

Prayer

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Certainly one of the most exciting times in history was the period of the early Christian church as chronicled in the book of Acts. God's gift of holy Spirit, first poured out to all believers on the day of Pentecost, enabled those who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ to manifest great power to an extent which has only been hinted at in the revivals that have followed since the first century. Nowhere was this power more evident than in the prayers of the church in Acts. What made the prayers of those first Christians so effective, so powerful? This article will explore a few of the many verses on prayer in search of an answer to this question. A picture of the life of the early church is given to us in Acts 2:42-47.

These verses yield important keys to the phenomenal power the first century church experienced as they

"continued steadfastly...in prayers vs. 42 NKJV)."

These keys are: 1. prayer according to the will of God, 2. persistence, 3. fear/trust in God, 4. thanksgiving, 5. fellowship.

The first key is prayer according to the will of God. Psalm 145:18 says,

The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.

Perhaps this is why the prayers of Paul so often included a request that the believers received knowledge (Ephesians 1:17, Colossians 1:9). Understanding and knowledge of what God wills in any situation enables us to *"call upon Him in truth"* because we are praying for those things which God has promised to fulfill. On the other hand, James 4 explicitly states the results of prayer outside of God's will.

You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:2, 3)

Contrast this with John 17. The entire chapter is the prayer of Jesus shortly before his arrest. What a perfect and noble example of the submission of one's will to the will of God. What a beautiful and inspiring account of prayer in complete agreement with the purposes of our heavenly Father.

Take a fresh look at the "Lord's Prayer" recorded in Matthew 6:9-13 as an example of this concept. Too often we take *"Your will be done"* as meaning we have no way of knowing what God wants to happen. Jesus said in John 14:13

"And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

Implicit in this statement is that what we ask is according to God's will. Asking in the name of Jesus Christ acknowledges that he always acted according to the will of his heavenly Father as John 14:9-11 clearly states. God has lovingly provided us with His Word, His written will. We can know what God would accomplish and because of this we have the assurance recorded in 1 John 5.

"Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. (vss. 14, 15)"

Could God say it any plainer? Prayer according to His will gets answered. The second key to powerful prayer is persistence. This is not to be confused with simple

repetition. As a matter of fact, Jesus warned against mere repetition in Matthew 6:7, 8.

“And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore, do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.”

According to Webster’s Dictionary, to persist is “to continue in the face of some opposition.” This principle of persistence is addressed by Jesus in Luke 11. In verses 1-4, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, and Jesus responds with what is known as the “Lord’s Prayer.” Then he continues with the following illustration:

And He said to them, “Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and he will answer from within and say, ‘Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you’? I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Luke 11:5-10)

The parable of the unjust judge in Luke 18:1-8 is another vivid example of this principle. The church epistles also contain encouragement in this area. Ephesians 6:18 says,

Praying with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.”

And Colossians 4:2 reminds us to “*Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.*”

The third key is the fear of and trust in God. As expressed so wonderfully in Psalm 145:19,

“He will fulfill the desires of those who fear Him; He also will hear their cry and save them.”

Vine’s Expository Dictionary defines fear as “reverential fear of God, as a controlling motive of the life, in matters spiritual and moral, not a mere ‘fear’ of His power and righteous retribution, but a wholesome dread of displeasing Him, a ‘fear’ which banishes the terror that shrinks from His presence, and which influences the disposition and attitude of one whose circumstances are guided by trust in God, through the indwelling Spirit of God.”

This fear is an attitude of complete reliance upon God and His power. It is an attitude, which recognizes the holiness of God and endeavors to please Him in every aspect of life. It is an attitude that whole-heartedly trusts God to bring to pass His perfect will no matter what the obstacle, no matter what the circumstance. Our Savior certainly exemplified this quality of fear in his life and ministry. Hebrews 5:7-9 says,

...in the days of His flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though he was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which he suffered. And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was able to minister God’s Word in the face of incredible opposition and unbelief, to face a horrible

death by crucifixion, because he knew the Scriptures. He knew God's will for his life, he feared God, and trusted in God's ability and willingness to fulfill His promises (Mark 11:22-24). The early church had this same fear as they steadfastly prayed to God (Acts 2:43).

The fourth concept inextricably linked with prayer is that of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Yet, Holy One, you who make your home in the praises of Israel, in you our father's put their trust, they trusted you and you rescued them; they called to you for help and they were saved, they never trusted you in vain. (Psalm 22:3-5 Jerusalem Bible)

In the Old Testament, the presence of God was in the Holy Place in the tabernacle and later in the temple. In these verses "praises" is put by the figure of speech metonymy for the sanctuary where the praises were offered, emphasizing the importance of thanksgiving when appealing to God. Philippians 4:6 encourages Christians to

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

And Ephesians 5:20 exhorts us in

"giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

And look at just a few of the things for which we have to be thankful. We have salvation through Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9, 10); the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21); justification (Romans 4:25); an inheritance sealed with the gift of holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13, 14); and citizenship in the heavenlies (Philippians 3:20). What great and glorious works God has already accomplished on our behalf! How worthy is He of our fear and trust. How much more will He do for us

as we keep our hearts and minds focused on Him in praise.

The fifth element is fellowship. Hebrews 10:25 encourages us in,

"not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another..."

Although there are unquestionably many instances of God accomplishing great things through the prayers of individuals, the power of prayer from committed groups of believers is also present. Jesus confirmed this in Matthew 18.

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:19, 20)

There is great power in the fellowship of believers who are united together to seek God's will (Acts 4:23-31). Look at Paul's request for prayer in light of this.

Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you. (Romans 15:30-32)

But perhaps the most compelling evidence for the idea of fellowship in prayer (and every aspect of our walk) comes through the richness of the metaphor of the body of Christ as revealed in Ephesians. For when we as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ can truly see ourselves as one body, with Christ as the head, then we can join together in prayer with singleness of purpose: the accomplishment of

the will of God. This was the desire of our Lord Jesus Christ when he poured out his heart to God as recorded in John 17.

“that they all may be one, as You Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.” (John 17:21-23)

By looking at a few examples from the book of Acts we can see how the five elements discussed were practiced by the believers, and the awesome results to the prayers of the saints

In Acts 3 and 4, Peter and John heal a lame man at the temple gate called Beautiful. Peter’s speech following this miracle resulted in many people being added to the church. But it also resulted in the arrest of Peter and John by the Jewish religious leaders, and threats to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. After their release, Peter and John returned to the believers and had a prayer meeting where they first rehearsed the will of God in His plan of salvation (vss.24-28) and that prayed,

“Now Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was

his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:29-33)

In Acts 12, King Herod had James the brother of John killed, and Peter put in prison, intending to have him killed also after Passover. Verse 5 says that *‘constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.’* The following verses relate Peter’s release from prison by an angel from God and his reunion with believers (who were still busy praying while he was knocking on the door!). Soon after this, Herod was struck dead, and verse 24 says *“But the word of God grew and multiplied.”* Acts 13 and 14 recounts the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabus. The journey started with prayer (Acts 13:1-3). The result was the light of the Word brought to the gentiles. As Acts 13:49 says,

“...the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region.”

In Acts 16 Paul and Silas delivered a slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination. But this act angered her masters who profited from her bondage. They convinced the magistrates of the city to have Paul and Silas arrested, beaten and thrown into prison.

“But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosed.” (vss. 25, 26)

After this, the prison keeper and his family received the message of salvation and were born again (vss. 27-34). The next day Paul and Silas were released and

“when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.” (vs. 40)

In each account, we can see how the believers had integrated the will of God, persistence, fear and trust, thanksgiving and fellowship into their lives. How powerfully God was able to move in that day and time. May we heed the call of God’s incomparable word and make these five principles of prayer a part of our lives to the glory of God.

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