

DEVOTED TO PRAYER

Open your bible with me to Acts 2. I read through the book of Colossians one day this week and was absolutely struck by the prayer that Paul prayed for the church as he wrote to them. It is an evergreen prayer. Colossians 1:9–12 reads this:

⁹And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

As I reflected on this prayer for a little church plant in Colossae, I was reminded of the church in Jerusalem that we have been studying over the last few weeks. Paul prays for many of the same Spirit-wrought characteristics that we have noted in this congregation filled with the knowledge of God's will, a fellowship of believers bearing fruit with endurance and joy, the people praising God and giving thanks to Him. The words of this prayer for the church in Colossians 1 sound very similar to the picture of the church in Acts 2.

This prayer also gave me fresh language to pray for The Trails Church. I prayed that we also might be filled with and increasing in the knowledge of God, that we would be strengthened with the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit and with the glorious might of the risen Christ, that we would be tirelessly patient and continually joyful as we follow Christ together. I prayed especially as we enter Thanksgiving week, that we would never lose the wonder of what God has done for us in Christ, but that we would give thanks to the Father for the great privilege of sharing in the inheritance of the gospel with the saints in light.

Through this series of sermons from Acts 2:42-47 entitled "Devoted," we are studying specific characteristics of a gospel-centered church that transcend time, culture, and geography. Today we look at the role of prayer. As I thought about the subject of prayer this week against

the background of our mission statement, I saw with fresh eyes the reality that there is no way we can achieve what we have set out to do apart from depending on the Lord in prayer. Our mission statement says, “We exist to glorify God by making disciples through the gospel, in community, and on mission.” This statement is simply a combination of the great commandment: loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and the great commission: going and making disciples of Jesus. Yet, if we are to live out the great commandment and the great commission, we must recognize our *great condition*. Our mission is only possible if it is conducted in prayer. Martin Lloyd Jones pointed out:

Prayer is the best test of a church. A church can be flourishing: She can be successful in terms of organizations, she can be tremendously active and appear to be prosperous; but if you want to know whether she is a real church or not, examine the amount of prayer that takes place.¹

It is possible to build what appears to be a successful church from the outside that is prayerless on the inside. So, the question I would like us to wrestle with together is, “What role does prayer play in the life of a local church?”

Summary Paragraph

The church in Jerusalem was birthed in prayer, grew in prayer, and multiplied in prayer. At almost every important turning point in the Book of Acts we find the mention of prayer (1:24; 8:14-17; 9:11-12; 10:4, 9, 30; 13:23).² From the witness of this ancient church, we will look at the vital practice of prayer and the role it plays in our life together. What I would like to do this morning is to pray together through these sermon points, asking the Lord that we would be a praying church devoted to: *1. Knowing God in Prayer, 2. Supporting One Another in Prayer, and 3. Advancing the Gospel by Prayer.*

¹ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity*, 1st U.S. ed, Studies in the Book of Acts, v. 1 (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2000), 162.

² David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 118.

Knowing God in Prayer

First, pray that we would be devoted to *Knowing God in Prayer*. Acts 2:42 says that the church was devoted to prayer. We have defined this word ‘devoted’ as “to attach oneself, to be faithful, to persist.”³ Here we find that the disciples attached themselves to, were faithful through, and persisted in prayer.

Evidence of Prayer

To get a sense of the role this practice played in their life, allow me to show you two other places in chapters 1-4 where we find evidence of prayer. The first place is in Acts 1:14. There the church is eagerly awaiting the promise of the Holy Spirit to empower them for their mission of making disciples. But they were not only waiting; they were also praying. The Bible says, “All these with one accord were *devoting themselves to prayer*.” It was in this environment of prayer that they decided who from among them would be elected as an apostle. (Of course, how thankful we are to the Lord that last Sunday in the same spirit, we elected three new elders to assist in shepherding our congregation.) The next evidence of prayer is found in Acts 4. The apostles Peter and John were arrested for healing a crippled man and preaching about forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Eventually, the authorities decided that the apostles had to be released but they were given a strong warning to no longer preach or do miracles in the name of Jesus. In the first of many times we find a government trying to exterminate the Christian church, Acts 4:23 says that when Peter and John made it back to the congregation, “They lifted their voices together to God.” They prayed and the walls of the building trembled. They didn’t ask for God to change their circumstances, they pleaded for boldness in their circumstances. In these two passages we see that when the church needed God’s wisdom, they sought it. When they needed His power, they pleaded for it. And the Lord heard His people.

³ Patrick Schreiner, *Acts* (Brentwood, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2021), 142.

We see evidence of these early Christians praying. But what did the practice, or perhaps to put it in a brighter light, the privilege of prayer mean to them? Isaac Watts once wrote about the privilege of knowing God in prayer:

Prayer is the conversation which God allows us to maintain with himself above, while we are here below. It is that language in which a creature communicates with his Creator and in which the soul of a saint often gets near to God, experiences great delight and, as it were, dwells with his heavenly Father for a short time before he comes to heaven. It is a glorious privilege.⁴

As we think about knowing God in prayer, let us not miss what a glorious privilege that holds for us. What a wonder it is that the Creator and Sustainer of All Things would turn His ear to His children. Hebrews 4 tells us that because of the finished work of Christ, we now have a Great High Priest who has given us access to the very presence of God. What a gift this is. Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.” Christian, you are welcomed to the very throne of God.

Pray the Word

This week I have been living with this thought of being a church “devoted to prayer.” I am convinced that if we are going to continue to grow as disciples, we must grow in our experience of prayer. But this cannot grow from guilt and shame as motivators. It must be that the gospel of grace grips our hearts and spurs us on to *know God in prayer*. If you struggle with what to pray, or fall into the same ruts in prayer, I want to offer a tool to help you know God in prayer: the practice of praying Scripture. I began the sermon with one of hundreds of prayers in the Bible. You might begin right there with Colossians 1:9-12 and pray it this week. Ask God that you be filled with and grow in the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. As you fight sin, pray that you would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him. Pray that you would bear fruit in every good work. Give thanks above all things for the work of Christ which has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. *In*

⁴ Isaac Watts, *A Guide to Prayer* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 2001), 8.

the Scriptures God speaks to us, in prayer we speak to God. As we pray Scripture – a wonderful collision of conversation occurs. A relationship is developed and deepened. Let's ask the Lord that we might *Know Him in Prayer*.

Supporting One Another in Prayer

Second, pray that we would be devoted to *Supporting One Another in Prayer*. As we carry on in our exploration of the Book of Acts we do discover Christians praying alone (10:9), but most of the time we find them either praying together (2:46) or praying for one another.⁵

A Praying Church

The church prays together in 3:1 as they go to the temple to pray. Prayer played a vital role in the corporate worship of the early church. In 4:24 they “lift up their voices together in prayer.” In 6:4, deacons are installed to serve the church so that the pastors can fully devote themselves to the teaching of the word and *to prayer*. In 8:15 the church prays together for the Holy Spirit to be given to the Gentiles, and they are saved by faith and given the Holy Spirit. In 9:40 Peter prays to God for a little girl named Talitha to be brought back to life and amazingly she is! In 12:5 the church prays for Peter while he is in prison. In 14:23 the church prays and fasts together before elders are appointed. In Acts 16 Paul and Silas are detained in prison in the middle of the night. Rather than complaining, they are praying and singing hymns to God together. Acts 20-21 paint a beautiful picture of Paul and the Ephesian elders standing on the beach in tears and in prayer as Paul sets sail for his next ministry opportunity. With every turning of the page in the book of Acts we see the church praying *together* and praying *for one another*. The prayer life of these early Christians did not only focus on themselves, on their careers, on their families, on their wants. All of these things are good and should be covered in prayer. But the prayer life of the church in Scripture was radically focused on gospel growth, on the body of Christ, on the spread of the gospel.

⁵ Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 77.

A Praying Church

I want to encourage us in light of this to grow in the practice of praying for each other. In two different letters Paul encourages the church to pray for one another. When he writes to the church at Philippi he tells them *pray continually*. He uses the same word when he says he prays for the church in Rome “always.” He doesn’t mean that he does nothing but pray, but that he is never going to stop. By God’s grace I have seen this at work in you: through marriage heartbreaks, through the death of beloved family members, through the challenges of parenthood, through adoption, through jobs lost and jobs found. You pray for one another in community groups, and serve teams, and friendship. Keep on praying as an expression of love, unity, and devotion to one another.

If you find your prayer life is boring it may be that you just haven’t learned to pray outside of your own life. Widen your prayer life by praying for your church. Pray for our elders. Pray for your friends here. Pray for your community group. Pray for your serve team. Pray for our set up team when you wake up on Sunday mornings. Pray for the people discipling week by week in Trails Kids, and 56, and Students. Pray for our musicians and the team that serves us in our worship service. Pray for our connect team that welcomes new people. Pray for men’s and women’s Bible studies, and community groups, and community group leaders. Pray over our new building. Pray for your pastor. Continually pray. Don’t stop praying.

Membership Directory

One tool we have provided to help you to grow in the practice of praying for one another is our membership directory. In fact, the primary reason we have a membership directory is so that each member of our church would have a list of our church family to pray for them by name. I have a printed copy of it that sits in my study. I try to pray through that each week. Our elders pray through the entire directory out loud together at least once a year in elder meetings. I would encourage you to do the same – maybe even to drop people a quick email to let them know you prayed for them. One of the practices we see in the church in Acts is their devotion to

praying for one another. I pray that we would follow in their footsteps and see what prayers God might answer – because we *Supported One Another in Prayer*.

Advancing the Gospel by Prayer

Finally, pray that we would be devoted to *Advancing the Gospel by Prayer*. The church in Acts was a praying church, and part of what marked their prayers was an understanding that there is no forgiveness of sin, and no salvation apart from the saving grace of Jesus Christ. So, they shared the gospel, they planted seeds, and then watered them with prayer.

Preaching and Praying

The theme of the book of Acts is the advancement of the gospel. The key verse of the book is Acts 1:8 which says, “And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” What Luke shows through this book is just this: how the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. The good news was proclaimed, preached, spoken, and said. Yet, the church has always understood the role of prayer in this work and how dependent she is on the God Who Saves. I am reminded of the words of Jesus in Matthew 9:37-38 when He said, “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few; therefore *pray earnestly* to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” As Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthian church, he understood their prayers to be an effective reason for the advancement of the gospel. He writes in 2 Corinthians 1:11, “You also must *help us by prayer*, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.” Prayer is the fuel of mission.

J.I. Packer wrote a wonderful book called *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. In it he showed that in the advancement of the gospel, both preaching and praying are essential.⁶ He explains how evangelistic prayer consists of at least three elements: confession of one’s

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1991), 124.

powerlessness and need; acknowledging one's helplessness and dependence; and entreating God's power to do what one cannot do.⁷ As we seek to proclaim the gospel in our circles of influence, what a helpful reminder this is. We are not only called to evangelistically preach but also to evangelistically pray: confessing our powerlessness to render change in the heart of another person, acknowledge our dependence, trusting not in our ability or articulation, and entreating God's power to save the ones we love. We cannot open the spiritually blind eyes of our friends, so we call upon the God who can open blind eyes. We cannot heal the spiritually deaf ears of our children, so we plead with the God who can open deaf ears. We cannot redeem the hearts of our neighbors, so we cry out to the God who can take a heart of stone and make a heart of flesh. We preach and we pray evangelistically.

Evangelistic Prayers

It seems providential at this time in the life of our church as we sit just a few months away from moving into a new building, that we would pause and think about the marks of a healthy church. We've looked through these marks before, but I pray as we study them again that it would stir up in us the things that matter most. As I studied Charles Spurgeon in my doctoral work, I learned a lot about prayer from him: the role of prayer in the life of a pastor, the role of prayer in the life of a local church. When Charles Spurgeon was asked how it was that the preaching ministry of Metropolitan Tabernacle was so effective, he simply said, "Our people pray." As they saw thousands come to faith in Christ, they understood that it was through preaching and it was through praying.

Conclusion

Let us pray that we would grow more and more into a church "Devoted to Prayer" which exists to glorify God by making disciples through the gospel, in community, and on mission—a mission that is only possible if conducted in prayer. By God's grace let us pray that

⁷ Packer, 122.

we will grow in our understanding and experience of prayer in the years to come as we set our hearts to know God in prayer, as we open our hearts to pray for one another, and as we offer our hearts in prayer for those who have not tasted and seen the goodness of our God and known His great salvation.

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