

They Devoted Themselves to Prayer

The Prominence of Prayer in the Book of Acts (Part 1)

Introduction

A Week of Prayer and the Book of Acts

- A. We've established a tradition of sorts here at Mercy Hill, where at the beginning of every new year, we try to participate together in what we call a Week of Prayer.
1. And, of course, this week is launched, really, during the service here with a special sermon preached on the subject. So I'll be preaching on prayer both this week and next, as a matter of fact.
- B. And for this year I'm going to tackle the matter as it pertains to the book of Acts in particular.
1. I've told you before that prayer is featured prominently in the book, and it's really prayer that can be seen as the critical piece that moves the whole plotline forward. Not to give away too much here at the beginning, but if you're at all familiar with the narrative, perhaps you've already seen this . . .
 - a. The whole book starts with the church waiting and praying. Then the Spirit is first poured out upon them and they go out boldly proclaiming the gospel.
 - b. But there's opposition, and they're afraid, so they pray. And the Spirit falls and gives them fresh filling and they proceed with great courage.
 - c. Paul the infamous persecutor is prayed for by Stephen and he's later confronted by the risen Christ in dramatic fashion, and then he's there praying, and, as he's praying, Ananias shows up and prays for him and his eyes are literally opened and he's changed.
 - d. Then it's Peter who is praying and God gives him vision of the gospel going to the Gentiles. And he's connected to a particular Gentile, named Cornelius, who was praying. And Peter tells him the gospel—that it's for him and all the Gentiles with him. And the Spirit falls on them as well.
 - e. Then it's through prayer that the Spirit reveals that Paul and Barnabas have been set apart for a broader mission to the Gentiles.
 - f. And the whole book carries on from there—as the gospel goes from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth.
 - i. And at every point it's prayer that moves the plotline forward. It's prayer that is the real powerhouse of the church.
- C. Therefore, it's prayer that we must give ourselves to first and foremost here at Mercy Hill. Which is why we put this Week of Prayer at the outset of the year and say: "If we're to do anything this year worthwhile for God and for others, it can only be done in and through and as a result of prayer."

1. As we've often said here (and as we'll reflect on further in this message): "Prayer is the start of everything good."
- D. And so all I want to do here is simply consider the book of Acts with you for these two weeks through this lens. I just want to show you the ubiquity of prayer in the early church—that it's present everywhere, at all times. The occasions for prayer are myriad, spanning the whole of human experience and life under the sun. They're always praying in one way or another.
1. And we're simply going to fly over this book and drop into some of the various occasions where the church is praying. And we'll just consider what's happening and how we can pursue more of the same in our own lives.
 - a. I believe I've got somewhere around 12 different occasions for us. I'll take 4 this week and we'll see if we can finish up with the rest next time.

Relational at Its Core

- A. But before we really dive in, let me make something clear about prayer that we often get wrong. I just want to make sure we understand the essence of prayer before we do anything else.
- B. What I mean is we tend to reduce prayer to something less than it is.
1. So for some prayer is reduced to something that's merely mystical. We light a candle, we get in particular postures, we use special phrases and speak in soft breathy tones. We act like it's something akin to magic.
 - a. Now is there mystery to prayer. Is it mystical in a sense? It sure is. But it's so much more than this.
 2. For others of us prayer is often reduced something that's merely transactional. We come to God to get stuff. We make promises of what we'll offer him and we make requests that fill out what his side of the deal will be. We come to God like a person walking into a store or architecting a contract. It's about the transaction—the exchange of goods and services.
 - a. Now, again, seen from a certain angle, prayer is transactional, isn't it? We do make promises and requests and things like this when we pray. But it's so much more.
 3. To give one more common reduction, for many prayer is just about utility or pragmatism. We do it because it's useful, because it "works." And if it doesn't work we don't really see the point. We move on to some other strategy that will deliver on what it is we need.
 - a. Now, is prayer useful and practical? Sure. And it does "work." But, again, it's so much more than this.
- C. You see, in its essence (and this is what we must keep always before us), prayer is not merely mystical, nor transactional, nor useful. No! At its core, prayer is relational.

1. It's about engaging this relationship we have with the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit.
2. It's about connecting my heart with his and his heart with mine.
3. It's the way that we take in his love for us and grow in our love for him.

a. It's about relationship before it's about anything else.

D. And so, when we see all these various occasions for prayer in the book of Acts, we need to remember that what we're really witnessing is the fact that disciples of Jesus should be engaging this relationship with God in all of life at all times. That's the essence of it.

1. But let's look at some of these occasions now . . .

Occasion #1: When There's a Lot of Work to Be Done

Two Extremes and a Way Down the Middle

A. Let me ask you: what you do when your plate is just overwhelmingly full; when the days don't seem long enough to get it all done; when the to-do list feels like its never-ending? How do you handle that? How do you respond?

B. It seems to me we often trend towards one of two extremes on this:

1. Some of us are more the "go-getter" type. We start our day ready to take on the world. We make lists and spreadsheets and flowcharts. We reprioritize and reorganize. We are determined to figure it out, to crack the case, to get it done . . . and we won't rest until we do.
2. But then others of us fall off on the other side. We see the sheer enormity of the task, feel the weight of it, and we recognize the futility in trying to get it done because you know you'll just wake up tomorrow and find even more there waiting for you. You're never finished. And so the upshot in all this is you find yourself wanting to just quit. You're tired. And so you give up.

C. Now, I'm personally prone to the first extreme there, but, I must admit, sometimes I oscillate from one of these extremes to the other, sometimes even in the same day.

1. I can start off my day in that first camp—relentlessly optimistic about what I'll accomplish that day.
2. And then when 5:30 rolls around, I go into a mild state of depression when I realize what I actually ended up accomplishing. This is what I thought I'd get done, this is what I actually got done. How could that be? It's frustrating. It's enough to make me want to quit sometimes, right?

D. But now, in this first example, we see that Jesus offers us a way down the middle. It's the way of prayer. Here's the only way to thread the needle, as it were, between overconfidence and despair.

1. On the one hand, prayer reminds me that I can't do it in my own strength—that I won't figure it out or get it all done. So I'm not overconfident.
2. But, on the other hand, prayer also keeps me from falling off into despondency because it reminds me that, though I can't do it, God can. I'm not left alone in this. He's with me.

Devoting Themselves to Prayer

A. So consider the way the book of Acts opens.

1. Remember, at this point Jesus has already been crucified, dead, buried, raised, and he's about to ascend to the Father. He's giving these last marching orders, as it were, to his disciples.
 - a. And he tells them that he's got a task of magnificent proportion for them, [Acts 1:8](#): “[Y]ou will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” “Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to reach the world with the gospel.”
 - i. It's the sort of task that would make the apostle Paul cry out: “Who is sufficient for these things?” ([2 Cor. 2:16](#)).

B. Now, we know, prior to the cross, how a guy like Peter would have responded. He's already played out the two extremes, hasn't he?

1. He would start off: “I'm sufficient. Put me in coach. I'm up to the task.”
2. But then, when he realizes what he's actually made of, he falls flat and figures there's nothing left for him.

C. But here, again, we see this middle way of prayer. For Jesus says: “Yes I have a massive mission for you of global even cosmic proportion. But—before you either run out from here in self-confidence and try to do it yourself or stagger out from here with your tail between your legs and your head hung low under the burden of it—I want you to pray.”

1. This is why back up in [vv. 4-5](#) we read: “⁴ And while staying with them he [Jesus] ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’”
 - a. And this idea finds its way into the first part of [v. 8](#) which I skipped over, listen: “[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” “It's not from you, it's from me.”

D. And this is why we're told in [v. 14](#), that disciples and early church didn't run off to tackle the task on their own, nor were they crumbling in the face of their own inability. No, instead we read: “[All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer . . .](#)” They knew they couldn't handle it, but they knew that he could. So they pray.

1. And the Spirit falls and fills and they go out with power.
 - a. And it's Peter who's opening his mouth with boldness. The guy who couldn't stand up for Jesus before a little servant girl is standing up before thousands and boldly proclaiming the gospel. And he knows now: "This isn't me. This is Christ in me!"
 - i. And it starts with prayer.
- E. And you know they don't just start with prayer, they continue in it.
1. It's not like prayer is the spark that gets the engine roaring and then you just barrel off from there without it.
 2. No. Prayer, this relational engagement with God, relying on him, opening your heart to him, asking him for help and things. It's carried along all the way through.
 - a. This is why the initial story here, it begins with the church "devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14), but it also ends with them redoubling their efforts in prayer. So in Acts 2:42 we read: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."
 - i. Prayer isn't just what gets the work started, it's what keeps the work going.
 - b. So too, later, when the church has exploded, and the apostles are being drawn into all manner of activities, they have to pull back and delegate some of these things to other leaders. Why? Because, they say: "[W]e will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).
 - i. They know that if they lose prayer in the midst of the busyness, their whole ministry will lose its vitality and fruitfulness. Oh sure, they'd be busy doing a lot of things, but they wouldn't be fruitful in the eternal sense of it. Their work would be characterized by rush and hurry, anxiety and fear, competition and pride, and so forth.
- F. You know, the great reformer Martin Luther is famous now for responding to someone's inquiry into his upcoming schedule: "Work, work, from early until late. In fact, I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."
1. Well, we may be prone to roll our eyes at such a thing: "It's a nice sentiment but clearly not realistic. Maybe this works for Luther because he was a monk for a while there after all, but not for me. Give me a break."
 - a. But such a response from us does violence to the implications of what we've been seeing so far in the book of Acts. They had a great many things to do and it is precisely because of this that they devoted themselves to prayer.
 - i. I'm reminded here of Jesus' words in John 15: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (v. 5).

G. So what about you?

1. Do you have a big to-do list these days? Are you rushing off ahead of God to get it done, or ready to throw in the towel because you're just so tired? Let me encourage you to put prayer at the top of that list. And don't just check it off and move on. Let it permeate all you do. God is with you in the going and the doing, he can empower and make you fruitful in a deeper more eternal sense.

Occasion #2: When There Are Decisions to Be Made

The Engineer, the Artist, and the Disciple

A. I wonder, how do you go about making decisions? When you're deciding where to live, what job to take, what school to send your kids to, what ministries to commit to, what extracurricular stuff to take on, and so forth . . . how do you decide?

1. Some of us, perhaps, rely on our own wisdom and logic. We do research, we ask around, we weigh the pros and cons, we do the math. Our reason and rationale carry the day.
 - a. Here's what I might call the Engineer's approach to decision-making, as it were.
2. Others of us, make decisions less from the head and more from the heart, if you know what I mean. Something "feels" right to us, so we go with it. We really want something, so we decide to move in that direction. Our feelings and desires win out.
 - a. This is more like what I'd call the Artist's approach to decision-making, if you will.

B. But what about the disciple's approach, the Christian's approach?

The Lord Who Knows the Hearts of All

A. Well, here's where we come to this little vignette tucked in the middle of the larger story we just looked at. The particular reference I'm interested in is [Acts 1:24](#).

B. The background is simply that the apostles are looking for a replacement for Judas. You remember, Jesus appointed twelve, and one of them, Judas betrayed him and ultimately ended up losing his own life in the wreckage of it all.

1. And so they have a big decision to make: who should take Judas' place?
 - a. Well, they could have taken the Engineer's approach: "Let's look at who we have. Let's weigh out their gifts and talents. Let's get a spreadsheet going. Let's come up with some tangible, measurable means of evaluating, and we'll find our answer."
 - b. They could have also taken the Artist's approach: "Who do we like the best? Who feels like a better fit? This guy's got cool hair, I vote him in. I get along easier with this brother. I want him." That sort of thing.

- C. But that's not what they do, is it? No. Instead, they pray: " ²⁴ [T]hey prayed and said, 'You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place'" (Acts 1:24–25).
1. To be sure, there's a place in decision-making for man's head and heart, for logic and feeling—of course God wants us to integrate such things. But they have a limit. They can't bear the full weight of it. Only God can.
 - a. You notice here how they put it: "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all . . ." (v. 24). I love that. Because it reminds us that we don't know the hearts, we don't know the deepest part of the matter, we only see from the outside. Our perspective is limited.
- D. This recalls the whole story of King Saul versus King David, do you remember that?
1. Everybody thought Saul was such a great fit for the job, because he looked the part. Remember we're told in 1 Sam. 9:2, Saul was "a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people."
 - a. Using both your head and your heart you think this is the one. Surely here's our king. But he wasn't.
 2. And when God reveals that he's chosen David, he has to remind Samuel: "Do not look on [man's] appearance or on the height of his stature . . . For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).
 - a. When making decisions we can't trust merely in our own wisdom or intuitions. We must trust in the Lord, and that means we come to him concerning the matter in prayer. "God you know all, show me, lead me, help me decide aright."
- E. And as with our work, so too with our various decisions, we do this all the day long.
1. Now, to be clear, I'm not saying you need to wait for an audible voice from heaven before you decide on which pair of jeans to wear or something. But I am saying that all of life should have this open-handed posture to it—we're surrendered and listening and looking for God to guide us.
- F. This gets back into what Joey was talking about last week from James 4: " ¹³ Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'— ¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that'" (vv. 13–15).
1. When we're making decisions and plans, it all has this air of prayerfulness about it. We're are consciously opening it all up to him—planning and thinking and making decisions in his

presence, with the ceiling open as it were. We don't close off and act in isolation. We rip the roof off and do whatever we do with him.

G. Is that how you've been approaching decisions lately? If you're the type that makes New Year's resolutions, have these been prayerfully crafted, or are you just going about it like the Engineer or the Artist.

1. We want to be Disciples.

a. That's why we do this Week of Prayer at the front of the year when you might be making resolutions and big decisions and things. We want you to consider all of that in the context of prayer and seeking God's wisdom and heart. The Prayer Guide will help you in this if you really give yourself to it this week.

Occasion #3: When You're Going About Your Day

The Hour of Prayer

A. Obviously, this one is just drafting on what I've already been saying to this point. But, nonetheless, there is something new I wanted to bring out here.

B. In many places throughout the book of Acts we see that the early disciples didn't just expect prayer to happen. It's one thing to know it should happen, it's another thing to actually do it, right? So they build into their schedules certain rhythms whereby they stop what they're doing and particularly give themselves to prayer. They're planned and strategic about it.

1. So in [Acts 3:1](#) we read: "Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour." They count up their hours from 6:00am, so the ninth hour is 3:00 in the afternoon. And it's here called "the hour of prayer."

a. At this point in the day, it would seem, they would take a break, however backlogged they felt, and go engage in a time of focused prayer. "I don't exist just to get stuff done. I exist for relationship with God." They treated it almost as a meeting you would have with your coworker or boss. It's on my calendar. "I've got to be there."

2. So too Cornelius, a Gentile who feared the God of Israel, we're told when we bring [Acts 10:3](#) in conjunction with [v. 30](#) of the same chapter, that at "[a]bout the ninth hour of the day" he was praying. It seems to have been some sort regular rhythm for him as well.

3. But it wasn't just this ninth hour that would be a time of prayer for folks. Peter, we're told in [Acts 10:9](#), "went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray"—the sixth hour, counting up from 6:00am again, would've been noon.

C. Some see in these references to certain hours set aside for prayer a shoutout to the OT pattern serious Jews had of praying in a more focused way at least three times a day.

1. So David says in [Ps. 55:17](#): “Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and [God] hears my voice.”
2. Or Daniel, we’re told in [Dan. 6:10](#), “got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God.”

D. But here’s the idea: we build into our schedules certain rhythms, certain structures that support this relationship we have with God and encourage our own dependence upon him.

1. Often we can get too rushed and as the day gets going, we let all the pressure just sort of crowd God out. So we need placeholders to help us. Certain habits that keep us in line.

Hourly Prayer for Continual Prayer

A. You know, sometimes we pin structure and system against the more organic and freeform life of prayer. We would say that such regular intervals are more the work of legalism than anything else. Real prayer is free and unscripted, you know.

1. But the two ideas don’t have to be at odds with each other. Indeed, when properly understood, truly they are synergetic, mutually encouraging—the former stimulating the latter and the latter stimulating the former.

B. There are so many analogies to help us along in this . . .

1. Think of the skeleton as structure and support for the organic and more freeform life of the body. If you don’t have a skeletal structure, you’re like an amoeba on the floor. The organization serves the organism. So too times of regular prayer stimulate and serve the ongoing vital life of prayer throughout the day.
2. Think of scales and music. I always liked being creative with music, but I didn’t want to put in the time to learn chords and scales and boring stuff like that. It felt legalistic to practice these things or memorize things. But when once you do, you realize it doesn’t hinder your creativity and freedom as a musician, it helps it. You have so much more to work with when you’re writing and singing. So too disciplined times of prayer scheduled throughout the day don’t hinder the freeform life of prayer, they help it flourish.
3. Think of a weekly date night with your spouse. The idea isn’t well we just got romance out of the way, now we’re done. No. The idea is to kindle romance and connection that then spills over into the rest of your week and interactions. You set aside that more focused time and that’s what sparks the fire that then burns into the rest of your time together as you go about things.
4. The last analogy I’d give you is this. I said that the early disciples built these rhythms into their day because they knew both that prayer was important and that it wouldn’t just happen on its own. There needed to be some discipline and strategy.
 - a. Well, to assume prayer will just happen is no different really from assuming that a beautiful flower garden will just “happen” in your backyard as you sit around sipping cabernet or something. No! We all know, it’s not flowers that will come up

naturally there, but weeds. If we want flowers we have to get disciplined and structured and systematic. We have to get out there clear the area and plant the seeds and water and things. The organized effort here serves the organic life of the flower. Sure they can now freely and wonderfully pop up in the garden, seemingly effortlessly, but it's taken effort and it's because of that discipline.

- C. So you see scheduled times of prayer far from hindering the organic, ongoing nature of prayer, it really helps it flourish.
 - 1. This is why we're told of that same Cornelius who seems to have made a habit to pray specifically at the ninth hour of the day that he really was a man who "prayed continually to God" (Acts 10:2)—'dia pantos' in the Greek = throughout the whole; at all times in all things.
 - a. Don't you see? Making a habit of praying at regular intervals leads to a life of praying continually in everything.
- D. So how about you? Do you have any regular rhythms of prayer?
 - 1. Perhaps three focused times a day seems too much to start. Okay, begin with one. And perhaps make a habit of attending the bimonthly All Church Prayer meeting.

Occasion #4: When Your Body's Broken Down

Running Out of Options

- A. Anyone else experiencing your body not working the way it used to?
 - 1. I turned 38 this last year and it's like that was the magic number or something for me, where things just started hurting and flaring up in ways I'd not experienced prior.
 - a. I realize now why every athlete is done in their mid-30s at the latest, because you're body just doesn't recover in the same way, and things are getting brittle and tired.
- B. And I know some of us are dealing with broken down bodies in much more severe ways than I am.
 - 1. We've got mental and physical disabilities in this church.
 - 2. We've got chronic pain in this church.
 - 3. We've got heart surgeries in this church.
 - 4. We've got COVID in this church.
 - 5. We've got cancer in this church.
 - a. We've got bodies breaking down in here.
- C. So what do you do? Where do you go when stuff starts to hurt, when the body's not working right?
 - 1. Do you doomscroll doctor google and worry yourself sick?

2. Do you place all your hope in modern medicine and technology? If I can get my hands on that pill or can see that top-tier specialist all will be well?
 - a. Again these things may have their place. Of course you want to research. Of course you want a good doctor.
 - i. But are you praying? Jesus is not referred to as the Great Physician for no reason.
- D. Do you remember that woman who had had some discharge of blood for twelve years and had tried everything? In [Luke 8:43](#) we're told that "she had spent all her living on physicians, [and yet] she could not be healed by anyone." She tried it all.
 1. But she hadn't tried Jesus. So she presses through the crowd in towards him and with just a touch of the fringe of his garment "immediately her discharge of blood ceased" (v. 44).
- E. Jesus is the NT manifestation of what God was referred to as in the OT: [YHWH-rophaka](#) = the LORD your healer ([Exod. 15:26](#)).
 1. And we get to this Great Physician, to the LORD our healer . . . through prayer.

A Man Born Lame

- A. So, in the book of Acts, right there in [chs. 3-4](#), we're told this magnificent story of a miracle that occurs for a man who had been lame from birth, and he was at this point "more than forty years old" ([Acts 4: 22](#)).
 1. And his friends would just daily lay him out in front of the temple there in Jerusalem so he could beg for pocket change as people came and went.
- B. But this day would be different. Because, as we just read, "Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" ([Acts 3:1](#)) . . . and there he was. Peter's gaze meets his and his heart gushes forth with compassion.
 1. And so Peter utters these words: " ⁶ 'I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!' ⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God" (vv. 6–8).
- C. And we can't miss the connection. When does this happen? It happens at the "hour of prayer."
 1. Elsewhere the connection is made more explicit—the apostles come upon an unwell person, pray, and the person is healed ([Acts 9:40; 28:8](#)).
 2. But here it's more implicit.
 - a. Nonetheless we must catch the message: when your body's broken down, pray!

He Does . . . and He Doesn't . . . and He Does!

- A. I have friends—a guy and a gal, missionaries in Hungary—they got married, but both them found out they had cancer and both of them were miraculously healed through prayer to such a degree that the doctors working on them asked if they could come over to hear more about this Jesus and the gospel they proclaim.
- B. I myself have personally laid hands on a sick person, prayed for them, and felt the fire of God's healing power in my fingertips, and he did, he healed her.
- C. Now it doesn't happen all the time. I don't know why or how or when God chooses to do such a thing. But I know he can.
 - 1. And I know that even if he wills not to heal the body, he can always heal the heart if we'll let him. Do you know what I mean?
 - a. In Gethsemane, God didn't take away the cup as Jesus had asked but he did provide an angel to minister to him and strengthen him and help him through. And it will be the same for you.
- D. He may heal our bodies now, or he may not. But one thing is certainly do so in the end.
 - 1. That is one of the entailments of the gospel. That's one of the reasons Jesus came. That's what's being pictured as he goes about healing all these people of their maladies and raising the dead and things.
 - a. The curse is being overturned. He's taking that on himself and taking us to glory.
- E. You know, something occurred to me the other day and just struck with me wonder: Do you realize that of all the people from every tribe, tongue, and nation that will be present amid the glories of heaven, only one of them shall still bear the scars of earth. And his name is Jesus.
 - 1. This is a Great Physician unlike any other. On that cross, he took the curse, he took the wrath, he took the sickness and the brokenness. . . so that, in the end, we could be healed: “[H]e was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).
- F. So, when our bodies are breaking down, pray. He can help. He will help.