

Prayer that Changed History: 7 Brief Studies of Prayer in the Early Church

Written by Rick Ezell

One of the most dominant features of the New Testament church was that they prayed.

- Following the ascension of Jesus, the followers of Jesus were left in Jerusalem without Jesus' physical presence, but spiritually they were still in contact with Him because they prayed.
- When the disciples were selecting the replacement for Judas they prayed. The decision was too great to make by themselves.
- Following Peter's sermon on Pentecost that resulted in many new believers, they were instructed in spiritual growth tools. Among those tools was prayer.
- Prayer was such a way of life that they took time out each day, even in the afternoons, to spend time in prayer to God.
- Prayer was so important to the apostles that they set aside other servants to care for the physical needs of the widows, so they could spend extended periods of time in prayer.

Do you see the picture?

- Prayer is not some function tacked on at the end of a service.
- It is not an agenda item that if we get to it then we will pray.

Prayer is to be **prominent**, **primary**, and **prestigious** in the life of a church and its members. Our prayers should move beyond the walls of the church and embrace the concerns of our communities with the power of God.

The following seven (7) brief studies deal with prayer in the early church:

1. The Indispensable and Distinguishing Feature (Acts 2:42)
2. Prayer Brings God to Us (Acts 4:24)
3. Prayer Changes Us (Acts 4:13)
4. Prayer Unleashes the Power of God (Acts 4:31)
5. Prayer Prepares Us to Share Our Faith Boldly (Acts 4:31)
6. What Happens When A Church Prays? (Acts 12:5)
7. The Prayer Force (Acts 6:1-4)

LifeWay has many resources to help you learn about prayer and train your church family members to pray. Consider the following prayer studies:

- [Pray In Faith](#) by T.W. Hunt and Claude King
- [And the Place Was Shaken: How to Lead a Powerful Prayer Meeting](#) by John Franklin
- [Disciple's Prayer Life: Walking in Fellowship with God](#) by T.W. Hunt

Study 1: The Indispensable and Distinguishing Feature (Acts 2:42)

Prayer was one of the most distinguishing features of their lives. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples were instructed to wait (Acts 1). While they waited they prayed (Acts 2). And in the midst of their first prayer meeting the Spirit of God visited them in such a dramatic way that they were not only changed but 3,000 additional souls were brought into God's kingdom (Acts 2:41). It was their first victory. The enemy suffered a major defeat. Prayer became a major thrust of their lives and ministry.

The early disciples "devoted themselves . . . to prayer" (Acts 2:42 NIV) and the church continued to take territory from the enemy. "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47 NIV). These men leading the charge in this spiritual battle "were unschooled, ordinary men" (Acts 4:13 NIV) but the enemy recognized "that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13 NIV). They were spiritual warriors advancing the kingdom of God. The opposition "commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18 NIV) but they couldn't "help speaking about what they had seen and heard" (Acts 4:20 NIV).

- What gave them the boldness to speak in the face of opposition?
- What gave them the power to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders?
- What gave them the courage to assault a formidable foe with limited resources?

The answer is simply because they prayed. "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 (Acts 4:31 NIV). And, the result: "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7 NIV). In answer to their united and earnest prayers, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and as Chrysostom commented, "that makes them the more unshaken." They spoke the word of God boldly resulting in more of the enemy's territory taken as the church continued to expand beyond its walls. Even the most hostile of opponents, the priests, were converted to Christ.

The apostles didn't always see prayer that way. They had to be taught how to pray. They had to learn the practice of prayer. They had to test the principles of prayer. There was much trial and error. But eventually they got it.

At the outset of their ministry, the apostles were fearful, but eventually they became men of faith. They were impotent, but became stalwarts of power. They were dumbfounded, but became creative geniuses. They were cowards, but became profiles in courage.

What made the difference? In a word: prayer.

When we work, we work; when we pray, God works. Prayer is the means God has ordained by which he will work on earth and meet the needs of his people. If you and I don't pray, if prayer is not the indispensable and distinguishing feature of our lives, we will not see the hand or the movement of God.

Study 2: Prayer Brings God to Us (Acts 4:24)

Upon Peter and John's release from the chief priests and elders, "they raised their voices together in prayer to God" (Acts 4:24 NIV). This was not an off-the-cuff prayer. The whole community joined together in prayer. They knew they needed God more than they needed each other. They were not first trying to get through to God; they were opening up to God who was trying to get through to them.

Prayer reminds us that we need God more than he needs us. Prayer brings God to us. The essence of prayer is to join God, not God joining us. We ask what is on God's heart rather than telling God what is on our hearts.

Prayer is the lifeline that saves the drowning soul. Prayer is the umbilical cord that provides nourishment to the starving spirit. Prayer is the channel by which God's life-giving presence flows to us.

St. Augustine, the early church father and theologian, described prayer as like a man in a hapless boat who throws a rope at a rock. The rock provides the needed security and stability and life for the helpless man. When the rock is lassoed, it's not the man pulling the rock to the boat (though it may appear that way); it is the pulling of the boat to the rock. Jesus is the rock, and we throw the rope through prayer.

Through prayer God comes to us. The Scripture states, "Come near to God, and he will come near to you" (James 4:8a GN). Prayer provides the communication that puts us in contact with God. An anonymous author wrote:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Savior true,
No, I was found of thee.

One of the major problems of our prayer life to day is that we focus too much on ourselves, our needs, our concerns, our wishes, our wants, than on God. Reflect on your prayers of the past, how much time did you spend on your concerns versus God? God must become central in our prayers and the church's prayer meetings.

Study 3: Prayer Changes Us (Acts 4:13)

What does prayer change? Have you seen any changes because of your prayers?

A well-known preacher began his message by stating thunderously, "Prayer doesn't change God." The audience fell to a hush with an eerie silence. "Prayer doesn't change things," he continued. "Prayer doesn't change circumstances," he bellowed. "Prayer changes us." Our prayers often reflect the statement, "Every one thinks of changing humanity, but no one wants to change themselves." Real prayer is first and foremost about changing us.

The prayers of the early disciples changed them. They were once timid and afraid, hiding and secretive, embarrassed and ashamed. In fact, their adversaries commented, "... they were unschooled, ordinary men" (Acts 4:13 NIV). But now they were praying for boldness and power in public ministry. "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 Christ" (Acts 4:29-30 NIV). Through their prevailing prayers God continued to change them. He took wimps (weak, ineffectual, and insipid persons) and transformed them into warriors (bold, courageous, and powerful people).

What made the difference? Again, their adversaries answered that question: "... they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13 NIV).

Real prayer is not only soul satisfying; it is life changing. When you and I spend time with Jesus, he changes us. Richard Foster wrote, "To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ."

By being with Jesus, he changes us into his likeness. We become joyful, strong, fearless, and courageous. Like the apostles, as we grow more and more like him, we move from the rear guard to the front lines of the battle. We move from weakness to power. We move from fearfulness to boldness. We move from the comfort of the sidelines to the action of the game.

Don't pray unless you want to change. Don't pray unless you want to be propelled into action. Don't pray unless you want to move on the offensive. Don't pray unless you want to go to war. Don't pray unless you want to advance God's kingdom. Don't pray if you don't want to see people cross the line of faith. Don't pray if you don't want to see the church to stagnate and die.

Study 4: Prayer Unleashes the Power of God (Acts 4:31)

Two characteristics dominated the apostle's prayer meetings: God's presence and God's power. Is it any wonder that the Evil One seeks valiantly to keep Christ followers from praying? When we don't pray Satan has won the battle. But when we pray, the presence and the power of God are unleashed.

Questions: When was the last time you experienced God's presence? When was the last time you experienced God's power? Shouldn't we witness God's power and presence when we gather as a group to prayer? Why do we not want God's power and presence?

For those disciples in Jerusalem they experienced the power of God in a very tangible and real way. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken" (Acts 4:31 NIV). Perhaps the shaking was from thunder in the sky or a tremor of the earth or maybe it was the devil shaking in his boots. Whatever caused it, the shaking gave those early disciples a sense of God's presence and power.

That power is unleashed on two fronts. The power is felt on the human front. Sidlow Baxter wrote, "Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons, but they are helpless against our prayers." The chief priests and elders knew that these early disciples were unschooled and ordinary men, but they recognized them as having been with Jesus.

The power is, also, felt on the spiritual front. Samuel Chadwick said, "The one concern of the devil is to keep saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray."

How will we know God's power and presence show up in a prayer gathering? It seems that the most obvious answer is through answered prayer.

The practice of prayer in a believer's life is an incredible, virtually untapped power source. Prayer moves the hand of God. Prayer prevails. Prayer turns ordinary mortals into men and women of power. It is the key that unlocks the storehouse of God's riches. It is the call that moves heaven to act on behalf of earth.

Study 5: Prayer Prepares Us to Share Our Faith Boldly (Acts 4:31)

The early disciples prayed. Notice, “After they prayed . . . they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31 NIV). This was not a second Pentecost. This was a fresh filling, a renewed awareness of the Spirit’s power and presence in their life and witness. This endowment of power for witness would continue as they prayed. Boldness was the outward sign of the Holy Spirit’s anointing.

Telling others about Jesus is the front line of the battle for the hearts of men and women. Prayer equips us to tell the story. How foolish one would be to go to battle without proper preparation, training, and equipment. How foolish are we to go to spiritual battles without prayer.

Prayer is the equipment of our warfare. We are not outfitted for the battle against evil unless we pray. John Henry Jowett claimed that “it is in the field of prayer that life’s critical battles are won or lost.” As believers and as a church we will only be triumphant in storming the lines of evil for the souls of men and women when we pray.

Evelyn Christenson tells of the time the pastor of a large Texas church and his wife walked her to her car after an all-day prayer seminar for 2,000 people. Earlier at the final session of the seminar, when she had given the invitation to pray aloud in groups, over one-fourth of the people, many weeping, repented and boldly invited Jesus into their hearts.

The pastor asked, “To what do you owe that kind of power?”
Taken aback, Evelyn responded, “Well, prayer, of course.”
“What kind of prayer?” he quizzed.

“First of all, the prayer of the committee who invited me to come here. They signed a contract promising to get a representative from the churches in the community and pray together for at least six months before I came—I said I wouldn’t come unless they did. Then last night, I dropped in to their group and kicked off the seminar with an evening of prayer, once again pleading for those who didn’t know Jesus. My own board members pray every day. I have a prayer calendar that includes a special intercessor of the day. My telephone prayer chains pray three times a week. Thousands of my newsletter subscribers pray. We have a group that prays around the clock for special events and overseas trips. Plus the prayers of friends, family, and my own prayers several hours each day.”

The pastor looked at Evelyn in silence. Finally, he said, “What would happen if I, as pastor of this church, had that kind of prayer?”

“Sir,” she replied, “you wouldn’t be able to get all the new believers into your overcrowded sanctuary.”

God is working powerfully around the globe today. In fact, some view it as the greatest movement of God ever. Christianity is rapidly advancing all over the world—China, India, Africa, Central and South America. According to one researcher, if Christianity keeps growing at the same pace that it is today the whole world will be Christian by 2032. One of the common denominators in all these locations is that the people of God pray together. In general, there are only a few places in the world where the gospel is declining or not advancing—Australia, Japan, Western Europe, and North America. Could it be that in these places, believers are not praying?

What would God have us do? William Arthur Wade wrote, “God wants us to be victors, not victims; to grow, not grovel; to soar, not sink; to overcome, not to be overwhelmed.” Offer bold prayers that reflect a strong faith and secure hope. Let’s not just talk about prayer, and have seminars on prayer, and read books about prayer, and listening to sermons on prayer. Let us pray. The souls of men and women hang in the balance.

Study 6: What Happens When A Church Prays? (Acts 12:5)

The Apostle Peter was in prison, guarded by sixteen soldiers, waiting to be executed the next day by orders of King Herod, Roman governor over Palestine. Peter was asleep ready and prepared to meet God. There would be no eleventh hour reprieve. Or, so he thought. As the story unfolds, its teller, Luke, knows something that Peter and the guards and King Herod do not know: "But the church was earnestly praying to God for him" (Acts 12:5 NIV). This story was included in the Scriptures not just to provide a biographical slice of Peter's life. It was placed in the New Testament to remind the church of their responsibility to pray and the power that is available to the church when she does pray.

What can we learn from a church that prays? People's needs are met. Just as Peter was in prison, many people are locked up. Their cell is not cold and dark cement surrounded by steel bars with a stained toilet in the corner, but it is nevertheless a jail. Many people are in a prison of pain—emotional rejection, physical hardship, or spiritual suffering; others are in chains of confusion—either through a loss of job, an unhappy home life, an unfulfilled vocation. Others are bound by their own inadequacies or inferiorities. These people are hurting and are in desperate need of prayer.

Because the early church prayed, Peter was released from his prison. Miraculously, the chains fell off and he walked out of the prison without even a fight.

I find it highly interesting that the main character of this story doubted. Peter's faith was imperfect (see Acts 12:9). The church's faith was imperfect (see Acts 12:14-15).

It was not the perfect faith of a powerful church that rescued Peter from prison, for the believers praying for Peter's deliverance didn't even have enough faith to leave the front door unlocked. Those believers did not know for sure what God would do for Peter, but they knew what God could do. And their imperfect faith, coupled with fervent, persistent prayer, moved the hand of God.

Don't put them down for their unbelief. Often we are in the same position. Their strange mixture of faith and fear should inspire us to continue praying earnestly even though we may not have perfect faith. God can work in spite of our imperfect faith. Have you ever prayed about something then doubted if God could do something about it? Perhaps, you prayed for a job but saw no way that you could get it. But you did! Or, perhaps you prayed for a certain outcome at work or at home. "But there's no way that will happen," you thought. And what do you know what? It happened just as you prayed. Maybe not in your timing, but nevertheless, the results were what you had hoped for.

What the early church did for Peter, our church can do for those people around us who are imprisoned. And if we are the one's imprisoned, we too can experience freedom from the chains that bind us. But first we must pray. And if we will, God has a lot of surprises in store for us.

Study 7: The Prayer Force (Acts 6:1-4)

In December of 1944 the atmosphere was tense at Third Army headquarters in France, recalls George Metcalf, a chaplain in General George S. Patton's army. At a time when the allies sensed victory was within reach, Hitler launched a surprise attack of 25 armored divisions through the Ardennes region in Belgium. During what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge, thousands of Nazi troops and tanks advanced relentlessly through the allied lines, creating havoc and confusion. Complicating matters was the inclement weather. For days it had been snowing and a heavy fog descended on the area, effectively shielding the Nazi advance from an Allied air attack.

Then on December 22, at 8 a.m. General Patton phoned Metcalf with this simple, urgent request: "Chaplain, do you have any prayers for fair weather? Our men are having a rough time without air cover in the Ardennes, and the ceiling is too low for flying." Although an iron-tough military genius, General Patton was also a deeply spiritual man who took his faith very seriously. Even during the height of battle, he seldom missed Sunday services. Chaplain Metcalf assured the general he would write a suitable prayer. Working with other chaplains, Metcalf wrote a short prayer asking for God's help in the allies through their crisis. He then had the prayer delivered to General Patton who not only used it personally but sent it out with a Christmas greeting to everyone in the Third Army. Over the next few days hundreds and possibly thousands offered that prayer for fair weather.

The effect of that prayer was immediate and dramatic. On December 23, soldiers, blinking in the bright sunlight, looked up into a clear blue sky laced with Allied aircraft successfully pushing back the Nazi advance. The war would end 19 weeks later. This was the prayer that General Patton and his troops offered:

"Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech thee, of thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon thee, that armed with thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies, and establish thy justice among men and nations."

General Patton was a prayer warrior. His faith propelled him to count on God for large results. He is not alone.

The apostles listed preaching the Word and prayer to God as their two most important ministries (Acts 6:1-4). They became people of authority and people of power as a result of their study of the Bible and the practice of prayer. The early believers were spiritual warriors. They knew that prayer was their main offensive weapon in winning the battle.

For us to be spiritual warriors we had better come to that same realization. Prayer is the indispensable and vital function of a believer. No aspect of our Christian life is more essential and crucial to our personal growth and health and the church's growth and health than spending time with God. We are never taller than when we are on our knees. We are never stronger than when we are confessing our weaknesses. We are never bolder in public than when we are quiet before God in private. Those individuals and churches that have been mightily used by God have been great prayers. Prayer warriors, like those mentioned in the book of Acts and those whose stories are told in annals of history, make prayer a way of life. They view prayer as the main business of their lives.