

THE PRAYER LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Part 2

Personal Prayer Life

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We have divided our study into three or four major divisions. First is the prayer life and teachings of Jesus. Secondly the prayer life of the early church and the next two Sunday nights that we're in this series we'll look at the prayer life of the apostle Paul and examine his prayers. Then the fourth part of our series will be prayers from the book of Revelation.

Looking at the prayer life of the Lord we identified 23 times in the Lord's earthly ministry where the gospels recorded him as praying. Out of those 23 times we looked at eleven specific prayers that he prayed. Most all of them extremely short. The longest prayer takes about 2 or 3 minutes to read, John 17. Then we also looked at 15 specific teachings the Lord gave concerning prayer. When we look at the theme of the prayer life of the early church and take the book of Acts as our text we'll find in all 28 chapters of Acts there are 28 specific times that individuals or the church are recorded as praying. We broke this up into 2 different segments. Last week we looked at the first 7 chapters of Acts and noted 10 times that they were praying. Tonight we'll look at the remaining part of Acts.

You can operate a social club without prayer. But you cannot have a dynamic church nor can you have a personal Christian life without prayer. The most important thing that the church can really do and we as individuals can do is to pray. Someone has said that when God gave us the Bible he intended the main things to be the plain things and the plain things to be the main things. In the body of Christ it's so easy for us to get drawn up with what's latest.

So often to our problems lay with scriptures we don't understand. The esoteric hidden scriptures. Our problems lie with the scriptures we *do* understand. Our great problem is with our priorities. We put God's word operative in our life. We know that when Jesus left his church in the world, he left it a praying church. And he built his church first on a prayer meeting. Without building a church on prayer, without building the individual life on prayer what happens is we get into problem solving rather than life changing experiences. There's a great deal of difference between simply trying to solve a problem by putting a finger in the dike here and there. Rather than change that totally revolutionizes us from the inside out.

I really feel from this series the Lord has been speaking to my heart anew about the importance we have as a church body of putting the priority emphasis upon prayer. Prayer keeps termites out of the church. It keeps revival in the church. It keeps God's people concerned with the things with which the Lord himself is most concerned.

It's been said by an early church father, God can refuse nothing to a praying church.

The eleventh occasion in Acts the church is found in prayer is that it moves out of Jerusalem. It comes through Peter and John up to Samaria. Verse 15 gives us the setting. The eleventh occasion is a prayer to receive the Holy Spirit. "When they arrived they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit." The book of Acts tells us in our Christian experience there is an additional step past conversion where we need the empowering work of the spirit. In conversion the Spirit indwells us. But beyond that there is an empowering of God's Spirit. At

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Samaria they had already believed and had already been baptized. But the Spirit had not yet come upon them. Nor had the Spirit yet overwhelmed them. So therefore this experience of the baptism in the Spirit comes into focus. The baptism in the Spirit does not come except through a context of prayer. That's why when we're seeking the baptism of the Spirit we must come in an attitude of prayer and hunger of prayer in our heart. It's good for us to gather around one another and pray for one another. That comes right out of the early church. This is only the second time when we are given a window into understanding the work of the baptism of the Spirit. The first time is the sovereign work of the Spirit where he descends upon the 120. But the next time the Spirit is outpoured describes for us it is in association with leadership first praying and then laying hands upon persons to receive the Spirit.

Another occasion of prayer that follows rapidly after that, verses 20-24 of Acts 8. That is Simon Magus who wants to buy the gift of giving the Spirit. He's rebuked by Peter and told to pray that God would perhaps forgive him. So Simon asks for prayer. A genuine prayer request evidently on his part. "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you've said may happen to me." This would lead us to conclude that another occasion we may and should pray is when we have done wrong and need God's forgiveness. Here's a converted person Simon Magus who has been baptized in water who had let the self life creep back in. The minute he is rebuked he is asking for the forgiveness of God.

Then the thirteenth occasion of prayer in Acts is found in Acts 9:11. It is prayer as a first response following conversion. It happens to Saul of Tarsus. Saul having been converted on the Damascus road has gone up into Damascus. What is he doing in Damascus? First instinct – praying. "Go to the house of Judas on straight street," the Lord tells Ananias, "And ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul for he is prying." Paul had been before his conversion a man of prayer because he was a Jewish rabbi. He knew therefore how to pray. He knew how to employ the psalms in prayer. I would submit to you that often there is a great deal of difference of someone who comes into conversion who has been from a religious background versus someone who has had not spiritual training at all. The person who has had the advantage of spiritual training even if they haven't had a conversion experience, instinctively begins to understand how to pray. That's why the charismatic renewal has had such a wave after wave of emphasis in the Catholic church. While many in the Catholic church do not have an individual conversion experience they have been around praying.

When you're singing in the Spirit in the Catholic charismatic renewal group you'll often find it in the context of a Gregorian chant. What the Holy Spirit is doing is building on the pre-Christian praying experience and transforming it. Where a person comes from never having experience of having prayed it means that a whole lot of new ground has to be broken. Whether a person comes from a spiritual background or a non-spiritual background, the instinct after we're converted is to begin to be on speaking terms with the Lord. Prayer will become less awkward and more an expression of the heart. The more we follow the Lord we want to pray after we come to faith in Christ.

Chapter 9:40 gives us the fourteenth occasion of prayer in Acts. It is a very difficult moment I'm sure for Peter because he has gone to visit a woman in the church who has done great deeds for other people. Her name is Dorcas. We have a group in our church named the Dorcas group. The thing that I like about Dorcas is she was rather subtle in her spirituality. She was a maker of things for other people. I'm sure there had to be people in the early church that would have

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come along and said, “You’re doing fine things making things for other people. But you’d have a more dynamic ministry if you’d be a Bible teacher. Or you’re have a more dynamic ministry if you had the gift of prophecy.” But I think Dorcas functioned within the realm of her giftedness. She was most spiritual in doing what the Lord had called her to do and not trying to be something she wasn’t. Peter comes and sent them all out of the room. Then he got down on his knees and said the last rites. Peter does something here – he prays.

What is happening in that tremendous moment when he prays? I really believe prayer became the occasion through which the Lord gave Peter the operation of the gift of faith. Peter suddenly was back in another room a couple of years earlier in his mind where the Lord had come into a twelve-year old girl’s room. Her name was Tabitha. The Lord had simply said to her in Aramaic, Tabitha Cumi. After he had sent everybody out of the room except Peter, James and John. Now here with Dorcas whose name in Aramaic was Tabitha. Same name – just one letter different. Peter is raving and he is remembering that room where the Lord had previously been. I believe operating in his heart at that moment is the gift of faith to reach out and pray that God could do the same thing again. So he stand up and says Tabitha cumi.” Meaning Dorcas, arise. And she does.

You’ll find in your life as you pray that it is easier for you to have the operation of the gift of faith when you’ve gone through an experience that has a parallel. I have areas of operation of faith in my life where I am strong because I have been through that before and I know God works. Thank God Peter kneels down and prays when he confronts death. He has the gift of faith that operates even over death. He’s been through it before and he knows God can raise the dead.

Maybe we don’t see this kind of thing happen because we haven’t been through it before. Therefore we don’t have any faith for it. But who says that it can’t happen again.

The fifteenth occasion for prayer in the book of Acts is prayer in a pre Christian. That is a person who has not yet given their life to the Lord. It’s not just Christians who pray.

Someone has raised the question, Does God hear the prayer of a non Christian. Of course he does. Read the book of Acts. He hears the prayer of a non-Christian. Cornelius, Acts 10:2-6, 30-32. God appears to Cornelius whose family was devout and he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. Then the angel answers him in 10:4 “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a remembrance before God.” If the person is truly praying to the one God, God will cause them to be connected up to the body of Jesus Christ. He will bring it to pass where there is genuine prayer from the heart.

Probably none of us would have come to Jesus Christ except that before we became converted God through the Holy Spirit began stirring up our heart. One of the things we now as Christians ought to pray for is that the Holy Spirit would stir up those within our community that do not know the Lord that there would be lots of pre Christian experiences with God that will bring people into union with the Lord.

A sixteenth moment of prayer in the book of Acts is prayer as an instrument of God in hinge moments. 10:9 and 11:5. While Cornelius in Caesarea has been praying Peter who is down

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south in Joppa has gone up to keep his time of prayer at the noon hour. As he is praying the Lord brings him this vision that shows him that nothing is unclean.

Given today when we talk about those in Christ neither Jew or Gentile we tend to forget that the church once was all Jewish and if you're in an orthodox section of New York or Los Angeles or Jerusalem and you see orthodox you remember that one time the church of Jesus Christ looked like or similar kinds of garb. And did not set down and ever eat a non-kosher meal, never ate butter and meat together, never drink milk while eating meat. Kept kosher. Kept Sabbath laws. Kept regimented. The whole idea of somebody coming into fellowship with Christ who ate a cheeseburger or a bacon cheeseburger was as bad as thing as going out and being a rank sinner. It just wasn't done. Here was this all-ethnic church. How was it to reach the whole world?

The great problem in the first century of reaching the whole world had nothing to do with limited transportation. It had nothing to do with no phone lines or telegraphs. The great problem of the early church was its own enculturation. It's own confining the Christian faith to its Jewish mode of life. If the gospel was to get to all the world somehow it had to break out of that cultural capsule.

Where does that begin to take place? At an hour of prayer. I shudder to think what would have been the history of the Christian church had Peter met his appointment to pray that day on the rooftop because we'd had no Caesarea. If we'd had no conversion of Cornelius at Caesarea there would never have been those that would have been bold to reach Gentiles at Antioch and had they not done that there would not have been the missionary sending church out of Antioch with the journeys. And had thee not been that there would have never been Acts 15 which was the debate on shall we include Gentiles in the church.

I say, "never have been." I'm sure the Holy Spirit would have found another way. But he used that way and he used it through prayer.

I wonder if it isn't possible that the Lord has in mind for you or for me as members of the body of Christ to reach key people who will unlock doors for the gospel in people groups in our area. But we'll miss that connection if we ourselves miss our time of prayer. When the records are opened in heaven I wonder if we will have missed any opportunities that we could have seize because we missed our time of prayer. Peter kept his time of prayer and the Lord used it as a hinge moment to guide him on. We need to keep our times of prayer lest we ourselves miss a hinge moment. If it's only one moment in a lifetime that unlocks all the doors, we need to keep that time of prayer.

The seventeenth occasion in the book of Acts for prayer is the prayer in other tongues as companion to the gift of the Spirit. This happens in Acts 10:44-46. It happens again in Acts 19:6 at Ephesus where other tongues as is the case in Acts 2 is occurring as an immediate consequence of being baptized with the Spirit. So that the praying church is a church that not only praises to God with its rational side and with language that can be understood but praises God in languages it does not know that is a gift from the Spirit.

An eighteenth occasion for prayer is found in Acts 12:5 and 12. The setting is the imprisonment of Peter. Two apostles have been imprisoned. In fact James who has already been executed by

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the time we come to verse 5 and here's Peter now kept in prison. But the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

I would submit to you that the church is not said to be praying for his release. The church was praying for him. There's great deal of difference. In fact to substantiate the idea that they were not evidently praying for his release is verse 12. "When he was free he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying." When he knocked at the door and Rhoda comes and goes back to tell the group they tell her it must be his angel. But the phrase used in verse 5, they were praying for *him*. I think that's consistent with what they had prayed in Acts 4 when they said, "Sovereign Lord." They had not asked the Lord to change their external circumstance but they had prayed that they would have power and boldness. Probably at this point, probably what the church was praying for was that Peter in this prison experience no matter what was required of him, that he would still declare the word of God with boldness. They knew how he had been afraid before when he was in prison, or threatened with imprisonment when he was at Jesus' side. So they were praying for him now.

We especially as believers need to do the same thing, when we have fellow members of our body who are in danger. It may not be the danger of a prison. Maybe it's the danger of an illness. Maybe it's the danger of a tremendous disruption in family life. But we can all identify people we know who are going through moments of great danger. We can also identify with people in other parts of the world who live their lives out in constant danger in their service to the Lord. Prayer for such people is in order.

The nineteenth occasion for prayer in the book of Acts is Acts 13:1-3 which finds in the new Gentile church, the Gentile Jewish church at Antioch the five leaders of that church worshipping the Lord and fasting. Up until Acts 13 there had never been from the church an organized missionary effort. Up until that time all evangelism that had occurred had been the results of the expansion brought through persecution. Believers were forced out of one town therefore went to another. Now for the first time the body of Christ makes the decision to carry the message somewhere else. That occurs in a context of praying and fasting.

It's true today. Where the gospel has broken through to new people groups where it has gone into missionary fields both at home and abroad, where there is no church of Jesus Christ, it has been birthed out of prayer.

The twentieth occasion for prayer in the book of Acts is an intense season of prayer in the commissioning of new leaders. 14:23. The setting for this is the first missionary journey is at an end. Churches have been established. What needs to be done? Leadership needs to be appointed. So Paul and Barnabus appointed elders for them in each church with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust. An intense season of prayer for new leadership.

We in church need to have commissioning services, whole services set aside to pray. We need to break the mentality to think that every time we're here for service that somehow preaching must be the major item on the agenda. There needs to be times when we gather together that the only focus we have for that service is to pray. And there's planning and order and forethought and participation in the prayer.

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As you go on through the book of Acts after this time of intense commissioning that in Acts 15 where you would expect to find prayer you don't find it mentioned. I'm sure that prayer had to be a part of Acts 15 but it's just not mentioned. Acts 15 is the story of the first great theological struggle that the early church had. It's the struggle of shall we admit Gentiles into full membership of the church without going through the Jewish rite of circumcision and dietary laws. The church struggled with that issue. They had a full-scale theological debate with both sides represented. And not a word is said about prayer. Which suggests to you that there are some problems in the body of Christ that are not necessarily solved by saying, Let's just pray about that. We cannot use prayer to always sweep under the carpet our differences. There are times when we just have to open them up and get them explored and get them dealt with. Nor can we suddenly turn spiritual in a tremendous debate and say I have a word from the Lord: Thus sayeth the Lord. Missionaries have found in foreign fields that they have to teach new Christians when they gather together as church leaders and pastors and they're discussing sensitive things the tendency is for someone to want to get up and solve the issue by someone to get up and say, "Now I have a prophecy for this issue." Of course one side will prophecy this and another side, that. We've had mission fields where the person in charge has had to say, "In this business meeting a word of prophecy will be out of order. We're here as a deliberative body."

That's what the early church did. It was not a word of prophecy that swung the day in Acts 15. It was "Is what is being taught consistent with what Jesus himself taught and what the Old Testament scriptures teach us?" The anchor was to the word and not to a prophecy. That's probably why we don't have a reference of prayer in Acts 15. There certainly had to be prayer but prayer was an underlying factor in the decision and not the single factor which had to be correspondent with God's word.

If you have an argument with somebody in the body of Christ or in family you may not be successfully deal with that by simply saying, Let's pray. Let's suddenly get spiritual and if you're spiritual you'll forget the differences you had with me. We like to do that with people. But prayer won't sweep it under the carpet. You have to deal with it.

The twenty-first occasion where prayer is mentioned in Acts is 16:13 and 16 which is at the town of Philippi where a place of prayer is a base for building a new church. Paul has come to the city of Philippi on orders to find the man of Macedonia. When he gets there, there is no man of Macedonia. Only a group of women who are worshipping by the riverside. We know it was the Jewish custom of the period that if there was not ten Jewish males twenty years of age and over to constitute a quorum of a synagogue that there could not be a synagogue building. Therefore those who were of the Jewish faith would find someplace out of town, preferably by a river or in some quiet area to have worship on the Sabbath. The Jewish community at Philippi, which also included God-fearers, gentiles were attracted to Judaism but who had not yet been converted. A handful of them were gathering by the river on the Sabbath. And it was in that place of prayer that the church in Europe began to be built. May the church always be a base of prayer from which God's work is built.

Acts 16:25 is another is another occasion for prayer. It's prayer in the midst of suffering an unjust treatment. Paul for his witness in the town of Philippi and for thanks of his exorcism of a demon possessed girl is stripped along with Silas and beaten, severely flogged and thrown into prison. What's Paul doing? At about midnight Paul and Silas were praying, not complaining,

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not saying, “God, this isn’t fair.” Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them.

I think this is one of the most important verses in all the Bible. It tells us exactly what we need to do when we are rubbed wrong. We don’t have to have our backs bleeding to feel this way at times. We feel that we have done what we thought we should be doing and look what happened to us. Is this the way God treats those who try to do their best?

That’s the time we need to pray. And not necessarily a prayer of complaint either. But a prayer, Lord, you’ve got control. It’s you who called my life. I’m yours. I’m your property if this is the way you want your property to be treated, glory to your name. Praise you anyway. You’re going to get a victory anyway out of this. Every reverse we’ve always found is a victory. Thank you Lord.

If we could somehow take our reverses that way. There is always meant to be victories. They will only be defeats if we let them be defeats. But if we’ll come to God at that moment and praise him and sing hymns it changes the atmosphere in our hearts and it changes the atmosphere around us.

Prayer in the midst of suffering.

The twenty-third occasion for prayer is a very touching moment. It’s found in Acts 20:36 and 21:5. Two separate occasions. Both of them are farewell times. 20:36 Paul is at the end of his third missionary journey. He meets with the elders at Ephesus and prayed. This is only the second time (if memory serves me correctly) in the New Testament that the word “kneel” is used in describing prayer. It doesn’t mean that other prayers weren’t accompanied by kneeling. I expect that a great deal of prayer was sitting, standing and some knelling. Here they kneel.

And again they kneel at Tyre with the disciples when they leave them. Acts 21:5 “When our time was up we left on our way. All the disciples and wives and children accompanied us out of the city and there on the beach we knelt to pray.”

Then the twenty-fourth occasion for prayer is found in Acts 22:17-21. This is actually an occasion that really happened at the beginning of Paul’s walk as a Christian but it isn’t noted until he testifies of it at a much later time. Paul is speaking to a thoroughly unruly mob in the temple area who has just proceeded to tear him limb from limb. He’s been rescued by Roman soldiers. He’s in the temple grounds. It’s his last time in the temple grounds. As he is speaking he gives the details concerning his call. “When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking, ‘Quick he said to me, ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately because they will not accept your testimony about me.’” He was praying in the temple. What is that prayer the source of? It is the origin of his life call. Just as the prayer had been the womb for missions for the church at Antioch, Acts 13, so prayer in the life of the Apostle Paul had been the womb for his own personal call in life.

Then to note briefly the other occasions for prayer and to put a wrap on this evening.

Acts 26:29. Paul indicates as he testifies before Herod Agrippa “Short time or long I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am except for these

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chains.” Here is a prayer for the conversion of those who do not know Christ whom we will meet up with. Paul knew that he was going to meet with Herod Agrippa and give testimony concerning Jesus to him. He’s been praying for his conversion. As Paul closes his speech to Agrippa he’s able to look him in the eye and say to him, “I’ve been praying for you.” Isn’t that a great thing to be able to say to somebody whom we talk to that is not a Christian? “I have prayed for you.” There will really be no effective evangelism without that kind of praying.

Paul by the way, very humbly realizes that when Herod Agrippa listens to this it seems brash so Paul tacks on the tag line “except for these chains.” I pray that you will be like I am except you won’t have to wear these.

Then Acts 27:35, the twenty-sixth time for prayer is Paul giving thanks at mealtime. It’s been a time when for two weeks hardly anybody’s eaten because they’ve been on a wild ride across the Mediterranean. Paul has assured them that the Lord has indicated all the lives of those on board the ship would be saved. So when he gave them that assurance he took some bread and gave thank to God in front of them all.

Acts 28:8 the next to the last time for prayer, Paul prays for the sick. Publius’ father was sick in bed suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went into see him and after prayer placed his hands on him and healed him.

Then the last prayer, Acts 28:15, Paul gets to Rome. He has been a prisoner for three years by the time he arrives and certainly he has got to wonder if anybody at the church in Rome is interested in him. They had received his letter years earlier. They had never met face to face. Would they risk identifying with him? We get the answer. When Paul is 43 miles out of Rome they arrange to meet him on a certain day. Verse 15 “The brothers there heard that we were coming and traveled as far as the Three Taverns to meet us and at the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged. It was a prayer of thanksgiving for companionship.

And God intends for that to be part of our life was well.

Let’s take a moment and ask some questions of application. I’ll try to put all these various scriptures together as they relate to our own personal prayer life.

Do we seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

Do we need forgiveness?

Have we just become a believer in Christ?

Are we facing something that we have no power in ourselves to change?

Are we at prayer regularly so that God can make that time of prayer a hinge moment?

Do our fellow believers find themselves in great danger?

Do we hunger for an extension of God’s work?

Do we want our church leaders to be filled with wisdom, ability and power?

Are we experiencing unjust treatment?

Are we saying goodbye to a fellow believer?

Do we know what call God wants in our life? What he wants us to do? Where he wants us to go?

Do we seek conversion of someone else?

What should we do at mealtime?

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When we visit the sick what should we do?

When we receive unexpected help, what is our response? Give thanks and pray.

Our Lord we pray now. We want to seek your face, Lord. We want to dedicate ourselves to be a praying Christian. We ask that you will help us to have right priorities and you'll give us the strength to do the most difficult thing that probably we'll ever be called upon to do in our whole Christian life. That is to find faithful moments alone each day where we can pray. That Lord is where the enemy will fight us the hardest, will struggle with us to make us people of neglect. But Lord, we want to pray. Teach us to pray. Help us to pray in all of these ways that your word lays out before us that we may be complete lacking no good thing. Tonight all of us come with different needs. Some of us are facing situations we have in ourselves no power to change. We just want to pray to you in this moment that you'll give us power. Maybe some of us are at moments in our life we are truly in the balance. It's a hinge moment for us or someone else. We want your direction. Others of us hunger for an extension of your word to those who know you not. We pray that your Holy Spirit would empower us to have a vision. We thank you for those in our church body who've stepped out in faith to extend your work. For all the many ways that we are seeking to bring your good news to those who know you not. Equip us to do every good thing. We seek the conversion of others. Those we know, those we don't know. We pray for healing of the sick. We pray you'll raise them up. We pray for all in our church family who pass through time of danger, whether it's illness or family strife or temptation to sin and fall away from you. We pray for them. We pray too for ourselves when we face unjust treatment and we've gotten something we don't feel we deserve or earned. Give us the strength to turn that reverse into a triumph and see you at work in our life through it. Thank you, Lord, for your love. Thank you for your mercy and your grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.