

We must Maximize the Power of Prayer

Series: Acts of a Healthy Growing Church

Acts 4:23-31

February 5, 2017

Welcome again to worship. I'm so glad you are here. I want you to turn to pages 6-7 in your bulletin so that you can take some notes.

I came across this meme last month. For those of you who do not know, a meme is an online picture that someone has put text on to in order to get across a message. I came across this one: "There's a fine line between a long sermon and a hostage situation." Well, I'll let you decide what today is.

We are in the midst of our series "Acts of a Healthy Growing Church." We are looking back at the Early Church through the book of Acts and see how they were healthy and growing. I've listed in the bulletin the first four acts we covered. Today, our act of a healthy growing church is this:

We must maximize the power of prayer.

There was a woman at work who got a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication for her daughter. When she returned to her car, she found she had locked the keys inside. She didn't know what to do and started to panic. She looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground, possibly by someone else who also had locked their keys in their car. She looked at the hanger and said, "I don't know how to use this." So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help.

Within a few minutes, a motorcycle roared up and pulled into the parking space next to her car. A rough, dirty-looking biker got off and saw her situation. He asked if he could help her. The woman thought, "This is what you sent to help me, God?"

She finally told him yes, as she needed to hurry and get home to her sick daughter. He walked over to the car, and in less than one minute the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, "Thank you so much! You are such a nice man."

He replied; "No, I'm not, Lady. I just got out of prison for car theft." The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out, "Thank you God. You even sent me a professional."

Today, we are going to study Acts 4:23-31. Let me give you the context for this passage. Peter and John healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate leading into the Temple. And for all the good that was, they were thrown in prison overnight. The next morning, they were brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court. Peter gave a powerful testimony about Jesus, which made the Jewish leaders angry. Acts 4:21 reads:

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.¹

¹ Acts 4:21-22 (NIV)

Here is where we pick up our passage today. Follow along in your bulletin as I read it:

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.²

The company of believers was a praying company. We already read that in Acts 2:42:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.³

But I never realized how much prayer is in the book of Acts. In fact, there is more prayer in the book of Acts than in the Gospels combined. I've given you a list of times when the Church or individuals prayed. You can look all of those up for your own personal Bible Study time; it would be very beneficial for your faith. Sufficed to say, these were a praying group of folks. They knew the absolute importance of prayer.

What can we learn about prayer from this passage today to be a healthy growing church?

First, the attitude for the prayer.

Verse 24 reads:

When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.⁴

Today, many in churches would want to do something else, anything else, such as start a church softball league, have a party, than pray. Not many in our churches today want to pray.

In 2005, George Barna's survey company reported this, "Prayer is one of three critical spiritual dimensions which most local churches essentially ignore. Prayer is said to be one of the top priorities in less than 4% of the churches surveyed."

That's not the way it was in the healthy and growing Early Church. Not only did they pray, they were praying together in unity. They were all in accord with the idea of praying after the report from Peter and John and their court hearing with the Sanhedrin. And remember. They had good reason to pray; the last time one of their company appeared before the Sanhedrin, He was crucified on a cross.

² Acts 4:23-31 (NIV)

³ Acts 2:42 (NIV)

⁴ Acts 4:24a (NIV)

Whether it is a prayer like this one, or it is praying for healing for someone or a great spiritual need or the effectiveness and success of a program; whatever it is, the church needs to be in one accord in prayer. The attitude of prayer should be that we are all joined in that prayer. You don't leave prayer to just the preacher or the Wednesday night prayer group. We all need to be together in prayer.

Second, we see in this passage the adoration in the prayer. The Church prayed in verse 24:

“Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.”⁵

A good way to begin any prayer is adoration for God. Here they glorified God by acknowledging His greatness in creation.

The disciples once asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and He gave them the Lord's Prayer. And how does that start? “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”

Listen to this prayer from David in Psalm 8:

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!⁶

Our prayers should first speak of our adoration of God, for when you know and are confident of the wonder and majesty and power and scope and faithfulness of God, then you will know that He will hear and answer your prayers. A healthy growing church prays in adoration of God.

Third, we see the assault in the prayer. The Church prayed in Acts 4:25-27:

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.⁷

In the prayer, they mention the assault by the enemy upon God. The persecution of Peter and John was not a surprise to the company of believers. They knew that Jesus had predicted this. On Thursday night in the Upper Room before His crucifixion, Jesus said:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”⁸

⁵ Acts 4:24 (NIV)

⁶ Psalm 8:1-9 (NIV)

⁷ Acts 4:25-27 (NIV)

⁸ John 15:18-19 (NIV)

We are to expect persecution. In fact, I know that when an individual Christian or a group of Christians are doing what God wants them to do, Satan will attack and try to stop them. If the devil isn't bothering you, it's probably because you're not doing anything that bothers him.

We should not be surprised to find opposition to God's work from every area of life. So don't be discouraged when you face trials; it is part of the job description of a healthy growing Christian and Church.

Four, we see the authority in the prayer. The Church prayed in verse 28:

*They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*⁹

Here the prayer reaffirms the belief that God is in control and everything that happens occurs according to His plan and purpose in life.

Remember again the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

God is the sovereign Lord of all events, who rules history to fulfill his purposes. What His will determines, His power carries out. No leader, army, government, or council can stand in God's way.¹⁰

Finally, we see the asking in the prayer. The Church prayed in verse 29-30:

*Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.*¹¹

They asked for two things. First, the asking for courage.

*"... enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."*¹²

They did not pretend that they could face this in their own strength; they turned to a power that was not their own. They did not pray for the persecution to stop but for boldness to be faithful to the message.

Second, the asking for confirmation.

*"Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*¹³

This second request was for confirmation of their ministry through signs and wonders which would exalt the name of Jesus. The people wanted a strong ministry and a validated ministry. This is a good request and needs to be prayed today, too.

Last week, I mentioned briefly that God always answers prayer with one of three answers: Yes, No, or Later. Let me talk just a bit more on that.

When we pray and God answers our prayer with a "Yes," we say, "Yeah, God. You are awesome. You are there. You heard my prayer and answered it."

Let me give you an example. Most of you know Nelson Hinkle. This Fall, Nelson had a major stroke. He had paralysis on his left side and could not speak. Just before Christmas, a group from the church went caroling and visited Nelson at Astoria. As we were singing Christmas carols to him, he started at us with an absolutely blank stare. When we were done, he gave us the only sign of acknowledgement; he lifted his right

⁹ Acts 4:28 (NIV)

¹⁰ Life Application Study Bible

¹¹ Acts 4:29-30 (NIV)

¹² Acts 4:29 (NIV)

¹³ Acts 4:30 (NIV)

hand and gave us a thumbs up. And at that moment, I felt led to ask the carolers to gather around Nelson, lay hands on him, and pray for healing, and we did. The next morning when Anna Mae went into his room, Nelson was talking up a storm, whereas before, he wasn't speaking at all. God answered that prayer that night with a resounding, "Yes."

Sometimes, God says, "No." Fifteen minutes before dinner, a young boy asked his mother for a candy bar, and she said, "No." He walked away and told his sister, "I asked mom for a candy bar." The sister asked, "What did she say?" "Nothing."

That wasn't entirely true, was it? The mother didn't say nothing; she said "No" because she knew what was best for her son.

When God answers our prayer with a "No" or "Later," we think, "God didn't answer my prayer. Where are You, God?" And we begin to question our faith, our conduct, even God Himself.

But God knows what's best for us. We pray for things sometimes, and God knows that despite our desire for them, they will not be good for us in His perfect will. God is not going to answer "yes" to a prayer for a lover outside the marriage. God is not going to give you money when you are a bad steward of what He has already given you. God is not going to give you what you want when you don't give Him what He wants: your entire life. Sometimes, God says "no."

And sometimes, God says, "Later."

BROKEN ARM AT THE ASHRAM. PRAYER SERVICE. OBVIOUS WHAT I WANTED. NOT WHAT I NEEDED AT THE TIME. HE GAVE ME A DRIVE FOR GOOD GRADES, THE GIRL WHO WOULD BECOME MY WIFE, AND MY CALLING TO MINISTRY.

If God had said, "Yes," to my prayer for healing, I wouldn't be here today, and little of my life today would be what it is now. God said, "Later" so that He could fashion me into His perfect will.

What was the effect of prayer in the church? Quickly, verse 31:

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.¹⁴

First, God showed His power.

We will have the power the early church experienced when we pray like the early church prayed. When was the last time you were in a prayer meeting like that?

Second, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. We've already talked about that we must minister in the Holy Spirit's power, and in order to do that, we must be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Third, they spoke the word of God boldly.

Boldness requires courage to press on through our fears and do what we know is right. How can we be more bold? Like the disciples, we need to pray with others. To gain boldness, you can (1) pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to give you courage, (2) look for opportunities in your family and neighborhood to talk about Christ, (3) realize

¹⁴ Acts 4:31 (NIV)

that rejection, social discomfort, and embarrassment are not necessarily persecution, and (4) start where you are by being bolder in small ways.¹⁵

During the Christian Ashram this last summer, the evangelist shared that he repeated tells his congregation this. I want you to write it down:

Much prayer – much power

Little prayer – little power

No prayer – no power

Say that with me.

We must maximize the power of prayer if we're going to be a healthy growing church like the church of Jerusalem.

CLOSING CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER: "Mighty God, all we see around us, You made. Praise You for Your wonderful works. You created beauty, order, and love. The evils against You take what You've created and make it ugly, chaotic, and hateful. Yet we know that Your kingdom will come, Your Will will be done, because You are more powerful than them all. Now, Lord, give us love for You and love for others. Give us courage in the face of evil and threats. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. Amen."

¹⁵ Life Application Study Bible, Acts 4:29-31