

Prayer, the lifeline of the church

Acts

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Think back through your life. When have you prayed the most and prayed the hardest? What was happening in your life at that time? Maybe you were passing through marital problems. Maybe you had lost your job and had no idea how you were going to provide for your family. Maybe you or someone you knew had a terminal illness. Maybe it was for the salvation of a loved one. Maybe it was because your heart had been broken or your dreams had been shattered.

I would imagine that most of us were driven to prayer because we were in a desperate situation that we could not take care of ourselves. We realized we were not smart enough. We were not rich enough. We were not strong enough. We were not good enough . . . We just were not enough. In our weakness we had to look outside of ourselves for help, so we turned to God and cried out to Him from the depths of our hearts.

Out of our weakness we turned to God. That is what happened. That is why we prayed so intensely. It reminds us of God's words when He spoke to the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9. The Apostle Paul was crying out to the Lord for help and the Lord responded, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* In other words, weakness drives us to God and in Him we find everything that we need. When, out of our desperation, we cry out to God, He responds, and his glory and power are put on display.

In prayer, Christ is our lifeline, our hope, our salvation. It is true for the church as well. Prayer is the Lifeline of the church. It is our saving grace which ushers us into unity. That leads us to evangelize. That moves our hearts to agree with God's. Through prayer the church is empowered, and God works wonders, even more than when we pray individually. It has been summarized in this simple phrase:

When we work, we work. When we pray, God works.

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As a church we have a choice. We can either serve Christ in our own power, or we can follow Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture at times differentiates this by talking of the flesh and the spirit. Are we serving God out of our own power and our own resources, the flesh, or are we serving God, trusting in His power and His resources? This would be serving in the Spirit. One key indicator is how much we pray. Those who serve God in the flesh will be very busy doing the work of the church but will spend little time in prayer. Those who are serving God in the Spirit will also be working diligently, but their main work will be that of prayer.

Imagine a boat in the middle of the ocean. You see two people in the boat rowing as hard as they can to make progress and reach the other shore. Fatigue is setting in and yet all they see on the horizon is endless water. How futile must that feel! They are working tirelessly, trusting in their own strength, with very little results. But what if they put up their sail and catch the wind? They would still need to discern the direction of the wind and steer the boat, but how much greater would the result be as they catch the wind and are carried along by it.

The Holy Spirit is to the life of the Church as the wind is to a sailboat. The sailor does not create the wind; he merely puts up the sail and is driven along by the wind's power. Prayer is how we put up our spiritual sail to catch the wind of God. If we are going to be the church that God desires us to be, we must be a church that prays.

We even see this truth in Jesus' life. Only Jesus had seen prayer from both an earthly and heavenly perspective. With this complete understanding, He prayed, continually. If He, the Son of God, needed prayer that much, how much more do we.

In Acts 1, we see this same truth lived out by Jesus' closest followers. He told them to return to Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. So, they returned as Jesus had instructed and they waited.

This group, of 120 followers, including the apostles and even Jesus' mother and brothers, did what Jesus had taught them to do, ***"In one accord they devoted themselves to pray"*** (Acts 1:14).

Then the miraculous happened. ***"And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance"*** (Acts 2:2-4). Jews and proselytes from all over the world who were in Jerusalem for the Pentecost celebration heard the apostles sharing the gospel in their own languages. Peter then stood up and preached, and 3,000 people were convicted of their sin and put their faith in Jesus.

All of this story flowed out of the fact that God's people waited for God in one accord, devoting themselves in prayer. They put up their spiritual sail and were carried along by the Spirit of God. That was the way that they prepared for the working of God in Acts 2, and it continued to be the way that the early church prepared for the working of God throughout the book of Acts.

In Acts 1:24 they prayed, and God led them as they chose a new apostle. In Acts 4:31, in the face of persecution, ***“They prayed, and 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.”*** In Acts 6:6 they prayed as they chose the first deacons. The deacons would now take over the physical needs of the church so the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. That is how important prayer was to them . . . ***“As a result, the word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.”***

In Acts 9:40 Peter prayed over the body of a woman named Dorcas and she was miraculously brought back to life. In response, ***“It became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”***

In Acts 10-11 prayer played a key role in Gentiles coming to Jesus and being admitted to the church. In Acts 12:6-19 the church prayed for Peter’s rescue from prison and God sent an angel who miraculously freed him.

In Acts 13:1-3 the church prayed before sending out the first missionaries, Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 14:23 they prayed as they appointed new elders to the church. Prayer is essential in the life of the church.

Their prayers changed them from a small group of simple, intimidated people who had fled at Jesus’ arrest, to those who would eventually stand before the most powerful leaders of all Judaism and proclaim the name of Jesus fearlessly. They would rejoice when they were counted worthy to be beaten for the sake of Jesus. Through their prayers God would heal the sick, raise the dead and bring thousands to faith in Jesus.

From this small band of believers Christianity would grow to become the main religion in the Roman Empire by 325 AD.

This pattern of prayer in the church continued all the way through Paul’s writings. Prayer was the lifeline for the church in biblical times and has continued throughout church history. A church, ministering out of the abilities of man, can at best be well organized with quality programs and pleasing to the eye, but in the end, it can bear no lasting fruit. Only the fruit that is born of the Spirit will truly last and advance the kingdom of God.

If we are to be a church that reaches the lost for Christ, we must be a people who pray. Sidlow Baxter wrote, ***“Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons, but they are helpless against our prayers.”***

Whether it be the church or our personal lives, we must come to the point where we realize our desperate need for God.

Prayer ushers the presence and the power of God into each situation for which we pray. How many areas of our church need the presence of God? The preaching, the evangelism, the discipleship, the Children’s Ministry, Youth Ministry, University ministry, Young Adult ministry, Women’s ministry, Social

ministry, the Music ministry, the Deacons, the Pastor, and even the church during this time of transition. May we raise the sail of prayer and catch the wind of God.

Samuel Chadwick said, *"The one concern of the devil is to keep saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray."*

We must remember, *"We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."* For this reason, our weapons must be spiritual, and prayer is the first to which we turn.

We see its importance in the words of the Apostle Paul when he instructed the Thessalonians to pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

In scripture we are instructed to pray for unity in the church. Pray that God would be glorified in all things and that the name of Christ is exalted. Pray that God's Spirit and power would fill the church. Pray that the world would know us by our love. Pray that the hearts and the minds of the church leaders would be submitted to Christ. Pray that our church would be a people of God's Word. Pray for the church against the attacks of the enemy. Pray that through us people would be ushered towards Christ and that the church would be faithful to make disciples who love God and love neighbor.

As a church we would like to take this to heart. We know there are people in our church who pray often. We know that there are small groups that focus on prayer. We believe that God has and is working in the life of our church, but we long for God to do more. With this in mind I would like to suggest you find a prayer partner. If you are not praying regularly with someone from the church, let me encourage to start to do so. Ask God to lead you to a person or two who could be your prayer partners. On a regular basis begin to share your prayer requests. Then together begin to pray for each other and for our church. Imagine what God could do with 100 groups from our church who pray with their prayer partners regularly.

Let me encourage you to take the initiative and begin to make prayer a larger part of your life. The best way to learn to pray is to pray. Open your heart to God. As you continue in this discipline, I believe you will begin to experience the Spirit of God working in your life like never before. Even if you need to set an alarm or schedule it during your day, take the basic steps to begin to make prayer a regular part of your life. As we have mentioned before "discipline to delight." In the beginning discipline is what makes it happen, but eventually delight becomes your driving motivation. Even if you need to use a prayer app to organize your prayer list, the important part is to pray.

I would like to close by turning our attention back to Acts 12. James, the brother of John, one of the apostles, had just been killed by King Herod:

⁶ Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the

prison.⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands.⁸ And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."⁹ And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.¹⁰ When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

¹² When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.¹⁴ Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!"¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.

The reason I close with this story is that we see that the church was praying, but when God answered their prayers, their response was, *"You are out of your mind."* They prayed, but they did not fully believe that God could do what they were asking. Even in their limited faith God worked a miracle anyway. I show you this to be encouraged. Maybe you are here today longing to be strong in prayer, but you lack desire, discipline or faith. Today, start from where you are. 1 minute of prayer. 5 minutes of prayer. With minimal faith. Raise your sail and ask God to come. He will meet us in our prayers and provide the stability and wisdom that will be needed in the days ahead.