out in prayer to the God of providence. Acts 4:24 says of the early believers, “And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord.” How did they pray? They prayed with urgency and passion: “they lifted up their voice.”³ They also prayed “with one accord.” Calvin said that the apostles met with the church “that they might arm themselves with prayer against the furious threatenings

2. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 26.

3. “Lift the voice” (*airō* [or *epairō*] *phōnēn*) appears several times with “and wept” (LXX Judg. 2:4; 21:2; Ruth 1:9, 14; 1 Sam. 24:16; 2 Sam. 3:32; 13:36). It can also describe the roaring of the seas (LXX Ps. 92[93]:3) and the cry of lepers to Jesus for healing (Luke 17:13).

of their enemies; and thus must the children of God do, one must prick forward another, and they must join hand in hand, that they may vanquish the common adversary fighting under Christ's banner."⁴

What did they pray? First, they offered praise to God. Second, they offered prayers for power. Those prayers were answered by God. Let us go on to see how we must join together to lift our prayers to the God of providence.

Prayers of Praise

The apostles and the early church did not begin praying by asking God for anything. They knew they faced the immediate danger of being imprisoned, beaten, robbed of their possessions, and even killed. But they started with praise. They glorified God for who He is and what He has done. They did not rush through a quick or well-worn word of praise to get to what they thought was really important: asking God for help. In fact, more than two-thirds of their prayer consists of praise to God! Surely this is one effect of faith in God's providence. We do not need to panic as if God were asleep and cry out, "Carest thou not that we perish?" (Mark 4:38). No, we may pray with the calm assurance that He is very much in control, even in the worst of circumstances.

As we look at their praises in verses 24–28, we see they focus on God's sovereignty in the universe He has created, His sovereignty in exaltation of His Son, and His sovereignty in the redemption of His people.

Praise of God's Sovereignty as the Creator of All Things

Verse 24 tells us the church prayed, "Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is." "Lord" is not the usual word for God used in Greek but a word (*despota*) that refers to the master of a household who rules over servants and

4. John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:181.

slaves, or a king who rules with absolute power.⁵ God's kingdom is nothing less than "heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is," for he "made" them and rules them with total authority. All creatures are His servants (Pss. 119:90–91; 146:5–6).

Calvin said, "If we want our faith to be strong, we must consider God's power when praying and mention the promises which we rely on.... We cannot have confidence in God as we ought unless we are firmly convinced that he disposes all things in accordance with his will so that all creatures are subject to him. That stems from the fact that he created all things."⁶

When men begin to act like dictators and tyrants, threatening God's people with penalties for their fidelity to their God, we must begin by praising the One who is the only true Sovereign over all creation. Even if we are beaten, thrown into prison, and locked up in stocks, we may respond as Paul and Silas did by singing praises to God (Acts 16:25).

The early church constantly sang the Psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), so perhaps they had Psalm 146 in mind when they prayed:

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God: which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is: which keepeth truth for ever: which executeth judgment for the oppressed: which giveth food to the hungry. The LORD looseth the prisoners (Ps. 146:3–7).

How comforting it is for us to remember that men are mere flesh but God is the eternal Spirit who created all

5. Greek *despotēs*. Cf. Luke 2:29; 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; 2 Tim. 2:21; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18.

6. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 1–7*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 163–64.

things! What peace we can find in His providence! Truly we can sing,

Heav'n and earth the Lord created,
Seas and all that they contain;
He delivers from oppression,
Righteousness He will maintain.⁷

Let us therefore lift up our voices in praise of God's sovereignty as the Maker of heaven and earth.

Praise for God's Sovereignty in the Exaltation of His Incarnate Son

Acts 4:25–26 goes on to tell us that the church quoted Psalm 2, saying, “Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.” How good to pray the words of Scripture! The Bible is God's own Word, placed in the mouth of His servants who spoke it and wrote it. When we saturate our prayers with God's Word, our minds cannot help but be lifted up to Christ and our prayers are aligned with God's will.

When the apostolic church faced opposition, they turned to Psalm 2, which says that God had long before announced that nations would rage and that kings and rulers would conspire against the Lord and against His Anointed. We should not be surprised, then, when this very thing happens in our time. Rather, we should be profoundly grateful when any earthly authority stands up for what is true and good.

Though the rulers of the world war against God, their efforts are vain, empty, and futile, for, as Psalm 2 tells us, God has established His Christ as the King of kings, and

7. *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), #400, verse 4 [Ps. 146].

He will reign forever. The Father said to the Son, “Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Ps. 2:8–9).

God’s providence is entirely in the hands of Christ as the Mediator (John 17:2). Calvin said, “God will reign in the person of his Son alone.”⁸ Therefore we may be assured that Christ will conquer all enemies of the church, and it will not fail on earth. Jesus Christ has already risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits at God’s right hand with all authority in heaven and on earth (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20–21). William Perkins said, “Christ, [as] God and man, after his ascension is advanced to such an estate in which he has fulness of glory, power, majesty, and authority in the presence of his Father and all the saints and holy angels.” His kingdom “spreadeth itself over heaven and earth.”⁹

So, when we pray for God’s kingdom to come, we should lift our eyes to Jesus Christ, giving thanks that God has promised to establish the throne and kingdom of His Son over all the earth. When the church faces opposition from powerful enemies, we must take time to meditate on the promises and to lift praises to God. Fixing our eyes upon Jesus and setting our affections upon Him, we will then be able to pray with faith and not with the fear of man. We can pray, “Thy kingdom come” with the confidence that we are simply asking God to do what He promised—to give the nations to His Son as His inheritance.

Praise of God’s Sovereignty in the Redemption of His People

The third part of the believers’ praises, are, according to

8. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:185; cf. *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles*, 165.

9. William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles* (London: John Legatt, 1595), 352.

verses 27–28, “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” In the darkest hours of the church’s sufferings in this world, God’s will is being done. The counsels and deeds of wicked men were the instruments of God’s redemption of His people.

There was no darker hour in the history of God’s people than when Jesus died on the cross. It seemed to the disciples that all of God’s purposes had failed. The Messiah, anointed by God, had perished at the hands of cruel and wicked men. They had brought Him to trial, condemned Him as a criminal, beat Him, nailed Him to the cross, then mocked Him while He slowly died. If ever there was a time for despair, this was it. The apostles hid themselves in fear that they might be taken next (John 20:19). Christians in many parts of the world today might also be tempted to hide themselves for fear of what is coming next in their country.

When Christ rose from the dead, however, He told His disciples that everything had happened according to God’s providential decree as revealed in Scripture and Christ’s own words (Luke 24:25–27, 44–46). What appeared to be the darkest hour was in truth the most glorious moment in history: God had accomplished the redemption of His people. God’s providence ruled over the sins of wicked authorities and caused them “to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” God has predestined even the acts of sinners (1 Peter 2:8). The vicious and ugly murder of God’s Son was determined by God before time began (1 Peter 1:19).

The apostolic church took hold of this doctrine in the darkness and turned it into a prayer of praise. They knew the crucified Christ was not a criminal. Though rejected by men, He was God’s holy child whom God had anointed. “Child” is the same Greek word used of David in verse

25 and can also be translated “servant.”¹⁰ It is the same word used in the covenant with David and in reference to the suffering servant in Isaiah.¹¹ Jesus’ death was not a defeat, but an ushering in of the kingdom promised to David. His death on the cross was God’s will for our salvation (Isa. 53:10–11). Derek Thomas said, “The doctrine of God’s absolute sovereignty is necessary if we are to understand what occurred at Calvary.... God was the Author of the cross.”¹²

Can you praise God at the foot of Christ’s cross? You can if you trust that Christ suffered for your sins. But can you also praise God as you take up your cross? You may if your faith grasps the doctrine of divine providence. Calvin wrote, “God doth so govern and guide all things by his secret counsel, that he doth bring to pass those things which he hath determined, even by the wicked.”¹³ If we believe that, we can stand before wicked men, even wicked rulers, and sing God’s praises. The worst thing they can do to us is the best thing God has planned for our good (Rom. 8:28).

In Christ we are more than overcomers. Though rejected by men, we are not criminals. We are God’s children and God’s servants. Our suffering does not mean defeat for the kingdom. It is the very means that God has ordained to advance His kingdom and cause His eternal weight of glory to be revealed in our lives.

When the powers of this world threaten the church, let us lift our voices in prayer. And let us begin with heart-warming and faith-forming praise. We serve the God of providence; therefore, we can adore Him for His supremacy and sovereignty in His Son. We can sing,

10. Greek *pais*.

11. LXX 1 Chron. 17:4, 17, 23, 24, 25, 27; Isa. 41:8–9; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1–2, 21, 26; 45:4; 49:6; 50:10; 52:13.

12. Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2011), 110.

13. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:187.

When the needy seek Him, He will mercy show;
 Yea, the weak and helpless shall His pity know;
 He will surely save them from oppression's might,
 For their lives are precious in His holy sight.
 Christ shall have dominion over land and sea,
 Earth's remotest regions shall His empire be.¹⁴

Prayers for Power

The first response of the church to threats of oppression is to lift up prayers of praise. We have great cause to praise God's sovereignty in creation, in the exaltation of His Son, and in the redemption of His people. We should not stop with praise, however. Acts 4:29 reminds us that we are God's servants, literally His slaves,¹⁵ who live to do His will. We have commandments to keep and a mission to fulfill, and we must not allow the high cost of discipleship to deter us from doing the work God has given us to do. The apostles told the ruling council, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (Acts 4:19). We must keep on listening to God's Word and doing His will as His servants in the world.

We cannot serve God in our own strength. Nothing reveals how weak and fragile we are as does the opposition of sinners. We must thus pray for power. The last part of the church's prayer in Acts 4 teaches us how to pray for ourselves.

The early believers began their petitions with a brief request for protection. Acts 4:29 says, "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings." This is the only petition the church makes for protection against persecution. "Behold" here means "look upon our painful situation and act out of Thy compassion and love."¹⁶ It is good and right for us

14. *The Psalter*, #200, verse 2 [Ps. 72].

15. Greek *doulos*, a different word than that translated "servant" in v. 25.

16. The verb "look upon" (*ephoraō*) has a variety of applications, yet sometimes takes the special connotation of responding to trouble

to cry out to God for deliverance from those who would harm us so that He may be glorified (Isa. 37:16–20). Let us not romanticize persecution; it is ugly and evil. The Psalms are full of cries for deliverance from the assaults of the wicked, and God’s providence often spares His children from suffering in answer to such prayers. Ultimately God will send His Son to deliver us from all evil.

Note, however, that the church quickly goes on to pray for the display of divine power. Verses 29b–30 say, “and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.” The believers prayed for power for the ministry of the Word and power for ministry to the bodies of sinful men. In answer to that prayer, verse 31 tells us, “They were all filled with the Holy Ghost.” They had offered praise to the Father, taken hold of the promises made to the Son, and now they obtained the power of the Spirit. Their prayer was truly Trinitarian in scope and effect.

The heart of their request was for God to empower them by the Holy Spirit with spiritual gifts. We no longer live in the apostolic age; we are not apostles and do not have the same spiritual gifts that they had. But this text does call our church to ask God for spiritual gifts of speaking and serving. Let us consider each spiritual gift.

Power for Spiritual Gifts of Speaking

First, the believers prayed for the apostles as ministers of the Word, “that with all boldness they may speak thy word” (Acts 4:29). Our ministers today are also mere flesh and blood. They may feel bold as a lion, but like Peter, these leaders may also discover all too quickly how easily

with mercy and compassion (LXX Gen. 16:13; Ex. 2:25; Ps. 30:8 [31:7]; 112[113]:6; 137[138]:6; Luke 1:25; cf. 2 Macc. 7:6; 8:2; 3 Macc. 6:3, 12).

they can deny their Lord. Pray for your ministers, so they may boldly preach and witness for Christ.

Ministers also carry God’s treasures in earthen vessels and often feel troubled, perplexed, and cast down as they experience the dying of Jesus in their own bodies (2 Cor. 4:7–10). Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit gives them courage to speak, for He is “the Spirit of faith” (2 Cor. 4:13). Luke stresses in verse 8 that the apostle who spoke so boldly to the council was not Peter the man of flesh, but Peter, “filled with the Holy Ghost.” Verse 31 says that God answered their prayer, “and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.”

Boldness refers to being confident, frank, open, and unashamed.¹⁷ We think of Paul, who said in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” But even Paul needed people to pray for him when he faced opposition. He wrote in Ephesians 6:19–20, “And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”

If we would persevere in serving the Lord, we must also seek power for spiritual gifts of speaking. Pray your preachers “full of the Spirit” and they will preach you full.

Charles Spurgeon preached with such power from the Holy Spirit that several thousand people came out to hear him every Sunday for thirty-eight years, and millions have read his sermons ever since. On one occasion, Spurgeon met some enthusiastic visitors to his church and asked them if they wanted to see the church’s power plant. They were far more interested in the preaching, but they followed him anyway. So he took them to a large room where believers were gathered for prayer. His

17. Greek *parrēsia*.

church sought the power of God through united prayer. Spurgeon recognized this was a notable characteristic of the church, saying,

When I came to New Park Street Chapel, it was a mere handful of people to whom I first preached, yet I could never forget how earnestly they prayed. Sometimes they seemed to plead as though they could really see the Angel of the Covenant [that is, Christ] present with them, and as if they must have a blessing from him. More than once we were so awe-struck with the solemnity of the [prayer] meeting that we sat silent for some moments while the Lord's Power appeared to overshadow us.¹⁸

Ministers long to see prayer meetings full of people and full of God's Spirit, for powerful preaching in the church begins with powerful praying by the church. Acts 4:33 says what happened after the apostles prayed for boldness to speak: "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all."

Cotton Mather said that Thomas Hooker was a minister of such courage that "while doing his Master's work, he would put a king in his pocket."¹⁹ God can give remarkable power to His preachers. We must seek power for spiritual gifts of speaking so that our ministers may preach boldly, even when under fire.

Power for Spiritual Gifts of Serving

In verse 30, the early church prayed that God would assist the preaching of the Word "by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus." The apostles were commissioned by Christ Jesus to work miracles as they

18. Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 270–71.

19. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), book 3, 64.

preached the kingdom of God.²⁰ They now prayed for God to empower their spiritual gifts in practical ministry as well in order to heal the sick. They could not heal at will; even apostles had to depend on God’s power to work a miracle (Acts 3:12). Such miracles are called “signs and wonders” because God used them to confirm publicly that He had sent the apostles (Acts 14:3; Heb. 2:3–4), just as God worked miracles through His servant Moses (Ex. 7:3, 9; Deut. 4:34). By healing the bodies of men, God visibly showed that His redeeming love had come to heal our accursed world and save us from our sins (Isa. 35; Luke 7:20–23).

God answered their prayer in an extraordinary manner. Verse 31 tells us that “the place was shaken where they were assembled together.” In the Bible, earthquakes were signs that God had come to bless His people with His power.²¹ Luke reported that shortly afterwards, in answer to this prayer, the Lord struck dead some hypocrites in the church, caused amazing miracles of healing through the apostles, and used an angel to release the apostles from prison (Acts 5:1–20).

However, Acts 4 does not focus on these miracles of healing.²² Instead, verses 32–37 dwell on the practical ministries of loving and caring for the poor. This makes

20. Luke 9:1–2; Acts 5:12; 2 Cor. 12:12.

21. Earthquakes appear at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:18), the death and resurrection of Jesus (Matt. 27:54; 28:2) and at the Day of the Lord (Ezek. 38:19–20; Rev. 6:12; etc.).

22. The only possible reference to miracles in Acts 4:31–37 would be “power” in v. 33, “with great power gave the apostles witness.” It seems more likely that the singular “power” (*dunamis*) does not refer to miracles but to the “power” to convict, convert, and comfort souls through witness (Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24; 2:4–5; Eph. 1:19; Col. 1:28–29; 1 Thess. 1:5). Thus Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 174. However, miracles are called “powers” (Acts 2:22; 6:8; 8:13; 19:11; Gal. 3:5) or works done by “power” (Acts 3:12; 4:7; 6:8; 8:10; 10:38; 2 Thess. 2:9). So Acts 4:33 could mean that the apostles ministered the Word of Christ accompanied by miracles. Nevertheless, this is not the emphasis of this section.

perfect sense. The apostles had prayed for God to stretch out His hand and heal the hurting. God then filled them with the Spirit, and the believers stretched out their hands to care for the widows, orphans, foreigners, handicapped, and poor among them. The church became the fatherly hand of the God of providence. The apostles established a fund for the church to serve the practical needs of people. This was not some form of communism imposed by a church authority or political party. It was instead the voluntary sharing of property and possessions as each had ability or need.²³

We must likewise pray for power to serve today. We are neither apostles nor those on whom the apostles laid their hands. We do not possess miraculous gifts. But many of us have practical gifts. If the church in America faces opposition from wicked rulers, people will suffer. The church must develop a culture of caring for each other. In that way, God's providence will turn persecution into an opportunity to glorify Christ.

Practical works of service are greater signs to the world than raising the dead.²⁴ Christ said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). The diaconal ministry of the church is the most effective gift we have to confirm the truth of the gospel.

We must also pray for God's power. It actually takes more supernatural power to produce love and practical service to needy people than it does to work a miracle of healing. Our Lord understood that only supernatural

23. Contrast Qumran, where such community of goods was required. See Kistemaker, *Acts*, 173–74.

24. "Great grace" (v. 33) may mean "much favor," in the sense that the larger Jewish community looked upon the church with much favor because of their Spirit-empowered lives (Acts 2:47; 4:21; 5:13). So Kistemaker, *Acts*, 174.

grace can make us love each other sacrificially. He prayed that we would love one another and be one with each other so “that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me” (John 17:23).

Join your prayers to Christ’s prayer, and lift up constant requests for spiritual gifts of service! Pray that God would cause your love to abound yet more and more (Phil. 1:9). Ask the Lord to make us increase and abound in love towards one another and all men (1 Thess. 3:12). Cry out that the Lord would bless our church with rich and practical spiritual gifts for mercy and service. Pray for our deacons as they administer the funds of the church to care for those in need. In all this, pray for God to stretch out His loving hands through our ministries, and show the world that He has come to set sinful and miserable people free.

Conclusion

The doctrine of providence teaches us that when the church faces opposition, we must lift up our prayers to the God of providence. We must lift up prayers of praise. Praise glorifies God and strengthens our faith and joy. Praise enthrones the Lord as the true Sovereign even as wicked leaders try to overthrow the kingdom of Christ. We must also lift up prayers for power. The Holy Spirit can give our ministers amazing power to preach the Word even in the face of enemies. The Holy Spirit can also mobilize the body to serve the poor when the church is oppressed.

To enjoy the Spirit’s blessings, we must pray for them. Do you believe that God reigns? Then show it in your prayers. God forbid that it be said of our congregation, “Ye have not, because ye ask not” (James 4:2). Rather, may our congregation be living proof of Christ’s promise, “Ask, and it shall be given you” (Matt. 7:7). Amen.