



CONTINUALLY DEVOTED: PRAYING

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The early church of the book of Acts was in love with Jesus Christ, who loved them and gave Himself for them, and they were alive with the present power of the Holy Spirit!

The Church was spiritually young and still immature, but they were listening to God and to each other, and growing every day.

Acts 2:42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

In this verse, Luke identified four spiritually seismic shifts that became visible in the church community:

- They attended to the apostles' teaching
- They maximized fellowship (communion)
- They broke bread together
- They learned to pray

Teaching

As a result of their devotion to the apostles' teaching...

Acts 2:43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

I am not suggesting that we turn the church into a circus of spectacles, but that we make welcome the Holy Spirit, permitting Him to move upon us and move within us, to continue what Jesus began both to do and to teach (Acts 1:1).

Fellowship

They also expressed their devotion to fellowship with the Lord and each other when...

Acts 2:44 All those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.

We don't need to give up or give away all that God has entrusted us with, but we do need to give the ownership back to Him, and see ourselves as stewards of His riches. This leads to active fellowship and compassionate service.

Breaking Bread

The teaching and the fellowship were so good that they continued to celebrate God's goodness by breaking bread together, showing hospitality even to the newcomers among them.

Acts 2:46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,

Prayer

Today, we conclude this series by discussing what it means to become Devoted to Prayer.

It's appropriate for us to end on this note, for this is the very note on which this astounding story began. After Jesus commanded His disciples *"not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'"* (Acts 1:4-5), then, He left them, returning to His Father in Heaven.

In obedience to His command, they met together in an upper room in the city. Luke described their meetings in this way: *"These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers"* (Acts 1:14).

They began with prayer, and they continued in prayer. They waited in prayer. They devoted themselves to prayer. After ten days of prayer... well, you know what happened... *"Suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance"* (Acts 2:2-4).

The city was moved, and a crowd gathered. Peter preached about the Resurrected Christ, whom they had executed and buried, only seven weeks ago. His hearers were convicted of their wrongdoing and asked what to do. Peter told them to repent and give their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. 3,000 heard and believed and repented and were baptized that same day.

Some short time later, as Peter and John headed to the temple for afternoon prayer—that was an essential purpose for attending meetings in the temple—they encountered a lame man who was begging outside. Peter spoke the name of Jesus over him and the lame man was healed on the spot.

The worshipers were moved, and a crowd gathered. Peter preached about the Resurrected Christ who heals. The temple guards arrested Peter and John and put them in prison for speaking about Jesus in this way. *“But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand”* (Acts 4:4).

This is not a picture of the power of prayer (as some kind of abstract religious behavior), but it is a picture of the power of a praying people. The early church, the living church, were (and are still) a people of prayer. This activity, more than any other, marked them, and will mark us, as the people of God.

We can’t just leave Peter and John in prison! The next day, they stood before the council of priests, and declared to *them* what they had told the crowd: *“Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health”* (Acts 4:10).

The council could not deny or ignore that “a noteworthy miracle” had occurred, so they charged the disciples not to speak any more about Jesus.

“When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord” (Acts 4:23-24)—they prayed, saying, *“Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus”* (Acts 4:29-30).

Praying together like that, and asking God to help us bear clear and convincing witness of His great name, and asking Him to work with us with attesting signs and wonders—those are prayers that God is pleased to answer.

“And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

This was the character of the daily life of that early, spiritually alive and thriving church—they prayed together, in large groups, in small groups, and individually.

As their numbers increased, so did their challenges and issues. How did they respond? They were careful *not* to give up prayer.

“Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of [some]... So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said... ‘Brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ The statement found approval with the whole congregation” (Acts 6:1-4).

The “whole congregation” chose to keep prayer primary and central to their life together.

They prayed for people to repent. They prayed for people to be saved. They prayed for people to be healed. They prayed for people to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They punctuated their days with prayer, before and after meals, before they slept at night and upon rising in the morning.

Prayer linked Peter and a Roman soldier, Cornelius, and led to his entire household being saved and filled with the Spirit (Acts 9-11), as the Message of Jesus broke the bounds of Judaism and began to flood the nations of the world. Prayer was the key.

The spirit of the world reacted to that invasion and had James, pastor of the church in Jerusalem beheaded, and Peter imprisoned, destined for the same brutal end. *“But prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God” (Acts 12:5).* The result was astonishing! An “angel of the Lord” appeared in his prison cell, loosed his chains, covered the eyes of all the guards, opened the iron gates, and escorted Peter out into the city streets. When Peter realized that this was not a dream, *“he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying” (Acts 12:12).*

Meanwhile, Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee zealous for the traditions of the elders, was persecuting the followers of Jesus. He was arrested by the blinding presence of Jesus in the midst of a journey to Damascus, and became blind for three days, while he waited for the Lord’s instructions of what to do next. One of the disciples in that city, named Ananias, came to the house where Saul was staying to pray for him. *“And after laying his hands on [Saul, Ananias] said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized” (Acts 9:17-18).*

The Gospel message was exploding! With a burden to carry it as far as they could, in the midst of a gathering, as they worshipped the Lord, *“the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away”* (Acts 13:2-3).

Saul, who was later called by his Roman name, Paul, did not have an easy mission. On his way to a place of prayer, he and Silas were hounded by a demonized woman. Paul cast out the demon and a crowd was stirred, and they were seized and dragged to the city center, where the judges had them beaten with rods and thrown into a dungeon, their feet fastened in stocks. *“But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened”* (Acts 16:25-26).

Amazing as that was, it was but the means to a still greater end: the jailer, and all his household, put their trust in Jesus and were converted that night. The jailhouse became a house of prayer.

Paul was eventually imprisoned again in Rome, and in the final chapter of this phenomenal account of the Spirit’s work among the apostles, Luke included Paul’s final recorded address, in which he quoted God’s commission to him, from the words of Isaiah the prophet: *“Go to this people and say, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them’”* (Acts 28:26-27).

Do you hear it? Do you see what had happened to the people of Israel? Despite the law and the prophets, despite their ritual worship, they had become deaf and blind, unmoved by what moved the heart of God.

Don’t scoff at their unbelief. Don’t judge them harshly. We are more like them than we are willing to admit. What could generate such a disparity between religion and relationship? No understanding of the truth, no perception of the Spirit—and the result: no reception of God’s grace, no release of God’s power.

It wasn’t that they *never* prayed (they prayed every day). But they had lost the *fire* of prayer (I’m not referring to energetic or boisterous expressions, or loud or eloquent words). The fire of prayer, that must be kindled and maintained on the altar of our hearts, is our passionate pursuit of the person of Jesus Christ (not the religion that surrounds Him, but Himself, our Savior, our Healer, and our Friend).

When God's people—you or I—cease to organically and naturally worship the Lord and communicate with Him in prayer, our faith wilts and we withdraw into empty religious forms of activity and expression. Hearing, without understanding; seeing, without perceiving; meeting, without communing; eating, without fellowship; singing, without worshipping; praying, without changing; promoting Jesus, without impact.

In the words of Ezekiel: *"Let us examine and probe our ways, and let us return to the Lord"* (Lamentations 3:40). And Hosea: *"Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him, 'Take away all iniquity and receive us graciously, that we may present the fruit of our lips [as a sacrifice of worship]'"* (Hosea 14:2). And Isaiah: *"Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, [who] will have compassion on him, and to our God, [who] will abundantly pardon"* (Isaiah 55:6-7).

Prayer is the breath and language of the Church. If we do not pray (breathe), we will die a slow death. If we do not pray (speak with God) we will grow increasingly dull.

Christ's living Church is characterized by earnest, fervent, continuous prayer. God spoke through Isaiah, saying, *"I will bring [My faithful ones] to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer... For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples"* (Isaiah 56:7). In His zeal for God, Jesus proclaimed the same thought. How can we do less?

Let's return to Acts 2 where we began. For the first believers, it looked like this:

Acts 2:46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple... ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Whether in the church house ("the temple") or in their family homes, they "continued" in unity of spirit ("one mind"), praying to and praising God.

Verse 42 tells us they continually devoted themselves "to prayer."

Verse 46 tells us where—"in the temple" and "from house to house."

Verse 47 tells us how—"praising God and having favor with all the people."

Our Lord Jesus said:

Matthew 6:9 "Pray, then, in this way:

'Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'

Today, will you set your mind to devote yourself to prayer? It is the breath and language of the Church.

Based on the prayer that Jesus offered as our guide, let these seven stages of prayer lead you into His presence:

PRAISE the Father: *"Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name."*
Lift your voice in praise to God our Father for His great goodness.

PROCLAIM the Kingdom: *"Your kingdom come."*
Over those areas in your world where the influence of His Kingdom is seldom seen, declare its coming today. Be specific.

PETITION His will: *"Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*
Ask Him to have His way in lives and circumstances, beginning with your own.

PROVISION for today: *"Give us this day our daily bread."*
What do you need in terms of material provision? Ask Him for it.

PARTNERSHIP exchange: *"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."*
Who do you need to forgive? Do it now, so that you, in turn, may receive forgiveness from the Lord.

PROTECTIVE covering: *"Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil."*
Pray for wisdom and discernment, so you are not duped or misled, so that evil schemes are kept from your door.

PRAISE the King: *"Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."*
Declare His power, His wisdom, His greatness, His sufficiency, His mastery, His everlasting glory!

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the peoples."