

Part 9: The Prayer of the Church

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The first Indiana Jones movie opens with a classic scene in which Indy approaches a stone table deep in the jungle. A priceless golden statue sits upon the table, but Indiana knows it's booby trapped. So to avoid setting off the trap he has to make a swap. He fills his dingy leather bag full of sand, and quickly removes the valuable statue and places the bag of dirt on the altar so quickly that it doesn't trigger the trap.

The scene has become a staple of pop-culture and spoofs since it first aired in 1981. The drama of it not only captures our imagination—but from a biblical perspective it captures the ironic swap that Adam made deep in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve enjoyed the powerful and profoundly rich relationship they had with the creator God and yet, deceived by the Serpent, they made a swap. Unlike Indy, who swapped a bag of sand for something of greater value—the story of sin is that we have swapped out the infinite beauty of God's holiness for the dust of created things.

Our study in the gospel of Luke showed that Jesus came as the new Adam—where Adam's sin exchanged God's glory for the emptiness of man—Jesus came in order to place the object of greatest beauty and value back on the altar of our hearts. God himself—is man's greatest hope and help.

The book of Acts shows us that the church Jesus established on the cross has learned to treasure the same thing Jesus treasured. Coming out of the first persecution of the church, the disciples look for help, they look for solutions, they look for peace—but as Jesus modeled and taught, and as their conversion now allows—they look past the resources of man and find their hope and their help in God alone.

The early church endured difficulty and trials because they learned to treasure God and to cling to him in prayer. We too, as disciples as Jesus, just further down the road must learn that it's only when we see the beauty of God in prayer that we can increasingly turn away from the useless sand the world offers.

In all my years as a Christian, I've never met a believer who is satisfied with their prayer life—and yet there is seemingly nothing so simple to do than pray. We often struggle to pray because we don't know what to pray, and we don't know how to start praying. But in examining the pattern of prayer in Acts 4 we will find all of this and more. Both as a corporate body and as individuals what we see in this text is that: **The church prays because God is sovereign, life is hard, and there's work to be done.**

To help us apply that we will look at this text from two angles. First, we will examine **When We Pray**—what is the context that lead to a pattern of prayer here, and what does that look like in our own life? Second we will see some pointers for **What We Pray**—what does the church pray for here and how can that help us today?

Our passage today picks up after the officials charged Peter and John to no longer preach Jesus, Luke tells us in **Acts 4:21** "they further threatened them, they let them go..."

I wonder what you would do if this were you? Unlawfully detained—unjustly threatened—and the released as if nothing happened. We might find a lawyer and begin to file a lawsuit. We might slink away

in shameful fear and embarrassment. We might return to those same men in a dark alley with clenched fists and physical retaliation.

But notice the response of Peter and John: **Acts 4:23-24**, “When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord...’”

As of first importance, they gathered with their friends and together prayed to their Sovereign Lord.

If we want to first examine **When We Pray**, what is modeled for us is that we will pray ***When we are practiced in prayer.***

The Greek word *homothymadon* is word that expresses a deep unity, a togetherness, a single accord of mind and heart. It’s used eleven times in the whole New Testament and ten of those times the word is used by Luke in the book of Acts. It’s translated as “together” in verse 24. Twice now Luke has used it to describe the prayer life of the church. In his gospel Luke went out of his way to highlight Jesus’ prayer life, and now he’s highlighting for us the prayer life of Jesus’ followers.

You’ll notice in verse 24, it says that the whole group lifted their voices together in this prayer. Whatever this looked like, Luke wants us to see how comfortable and familiar the practice of community prayer was in the church.

When you go to a football game you’re not shocked when the quarterback knows where the receivers will be when he throws. When you go to a play, you’re not confused when all the characters seem to know the words to the same songs and moves to the same choreography. Neither do you assume it happened all at once as if some natural unity came upon them. You know those things happened because the community practiced these patterns.

Through four chapters of Acts we have seen two sermons, but four prayer meetings. On top of that the day to day life of the church included Christians attending the temple daily during the three times of prayer each day.

Let me remind you, this was not a remote work world. This wasn’t a four day work week world. This church of more than 5,000 men broke from their fields, their families and their blacksmithing and for the happy inconvenience of daily and frequently approaching God together in prayer. The basis of the community of the church has been from day one teaching the word and prayer.

If you were to go pick up a book on prayer from Amazon, my guess would be that it is about private or personal prayer. While that is important—it shows us why we perhaps struggle so much with prayer! In Acts we read almost nothing of private prayer, that was assumed! But instead we see what drove clarity and comfort in private prayer—public prayer—prayer that encouraged one another and taught each other how to pray.

A primary reason we are in Acts is to help confirm and correct where we are as a growing church. As elders we are being challenged and pressed in a good way by the priorities Acts presents. While the elders and staff are diligent to pray through the membership directory at staff and elder meetings, and even in our own daily prayers—we aren’t convinced that we pray enough together as a church if you look at the pattern of Acts.

We want prayer to be not merely transitional, but intentional anytime we meet in community groups, classes, Bible studies or in discipleship. This is also why we've started men's prayer breakfasts. But we don't want to leave anything on the table here. I'd ask you to pray with us, and for us as elders—and I'd ask you humbly that if we do establish some more formal prayer meetings that you prioritize those as best you can.

Charles Spurgeon pastored a busy church in London and hosted midweek prayer meetings. He said that it was common to hear of busy men who felt too tired after work, or mothers worried about the various diseases circling in the city—but he asked if those individuals applied those same factors to their social events, birthday parties, and vacations.

I wonder how many times a day you pray an intentional way? If we take the classic Christian pattern of praying before our meals we will have prayed three times. If we are in the habit of daily Bible reading we can add a fourth to that. But let me remind you that faithful Muslims pray five times a day—breaking from their sleep, their work, their play, and their rest—to call out to a false god who is able to provide them no certainty of his love nor assurance of their salvation.

I say this with great shame in my own soul that often my prayers to the living God who loves me is outpaced by those who in frantic fear cry out to a loveless idol—and do so diligently.

What are your patterns of prayer? When do you pray? This week, pay attention to your patterns of prayer and of community and consider how you might marry the two of those together.

We pray when we have a pattern of prayer—so let us labor to pray frequently together as the church.

We need this because of the second cause for our prayer: we pray ***When we are pressed to pray.***

Allen Iverson famously said, “Practice? You’re in here talking about practice? Not a game, but practice?” But any good coach will tell you—you play like you practice. We must practice well because this game is hard.

The church prayed not because things were great—but because things were not. They were pressed by the fear of their own heart, the threats of powerful men, and the weight of their ministry.

The Bible makes it clear that we will suffer. The goal of the Christian life is not to avoid worldly suffering. But because the gospel removes from us eternal suffering—we know that God so chooses to use worldly suffering for greater good in the life of the believer. The way we remind ourselves of this seemingly backwards pattern is prayer.

One pastor said that just as a carpenter glues boards together and clamps them tightly to secure them—so too the pressings, persecutions and problems of life are designed by the Master Builder to keep us in close and secure contact with him.

We need to remember that because if we are honest most of the time we see prayer as a means to get out of something hard instead of getting press into the God who is good. That doesn't mean pray can't ask for that. But true prayer places everything in the right priority. Notice how in our text today that the

church never asks God to stop the suffering. Instead they wanted more of God in the midst of their suffering so that they could continue to obey and walk with him even when they were pressed.

The Bible actually gives two practices which are meant to stimulate our prayer life by simulating the pressings of life and cause us to find our hope in God and God's good. The first is by fasting, the second—which is so relevant to our world today—is given to us by Paul in **1 Corinthians 7:5** about married people abstaining from sex: "Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer."

For the Christian, Paul says the only legitimate non-biological reason a spouses should not mutually enjoy one another is so that they might in that pressure of absence remind themselves of the greater unity they have with God in prayer.

We don't know what hardships will come in life—but we know they will. So make a habit of harnessing even the smallest pressings of the world—of materialism, of lust, of sloth—and resist them by pressing into the God who is the source of every blessing.

We pray when we have a pattern, and we pray when life is hard. But what do we pray when that happens? This is our second consideration this morning: **What We Pray.**

Well let's consider four stimulating thoughts for our prayer life as we examine their prayer together: **Acts 4:24-30**, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our Father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and Against his Anointed--' for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, Look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your words with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

Christianity never calls you to learn something new. It only calls you to learn what you already know better. Last week evangelism was simply sharing what you have seen and heard in the gospel and here prayer is simply praying in light of what you already know about God.

This is the first consideration for what we pray: we pray ***What we know about God.***

This is how Jesus taught his disciples to start prayer in, **Luke 11:2**, "When you pray say, 'Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.'" Jesus says a big prayer life begins not with a big need, but a big God—a Father who is sovereign to establish his kingdom and distinct in his glory.

And here, with a big need present, the church models what Jesus taught opening with an appeal to their "Sovereign Lord."

Maybe you've heard someone push back against God's sovereignty and say, "Well if God is in control of everything anyway—why do we even need to pray?" Well, first I would say that it is because God tells us to. But secondly, prayer to a sovereign God soothes our soul because we make our requests to him knowing that his is sovereign in creation and sovereign in his rule.

God made everything. If you're pressed, persecuted, or provoked by anything in the world—God made it and he's got better answers than Google. Kid's there's nothing you'll every encounter in life which God doesn't have something helpful to share with you.

Second, that creator God is a ruling God. While quoting Psalm 2, the church shows that even when things seem bad, even when enemies rise up, God works according to his hand, his will and his desire. God uses everything, and prayer is where we find rest in there but it's also where we try and wrestle our own wants into submission to his wants.

We want to want what God wants because being sovereign—he's the only power that can do anything! How does Psalm 2 describe the combine powers of those who oppose God's king? Vanity! Their plots, their power, their passion meant nothing. It was empty. The Persian King Xerxes was the most powerful ruler on earth for a season. He built a bridge for his army to use as they crossed over into Europe and the bridge broke. In his anger, Xerxes whipped the sea 300 times and threw shackles into it to indicate their punishment. But the sea didn't and still doesn't obey Xerxes. His punishment and his power did nothing. But Jesus stills the sea, he tread on its waves and in eternity he paves it with calm like gold.

Don't side with the world's empty power—run to the sovereign ruler who worked all things for good on the cross—despite how dark it seemed. And trust that his plan and his goodness flourishes in the shade of his providence.

This leads us to our second piece of content: we pray ***What we know about the Bible.***

So far the prayers we've seen in Acts are prayers which pray parts of the Bible. If you want to find your voice in prayer—start praying with God's voice. Our family often has a habit of reading a Psalm before dinner and it's amazing how subtle that small reading shapes the prayer.

There are over 650 prayers in the Bible. Pict one each day. The Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:1-4 is 36 words long—but I imagine that if you began every prayer with those 36 words you'd find more words easily follow. Prayer and Bible reading are disciplines that are meant to fuel one another.

But the words of the Bible are most helpful when we are able to connect them to the gospel. Psalm 2 was not on its surface about David, nor did it have any concern for Christians' gathering in first century Jerusalem. But because Jesus had already taught his disciples in Luke 24 that the whole Old Testament is to be interpreted in light of him—Psalm 2 became relevant to them because the gospel is always relevant to us.

Notice the parallels in verses 25-27. Just as the Gentiles raged against King David—in Jerusalem the Gentiles gathered against Jesus. Just as the kings of the earth set themselves, King Herod set himself against Jesus, just as the rulers gathered, Pilate gathered against Jesus, and just as the peoples plotted in vain against the Lord and against his anointed—the peoples of Israel gathered against God's holy servant Jesus.

And here the final recreation of God's people is made clear isn't it? Who are God's people? No one by default according to race. The Jews gathered against the Lord's anointed, but God's true people (including Jews) gathered in an appeal to the Lord's anointed. The mark of the Christian is who we cry out to—and when things are hard we cry out to Jesus. Why?

Because everyone else plots in vain. David wasn't destroyed. Jesus was killed—but even the best plot of death was in vain because God raised him up. Prayer reminds us that because of what God did on the cross of Jesus Christ that his plan is never in vain. We are never without hope. God planned the mess of the cross to lead to our salvation and in the messes and presses of our life we do not pray in vain.

But how do we gauge if our prayers worked or not? How do we judge vanity for ourselves? This is our third consideration: we pray ***What we know about our purpose.***

We already pointed out that the believers didn't pray for God to relieve their suffering. In fact the only request they make is that God would look upon the threats of their enemies. But they don't ask that he look on them and crush them, he look on them and rough them up. Instead notice how the church's prayer life reflected their understanding of purpose in life and ministry: **Acts 4:29-30**, "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

They didn't ask for God to stop their enemies (though it wouldn't have been wrong to do so!) but instead they are more concerned that their enemies won't stop them from preaching Christ. They understood that it was in the nature of God to continue to work miracles on his own, they understood it was the nature of a fallen world to gather against Jesus' church in the same way that they gathered against Jesus, but they understood that it was in the nature of the Christian to rely on God so that in everything we never stop preaching Christ.

As one commentator said, "Their demand is not now for miracles of vengeance or destruction, such as fire from heaven, but for miracles of mercy."

When we understand that the whole of our lives as Christians is wrapped up in that one task of knowing and making Jesus known—our prayers take a different form. We are more concerned about the effectiveness of our witness than we are the ease of our witness.

D.A. Carson says it this way, "**Many of us do not want to pray because we know that disciplined, biblical prayer would force us to eliminate sin that we rather cherish.**"

In other words many of us don't pray because we don't want what prayer brings! Instead of praying for God to help us resist pornography, we'd rather try until we want to fail. Instead of praying that God grant us the humility needed to forgive, we'd rather hold onto that anger until the person comes groveling back. Some of us don't pray for boldness in evangelism because we'd rather not experience what these people experienced. We pray not because we fear it won't work, but because we fear it will.

But when we realize that God's goals are for our good even when it seems to be difficult—we can pray towards that end and know that God will give us exactly what we need to bear witness and follow him.

This leads us to our final quality—the content of our prayers should be ***What we know about our hope.***

Acts 4:31, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness."

So notice here how their prayer life began and ended in the comfort and supernatural grace they had in the Holy Spirit and with God's gathered people.

The church knew that their prayers were bettered when offered together. That's not to say that more prayer equals answered prayers--but it does mean that when we pray with believers we are comforted with believers.

When we are concerned with the trials of other believers, our prayer life grows. Paul says that the church is to have the "same care for one another" saying, **1 Corinthians 12:22**, "If one part suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

I love the verbiage we saw at the beginning, after being released from prison Peter and John fled to the Christian community. Yet here it isn't called that, it's not called the assembly, it's not called the church, instead it is called, "friends." The Greek literally reads, "they went to their own."

As we follow Jesus we will encounter hardship--and Jesus has given us a refuge among those who are our own in the church: those who are like us, those who feel with us, those who sin like us, those who need prayer just as we do.

The hope they had was shared with those who were their own, but the power they sought was not their own. Their hope was in God and his power. And he gave them a sign.

The place they gathered to pray shook. But they were not shaken. The words of the religious officials were meant to cause the young church to cower, but instead they called out to the God who shook the earth.

God will care for his church--through threats and trials, through gallows and grave--we have an unshakable hope together. What we need for boldness is nothing more than a bold reminder of our sovereign God.

To be an unshakable people, we must be a prayerful people. It's not the power of Peter but of prayer that endured the church. May we be of the same resolve when we encounter pain, persecution, trial and tribulation.

May we say together as the Psalmist in hope, **Psalms 46:1-3**, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling."