

Habits of a healthy church: A healthy church is a praying church

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[0 : 00] So this evening, from the book of Acts, we're thinking about this truth, that a healthy church is a praying church. And we're going to look at various texts in the book of Acts in a few moments to see that, but it's important for us to remember that prayer changes the world.

That's how Doug Kelly begins his really helpful book on prayer. He says, A prayer makes good things happen because it gets God's will done and thus brings down his best blessings. We pray your kingdom come, your will be done. James O. Fraser, a famous missionary in southwest China to the Lizu people, said, it will only be known on the last day how much has been accomplished in missions by the prayers of earnest believers at home. Echoing what people in church history and mission history have said, that prayer is the work of mission. J.D. Greer, in his recent book, Just Ask, which I know some of us have been reading, he says, prayer is a preordained way that God has appointed for executing his will on earth. He goes on to say, we were saved to pray. God's design is that his people's prayers be instruments achieving his purposes. That's the way God has wired the world. So since all those things are true, prayer changes the world, prayer changes mission, prayer is designed by God to achieve his purpose, then we need to ask ourselves the question, why do we struggle to pray? Why don't we pray? Perhaps a moment of honesty, I would have us say, well, often it's because we're busy. Perhaps we'd say, well, often it just seems really ordinary, or I find it really awkward. Maybe we would say, well, I pray and nothing seems to change, I kind of give up. Or I don't seem to change, so it seems pointless. If prayer is the oxygen of the soul, do we find ourselves tonight as Christians and as a local church gasping for breath? Are we lacking power because we are not praying? The Bible reminds us over and over that our efforts, even our good efforts at serving God without prayer and without the Holy Spirit will serve no effect. A healthy church is a praying church. But we struggle with prayer. The church struggles with prayer. So to counter our struggles, in part, I want to remind us from the book of Acts of the vital place of prayer in the church from the beginning, and also to remind us of stories from God's Word and church history to encourage us about the value of prayer, the priority of prayer, so that we would pray, that we'd pray together, that we'd be praying often. Spurgeon, the great preacher, said, asking is the rule of the kingdom, so that we've learned to ask boldly because we understand that God has made us to pray for his kingdom to come. So the first section of God's Word we're going to look at tonight is from Acts chapter 1, verses 6 to 14, and our big point that we're going to see is that a healthy church is united in prayer. So Acts chapter 1, this is just as Jesus is about to depart. Then they gathered round him, so that's the eleven disciples around Jesus, and asked him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, it is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. After he had said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath-day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas,

[5 : 11] Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother

of Jesus, and with his brothers. So that's their pattern as they are waiting for the Spirit. And then Acts chapter 2, verse 42, after Peter's sermon at Pentecost, after the Spirit has come to the church, we read, they devoted themselves to the following things, to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. So a healthy church is united in prayer, and we see that because that's the pattern from the beginning. So here's the apostles, and the apostles are appointed by Jesus as witnesses to Christ. And Jesus has told them, and they know that they need the Spirit.

And Jesus said to them, the Spirit will help you to remember all that I taught. And Jesus said to them, the Spirit will help you to speak when you find yourself having to bear witness for Jesus, even in the face of opposition. And the Spirit within them would cause them to seek the glory of Jesus, because that's what the Spirit wants, for Jesus to be glorified. So their first task, in verse 4, is to wait for the gift my Father promised.

To wait for the gift of the Spirit before beginning the mission of Jesus, continuing the mission of Jesus in the world. And so we find them waiting, we find them seeing Jesus ascend, and then they return back to the city as they were commanded. And in verse 13 and 14, we meet this church, and they're a church who are praying together, and they're a mixed group, aren't they? So the apostles are there, the 11 disciples, with the exception of Judas, are there. And we find that women are there gathering to pray.

We find a special mention of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and also the brothers of Jesus. So sceptical of him, before meeting the risen Lord Jesus, now they're believers in him as Lord, God, and Savior.

And what does it say? They all join together constantly in prayer. So the beginning of church life was marked by seasons of united prayer. There is togetherness. They are in one place, and they have one heart.

[7 : 48] This isn't a one-off thing. This is something they're doing constantly, because they are aware of the size of their task. Jesus has left.

They need to continue the mission of Jesus. They need to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. By their preaching and teaching, by the life that they live together, they'll be drawing people into the kingdom of God. They are representing Jesus, and they know they need the Spirit, and they know they need prayer. And then after Pentecost, the first church, so these 3,000 people who are converted by Peter's sermon, what does it say about them? It says they, 242, are devoted to prayer. Here's how they express their fellowship. Here's how they express their worship in meeting together to pray. Sometimes they would do that in a formal setting. So chapter 3, verse 1, we read, one day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer, at three in the afternoon.

So as every Jewish person in the vicinity would gather to pray, so these first Christians would gather to pray. Their prayers are different, because Jesus said, we call God Father. But other times, their prayers were informal. In their house meetings, they were still devoted to prayer. So at all times, formal, informal, this is a church united and devoted to prayer. And that makes sense.

The apostles had been with Jesus. Jesus, the ultimate man of prayer. Remember, they asked Jesus, teach us to pray. They heard Jesus teach. When you pray, say this. Not if you pray.

[9 : 40] Followers of Jesus pray. Instinct. They heard Jesus invite them to call God Father. They know they have this wonderful new relationship. And so these brothers and sisters prayed together for the Spirit in order that they would be witnesses. Now let's just pause for breath for a moment.

What connects the Lewis revivals of the 1940s and 50s? There's Duncan Campbell up there. Perhaps some of us have read the account of the Lewis revivals. Perhaps some of us have heard the stories firsthand.

What connects the Lewis revivals with the growth of the church in Korea? So we're really used to seeing Koreans come to study and to come to church and we hear about Korean fellowships. In 1900, only 1% of Korea was Christian. 2000, 29%.

What accounts for the revival, what accounts for the growth of church? Church is prayer. God answers prayer. We can think about that from God's Word. Perhaps one of the most fascinating accounts is when we find Moses in the Old Testament pleading for sinful Israel after they made and began worshipping before the golden calf. And God comes to Moses and says, these people have rebelled. And do you know what? I'm going to start again with you. And what's God doing? He's inviting Moses to stand in the gap, to be an intercessor, to mediate for the people, to claim the promises of God, to claim the covenant. And he prays and God answers.

Peggy and Christine Smith, two elderly sisters on the island of Lewis, praying God's promises for Lewis.

[11 : 39] And God answered and revival came. Prayer is God's means of building the kingdom. And he asks his people to commit to praying together for his kingdom to come and his will to be done.

And I think the question for us is, do we believe that? And if we do, will we commit to praying and praying together? So we have lots of different opportunities to pray, whether that's online on a Monday, whether that's Sunday at five o'clock, whether that's at Wednesdays in community group or centrally.

And do you know, if we understood the importance of prayer, this place would be packed out, wouldn't it? As we'd be calling on God to work in our church and in our city.

It would be a priority for us if we remind ourselves that healthy church is united in prayer and our prayers change the world. So us praying together is vital to God's work in our community and it's vital for us knowing God's power as a church.

Will we commit to praying together? So a healthy church is united in prayer. In a way, building on what we said last week, a healthy church supports preaching with prayer. That's the second thing I want us to notice, and that's from Acts chapter 4. So Acts 3 and 4, in a one long narrative, you find Peter and John, and Peter heals a lame beggar. And this gets the attention of the Sanhedrin, and they eventually end up being arrested and they're told to stop speaking about Jesus. Chapter 4.

[13 : 46] They're then let out and we find the disciples on their release, Peter and John, coming back to the church. So Acts chapter 4, verse 23 to 31. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Psalm 2. Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. 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.

So Peter and John are released. They go back to the church and they go back to prayer. This is their instinct. This is their oxygen. They're in a stressful and a dangerous situation. Just as Jesus faced persecution, he told his followers they too would face persecution. They are experiencing that in their arrest and that in their arrest and that becomes for them a reason to pray. First thing they do, though, is they worship God as they pray. And I think there's a really helpful reminder for us as we pause. In our anxious times, when our hearts get all unsettled, it's an invitation for us to talk to our hearts about our God.

That's where peace comes from. That's where restoration in the midst of anxiety is going to come from when we talk to our hearts about who our God is. And that's what they do here.

And again, just as an aside, we recognize that these first followers of Jesus, that the way that they pray matches the prayer focus of Jesus.

[16 : 34] Concern for the kingdom of God. Concern for the glory of the Father, just as they saw in Jesus, the Savior. So how do they worship as they pray?

Well, notice that they pray to God, acknowledging him as creator. Verse 24, Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

And that's good news. They pray to the one who is in charge. They pray to the God of revelation. So as they pray, Psalm 2, they are seeing it fulfilled in their day.

Jesus is God's anointed king, and the leaders and the nations have conspired against him, but they are powerless to defeat him and his purposes.

In Psalm 2, God laughs at his enemies. His victory is certain and sure, and the resurrection is that demonstration. And they pray and they worship the God of history.

[17 : 45] So in verse 27, they can recognize Herod and Pontius Pilate meeting together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, and they're all conspiring against Jesus, God's holy servant.

But, verse 28, they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. So these evil acts from evil men fulfill God's powerful, loving will to save sinners through the blood of Jesus. So as they pray, they remember those lessons that they learned from Jesus. Focus on God first. The Lord's Prayer, Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done. Because that's a reminder to the church.

It's a reminder to us. Our God is in heaven. He does what pleases him. He is powerful. He is faithful. So when we find ourselves with anxious or doubtful hearts, speak to your heart about God. But the next thing, and this is where we're going to focus, verse 29, Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

[19 : 00] Perhaps that surprises us how they finish that sentence. God, pay attention to the opposition that we are facing, the persecution that we're experiencing.

We might expect and make it go away. But that's not how they pray. Because they heard Jesus say, persecution and suffering is normal. So they pray, please make us bold to preach.

And then in verse 30, they say, stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus. In the early church, those miracles were a sign that these were God's men.

So they're praying, please set your seal of approval on us. Please show that you are working, you are alive, and you are powerful. And see how God answered. 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.

So they pray as a church. God answers. The power of the Holy Spirit comes, and there is more bold preaching that happens. The church functions as witnesses of Jesus.

[20 : 17] Jesus. John Chrysostom makes the observation that the room was shaken, but these disciples were all the more unshaken.

They pray. They have prayer support. They have the Spirit. It made me think of the story we've probably, many of us heard about Spurgeon's church boiler room.

There was one time where some visitors came to meet the famed preacher and to see around his church, and he took them to the huge sanctuary that could see 5,000 in one sitting.

And then he took them downstairs, and he said, well, here is the boiler room. I imagine they were perhaps curious as to why he would pay such attention to that.

But when he opened the door, there was 100 people gathering to pray before the service for the preaching of God's Word. Spurgeon always knew and was happy to testify, my people pray for me.

[21 : 23] And he understood that was such a significant part of his fruitful ministry. In a different era, William Carey, famous as a missionary to India, he had four lifelong friends, some of whom were in ministry, some were Christian friends.

And he said of going to the mission field, so of using the idea of, I guess, coal mines in the day, he said, I will go down into the pits if you will hold the ropes.

He was relying on those friends' steadfast prayer ministry as he looked to preach the gospel in India. A healthy church supports preaching with prayer, is the pattern we find in the book of Acts. I was reading this week about some of the prayers that the persecuted church ask for themselves. And again, it's so striking and humbling. Just as Peter and John, they want prayer for boldness to keep preaching.

So my favorite, this is one of my favorite stories of all time, but my favorite story this week from the persecuted church, from an evangelist a number of years ago in China called Wang Mingdao, who found himself imprisoned for his faith.

[22 : 44] And the church was praying for him. And so he was downhearted. He's in prison. He's an evangelist. He loves to tell people about Jesus, but there's nobody else in his cell. So what is he going to do?

He has a brainwave. He realizes, this could be a ministry for some of us, if he preaches down his toilet, then the sound will carry along the pipes.

And so he begins a wonderful gospel toilet bowl ministry, and he discovers months later that 96 people were converted by those sermons.

The church prayed to support his preaching, and he preached in a novel way, and God worked and was glorified. Last week we said a healthy church is committed to proclaiming God's Word. That's a Sunday by Sunday pulpit thing, but that's an everyday witness from the people of God thing as well. And that needs us to pray, to pray for me and whoever's preaching, but to pray for one another, that we'd have wisdom and boldness as we look to share our faith.

[23 : 48] So again, as we think about this principle and as we look to apply it, will we commit together to make time to pray for Sunday services and for daily conversations and for global mission and for those who desperately need to hear?

So think about William Carey's image. There are people all over the world going down into the pits, engaging in gospel ministry. Will we hold the ropes for them by faithfully praying?

A healthy church supports preaching with prayer. And the last thing I want to say is that a healthy church seeks spiritual protection in prayer.

And this takes us to Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders. So Acts chapter 20, and we're going to read from verse 25 to 36.

Now, so Paul gathers these elders. He's been with them for three years. He's been in the region for seven or eight years or so. Now he's returning to Jerusalem and he loves this church and he shows it in his prayerful concern.

[25 : 05] So let's read Acts 20 from verse 25. Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.

Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

So be on your guard. Remember that for three years, I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now, I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak.

[26 : 20] Remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said, it is more blessed to give than to receive. When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

So in verse 25 to 27, we have that testimony that he has faithfully preached the whole will of God among them. He says, I'm innocent of the blood of anyone.

It's the language of Ezekiel. He sounded a warning. The warning of sin, the warning of God's judgment. He also announced the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus.

And then he gives instruction to the elders. Did you notice it? Keep watch. Be shepherds. Be on guard.

Using that powerful biblical image of sheep and shepherds. They are to be shepherds over the flock, aware, Paul is aware, that they need to be on guard from wolves.

[27 : 24] They need to be guarding the truth. There will be threats from within the church. There will be threats from outside the church. And so no doubt, as Paul brings this message, he anticipates that this will, at very least, lead them to pray for the church and its protection.

Paul won't be there to act as shepherd any longer. So what can he do? What does he do? In verse 32, we see him pray.

It says there, Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace. Committing them to God, the good and true shepherd.

Committing them to the word of grace, that word that's saved, that word that is building them in faith, that word that will, if they persevere in it, give assurance of future inheritance.

He prays, commits them to God and to the word of God. And you read the letter of Ephesians, and you see Paul's consistent pattern of praying for this church that he loves and seeking their spiritual good.

[28 : 45] But he is aware of the danger and of their need of spiritual protection. It says, Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer, lead us not into temptation, internal sinful desires.

Deliver us from evil, external pressures and temptations. Paul shows us, it says, Jesus shows us that we are to seek the spiritual health and protection of the church as we pray, as we pray for one another.

John Knox, church history, gives us a powerful example of this. As he was dying, these words of his are recorded. He said, I have been in meditation these last two nights upon the troubled kirk of God, the church of God, despised of the world but precious in his sight, and have called to God for it and commended it to Christ, her head.

A similar language as Paul used. I have been fighting against Satan who is ever ready to assault. I have fought against spiritual wickednesses and have prevailed.

John Knox, fighting until his last breath for the spiritual health and protection of the church in this country. Paul knew.

[30 : 16] Knox knew. Prayer is necessary to keep the church strong, to keep the church pure, so that the gospel will be effective in bringing many to salvation. So again, as we think about our own prayers, will we commit as we pray to pray for spiritual health, to pray protection over our local church, indeed, over our denomination as well.

Book of Acts tells us in so many places a healthy church is a praying church. The Norwegian theologian Halsby, he says, the essence of prayer is opening the door of our lives to the risen Christ.

Prayer is asking him to come into our human situation with his resurrection power. again, what a wonderful motivation to pray, to know the resurrection power of the Lord Jesus in our own lives, in the life of our church, in the life of our city.

We pray because Jesus loves his church. We pray because Jesus bought his bride with his own precious blood. We pray because Jesus, the good shepherd, is seeking after calling other lost sheep to himself.

And we pray because Jesus works through his church and through our prayers. Absolutely, yes, through our witness, but absolutely, yes, through our prayers to build his kingdom.

[31 : 58] So, the question for each one of us and the question we always need to ask of ourselves as a local church is, am I committed to prayer? And will we commit to praying together for God's kingdom to come, for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Let's pray briefly now. Lord God, thank you for the wonderful book of Acts and for the way that we can look through its pages and see how often your people found themselves praying, how essential and vital and basic it was to their spiritual life.

Lord, we confess as a church and as individuals often we lack motivation to pray. Often we don't make time to pray.

Often we'd rather do anything but pray. But Lord, we ask that by your spirit you would remind us of your purpose in prayer, of the privilege and priority of prayer, so that you might draw us to your throne of grace often, that you would draw us together to your throne of grace, that we would be a church united in our devotion to prayer, that we would be supporting gospel work at home and abroad in prayer, that we would be seeking the spiritual good and welfare of your church as we pray.

Lord, all of us will need to make changes in order to respond. Give us wisdom to know how to make prayer a priority.

[33 : 53] Give us wisdom as church leaders to know how to keep prayer as a priority for us as a local church. Lord, without you we can do nothing.

Without you we are lost. Teach us to pray. Amen.