

Prayer 09 in the Early Church

by Bob Clark

The practice of prayer was a vital part of the early church, and it was a means of deliverance, protection, and enabling ministry, and it is still an essential part of the Christian life today.

Duration: 37:53

Scripture: Acts 1:14, Acts 2:5, Acts 6:4, Acts 12:5, Acts 16:25, Acts 20:36, Colossians 4:2

Topics: "Early Church"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of prayer in the Christian home. He refers to the exhortations given in Colossians 3 and 4, which outline how husbands, wives, children, fathers, servants, and masters should behave. The speaker highlights the need for continual prayer and thanksgiving in order for the Christian home to function properly. He also mentions that prayer is not just for personal benefit or spiritual growth, but it should be integrated into daily family life. Additionally, the speaker discusses how prayer can have a transformative effect on individuals and situations, as seen in the example of the apostle Paul's imprisonment leading to the furtherance of the gospel.

Transcript

Now, let's have our thoughts directed toward the Word of God, and what I would like to do is something that is going to be too brief to be profitable in one sense, and yet just a very simple reminder. Earlier in the week, we looked at the references of our Lord in prayer, and the practice of prayer and the experience of our Lord, or in the life of the Lord Jesus. What we'd like to do is look at some references rather quickly, just one right after the other, with the thought of impressing our mind afresh with the practice of prayer in the life of the early church of our Lord Jesus.

So, we look in the book of Acts, and in Acts chapter 1, we find the first reference, and what we'll do is just rather briefly look at a series of references, just making mention of them that if you have a pencil in order to make down the jotting, and could look them up later and give some thought to them. For some of them, some interesting thoughts can be derived by reflecting on it, but we just want to see the frequency with which God's people are found in prayer, and in a very broad and varied kind of practice. In chapter 1, in verse 14, these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication with the women.

This is an innovation. The first time we find men and women together in prayer. Previously, during the temple arrangements, the women had a separate courtyard and separate activities, but the church, the body of Christ, and the Christian teaching has removed that, and they're drawn together, and now the men

and the women are found in prayer together.

In Acts chapter 2, in verse 42, this company of newly baptized believers added to the others, in verse 42, and they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. This is the continuity now, this consistency. This is one of the major practices, the four essential practices of the early church, and they continued in prayers.

Chapter 4, in verse 31, some of the apostles had, or the disciples, had suffered greatly because of their testimony and the persecution, and they came back, and there was a unified exercise of heart, and in that meeting, we find in verse 31, and when they had prayed, the place was shaken, where they were assembled together, they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they all spoke the word of God with boldness. And here, they resort to, after they had come together, a season of prayer, and the season of prayer turned to be quite a remarkable impact on the physical building, because of their unity and warmth and expression and intensity of feeling. In chapter 6, the apostles realize that they are much in need of spending more time with the Lord, and they make the observation, in verse 4, we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

So, their exercise was to intensify their prayer life, and avail themselves of the opportunity of ministering the word of God as a result of this prayer time, and so they chose out from among them these seven men that were going to maintain some of the physical ministries, possibly doing these services as what we might think of as deacon work, and in verse 6, whom they set before the apostles, and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. It's very easy to see that in all different aspects of the life of the body of Christ, they were in prayer, they resorted to prayer. It wasn't particularly just convened meetings for prayer, but they were men and women that appreciated the importance of going frequently into the presence of the Lord.

In chapter 9, the spirit of God draws our attention to something that's noteworthy, and that is that the apostle Paul has been touched by God, he has physically blinded, Ananias is urged to go down and find him, and the description that is given to Paul to Ananias is in chapter 9, in verse 11, the Lord said, Arise and go into the street which is called straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold he prayeth. The mark of a man that's been brought into a relationship with the Lord, that was his distinguishing feature. Now as a Pharisee, and possibly a member of the Sanhedrin, a man who was a teacher and skilled, he had spent much time in prayer, but the Lord describes him now, behold, he's a praying man.

This is a man who is in prayer. Chapter 10, and verse 9, And on the morrow, as they went on their journey, they drew nigh unto the city. Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour.

And here, just a simple statement that the implication is, it was his practice, but certainly he had set himself aside for this day, in the middle of the day, in the heat of the day, to find a respite, and go to the rooftop and spend some time in prayer. In chapter 12, and verse 5, the word of God reminds us that Peter had been put into prison, James had been decapitated, and the peril of all the others were just the apprehension and the fear, and the whole city was in a tumult as a result of this activity, and a very familiar statement in verse 5, Peter therefore was kept in prison, but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. The exercise to intercede for others in a time of peril.

In chapter 13, it's quite different circumstance that Antioch, the prophets and the teachers, the leadership of the local assembly are together, they're exercising their heart before God, and in verse 2, they

ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. Most instructive, and a very important principle, that it was not that Barnabas and Saul received the call here, they obviously knew they had been drawn by God to this service, but the fact that the leadership in the local church were told, separate me Paul and Barnabas, and their activity was, and when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. Identifying themselves with the new workers, they would intercede for workers that are in prison, and they're going to intercede for workers that are being thrust out and let go to do the work of the Lord.

A constant reminder, even though these are just brief, but we see the early church almost in every chapter, in every varying experience, men of prayer, men and women who were before God, exercised in concern. Some of this spirit seems to be slipping away from us. It's not so frequent and not so regular and not so consistent.

There are times for prayer, and we come together, hopefully, and assemble with God's people for stated, planned meetings for prayer, but that does not seem to be the tone of prayer here. They do that, obviously, but the thought is there's a constant retreat to prayer, a constant concern to be in prayer, and the missionary in chapter 14, after he has established a work, and God has given him wisdom to seek out on this first missionary trip those that would be appropriate for leadership, we read in verse 23, and when they had ordained them elders in every church and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed. Here again, the exercise of heart to identify prayer on the behalf of those that are going to be leadership in the church.

This is not particularly a specific meeting, but rather that which is in the logical flow of the activities of the local church. They seem to have made God very near, very real, a sense of their dependence upon him, a constant retreating into his presence, a consistent exercise of soul to be in touch with the Lord and involved with him and laying out the problems and the needs of the local church before him. In chapter 20, in verse 36, again it was the apostle, as we mentioned last evening, after he met with the elders at Ephesus, they had come down to meet him at Miletus, there was a very moving time together, and in verse 36, when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down and prayed with them all.

A token of fellowship, certainly. A token of commending these men who are potential leaders for the church at Ephesus into the hands of God is an expression of separation. All of these things are involved, but again, it's the thought of doing it in prayer.

Speaking to God about the work of the Lord and the needs of the work. Constantly exercising our hearts before him. It is this that gave dynamic and power and effectiveness to the early church.

We oftentimes don't see each other. We oftentimes do not have the same privilege in our heavily structured lives in large metropolitan cities with businessmen constantly on the move and housewives seeking to take care of their responsibilities, and how important it is when we do come together to be able to pray, to have that freedom. But it seems everything else will interfere with those things.

But it is very pleasant where there is an opportunity, and if we are living in a quieter community where there is privilege to be together, that we would turn to the Lord in prayer. Not in formality because of an obligation, but rather because of warmth and desire to share. When we hear of the needs of others, we would think of immediately going to his presence and praying for them.

Praying for protection on the road, praying for their strengthening and blessing, praying for those that might be coming to visit, praying for the meetings that are going on. There are many different ways that we can individually express our interest and concern and support for one another. Now, in all of these references, and in Exercises of Heart, it establishes a very basic concept that the practice of prayer in the early church was evident.

But what did individuals think about this? Now this is what we would like to direct our thoughts to. The Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. Now here is a man who is in the middle of this missionary journey, and as he travels, he looks back, and as near as we can tell, this is the first set of letters that he has written. In 1 Thessalonians he writes his first letter, and this letter is the first volume, the first expression of church doctrine that is included in the word of God.

This letter appears to be the first one that he has written, and in the end of this letter he urges, in 1 Thessalonians 5 and 17, that we should pray without ceasing. But being more specific, in 2 Thessalonians in chapter 3, he says, Finally brethren, at the end of his second letter, Finally brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have recourse and be glorified, even as it was or is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men, for all men have not faith. The letter is dealing with the latter times, and the responsibilities of the church, and giving them insight, and correcting misconceptions regarding some teaching that they had been exposed to, or whether human natural thinking had led them, and after he is clarifying this, he says, Now finally brethren, pray for us.

Why does Paul want prayer? What is he expecting their prayer to do for him? Chapter 3, verse 1. What's the first request that he has? The word of the Lord have recourse. What does that mean? What do you imply from that? Not be hindered. What else? Obstacles to be removed.

What might be obstacles that would hinder the word of God? Those who are blatantly opposed to Christian doctrine. That's right, the political time, the feeling of the era, and the people. Ridicule of the word itself.

I said, Now pray that this the word would be free, and, what's that second phrase? And be glorified, even as it is with you. How did they glorify the word? Getting to know it, studying it. Studying it, by getting to know it, by accepting it into their lives, and having it affect their lives.

And as they received the word, and it affected them, there sounded out from them the gospels all over Achaia, all over the Greek peninsula. People were hearing the word of God, because these Thessalonians had embraced the truth. And he says, Now what's been effectively done in your heart? Pray.

Pray for us, that, 1. The word of the Lord would have recourse, and that it would have its good effect. 2. Be free to be magnified in the life of the listeners, and that, secondly, we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men. Prayer for what? Safety, protection for the missionary, that the worker himself would be kept from peril.

Now these are very simple, basic things, but they give us good insight. Are there areas today, workers in areas, there is perilous to announce the word of God? There might be political or religious opposition to it? Certainly. For what should we be praying? The word would have recourse, and in those that hear it, they would truly embrace it, and it would be a glorifying thing to God, and to the word, and that the worker himself, those that are serving, he or she might be given protection and care.

The world is filled with wicked, unreasonable people that do not have faith, that are not sensitive to respond to the word of God. Now, in this first group of letters, he announces his convictions concerning prayer. We should continue in prayer with a group of believers at Thessalonica, pray that the word would go forth with power, and not only with freedom, but it would have a good effect in the listeners, and that the worker himself would be protected.

Now, if you would, would you look at 2 Corinthians? This would appear to me, at least, to be the next in the series of these little letters. 2 Corinthians, in chapter 1, he is talking about physical peril now, physical hazards that threaten his very life. For you would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life, that we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God, which raiseth the dead, who delivereth us from so great a death, and doth deliver, in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us.

You also, helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons, thanks may be given by many on our behalf." Verse 11 tells us what? Paul's conviction, and what does he think concerning their prayer? All right, very good. Starts us off with, it's valuable. What is its effect? What is the real value of this prayer? You also, helping together by prayer for us.

Helping do what? We're in fellowship and in cooperation with God, and God who delivered him from what? From trouble and death itself. The very threat and the peril of death, and God comes in, and what part did the Corinthians have? By praying for him. They might not have known, particularly, that he was in this condition over there in Asia, but when he writes this letter, he says that God has delivered me, and he is delivering me, and I believe he will yet deliver me.

You also, helping together. Now, he doesn't talk this way in his last epistle to Timothy. He knows that he is going to be executed, and he has accepted that, but he senses the freedom and the enabling, and he attributes it to the cooperative prayer of God's people.

How many times, in my simple experience in serving the Lord, we have felt God's special help, and special enabling, and the confidence, not being able to write or say to an individual, it was your prayer, but knowledge that the intercession of God's people had been helpful, and encouraging, and sometimes, in a very specific way, enabling. We cannot overemphasize the importance of being mindful of those that are serving the Lord and their need for prayer. It is of great importance that those who are handling the word of God, to keep them humble, to keep them useful, to keep them enabled to be fruitful, to make them be in the position where they can sense what it is they should be doing, and what specific ministries.

We all need prayer, but these are the worker himself, very mindful of the great importance of intercessory prayer. Now, this is emphasized, I think, in the last part of the book of Romans. A most remarkable statement is made in Romans chapter 15.

We've been thinking now, in Thessalonians, the next letter Corinthians, the next letter Romans, statements concerning Paul's convictions of prayer. We know that the early church practiced prayer in every imaginable aspect of their life. Prayer was woven into it.

Now, Paul is convinced that he is practically helped by this. Now, he says, in verse 30, I beseech you, this is an imploring, an intense word, I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in your prayers to God for me. Now, that word, strive

together, it's the only time it's used in the New Testament, and it's a compounding of words.

And the idea is, it's the English, our English word to agonize, comes from this basic word that is described here as strive together. And so the idea is, in the language in which this Bible was written, and during that time, we might say, we saw maybe an athletic event with, say, a remarkably great basketball team, and they moved very rapidly, and they seemed to pass quickly, and there was great movement and symmetry, and they just seemed to be unstoppable, unbeatable. And we would say that they did everything in concert, there was real team workmanship, or team play, that's the expression here.

It was applied in the Greek games to any kind of physical competition with a group of people that were acted in concert with each other with intensity, and exercise of physical and mental strain, that's what's conveyed, a very strong word. And I beseech you, who there at Rome can be together as a collective team, remember now, each of these letters are written to corporate groups of believers. And what is in mind here is not individual prayer at Thessalonica, and not individual prayer at Corinth, nor at Rome, but corporate prayer, coming together in team concert, in team cooperation, exercise of heart, and strive together, toward what end? That I may be delivered from them do not believe in Judea.

Physical protection, right? And secondly, that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints. He is carrying a gift, a gift from whom? Gentile believers, right? Christians at Macedonia, Corinth, he's carrying this gift, and he's moving toward the city of Now what is he asking for? That my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints. Why would they not want to accept this gift? Because it came from Gentiles.

What do we call that? Prejudice? National pride? Independent spirit? We're not going to receive anything from Gentiles? Pardon? Pride? That's right. Now, what is he asking that the corporate prayer of God's people would do? Bind them together in love. Good expression.

Effectively overpower national prejudices or pride. And it's very easy for one person, a worker of any kind, coming into an area, making a parallel in a contemporary time, that you might have misunderstanding amongst the people to whom you go. That we should be praying that they would be giving this special enabling and God would predispose those to whom he or she is going to minister to be able to receive their ministries, whether it comes in the form of financial gifts or the teaching of God's word.

But the exercise of heart, what does this tell us about prayer? Corporate prayer amongst God's people. Give us an inclination. Start our thoughts.

Without the exact detail of repeating each of the things, what does it tell us about corporate prayer? Very good. It changes things and people, does it not? What else? Pardon? It has an effective power operating, not only through the word of God, but in the hearts and lives of individuals who may not be disposed, humanly speaking, to think and feel that way. These are great significant things.

Why does the prayer have that effect? Is it because I bow my head and speak? Is there something mystical or magical about the posture of prayer or the fact that we are doing this together? What's the real force? The Spirit of God doing what? Right, moving in our hearts corporately, freeing him and liberating him. And the real effectiveness is our great God seeing mutual corporate agreement in the name of the Lord, confessing impediments, mutual concern for the glory of Christ, and he is thus freed to work and be enabled in some capacity. It's a realm that we do not really understand, but we know that we don't wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, the rulers of darkness and the wickedness

in high places.

It's a spirit conflict, and we need to free and be participant in it and capacitate those that are serving that they'd not be encumbered with the opposition. Tremendous potential if we are exercised for prayer. Now the apostle goes further, and in Philippians chapter 1, he writes something that is very familiar to us, but it describes a little intimate exercise of heart that comes from this man.

We're moving later into his life now. I read from chapter 1 in verse 12, but our thoughts are found in verse 19. I would that you should understand, brethren, that the things which have happened unto me have fallen outrather unto the furtherance of the gospel.

I am in jail. I am in prison, but the gospel is being furthered. Don't lament because the great apostle to the Gentiles has been detained in some way.

It's actually been turned to the furtherance of the gospel, so that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace and in other places. I have freedom to move around in the areas where others cannot go, right amongst the royalty, in the houses where their soldiers live and the servants are, and I am reaching out with the gospel, and many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Others are being freed who felt impeded because, well, I can't speak because the apostle's here, but now because he has been detained, now they have been raised up, and they are sharing the word of God.

Some, indeed, preach even out of envy and strife. Unfortunately, there were some that thought, aha, Paul's in prison, and now I'll really add to his burden. I'll go out and preach, and that'll make him feel bad.

It was just envy and strife, a contentious attitude, but they were preaching Christ. The one preached Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds, but the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel. What then? Notwithstanding every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached, and I therein do rejoice.

Yea, and will rejoice, for I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer and the supply of the spirit of Jesus Christ. He has a confidence that even though there is a great hurt to himself, people meaning to add offense, that the gospel is still going forth, and that these very experiences are going to be turned to his greater freedom, and maybe even a liberation from the prison, and the apprehension of immediate death, all because of their intercessory prayer. He said concerning Corinth, I know that your prayers have delivered me.

Here he is saying to Philippi, I believe your prayers will deliver me. The past experience and his convictions about corporate prayer on his behalf have assured him that there will be something in the future done and giving him special enabling, and it might also mean that these things shall turn and through your prayer and the supply of the spirit, there will be an extra ministration given to me. Do pray for me over there at Philippi.

I don't know how many times we have heard servants of the Lord, missionaries, ask us, brethren, pray for us, and I don't know how many times we have been moved by the spirit of God and reminded. Now I know that it is very difficult. We sometimes become discouraged, and we look at that large manual, and there's so many workers, and there's so many preachers, and there's so many needs, but it would be a very fine thing if the Lord touched your heart through this week that we have spent together and talked about

prayer, and seen scores and scores of portions, some in detail, some just a cursory observation, but the whole idea is the Lord spent time in prayer when he was on earth.

The Lord is spending time in prayer now that he is in heaven. The whole church in the early years spent time in prayer. The Lord has exhorted us to pray.

The apostle has affirmed again and again the power and the effectiveness of turning to him in prayer. It says, concerning Job, whose afflictions and problems, oh, we just don't have to go over it. Just the name brings back some real heartache and grief beyond our comprehension, but what does it say about him? The Lord did something for Job when he did something for others.

He turned his captivity. The Lord moved in his life and freed and blessed him when he started to pray for his friends. Up to that time, he had been thinking about himself, and something happened when he started to pray for others, and those men that were ministering to him, and he prayed for them, and raised his heart to God for them, and the Lord delivered himself.

He spared him. He refreshed him. He enabled him.

I am sure there is a great blessing available to us, and of course, I would be rather careless to say the least if I didn't personally say, I surely trust that maybe one or two of you in the coming days and months might just have something nestle in your heart, and you might remember. There's many people that come through, and many friends, and many contacts, but what a blessing for us, for Joyce and me, that you might remember us in prayer, and think of us, and ask the Lord to do his will in us, and then through us. In the latter part of Colossians, there's kind of a summary statement.

In Colossians chapter 4, in chapter 3, he begins a series of exhortations to wives, to husbands, to children, to fathers, to servants. It goes over into chapter 4. It's an unfortunate chapter division, and to the households, servants, and to the masters, and then he says in verse 2, continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving, with all praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance to speak the mystery of Christ, for I am also in bond, that I may make it manifest as I ought to speak. This is a little linkage.

He has just described the Christian home, and how it should function, and then he says, be continuing in prayer. Be constantly before the Lord in prayer. The only way the Christian home is going to work, and the things that I start to tell you in chapter 3, verse 18, all the way through into chapter 4, verse 1, the only way that's going to work, and be realistic as you continually give attention to prayer, and then constantly be alerted in that prayer time with thanksgiving.

Just believe that God is going to work, and that brings down our prayer right into our daily family living. It's not just reaching way off to foreign lands. It's not just thinking of missionaries.

It is not merely our communion in expressing to God. It's not only for our good to be Christ-like. It's not merely for enlarging our lives spiritually, but it's coming right into the experience of daily life, husband and wife, father and children, children to parents, all these intimate relationships.

Be constantly alerted and continually speaking to God in prayer. What's the issue of all of that? And Paul says, and for me, that I might be enabled to speak out the great mystery of Christ, the truths of the church, the dispensation given to me. It's a wonderful thing, isn't it, that we can speak to God, and bring blessing to our own souls, and blessing into the lives of others.

Well, come up and close for us, will you? Come up and close for us. What a privilege we have. The living God.

Don't touch it. The living God, listening to all that was said this morning. We're unable to take it in, but thank God He knows that, too, and makes up for it.

Our Father, we thank Thee from the depths of our hearts for the fact that Thou hast touched our own hearts to be part and parcel of that which our brother has been able to bring to our remembrance. The need is great. Oh God, we have to confess.

We carry little with us as we leave here, but it is line upon line, precept upon precept, and eventually, blessed Lord, we'll be in Thy very presence and understand it all. For this privilege, then, this morning, we thank Thee. Pray for our brother.

Lord, He has asked us in the closing remarks to pray for him. We would with hearts vowed in Thy presence and remember that he, too, is like us, just a human individual, but the Spirit of God has given him great thoughts from Thyself. We thank Thee this morning for any part that has reached our own hearts in all that has been said.

We commit one another to Thee. Pray for the blessing of God on what has been said to the essence that our Lord Jesus Christ will be exalted in our own lives, day by day, as we wait for Him in the precious, purest name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask Thy blessing, giving thanks.

Amen.

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