

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE CHURCH PRAYS

Acts 1:14, Acts 12:1-17

We all know how difficult life is nowadays. Companies are going bankrupt, people are losing their jobs, politicians are hard to trust, families are breaking up, people are committing suicide, children are getting killed in schools, terrorism is on the rise, and tolls are increasing. Someone said, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” And someone also said, “Desperate times call for desperate measures.” And one of these desperate measures, which many people are turning to because of the hard times, is praying.

But isn’t it that most of the time, only when we find ourselves in deepest trouble that we begin to pray? And that’s where the trouble lies. We pray only when we’re desperate. We pray only when we reach the end of our rope. We pray only when things look hopeless. But shouldn’t we pray before we become desperate? Before we reach the end of our rope? Before we become hopeless? As individuals we should learn this. But as a church we should learn this too. Things may be going fine and there’s no desperate need for prayer. But we know God has a way of pricking his children so that they would start to pray.

This afternoon, we’ve reached the second to the last part of our five-part series on “Plugged In.” Today, we’ll look at an instance in the life of the early church when they came together to pray. This is recorded for us by Dr. Luke in the book of Acts.

Now, Acts is the story of the church from its poor beginnings to its becoming a powerhouse later on. Dr. Luke records how a handful of frightened believers rocked the mighty Roman Empire. I want us to look particularly on Acts 12 which is the story of the church in crisis.

The Jerusalem church had grown rapidly. They had faced persecution. Now their leaders faced execution. How would they react?

Let me read. (Acts 1:14, Acts 12:1-17)

So, that's the early church being persecuted. Now, in our day, we also hear of persecutions going on in different parts of the world. And I mentioned some of these in my sermon a couple of weeks ago. And I mentioned, too, that what our persecuted brothers and sisters need are prayers and more prayers. You see, we can start a petition to release an imprisoned pastor. We can lobby our congressman or congresswoman to change a law that discriminates against Christians. We can even start a Christian political party to advance causes that are near to our hearts. Why can we do this? Because the church today has many advantages over that first century church. We have more money, more buildings, more Bibles, more freedoms, more tools. We have padded pews, we have air conditioning, sound systems, guitars and drums. We have many advantages! But that first century church has us beat in one all-important category—prayer. They knew how to pray, when to pray, and what to pray for. They believed that prayer was a power that overruled even the most powerful opponent!

My goal is to once again take you to the pages of that first century church and challenge you to make their prayer lives the pattern for our prayer lives. When faced with a crisis they did the most revolutionary thing available to them—they appealed to the God of heaven to overrule the laws of kings. That church was carried on the backs of those prayers. That church was born in a prayer meeting. We find that in Acts 1; it grew because it believed the power of prayer was the secret of their existence. I believe that any church that believes like they did and prays like they did will experience what they did! Amen?

Another thing happens when a church begins to major in prayer. When the tongues of believers are occupied with praying to the Almighty, there is no time left for gossiping, complaining, or bickering. Amen again?

My burden is to continue to challenge you to see prayer as first impulse not a last resort. I want us to corporately begin to make prayer the lifeblood of this church. I want you to begin to ask—not just me or not just the leaders—“How can we become a more praying church? What would happen if we began to pray like the early church?”

Using Acts 12 as a case study, we’re going to answer the question “What happens when the church prays?”

The first thing that happens when the church prays is that

1. GOD HEARS.

This is the heart of the Bible faith. It is an amazing truth-----God listens and He responds. That’s the promise of **1 John 5:14-15, *"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him."***

Prayer is not first about us but about a God who hears. Prayer works because God has promised to hear. Our God is a willing participant in our prayer meetings. There is no reluctance on his part. If there is any reluctance to prayer, it is on our part, not God’s.

The brilliant scientist Sir Isaac Newton said that he could take his telescope and look millions and millions of miles into space. Then he added, *“But when I lay it aside, go into my room, shut the door, and get down on my knees in earnest prayer, I see more of Heaven and feel closer to the Lord than if I were assisted by all the telescopes on earth.”* Any pray-er, or the person who prays, can know that by experience.

Jim Elliot, a missionary-martyr, once said, “God is still on His throne and man is still on his footstool. There’s only a knee’s distance in between.”

When the church prays, the first thing that happens is God hears. A second thing happens. And that’s...

2. CIRCUMSTANCES ARE ALTERED.

There is something significant about the crisis the early church faced. James had been killed and Peter was arrested. In all likelihood, Peter faced the same fate that James had. So, the church prayed. No doubt they had prayed for James, too. And he had died. They knew all prayers are not answered in the way we want them to. But that’s God’s decision. So, they prayed for Peter.

Now, let me state one truth. **We don’t pray because we know for sure that we are going to get what we asked for. We pray because we want God to make the choice. Ultimately, it is God’s decision, not ours, when it comes to prayer. God is in control, we are not.**

Let me read again beginning in verse 5, “*So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. ‘Quick, get up!’ he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.*”

Note what happened—Peter released from prison! God didn’t just give comfort to the church and make them more accepting of the problem. God didn’t just give Peter the courage to endure the hardship. **GOD RELEASED PETER FROM PRISON!** For sure, the church prayed to change the circumstances. And God answered their prayer.

This is why the effective pray-ers and praying churches pray today. We are not just looking for a change in our feelings. We expect God to change our circumstances.

A church that prays knows, that when answers come from the hand of God, it is not just a coincidence. It is a God-incidence. God has acted. It is not good luck or mere chance!

Let's take a break for a moment because I want us to practice what I'm preaching. If we really believe that God can alter our circumstances, let us pray that he act on our behalf. Please form triplets, and for the next three minutes, pray for each other. Just quickly share with your partners, the one thing that you'd like to be prayed for. Then, pray simultaneously. We call it Korean-Style praying. So, in effect, two people are praying for your need and you are praying for two people. Shall we do that?

Now, a third thing happened when that early church prayed. The same thing will likely happen today.

3. BELIEVERS ARE SURPRISED.

You know, even when we fully believe in the power of prayer, we get surprised when God answers. As if we're not really expecting it.

Let me tell you a story I shared with you before. I remember during my missionary outreach in Russia together with other young missionaries from different countries. We were in a city called Krasnodar. One time, we presented the gospel on the street, preaching, singing, and doing a skit. Afterwards, we were approached by the people, eager to learn more and just wanted to have the literature we were handing out. I saw one of the missionaries, a girl, talking to a Russian in military uniform. She pointed to his hat and then, this soldier took off his hat and gave it to the missionary. Of course, she was elated. Suddenly, I felt

envious. And I said, “Lord, I wish I could have a military hat like that. It will be nice for a souvenir.”

A week passed and I forgot about it. I didn’t pray again because I thought it was unlikely that I’d get a gift like that. Then, one night, I came back to my room after our school outreach. I opened the door and lo and behold, lying on top of my bed was a blue, military hat like this. I didn’t know where it came from.

My roommates then told me that a soldier came earlier and asked for me and then left his hat on my bed. I then realized that that soldier was actually Sasha, an officer in the Air Force, who I met weeks before. How he knew that I wanted a hat was beyond me. But I knew God knew and he surprised me.

Now, note how the church reacted upon the news of Peter’s arrest. They gathered in a prayer meeting, petitioning the God of heaven for Peter. God heard. An angel was sent. Even Peter was surprised and had to be told by the angel what to do. When Peter went to the praying church after his release, no one wanted to believe Rhoda, the servant girl. The servant girl must be seeing things. I can imagine them saying, “Hush-hush, little girl.” Then they continued praying. Maybe, they even prayed for the servant girl. “God, will you please bring Rhoda back to her senses? She’s been praying so long that she’s beginning to imagine things.”

Then, Peter continued to knock on the door. I guess he started praying too. “Lord, please send someone to open the door before the jailer finds out and looks for me.” He was praying, the people were praying. He becomes a part of their prayer meeting. Anyway, they came out, finally, and the Bible says, “...*when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.*” (Acts 12:16b) To be astonished is to be more than surprised. Actually, the Greek word means to be amazed, to be thrown into wonderment.

Even this church that believed in prayer was surprised or amazed at how God answered. Perhaps, as answer to prayer, they expected Peter to be tried and then freed. They weren't expecting a heaven-sent jailbreak!

Too often we can also be surprised that God answers. In his book "Connecting with God," Herb Miller tells the story of a nightclub opening on Main Street in a small town.

Upon hearing the news, the only church in that town organized an all-night prayer meeting. The members asked God to burn down the club. Within a few minutes, lightning struck the club, and it burned to the ground. The club owner sued the church, which then denied responsibility for the destruction of the club.

They went to court and after hearing both sides, the judge said, "It seems that wherever the guilt may lie, the nightclub owner believes in prayer, while the church doesn't."

Surprised or not, when the church on earth believes in prayer, things happen in heaven and then on earth. C.H. Spurgeon once said, *"Prayer pulls the rope down below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly; others give only an occasional jerk at the rope. But he who communicates with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously with all his might."*

Another thing that happens when the church prays is that

4. LEADERS ARE EMBOLDENED.

I'm sure Peter never preached the same after that day. I'm sure the other leaders in the church prayed with fresh zeal and boldness. I'm sure the whole church prayed with fresh vigor from that day on. Paul himself believed that prayer was important to his ministry, *"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that*

we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should” (Col 4:2-4).

Do you want to see your preachers, missionaries, Sunday School teachers, youth workers set on fire with a new effectiveness and power from heaven? You have it within your power to make that happen. Pray for us. Pray for us in good times and in bad. Pray for us when you agree with us and when you don't. Pray for us and await the miracle that God will send.

Now, we just learned the four things that happens when a church prays. Of course, there are others more that can happen when a church prays. The ones I've given you are just the ones we can extract from the experience of the early church.

I just wonder what would happen if . . . this church prayed like that church prayed! **MAYBE, WE'LL HAVE MORE PEOPLE COMING TO CHURCH! MAYBE, WE'LL FIND MORE VOLUNTEERS IN CHURCH. MAYBE, WE'LL GET MORE EXCITED ABOUT OUR MINISTRIES. MAYBE, WE'LL SEE PEOPLE GETTING HEALED. MAYBE FRACTURED RELATIONSHIPS WILL BE MENDED. MAYBE, WE'LL HEAR ABOUT MARRIAGES GETTING SAVED. MAYBE, WE'LL KNOW ABOUT PEOPLE DELIVERED FROM ADDICTIONS. MAYBE WE'LL HEAR MORE UPLIFTING MESSAGES. MAYBE, WE'LL BECOME MORE EAGER TO SHARE OUR FAITH. MAYBE, WE'LL SEE MORE SOULS BEING SAVED. AND MAYBE, WE'LL HAVE A BUILDING OF OUR OWN VERY SOON. AMEN?**

God wants us to pray and he wants us to pray together as a church. Of course, there's nothing wrong with praying alone. In fact, Jesus Christ prayed alone many times. But, in one of his most important teachings in prayer, he taught his disciples to make it a habit to pray together. In his model prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer, note that Jesus uses personal plural pronouns, "Our Father", "Give us today", "Forgive us", "Lead us not into temptation", and "Deliver us".

So, all the pronouns used are plural, first person plural. So, this model prayer is supposed to be a prayer that is prayed by the church.

The problem in our society is that we have put more emphasis on prayer as an individual activity rather than a team activity. Perhaps, we have been influenced by our “me-first” society, a society that puts my needs, my interests, my well-being above and ahead of anybody else. That’s why we’re more comfortable in praying in the privacy of our own homes. But God didn’t design in that way. In the time of Jesus, for example, and even before his time, Jewish people met every day in the temple at 9 AM, 12 noon, and 3 PM to pray. The followers of Jesus continued this practice as recorded for us in the Bible. *Acts 2:46 says, “Every day they (meaning, the disciples) continued to meet together in the temple courts.”* They met there to receive some teaching and, of course, to pray and worship with others. Somewhere along the road, Christians have lost the wonderment of praying together as a church.

I hope we learned a bit about prayer together as a church this afternoon. I hope we learned enough to make it part of our lives, a lifestyle that we will adopt. But you know what, if we learned to pray but our prayer has us focused on ourselves rather than on God, then I have failed. Prayer is about God. It’s an instrument that God uses to draw us close to him that we may know him better. God shows us his power through prayer. Whether he answers it or not, he shows us his power. And sometimes, he shows up unexpectedly after we’ve prayed and given up.

Now, let me tell you another true story that I’ve also shared before. I’m sharing these stories because some of you are new or, maybe, you were absent when I shared this. But anyway, it’s worth retelling because it is a testimony to what God can do and will do when his people gather together to pray.

It happened to a small congregation in Netcong, New Jersey in 1972. They built a new church on a piece of land sold to them by a church member who was retiring and moving to Florida. About a month before the new church was to open, the local building inspector informed the pastor that the parking lot was inadequate for the size of the building. Until the church doubled the size of the parking lot, they would not be able to use the new sanctuary. Unfortunately, the church with its undersized lot had used every inch of their land except for the mountainous stretch of land which they own in the back of the building.

In order to build more parking spaces, they would have to move the mountain out of the back yard. The cost of removing this mountain would be prohibitive for the church. The next Sunday morning the Pastor reminded the congregation of Christ's promise, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you." (Matt. 17:20). Then he added, "If you believe that, come on Wednesday night to pray with me that God will move this mountain in the back of our church."

So, the people went to pray that Wednesday night. The next morning the phone rang. It was the telephone company. They were planning to erect a new building just east of their land and they needed fill for a large swampy area. And they asked whether the church could sell them some dirt! The pastor said yes, of course. In about a month the phone company had hauled away 40,000 square yards of dirt, for which they paid the church \$25,400 and also leveled the ground for the required three parking lots and prepared them for paving. The church opened and was dedicated on schedule. The church is called "Grace Church on the Mount." Folks, as I said, this is a true story. I personally interviewed the secretary who witnessed all these events.

Let me ask you, Would you have shown up for that prayer meeting?

Some people say faith comes from miracles. But others know:

MIRACLES COME FROM FAITH!

Now, the faith that God asks us to have is not blind faith. It is faith based on the character of God. The Bible says that God is faithful and therefore, he will do what he says he will do.

If we believe that, if we believe that God answers prayers, then all we need to do is follow the command of Jesus, *“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”* (John 15:7).