

# The Church Demonstrates Prayerful Dependence

*June 8, 2025*

## Lesson Summary

### **Main Passages**

Acts 1:12-14; 12:3-16; James 5:16

### **Session Outline**

1. United in Prayer (Acts 1:12-14)
2. Together in Prayer (James 5:16)
3. Fervent in Prayer (Acts 12:3-16)

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### **Theological Theme**

Prayer, both individually and in community, is a vital attribute of a healthy church.

### **Call to Action**

This is a great Sunday to have folks group up and pray together before the service is over. Also, challenge them to make a special effort to pray with other believers this week. Put it on the calendar!



## Leader Guide

# The Church Demonstrates Prayerful Dependence

### Introduction

In his book *The Secret of Guidance* F.B. Meyer wrote, “The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but un-offered prayer.”<sup>1</sup>

This idea prompts us to consider: How seriously do we take prayer? Is prayer a neglected spiritual discipline? If our capacity to do and manage things in our lives is a finite container, it is tempting to have it filled to the brim with little time and space for quiet things like prayer, but Scripture teaches that prayer is vital and worth prioritizing.

Prayer is the first action we see the believers take after Jesus commissioned them to be His witnesses in Acts 1:8. We’ll explore this and other examples of prayer today.



How effective have you found prayer in your life? What has contributed to this view?



What role do you think prayer plays in a healthy church?

### Session Summary



Today’s main passage in Acts 1 reminds us a healthy church is continually united in prayer. Unity doesn’t mean always agreeing or getting along, but it does mean prioritizing peace and seeking compromise for the good of the kingdom. This takes continual work!

The book of James teaches us to “pray for one another” (James 5:16). When we pray for one another, we do so privately and in community, but it is vital regardless. James further explained that “the prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect” (James 5:16).

In Acts 12, we see dedication in prayer in action with the church coming together to pray for an imprisoned Peter. Luke records that they prayed fervently together, and their prayers were answered during that very prayer meeting!

Prayer, both individually and in community, is a vital component of our faith. It is an important component of a healthy church and is necessary to carry out the mission God gave us to share the good news with the nations.

## 1. United in Prayer (Acts 1:12-14)

-  What does it tell us about the priority of prayer that it was the first step Jesus's followers took after His ascension?
-  Why is it important that this was a united act and not just one or two people in the group on their own?

In Acts 1:9, Jesus ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives, and at the start of our passage, the disciples returned to Jerusalem as Jesus commanded (v. 4). Luke's gospel also records this event, saying that "after worshiping him, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:52) and they "were continually in the temple praising God" (Luke 24:53).

Luke indicated those present at this time in Acts 1 were:

**The Remaining Eleven:** The remaining eleven disciples were present. The twelfth disciple was Judas, Jesus's betrayer, who had already died at this point (Matthew 27:3–10).

**Women:** Luke records that Mary the mother of Jesus along with other unnamed women were present (v. 14). There were no women among Jesus's twelve apostles, but Jesus had female disciples (or students) and followers, and the gospels record that women traveled with Jesus during His ministry (Luke 8:1-3).

**Jesus's Brothers:** John 7:5 records that Jesus's brothers did not believe in Him during His earthly ministry, so we can assume that they came to believe in and follow Jesus after His resurrection.

In verse 14, Luke recorded that the group was "continually united in prayer." What an important posture for this group of believers! Let's break this down further.

**"Continually United":** The Greek phrase used to communicate the unity of the group—*homothymadon*, which means "with one mind"<sup>2</sup>—is found six times in the book of Acts.<sup>3</sup> The New Testament continually teaches the importance of unity in the church (1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 2:2).

A united church better glorifies God and is more effective in ministry. Jesus had recently given these believers a mission to go and make disciples of the nations (the Great Commission; Matthew 28:18-20), and in Acts 1:8, Jesus told them they would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. To complete these tasks effectively as Christ commanded, unity *was essential*.

It is just as essential for us today. Being united doesn't mean we must all believe the same thing or agree on everything. The fact of the matter is we won't, but we are to agree on the most important things—the truth of the gospel and that we are called to share it—and continue the mission the early church began.

Not only was this group of believers united, but they were also *continually* united. This wasn't a one-time thing. They weren't only united when everyone was getting along or when they were gathered weekly. They were continually united. Being united on an ongoing basis is hard. A healthy church doesn't always get it right, but they also don't quit working toward this.

**“In Prayer”:** Unity is an essential element of success for a body of believers, and so is prayer. Continuous unity in prayer strengthened the early church for the challenging days and mission ahead.

Note how the believers in Acts followed what Jesus Himself modeled. Prayer was an important hallmark of Jesus's earthly ministry. Luke 5:16 notes that Jesus “often withdrew to deserted places and prayed.” Once, He was praying for so long that people began to worry and went to search for Him (Mark 1:35-37).

When facing the hardest moment of His life on earth, the crucifixion, Jesus devoted Himself to prayer in the garden at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). Jesus knew the importance of prayer, and not only did He model it, but He also taught His disciples the importance of it (Luke 18:1-8).



Application: What would it look like for our group to be “united in prayer”?

## 2. Together in Prayer (James 5:16)

James 5:16 gives us another model for a healthy church: True Christian community should be a safe space to confess our sins to one another, and the response to that confession should be prayer. We live in a time where we see public figures routinely get “canceled” when they fail, but that's not what Scripture tells us godly community should look like.



What connection did James make between confession and healing? How have you experienced this reality?

James's implication here isn't that the confession of all sin should be public, though some sin may call for that. Rather, James 5:16 tells us the humble confession of sin, followed by prayer, results in healing. Sometimes this healing is physical, but it is always spiritual.

Let's look deeper into the role of prayer here. When we confess our sins, we aren't at our proudest moment. In fact, in some cases, this is a very low moment. A healthy church creates a safe space for this. When we are struggling, when we are hurting or at our lowest, the church is called to pray. Don't mistake this type of prayer for inaction. Sometimes additional action may be called for, but prayer is a vital, powerful step we must always take.



How have you seen that, "The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect"?

This call to pray for one another is echoed elsewhere in the New Testament, too (1 Thessalonians 1:2; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 1:3). Prayer is important and powerful. James specified that powerful prayer comes from a righteous person. Being righteous doesn't mean we are perfect—the Bible is full of cautionary tales of righteous people who missed the mark—but it does mean we pray earnestly and sincerely while striving to live in a Christlike manner. When we pray this way, we have a correct understanding of God as just and right though we are often not (Psalm 89:14). When we pray this way, our hearts are in the right place.



Application: How are we to apply this verse in our daily lives and time together as a church?

### 3. Fervent in Prayer (Acts 12:5-16)



The church immediately turned to prayer once Peter was imprisoned. How likely are we to turn to prayer as our first option in times of trouble?

After King Herod arrested Peter, something miraculous happens. Peter was kept in chains under heavy guard (vv. 4,6), but the Lord had other plans. On the night he was supposed to be brought out to trial, an angel rescued Peter from jail, breaking his chains and leading him out to the street. Peter went to the home of Mary, John Mark's mom. He startled the servant Rhoda, who (rather humorously), in her haste to tell everyone Peter was at the door, didn't open the door immediately and left him standing at the gate.

## Peter's Release

Rhoda ("Rosie"), the little servant girl, was so excited to see Peter that she left him at the gate. The Christians inside could not believe her good news. They found it easier to believe that Peter had been executed and his ghost returned to earth than that their prayer for his release had been answered.

This is just one of the amazing stories of God working in the book of Acts, but let's look closely at how the church reacts to Peter's misfortune:

**"The church was praying fervently to God for him"** (v. 5). Jesus taught to pray without giving up, and here the believers were, using the only weapon at their disposal to help Peter: *fervent prayer*.<sup>4</sup> They were praying earnestly and intensely.<sup>5</sup> When was the last time you would describe your prayers that way?

Peter's arrest happened on the heels of the execution of James the brother of John (v. 2). These believers had every reason to think Peter would be next in line for martyrdom, but they knew and believed the Lord could help, so they fervently asked Him to do so. God doesn't always answer our fervent prayers with a "yes," but in this case, He did so in a miraculous way.

**"Many had assembled and were praying"** (v. 12). Luke records that "many had assembled" to pray for Peter during his hour of need. In verse 6, we learn that Peter's trial was supposed to happen that very night, so the church gathered to pray. They knew the power of prayer, and their prayers were answered even before they parted from their gathering.



How has your prayer life grown through praying alongside other believers?

The way God works often looks different than Peter's divine rescue. Sometimes our prayers are answered quickly, while other times we must wait for God's purpose and timing. Whatever the situation, a healthy church joining together in prayer is powerful.



Application: In Acts, the church came together in Peter's time of need. What would it look like for us to do the same for those in need in our church?

## Conclusion




Today's passage reminds us of the importance of a unified, praying church. Prayer is essential. In Scripture we see the importance of two different types of prayer: individual prayer (as modeled consistently by Jesus, who would go off on His own to pray and have private time with the Father) and corporate prayer, or prayer in community (as modeled by the believers in Acts 1). Both are important and necessary for the church.

When was the last time you prayed over our group's prayer list outside of a Sunday morning? When you tell someone you'll be praying for them or their situation, do you actually do it? If you struggle with this, you aren't alone. Instead of feeling shame, give this struggle over to God and ask for His help as you work to build this habit.

While skeptics may see prayer as a step of inaction, we know, and Scripture teaches, that it is anything but. While some situations do require other action, praying for a situation is the most powerful thing we can do. When we pray, we know that the One who can make the difference in a situation isn't us, but the Lord.

In Acts 12, we explored the story of the church joining in prayer for Peter after he was arrested. Luke recorded that “the church was praying fervently to God for him” (v. 5) and that they joined together in prayer (v. 12). In this case, prayer was more powerful than the prison chains and guards Herod had set in place. The prayers of the gathered believers were answered during the very prayer meeting they were attending.

Prayer is crucial to the function of the church body and is not to be neglected in our lives, personally or communally.

-  How have you seen the effectiveness of prayer, personally or in community?
-  How can we commit to prayer for one another on an ongoing basis?
-  How might fervent united prayer give us more opportunities to share the gospel with others?

## Prayer of Response

*Thank God for showing us examples of how to pray and teaching us the importance of prayer in His Word. Thank Him for listening when we pray. Ask for His help as you work to make prayer a continual fixture in your lives.*

## Memory Verse

*They all were continually united in prayer, along with the women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. —Acts 1:14*

## Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Acts* by Tony Merida
- *Acts* by R. C. Sproul
- *Exalting Jesus in James* by David Platt

## Disciples Multiplying Disciples





# 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 1:12-14

1:12–13 Lk 6:14–16 provides the same list of disciples. The lists in Mark and Matthew are similar, except for differences in the names of two disciples between Luke-Acts and Mark and Matthew. Several disciples had alternative names (Simon/Peter, Matthew/Levi; cp. v. 23), possibly accounting for differences between the lists. Simon the Zealot of Luke-Acts is probably Simon the Cananaean, and Judas the son of James in Luke-Acts may be Thaddaeus.

1:14 The women may have included the wives of the apostles. Jesus had six half-brothers according to Mk 6:3. Jesus appeared to James (1Co 15:7) and the others may have seen him as well.<sup>6</sup>

### Acts 12:3-16

12:3–5 Peter would have been guarded by four soldiers at a time, who worked three-hour shifts. The Sanhedrin may have recommended the heavy guard to Herod in light of their own experience attempting to jail the apostles (5:19).

12:6–10 Peter was again rescued from prison by an angel of the Lord (see 5:19–20), though this time he initially thought he was only seeing a vision.

12:11 Jesus too was once rescued from Herod's grasp, though it was a different king Herod (Mt 2:13–15).

12:12–16 Knowing that everyone inside was praying for Peter, Rhoda rushed back in to tell them that God had answered their prayers, not bothering to let Peter in first! Remarkably, they disbelieved her and suggested it was Peter's angel. This reflected the common Jewish belief in guardian angels. It also shows how serious the persecutions had become, for it was believed that your guardian angel would sometimes appear shortly after your death. Thus it seems the crowd of believers was better prepared to believe Peter had been executed than that he had been released.<sup>7</sup>

### James 5:16

5:16 Pray for one another echoes the prayers of the elders, and these should lead to both physical and spiritual healing (i.e., forgiveness). Prayer is not a magical incantation or a guarantee of healing, but when offered fervently by a righteous person, God will respond in a way that best fits his good purposes.<sup>8</sup>

## References

1. F. B. Meyer, quoted in Calvin Wittman, "Sermon: The Prayer Life of a Christian - Colossians 4," Lifeway.com, January 27, 2014, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-prayer-life-of-a-christian-colossians-4>.
2. Blue Letter Bible, "Strong's G3661 – homothymadon," accessed March 11, 2025 <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3661/csb/mgnt/0-1/>.

3. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Dynamic: Experience the Power of God's People* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1987), 25.
4. Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Acts, 2025 Edition," Sonilight.com, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://sonilight.com/tcon/notes/html/acts/acts.htm>.
5. Blue Letter Bible, "Strong's G1619 – ektenōs," accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1619/csb/mgnt/0-1/>.
6. Stanley E. Porter, "Acts," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1716–1718.
7. Stanley E. Porter, "Acts," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1738–1739.
8. R. Gregg Watson, "James," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1972.