

Prayer in the New Testament Church

Lesson 5

They Devoted Themselves to Prayer

The Book of Acts begins with the Ascension of Jesus. The apostles were “feeling their way”. What should they do? Peter suggested they replace Judas. So they identified two candidates and prayed God would indicate his choice by lot. The author of Acts, Luke, states in both of the first two chapters that “*they devoted themselves to prayer.*” The first passage below is a snapshot of the church before Pentecost and the second one is just after.

*All these with one accord were **devoting themselves to prayer**, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.* Acts 1:14

*And they **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*** Acts 2:42

Soon their bold public testimony to the resurrection of Christ got Peter and John a night in the local jail. In the morning they were interrogated and threatened by the Jewish leaders. They were ordered not to speak of Christ again and released. They returned to the believers and prayed for boldness to speak the message:

*When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, they **lifted their voices together to God and said**, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ 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?*

*²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—*

*²⁷ 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, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, **Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness,** ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 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. Acts 4:23-31*

1. What can we learn from the Church in Jerusalem in those first days?

The church was growing rapidly. “... many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand . . . And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 4:4; 6:7 The apostles couldn’t keep up so they prayed and laid hands on seven men to assist them. The reason for this is stated as follows: *But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*” Acts 6:4

2. Things were going so well. Why did the apostles think they needed more time for prayer?

3. Americans are “doers”. We think our actions will get the job done. Peter Marshall, former Senate Chaplain must have been commenting on this when he wrote: “Forgive us for thinking that prayer is a waste of time and help us to see that without prayer our work is a waste of time.” **How much time should a pastor or church leader spend praying?**

4. What should church leaders pray about?

They Continued to Devote Themselves to Prayer

1. **Paul's First Missionary Journey began in prayer** and was sustained with prayer. The Church in Antioch prayed and fasted about how to carry forward the work of the Lord and the Holy Spirit directed them to send Paul and Barnabas to the gentiles.
*"Then after fasting and **praying** they laid their hands on them and sent them off."* (Acts 13:3)
2. **Prayer was a central part of their lives.** Often it was associated with fasting. Daily needs were brought to God in prayer by the church and individual members. They knew the church was not a human undertaking. They were sent to the world with a message founded on the resurrection of Christ. Since they were sent by God they were constantly in communion with him through prayer. The examples of this are too numerous to mention.
3. **Prayer was a major part of the Apostle Paul's work for the churches.** This is apparent from the fact that in all but one of his letters to churches he tells them about his prayers for them.

To Ephesus: *"This is why, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I never stop giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep praying that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, will give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in knowing Christ fully. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know the hope to which he has called you, just how rich his glorious inheritance among the saints is, and just how surpassingly great his power is for us who believe."* (Ephesians 1:15-18a)

For this reason I kneel before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵from whom the entire family in heaven and on earth receives its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he would strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner self, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. Then, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸I pray that you would be able to comprehend, along with all the saints, how wide and long and high and deep his love is, ¹⁹and that you would be able to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled to all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:14-19) Paul had spent almost three years working in Ephesus. He must have known that church and its members very well. Maybe that explains all the prayer for them.

To Corinth: *"I always thank my God for you because of the grace of God given to you in Christ Jesus. You were enriched in him in every way, in all your speaking and all your knowledge, because the testimony about Christ was established in you."* (1 Corinthians 1:4-6)

To Thessalonica: *"We always give thanks to God for all of you as we make mention of you in our prayers, because we constantly remember before God our Father your work produced by faith, your labor produced by love, and your patient endurance produced by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Night and day we are praying earnestly to see you in person and to supply what is lacking in your faith."* (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

He mentions his prayers for them also to the Philippians (1:3) and Colossians (1:3, 9-11). One wonders how anyone could pray that much!

4. **Paul also requests prayer.** When he wrote to the Roman congregation Paul had not yet been there. He was not the founder of that church, but he knew at least 26 members, whom he greets by name in chapter 16.

Paul anticipated traveling to Rome after he had gone to Jerusalem and also requested that they pray for his safety: ³⁰ *Now I urge you, brothers, through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, to struggle with me in prayers to God on my behalf.* ³¹ *Pray that I may be rescued from those in Judea who are disobedient and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,* ³² *so that by God's will I may come to you in joy and be refreshed in your company.*" (Romans 15:30-32)

He appeals to the Ephesians: *"Pray for me also, that when I open my mouth a message will be given to me that boldly reveals the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may speak about it boldly, as it is necessary for me to speak,"* (Ephesians 5:19-21) and the Colossians: *"Pray that I may make it known clearly, as it is necessary for me to speak."* (Colossians 4:12) He makes similar requests of the Thessalonians in both letters to them (1 Thessalonians 5:25, 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2) and of the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 1:10-11)

5. **Paul also encourages the believers to pray:** *"Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Brothers, pray for us."*(1 Thessalonians 5:17-18); *"Be persistent in prayer, and as you pray, be alert and thankful."*(Colossians 4:2)

6. Praying in the Spirit

Paul wrote: *"At every opportunity, **pray in the Spirit**..."*. (Ephesians 6:18) and Jude exhorted: *"But you, dear friends, continue to build yourselves up in your most holy faith as you keep **praying in the Holy Spirit.**"* (Jude 20)

What is praying in the Spirit? Is it some secret way to pray effectively? Is it a certain technique?

Actually, it is simply to depend upon the Spirit as our *paraclete*, the One promised by Christ to be at our side, our helper. The Spirit produces all things spiritual, including prayer. We are weak and sometimes don't even know how to pray or what to pray for. So St. Paul advises: *"In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we should pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that are not expressed in words.* ²⁷ *And he who searches our hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints, according to God's will."* (Romans 8:26-27) We can appeal to the Spirit to help us and to interpret what we should say when we don't know.

Summary

In Lesson One we learned about the prayer-life of Jesus, that he prayed often and for prolonged periods of time. We saw that he spent whole nights in prayer before important events, especially as the cross drew near. He typically addressed God as Father and always prayed from a position of perfect unity with him.

In Lesson Two we saw that Jesus taught us to view God as Our Father in Heaven. He also commanded us to pray and promised to respond. He taught to be bold and persistent in prayer, and not to give up in discouragement.

In Lesson Three we "listened in on" four prayers of Jesus. We saw that his prayers were mainly conversations with his Father about Kingdom matters.

In Lesson Four looked at DOs and DON'Ts. Prayer pleasing to God is undertaken in humility, never to gain an admiring audience. Jesus promises he will give us what we ask for in His Name. But to ask in His Name is to ask that his will be done.

In Lesson Five we saw that the New Testament Church, the Church of the Apostles, was devoted to prayer.

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Unuttered or expressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath
The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gates of death –
He enters heaven with prayer

Nor prayer is made by man alone –
The Holy Spirit pleads
And Jesus on the eternal throne
For sinners intercedes. (TLH, #454)