

“Many Were Gathered”

1 Kings 8:22-30 • Acts 12:1-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 3, 2015

This Thursday is the National Day of Prayer and it's our privilege to once again host the downtown prayer service at noon here in our sanctuary. I really hope you will be here to pray and to welcome our guests. Our country has a long history calling on the people to pray, going back to the very founding. In 1775, the Continental Congress issued a proclamation calling for a day of public “humiliation, fasting and prayer.” With very few exceptions, Congress and the president have called for a national day of prayer since that time. In 1952, President Truman signed into law a bill that permanently called for a national day of prayer each year, and in 1988 the law was amended to set the first Thursday of May as the official day of prayer.

In addition to the official national day of prayer, governors have called for days of prayer. For example, you may remember in 2011, Governor Perry called for days of prayer for rain in Texas. The question, then, is “does God answer prayer? Do times of prayer make a difference?”

As I thought about that question, I began to think about the book of Acts. This full title of the book is “The Acts of the Apostles.” But as you read it you discover that it's really about the acts of God in the lives of the Apostles. And throughout the book you find God answering prayer. One example is today's passage from Acts chapter 12.

Twice in this story we're told that people were praying for Peter while he was in prison. Verse 5 says, “So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” Then in verse 12 we discover that they were praying all night long for him. And God answered their prayers.

In June of 1873, pioneer farmers in Minnesota saw a brown cloud coming toward them from the southwest. Some thought it was a storm, others thought it was a cloud of dust. Eyewitnesses described it as looking like a

snowstorm. But within minutes they discovered that it was no ordinary storm. It was a cloud of grasshoppers, also known as Rocky Mountain Locusts. They had been blown in from the Dakotas and they proceeded to eat entire crops. Within hours the grasshoppers destroyed entire fields of knee-high wheat and other grains.

The grasshoppers then laid millions of eggs deep in the soil. The next year the eggs hatched and the crops were again devoured. This went on for four years. In 1876 alone the grasshoppers destroyed over half a million acres of crops. All the while the government implemented every program they could imagine to solve the problem, yet it continued to get worse.

However, in 1877, governor John Pillsbury declared April 26 a day of fasting and prayer. People gathered in churches and homes to pray that God would prevent the coming disaster. As you can imagine, many people were disappointed when the grasshoppers began to hatch in the warm weather. But a late freeze killed many of the newly hatched insects and then in July, for unknown reasons, the rest of the grasshoppers simply flew away without laying any eggs. The wheat crop of 1877 was the best in the state's history. God answered their prayers.

As we look at the events taking place in our country and even in our city, our primary response should be to cry out to God in prayer. As one pastor put it, “One of the reasons for a lack of Godliness is prayerlessness.” From the Bible we see that God expects us to pray. In Matthew 6, Jesus repeatedly says, “When you pray...” Colossians 4:2 says, “Devote yourselves to prayer.” This spring we studied Acts 2:42 where we see that the early church “devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Prayer was central to the early church and it should be central to our church. Donald Whitney writes, “Of all the Spiritual

Disciplines, prayer is second only to the intake of God's word in importance." The great reformer Martin Luther said, "As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray."

But it's not just a duty that we pray. It's a privilege. The God who created and rules the entire universe wants to talk *to* you and to hear *from* you! What He wants is a relationship with you. That's why Jesus came.

So why aren't we better at praying? I think there are basically four reasons people don't pray. First are issues of faith. We don't pray because we doubt that anything will actually happen. If you knew that your prayer would be answered within sixty seconds of praying, you would have holes in your pants from praying. Sometimes we pray and pray and it seems like nothing happens. One explanation is that the prayer is answered in a different way than we expect. In verse 12, after Peter is lead out of prison by the angel, he goes to the house of John Mark's mother "where many were gathered together and were praying." But when he gets there they don't believe it's really him. Their prayer was answered but not in the way they expected.

In the Wikipedia article about Governor Perry's call for prayer for rain, they point out that it was months before any significant rain fell on Texas. In their view the prayers didn't "work" because it didn't start raining right away. In the Summer of 2011, more than 80% of Texas was in extreme or exceptional drought. Today, parts of only about 12 counties are in that level of drought. Much of Texas is not even considered to be in any stage of drought.

The second reason people don't pray is because they are not aware of God. John Calvin said all wisdom consists of two parts: knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves. Sometimes we don't pray because we don't sense the nearness of God. He seems distant. But he seems distant because we don't pray. We aren't aware of His presence. If we were aware of who God is, we would become aware of who

we are. We would realize our sinfulness, which would cause us to pray for forgiveness. We draw close to God primarily through reading and meditating on the Bible.

The third reason we don't pray like we should is plain old busyness. We crowd our lives from the moment we reluctantly get up until the moment we fall asleep exhausted. We crowd our minds with music or television or radio and we don't have any space for quiet conversation with God. That's why prayer is a discipline. You must plan for it and prioritize it.

The fourth reason I think we don't pray is that we have never really learned how. Prayer is like a foreign language and the best way to learn a language is to speak it. Mark Twain said, "A man who carries a cat by its tail learns something he can learn in no other way." We learn to pray by praying and by meditating on Scripture. The two go hand in hand. We also learn to pray by praying with other people. And we can learn about prayer by reading about it. You can read about the prayer lives of people like George Müller.

One of the tools that can help you in your prayer life is to have a pattern of prayer. The Bible is filled with lots of different kinds of prayer that can serve as examples but there is none better than the Lord's Prayer. You can use the Lord's Prayer as an outline, praying through each line with your own words. What you will find is that there are four types of prayer in the Lord's Prayer and you can remember the pattern with the acronym ACTS, which stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

Adoration means telling God how much you love him. It means recognizing who He is, His greatness and His attributes. One of the ways we pray prayers of adoration is in our singing. Many of our hymns are prayers of adoration. The Lord's Prayer begins, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed (holy, worshipped) is your name."

If adoration is recognizing who God is, confession is recognizing who we are. "Forgive us our debts." When we pray we confess our

sinfulness to God seeking His forgiveness, which He promises in His Word, which leads us to thankfulness. Calvin said, “We dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.” Reading and meditating on the Bible should naturally lead us to thanking God.

Finally, supplication means asking or begging. Within the relationship formed by adoration, confession and thanksgiving, we can ask God to move and act. We pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” but more importantly we pray, “may your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth, just as it is in heaven.” In other words, as John Ortberg says, “make up there come down here.” This is the prayer that changes things. This is the prayer that changes us and our church and our community. God answers prayers.

So how do we become better at praying? First, recognize your need to be in conversation with God. Then, set aside time every day to read and meditate on some passage of Scripture and pray along with it. Pray for your church. I

want to challenge each one of you to earnestly pray the prayers listed in the Towertime every day for the next 30 days. Pray for unity and passion. I am confident that if all of us do that we will see those prayers answered in powerful ways. Finally, I want to encourage you to find a group of people with whom you can pray together regularly. I’m not asking you to start a program, just get together to pray and learn to pray. This message is as much for me as it is for you, so beginning tomorrow you are invited to join me in my study at 8:05 a.m. on Monday mornings for an informal time of prayer for each other and for the church.

Does God answer prayer? Some people would say that they are merely coincidences. The grasshoppers mysteriously flying away forever after a day of prayer– coincidence. The rains in Texas – coincidence. The marriages healed, the relationships restored – coincidence. But as one person put it, “I sure have a lot more coincidences when I pray than when I don’t.”

Amen