

THE PRAYER LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Part 1

Personal Prayer Life

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We've looked at the prayer life of Jesus and seeing the times in his life the prayer, the prayers he prayed and what he taught us about prayer. Tonight we begin by looking at the book of Acts, the prayer life of the early church. Sometimes I bite off more than I can chew and I think the title tonight I bit off more than I chew. I realize the words of my father keep echoing in my mind when he got a hold of me one Sunday night after I'd preached an hour. "Son, that will never do." I said "But Dad when I was young you used to preach an hour." He said, "But as I got older, I got smarter."

I realized as I head into the subject, the prayer life of the early church, and was going to trace prayers as they were found throughout the book of Acts that I had indeed bitten off more than you or I could chew in one evening.

So I'm going to break this up a little bit. This will be part one. Next week will be part two. Tonight we'll look especially at the first seven chapters of the book of Acts. We'll find ten instances where either individuals or the church as a whole prayed. This is a time in the early church, if you've followed the book of Acts, you'll find that the time is the first division of that Acts – the growth of the church in Jerusalem. After chapter 7, the church moves outside Jerusalem to Samaria and later chapter 12 it moves even beyond that, to all the world. So we get an idea through looking at the first 7 chapters of Acts exactly what occasions we find the church praying and what it teaches us concerning prayer.

The first time we find the church praying is in chapter 1:12-14. The setting is that the Lord has just ascended into heaven. They return a Sabbath day's journey away from the Mt. of Olives, which is now Mt. Zion area of Jerusalem. There they gather in an upper room, an upper chamber. They spend ten days praying together. The persons present were Peter, John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the zealot and Judas the son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers.

Several things that this little incident tells us about prayer. First thing that it tells us that the natural instinct and first instinct of the church following the ascension of the Lord was to pray. It must always be our natural and first instinct as we grow in Christ to seek the Lord. They had no agenda, they had no plans for doing anything other than the Lord had told them to wait and so their instinct is to do exactly that.

There are so many times when we face alternatives and we don't know exactly what course should be taken in our life, we don't know what to do next. The instinct rather than to sit down and try to figure out the greatness of the challenge we've been given as was the case of the church, "Go into all the world," the first instinct was to simply wait before the Lord. We don't know if they waited on their knees. We don't know if they sat around in a group like we do tonight. We really don't know if they prayed liturgical prayers. By that I mean prayers from the Psalms. We sometimes assume that the early church was all free form praying and they simply prayed whatever was in their mind at that particular moment. But a study of the prayers of Jesus

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has revealed that a great deal of his praying was from the psalms. We also will see that in the book of Acts, that the early church prays from the psalms. And one of the things that perhaps they have in that prayer meeting is that they took portions of the word of God and simply prayed them. They may have been praying in concert. They may have been praying one at a time. But they gave themselves devotedly to prayer as an instinct.

Another tremendous thing that comes out of that particular passage on prayer is that they come with a great assurance as they prayed. They were only hours away from the ascension. They have spent forty days with the risen Christ and as they came together in prayer they knew the God that held all power in his hand. They were not sending arrows up into heaven hoping that maybe there was a God who heard or answered. Effective prayer comes as we know that we are proceeding from a great victory that has been won and God is real and God is on our side and God has fully revealed himself in Jesus and we need not fear anything that is facing us because Christ has demonstrated his power once and for all for us.

It's like going into a negotiating session for buying a piece of property when you know you have a million dollars in your bank account and you know that there is no way that the price of that property could be more than three to four hundred thousand dollars. So you can enter in with assurance in some kind of negotiation and out do everybody in the field that's looking at that property.

Or like going into an exam knowing that you have all the answers before you take the exam and it's no sweat at all facing it.

Prayer is that sense that Jesus is risen. All's well. And it's tremendous confidence as they go to prayer.

Another important facet of that first time of prayer in the early church was the concentration of leadership at the time of prayer. It's a model for the church for all time to suggest that a church is only really as strong as it's leadership can be given to prayer. I have a very firm conviction I believe rooted right here in the book of Acts and demonstrated in the gospels and that is what might be called the solidarity of Christian leadership. Where leaders are in solidarity together there can be progress in the gospel. But where there is division or where there is absenteeism among leadership in the body of Christ in the matter of prayer then the church itself is in great trouble. In that particular moment the leadership was all present giving themselves to prayer. I encourage leadership of this church that it is important for us as those given the responsibility for leadership in the body of Christ to find ourselves present together in prayer.

Another thing that comes out of this is that in addition to the leadership there was community prayer. Everybody seems to be there. There was a committed following of Jesus Christ – 120 remained in Jerusalem. They not only included the leadership but they included the mother of Jesus – notice she was at the prayer meeting praying. She was not being prayed to. This is the last mention of Mary in the scripture. The last mention we have of her is in connection with prayer. She was praying along with Jesus' brothers who by this time had been converted. They were together in a concentrated time of prayer.

There are seasons in our life when we need to have concentrated times of prayer. The early church spent those first days, the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost, giving themselves

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to prayer. All great revivals have come as a result of extended commitments of the people of God to day after day, day after day, seek God together. This ought not to be a once in a generation kind of a thing. But there ought to be regular moment sin the calendar during a year or during a course of time when we call the people of the Lord to prayer together for extended sessions.

One other thing that comes out of this first prayer meeting of the early church is that they sensed a need to minister to God before they ministered to the world. Jesus had given them a really impossible assignment. Before they ever went out to try to do it, even though they were proceeding out of the victory of his resurrection and his ascension, before they went out to do it, they spent time ministering to God. All of our life is only as effective as we spend in ministering first to the Lord and then become involved in his work following that.

Second occasion of prayer in the first seven chapters of the book of Acts follows on this. It's during part of this ten days together. But I want to crystallize it as a separate event in verses 15-26. As they are praying, Peter stands up and notes that Judas' place has been vacated. Evidently as part of their praying they have been thumbing through the psalms. They come to the place in the Psalter where it says – Psalm 69:25 and 109:8 “May his place be deserted. Let there be no one to dwell in it. May another take his place of leadership.” They come to the conclusion on the basis of reading in the word of God that Judas' place should be filled. They therefore selected two people equally qualified who had been eyewitnesses of Jesus from John's baptism – Joseph called Barsabbas who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed. “Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of the two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry which Judas left to go to where he belongs.” They drew lots an the lot fell to Matthias. So he was added to the eleven apostles.

A very strange thing. The first recorded prayer in the church is a prayer that God would show them, which one of two should be elected to fill Judas' position.

This scripture, this kind of strange way to launch the church, teaches us three dimensions to prayer. One is that scripture ought to always be a part of our praying. Because it is as we pray to the Lord and have an open Bible that God is continually speaking to us and informing us about the steps we need to take in our life. The second thing that it shows us about prayer is that there are many things that are our responsibility before God himself acts. What I mean by that is the church didn't simply say in that moment, “There's 120 of us in this room and there are eleven who are apostles. That leaves 109. Would you give a vision as to which 109 should be elected to this position?” What they did was they used good judgment and they said, there ought to be a criteria. And the criteria for all of us is we've been following the Lord as apostles since John's baptism therefore we need to know all the Lord's ministry if we're going to be faithful to witness to it. That therefore immediately cuts a group. They finally narrowed it down to two by a process of selection. They didn't leave everything to simply some vision or revelation. But they took practical steps. Then when they had taken the practical steps and fulfilled their responsibility as we ought to also do in our praying.

God intends some things to be left with us. Then when they came to a cut between two and they couldn't decide then they did another very strange thing. They expected God to work through indirect means and not answer them by audible voice. They simply cast lots. Or we would call it pulling straws. Something that almost sounds mysterious to us. But what they did again was

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find a place in the scripture, Proverbs 16:33 which says “The lot is cast into the lap but the decision is wholly from the Lord.” They came to a scriptural understanding that when you are between two decisions and they seem equally valid and you don’t know what to do it’s appropriate from the scripture to simply flip a coin.

Have you ever tried to make a decision that way? Sometime we don’t know what to do. We’ve tried to eliminate our choices. Why get stuck saying, “I have to go on praying and praying until I get a supernatural vision or revelation on this.” I appreciate the early church had its feet on the ground. It didn’t simply keep on going in an extreme form of mysticism in its praying when it could be very practical. They simply said, Lord we’re going to be practical about this. We’ve done the best we could. Now it’s your choice. We’ll use this means of casting a lot, an indirect way of discovering your will rather than a direct way of your speaking and your will be made known in it. They trusted God to work through the circumstances.

The third occasion which the church is seen at prayer in the early church is still a part of this ten-day period. It’s covered in Acts 2:1-13. You’ll notice that the first three occasions of prayer are all compassed within this ten-day period. This is the day of Pentecost itself where they are all filled with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

What is speaking in other tongues or with other tongues? It is praying or praising God in a language that is not learned. It is a form of prayer. Sure enough as the crowds gathered they hear them all telling in their own languages. Verse 11, “The wonders of God.” Here they are exploding with joy that is so great that their own language cannot contain it. Supernaturally new language is given to them. They begin to teach us, the early church does, that there are moments of rhapsody, moments of being caught up in the glory of God that escape our linguistic ability to describe it. Therefore the Lord has for us a stepping outside of our own language context, our own vocabulary, syntax and grammar, into a language which is not our own that we might from the deeper dimensions of our spirit, praise God without intellectually understanding our words but simply praising God from the depths of our heart with language we do not personally understand. But it is prayer nevertheless. And intelligent prayer.

God understands the prayer. No one that day would have understood the prayers that were being prayed by the 120 if there had not been pilgrims for all these different language groups that were in Jerusalem. The day of Pentecost was a very universal kind of thing for the Jewish community when pilgrims had come in from all over the world. If it had been a service like what would have been later taking place in the church and other tongues spoken, people would have been there not knowing the languages it would not have been edifying or not have understood it. But we are always assured that when the Spirit comes upon us and we speak in tongues that the Lord understands and knows and picks up on our praise.

Then another dimension to the early church’s praying is the fact that their praying was in such a manner in the day of Pentecost that they are tremendously joyful. Our praying can have different dimensions to it. There are times were we need to be contemplative in prayer. Times when we need to be serious in prayer. Times we need to be so burden down in our heart maybe with prayer. But one of the things that I find that we sometimes miss in prayer is the dimension of joy in prayer. The explosive joy. In fact the early believers in this context of praying are so beside themselves with joy that they are accused of being drunk. Does joy characterize our praying?

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Joy isn't something we work up. But it is something that we can set our hearts to. One of the things we need to do when we gather together in worship and we pick up the hymnal is take ourselves and deliberately begin to enter in and let our whole body and our body language and our voice and our heart immediately pick up on what is going on. And be known as people who have taken a deep drink from the well of God's joy.

A fourth occasion for prayer in the book of Acts is Acts 2:42&47. That is characteristic time of praying. The church had grown rapidly in its early days. One day 3000 had been added to the church. So 3000 joined the 120. The next thing that is said after that inclusion of believers is they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Four pillars of the early church as they gathered together are reflected here in verse 42. The apostles teaching. Instruction. There was a body of instruction that the Lord had that was to be communicated. There is no church unless there is instruction for it's not simply experience. It is also line upon line and precept upon precept. There was instruction.

But there cannot only be instruction. There must be fellowship. That's why a church is never a church if people come and just listen to a lecture, a sermon or simply observe what is going on. We must have *koinonia*. Devoted to *koinonia*.

Then there was devotion to the breaking of bread. We take this immediately as a reference to communion. But it's more than that. In the early church it was a pot luck meal. It was table fellowship. At the conclusion of which there was communion together. So you might be invited to someone's home and part of that meal would be concluded by having communion together. I think it would be perfectly appropriate and in accord with scripture if communion moved outside the sanctuary and moved into the home. When you invite people over for dinner, make that meal sacramental by including in your time of breaking of bread with someone else the Lord's table. And take communion together and make your meal more than a meal of fellowship with one another. Make it also a meal of fellowship with God.

Breaking bread together. How do we really get to know one another? We know one another best when we set down and eat together. So the early church knew instinctively. The Holy Spirit taught it that the church was more than just a body of people that gathered together and front and center faced the preacher. It was a body of people who gave themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. These four legs of the chair kept it steady and kept it growing and are essential today to the life of this church or any church, any body of people. We need to be giving ourselves to those dimensions of Christian worship and fellowship. The word "devoted" will describe those bodies of believers that really reach out to effect lives and effect the world for Christ. It's not a halfhearted kind of a deal. It's not whenever I feel like it or get around to it. It's making a commitment that these are the things in my life in the body of Christ that I am really committed to. Devoted to prayer.

A fifth occasion for prayer in the book of Acts I found in Acts 3:1. "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer, at three in the afternoon." This suggests that the early church kept even set times of prayer. In fact, in the book of Acts there are several times when we see the church at prayer at set times. For example Acts 10, Peter is praying at noon.

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Also in Acts 10, Cornelius is praying at three in the afternoon. Why three in the afternoon? Because three in the afternoon was the time of day when in the temple the second major offering of the day was presented. The whole burnt sacrifice. People who were away from Jerusalem and couldn't make it to the temple kept that as an observance, when that sacrifice was being offered. They were in far away lands or cities and their faces were set toward Jerusalem and they were remembering God in that time of prayer. Nine o'clock in the morning was also another time for sacrifice. The morning burnt offering. So you could expect Christians to be praying at nine o'clock and like Peter, at noon, and others at three o'clock. Sometimes a person had opportunity to participate in all three set sessions of prayer. This is just to say that the Holy Spirit in giving us a picture of prayer in the early church teaches us right from the beginning that there was structure and order to daily life. That the early Christians did not simply see prayer as something they did when they got around to it. But rather there were set times when it was expected one was at prayer. In their culture in society it was one o'clock, noon, and three o'clock as the appropriate times. Perhaps we might even add to that sunrise and going to bed at night. There may have been five times all together though we're only told about three in the book of Acts.

The suggestion by transference is that each of us needs to have in our own life fixed times when we can be counted upon to be at prayer. And stay with that as nearly as we can with the kind of schedules we lead.

Then a sixth occasion we see someone praying in the book of Acts is actually a separate form of prayer. It's praise. Acts 3:9, the man who is healed at the temple who had been lame from birth. He's walking and jumping and praising God. Praise a form of prayer. Praising God with wild joy because he has been healed.

You say, "I've never been lame. Therefore I've never needed to be healed. There's nothing for me to get enthusiastic about." If you've walked all your life there is something to be enthusiastic about. This guy is jumping around, healed. He's o happy. He's had decades he hasn't been able to walk. The first time he had the chance he got up and he started praising the Lord. All my life, I've never shouted out, "I can walk! I can walk!" I've been walking ever since I was about twelve months old. Or whenever. But we've been walking. We ought not to simply wait until God does some miracle for us to find some occasion to praise him but to look around and see all the things that could have happened to us that didn't that we can give God praise for. Praise the Lord!

A seventh occasion for prayer in the book of Acts is seen in Acts 4:23-31. The connection for this prayer is that Peter and John had been thrown into prison overnight because of the healing of the lame man. They had been let out the next day. They had appeared before the Sanhedrin who threatened them that they were not to each any more in the name of Jesus, the miracle that had happened to the man who was lame. In fact Acts 4:22 it gives us his age. He was forty years old. They are told no more of this. So on their release what do they do? They go back to their people and verse 24 "They raised their voices together in prayer."

That's an interesting phrase because when we all raise our voices audibly together in prayer most of the time we are not following a set prayer together. We are all expressing to God our individual praises and that's perfectly appropriate and proper. There must however have been someone who either led this prayer or someone who in advance or as the meeting progressed

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took a prayer, based again on the psalms, wrote it and it began to be shared with all the group and they began to focus all together in the same kind of language and spirit. Their prayer teaches us again so much about praying. First words out of their mouths is “Sovereign Lord.” That phrase sovereign Lord comes at a time in their experience when their own world begins to look threatened and insecure. They go in this unique way the Holy Spirit has in giving them power over a cripple and then making them vulnerable to prison. If they have power over cripples why can they not have power to resist imprisonment. But here is this strength one moment and weakness the next moment. They have to raise concerns. Peter had not been a strong persons before the resurrection and he had been very, very frightened of imprisonment. Now he’s had it happen to him. What’s going to be their response to that? “Sovereign Lord!”

They quote from Psalms 2 “Why do the nations raise and the people plot in vein? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.” All this rebellion against Christ is useless. They have a keen sense that they’re on the side that is going to win.

That is meant to permeate our praying too. In the moments of life when things look insecure for us, and we might be tempted instead to wonder “God, are you there? Are you in control?” Their instinctive response is “Sovereign Lord. All raging against you and against your plan are not going to prosper.”

Then they have another dimension of their prayer that’s to me extremely enlightening. “Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” Note that they do not ask the Lord to change their circumstances. Note that they are not asking the Lord to make the heart of the high priest soft. Notice that they are not asking the Lord for him to retaliate on the leadership that has imprisoned them. Nor are they saying to the Lord, “Lord, zap them!” They asked for no change in their circumstances. What they asked for was more power in the circumstances.

When I began to discover that in my Christian life. That the Lord is far more concerned with what is happening in me than what’s happening to me it revolutionized my experience because up until that time as a younger Christian I had always been asking God to rearrange the date of my life. “Lord, make it easier for me ... or give me this... or give me that...” Then when things didn’t yield and I didn’t get what I want I’d get real tight lipped with God and upset with God for what he was doing.

Here the church is learning to pray, “Lord, you work through us. You don’t have to change those outside circumstances. You don’t have to make the high priest smile at us. You don’t have to make the teacher like us... You don’t have to make the boss pat us on the back for wanting to be honest... You don’t have to change a thing in our world. Just give us power to face it and boldness to go through it...”

Then the third dimension they are praying as they reach out beyond themselves and ask the Lord to stretch out his hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders in the name of his holy servant Jesus. What they are seeking for is a concern for other people and asking the Lord to manifest himself to others who are not in any kind of a bless me group. Their concern is for the world and they want to see God work with power.

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There are three other occasions for prayer as we go through the first seven chapters of Acts. Let me go through them briefly then I'll come to a conclusion for tonight.

An eighth occasion for prayer is in Acts 6:4 where Peter as a part of the twelve is speaking. The problem had to do in Acts 6 with the fact that some of the widows were neglected in the daily distribution. One of the things the contemporary church. Because in that society there was no social security system, the church like the Jewish institutions before them, the synagogue took it upon themselves to support the elderly in their midst who had no family to support them. This was what was happening in the early church. Some of the widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. The resolution of the problem is that new leadership would emerge called deacons who would serve tables. That is not actually to be waiters – serving meals at tables – the tables in the Greek is the same word used for money changing tables that's used in the gospel of Matthew when Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers. So the tables that were being served were tables where money was being counted out. We need people to be in charge of the ledger and to count out the funds. The rationale for the new leadership that Peter puts forward is "We must give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." Peter is not saying this because he's beneath waiting on tables. Or beneath being involved in practical details of administration. But he's recognizing a critical principle that all leadership in the body of Christ must ultimately recognize and that is leadership cannot do everything. In fact, the more finely honed leadership will be the more specialized in a very, very few things. And when it comes right down to it leadership in the body of Christ that occupies pastoral ministry or teaching ministry really ought to almost be confined to two kinds of things – prayer and the ministry of the word. Because without those dimensions the whole church loses its heartbeat and its ability to be strengthened in the power of the Lord through the ministry of the word.

So Peter recognizes this and the early church agrees with that.

Peter had the good recognition by the Holy Spirit that those who serve in leadership positions cannot be all things to all people. There must be a fundamental commitment to the Lord and to the word.

Then the ninth occasion for prayer follows quickly after because the seven are chosen at 6:6 says they presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. I'd love to know what they prayed for these leaders. But we don't know that.

Things appear in the scripture and they may go for a while and we do not take regard that they are there.

The tenth instance of prayer in the early church in the first seven chapters of Acts and this certainly wasn't the only time the church could be seen at prayer or individuals at prayer but these are the ten times in the first seven chapters. The seventh is very terrible moment in the life of the church and the life of Stephen. He is dying because he has been pelted with rocks. Verse 59 says, "While they were stoning him Stephen prayed." What do you pray when you've only got a minute? When you've got less than a minute? "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." He prays two of the prayers Christ himself prayed from the cross. The first prayer and the last prayer. Forgive them and into thy hands I commit my spirit. When he said this he fell asleep.

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He would not go out of life with any bitterness in his life. He would surrender all temptation to bitterness even in that last moment and ask the Lord for his forgiveness.

This is how the early church prayed. A natural instinct to pray. Praying at key junctures. Praying that God would make them powerful in their circumstances. Praying that flowed out of the confidence they had in the Lord.

We need to be a church of prayer. The church of prayer is a powerful church. God can't do anything in this community, he's limited himself doing anything apart from his people's prayer. he will not act apart from our prayers. It's as we pray that God moves and answers.

All of our prayers, scripture says, are in God's book. I've lost track of a few prayers and maybe you have but God hasn't lost track of a one. I wonder if God sometimes takes the book of our prayers in heaven and leafs through them and forgets a lot of things I've done that I wish I could forget. Instead he's reading my prayers. I think he is. Prayers are precious to God. And they need to be precious to us.

Father, we take a moment to look over the entire landscape of our life as though we were standing in some beautiful terrain with the prairie miles before us. The prairie represents the landscape of our whole life. We take a moment to get a whole view of it because you have a whole view of life. In it there are all these prayers we've prayed in so many different ways, so many different places. Sometimes Lord we've forgotten what we've prayed. But you've never forgotten. You've never forgotten the prayers that people have prayed for us that make it possible for us to be where we are this evening in you. Lord, we're mindful of that little hymn that says, "All of our dreams you're mending." Lord there are ideals and hopes that we've expressed before in prayer that we've lost sight of in the living. Lord, in this moment of prayer, renew your work in us. Let all of those prayers which have been prayed for us and which we have prayed ourselves find a new echoing and reverberation in our heart. Help us to be a praying church. Help us to really get a hold of what our mission is in this community and to one another. Whenever we gather for worship Lord may it be with a sincere heart, a heart that only has as its goal to exalt you and be very simple and childlike in our faith. Lord, cleanse all of our heart from the accumulations of adult living. From what comes with the dirt of life, the collection of life's dust. Make us simple in your presence, very transparent, very caring. Make us a light for you in the community and to one another. Make us a help to one another and an encouragement to one another. Bless all our boys and girls and all the boys and girls that are yet outside the gospel living in this community. Lord, help us in this generation you give us to touch the life of every boy and girl in this community with all the other churches working here. Help there not to be one boy or girl to grow up in these towns around us that doesn't know how to accept you as their Lord and savior. Help us to shine as a light to young people, to college students. There's so many college students at critical moments in their life. We want to reach out to them, Lord. As a church we want to reach out to the university student who's come from far away places. We want to have an open heart, an open homes and open church so they'll come to know you. We want to pray for all the brides and grooms that come, all the new families, all the troubled families, all the lonely people, all the single people who have gone through stress, all the single people who have had a great time living so far and haven't had major heartbreaks. We want to reach everyone. We want to reach the old who are young in their faith yet for you. We want to see no one in this community slip away in a nursing home or

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in a hospital bed or in their residence. We want to see no one slip away who hasn't have the opportunity to know you as their Lord and Savior. Lord, help us as an entire church to do the work of an evangelist. And to find the power of the Holy Spirit to be a witness for you in our world. Let our love for one another be unfeigned and without rank or any unforgiveness. Without anything that would hinder our relationship with you or with one another. Breathe upon us Spirit of God and help us to be all that we can be as your people living in this world. We pray it in your name. Amen.