

we devote ourselves to prayer

Cindy Bridges

Congregational Life Pastor English Congregation

Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, British Columbia

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Scripture Passage Acts 2:42; Acts 4:23-31

Today I want us to consider what it means for a church to be devoted to prayer. You are going to need your Bibles today, specifically turn to the book of Acts.

First, look at Acts 2:42. In this reference to the early church it says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Prayer was the source of life in the early church; it was the air they breathed day in and day out; the driving force of everything they did. One of the diseases of the modern church, is we have taken that which was fundamental in the early church and we have made it supplemental in our churches today, to where prayer is an optional program for a faithful few as opposed to the driving force behind everything the church does.

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 of the church unfolded as the mission of Christ advanced. Because there are 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 one story that demonstrates this priority of prayer in the early church.

Turn to Acts 4. Let me read this story to you from verses 23-31. In Acts 4, the context here is the Christians are for the first time experiencing persecution. They have been brought before the ruling body.

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 when they come together and what they 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

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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."

What an example of prayer in the early church! Let's look further in the book of Acts to see what it means to be devoted to prayer. And I want us to ask some questions.

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. But 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. For God to be sovereign basically means that he is in control. He has a purpose and he will accomplish his purpose. 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.

When you come to Acts 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. 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.

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? 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? He is sovereign over everything in the world.

Not only is he sovereign, but second he's the God who 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 17:25. This is Paul speaking at a place called Mars Hill, basically he's addressing a bunch of people who were very closed off to the gospel. "And God is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." I want us to think about how this relates to prayer.

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. 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 needed.

When they gathered together in Acts 4, they said, God, we need boldness to proclaim your word, and God gives it. And God supplies everything they need to accomplish the mission of the church. This is the great confidence we have in prayer. 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 need to 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. 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. 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.

Second question. Why did they pray? Why should WE pray? Well, number one, they were utterly dependent on God's power. Acts 4:33

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says that great power was on them. Literally it means mega power was on the church. They had mega power from God.

Let's take a look at some examples starting in Acts 1:14. 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.

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. 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."

Do we really believe at VCBC that apart from deep devoted prayer for the power of God we can do nothing? 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 the book of Acts 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. 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 instead of coming up with more prayer and more prayer and more prayer for the power of God.

They were utterly dependant 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. I want you to see grace, and I want you to see their desperation for God's grace.

Look 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 God's grace in his life.

Go over to Acts 11:23. This is the church at Antioch. 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.

Look at Acts 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. The whole missionary journey was described as the grace of God for the work that God had now completed.

Notice that the early church did not grow because they got a nice new young pastor or implemented a hip new worship service. They did not grow because they came up with new plans or methods for doing ministry. The early church 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.

And why do we see that repetition over and over again? Here is why. Because 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 programs that we are doing to reach more people, then those new programs get the glory.

But God has designed the church so that in the end he pours out grace and he alone gets glory. 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 dependant on God's power, desperate for God's grace. Number three, they were utterly devoted to God's mission. All throughout the book of Acts when we see them praying, it is intricately linked to the mission of the church. God has given us prayer because Jesus has given us a mission.

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. 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. 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. Our prayerlessness may just be due to the fact that we are not on a mission.

The last question I want us to think about is 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 referenced in Acts 2:42. 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. In Acts 4 they asked, "Lord, enable us to speak your word with great boldness." They quoted from the Word—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 the prayer that accompanied it, that unleashed God's power. They both go together. We can't have one without the other.

Second, they prayed 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. The way they cared for each other is one of the things that did unite them together. They cared for each other because they prayed for each other. When you pray for people, God begins to give you his heart for the people for whom you're praying.

Third, they prayed for 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. In Acts 4 when they prayed they quote from 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.

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's lives met and needs around the world met and we will see the spread of God's worship.

I want to challenge us to begin praying God-size prayers. To pray, "God, we are desperate for your grace and we are devoted to your mission. God, show up through us. Show your person. Show your character. Show your glory. Do it through us, and do it in such a way that only you can get the glory." That's how I want us to begin praying. And God has promised to answer those kinds of prayers.

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. I want to give you some challenges to take steps forward in prayer, and I want to ask all of us in this room who are Christ followers to take these steps this week.

The first challenge is this: 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. 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. 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 so that it's in your mind and in your heart, and pray it each day, all day.

The second step 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 time every 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. (Operation World: <http://www.operationworld.org/today1>)

The third step forward that I would ask you to consider is to participate in the Prayer Retreat on October 22. Again this is another way that you can set aside, structured, concentrated, time to pray. It's a time of worship, examination and intercession. We rarely make time for such an opportunity, but it is always refreshing and restoring. You can read about this opportunity in today's worship folder. I urge you to make this opportunity a priority.



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Acts 2:42; Acts 4:23-31 (pew Bible pp. 1005,1006-7)

I. They devoted themselves to prayer . . .

A. Who did they pray to?

- ❖ The God who is _____ over everything in the world.
- ❖ The God who _____ everything we need.

B. Why did they pray?

- ❖ They were utterly dependent on God's _____.
- ❖ They were utterly desperate for God's _____.
- ❖ They were utterly devoted to God's _____.

C. Why did they pray?

- ❖ For the _____ of God's Word.
- ❖ For the _____ of each other and the world.
- ❖ For the _____ of God's worship.

II. We devote ourselves to prayer . . .

D. Taking the next steps:

- ❖ Pray a _____ each day—all day.
- ❖ Set aside _____, concentrated time each day to pray for local and global needs around you.

www.operationworld.org/today1

- ❖ Register to attend the _____ for October 22.



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Acts 2:42; Acts 4:23-31 (pew Bible pp. 1005,1006-7)

I. Getting Started

1. What insight, principle, or observation from this Sunday's message did you find to be most helpful, eye-opening, or troubling? Explain.
2. When you think of being devoted to prayer, what comes to mind? Do you think we are a church who is devoted to prayer? Why or why not?

II. Digging Deeper

3. Why do you think Pastor Cindy began the sermon by focusing on God being sovereign and being the one who supplies everything we need? What affect should this knowledge have in the way we pray?
4. One of the points to "why did they pray?" was that they were utterly desperate for God's grace. How do you define God's grace? What do you think it means to live under God's grace?
5. Look at these other passages, not mentioned in the sermon, to see further how the early church was desperate for God's grace. Note every time you see God's grace mentioned.
 - ❖ Acts 13:43 ❖ Acts 14:26
 - ❖ Acts 15:11 ❖ Acts 18:27
 - ❖ Acts 20:24 ❖ Acts 20:32
6. When you examine your own prayer life, what do you typically pray for? Do you often pray for the things mentioned in Sunday's sermon: the success of God's Word, needs of each other and the world and the spread of God's worship? Explain.

III. Applying God's Truth

7. As a result of Sunday's sermon, have you changed anything about the way you pray or the content of what you pray? If so, explain?
8. Did you try any of the prayer challenges? If so share about your experiences. What obstacles did you encounter? What surprises did you find? What new insights did you gain? How have you seen God at work?
 - ❖ Praying a scripture each day, all day.
 - ❖ Setting aside a structured, concentrated time of prayer each day to pray for local and global needs around you.
 - ❖ Register to attend the Prayer Retreat for October 22.