

“Praying Church”
Acts 12:5-17
August 23, 2009 by Kevin Haah



I. Introduction

Talk about what happened at Dockweiler Beach yesterday.

Thanks Nori, Eugene, and Kathy.

Pray for gangs and gang infested neighborhoods.

I was preparing to preach on a different topic today, but I felt compelled by the Spirit to talk to you about becoming a praying church. Lately, that has been on my heart heavily. So, I am going to share something I've shared before we launched. So, some of you heard me talk about this. But, I think it is crucial that we all dive deeply into this.

II. Book of Acts: Early Church was a Praying Church

If you look at the Book of Acts, which is the history of the church, we see that most of prayers happened together as a community.

- After Jesus ascended up to heaven, the disciples came together and prayed. In fact, Jesus told them to pray for the Holy Spirit to come before they did anything else. The Holy Spirit came with power when we were praying all together in one place.
- When the Holy Spirit came and we were filled with the Holy Spirit, they prayed. They prayed in tongues as the Spirit enabled them.
- When the church started to do life together as a community, they prayed together in people's homes (in small groups) and at the temple (in large groups).
- In Acts 4:24, it says: **“When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. . . .”** In verse 31, it says: **“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”**

- When the Holy Spirit came to the Gentiles at the house of a Gentile named Cornelius, they started to pray, speaking in tongues and praising God.
- At about 44 AD (maybe about a dozen years after Jesus ascended), the Jesus movement had spread like wildfire all over Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and now to Antioch, which was the first Gentile church.
- Meanwhile in Jerusalem, King Herod Agrippa I (this is the son of King Herod the Great, who was the King Herod that persecuted Jesus when he was born) killed Apostle James, the brother of John. Then, he arrested Peter and was planning on executing him. The leader of the Jesus movement was about to be executed. This was a critical moment for the church and for Peter.
- **And I want us to see how the church responded to this crisis in 12:5:**

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

The church was earnestly praying to God for him. That's what the church did. They prayed. As you can see, this is not an aberration. They constantly prayed together. When they prayed, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, the power of God was manifested, and the Kingdom expanded. Let's continue the story: God answered the prayers of the church by sending an angel to free him from prison. Then, he goes to the prayer meeting. Let's catch the story at verse 12:

12When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. 13Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

It's kind of a comical situation. Peter's probably a little frantic right now. He wants them to open the door. But Rhoda is so excited that she doesn't open the door. Here's a group of people who have been praying for Peter's release and when someone delivers the news that God had answered their prayers, they said:

15 "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James (this is James, brother of Jesus) and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

Now, this doesn't mean that God will answer all of our prayers in the way we ask him. I am sure the church also prayed for James when he was arrested but he was executed. But, they didn't give up. They continued to pray for Peter. Frankly, I don't think they expected God to answer their prayers. But, they prayed anyway. **The early church was a praying church and I believe God is calling us to be a praying church. He's calling us to pray together.**

- Someone said, "When we work, we work, but when we pray God works." Prayers bring out the power of the Holy Spirit. And when the power of the Holy Spirit begins to manifest, the church becomes a real thing. People's relationship with God comes alive, people who do not have a relationship with God come to a relationship with God, and people start to change. We start to see genuine inside out transformation. They become more like Jesus. They start to share the good news. They start to do something for the community beyond themselves. They start bringing up there down here. "Thy Kingdom Come." There's a genuine revival, a revival of our lives and our church.
- Jim Cymbala, pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle, in New York, says this about revival:

"Revival is where you see multitudes getting saved, not coming over from another church because there's a better program...a church loving each other and coming together to pray and call out to the Lord...a return to the Book of Acts."

- One prominent pastor, when he was eighty-five years of age, said this:
"I have pastored only three churches in my more than sixty years of ministry. We had revival in every one. And not one of them came as a result of my preaching. They came as a result of the membership entering into a covenant to pray until revival come. And it did come, every time."

III. Prayer is the fountain from which revival springs. The key to revival in every age was prayer.

In 1904, Frank Beardsley wrote:

"It is possible to have revivals without preaching, without churches, and without ministers, but without prayer a genuine revival is impossible."

- Dr A. T. Pierson (an expert in revival history) once said:
"There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer."
- In fact, all revivals in recent history came through a movement of prayer:
- Not many people realize that around the American Revolution (following 1776-1781), this country was a moral mess. Alcohol abuse became epidemic. Out of a population of five million, 300,000 were confirmed drunkards; profanity was the norm. Women were afraid to go out at night. Banks were getting robbed all the time.
- All the mainline churches were in decline. So much that the Chief Justice of the United States, John Marshall, wrote to James Madison, that the Church "was too far gone ever to be redeemed." Voltaire agreed and Thomas Paine said:
"Christianity will be forgotten in thirty years." Church attendance rate was at around 10%.

- Take the liberal arts colleges at that time. A poll taken around that time shows that there were no Christian students at Harvard and only a couple in Princeton. Students were gone wild.
- How did the situation change? It came through a concert of prayer.
- There was a Scottish Presbyterian minister named John Erskine who wrote a short pamphlet encouraging everyone to pray for a revival. Jonathan Edwards was so inspired by this that he published a pamphlet responding to what Erskine said and adding some more.
- And in England and in America, there was a network of churches which started to pray on the first Monday of the month. It was not a lot of people, but mostly a small group of people in each church.
- Revival started to break out everywhere.
- At the height of the revival, Yale College had become a “little temple of prayer.” About a third of the students were caught up in the revival. There are tons of stories like this throughout the country as people started to gather together and pray for the power of God to come.
- Out of this revival (referred to as the second great awakening), came the whole modern missionary movement. The first missionaries from America came from a prayer meeting of college students. Out of the revival came the abolition of slavery, universal education for children, many Bible Societies, Sunday Schools, and many charitable organizations.
- Around 1904, a great revival started in Wales, Great Britain, started as a movement of prayer. This spread to North America—to Azusa Street Revival (which led to the beginning of the Pentecostal movement), to Korea—Pyongyang, the Great Revival of 1907, where over 100,000 people became a Christian in Korea from less than 10,000. It affected Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and South America. It spread throughout the world. In all of these revivals, the movement came through prayer.
- Revival won't come by great worship music or beautiful buildings. Revival won't come by creating the most engaging worship services, with lights and videos and all the bells and whistles.

- Revival will come only through praying together!

IV. Revival is not only experientially linked to prayer, it is scripturally linked to prayer.

- There is an interesting vision in Revelation that shows us that only through our prayers God carries out His purpose. In Revelations 8, when the final seventh seal is open, there is silence for about a half an hour. It wasn't just for dramatic effect, or a silence before the storm. It was because God would not act until his people prayed. Once their prayers had risen to the throne, God poured out his fire from the altar upon the earth. The fire of the Spirit comes in answer to prayer. We have to realize that we have an awesome power as we pray in the Spirit.

- Also, Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:12:

12For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

We have to come to the realization that we are in a spiritual battle against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms. So, Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God. And he concludes by saying this in 6:18 on:

18And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

19Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Prayer is one of our greatest weapons in the Spiritual battle we are engaged in. That's why prayer is so important to our lives and to the revival.

- In 2 Chronicle 7:14, God says:

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

- The term "pray" in the preceding verse comes from the same Hebrew root that describes the position of a woman in labor.
- This is not dealing with the posture of the body, but that of the heart. It is a picture of deep intercession and crying out to God in pain until revival is birthed.
- Every true revival of the heart and of the church and of the nation and of the world started with a prayer movement.

So, I want to make a few application suggestions:

1. Let's not just pray by ourselves. Let's pray together in our Community Groups and in prayer groups. Make this a priority. Don't worry about getting a lot of people to the prayer meetings. Let's just start with a few. Some great prayer movement started with a few people. The famous Haystack Prayer Meeting that ignited the modern missionary movement in 1804 started with 5 Williams College students praying together on a weekly basis.
2. Let's pray for the church and for a revival. Let's pray that God might do something amazing through this church. That we might be a kingdom community that changes not only ourselves, our families and friends, our city, but also our world. Let's also pray for finances of the church. Pray for the leaders and pray for me. I think God is calling some of you to become intercessor, prayer warriors, for the leadership of this church.
3. Let's pray for one another. When someone is going through a difficult situation, pray for that person. When someone is going through a difficult time, pray together.

Paul's Story:

- Paul is my wife Grace's brother, about 4 years younger than her
- He grew up going to church, but turned away during high school when one of his best friends committed suicide
- He declared that he was an atheist and stopped going to church

- It broke his family's heart and they prayed and prayed and prayed for him. But, he went further and further away from God.
- When Grace and I got married 15 years ago, the number one prayer topic was Paul. Grace and I prayed for Paul all the time.
- In fact, our entire small group prayed for Paul. That was our number one prayer topic. I think over 100 people prayed for Paul over a period of about 5 years.
- Grace led a women's discipling group and that group always prayed for Paul, never having met him. One of those women was a person named Yujeo.
- Because he lived in Birmingham Alabama, I couldn't really talk to him too often. So, Grace suggested that I write a letter to him to reason him out of atheism. That's when I went to a bookstore and bought about half of dozen books on Christian Apologetics and research and think about things in more detail.
- I ended up writing the paper about Case for Existence of God with Paul in mind.
- When Paul came to visit us, he and I had long conversations. He also attended a course that I used to teach called Basic Beliefs.
- Then, at one point, he declared that he was no longer an atheist but an agnostic or just unsure.
- We continue to pray for him. At the time we were thinking about whether I should go into full time ministry, and Grace felt that if I can't even effectively reach out to his brother, how can I reach out to others. Grace was completely pessimistic about her brother coming to Christ.
- Then one day, he asked Grace how to become a Christian. Grace explained. Then, he said, "I did that." Grace was in disbelief and tears.
- Paul ended up moving to Los Angeles. He ended up marrying Yujeo, one of the women in Grace's discipling group that used to pray for Paul all the time.

PRAY TOGETHER!

-Pray for Tim Cramer, Pray for Priscilla