

September 7, 2014
Church Planting

Effective Prayer
Acts 12:1-11

Opening words: This is the final message in my summer sermon series, *Church Planting*. My goal is to preach through the Book of Acts during the summer months. Last summer, we looked at the first eight chapters. This summer, we looked at chapters nine through twelve. We will begin with chapter thirteen next summer. Do you remember the storyline to this point?

The church is expanding. It started in Jerusalem, where the Jews responded to the Good News. The Gentiles - non-Jews, people like us - were next. That is why the story of Cornelius was so important. Then, we found out the church had taken on an international flavor. Greek-speaking people in Antioch came to believe. Some things don't change. The church itself had to wrestle with growing pains. However, in time, they accepted the fact that this was all part of God's plan of salvation for the world. However, the non-converted part of the Jewish population still struggled with this Christian movement. They were always trying to frustrate the church's expansion. Today's story illustrates that point. Our scripture lesson for today is Acts 12:1-11. Let me call this message *Effective Prayer*.

Acts 12:1-11 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. ¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

There is an old preaching story from yesteryear about five young college students. They were in London on a Sunday evening and longed to hear Charles Spurgeon preach. While they were waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who asked, "Gentlemen, let me show you around. Would you like to see the heating plant of this church?" They were not particularly interested, for it was a hot day in July. But they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway, a door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman then introduced himself. He was Charles Spurgeon. This morning's message is about prayer. If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves in the twelfth chapter of Acts. According to the text, King Herod is on the throne. That is bad news for the early church, because he is still practicing Christian persecution. Verse two is hard to read two thousand years later. It tells us James, the brother of John, has been put to death. His end was not pretty. He died as John the Baptist died, by the sword. I find verse three to be disturbing. The Jews were pleased at his death and longed for more blood. This time, the victim will be Peter himself. Like Jesus, he is arrested during the Passover and is watched by a surplus of guards. His outcome is predictable, except for one thing. In verse five, we are told the church begins to pray for him and the miraculous happens. An angel appears in his prison cell and helps him to escape. Isn't it great when our prayers are answered, "Yes? That is not the only story. There are many stories when God answered, "Yes!"

Dr. Helen Roseveare was a missionary in Zaire, Africa. A mother at her mission station died shortly after giving birth to a premature baby. They tried to improvise an incubator to keep the infant alive, but the only hot water bottle they had was beyond repair. So she asked the children to pray for the baby and for her sister. One of the girls prayed, "Dear God, please send a hot water bottle today. Tomorrow will be too late because by then the baby will be dead. And dear Lord, send a doll for the sister so she won't feel so lonely." That afternoon a large package arrived from England. The children watched eagerly as it was opened. Much to their surprise, under some clothing was a hot water bottle! Immediately, the girl who had prayed so earnestly started to dig deeper, exclaiming, "If God sent that, I'm sure He also sent a doll!" And she was right! The doll was in the bottom of the trunk. Isn't it great when God answers our prayers, "Yes?" Wouldn't it be nice if our prayers were always answered with a yes? This is the truth. Sometime, our prayers are answered with a no.

It was on a Sunday evening years ago. The plan was to bring a terminally ill woman to the altar for prayer. You may have been here. She came that evening by a nursing home van. When she arrived, the sanctuary lights were dimmed and the candles were lit. The congregation who had assembled was ready for the miraculous. After the healing scriptures were read, she was surrounded by the most important people in her life. We laid hands on her and I placed oil on her forehead to intensify our prayers.

One by one, we all prayed for her. Filled with emotions, each word was genuine. When we said the Lord's Prayer, the Holy Spirit washed over us. Emotionally and spiritually exhausted, the woman was placed back into her wheelchair and directed back to the van. With few words spoken, we watched her being driven out of the parking lot. That evening we boldly prayed for a complete healing, but it never came. A short time later, the same group gathered again for her funeral. Sometimes our prayer are answered "No". Sometimes our prayers are answered, "Later".

One of the great privileges I have in my job is praying with people. I pray with people all the time and in various locations. I have prayed with people in my office and in the parlor. I have prayed with people at the altar and in their homes. I have with people in the hospital. Several years ago, I was talking to a man who began complaining about something that happened years ago. He told me the story in great detail. As I listened, I realized all the characters in his story were dead! He was mad at dead people. I said to him, "They may be dead, but they still have power over you! Look how upset you are! You need to pray!" He responded, "I don't pray." I said, "You do today!" And in the middle of the parking lot, I grabbed his hand and we prayed that God would heal his damaged emotions. This is my question for you today.

What makes prayer effective? Many seem to believe effective prayer is always getting what you want. They pray for the terminally ill person and they are healed. They pray for the winning lottery numbers and they are drawn. They pray for the missing family pet and they are returned. They pray for their favorite team and they win. Is that your definition of effective prayer? To God, effective prayer is communicating with God and treating Him with the respect He deserves. We pray to cultivate a relationship with God. Gandhi once said, "*Prayer is not asking. Prayer is longing for the soul.*" You know it is true. Many of our prayers sound like a wish list for a rich uncle. Never forget it. When you pray, you are speaking to God, the creator of the universe. That reminder should change your prayer life. In comparison to God, we are nothing. Today, I want to help you improve your prayer life by reminding you of three more things. Each one is Biblical. I am going to be quick, because this is Communion Sunday. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Praise God

One of my favorite Bible stories is the transfiguration. Do you remember it? We have looked at it in the past. It is found in all of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Peter had just stated for the first time that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. That announcement changed everything. Jesus took the inner circle, Peter, Andrew, James and John, to the top of the mountain to pray. They had no clue what was about to happen. Without warning, Jesus is transfigured. In other words, he begins to glow. Then, Moses and Elijah suddenly appear. Moses was the great law giver and Elijah was considered the greatest of the prophets. (They must have been wearing name tags for the disciples to recognize them.) Then God showed up covered by a cloud. He tells everyone Jesus is his son. "Listen to him!" The disciples are blown away.

They had just experienced God, first hand. When you pray, you are talking to God, the great and mighty one, one on one.

Effective prayer praises God. In the scripture lesson for today, we were simply told the church prayed for Peter. Their prayer is not quoted and no details are given. However, the early church was mindful of the fact that God was worthy of their praise. The one thing that united them all was the resurrection of Jesus. If you have the power to bring a dead man back to life, then you have the power to do anything. Factor in this next statement. This all-powerful God wanted to have a relationship with them and he wants to have a relationship you. If you let that divine truth sink into your heart, then you will be humbled. Just like at the transfiguration, you have no other choice but to praise God. Does your prayer life include praise? If that makes you think, say **"Amen!"**

Obey God

One of the great mysteries in our lives is discerning God's will. Have you ever wondered what God wants you to do? Most of the time we know what God wants us to do, but we just refuse to do it. We know we are to love everyone, but we only tolerate people who are just like us. We know we are to forgive, but we remember. We know that we are to sacrifice for others, but we save the best for ourselves. We know that we are to tithe (10%) but we give about 2%. We know we are to love God with all of our heart, mind and soul, but we only come to church when it is convenient.

Effective prayer obeys God. What you say is important. What you do is really important. We are only in this world for a short time. We are going to be in heaven for eternity. Are you practicing today what you will be doing in heaven for eternity? How obedient are you to God? Effective prayer obeys God. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Trust God

Ivan Denisovitch endured all the horrors of a Soviet prison camp. One day he is praying with his eyes closed when a fellow prisoner notices him, and says with ridicule, "Prayers won't help you get out of here any faster." Opening his eyes, Ivan answers, "I do not pray to get out of prison, but to do the will of God."

Effective prayer trusts God. Sometime God answers no. That means that your will and God's will are running in opposite directions. Have you ever been mad at God because he didn't listen to you? If so, then you are extremely arrogant and not very trusting. In prayer, we are cultivating a relationship with God. Never forget, you are speaking to God! If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Early African converts to Christianity were earnest and regular in private devotions. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the thicket where he would pour out his heart to God. Over time, the paths to these places became well worn. As a result, if one of these believers began to neglect prayer, it was soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind the negligent one, "Brother, the grass grows on your path."

How often do you pray? In other words, how often do you talk to God? Are you cultivating a real relationship with God? Or do your prayers sound like a wish list for a rich uncle? Is it possible you have forgotten you are speaking to God, the creator of the universe? Next to Him, we are nothing. Effective prayer praises God. Effective prayer obeys God. Effective prayer trusts God. Martin Luther once said, "*To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"