

Christian Community is Marked by Prayer

A sermon on Acts 12

Knox White @ Faith Tacoma PCA

August 18, 2024 AM

This will be the third sermon in a mini-series that Pastor Steven has asked me to preach leading up to the launch of our small group ministry in September. In this sermon my primary goal will be to provide something of a theological rationale for why we have included prayer as a significant element of our small group meetings. But, as I mentioned in the previous two sermons, the application of these truths isn't limited to small groups. There are many ways to pray, and so I hope that what follows generally reminds us of why prayer is woven into everything our church does, most notably the Wednesday evening prayer meeting.

There are many Biblical passages that we could draw from as we consider the topic of prayer, but I decided to go with Acts 12 for a few reasons. First, because Acts 12 is the very next passage in our evening series on Acts. That is helpful in terms of shared context and recent memory. Secondly, because Acts 12 not only instructs us in the art of prayer, but because it models a prayer meeting of the apostolic church, and so there is obvious overlap with our small group structure. Thirdly, because Acts 12 is a balanced and complex portrait of prayer. Not only does it challenge us by illustrating the effectiveness of prayer, I think we will also see that it resonates with us by implicitly acknowledging the difficulty of prayer.

As I was studying for this sermon, as is so often the case, I discovered that the path is already well-worn. You can find on our website that Pastor Rayburn preached on verses 1-19 of this chapter twice about 7 to 8 years ago, and one of those sermons gave a rationale for the Wednesday evening prayer meeting. While my approach to this chapter won't be identical to either of those sermons, I do want to acknowledge my indebtedness to many of his insights and observations.¹ I also want to encourage those of you who either weren't here in May of 2017 or were here but need a reminder, to go back and listen to his explanation of the theological thinking behind our Wednesday evening prayer meeting.

Acts 12.

¹ Rayburn, Robert S. "The Prayer Meeting" Acts 12:1-14. May 28, 2017. And "The Early Church at Prayer" Acts 12:1-19. March 13, 2016. FaithTacoma.org.

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles in front of you, and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Acts 12 illustrates four reasons why Christian community should be marked by prayer.

The first is simply that we need prayer. Look again at Acts 12 and consider that prayer is the marriage of two realizations: our weakness and God's strength. Look again at verses 1-5 and consider how helpless the church's situation looked from a human perspective. Peter was in maximum security prison, chained to two guards in a prison cell, and guarded outside with two more soldiers, who were guarding him at the cost of their lives. Persecution against the church had expanded from the religious authorities (*the Sanhedrin in chapters 4-7*) to the civil authorities (*King Herod here in chapter 12*). Remember how ominous the name "Herod" must have been for the disciples. It was another King Herod (*the grandfather of this one actually*) who hunted baby Jesus and slaughtered the baby boys of Bethlehem. It was a Herod who had ordered John the Baptist to be beheaded (*remember just a few months ago how Pastor Steven showed us the contrast in Mark 6 between the gruesome banquet of Herod and the generous banquet of Jesus*). It was a Herod who conspired against Jesus, questioning and mocking him, before sending him on to Pilate hours before his death. This Herod in Acts 12 had already killed one of Jesus' inner ring of disciples, and now had their leader, Peter, in his clutches.

From a human perspective, Herod had virtually every kind of strength on his side: the favor of the Jewish authorities, the backing of Rome, wealth, political authority and power, soldiers at his command, and more. The church had none of these. She was an infant, breakaway movement within Judaism, which was itself a small and oppressed nation. At this moment the church was a minority within a minority, having virtually no wealth or property, no official standing, and certainly no political or military power.

But what the church did have was faith in her sovereign Lord. Remember that in Acts 4 the church had faced a similar situation when Peter and John were arrested and questioned by the Sadducees. Upon their release, the church had gathered to pray, and Luke summarized their prayers in that chapter. Remember that they began that prayer with the words, "sovereign lord" and then proceeded to pray through Psalm 2, applying it to their situation, identifying Jesus with the Lord's anointed, and the authorities (*Herod, Pontius Pilate and the Sandhedrin*) with the "rulers of the earth" who resist the Lord.

That window into their prayer life demonstrates their confidence in the Lord's authority and power. Not only did they see Jesus as the rightful King of this world, but they also believed He had the strength and the will to subdue those who resisted Him.

Like mixing baking soda with vinegar, it's the combination of these two elements (*confidence in God's strength and an acknowledgement of our weakness*) that causes prayer to bubble over.

Of course, the reality is that all people need prayer at all times. Every one of us, whether Christian or pagan, rich or poor, healthy or sick, happy or sad, young or old, is entirely dependent on the mercy and goodness of God at every moment. Whether we know it or not, we are all ignorant, weak, small, and vulnerable. Every one of us lives in the shadow of 1,000 dangers, and, for all we know, each of us is only a few moments and a few inches away from disaster, grief, and death.

But, in our sinful, fallen nature, most of us most of the time don't like to admit our creaturely limitations, our weakness and vulnerability, our dependence, or the depths of our need for God's protection and blessing. And so, the unbelieving world often scorns prayer as sentimentality, useless superstition, and a waste of time. And even as Christians, we are sometimes prayerless.

This is why prayer is an index of faith. Do we see ourselves with accuracy? Do we realize that we are creatures of dust and sinners? Do we believe that the Lord is willing and able to shepherd us through each step of this life? If so, then we will pray. Have we bought into worldly delusions of self-sufficiency and self-determination? Do we doubt the Lord's promises? Then we won't.

Speaking of the need for faith to be demonstrated by good works, James writes, "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Reflecting on Acts 12, we might paraphrase James' statement this way, "Show me your faith apart from prayer, and I will show you my faith by prayer."

Christian, what does your prayer life say about your faith?

Have difficulties, frustrations, disappointments, and griefs recently reminded you of your limitations and weaknesses? Perhaps the Lord means to grow your faith by renewing and deepening your prayer life.

One of our hopes is that small groups would be a time and place where many of you share your difficulties, frustrations, disappointments, griefs, and yes, even your weaknesses. Our hope is that as groups get to know each other on a deeper level through hospitality and sermon discussion, that enough trust would develop that you are willing to share your weaknesses with each other. Not only does that allow us to bear each other's burdens, but it gives us the opportunity to pray for each other in a focused and intimate way. If we aren't willing to share our weaknesses, how well do we really know each other? If we don't know each other, then how will we pray effectively and accurately for each other?

The need for prayer.

Secondly, the example of prayer. Look again at Acts 12 and consider how it models corporate prayer for us. One of the reasons that I think this description of a prayer meeting is not merely descriptive, but prescriptive, is that Luke so often portrays the apostolic church as gathering for prayer. Even though we aren't even halfway through the book of Acts, we've already seen many examples of prayer meetings so far. That fact alone ought to clue us into the importance of gathered prayer. But

even more significant than the repetition, we've begun to see a pattern in those examples: when the church prays, the plot moves forward.

In Acts 1, the replacement of Judas happened in the context of a prayer meeting. Acts 2:1 implied that the initial outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost also happened in the context of a prayer meeting. The end of Acts 2 teaches us that regular, gathered prayer was one of the engines behind the marvelous generosity, unity, and growth of the apostolic church. In Acts 4, the church's immediate response to her first blush with organized opposition was a prayer meeting, and it resulted in the place being shaken and renewed boldness in witness. In Acts 6, "the seven" (*who may have been the church's first deacons*) were set apart by prayer, and then Luke comments on how the church continued to grow and flourish, especially among the Jewish priests. In Acts 7 Steven's dying act was to pray for his persecutors, and then, in chapter 9 one of those persecutors, Saul, was dramatically converted, eventually becoming the greatest of the apostles. In Acts 9, Peter prayed for Dorcas, and she was raised from the dead. In Acts 10 both Peter and Cornelius received theologically significant visions while they were praying.

If we were to skip ahead in Acts, we could continue to multiply examples, but the point is clear enough from what we've already seen so far: the kingdom of God advances when the church prays.

Are you distressed by declining church attendance and waning Christian influence? Are you burdened by the thought of unbelievers leaving this life without Christ? Are you saddened and frustrated by churches falling deep into error and immorality? Then I want to encourage you to follow the example of the apostolic church: let us come together for earnest prayer.

If you don't already attend our weekly prayer meeting, then let me simply remind you that this is exactly what we do each Wednesday evening. This is a focused time of kingdom-oriented prayer. To modify another pastor's description of worship, each prayer meeting is another chance to swing the battering ram of prayer against the gates of hell.²

But this pattern (*i.e. that the kingdom advances when the church prays*) which is so clear in the book of Acts does not originate with the apostles. On the contrary, the apostles learned it from the Lord Jesus. Look again at verse 5 and consider how this example of prayer in Acts 12 hearkens back to the prayer life of the Lord Jesus. The English word translated here as "earnest" (*literally "stretched out" in Greek*) is only used two other times in the Greek Scriptures: one of those is Luke 22:44, which reads, "And being in agony, he [*Jesus*] prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." Given how rare this word is and how similar the context of Acts 12 is to Luke 22, it seems that Luke is inviting us to reflect on how the disciples here are imitating the prayer life of Jesus. Remember that in Luke 22, Jesus held a late night prayer vigil on the eve of the greatest

² Doug Wilson (I don't recall the reference!) In the original context, Wilson was referring to Sunday morning worship as "swinging a battering ram against the gates of hell" (Matt 16:18). How much more so does the sentiment apply to a gathered time of kingdom-oriented prayer!

kingdom advance: His passion, death, and resurrection. Remember as well how Jesus exhorted his disciples to follow his example of “watching and praying,” but they fell asleep instead.

Here in Acts 12, the preeminent apostle of Jesus, Peter, is also on the eve of his death. Like Jesus, Peter too has been wrongfully arrested and is about to be unjustly accused by the Jewish people around the time of Passover. Like Jesus on the cross, Peter is also confined between two men. As Jesus laid in the darkness of the tomb, so here Peter lays in prison, sleeping in the dead of night. As Jesus was speared in the side to ensure his death, Peter here is struck in the side to raise him from this symbolic death of sleep and imprisonment. Angels were present at the resurrection of Jesus, and it is an angel which leads Peter back to his normal life. And as the first witness of Jesus’ resurrection was a woman whom the other disciples did not believe at first, so the first witness of Peter’s symbolic resurrection is a woman whom the disciples did not believe.

These many parallels between Acts 12 and Luke 22 remind us that the Lord is in the business of conforming His disciples into the image of Christ. Acts 12 illustrates two essential aspects of that image: Christ suffers righteously (*illustrated here by Peter*) and Christ overcomes by earnest prayer (*illustrated here by the church*). It was through earnest prayer on the Mount of Olives that Jesus overcame the temptation to avoid the cross, “not my will, but your will be done.” It was through earnest prayer that Jesus was strengthened to endure the cross, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (John 17:1). And it was through the earnest prayer of the church that Peter was delivered from prison and death.

Compare Luke 22 with Acts 12, and you can see that the disciples of Jesus have matured. They have become more like Jesus than they were in Luke 22. They do not fail Peter the way they failed Jesus. Instead of falling asleep, the disciples in Acts 12 prayed through the night for Peter, and their prayers were effective.

Acts 12 is a reminder that when suffering, trials, injustice, and the threat of death bring us to our knees in our earnest prayer, we are being conformed to the image of a suffering and praying Jesus. Does your life reflect that pattern?

The example of prayer.

Thirdly, Acts 12 encourages us to be marked by prayer by illustrating the effectiveness of prayer. In one sense we just noted an aspect of the effectiveness of prayer: it is one way that the Lord conforms us to the image of Jesus. But notice that Acts 12 illustrates the effectiveness of prayer in two additional senses.

First, it shows us that God delivers his people by means of prayer. The theme of deliverance is obviously illustrated here by displays of supernatural power: chains falling off, heavenly light, angels, gates automatically opening, guards somehow not seeing what is happening, and Peter’s trance. But the theme of deliverance is also illustrated by allusions to Passover and the Exodus. Look again at this

passage and notice them with me: Peter, like the Israelites, is in bondage to a tyrannical, Pharaoh-like ruler (verse 1). Peter's deliverance happens at the same time of year as the Passover (verses 3-4), and, like Passover, is associated with nighttime. Both accounts have an angel who brings deliverance to God's people and death to God's enemies. (verses 9 and 23). And both emphasize getting dressed and leaving in haste (verse 8).

Just as Exodus 2:23-24 emphasizes that the deliverance of Israel began with the Lord hearing their groanings and cries, so Acts 12 emphasizes that it was the prayers of God's people which moved the Lord to deliver Peter.

But Acts 12 also illustrates the effectiveness of prayer in another sense, one that is less obvious, but equally significant. It shows us that the Lord not only answers prayer by delivering His people, but also by judging His enemies. Look again at verses 20-23 and notice that Luke juxtaposes the story of Peter's deliverance with the story of Herod's judgment. Although preachers and commentators often treat these stories separately (*which is perfectly legitimate given how much material there is to work with in each account*), there can be little doubt that Luke intended for us to see a connection between the two.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible the deliverance of God's people was usually tied up with the destruction of God's enemies (*think for example of the men of Sodom, Pharaoh, Goliath, Haman, or the armies of Rabshakeh for example*). The same is true here.

Although chapter 12 verse 5 does not tell us the specific content of the church's prayers in this circumstance, we do know that when they were in a similar situation in Acts 4, they prayed through Psalm 2, which includes warnings for the kings and rulers who resist the Lord's anointed. According to verse 9 of Psalm 2 he "shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Acts 12:20-23 dramatically illustrates how the Lord Jesus heard these prayers, and how He judged this oppressor (Herod) of His people. Like a potter's vessel, Herod's body was broken by the Lord's angel. In other words, Acts 12:20-23 is Psalm 2 enacted.

But Acts 12:20-23 also elucidates the connection between oppressing the Lord's people and opposing the Lord's sovereignty. Herod did not fear God; Herod wanted to be God, as evidenced by the fact that he accepted worship (verse 22-23). Because He did not fear God, He did not submit to the rule of His Son, Jesus Christ. Instead he tyrannized God's people.

This is the heart of tyranny: autonomous self-worship. If a human authority will not acknowledge God's ultimate authority over him, it's only a matter of time before he starts acting like he is god, the arbiter of right and wrong, unquestionable, and possessing unqualified authority.³

³ Kudos to Doug Wilson for helping me see the connections tyranny and atheism on the one hand, and limited government and God's sovereignty on the other.

Both the attitude of autonomous self-worship and the action of oppression invite the Lord's judgment, because He is jealous for His own glory and He is a protector of His people.

Acts 12 is, thus, a reminder that prayer is an act of spiritual warfare. Wherever God's people are oppressed by enemies, whether they be tyrannical governments like Communist North Korea, enslaving addictions like pornography or drug addiction, or destructive lies of the Evil One, we can fight on behalf of God's people by prayer. Prayer is our most effective weapon against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The effectiveness of prayer.

Lastly, the difficulty of prayer.

Hopefully it has been obvious how the first three points (*the need, example, and effectiveness of prayer*) encourage us to pray together. I think our last point this morning will as well, but in more roundabout kind of way.

Look again at verses 14-16 and consider both the comedy and the irony of this moment when Peter is left knocking at the door and Rhoda is unsuccessfully trying to convince the disciples that Peter has been set free. As one commentator points out, Peter has a harder time getting into his own church than he does getting out of jail! While I think we are meant to appreciate the Lord's sense of humor in this moment, I also wonder if we are meant to reflect on the faith of these disciples. Even as they prayed for Peter's release, they were incredulous when it happened.

Did they believe that the Lord would answer their prayers to deliver Peter? Clearly they believed enough to spend the night in prayer. But apparently not enough to believe Rhoda's report that Peter was standing outside the door.

I think there is some encouragement for us in this comical moment. Even these early disciples who rubbed shoulders with apostles, who witnessed miracles, and who were part of the remarkable growth of the early church...even they faltered in their faith...even they were taken aback when the Lord gave them exactly what they asked for.

It's a helpful reminder that, exemplary as they were, these disciples were still human beings like you and me, subject to the same fears, doubts, discouragement, and weakness.

In one of his sermons on this passage, Pastor Rayburn said this, "*There is nothing more difficult in the life of mankind than living by faith, and that makes prayer – which is an exercise of pure faith – as difficult as anything Christians ever do. It is difficult to believe that God will answer; it is even difficult to believe that he has answered, even when the answer is knocking on your front gate! Any thoughtful Christian will tell you that he or she often struggles to pray earnestly and specifically precisely because he or she doubts it will do any good. And they will hurry on to tell you that such doubts are nonsense because if they stop to think about it, quite apart from what the Word of God tells us about prayer and*

God’s promise to hear and answer our prayer, they can begin to enumerate a long list of prayers they have made to God that he has answered wonderfully.⁴

I want to suggest to you this morning that this is one of the main reasons that the kind of prayer we do together on Wednesday nights and that we plan to do in small groups is so important. Our faith is weak and inconsistent; we need help and encouragement to pray earnestly, faithfully, and persistently.

But even more important than that is the truth that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father now, praying for us. And even when we falter in prayer, He will not.

May we be a people marked by prayer! Amen.

Works Consulted

Hughes, R Kent. Acts: The Church Afire. Preaching the Word Series. Crossway.

Leithart, Peter. Bejon, James. Meyers, Jeff. Roberts, Alistair. Acts 12. The Book of Acts: A Podcast Series. April 6, 2023. Theopolis App

Peterson, David G. The Acts of the Apostles. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Eerdmans.

Piper, John. “Explosive Fellowship.” September 9, 1990

<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/explosive-fellowship>

Rayburn, Robert S. The Early Church at Prayer Acts 12:1-19. March 13, 2016. FaithTacoma.org

Rayburn, Robert S. The Prayer Meeting Acts 12:1-14. May 28, 2017. FaithTacoma.org

Roberts, Alistair. Acts 13. The Book of Acts: Biblical Reflections

Stott, John R. W. The Message of Acts. The Bible Speaks Today. Intervarsity Press Academic

Waters, Guy. Acts. EP Study Commentary.

Witherington, Ben. The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary. Eerdmans.

⁴ Rayburn, Robert S. The Early Church at Prayer Acts 12:1-19. March 13, 2016. FaithTacoma.org