

Act Normal

5. Get a (prayer) life

March 26, 2023

I'm glad you're worshipping with us this week. Today we continue our series "Act Normal" where we see the life of the early church. Please turn to Acts 12 in your Bible or in your app.

The early Christians were a praying people, but none of us, not even the first disciples ever finish learning about prayer in this lifetime. So we're going to learn more today. It will help you and me to remember that **prayer is an action, not a mindset** (Larry Osborne) It is easy to think that we first need to feel spiritual and focused in order to pray. If so, we'll wait until we feel like praying before we actually pray. We might even think that unless our heart is fully in it and we feel inspired to pray that our prayer is not effective or authentic. But when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he didn't say, "First, start by feeling close to God" or "Get into a spiritual mood." No, Jesus said, "Pray like this..." and then taught them what we call the Lord's Prayer – or the "Our Father."

Prayer is an action, not a mindset. We can pray authentically even if we aren't feeling it. It is no less legitimate. Prayer is a discipline. Having a job requires discipline. If you only go to work when you feel inspired, how long will you have your job? If we only pray when we feel like it, how often will we hear God's voice or see his power? If we only pray when we feel like it, then we rob ourselves of a growing relationship with God. With this in mind, let's learn from the early church's prayer experiences.

Acts 12:1-5 *The rulers had started to persecute Christ-followers again, and the apostles became prime targets.*

Acts 12:1-5 *It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (NIV)*

Give the first believers a lot of credit; when Peter was arrested, they didn't just shake their heads and say, "Too bad." They didn't quake in fear. They went to prayer and they prayed *earnestly*. And God answered in a big way! The passage says that later that night Peter was sleeping in jail. By the way, that says a lot about Peter's trust in God, that he could sleep when he knew he might be executed at any moment. Peter got a bad rap for sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before the crucifixion when Jesus asked him to pray, but I admire him for sleeping in jail. So Peter was asleep when an angel appeared, freed Peter from his chains and opened the prison gates so

Peter could walk free. At first he thought it might be a dream or a vision, but when he found himself outside he knew it was real. Peter knew God had done something miraculous. It wasn't a dream or a vision. He was really free.

Acts 12:11 *Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."*

Acts 12:12 *When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.*

Remember, this was the middle of the night! Maybe 2 am and there was a group of people praying for Peter. This explains so much of the power of the early church; they prayed. That night they were seriously interceding for their friend. (Maybe that's why Peter could sleep!) They didn't know yet that Peter had been released, but their prayers had already been answered. Now comes one of the more humorous passages in the Bible:

Acts 12:13-15 *Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" ¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."*

The disciples were praying for Peter and yet they didn't believe God answered them! Rhoda said, "He's at the door!" and they said, "You're crazy." After she kept insisting, they conceded that Rhoda must have seen something but they figured Peter was dead and it was his ghost. Great faith, huh? It was easier for them to believe that Peter had been killed than that he had been freed.

Acts 12:16 *But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.*

This passage teaches us several important truths:

Our job is to pray. God's job is to do what's best

When we pray, we might have an idea of what we think is best, but God is the one who truly knows. Peter's friends cared enough about him and had faith enough to pray through the night. They just weren't prepared for the way God would answer their prayer. Maybe deep down they didn't really expect Peter to be freed. After all, just days earlier, they had seen the apostle James executed by the sword. They might have secretly assumed there was no hope for Peter. Or they may have been praying specifically that Peter's trial would go well and that he would be spared that way. Either way they clearly didn't expect that Peter would be miraculously delivered and show up at the door in the middle of the night!

Has God ever answered your prayer in a way you didn't expect? God will answer our prayers in one of three ways: "Yes," "No," or "Wait." We all love it when God answers "Yes." When he says "yes" we celebrate and say "thank you." By the way, I need to write down some of my prayers because I can forget that I prayed them. Then later when God answers I react like it just happened to work out and I forgot that I asked God. When God says "no," it can be hard to accept. We can't know God's reasons, but we know his character and we know He is good. How do we tell the difference between "No" and "Wait?" As long as there is a possibility, I treat it like "wait." That means I keep praying about it until either it happens or it becomes impossible.

Prayer changes circumstances

Peter was chained between 2 guards behind the gates of a prison. The king intended to execute him. And yet, he walked free. That was a miracle and everyone knew it. I don't think this miracle would have happened if the church had not been praying for Peter. Some things won't happen unless we pray. When the disciples were frustrated that they could not heal a boy from a demon that was oppressing him, Jesus told them, "This doesn't come out except through prayer and fasting." **James 4:2** *You do not have because you do not ask God.* So ask!

This week one of our Crossroads family members told me that several years ago God answered a big prayer for her. She was a divorced single mom with young kids and no money. She was self-employed and struggling to make ends meet. She was at a service when we challenged people to pray and make one specific, bold request of God and to write it down. As she thought about what that ask should be, she knew it would be financial. Just then a number popped into her mind... it was a big number - three times what she had ever made in her life. She was almost embarrassed to write it down, so she wrote it in a way that no one would know what it meant. And very shortly after that, her business picked up dramatically and she earned exactly the amount that she had written down as a request from God. And for years after that it never dipped below that number. Let's pray for the change we need to see.

Praying with others increases our prayers' effectiveness

Peter's friends were praying together in the same place for him. We think of prayer as solitary, but we need to pray together with other believers too. The Lord's Prayer is in plural terms: "OUR Father," not "My Father" "Forgive US, our sins" – not just MY sins. There is power when a Life Group prays together for the same thing. There is power when our staff gathers to pray. There is power when we pray together in our services. It can help us to be consistent in prayer if we have a pattern to follow, so we don't have to depend on feelings of inspiration. There are many good prayer patterns to follow. One we teach in our Following Jesus class is the acronym P.R.A.Y. I'll explain it and then in just a couple minutes we will do it.

PRAY Pattern (from Pete Greig)

P-ause [<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-did-jesus-mean-by-peace-be-still.html>] **Psalm 46:10 “Be still and know that I am God.”**

Start with 2 minutes in silence, no music, no scripture, not saying anything. The goal isn't to hear a word from God, though if you do, by all means pay attention. The goal is simply to still your soul so that you are able to connect with God. Getting quiet is like letting the silt sink to the bottom so the water becomes clear. We may become aware of his presence and simply enjoy it, like sitting quietly with your spouse or friend. Don't be surprised if you find that this is hard! Most of us fill every moment with our phone or some other input. About half of us are wired as kinetic learners – we learn by doing. If that's you, it can be hard to sit still. You can also still your soul while your body is in motion: you can walk – even run – and get inwardly quiet. Some of my better ideas come when I am jogging.

R-ejoice through a Psalm/Song [<https://www.heraldofhope.org.au/rejoice-coming-day-christ/>]

When we rejoice we praise God. That's the way the Lord's Prayer begins: “Our Father in heaven – *holy is your name.*” We declare his holy nature. We can praise God in prayer in many ways. We can read a Psalm of praise out of the Bible. Pick one and speak it out loud to God. We can sing a praise song, we can use recordings, YouTube or just from our memory. Praise him in song.

R-eflect on scripture [<https://holdingtotruth.com/2013/06/17/how-to-study-the-bible/>]

We can hear from God through his word. Very simply, we read a portion of scripture and ask ourselves, “What is God saying to me?” As you read, ask yourself which one verse or phrase stands out to you more than others? Just pick that verse and ask God what he wants you to know or do about it. Sit with it. In Following Jesus we teach the SOAP method of encountering God in scripture, so you can learn more about how to read the Bible and get more out of it there.

A-sk God to help

“Asking” is when we seek God to work in our lives and in the lives of others. This is the most familiar type of prayer. [<https://ymi.today/2018/08/when-im-praying-for-you-feels-hollow/>]

Ask God to help others (intercession)

Peter's friends were committed to pray for him. They gathered together and prayed for hours and the result was a miracle. As a child of God, you have the authority to ask for God's purposes to be accomplished in the lives of others. Barb Turner is on our staff. When she first came to the church 20 years ago, she was a single mom of 2 kids and in a tough place. One week one of our members approached Barb in the lobby, introduced herself then asked, “Can I pray for you?” Barb cautiously said, “OK.” Then the member prayed 3 things: for Barb to find a good job, for her to find a godly man, and to move closer to the church so that she could serve. Barb was startled. She thought, “How does she know to pray for that?” And what does she mean by “serve?” Within the next month, Barb had a new job, a few weeks later she met Mark, who became her husband and then she moved to within 5 minutes of the church. And she has been

serving the Lord for years. Barb was glad that member knew to offer prayer for others. When we are in a Life Group we have people who will pray for us and we will know people we can pray for. Seeing God answer prayers builds everyone's faith.

Ask for ourselves (Petition) [<https://www.myfaithvotes.org/articles/praying-for-a-nation-in-chaos>]

Jesus prompts us to ask for God to provide for us and to forgive us;; "Give us this day our daily bread" and "Forgive us our sins." Let me urge you to pray specifically. Vague prayers like "Please be with me" (he always is) lack power. Specific prayer gets answer. Tell him how much money you need or the changes you need to see in your child. If God could do one miracle in your life, what would it be? Today before you leave here, why not ask God for that?

Yield to God's will

When God speaks, it is important that we respond. A member of our church family recently told me that he and wife had gone through an emotionally draining time. As he prayed, he sensed God was telling them to get away for a break. The problem was, he didn't have the money for that. But out of obedience he booked a flight. And then, over the next week, money from unexpected sources flowed in that paid for their trip. That is living out our prayer life.

We meet God when we P.R.A.Y. So, let's do this together now.