

Different To Make A Difference

Pray Desperately – Part 1

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PRAY DESPERATELY – PART 1 **Acts 2:42**

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, I want to invite you to open to the book of Acts. Let me encourage you to open to the book of Acts. If you know it, quote it with me. Acts 2:42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

The last couple of months we've been diving into this picture of the early church and what made them different, their devotion to the Word and the centrality of the Word, their devotion to caring for each other sacrificially, to the fellowship. They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread, the Lord's Supper, as the center of their worship. And then they devoted themselves to prayer.

What we are going to see this and next week is that prayer was the source of life in the early church, that it was the air they breathed day in and day out, that it was central, the driving force of everything they did. And I'm convinced one of the diseases of the modern evangelical church, especially in America, is we have taken that which was fundamental in the early church and we have made it supplemental in our churches today. We have taken that which the early church counted as fundamental, and we've made it supplemental to where prayer is an optional program for a faithful few as opposed to the driving force behind everything the church does.

So, what we are going to do is we are going to dive into the book of Acts, which has more references to prayer than any other book in the New Testament, and we are going to see how the prayer life at the church unfolded as the mission of Christ advanced. We are going to use a couple of different stories as kind of foundations. But I want us to start by looking at three verses. Get your pencils or pens ready and just underline or make notes about the prayer life of the early church throughout the book of Acts.

I want you to look with me at Acts 1:14. I want you to see three instances from the very beginning where the Bible says that the church was devoted to prayer. In each of these three different verses, I want to show you — it's actually different words in the English translation, but it's the same words in Greek, in the original language of the New Testament. Verse 14 of Acts 1 says, "They all joined together constantly in prayer." That word right there is the same word that they are using to describe what happens in Acts 2:42. Instead of joining constantly in Acts 2:42, it says that they devoted themselves to, and it lists a couple of things, and when you get to the end prayer is mentioned.

Then you get to Acts 6:4. Go ahead and get your fingers ready. We are going to do a lot of turning today. We'll start in Acts 6:3 just to give a picture. This is when they were choosing those who would serve in the role of deacons. We've studied this passage together. "Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them, and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." We are going to give our attention to it. We are going

to devote ourselves to it. We are going to join constantly together in prayer. That's the terms that we are seeing used to describe the prayer life in the early church.

They Devoted Themselves To Prayer ...

So, what I want us to do is I want us to think about what it means for a church to be devoted to prayer. What does it mean to say they devoted themselves to prayer? Because there's over 30 instances of prayer in the book of Acts, we don't have time to study every single one of them just now. Let me show you two stories that I think exemplify and demonstrate the priority of prayer in the early church.

Turn to Acts 4. Let me read this story to you. In Acts 4, the context here is the Christians are for the first time experiencing persecution. They have been brought before the ruling body. They've had threats made against them. It says in Verse 23, "On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God." I want you to hear the prayer of the persecuted church in Acts 4. Imagine you are being attacked and threatened. This is what we come together and we pray. "'Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.'

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

There's a portrait of prayer in the early church. If you were here with us in April, we had four brothers from the Sudan with us. We talked about the relationship between prayer and persecution and the responsibility we have to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters. So, that's Acts 4.

Now turn over to Acts 12. These are two foundational stories that we are going to come back to at different points. Look at Acts 12, a great story of the church praying in the book of Acts. Listen to this. It kind of sets the stage. Luke tells us, "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them." So, we've got the context of persecution again. "He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword." James was beheaded. "When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter, also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him," meaning Peter, "he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover." So, Peter was kept in prison, but the church was doing what? Earnestly praying to God for him. So, here is what happens.

"The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance." Let's pause there for just a second. Peter, he's about to face the same fate that James had faced, beheading. He's

sitting there in prison. You would think if there was a night he couldn't sleep, this would be the one. But Peter is fast asleep, snoring there in the jail. He's not devising some prison break. He's not working with Chuck Norris on how he can get out of the situation he's in. Peter is just snoring away, sleeping there. So, that's the picture. See the peace of God. Do you see the peace of God in the middle of prison? So, listen to what happens. Here is where it gets kind of funny I think.

"Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shown in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. 'Quick, get up!' he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists." Do you have the picture? An angel comes into the cell, this grand entrance. You've got this white light shining in the cell, this majestic scene going on. What is Peter doing? He's sleeping. So, the angel struck Peter in the side. Get up, dude! Get up! You need to wake up!

So, Peter gets up, and the angel said to him in Verse 8, "Put on your clothes and sandals," which was good advice. Peter was ready to go. No, put your clothes on first, Peter. This is a story that's going to be told for 2,000 years. We don't need you without clothes in the middle of the street. "And Peter did so. 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,' the angel told him." Can you picture that the angel is kind of rolling his eyes at this point? Gosh, this guy really needs some help.

"Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision." Peter was still kind of in a daze. "They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself." Isn't that great? We love Peter because Peter is slow. You've been woken up by an angel. You've walked past all these guards. You are now a street past the prison. Oh, something has happened here.

"Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.' When 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. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, 'Peter is at the door!'" Put yourself in Peter's shoes. You have now realized that you are an escaped convict and you have fled the prison. You are out in the middle of the street on your own. You are really wanting to get inside. You find where the church is praying, you knock on the door, and Rhoda comes. She's so excited that she leaves Peter hanging out there as Peter keeps knocking, and she goes running back in to tell everybody what has happened. She goes back in and says, "Peter is at the door!"

Verse 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.'" Do you have the picture here? The church is gathered around together praying for Peter. Rhoda comes in and says, "Peter is at the door!" They said, "Be quiet, Rhoda. We are praying for Peter." They continue praying. Rhoda keeps saying, "Peter is at the door! Peter is at the door!" They said, "Rhoda, if you don't stop interrupting us, God is never going to answer our prayer. God, we pray for Peter." Finally, Rhoda and the other people come on the same page and decide they will go to the door.

Verse 16, "But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. 'Tell James and the brothers about this,' he said, and then he left for another place. In the morning, there was no small commotion among the

soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the King, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.' Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread." You want to be on God's side.

Who did they pray to?

Now, there are two pictures of prayer in the early church. With those two as a foundation, I want us to launch into a tour of the book of Acts to see what it means to be devoted to prayer. And I want us to ask some questions. It may seem pretty basic, but I think we have a great tendency to miss out on it. First of all, who did they pray to? And this is a huge question. People all around the world are praying today. Muslims are praying, Hindus are praying. There are a lot of people praying. Who are we praying to? What sets the God of the Bible in the book of Acts apart from everything else?

Look at two characteristics. Number one, we pray to the God who is sovereign over everything in the world. The God that is sovereign over everything in the world. For God to be sovereign basically means that he is in control. He has a purpose and he will accomplish his purpose. That is what the sovereignty of God means. Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." The world and all who live in it belong to God. He is sovereign." Psalm 22 says that all dominion, all rule, all authority belongs to God. Psalm 47 says that all the kings of the earth belong to God. Isn't that good to know when you watch CNN or Fox News and you see what's going on with world leaders around the planet, and to think that every single one of those leaders is under the authority of God ultimately? Psalm 66 says all the earth bows down to God.

Now, this was huge. When you come to Chapter 4, Verse 24, and the early church bows on their faces in the middle of persecution, how do they start their prayer? They don't say, "Dear God." They say, "Sovereign Lord," the one who has all authority over everything. And that was huge for them. When you are facing persecution from all sides, when you are having threats against your family, when you are having threats against the church, it's good to look up and see that God is in control, that he has a purpose that's going to be accomplished through all this. It's why they go on in the rest of that prayer and they quote from Psalm 2 and they talk about how Jesus had been crucified and at the hands of these same people. And what do they say? What happened to Jesus happened because you appointed for it to happen. The death of Christ on a cross was not an accident. There's nothing that happens in our lives that is an accident. It's all under the sovereign hand of God. The same thing in Acts 12. You've got the world and the church pitted against one another. You've got King Herod and all the power he has with Peter in prison, and the church's meager praying, with no power except for prayer. And what happens? God shows his greatness. God is the hero of Acts 12. Not Peter. Peter hardly appears in the rest of the book of Acts. God is the hero. He's showing off his sovereignty, that he is in control and not Herod.

I want you to think about how this affects the way we pray. Isn't it good to know that the God who is worshiped in this room is sovereign over everything in the world? Ladies and

gentlemen, when the marriage seems like it's falling apart, when the cancer is at its height, when things are confusing at the work place or in the home and they just don't seem to be making sense, isn't it good to know that you can fall on your knees and look up and see that God is still on the throne and he is always in control, that there is nothing that happens to us by accident? Did you catch it? The persecutors in Acts 4 and Acts 12, they were on a leash. There was nothing they could do apart from the sovereign power of God. And isn't that good news for our brothers and sisters who are in prisons in China and North Korea? Isn't it good for those who have been separated from their families, maybe never to see them again, to look at their persecutors in their eyes and believe that there is nothing those persecutors can do to them apart from the sovereign hand of God to accomplish his purpose?

He is sovereign over everything in the world. And this affects the way they prayed throughout this book. You get to Acts 16 and they are praying that people would come to faith in Christ and they pray that the eyes of people would be open to salvation. God in his sovereignty opens people's eyes to see his grace and his mercy and to bring them to Christ. In Acts 18, Paul is struggling in the middle of Corinth, a very difficult city to be in. He's struggling and he's wondering if maybe he should leave. In Acts 18:9–11 Jesus comes to him and says, Paul, stay where you are and keep on speaking. Don't be silent. Here is why. Because I have many people in this city. That's the sovereignty of God. He says, Paul, there's people in the city that are going to come to faith in Christ. You stay here and preach. So, Paul did. And the next verse says in the next year and a half many people came to faith in Christ. Isn't that good to know? I'm convinced God has people in Birmingham and he wants to open their eyes to salvation. He has the power to do that. He wants to use us to do that. Isn't it good to know he has people in this city among the billion who have never heard the name of Jesus that he wants to draw to himself, and he's going to open their eyes to salvation and he's going to do it through us? That's a God worth praying to.

I remember when we were in east Asia. You've heard me tell about some of the time in underground house churches. The first time we had gone, while I was doing all that, the rest of the team, including my wife, Heather, was on a college campus in this predominantly unreached area, many who had never heard the name of Jesus, sharing the gospel undercover in a sense. And they had developed some relationships. There was one girl that Heather had spent a lot of time with. But we got to the end of the week and we were packing our bags that morning, and nobody had come to faith in Christ. We had seen God do some awesome things in some of those house churches, but we wanted to see somebody come to faith in Christ. We prayed all week, God, open eyes to your salvation. God, we know that on this campus there are people you are drawing to yourself.

We get to that last morning, and there was another team who had come that was going to be doing sort of the same thing, and they were meeting in a room in this apartment building. And we had walked outside that room and we were putting our bags on our shoulders to go outside, and this girl comes running up that Heather had spent all that time with. And she comes running up and said, "I want to believe in Jesus! I want to believe in Jesus!" Heather gets excited and walks over to the side with her and talks with her and prays with her. She placed her faith there in Christ. And I'm sitting there just rejoicing. As I was sitting there while we were waiting to leave, there was this devotion that's going on from this team that has come in. And they don't realize what's going on outside. But I hear them reading from scripture. And do you know which passage they were reading? Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted in the earth. I will be exalted among the nations." God has a purpose, and we will accomplish it. This is a God who is sovereign over everything in the world, and that is a God worth praying to.

Not only is he sovereign, but second he's the God who supplies everything we need. He supplies everything we need. I want to show you a little secret the early church knew that affected the way they prayed that we need to know. Turn over to Acts 17. I want to show you a verse that doesn't specifically talk about prayer, but it teaches us a lot about prayer and about how they viewed prayer in the early church. Look at Acts 17. This is Paul speaking at a place called Mars Hill, basically a bunch of people who were very closed off to the gospel. Listen to what he tells them in 24 and 25. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands." Do you see his sovereignty there? That's exactly what Paul is talking about.

Now listen to Verse 25 about the God who supplies everything we need. "And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." Did you catch that? I want you to think about how this relates to prayer. Let me read it one more time. "And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."

Here is the key that the early church knew about prayer. The secret they knew was that the key to seeing the power of God in the church is not found in serving God but in being served by God. Let me say that one more time. The key to seeing the power of God in the church is not found in serving God but in being served by God. The early church did not have this mentality that they were going to go out and provide for the needs of God and do his job for him. They prayed. They were devoted to prayer because they knew that God would accomplish his job through them. And it wasn't them going out and trying to do a bunch of great things for God. It was letting God work his power through them. And he would supply everything they need.

When they gathered together in Acts 4, they said, God, we need boldness to proclaim your word, and God gives it. Acts 12, God, we need you to show your deliverance. James has been beheaded. Now Peter is about to be beheaded. God show your deliverance, and God gives it. We need you to open eyes to salvation. God does it. We need you to advance your church. God does it. And God supplies everything they need to accomplish the mission of the church. This is the great confidence we have in prayer, that in approaching him we can know we have what we have asked when we ask for him to supply for his purpose to be accomplished through us. He will supply. That's the key in prayer.

We are a self-sufficient people and think, well, we are going to go out and do a good work for God. That's not the point. We fall on our faces and ask God to do his work through us. And he stands ready to give. He stands ready in all of our lives. And in the Church at Brook Hills he stands ready to give, to supply everything we need to impact the world with the gospel. Much of our poverty in prayer is due to the fact that we don't see him as the great grace-giver that he is. He stands ready to give. What does scripture say? "You have not because you do not ask." God is ready to supply everything we need. So, he's sovereign over everything in the world and he's ready to supply everything we need.

Why did they pray?

Second question. Why did they pray? Why should we pray? Well, number one, they were utterly dependent on God's power. Acts 4:33 says that great power was on them. Literally it means mega power was on the church. They had mega power from God. Here is what I want us to do. I want us to take a little tour, and maybe you can underline some of the times when they prayed and then write a note out to the side of what happened as a result.

For example, start in Acts 1:14. We read this verse just a second ago. What does it say? It says, "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the

mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." So, here they are in Acts 1. They are joined together constantly in prayer. What happens as a result? Acts 2:1, the spirit comes down in power. Peter stands up and preaches. And by Acts 2:42 you've got 3,000 plus people that have come to faith in Christ. That was worth getting together for prayer. Look at Acts 3:1. One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of what? Prayer. They are going up at the time of prayer, at 3:00 in the afternoon. What happens as a result of this? Well, a lame man walks for the first time in his life. 4:4 says the number of people who placed their faith in Christ grew to over 5,000. Maybe we should get together to pray. This seems to be working pretty well.

Let's come over to Acts 6. Because of some of the conflict in the church, you've got prayer being relegated to a minor duty of the apostles and they are having to do all these other things. So, they said let's get some deacons. We read this a second ago in Verse 3. "Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them, and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." So, they start to pray. What does Verse 7 say? "The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." This prayer thing seems to be working well. Let's try it again. Acts 7:59. This is probably my favorite. Stephen is in the process of being stoned. Stones are being hurled at him. So, what does he do? He prays. Acts 7:59, "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death." Stephen, as stones were being hurled at him, was praying for who? Saul. By the middle of Chapter 9, scales fall from Saul's eyes. He's come in contact with Christ and he is boldly preaching the gospel. Prayer works even when you are being stoned.

We continue on. Acts 13:1—3. They gather together and they pray. "In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers," and it lists their names. Now listen to Verse 2. "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." Ladies and gentlemen, that inaugurated the entire missionary movement of the early church. Paul goes off on one missionary journey, then another, then another, and churches are being started all over the region because they prayed together and the Lord sent them out.

Let me show you one more. Go to Acts 16. Check out Verse 25. This time it's not Peter in prison. It's Paul and Silas in prison. Look at Acts 16:25. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." Whether you are being stoned or you are sitting in prison, you pray. And what happens? "Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped." He had learned a lesson from Acts 12. "But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We are all here!' The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.'"

One minute you've got a guy who is holding you captive, who is your enemy. You are praying, and all of a sudden within a matter of seconds that guy is falling at your feet saying, "How can I believe in Jesus?" How do you do that? How do you see the power of God like that? You do it by falling on your face and saying God we are utterly dependent on your

power. Apart from your power, we can do nothing. Where did they learn that? In John 15:5 what did Jesus tell them? "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; but apart from me you can do nothing."

Do we really believe at the Church at Brook Hills that apart from deep devoted prayer for the power of God we can do nothing? It's the truth of God's word. We will spin our wheels in religious activity apart from prayer for the power of God, and we will get nowhere. But every major breakthrough in this book comes in response to prayer for the power of God. We live in a day in society where everything is about more work, more programs, more ideas, more methods. Come up with the best or get moved out of the way. And it creeps into the church. We've got to come up with new ideas and new programs and new methods instead of coming up with more prayer and more prayer and more prayer for the power of God.

They were utterly dependent on God's power. Second, they were utterly desperate for God's grace. Acts 4:33, the same verse that said they had mega power said they had mega grace. Much grace was upon them all. Here is where it gets really good. I know we are turning a lot, and I warned you we were going to turn a lot. Isn't it good, though, to hear the sound of turning? It's good. It brings honor and glory to God when we study his word. I want you to see grace. I want you to underline or circle grace every time we see it in a few different places in Acts, and I want you to see their desperation for God's grace.

With me in Acts 6:8. They were utterly desperate for God's grace. This is Stephen. Look at what it says about Stephen. Acts 6:8 says, "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." So, God is moving through Stephen in power because of his grace in his life. Go over to Acts 11:23. This is the church at Antioch. It's actually a passage we looked at last week talking about Barnabas. Listen to the church at Antioch described. "When Barnabas arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." The church is growing. He said this is evidence of grace right here.

So, we go to the next one. Look at Chapter 13:43. This is Paul and Barnabas going out and planning churches. "When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God." Look at 14:3. Paul and Barnabas are going to another town. It says, "So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders." God's plan is grace, and all these signs and wonders are happening because of his grace. Look at Verse 26 of the same chapter, 14:26. They finished going on this first journey and they come back. "From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God." The whole missionary journey was described as the grace of God for the work that he had now completed.

Look at 15:11. There's some debate on who can actually become Christians, who can be invited into the church, who can be a part of the church. 15:11 says, "No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." I want you to go to three more. Look at Acts 18:27. This is talking about people who believed in the gospel. Listen to this. "When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed." Why had they believed? Because grace was on them.

Acts 20:24. This is Paul talking about his missionary journeys and why he does what he does. Listen to what he says in Verse 24. "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I

may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." I've given my life for this thing. I want to testify to the gospel of his grace.

Look over in Verse 32. "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." This word of grace can do that all over. Over and over and over again the church is advancing. The gospel is going forth. Amazing things are happening because the gracious hand of God was upon them. Over and over again it's attributed to grace.

Notice that the early church did not grow because they got a nice new young pastor. They did not grow because they had a new hip worship service. They did not grow because they came up with new plans or methods for doing ministry. They didn't come up with all those plans and methods. Over and over again the holy spirit is intentional to show us that the church was advancing for one reason and one reason only. It was grace. Why do we see that repetition over and over again? Here is why. Because the one who gives the grace gets the glory. The one who gives the grace gets the glory. Because if the nice new young pastor is the reason why the church is growing, then the young pastor gets the glory. And if the new hip worship service is the reason why the church is growing, then the worship service gets the glory. If it's our new plans and methods and programs that we are doing to reach more people, then people look at the programs and say we need to do those things and they get the glory.

But God has designed the church so that in the end he pours out grace and he alone gets glory. God, pour out your grace on us in such a way that only you can get the credit for it. They were utterly desperate for the grace of God. Isn't that a good way to walk in the church? God, show more grace. God, show your grace in our time together. God, we are scattering apart this week. Show your grace. That's prayer. That's why they prayed. They were desperate for grace.

They were dependent on God's power, desperate for God's grace. Number three, they were utterly devoted to God's mission. They were utterly devoted to God's mission. All throughout the book of Acts when we see them praying, it is intertwined, tied in, intricately linked to the mission of the church. That's the place of prayer involved in the mission of the church. God has given us prayer because Jesus has given us a mission.

Probably my favorite book on theology of mission is called Let the Nations be Glad by a pastor up in Minnesota named John Piper. And in it he talks about the place of prayer in mission, the mission of the church. And he likens prayer to a wartime walkie-talkie that God's people have on a mission. I want you to hear what he says. He says, "It is as though the field commander, Jesus, called in the troops and gave them a crucial mission, go and bear fruit, and handed each of them a personal transmitter coded to the frequency of the general's headquarters and said, 'Comrades, the general has a mission for you. He aims to see it accomplished. And to that end he has authorized me to give each of you personal access to him through these transmitters. If you stay true to his mission and seek his victory first, he will always be as close as your transmitter to give tactical advice and to send in air cover when you or your comrades need it.'" Isn't that good? Here are your walkie-talkies. You use them as you go out on a mission. And when you need help, you call in and he will supply everything you need. He will send in air cover. He'll give you strength. He'll tell you what's going on in the battle in front of you and prepare you for what you're about to face. That's the concept that prayer is intended to be used in.

The problem is one of the questions we often ask in the church is why should we pray. We don't ask it overtly, but we live like prayer isn't that important. So, we live like we are asking the question why should we pray. You know why I think that's one of the most common questions we ask? Because you don't need prayer when you are watching TV, and you don't need prayer when you are mindlessly surfing the Internet, and you don't need prayer when there's no risk involved in your Christian life. You don't need prayer when you are not sacrificing everything. You don't need prayer when you are going through a monotonous motion of religious activity week in and week out. You don't need prayer for that. Ladies and gentlemen, you can do that on your own, and you can live the kind of Christian life where prayer is never necessary. And it's possible to do that in our culture, from point of salvation to point of death, to never really need prayer.

However, when you sacrifice everything to follow Christ, when he is your only hope and your only desire, when you have staked your reputation and your career on devotion to Christ, when the longing of your heart day in and day out is to lead other people to faith in Christ, when the ache in your soul is for the billion people who have never heard the name of Jesus and you surrender to that battle to make the gospel known among those places, then you need prayer. You depend on prayer. It's a walkie-talkie that you always have turned on. You are not just calling upstairs for more comforts now. You are calling for God's supply over and over and over again because your life depends on it.

If we go week in and week out, Sunday morning and Sunday morning and Sunday morning and it's just a motion of religious activity, then prayer is not necessary. However, if we as a faith family are engaged in a battle for our own souls and the souls of a billion people who haven't heard the name of Jesus, then prayer is fundamental. We need prayer then, because we are devoted to the mission.

I remember when I was in India, in this city there were many Muslims there, some militant Muslims, and many of them not exposed to the gospel. We were working with this Muslim—background believer, a guy who had come out of Islam and who was abandoned by his family and lost everything to follow Christ. I was going around with him. While the team was at different places, he and I would go scout out where we were going to go next. I was riding around on this motorcycle with him, which that will increase your prayer life right there. You will pray when you are in India and you are on the back of a motorcycle. This is not the way you want to go. This is not the way you pictured it. Maybe on the mission field somehow, but not on a motorcycle. So, you are praying as you go.

And everywhere we would go, we would stop and say, "Let's pray whether or not we should go to this place. Because God knows what he's doing among the Muslims here, and there are some who are open to the gospel and there are some who are very opposed to the gospel. We need to pray for strength if they are opposed to the gospel. We need to pray for openness of the gospel." And every single place we went, we stopped and we prayed, over and over and over again. You know why? Because you need prayer when you are in India and you are sharing the gospel and that's the passion of your heart, to lead Muslims to faith in Christ. You depend on prayer.

How did they pray?

Our prayerlessness may just be due to the fact that we are not on a mission. They were dependent on God's power, desperate for his grace and devoted to his mission. How did they pray? We are going to fly through some of these. There are two things here. They prayed with structure and they prayed with spontaneity. They prayed with structure and spontaneity. Here is what I mean by that. Acts 2:42, the original language of the New

Testament literally says they devoted themselves to the prayers. The word "the" is actually there in Acts 2:42, but not in most English translations, though. And the point is they were devoted to prayer, but there's definitely a lot of evidence that in the early church there was a structure to their prayer life, especially when they came together. They would pray prayers from the Old Testament. They had an intentional way that they would pray. So, there was structure there, but there's also spontaneity all over this book as needs arise, praying for those needs. So, there's both. The early church had both, and I think we need both.

Here is where I really want us to put some practical handles on how devoted lives to prayer look today, structured and spontaneous. If your prayer life is just spontaneous and you just pray as needs arise and there's no structure to it, you will never pray for all the things that God wants us to pray for. We need structure. If our prayer life is just based on spontaneity, we will quickly become shallow. One thing I use is a prayer journal to pray intentionally for different things in my life, because I know I'll forget them if I don't pray for these things. So, I have that kind of structure. But if that's all we have, then our prayer life becomes wooden. It becomes a chore that we've got to check off. And it's not supposed to be either. They prayed with structure and they prayed with spontaneity, and both are reflected in a life that's devoted to prayer. Does that make sense?

When did they pray?

And not just how they prayed. When did they pray? They participated in concentrated prayer and they participated in continual prayer. It was both, concentrated and continual. Acts 1, Acts 4, Acts 12 are all times where they gathered together for a concentrated time in prayer. You can picture that they gathered together in Acts 1, 4 or 12 for probably hours at a time, concentrated time in prayer. Many times we say, well, I just pray all the time. You are supposed to pray without ceasing, so that's what I do. And so we pray continually here and there, but we never have that concentrated time in prayer. You say, well, I pray when I feel like it. Ladies and gentlemen, we don't pray when we feel like it. Our prayer life is not intended to be based on our emotions. Our prayer life is to be based on the fact that we have a duty commanded by God to pray. And so we pray. We spend that concentrated time.

Have you ever seen those Five Love Languages books that those relationship gurus write to start conversations between wives and husbands about what kind of love languages there are? What's your love language, what's my love language? One of those love languages is quality time. I think a lot of women's love language is quality time. I know my wife's is. I'm not going to be able to call up Heather a couple of times during the day whenever I feel like it and say, "Hey, baby, how are you doing? Are you having a good day? Okay, bye." If I just do that a few times during the day, come home late at night and go to bed and get up the next morning do the same routine the next day and the same routine the next day, that just doesn't work for a good marriage in my house. There needs to be quality time.

Well, if there needs to be quality time with a spouse, how much more so with the God of the universe? To spend 15 minutes or half an hour or an hour or two hours or half a day or a whole day in concentrated prayer, and then continually pray on top of that. So, they prayed concentrated times and continual times. "Continue steadfastly," the Bible says, "in prayer."

Where did they pray?

That's when. Where did they pray? Well, they gathered together for prayer and they scattered apart for prayer. They did both. Most of the times we see the church praying in the book of Acts, it's them gathered together in corporate time. But then we see, for example, in Acts 13 they gathered together in that corporate time, they fast, pray, and they

send out Paul and Barnabas. And in the rest of their missionary journeys they are continually praying as they scatter out. In Acts 16:6—8 they are praying. God says go here. In Acts 18:9—11 God says stay here. In Acts 20:22 God says go there. So, they are scattering to pray after they gather to pray. Both need to be present in the church. The prayer together is important, and we are going to focus on that in depth next week. I'm very excited about our time together next Sunday when we look at the importance of corporate prayer in the church. And not just corporate prayer but individual prayer, both of them together. When you look at the history of the church, not just in the book of Acts but in the history of the church, every time we see a mighty move of God's hand, it is linked with united and devoted prayer in the church.

Let me give you two examples. New York City, 1857. It was a very difficult time in the City of New York. About 30,000 men over a period of just a couple of months lost their jobs. It was a very difficult financial time. People were in dire straits. A guy named Jeremiah Lampere was designated as a missionary, just a quiet businessman. He was put in New York City to be a missionary there. So, he sent out an invitation for businessmen who would like to gather together for prayer at noon on Wednesday of each week. The invitation went out. The day was set. The first Wednesday comes. He gets there at noon and he sits down. At about five minutes in, nobody is there. 10 minutes in, nobody is there. He starts to pace back and forth in the room. Is anybody going to come today? 15 minutes, 20 minutes, 25 minutes, 30 minutes.

Finally, after half an hour he hears somebody come up the steps. One person comes in, then a second and a third. Eventually six guys ended up praying for the rest of that half hour. The next week 40 guys showed up. Then they said, well, we don't need to just pray once a week. We need to pray every day. So, they started to pray daily. Within two months, over 10,000 businessmen in New York City were gathered together every single day for prayer, and God began to pour out his spirit. And within two years approximately a million people were converted into the churches in the United States because some businessmen believed it was important to pray. That's our country, our history.

This is a little more recent out of the country in South Korea where they estimate almost half the population now has come to faith in Christ, just an outpouring of God's spirit. Pastor Yongucho, I want you to listen to what he says, this pastor in South Korea. Pastor Paul Yongucho attributes his church's conversion rate of 12,000 people per month — let me repeat that. Some of you think I just said 12,000 people per month. Pastor Paul Yongucho attributes his church's conversion rate of 12,000 people per month as primarily due to ceaseless prayer. That would be a big week, a big month for us. How many services do you need for 12,000 people next month and the week and month after that? What happens when you pray? He said people will pray all night. They will go to bed early at night sometimes and get together at 4:00 o'clock in the morning to pray.

One of my colleagues, a fellow faculty member down at New Orleans Seminary, has spent some time in Korea. He said one morning he was in his hotel room at about 4:00 o'clock, and a noise woke him up outside. There was a stadium that was near the hotel where he was staying. He said the stadium was full of people, and they were all yelling out and shouting out. He thought to himself, what kind of sports do you play in Korea at 4:00 o'clock in the morning? He asked later on that day what was going on, and somebody said that was the church in Korea gathering to pray. God, what would happen in Alabama if we gathered in stadiums to seek your grace? What would happen?

This pastor says that any church might see this sort of phenomenal growth if they are prepared to pay the price. Is the Church at Brook Hills willing to pay the price? God help us to be united and devoted to prayer.

What did they pray for?

The last question I want us to think about is what did they pray for? What did they pray for? Here is where I want us to tie their devotion to prayer to those other three facets in the early church that we've looked at. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and to prayer. How did prayer tie into undergirding all of that? First of all, they prayed for the success of God's word. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the word, and prayer undergirded that. And we see that all throughout the New Testament. Acts 4, what we just read, Lord, enable us to speak your word with great boldness. They quoted from the Word. They quoted from Psalm 2 and said this is what your Word says. Now enable us to proclaim your Word with boldness. It was preaching of the Word and prayer that accompanied it, and prayer being the power that was there in the preaching. They both go together. We can't have one without the other.

If we have preaching with no prayer, then we are just participating in religious activity. If we have prayer with no preaching, we missed out on the advancement of the gospel. When you put prayer and preaching together, then you see the power of the Word come alive. God, help us when we gather together to come into this room praying for the power of the Word to be unleashed in our lives and unleashed in this church to bring people to salvation, to cause us as a church to see God in all of his glory and submit our lives to his mission. They go together for the success of God's Word.

Here is the deal. Mark this down. Whenever you pray for the success of God's word, you are guaranteed that God will answer and give you whatever you ask. That's good. That's good news. Some say, well, when I pray, I just don't feel like God answers. Well, start praying for the success of God's word. Pray for the advancement of the gospel. Pray that God will open our eyes to salvation. Take verses of scripture and say, God, you say in your Word that this is your will. I'm going to pray that it would look like that in my life. John 15:6—7 says, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you." Automatic success. Pray for the success of God's word.

Second, pray for the needs of each other and the world. We know that this early church was one in heart and mind. They were united together in this devotion of prayer. It's one of the things that did unite them together, the way they cared for each other. They cared for each other because they prayed for each other. When you pray for people, God begins to give you his heart for those people. It affected the way they lived among each other. In Acts 12 when they gathered together, they were specifically praying. Not general. They weren't in Acts 12 saying, oh, Lord, somewhere somebody is in prison. No. Peter is in prison, God. We pray that you would show your power and show your glory in his life. Wake him up. God, bring him out so that your glory would be displayed. And pray for the needs of each other and the world around them.

If there was one book that I could wish was in the hands of every single member of a church, it would be this book called *Operation World*. This is a book that basically is a prayer guide for every nation in the world and the needs represented in every nation in the world. If you start praying through this book in January and pray every day and get to the end of December, you will have prayed for every nation in the world. Nations you've never even heard of, you will pray for. It has what's going on in that nation, how people are coming to faith in Christ, the struggles in that nation and prayer needs for every single nation. How

small our prayers are, church. How small our prayers are. We have the opportunity to be a part of what God is doing in Cambodia and Vietnam today from our knees, and we neglect it.

This last week, for example, on October 11th you would have prayed for Somalia. And it gives information about Somalia. There's about 12 million in Somalia, over 99.9 percent Muslim. 99.9 percent Muslim, 12 million people. Somalia is the most lawless country in the world it tells us. The people of Somalia are desperate for peace and restoration of civil order. We know some about it from what we've seen on the news and the civil war that's happened over the last decade there. National recovery is the need, but the population is traumatized by suffering, death, famine and the savagery of the fighting.

Listen to this: Over 300,000 have died, and over 25 percent of all children under five have perished. Out of all kids under five, one in four have died. How many of us have been praying for Somalia? How many have been on our faces for Somalia? In a country that's 99.9 percent Muslim, the Somali church has been driven underground. At the time of printing of this book, Somalia was 25th on the persecution index in the world, which basically means the 25th most dangerous country to be in as a Christian. It has now risen to number four. Number four. How many of us have been praying for our brothers and sisters in Somalia? They estimate there's about 2,000 Somali Christians. Those 2,000 Christians in a country of 12 million with suffering and starvation and famine and hunger, do you think they need the American church praying for them?

God help us not to neglect the needs of our brothers and sisters around the world and the needs of those who are lost around the world by failing to pray for them. 1 Samuel 12:23, "Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you." Our prayers are small. We need to pray for the needs of each other and the needs of the world around us. I would highly suggest this. We are ordering some and we will have some available if you want to purchase a copy next week. There's CD versions, there's kids' versions. You can walk your kids through praying for the world.

Third, the success of God's Word, the needs of each other in the world and the spread of God's worship. There are 36 times in the book of Acts where it talks about how the church is growing. Over half of those times it is directly attributed to prayer, the spread of God's worship. We talked about the breaking of bread. That was the center of their worship at the church. And we are going to see here how prayer was undergirding that whole thing. They believed. In Acts 4 they prayed. They said Psalm 2 says. They quote from Psalm 2. Remember Psalm 2:8? "Ask of me, and I will make the nations as your inheritance." They said, God, we know you want your glory to be proclaimed through your son in all the nations. We know that. So, we are going to pray for that. They knew Habakkuk 2:14. If you've never read Habakkuk 2:14, there's good stuff in Habakkuk. And that's one of the good things in Habakkuk, 2:14. Here is what it says. It says the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the seas. The early church knew that. God, your glory is going to cover this entire earth, and so we are going to pray. We are going to pray day in and day out that you would display your glory and you would show your glory, you would open eyes to your glory and your worship would spread through the nations.

And they gave themselves to it, 11 guys. About a hundred more than that joined them, and then they turned the world upside down in 28 chapters. How do you do that? You do that by a passion to spread God's worship and seeing how prayer comes at the foundation of the Word. Prayer comes at the foundation of the Word, the way we reach out to each other, and prayer is at the foundation of our worship.

One of my favorite stories from the past is about a guy named D. L. Moody. You may have heard me talk about him. This is a guy who preached in inner city Chicago. God began to pour out his spirit in amazing ways, many people coming to faith in Christ. He began to preach, revival awakenings breaking out whenever he was preaching, Chicago, New England, then over in Europe. In the beginning of his ministry — I told the staff this story at our staff retreat. In the beginning of Moody's ministry, he was over in England one Sunday morning and he was preaching. And he wrote in his journal it was one of those times when you preach and it seemed like nobody was listening. Preachers have those kind of moments. It's very humbling when it happens. That never happens at the Church at Brook Hills, but it happens at other places sometimes, and you are just like is this microphone on? Is anybody really listening? Is everybody asleep? It was one of those kind of mornings for him.

And so he left after the service that morning. He was supposed to come back and preach that night. He wasn't very excited because Sunday night service is usually not more exciting than Sunday morning service. So, he came back that night kind of ready to get out of town. When he preached that night, he said there was a different atmosphere in the room. People were sitting on the edge of their seats. They were listening intently. He shared the gospel, preached the gospel, and he got up at the end and said, "If you would like to place your faith in Christ, I want to invite you to stand up where you are." And people across the room stood up.

Now, Moody was shocked. Sunday morning, nobody was listening. Sunday night, all these people are standing up. He thought, well, maybe they don't understand what I said. So, he told them to sit back down and he shared the gospel again. Then he said, "Now that I've explained it, if you really want to give your life to Christ, stand up where you are." Well, more people stood up this time than the first time.

Moody still wasn't convinced, though. True story. He said, "Sit back down." He went through the gospel again, and he said, "If you really want to give your life to Christ, meet me and the pastor in a room outside the sanctuary and we will share with you there how you can put your faith in Christ." So, they dismiss the service and they go to this room. It's standing room only, packed full of people. Moody is still not convinced. He goes through the gospel one more time, and he said, "It's the last time I'm going to say it. If you want to give your life to Christ, you come back tomorrow night and meet the pastor here." Then he dismissed them. He got on a boat and sailed somewhere else the next morning.

A few days later he gets a telegram from that pastor that said, "Moody, you need to get back over here. More people showed up on Monday night than were here Sunday night. Everybody is wanting to give their life to Christ." Moody came back and preached for weeks, and hundreds and hundreds of people came to faith in Christ.

Now, Moody is a very inquisitive guy. He wanted to find out what happened Sunday morning to Sunday night. What was the difference? So, he did some research, and he found that there was this one bedridden woman in that town who had not been in that church that morning because of her illness. When her sister came to bring her lunch, she asked her sister, "How did church go this morning?" The sister said, "Oh, it went all right. This guy named D. L. Moody preached. It wasn't very exciting." The bedridden woman's eyes lit up and she said, "I've heard of this man. I've read about him in a magazine, and I've been praying that God would bring him to our church." She said, "Put my food aside. I'm going to fast and pray the rest of the day because I believe God wants to bring a mighty revival of his spirit through this man."

We are fools if we think we can see anything happen in our own power and our own strength. Apart from the power of God and the Holy Spirit, we can do nothing. However, with the power of God and with the Holy Spirit, we will see his Word succeed and we will see needs in each other lives met and needs around the world met and we will see the spread of God's worship. We are going to ask God to give us the nations. We are going to ask him to do it in such a way that only he gets the glory for it. And we are going to believe that he stands ready now and every single day from now on to supply every single thing we need at the Church at Brook Hills to impact the world for his glory.

That's why it's going to be too small for us to pray, God, make us a church of 10,000 or make us a church of 20,000. That's not the point. We want 12,000 people to come to faith in Christ every month around the world because of what he's doing through us. So, we are going to pray God—size prayers and we are going to believe that history belongs to intercessors who fall on their faces before God and say, God, we are desperate for your grace and we are devoted to your mission. God, show it through us. Show your person. Show your character. Show your glory. Do it through us. God, give us the nations, and do it in such a way that only you can get the glory. That's what we are going to pray. And God has promised to answer it. Why not devote ourselves to prayer?

We Devote Ourselves To Prayer ...

So, here is my challenge for us. Not they devoted themselves to prayer, but we devote ourselves to prayer. I want to call us this week to a week of intentional prayer at the Church at Brook Hills. I want to give you three challenges, and I want to ask all of us in this room who are Christ followers to take these three challenges before we come back together next Sunday. It will have a great impact on what happens when we come back next Sunday.

Memorize and pray a verse of Scripture each day—all day.

The first challenge is this: Memorize and pray a verse of scripture each day, all day. Here is what I mean by that. We've seen that God has promised to give success when we pray according to his Word. So, what I want you to do is I want you to look at your life. And you can use the same verse every day or a different verse every day. Look at the situations you are in, and I want you to find a verse of scripture that speaks to what's going on in your life and I want you to use that verse to fuel your praying all day long.

For example, if you are struggling with some things in your life and there's a lot of hurt right now, memorize Psalm 46:1, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever—present help in trouble." Memorize that and pray it all day long. God, I trust you as my refuge. God, show yourself strong as my refuge. Give me strength today. That's a prayer God has promised by his Word to give us. Does that make sense, to pray a verse of scripture all day every day? Maybe you will do seven different verses. That would be great. Maybe you need to camp out on the same verse over and over again. But pray a verse of scripture and memorize it so that it's in your mind and in your heart, and pray it each day all day.

Set aside structured, concentrated time each day to pray for local and global needs around you.

The second challenge is to set aside this week structured, concentrated time each day to pray for local and global needs around you. Some of you already do this and you already spend an hour a day or you spend a couple of hours a day in that kind of prayer. Maybe you already do that. But if not, just for this week — and start with this week. Don't start dreaming grandiose dreams that you are going to do four hours a day for the rest of this

year. That would be great. I think that would be awesome. But let's just focus on this week. And each day schedule and plan concentrated times of prayer for local and global needs around you.

Begin to pray on a daily basis: "God, give us the nations, and do it in such a way that only You get the glory."

And then my third challenge goes back to what we were just talking about. I want us to begin praying a prayer as a church, and that prayer is this: Begin to pray on a daily basis, God, give us the nations and do it in such a way that only you get the glory. Does that sound like a good prayer for us to be praying together? Let's pray that every day as we scatter. And let's come back together and let's pray that together next week, and the week after that, and the week after that, and let's trust that God wants to give us the nations in such a way that only he gets the glory. Prayer is a good thing!

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