

# Prayer in the Early Church

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As a church here, one of our main goals is the restoration of first-century Christianity. We aren't interested in following all of the traditions of men that have arisen since Christ ascended into heaven 2000 years ago. We don't think that all of those human innovations constitute improvement. Instead, we believe that those innovations represent a departure from God's will and God's plan. We reject human wisdom in favor of a return to following only God's word.

In many ways, I believe that we do an excellent job of re-creating the early church. The Scripture teaches us that in their assemblies, they read the Bible, prayed, sang, partook of the Lord's Supper, and gave of their means. We do the same. The Scripture also teaches us that they used church funds only to support the preaching of the gospel and to care for needy saints. We do the same. However, simply because we imitate the actions of the early disciples in those areas does not mean that we can fold our hands, sit back, and declare that our work of restoration is finished. Instead, we must look to return to God's original intent not just in our actions but in our attitudes, not just in what we do in the assembly, but in what we do individually. Only as we succeed in doing that can we claim to be the true church of Christ.

One of the areas where we must take another look at God's pattern is the area of prayer. We know that we are supposed to pray, and there are many things that we pray for. However, the word reveals much more about the prayers of the early church than simply that. There are many ways that they used prayer in the same ways that we do, but there are some differences as well. In either case, the record of those early prayer patterns teaches us about what God wants us to be today. With this in mind, let's devote our attention this morning to prayer in the early church.

## How They Prayed.

Let's begin our study of this topic by looking at how the early church prayed. Most notably, they prayed **TOGETHER**. Consider the record of Acts 2:42. This passage is significant because it shows a commitment to prayer not just on the part of the church leadership, but on the part of the ordinary, rank-and-file Christians. The Jerusalem church assembled together on the grounds of the temple, but even outside of the assembly, small groups of Christians met daily in one another's homes, and as part of that routine, they prayed together, because they thought it was important.

This is an attitude that we could stand to capture in our gatherings outside of the assembly. The Christians here will gather in one another's homes on a semi-regular basis, whether it's for some specific occasion or just to enjoy one another's company, but how often do we invite the brethren over for the purpose of prayer? I've been a Christian for 20 years now, but I've been invited to a gathering like that exactly once, and it wasn't here. To be quite honest, friends, I think our failure to do that would baffle our brethren in first-century Jerusalem. Let's remember to pray together.

We also see that the first-century church prayed **A LOT**. As evidence for this, let's look at the exchange in Acts 6:2-4. In context, here's what has just happened. Some Christians have come to the apostles with the complaint that some widows have been overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Instead of saying, "That's terrible; we'll get right on that," the apostles said, "We can't help you." Why? Between preaching and praying, they didn't have the time to spare.

How many of us could give the same answer? How many of us spend so much time in prayer that it creates a schedule conflict with other good works that we could be doing? Certainly, many of us have schedule conflicts, with work, with school, with our children's activities, but how many of those schedule conflicts are caused by our prayer lives? It's tough for me to wrap my mind around that, that the apostles had whole sections of their day planners crossed off, because that was time they were going to use to pray. If our day planners looked like that, how different would our lives be? How different would our relationships with God be? Clearly, the answer to this problem is not to declare that next week, we're going to spend 20 hours praying, but if we just started blocking out half an hour every day, maybe a half an hour we spend reading Missouri Tigers fan sites, for instance, and gave that time to God instead? What if we got up half an hour earlier in the morning and took that opportunity to consecrate our day to our Lord? What if instead of spending our commute listening to the morning radio show, we spent it in prayer? Friends, let's seek out ways to pray more.

Our brethren 2000 years ago also prayed **WITH THEIR FAMILIES**. The most striking example of this appears in Acts 21:5. When the Christians in Tyre went with Paul to see him off to Jerusalem, they didn't leave the kids with a babysitter. Instead, whole families went with Paul to the beach, and there they all prayed together. Today, we don't often think of prayer as a very kid-friendly activity. During prayers in the assembly, our highest aspiration for our children is often that they don't do something loud and disruptive. We would be far better off, though, to think of prayer with our children not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity. When we pray with them, we're modeling for them what the life of a disciple looks like, and we're giving them a priceless insight into our relationship with God. My father always spent a lot of time discussing the Scripture with his other children and me, but I've never heard him pray outside of

mealtimes and the assembly. Today, I wonder what I would have learned from him if I had participated in those prayers as well. Let's give our children that chance. Let's make sure that they pray with us, and pray with us frequently.

Finally, the early church prayed **IN FAREWELL**. We see another instance of this, in addition to the one we just looked at, in Acts 20:36-38. Paul has just finished his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, and the logical conclusion for that was for all of them to pray together. This is something that we do, at least formally. After all, every one of our assemblies ends with a closing prayer. However, are those prayers that we offer because we're genuinely seeking God's blessings for one another, or just because it's our tradition to offer a prayer at the end of a worship service? I fear that a lot of the time, we aren't sure quite what to do with those closing prayers, and so we resort to prayer clichés, sometimes prayer clichés that don't even make sense. How many times, for instance, have we all heard a closing prayer that included the sentence, "We ask that all that we have said and done here has been pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight"? What does that even mean? After all, whatever we've said and done is what we've said and done. It's already happened, whether it was pleasing to God or not, and asking Him to go back and help us with that is a little bit like locking the barn door after the horse has escaped. Instead, let's be genuine in those closing prayers, and ask God for the things we truly want for our brethren whom we love. Sure, a prayer that we actually have to think about won't roll off the tongue as smoothly as a string of clichés, but it will be honest communication with God, and that's what matters. Let's use our prayers wisely.

### Why They Prayed.

Of course, the first-century church wasn't so dedicated to prayer for no good reason. There were any number of solid reasons why they prayed. First, we see them praying **FOR BOLDNESS**. Look at Acts 4:29. At this point, the apostles have just been threatened by the rulers of the Jewish people, who have warned them that they will be punished if they continue to preach Christ. What do they do? They go straight to a gathering of Christians and pray for boldness to preach Christ despite the intimidation of the Sanhedrin. They want the courage to dare the consequences.

How many of us pray for boldness to preach the gospel today? Do we want God to help us be brave enough to proclaim His word, so much so that we start getting pushback from the unbelievers around us? Or are we really much happier being timid with the gospel? After all, the path of timidity is an easy path to walk. When we don't talk about Jesus, we don't create awkward situations with our families, friends, and co-workers. We don't run the risk of damaging all of those important earthly relationships. Of course, the downside is that without us, those people never hear the gospel, and we ourselves never walk in the footsteps of Christ. Let's have the heart to pray to be bold.

In addition to that, our early brethren also prayed **FOR HELP** for those in trouble. We see just one case of this in Acts 12:5. At this point, Peter is in terrible danger. Herod the king has arrested him and plans to publicly execute him after the Passover. Against such a powerful threat, the Jerusalem church was physically powerless. There was nothing they could do to help—except pray. And pray they did, so earnestly that Peter was miraculously rescued by God.

Certainly, we do pray for our brethren here who are in need, but this is something that we can always do better. Let's do our best to pray for one another, not only in the assembly, but continually throughout the week as well. Perhaps it would help us if we paid attention to the bulletin and the announcements for the week, jotted down names and concerns on the back of a business card, and then carried that business card with us throughout the week, taking it out and praying through it every time we ourselves pause to pray. How wonderful it would be to help one another like that!

Third, we also see the first-century church praying **FOR SUCCESS** in doing the Lord's work. We see this, among other places, in Acts 13:2-3. This incident takes place at the very beginning of Paul's first missionary journey. God has summoned Paul and Barnabas to preach the gospel, but before they leave for Cyprus, the brethren in Antioch pray together with them, presumably so that God would protect His workers and grant them a full harvest. Paul and Barnabas were fully capable of praying on their own, but they still sought the extra help of the prayers of the church.

Likewise, we should be fully committed to praying for the success of our own labors in the kingdom. We do this in the assemblies quite frequently, but why shouldn't we also bring up our own individual efforts in the prayers we share with others? If we know we're going to have the opportunity to study the word with someone else, let's be sure to get other Christians involved in praying for that study. If we want an opportunity, let's have the brethren praying for that. We know that we can only succeed with the Lord's help, and the more we pray, the more help we get.

Finally, the disciples 2000 years ago prayed **FOR THE LEADERSHIP**. Look at the account of Acts 14:23. Just as soon as Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches of Lycaonia, they prayed for those elders too. The reasoning behind this should be obvious. If all of us need help in carrying out God's will, how much more do the elders need help in carrying out their difficult role! We must be careful not to neglect our elders in our prayers. I am certain that Joe and John will gladly receive all of the help through prayer that they can get. For myself, even though my work is much easier than the work of the elder, I will say that I also covet the prayers of the congregation. In my work as a preacher, I'm constantly conscious of how much I depend on God's help, and your prayers can guarantee that I will continue to receive that help. Let's pray for all the leaders here, so they can be as productive as possible.