

Prayer Meetings

by

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“They all joined together constantly in prayer.” (Acts 1:14)

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

In churches that are not completely tied and bound by liturgies and rituals, it has been common practice to hold meetings for corporate prayer. We call them prayer-meetings. Now, it may be profitable, now and then, to examine some of our traditions, to see whether they are Scriptural, to note their defects, to see in what respect they may be improved, or to observe their merits, so that we can be induced to continue in them even more. The subject, therefore, this evening, suggested to me by the fact that we are going to meet for a day of prayer tomorrow, is that of prayer-meetings — assemblies of the people of God for that special kind of worship which consists in each one expressing their desire before the Lord. Let us go through this very briefly:

I. THE APOSTOLIC HISTORY OF MEETINGS FOR PRAYER.

These meetings must have been very common. They were, doubtless, everyday occurrences; but still there are a few facts connected with them which may be instructive.

1. One of the first uses of the prayer-meeting was to encourage a discouraged people.

The first meeting for prayer which we find after our Lord's ascension into heaven is the one mentioned in the text, and we are led from it to remark that *united prayer is the comfort of a sorrowful church*. Can you imagine the sorrow which filled the hearts of the disciples when their Lord had departed from them? They were an army without a leader, a flock without a shepherd, a family without a head. Exposed to innumerable trials, the strong, bold wall of Jesus' presence, which had been around about them, was now withdrawn. In the deep desolation of their spirits they resorted to prayer. They were like a flock of sheep that will huddle together in a storm, or come closer to each other when they hear the sound of the wolf. Poor defenseless creatures as they were, yet they loved to come together, and would die together if need be. They felt that nothing made them so happy, nothing so encourage them, nothing so strengthened them to bear their daily difficulties, as to draw near to God in common prayer.

Beloved, let every church learn the value of its prayer-meetings in its darkest hour. When the pastor is gone, and when it has been difficult to find a suitable successor; when, it may be, there are splits and divisions; when death falls upon honored members, when poverty comes in, when there is a spiritual famine, and when the Holy Spirit appears to have withdrawn himself — then there is but one remedy for these and a thousand other evils, and that one remedy is contained in this short sentence, “Let us pray.”

Those churches which are now writing “Ichabod” (i.e., “The glory has departed”) on their walls, and who sorrowfully confess that the congregation is slowly dwindling, might soon restore their numbers if they only knew how to pray. These Brothers and Sisters, though they are presently discouraged, would soon change defeat into success, and their spirits would be revived simply by drawing near to God.

And if any of you are personally afflicted and troubled in your lives, you will find that, after meeting God in His throne room, your own private prayer closet will be especially comforting to you, and after that, come and unite with the saints of God, who have all most likely experienced the same struggles and assaults like yours, and as you hear them pouring out their hearts and making requests such as you would make, but scarcely know how to word them, you will clearly see the footsteps of the flock, and in time you will see the Shepherd himself. One of the first uses of the prayer-meeting, then, is to encourage a discouraged people.

2. The prayer-meeting is the appointed place to receive power.

Again, if you look at the second chapter of the Book of Acts, you will perceive that *the prayer-meeting is the place for the reception of divine power*. “They were all together in one place,” [Acts 2:1] lifting up their prayer, and, as they waited there, “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them,” [Acts 2:2-4] and they were clothed with the power which Jesus had promised them.

And what a difference it made in them! Common fishermen became the extraordinary messengers of heaven. Illiterate men spoke with languages that they had never heard before. They began to reveal mysteries which had not been revealed to philosophers or kings. These men were lifted out of the level of ordinary humanity, and became God-inspired, filled with the Deity himself, who came to dwell in their hearts and minds. The result was that poor wavering Peter became bold as a lion, and the impetuous John, who would have called fire down from heaven upon the Samaritans, had another fire fall upon him; one not to destroy, but to rescue and bless.

Now, the great need of the Church at all times is the power of the Holy Spirit. “We believe in the Holy Spirit,” says the doctrines of most churches, but how many, or rather how few, are there who really do believe in him? There is a mysterious, supernatural energy which comes from the Third Person of the blessed Trinity which really in this age falls upon men and women, as truly as when Peter spoke in languages unknown to him (tongues) or performed miracles; and though the power of working miracles is not given now, yet spiritual power is given, and this spiritual power is just as evident, and just as surely with us today, if we possess the Holy Spirit, as it was

with the apostles. Now, if we want to get this, the most likely place in which to find it is the prayer-meeting.

I will guarantee you that the best men who are of the right spirit, are those who will be found here tomorrow evening, at our special prayer-meeting. I will guarantee you that the best ministers are those that do not despise the gathering of the people of God, and I am sure that the cream of the Christian Church, other things being considered of course, will be found here among those who most commonly assemble for prayer. Oh! yes, this is the place to meet with the Holy Spirit, and this is the way to get his mighty power. If we would have the Holy Spirit, we must meet in greater numbers; we must pray with greater fervency, we must watch with greater earnestness, and believe with firmer determination. The prayer-meeting, then, has this second use, that it is the appointed place for the reception of power.

3. The prayer-meeting is the resource of the persecuted church.

You will find this next incident, in apostolic history, in the fourth chapter of the Book of Acts, and there you will see that *the prayer-meeting is the resource of a persecuted church*. Turn to the thirty-first verse. Peter and John had been locked up in prison. The Scribes and Pharisees had persecuted the disciples of Christ. The disciples resorted to prayer, and we read that “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. All the believers were one in heart and mind.” Yes, all the persecutions of each member should be lifted up in prayer before God, and if the entire Church should fall into disgrace through misrepresentation, or through the natural hostility of all men to God’s true Church, then it should resort to its Great Friend for its defense.

Often, times of persecution are very good for the Church, because they compel her to pray. When the devil, like the wild boar from the woods, should break up the vineyard, the vines seem to flourish all the more, because they are watered with the dew of heaven in answer to prayer. Let the burning stakes of the martyrs smoke, and the saints of God go up to heaven in chariots of fire, and then we will see the Word of God greatly multiplied, for the death of the martyrs brings down the blessing to the church and the nation in which they live.

Anything that would make us pray would be a blessing, and if we ever should face times of persecution again we must fly to the shadow of the Eternal, and keeping close together in simple, intense prayer, we will find a shelter from the blast.

4. The prayer-meeting is the means of individual deliverance.

Still staying in the Book of Acts, in the twelfth chapter you find *the prayer-meeting was a means of individual deliverance*. You know the story well. Peter was in prison, and Herod promised himself the great pleasure of putting him to death. “The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. But the church was earnestly praying to God for him” [Acts 12:4-5]. The walls of the prison were very thick, but prayer was made without ceasing. The soldiers were very watchful; there were sixteen of them—four squads of four soldiers each—appointed to watch him in shifts — four at a time, and he was chained by both hands to two of them. Yet prayer was

made without ceasing by the Church for him, and prayer laughs at stone walls, and handcuffs and iron bars, and gates of brass. And so in the middle of the night an angel struck Peter on the side waking him up, and told him to quickly get up and the chains fell off of his wrists. Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Every locked door opened by itself as he advanced, and Peter found himself in the street, and wondered whether he was awake, or whether he was seeing a vision. And when he got to the house where many people had gathered and were praying, they were all equally surprised, and thought it must be Peter's spirit, and that it could never be Peter himself. Yet there he was, in his flesh and blood, released from his prison in answer to their prayers.

And so in the prayer-meeting of the Church, God's people may plead for individuals. It may not be God's will, there may be no necessity for it, that every one of God's people would be brought out of prison, or raised up from sickness, or saved from their needs; but if it was the Master's will, and is the right thing, Then God will grant it. Therefore when we come together we may unite in exacting and personal supplications. I don't doubt that many a life has been spared in answer to united prayer, that many a soul that has been, as it were, spirit-burdened has obtained gracious liberty through the prayers of the brothers and sisters. It is good if we often raise up our prayers for one another, remembering those who are in prison for their faith in Christ, as if we are tied with them. Observe here, then, another valuable use of the Christian prayer-meeting, that it is the means of individual deliverance.

5. The prayer-meeting is the means of suggesting missionary operations.

Further on, in the next chapter, we find a prayer-meeting *suggesting missionary operations*. While the servants of God were meeting together — see the second and third verses of the thirteenth chapter — fasting and in prayer, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

We sit down, and we begin to figure the expenses of such-and-such a form of Christian service, and we think that it would be a good plan, and then another plan, and a third plan, and a fourth, and a fifth — all pieces of human wisdom. But I think if we would spend more time on our knees about God's work, we would more often do right, and the right methods and the right men, and the right plans would come to us. Christ is the head of the Church — and who thinks so much about the Church as the head of the Church?

And while we wait upon him I believe that fresh plans and fresh methods will be marked out, and that different kinds of men will be called to the work as distinctly as if angels had touched their lips with a live coal from the burning altar, and who may be "separated" to teach the Word where, perhaps, it has never reached before. Our country needs many who will shake her and waken her out of her sleep. She needs a new race of Whitfields, men suited to its culture. She needs some "Sons of Thunder," who will thunder out the Word, some men who will be like lightning in carrying out their holy mission. She needs men who will preach the truth, and tell it to her poor men and women, yes, and to her rich men and women too, and if she ever gets these men, it will only be in answer to prayer. Oh! that we would not only pray for such men, and,

having received them, pray that God would make them full of His Spirit, for they cannot run over with blessings to others, until they are full of blessing themselves. We would truly understand what the prayer-meeting is all about, if we did this. I look forward to tomorrow for a blessing of this kind. There may be sitting here now some man to whom China and India will be forever grateful. I don't know who it may be, but there may be one here who will yet bring up diamonds from the very depths, and who will be inspired to do so in answer to our prayers.

6. The prayer-meeting may be the first step in a new work for Christ.

Once more, I will remind you of a prayer-meeting which perhaps, you may have forgotten, but which is recorded in the sixteenth chapter of the Book of Acts. What was *the first Christian service that was held in Europe*? Do you know? Why, it was a prayer-meeting. The very first service was not an Episcopal ordination, nor even the preaching of a sermon, for Paul went to the place where prayer was needed to be made by the river-side, and there he met with Lydia, and preached to her, and her heart was so opened that she received the truth. So, then, a prayer-meeting became in Europe the first foothold of the gospel for Europeans, you ought never to forget, disown, or think lightly of prayer-meetings. How you ought to value them. Very often, I don't doubt, in a Christian enterprise, the first foothold that a cause gets is the prayer-meeting. Some of you live in some of the dark parts of this city, and you would like to see a cause for Christ there. Well, begin with a prayer-meeting, just as Paul did. Or you live in a small village, perhaps, where there is no church with whom you can worship. Well then, hold a prayer-meeting. This costs you nothing; this will enrich you; this will serve for a beginning, and although you may not be content with that as the only service on Sunday, give it a little time, just begin with it. This, then, is the missionary's lever; he begins with the prayer-meeting.

Thus I have, as briefly as I could, gone through the early history of prayer-meetings, and shown you the extreme value of such to the God's Holy Church. And now, secondly, and very briefly:

II. WHAT ARE THE USES OF THE PRAYER-MEETING?

The prayer-meeting is useful to us in itself, and also very useful from the answer which its gets, and bring to us from God.

1. It is a very useful thing for Christians to pray with each other, even apart from the answer.

God has made our holiness to be a thing which shall be personal, but yet he looks for family holiness. Happy is the household where the altar burns day and night with the sweet perfume of family worship! He also gives us more extended views, and makes us feel that all the saints are our brothers and sisters, and that, therefore, our meetings as Christian families, and as Christian Churches in the prayer-meeting, become the exponents and natural outgrowth of social godliness. We sing together and pray together, and thus our Christian brotherhood is manifested to the world, and is even more enjoyed by ourselves.

2. The prayer-meeting sometimes generates devotion.

Some of the brothers and sisters may be very dull and serious, but others who are at that time in a lively state of mind may stimulate and excite them. I must confess very often to deriving much fire from some of our brothers and sisters who pray here, when God gives them grace really to pray. When you have been busy all day long, and are not able to shake off the cares of business, you get warmed up by getting near to each other in your prayers. And, more than that, the united fires being placed together on the hearth, the fire-brands are made to burn with greater power. There is a kind of divine excitement that comes upon us sometimes at the prayer-meeting. I remember in one of our prayer-meetings where we fasted and prayed and an intense excitement was there, not fleshly, but deeply spiritual. How we felt ourselves bowed down at one time, and then lifted up again at another. I have sometimes sat side by side with a brother who has said, "Can you bear this much longer? I feel it is too much for my physical frame." Oh! the calm delight which springs from close communion with the invisible God! I have had such sweet times of prayer that have caused me to lay prostrate all the next day from extreme joy, from the excess of delight. Oh! this is good for us! This is good for you! "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" [2 Corinthians 4:16]. Oh! it is a great thing thus to be made fit again, with all of our joints oiled, and muscles all braced, and nerves all strung, for the battle of life. United prayer, then, serves this purpose, and therefore is it valuable.

3. God has promised extraordinary and special blessings in connection with the prayer-meeting.

United prayer is useful *inasmuch as God has promised extraordinary and special blessings in connection with it*, [we see this principle described in the context of church discipline]: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" [Matthew 18:20]. "If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" [Matthew 18:19]. God asks for agreement, and, once the saints agree, he pledges himself that the prayer of his agreeing ones shall be answered. Why, see what accumulated force there is in prayer, when one after another pours out their passionate desires; when many seem to be tugging at the rope; when many seem to be knocking at mercy's gate; when the mighty cries of many burning hearts come up to heaven. When, my beloved, you go and shake the very gates of heaven with the powerful battering-ram of holy passion, and sacred insistence, then will the kingdom of heaven forcefully advance. When first one, and then another, and yet another, throws their whole soul into the prayer, the kingdom of heaven is conquered and the victory is very great indeed.

As I was sitting for a little while and thinking over this text I thought of the accumulated love of God which there is in a prayer-meeting, because God loves every one of his children. There is so much love for one, and here is another, and there is so much love for him, and then, if God's love to one of his people is a reason for answering his requests, if there are ten present, there is ten times the reason; and if there is a thousand present then surely there must be a thousand times the force of love to move our Heavenly Father to grant the accumulated desires of the assembly.

The prayer-meeting is an institution which ought to be very precious to us, and to be cherished by us as a Church, for to it we owe everything. When our comparatively little chapel was all but empty, was it not a well-known fact that the prayer-meeting was always full? And when the Church increased, and the place was scarcely large enough, it was the prayer meeting that did it all. When we then met at Exeter Hall, we were a praying people, indeed; and when we entered into an even larger arena, the Surrey Music-hall, what cries and tears went up to heaven for our success! And so it has been ever since. It is in the spirit of prayer that our strength lies; and if we lose this, the hair will be cut off from Samson's head, and God's Holy Church will become weak as water and though we, as Samson did, go and try to shake ourselves as at other times, we shall hear the cry, "The Philistines are upon you," and our eyes will be put out, and our glory will depart, unless we continue mightily and earnestly in prayer. But now, once again, let us ask: —

III. WHAT ARE THE HINDRANCES TO THE PRAYER-MEETING?

Now listen, for perhaps some of you will hear something about yourselves. What are the hindrances to the prayer-meeting?

1. There is the hindrance of unholiness.

There are some hindrances before the people even come. *Unholiness* hinders prayer. A man or woman cannot walk contrary to God, and then expect to have their prayers heard. Jesus said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love" [John 15:10]. There is a promise made to those who keep God's commands. They will have power with God; but, on the other hand, inconsistent Christians will not be answered.

2. There is the hindrance of discord.

Discord always spoils prayer. When believers do not agree, and are picking each other apart, they do not really love one another, and then their prayers cannot succeed. Discord spoils prayer.

3. There is the hindrance of hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy always spoils prayer: for hypocrites will creep in, you cannot help it, and the larger the church the more, I believe, do hypocrites get in, just as you see many a noxious creeping thing come and get into a garden after a rain shower. The very things that make the flowers glad bring out these noxious things, and likewise hypocrites get in and drain much of the Church's sap away, and help spoil the prayer-meeting. Now, which among you does this belong to? I am not reflecting upon any person in particular, but God knows why some of you don't ever come to the prayer-meeting. Some of you, I know, have business that really prevents your coming, and others are serving Christ in other ways and that keeps them away; but surely some of our friends who have no other urgent engagement or duty, constantly stay away from the prayer-meeting. I only wish that their consciences were even half-awake, for I am sure it would convict them for neglecting this duty. I wish that they would feel ashamed that they have missed this very great

privilege, for had they come with us they might have drawn near to God and been healed in their hearts and souls.

4. There is the hindrance of long prayers.

There are some things which hinder the prayer-meeting when we are there praying. One is *long prayers*. It is dreadful to hear a brother or sister pray us into a good frame of mind and heart, and then, by their long prayer, pray us out of it again. You remember what John MacDonald once said, "When I am in a bad frame of mind I always pray short prayers, because my prayer will not be of any use, and when I am in a good frame of mind and heart, I pray short prayers, because if other people are in a good frame too, I might, if I kept on longer, pray them into a bad frame." Long prayers, then, spoil prayer-meetings, for long prayers and true devotion in our public assemblies seem pretty much to be divorced from one another.

5. There is the hindrance of preaching little sermons in our prayers.

Prayer-meetings are also hindered when those who get up to pray do not pray, but *preach a little sermon*, and tell the Lord all about themselves, though he knows them better than they do, instead of immediately asking for what they want.

6. There is the hindrance of a lack of being direct with our prayers.

Prayer-meetings are often hindered by *a lack of directness*, and by beating around the bush. I did admire a prayer I heard at our last prayer-meeting, in which a brother said, "Lord, the orphanage needs money, £3,000 to be exact [3,000 British Pounds]; please send it." Now, that was a straightforward request. Another brother would have said, "Lord, we have great difficulties in our work; please help us"; but this brother just stated the case, and I think he believed that God would hear him. Another way to never grow weary in prayer is to do as a good Scotsman said he did. He said, "I never go to God unless I have business to do with him, unless there is something I want to praise him for, to confess to him, or to seek at his hands." We must not come merely with well-sounding words and polished English, but really to pray, and really to praise, and really to confess and seek cleansing; and if we do this, the prayer-meeting will not disappoint us.

7. There is the hindrance of a lack of real intensity in our prayers.

Prayer-meetings are sometimes hindered by *a lack of real intensity* in those who pray, and in those who pray in silence. Oh! brothers and sisters, one warm, hearty prayer is worth twenty of those packed in ice. I fear that much of our prayer is lost because we don't sufficiently throw our hearts into it. It is possible for us to attend the prayer-meeting and all the while be thinking of things at home, the infant in the nursery, or the office, the factory, and who knows what else. Is it any wonder then that prayer stops? The brother who prays may be burning with intense desire, but his prayer lags because we are not backing it with silent agreement and passionate longing for God's blessing. Oh! brothers and sisters, we have often spoiled our prayer-meetings this way. We have each, I fear, in our turn done something towards it; let us pray that we may never again sin this way.

8. There is the hindrance of a lack of faith.

The prayer-meeting may also be spoiled *after we have been to it*. “How?” you say. Why, by our asking a blessing, and then not expecting to receive it. God has promised that he will answer us according to our faith, but if our faith is nothing, then the answer will also be nothing.

9. There is the hindrance of inconsistency in our prayers.

Inconsistency in not practically carrying out your desires will also spoil the prayer-meeting. If you ask God to convert souls, but you will not do anything for those souls; if you ask God to save your children, but you will not talk to them about their salvation; if you ask God to save your neighbors, and you do not distribute tracts among them, nor do anything else for them, are you not truly a hypocrite? You pray, but you refuse to do anything to affect an answer. You pray for fruit, but you will not put out your hand to pick it, and all this spoils the prayer-meeting. Earnest prayer, however, is always to be followed up by persevering efforts, and then the result will be very great.

Now for just a moment I will occupy your time on the next point, and then we will be done.

IV. WHAT SHOULD BE THE GREAT OBJECT OF THE PRAYER-MEETING, AND THAT FOR WHICH WE SHOULD SEEK THE ANSWER?

1. First, it must be for the glory of God, or else the prayer is invalid.

How much of the Lord’s Prayer consists in prayers for God, rather than for ourselves! “Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven;” and then comes, “Give us today our daily bread.” Don’t we often begin by asking for the bread, and ignore the glory of God? Pray that King Jesus may have his own way. Pray that the crown-royal may be set upon that dear head that once was surrounded with thorns. Pray that the thrones of the heathen may totter from their pedestals, and that Jesus may be acknowledged as the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is to be the great object of our prayer. You remember how David put it, “May the whole earth be filled with his glory. This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse” [Psalm 72:20]. For the coming of Christ in power, for the extension of his kingdom, for the downfall of error, for the end of the times of darkness, for the ingathering of the Jews and the Gentiles — for all these things let us pray, in order that God may be glorified, and on that account alone.

2. Secondly, we must pray for a blessing on the Church.

We ought to exercise a little of our love for one another in praying for our fellow-members. Pray for the minister, for he needs it most; his necessities in that direction are the greatest, and therefore let him always be remembered. Pray for the church officers: pray for the workers in all organizations: pray for those who suffer: pray for the strong, for the weak, for the rich, for the

poor, for the trembling, for the sick, for the backsliding, for the sinful. Yes, for every part of the one great body of Jesus let our supplications perpetually ascend. Let our prayers be continual.

3. Thirdly, we must pray for the conversion of the ungodly.

Oh! This ought to be like a burden on our hearts; this ought to be prayed out of the lowest depths of a soul that is all aglow with sympathy for them. They are dying; they are dying; they are dying without hope. I stood yesterday at the graveside of one of our brothers, an elder of the church. The place that knew him once will know him no more, and someone else now occupies the seat where he formerly sat. It was a great joy to know that he had rested on the rock so long, and that he had now entered into the rest which Jesus had promised him; but oh! to stand by those who die without hope is depressing work; this is to sorrow without alleviation, to mourn without any sweet thoughts to wipe away the tears. Oh! my dear friends, will you die in your sins? Will you live in your sins, for if you live in them you will die in them. My friends, will you die without a Savior? Will you live without a Savior? For if you live without him, you will assuredly die without him.

It is of no use for me to preach to the people, my dear Christian brothers and sisters, unless you pray for them. It is of no use holding special services for the quickening of the spiritually dead unless the Holy Spirit is brought to them by our prayers. It may be that you who pray have more to do with the blessed results than we who preach.

I think I have told you of the old story of the preacher who had been very successful in his preaching, but a message came from heaven to him that it would not have been so if it had not been for the prayers of an old deaf brother preacher, who sat on the pulpit stairs and pleaded with God for the conversion of the listeners. It may be true. We may appear to the eyes of men to have the credit of success, but all the while the real honor may belong to someone else, and I do certainly myself always ascribe the conversions brought about in this church to the prayers of God's people. Let it always be so ascribed, and let God have all the glory in it. But do pray for conversions. Never give up praying for your unconverted wife or husband! Never cease to pray for your unconverted children. Never let the devil tempt you to be silent concerning your ungodly neighbors, but day and night, in the house and on the road, lift up your hearts to God in real prayer, and say to him, "Oh! that Ishmael might live before you!" He has given us his pledge that he will answer: believe it, and you shall see it, and you shall have the joy of it while He shall have the glory. Amen.

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