

Pray

June 4, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 4:23-31; Philippians 4:6-7

Session Outline

1. Powerful Prayer (Acts 4:23-28)
2. Answered Prayer (Acts 4:29-31)
3. Practical Prayer (Philippians 4:6-7)

Theological Theme

The early church set an example Christians are wise to follow today. When tough times came their way, they gathered and prayed with faith, believing their prayers could bring about powerful results. Prayer should be our first response in good times and difficult days.



Leader Guide

Pray

Introduction

Most people have someone they turn to when something significant happens in life. We may even have different people we turn to depending on whether the circumstance is good or bad. Think about who you like to celebrate with. Now, who do you call when you are frustrated or need advice on parenting, career choices, financial issues, health, or a fitness question? You likely have different people that you reach out to depending on the topic.

But how quickly do you turn to the Lord in these moments? Do you tend to take your questions, frustrations, and challenges to every person on your list before you take it to God? Think about how much trouble or anxiety we could avoid if we developed the habit of turning to God in prayer before anything else.

- ❓ Who is your first call when you are frustrated or need advice?
- ❓ What stops you from taking your concerns to the Lord first in these moments?

Session Summary


The church in Acts gave examples we should follow in our own lives and churches today. Though they faced difficulties and persecution, they prioritized gathering in prayer. They devoted themselves to the Lord in unity and faith.

Throughout Scripture, we are reminded that prayer is our best resource in times of need. There are many powerful prayers recorded in the Bible as well as instruction on how to pray. Today, we will consider one example of dependency in prayer from the early church as well as Paul's instruction on prayer to a specific church.

1. Powerful Prayer (Acts 4:23-28)


As they lived out their faith in practical ways, the early church faced persecution and attack. Peter and John were taken into custody because of their ministry of preaching and healing in Jesus's name. In verse 23, they returned to their church family after being released and reported how God had used the persecution against them for His glory. It is important to recognize they did not gather and whine about how hard it was to be followers of Jesus. They did not complain about being arrested or mistreated. Instead, they celebrated the good things God was doing in their lives.

Hearing Peter and John's report of their experiences led to a time of prayer. This first Christian community responded just as we should: in good times or bad, the early church was dependent in prayer.

 What most often moves you to prayer?

Verse 24 says they raised their voices together in prayer to the Lord. The words used to describe this time indicated the people were all in agreement. Though we don't know exactly what this time looked like and the way the people prayed together, they were unified in dependency on and praise of the Lord.


The people acknowledged God as their Master, who was in control of all they faced and experienced. Acknowledging who we are praying to gives us confidence because it reminds us that God is in control. No situation is hopeless, and we are not helpless because the Sovereign God of the universe holds everything in the palms of His hands.

 How does it strengthen your prayers to remember the unchanging attributes and character of God as you call to Him?

They first acknowledged who they appealed to, then their prayer moved to quoting Scripture and applying God's Word to their current circumstances. David's words from the Psalms were a reminder that followers of Jesus should expect these types of persecution and need not be deterred by them. Praying Scripture also framed their circumstances in light of God's Word so they could keep proper perspective. Praying God's Word is empowering as we call on the promises of God and live considering what we know to be true, no matter our circumstances.


Promised Trouble

The early Christians recognized that just as Jesus had been promised trouble, they too would encounter persecution for proclaiming him as the Messiah. They asked God for the power to speak with all boldness, even if punishment should follow.


-  Application: How might you make a practice of praying the Bible back to God? Why is this good and appropriate to do?

2. Answered Prayer (Acts 4:29-31)

When making their requests, these believers did not ask God to take away their difficulties and persecution. Instead, they asked for boldness to keep spreading the gospel. Not only did they not ask to avoid difficulty, but the renewed boldness they sought would also inevitably lead to more confrontation and persecution. It would have been understandable for this group to seek relief from persecution, but they were far more concerned with advancing the gospel than protecting themselves.


-  Put yourself in the place of these early believers. What would you have asked God for in this moment? How did their prayers reveal their ultimate priority?

In keeping with an attitude of prayer, these believers asked God to stretch out His hand. This was an acknowledgement that it was only by God's work that true change and gospel advance would take place. This was a beautiful example of humility that all followers of Christ should exude. The early church took no credit for the great things done among them but humbly implored God to keep doing the work and vowed to keep giving Him the glory.

-  Why is humility key to being used by God? What makes it tempting to move away from humility when God is working among us?

In response to their prayers, there was a violent shaking, as if it was caused by an earthquake. This was tangible evidence of God's presence and power and His hearing the believers' prayers. The text then says the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit, but experience was not a repetition of Pentecost. The believers received a fresh infusion of the Spirit's power and inspiration in answer to their prayer. By the Spirit's power, they began to speak God's message with boldness. God gave them exactly what they had requested in verse 29.


In these events we see that those empowered by the Spirit of God proclaim the truth about God and give glory to God. Their motivation originates from the indwelling Holy Spirit's power and presence. Christians overflowing with the Holy Spirit share the gospel. In fact, one filled with the Spirit declares the gospel boldly. Isn't that what we want? Courage? Boldness? To live in obedience to Christ? Dependent prayer fosters such a transformation.

 Application: Where do you need Holy Spirit-inspired boldness today? How will you seek this from the Lord in prayer?

3. Practical Prayer (Philippians 4:6-7)

The apostle Paul wrote some of the most practical instruction in Scripture. In Philippians, he gave instructions relating to prayer that we can use in our lives as we are committed to intentional growth in our prayer lives. The way Paul addressed the subject gives us helpful guidance for prayer.

Note that these words were phrased as a command, not a suggestion. Believers need to be serious about our prayer lives. We are not to be anxious about anything. This is certainly easier said than done. Yet, through ongoing dependence on the Father, it is possible to live this way. Paul said we are not to be anxious but to pray about everything. Prayer is the key to living without anxiety. When we pray about our circumstances, we can live without the burdens of stress and anxiety. Prayer reminds us who is in control. Anxiety seeks to take control for us while prayer joyfully relinquishes control to God.

 How quickly do you submit the things that make you anxious before the Lord?

Paul further said we are to pray about everything. There is no reason to compartmentalize our lives into things we pray about and things we deal with on our own. Too many people limit their prayers to certain topics and issues instead of taking everything to the Lord. We can be encouraged that God cares about every single aspect of our lives, which means we can pray about every thing, not just some things.



What are the areas of your life you tend to compartmentalize or leave out of prayer? How can you bring those things before the Lord today?

As we pray, God invites us to ask Him. We are to make our requests known and leave them with Him. Some might argue that God already knows what we need, so there is no need to pray. Yes, He does know our every need, but He calls us to bring these things before Him regularly. And we are called to approach Him with thanksgiving. Our gratitude toward the Lord is key because it not only acknowledges who we are talking to, but it also expresses our thanks for His ongoing activity, protection, and provision. Praying with thanksgiving keeps us from a self-centered perspective on prayer.

Paul's instructions in these verses also come with a promise. When we learn to pray this way, the peace of God that passes understanding will guard our hearts and minds. God's peace rises above all circumstances and depends on nothing but the Lord. This peace goes beyond human understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.



Application: How could your prayer life change based on this passage?

Conclusion

God's people should be committed to prayer as seen in the example of the early church. Too many of us pray in ways that don't reflect who we are talking to or pray without the belief that our prayers make any difference. The early believers prayed in one accord and with great faith that God would respond. He did and they received the boldness they prayed for as the Holy Spirit filled each person.

Our world needs Christians to develop powerful prayer lives focused on spreading the gospel with boldness over everything else. We should pray about everything instead of trying to control our lives by constant worry and self-effort. When we learn to take our requests and concerns to the Lord in attitudes of gratitude, we are promised spiritual protection and peace that is only found in Jesus.

Based on today's study, what is one change you will seek to make in your habits of prayer?

Who can you be praying for that is far from Christ?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for inviting you to bring your requests to Him. Confess the ways you have limited your prayers. Commit to praying about everything with thanksgiving going forward.

Prayer Prompts:

Reflect on these thoughts in your prayer time.

- What are some specific areas of your life that you need to bring to God, praying about everything and not just some things?
- What is something in your community that you can pray about, giving God control over?
- What can you thank God for in your prayer time?

Additional Resources

- *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller
- *Prayer* by Timothy Keller
- *Praying the Bible* by Donald Whitney

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- Preach

Main Passages

- Acts 2:14-36; Romans 10:14-15

Session Outline

1. Preaching Is Necessary (Romans 10:14-15)
2. Bold Proclamation (Acts 2:14-21)
3. Preaching Jesus (Acts 2:22-36)

Memorize

When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly. - Acts 4:31

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 4:23-31

4:23–24. As Peter and John went back to the believers praying for them, they reported what must have been viewed by all as a victory. What follows is one of the most dramatic prayers of the New Testament because it reflects the way the early Christians prayed.

They began with creation—you made . . . everything. The word for sovereign Lord is *despotes*, literally “lord of the house,” used ten times in the New Testament, three to address God in prayers (Luke 2:29; Rev. 6:10; and here) and three referring to Christ (2 Tim. 2:21; 2 Pet. 2:1; Jude 4). As its English cognate *despot*, the term can imply harshness of rule and caprice, but the Greek Old Testament uses it for God twenty-five times, emphasizing God’s unlimited power. Notice also that they prayed together. Peter and John came back to their own people, and now they prayed together. Luke repeatedly emphasizes unity throughout the Book of Acts, a theme which might well be more highly developed in contemporary churches.

Why begin with creation? Why remind God of what he had done? Because creation remains foundational to every other doctrine, and it certainly demonstrates the sovereignty of God, the very foundation for this prayer (cf. Acts 14:15; 2 Pet. 3:1–14).

4:25–26. The second theme of the prayer is revelation—you spoke . . . through . . . David. Here Luke delivers another *pesher* to describe the praying of the early Christians as they found their present dilemma well outlined in Psalm 2:1–2. They just assumed the nations were Gentile authorities; the peoples, the religious leaders of Israel; the kings of the earth, a reference to Herod; and the rulers, likely pointing to Pilate. All that seems confirmed by the flow of the prayer beyond these two verses.

Let’s back up. This Creator whom the believers addressed in verse 24 is self-revealed. Since we cannot test creation by scientific methods which deal only with repeatable events, it must be understood by faith (Heb. 11:3). Furthermore, faith in a Creator demands a recognition of his involvement in his world (Rom. 1:18–20).

Most people have little difficulty dealing with a Creator, a vague concept accepted by many who have no faith in Jesus. It takes quite another step to recognize that the Creator has personally revealed himself and therefore made his creation responsible for what he has said.

4:27–28. Creation and revelation are followed by a discussion of the incarnation. Not only did the Sovereign Lord create the world, but he controls suffering—both of Jesus and now of his people. Human leaders may deliberate, but God ultimately determines destiny. An ancient king by the name of Nebuchadnezzar learned that the hard way (Dan. 4). Now incarnation becomes a highlight of revelation. All these people clearly understood that God had spoken through prophets for hundreds of years. The praying church emphasized that now he has spoken through Jesus Christ his Son (cf. Heb. 1:1–3).

A little boy finished his bedtime prayers with mommy. Holding her tight, he said, “Momma, I like you better than God.” In shock the Christian mother pointed out how important it is for

even little boys to love God more than they love their parents. She inquired why the youngster would say that he loved his mommy more than God. After only a brief pause the boy responded, “Because I can hug you.”

The incarnation made God “huggable.” All that had been heard in the thunderous words of Elijah and Elisha or read in the tomes of Isaiah and Jeremiah had now been seen on earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

4:29–31. At this point the prayer turned to the practical outworking of their dilemma. Creation, revelation, and incarnation are doctrines and important ones. Life and its daily problems are also important to you and to God, so now the prayer turns to motivation. “Sovereign Lord: you made everything; you spoke through David; you anointed Jesus; and now you enable your servants.” They reached out for even more courage, even greater boldness. They continued their witness as God confirmed it through miraculous signs in the name of Jesus.

This was not a prayer for relief, but a prayer for courage, an excellent pattern for the modern church. The prayer assumes dependence and faith. These believers expected to do nothing by themselves; everything rested in the sovereign power of God and the name of Jesus.

How did God respond? The room shook, and he filled them anew with the Holy Spirit and sent them out to speak the word of God boldly. Here they received no baptism, nor did they speak in foreign languages (see chap. 2); it was not necessary. These born-again, functioning believers only needed a fresh filling to continue their effective service.

The model of this prayer is still very applicable for us today. Like these early believers, we need to understand that the self-revealed Creator who sent his Son to earth to die and rise again for our salvation will give us the courage we need to carry out whatever ministry he places before us.¹

Philippians 4:6-7

4:6–7 Worry is anxiety (Mt 6:25–34). Prayer is the antidote for worry. Three words express different aspects of prayer: prayer, a worshipful attitude; petition, a need; and requests, the specific concern. Thanksgiving shapes prayers with gratitude. In response, the peace of God brings power to endure. The peace surpasses knowledge, calming a troubling situation when explanations fail. Further, peace guards by keeping anxieties from hearts (choices) and minds (attitudes).²

References

1. Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, vol. 5, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 62–63.
2. Richard R. Melick Jr., “Philippians,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1888–1889.

Author Bio

Paul Miller (A Praying Life)

Paul E. Miller is executive director of seeJesus, the global discipling mission he founded in 1999 to help Christians and non-Christians alike “see Jesus.” Today, seeJesus works in over 30 countries and has books and interactive Bible study materials translated into at least a dozen languages.

Timothy Keller (Prayer)

Timothy Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, which he started in 1989 with his wife, Kathy, and three young sons. Dr. Keller’s books, including the New York Times bestselling *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*, have sold over 2 million copies and been translated into 25 languages.

Donald Whitney (Praying the Bible)

Don Whitney has been Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate Dean at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, since 2005. Before that, he held a similar position (the first such position in the six Southern Baptist seminaries) at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, MO, for 10 years. He is the founder and president of The Center for Biblical Spirituality. Don is a frequent speaker in churches, retreats, and conferences in the U.S. and abroad.

Kenneth Gangel (Acts)

Dr. Kenneth O. Gangel (1935-2009): A prolific author and an experienced leader has been influential in the field of Christian education for over forty years. He’s written numerous articles and over 50 books, while pastoring, teaching, raising a family and leading schools. His impact reaches around the world through students, co-authored books, and working with leaders of churches and schools.