

A church that prays together

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- [0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 4 verse 23 to 31. 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. Amen. Well, I know that interesting sermons don't normally start with a list, but I am going to start with a list this morning.
- [1 : 4 1] Because in her book, Praying Together, Megan Hill lists the number of different times in the book of Acts that you find the church praying together in corporate or public prayer.
- And I want to start with that list, not because I want to bore you. I don't seem to have to work hard to do that. The boredom is just accidental. Rather, what I want to do is to start with a list because I want you to feel and me to feel the weight of this topic of corporate prayer in the life of the church in the book of Acts.
- I want you to notice that in the book of Acts, you cannot avoid the fact that the church are always praying together. So let me just read these out and hopefully we'll click along and you can see them.
- The idea of the list on the screen is not that you're going to be able to read it because it's going to be too small. But just again, you get this sense of the weight of it. So the believers pray together about Judas's replacement in Acts chapter 1 verse 24.
- After Pentecost, the believers pray together as a mark of their new spiritual life. Acts chapter 2 verse 42. They pray together at shared meals in Acts 2 verse 46.
- [2 : 4 6] They pray together at set times in the temple in Acts 3. They pray, as we've just read together, for boldness when threatened with persecution in Acts 4 verse 23. Prayer is a particular priority for the apostles as they lead the church in Acts 6 verse 4.
- They pray together for the blessing of the Holy Spirit in Samaria in Acts 8 verse 15. They pray in the middle of the night together for Peter when he was put in prison in Acts 12 verse 5.
- They pray together as a church in Antioch and send out Barnabas and Saul in Acts 13 verse 1 to 3. They pray together when appointing elders for the church, committing them to the Lord in Acts 14 verse 23.

They pray together when sending Paul and Silas in Acts 15 verse 40. On the Sabbath by the river in Philippi, they pray with the devout women in Acts 16 verse 13.

And again in Acts 16 verse 16. And then in the prison at midnight, they're praying together in Acts 16 verse 25. They hold a prayer gathering with the Ephesian elders as Paul says goodbye to them in Acts 20 verse 36.

[3 : 51] They pray together as whole families, we're told, on the beach in Tyre as Paul sets sail for Jerusalem in Acts 21 verse 5. They pray with thanksgiving for the food on board the ship in Acts 27 verse 35.

There's prayer for the sick father of Publius on the island of Malta in Acts 28 verse 8. And there's corporate prayer with the brothers in Rome who come to meet Paul in Acts 28 verse 15.

Now, I don't suppose you kept up with that list, but I just hope you feel the weight of it. But with everything going on in the early church, with all the persecution that they faced, all the wild living and the pagan culture, still the instinctive response of the church, right from the very beginning, in all circumstances, was to pray.

And notice, not to pray on their own, in their homes, in private, but to pray together. It's no surprise then when you get to the New Testament letters as you follow on from the book of Acts, you hear things like this, be constant in prayer, Romans 12 verse 12.

Continue steadfastly in prayer, Colossians 4 verse 2. Brothers and sisters, pray for us, 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 25. Or this in 2 Corinthians 1 verse 11. Help us by your prayers, says Paul.

[5 : 08] Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many. You see, it doesn't matter where the church is.

It doesn't matter who the church is made up of. It doesn't matter whether the church is particularly rich or particularly poor. It doesn't matter whether it's mostly men or mostly women. It doesn't matter whether it's orphans or widows or new converts or old saints, whether they are mature believers or new Christians.

Christians in the New Testament pray. And it doesn't seem so much that they have to pray. It's not that this is a new duty that they're given as Christians, right? You're a Christian.

You must pray. It's not that. Rather, they rejoice that they get to pray. That seems to be the sense of it. Having come to understand this gospel of grace, that God alone has saved them through Christ's work and not theirs, and that they've been brought into this relationship with the God who made them, that relationship is lived out in prayer.

Corporate and private prayer. You could put it like this in three words, okay? Living churches pray. Living churches pray. Not living churches should pray, as if this is mostly a command that we need to obey.

[6 : 26] Let me say to you this morning, if you're feeling guilty at your lack of prayer and hoping that that feeling of guilt will motivate you to pray, you will be very disappointed. Guilt is a poor motivation to pray.

It won't. Rather, this is living churches pray. It's a description of what will happen. Their corporate prayer is an expression of their life. And just like we saw, you can't actually hold your breath for very long.

So, likewise, a church should not be able to not pray for very long, because it's breathing for us. So, for us this morning, I'm not so much giving instructions here on what we should do, but rather trying to describe to you what I hope will happen as God is at work in our church life together.

If our church is going to be strengthened and refreshed, I think we will see it first in how we pray and that we pray together. Now, when your friends ask you, or maybe that family member who's moved away from London says, oh, how are things at West Kilburn Baptist Church?

Is church getting on okay? How is it doing? How's that new pastor doing? I hope that you'll be able to answer, instead of talking about me, which would be a dry and dull thing to do, to say something like this.

[7 : 34] You should be at the prayer meetings. You should hear us pray together. God is at work in our church family, and you can see it in the prayer meeting, because living churches pray.

Living churches pray. Now, in a way, that is all I've got to say to you this morning. Living churches, that's it. Living churches pray. That's all I've got to say to you this morning. If you get that, you've done it, right?

You can scroll your phone. That's it. You have my permission. But I also do want to show you five marks of a praying church from the passage that we just read. So if you have a little bit more attention, then look back at that passage, and let's work through it together and see these five things that a praying church are marked by.

So let's notice this first, that they pray together. They pray together. If you look down at verse 23, you find that Peter and John have just returned from a trial before the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin are the group, if you remember, who only a short while previously had handed Jesus over to be crucified. And Luke tells us that Peter and John have returned, look down at verse 23, returned back to their own people.

[8 : 42] Do you notice that? Their own people. Now, interestingly, in the Greek, that's a phrase that is normally reserved for someone's family. But here it's in reference to the church, the family of faith, which I think is more than a little hint that the Bible thinks that what God is doing in Christ is more significant even than what's happening in our blood relationships.

Anyway, they report back to their own people that they've been instructed by the chief priests not to speak about Jesus anymore. And it's as in verse 24, the church hears that news from Peter and John, their instinctive responses to what?

Well, how's it put? Raise their voices together in prayer. Now, I don't think as we read it, we're to understand that everyone all of a sudden was praying at the same time, or even necessarily that every individual in the church said their own prayer.

Rather, it seems that a few people are praying and we'll see what they pray in a moment. But it's as they pray, the church agrees together with what they are praying, and that therefore it's best described as the church raising their voices together in prayer.

Now, there's lots more to say here, but notice just that their response is not to each return home and pray on their own. Nor was it that they each prayed silently in their own hearts in a corner.

[10 : 03] Rather, their response is to pray together, to join their voices as one. Let me say, I think this is the unique thing about Christian prayer. Christian prayer is not interested so much in the quantity of words that we use.

We can think that, can't we, that God is moved by the sheer number of people praying at the same time about the same thing, as if getting as many people to pray on their own wherever they are is the sort of high point of Christian prayer.

But it doesn't seem to be that in the book of Acts. Christian prayer in the book of Acts seems to be a reflection of the work that God is doing in people to bring them together to God.

It's their togetherness, which is a reflection of what God has done for them in the gospel. He has made them a family of faith, their own people. When we gather to pray, we come to our own people to come before God, who is our God, together.

If you're a Christian this morning, it's true that God loves you. He loves you in such a way that in the person of Jesus Christ, he has paid for your sin, washed you of your guilt and brought you into his family, the family of faith.

[11 : 15] And praying together is a reflection of the fact that what Jesus has done for you is not just about you as an individual, but is about adopting you into his family. And so we pray together as a reflection of that.

So let me say this. You cannot do that on your own at home. You cannot. You can't pray on your own at home or worship at home in front of your own television in a way that expresses rightly what God is doing in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The togetherness that God is building through Christ is reflected in us coming together to pray to the God who has brought us into the family of faith.

So they pray together. Secondly, they pray together, trusting God's sovereignty, trusting God's sovereignty. This is all the way through the passage. Look down at it. Sovereign Lord is how they start their prayer, verse 24.

Then in verse 27 to 28, they have possibly one of the most remarkable statements of God's sovereignty. This is 27 to 28. Look down. Let me read it to you again.

[12 : 24] 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, this is incredible. Jesus' death on the cross was what we're told, the desire of Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel.

It was their intention to conspire against Jesus and put him to death on the cross. Now, just think about that for a moment. What is the most wicked thing that humanity could do?

Surely the cold-blooded killing of the Son of God is right at the very top of the list of the wicked things that humanity could do. Turning on our maker to such an extent that we want to kill him.

And that's exactly what happened. It's exactly what they wanted to do, what they conspired to do. But even as they do it, verse 28, they do what God's power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

[13 : 32] Now, again, there's loads that we could say about that, but just notice this. The church are absolutely convinced that God is in charge of even the most terrible things in the world.

And that they're not coming to him in prayer to sort of bend God's will or point out to God, hey God, I don't know whether you've noticed that these terrible things are happening in the world.

They're not coming like that, are they? Instead, they're coming to him knowing that God has a plan that he's decided beforehand, a plan that encompasses even the wicked intentions of humanity played out in the death of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

But also then played out in this new instruction from the chief priest not to speak of him again. Now, obviously, there's mystery here, isn't there? But these are the facts. The higher our view of God and his sovereignty, the more likely we are to pray.

The higher our view of God's power and sovereignty, the more likely we are to pray. Why? Well, because Christian prayer is not about trying to bend God's will to mine, but about me expressing my trust in him.

[14 : 38] And then remarkably, as we do that, we find that one of the causes God uses in the world, one of the means he uses for accomplishing his plans are what? The prayers of his people.

How does that work, right? How does the free prayers of God's people achieve God's sovereign plans that he's decided beforehand?

So that at times, God can be described as relenting or even changing his mind in response to the free prayers of his people. How does all that work?

How does all of that fit together? I have absolutely no idea. Because we're not told. But it does. It does work.

Absolutely. So for us as a church, we must accept that individually and corporately as a church, we are exactly where God wants us to be. Even all the difficult bits of that.

[15 : 36] Even the failing health. Even the trouble in the family. Even the fact that as a church, we have more money going out than coming in every month. Even the fact that our building could do with some attention because that door doesn't actually latch and stay closed.

Clifford will find out in a moment. What about the fact that brain counsel have been a bit difficult about us purchasing the freehold of the building? What about the fact that the mosque next door seems to do a better job of growing flowers than we do of growing weeds outside of our church building?

You know, all of that is in God's sovereign plan and purpose. So what do we do? Knowing that that's in God's sovereign plan and purpose. What if we fold our arms and say, well, you know, over to you then, God, do what you like?

Of course we don't. Not if we're spiritually alive. If we're spiritually alive, we pray. We pray. That's what we do. Because we know that the sovereign God invites us together as his children to come to him in prayer and present our needs and our concerns to him.

And if you and I are tempted to think, you know, what's the point in praying? God's going to do what God's going to do. What's the point? Well, then I need to rebuke that thought because it's a lie of the devil. Because the truth is God's going to do what God's going to do, but he's going to do it as we pray.

[16 : 54] So we pray. Third thing. They listen to God's word. They listen to God's word. If you look down at verse 25, you'll see this church has an extraordinary view of the scriptures.

Just before quoting from Psalm 2, they conclude that this is both what David spoke, but also what the Holy Spirit said. So the scriptures are both God speaking, but through human authors.

David speaks and the Holy Spirit speaks at the same time. But then notice that they also think that Psalm 2 is about Jesus. So they are saying that what David wrote thousands of years before is about the nations raging and plotting in vain against the anointed one of God is what has been happening in their immediate history.

As the people of Jerusalem, as the people of Israel, as the people of Israel crucified, as the people of Israel crucified, the Lord Jesus Christ, they are the nations raging and plotting in vain. And so the human divine words about Jesus form the bedrock of their prayers.

Even as they speak God's words back to him in prayer, showing God that they now understand that these words are about Jesus. Now, I suppose there might be lots of reasons a church doesn't pray together as it might.

[18 : 13] But there really is only one way to motivate prayer, and that's to listen. To listen to God's words and see that they're about Jesus. In other words, prayer starts with listening.

Not silent listening to a voice in your head. That's a risky business because all sorts of things can be said in your mind. Rather, we listen as we listen to what God is saying in his word and knowing that what he's saying in his word is about Jesus.

We don't live in a world where we're looking for God. We're not searching and looking for a God who's kind of playing hide and seek with us, just wondering whether we might turn over the right rock and find him.

No, not at all. We live in a world where God has spoken. He has revealed himself. There is news in our world from God. And he hasn't just said it once.

He's said it for thousands of years in the scriptures. As generation on generation look forward to the coming Messiah, the anointed king. A message which is now finally completed by the apostles in the New Testament, as they tell of the fulfillment of those prophecies in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection.

[19 : 24] A message which now rings out in our world and calls out to us this morning to turn from our sin, from our selfish, self-interested desire, which wants to live in this world as if God has not spoken, as if we can decide our own future.

It calls out to us to trust in Christ, to join to his family of faith and to be seen in local churches like ours. Let me say this this morning gently, but clearly if I can.

If you've never listened to that message, you have no right to pray. If you've not trusted Christ like that, you have no right to pray.

And certainly no expectation that God should listen. Why? Well, think about it. This is the great God, the sovereign king of kings, the creator of heaven and earth, the one who lives outside of time and space yet holds all things in his hands.

And the idea that we can rush into the presence of God and shout our mouths off before first listening to what he has to say is arrogance itself. We wouldn't do that with anybody else.

[20 : 36] And when we do listen, what we hear is that the place of prayer, the location of prayer is not a building. It's not a city. It's not a time of day. It's not a posture.

It's not a set of special words. The place of prayer is the message of the Bible centered on the work of Jesus Christ. That's where we come to pray. We listen to what the father says about the son through the spirit.

And if we don't start there, we have no reason to expect anything but a wall of silence. And if you are a Christian this morning, if you have listened and trusted in that message of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, then let me say to you and me this morning that prayer for us is motivated by exactly the same thing, by listening to the same message.

It says you and I turn to God's word, not mostly in a self-interested way, looking for self-help or looking even for specific guidance, as if this book was mostly about you and me.

It's rather as we listen to God's word and realize it's about the Lord Jesus Christ that we come and pray. As we hear him, we then speak to him.

[21 : 47] Okay, so they listen to God's word. Fourthly, they ask for courage. They ask God for courage. I think the big surprise in Acts chapter 4 is that the church don't pray for the persecution of the religious authorities to go away.

I think that's what I would do. Is it what you would do? I think that would be the most natural thing to expect them to do. You know, oh Lord, please make these guys change their mind. Please overturn the ban on preaching Jesus.

Please, please stop it. But they don't. Instead, they ask God for courage and boldness in speaking and testifying. Look down at verse 29. Now, Lord, consider their threats, they're saying, and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. It's amazing. As they come to pray, they recognize their big need is not for things to go well.

God has a plan. They can trust God. Their big need is for them to keep going. Oh, how I need that. How true is that? And then they long for God to accompany their bold speaking with the signs that are given to the apostolic church for the confirmation of the gospel as it's being established.

[22 : 57] Now, I assume here that there's an emphasis on the leaders of the church speaking the truth with boldness. They are the ones under threat, aren't they, from the Jewish leaders.

It's worth noting that even the apostles need God's help to speak bravely. Doesn't that bring comfort to you? I know I need that. And I assume that the apostles just didn't need that.

They could maybe just get on with it. But they need this boldness, don't they? But also, I think, as you read the book of Acts, you realize it's not just the leaders who need boldness to speak about Jesus or courage.

In fact, in Acts chapter 8, it seems that the persecution scatters everyone but the apostles. And it's the regular members of the church who are speaking about Jesus in the places that God puts them. So you and I all need courage.

Again, it's not hard, is it, for us to think about how that works for us as a church? I honestly think it probably takes more boldness for you to share the gospel at work under threat of being misunderstood or misrepresented than it does to stand and preach on a street corner to people that you're never going to see again.

[24 : 05] I think it probably takes more courage to share the gospel with an unbelieving husband or wife than it does to preach to a stadium of non-Christians. So when we come together as a church, as we come together trusting in God's sovereignty, listening to his words centered on the Lord Jesus Christ, we come together and we pray for courage that God might make us speak of him.

That God, in the places that he has put us, the people on our block or on our street or in our school or in our families, that we might speak clearly and faithfully about the Lord Jesus Christ without fear or with real courage.

Now, the evidence of Acts chapter 4 is that's a prayer that God loves to answer. Because at the end of verse 31, you see the people doing exactly what they prayed to be able to do. Filled with the Spirit, they speak boldly.

Finally then, the praying church here are seeking God's glory. I think this is really the theme of the whole prayer, isn't it? The sovereign creator, the God of all things is at the beginning, with a plan fulfilled in Christ, crucified in the middle of the prayer.

The God who they want to speak about at the end, whose power they want to see displayed in signs and wonders. And it's God who shakes the face for his glory, isn't it? In verse 31. So let me just point out the absolutely obvious here, that as a church praying together, trusting in God's sovereignty, listening to his word, asking for courage, they are more concerned for God's glory than their own comfort.

[25 : 41] Yeah? You notice that, don't you? It's not wrong to pray for comfort and healing, is it? In fact, they assume that God will work in that way to point to his glory in verse 30. It's not wrong to pray for relief in circumstances that are difficult.

We wouldn't be human if we didn't want that. Even Jesus in the garden prays like that in his full humanity. But the point is that prayer does not exist as the means to provide for my comfort, but as the means for me to call for God's glory.

Prayer does not exist as the means to provide for my comfort, but as the means for me to call for God's glory. Knowing that as we do, it's when God looks great, when God is glorified, that you and I are safe.

You're at rest and comfortable in all the right ways. You see, a church that's not bothered with God's glory will not pray. The church that longs for the honour of the Lord and for the accomplishment of his plans, that church will pray.

Our Father in heaven, glorified be your name. Your glorious kingdom come, your glorious will be done. Why? Well, because living churches pray.

[26 : 55] Living churches pray. They pray together. They trust in God's sovereignty. They listen to God's word. They ask for courage. And they look for God's glory. Let's pray together.

Let's just have a moment of quiet. You can think and ponder on what we've looked at. And then we'll say the words of the Lord's Prayer together, which will come up on the screen. Let's pray together in the words of the Lord's Prayer.

Follow along from the screen because you might have a different version in your head. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.