

# It's Only a Prayer Meeting!

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Now let's just go together in prayer.

*Our Father, we desperately need the showers of blessing but we recognize that there's a price to be paid and we have to tell thee, Lord, that so often we're unwilling to pay the price that, our Father, we would pray with the Psalmist this morning, "Lord, make us willing in the day of thy power." Grant, our Father, that at least some of us may get to the place where we're willing to pay the price that the showers of blessing might fall. We thank thee for thy word. We thank thee that it's our chart and our compass, and we pray that as we turn again to its holy pages, that the Holy Spirit who inspired this book will take of its truth and apply it with power to our hearts and our minds this morning. We need thy help, Lord. Our eyes are toward thee. For those who listen, grant concentration of heart and mind and, Father, as we handle thy word, we pray that we may know that fresh enduement with power. For Christ's sake. Amen.*

The Acts of the Apostles 1, just taking a break from the book of James, we've been looking at it for about 23 Sunday mornings. We've got to the end of chapter 3 but we'll just take a little break for a while. That will be some time in the future in the will of the Lord, we'll return to it but I just ask for your prayers in this incoming week. I commence tomorrow night a series of four Bible readings in Temple Moore Hall in Belfast and then on Wednesday night I'm continuing a series of four prophetic rallies in the Meeting House in Randalstown with our Brother George Bates, and then on Friday, Saturday night, Friday night, Saturday night and all day Sunday next weekend I'll be in Shotts in Scotland and would certainly value your prayers for these ministry meetings in the will of the Lord and then back home on Monday morning and again the same routine, Temple Moore Hall, Randalstown, etc. So we would value your prayers as we seek to minister the word of God.

There's a little phrase that has been going through my mind throughout these past number of weeks and the phrase is this: only a prayer meeting. Only a prayer meeting and I want us to read this morning from the Acts of the Apostles 1 and we're reading, please, at verse 9. The Acts of the Apostles 1, and we're reading at verse 9. "And when he," that is the risen Lord Jesus, for our Savior had risen bodily and actually and literally from among

the dead. He had spent 40 days authenticating his resurrection to the disciples and now he is ascending to heaven and it says in verse 9,

9 And when he had spoken these words, while they beheld [that is the disciples], he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. 10 And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; 11 Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. 12 Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey. 13 And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James. 14 These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

Only a prayer meeting. During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, God sent a mighty spiritual awakening to the land of Wales. In a matter of months, thousands were miraculously converted and the churches and the hills and the valleys of Wales were filled to capacity with people who were seeking God. The moral character in many of those towns and cities was radically transformed and news of what God was doing in the land of Wales spread throughout the world and many Christians traveled to Wales to glean the secret of the Welsh Revival.

One evening, Evan Roberts, the unofficial leader of the Welsh Revival, called for testimonies from those who were gathered. An evangelist stood up from another country and he said to him, "Mr. Roberts, we have come to Wales to glean the secret of the Welsh Revival," and instantly Evan Roberts thrust his finger at the visitor and he said, "There is no secret. Ask and it shall be given unto you. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you." I wonder if the evangelist from overseas was disappointed with Evan Roberts' reply? I think I would have been, after all, prayer is no secret, it's certainly not new. There are Christians in this church who pray every day. This church has prayer meetings every week but nothing like the Welsh Revival ever happens. I wonder is there nothing else, a program, a secret, a formula, a method? And yet, my dear friends, Evan Roberts was right, there is no secret, it is ask and ye shall receive.

I wonder what could we expect to happen if the church and if the whole church returned to its kneeling posture and recovered its praying power? Take another look this morning at the early church. They prayed for 10 days, they preached for 10 minutes and 3,000 people were saved. Today we pray for 10 minutes and we preach for 10 weeks and we are ecstatic if one soul is saved. You see, my friends, the Cinderella of the church today is the prayer meeting. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the greatest Baptist preacher of all time, certainly captured the common attitude in churches when he chose the title of his famous message on prayer, "Only a Prayer Meeting." Only a prayer meeting, and to this very day

the prayer meeting is the least regarded meeting in the church's program. It is undoubtedly the least significant and the least popular meeting in numerous churches. In this very church, less than 50% of the membership ever attend any prayer meeting and I'm being very generous in those figures. Less than 50% of the membership ever attend regularly any prayer meeting. We had a brother with us last Sunday evening who told us that it was in his unconverted, unregenerate days as a Muslim he sought what he considered to be the face of his God five times a day and yet we can't get members out to one prayer meeting per week.

Let's shut it down. Let's close the prayer meeting. Let's get the mats out on Thursday night and play the bowls. Let's shut down the prayer meeting. Can you imagine how that would go down among certain of God's people? How can we scrap the meeting that has been the hallmark of the church right down through the centuries? And yet so many who would object to such a proposal vote, in fact, for such a proposal regularly with their feet. They stay away.

I wonder is that you, dear Christian friend? Spiritual adolescents say, "I'll not go tonight. It's only the prayer meeting." Have you forgotten that prayer was God's idea? Do you not recognize the special promise that God attaches to corporate prayer? Are you among the many true believers who opt out of the church's prayer meeting and throw away the promises of God? Are you depriving this church of your prayer labor? Depriving other Christians of your fellowship in prayer and depriving your soul of the blessing that could come upon you as you seek the Lord's face together? Is your attendance spasmodic? Inconsistent? Nil? If so, I want to tell you this morning the Lord is offended and the church is wounded.

But you say to me this morning, "Preacher, it's only a prayer meeting! The choir practice is more important. The visitation of the sick is more important. The caring of the elderly is more important. There are so many things that are more important." Are they? Have we forgotten that prayer is the thermometer of the local church? That the spiritual temperature of this church rises or falls depending upon how we as the people of God in this assembly pray?

Well, how did the early church pray? Look at the little cameo that's brought before us in Acts this morning, chapter 1, verses 13 and 14. There is brought before us here what many 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians would call only a prayer meeting. There are three things here that I want you to notice. They're very simple things but they're very scriptural things. I want you to notice here as you look at this cameo that is brought before us, this little portrait that Dr. Luke brings before us here, I want you to notice very simply the people there. The people there. You see, when the disciples gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem for the first recorded prayer meeting, there was no doubt in their minds that the prayer meetings were for all.

Look at what it says in verse 14, "These all continued with one accord in prayer." They realized that corporate prayer is for all. This was the place to go. This was the business in hand. These all continued. Let me break that down for you a little further. You'll notice

that the church leaders were there. Look, if you will, at verse 13, "And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room," probably the same one that the risen Lord appeared to them after the resurrection, "where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James." All the apostles were there. These men had been with the Lord Jesus throughout his public ministry for 3 ½ years. They saw the tremendous emphasis that Christ had placed upon prayer. They heard the Lord Jesus saying that men ought always to pray and not to faint. They saw the Lord Jesus rising up a great while before day and going out into a solitary place and praying. They had seen Christ, the man of prayer, and now they were seeking to follow in his steps.

Look at chapter 3, verse 1 for a moment. Just flick over to chapter 3 and verse 1. Here's what it says, "Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour." In the early church, those in leadership prayed together. Now Peter and John were two opposites. You see, everybody in leadership is not the same. Peter and John were two opposites. They had fished together, they had prepared the Passover together, they had visited the tomb on Easter Sunday morning together, they would later witness before the Jewish Sanhedrin together, but here they are, Peter and John, and they're praying together. What I find amazing, this is an indictment on me this morning too as well as you, I find it an amazing thing that sometimes people who are in leadership in the Lord's work can't even pray together. Oh, they can fish together, and they can talk together, and they can drink coffee together, and they can hold committee meetings together, but call them together for prayer and they can hardly open their mouth. I wonder has the Lord placed you in a position of leadership, responsibility? Tell me, are you an example to the rest of the flock in the place of prayer? These all continued. Church leaders were there.

Look at verse 14 of chapter 1. I want you to see another group who were there, "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus." What women were these? Probably these were the women that accompanied our Lord Jesus Christ from Galilee, made their way down the Jordan Valley as he entered into the city of Jerusalem for his final week upon earth. These were the women who had ministered unto the Lord Jesus of his substance. These were the women who had accompanied Christ from the north, they were now in Jerusalem, they saw his crucifixion, they saw his burial, they rejoiced in his resurrection. Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, Martha and Mary the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ was there and she was quietly taking her place. She was just another believer. They weren't praying to Mary or anything like that. These were women who were lovingly devoted to the Savior and they were at the place of prayer.

What an immense debt we owe as a church to the faithful praying women in our churches, those women who have a burden for prayer, those women who know how to pray. Are you beginning to see how representative this prayer meeting really was? Church leaders were there. Loyal women were there.

Look at that little phrase at the end of verse 14, "and with his brothers, with his brethren." Young converts were there. Oh, they hadn't believed in Christ during his ministry but you know, my dear friends, they'd come to trust the Lord Jesus after his resurrection. Yet again we read of those who were converted in the day of Pentecost. Have a look at it, chapter 2, verse 42. They were saved through Peter's preaching in the day of Pentecost and here's what it says, "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine, in fellowship, in breaking of bread, in prayers." What a lovely picture in the early church. The apostles who had been with the Lord Jesus for three years, the mature leaders, those who would form the beginning of the church, the apostles who had been walking with Christ for about three years, yet these new converts who were just saved a little while and they were all present at the place of prayer.

Now can I encourage those of you this morning who are young in the faith, can I encourage those of you this morning who are young in age to attend the church prayer meeting? I have said before I don't know where we get this idea of dividing the church into so many departments. Personally I don't see it in the New Testament but I want to encourage those of you who are young this morning to attend the corporate prayer meeting of the church. C. H. Spurgeon said the prayer is the autograph of the Holy Ghost on the renewed heart. There is a tendency sometimes among new converts to live on their feelings, something subjective, to live on fellowship with other believers and then the devil turns up and he begins to create problems through temptation and testing, and that's why it is imperative that young converts learn to pray corporately and audibly, for prayer indicates our dependence upon God. Prayer acknowledges the Lordship of Christ. Prayer shows that we know our weakness and our needs.

These all continued, the people there. Who attended the prayer meeting in the first century? Well, the church leaders were there, the loyal women were there, the young converts were there. Are you there? Why are you absent when God's people come together corporately to pray? We seem to have time for visiting, for socializing, recreation, for entertainment, but no time for prayer. I'll tell you the difference between the early church and us: the early church were prayer conscious, we are pleasure conscious. The early church were prayer conscious, we are pleasure conscious. The prayer meeting will be held on Thursday evening at 8 o'clock. My friends, this is God's call to his people. Your response is neither an excuse given to the pastor or to the elders, it is neither a plea to your own conscience, your response is an answer to the head of the church, the Lord Jesus himself. These all continued with one accord in prayer. The people there.

Come back to Acts 1. Here's the second thing I want you to notice. It's very simple, I want you to see not only the people there but I want you to see the procedure there. "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." They were waiting for the advent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost but during those 10 days between Christ's ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, they had come together to pray. I want you to see how they prayed. They prayed audibly. Now that's not explicit in the text but it's implicit. Do you remember what our Lord Jesus taught about corporate prayer? I want you to turn to this just for a moment, Matthew 18. Look at it because I think if you

see it, you'll benefit more from it. Here's what the Lord Jesus said about corporate prayer. Matthew 18:19, here's what he says, "Again I say unto you," Matthew 18:19," Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We're now looking at the teaching of Christ, that there is a special power in the place of corporate prayer.

Now what exactly are we commanded by the Lord Jesus to do? Well, we are promised a special hearing when we agree about what we ask. That word "agree" in verse 19 is a very interesting one. He says that if two of you shall agree on earth, that literally means to sound together. The Lord Jesus is saying when you come together in corporate prayer, if you two of you shall sound together, but it goes deeper than that. It was used to describe instruments that were playing harmoniously together. It is also used in the New Testament to describe the way in which two people verbally and audibly strike a bargain. My dear friends, it is not a matter of different people praying aloud at the same time, there can be no intelligent agreement about that. Here is sounding together: one prays, another follows, winging those desires heavenward with the one who prays audibly. Christ says upon such praying is the unique favor of God.

So I ask myself is that element evident in our church prayer meetings? As one brother stands up to pray and we're behind him and we're winging those desires that he makes audibly, we're winging them and willing them towards heaven. There is certainly one element that is sadly missing in many of our prayer meetings and it's the shortest simplest prayer possible. Do you know what it is? The word "amen." When someone stands up to pray in the assembly, there should be a loud amen from the gathered congregation. It's scriptural. The word means truly, the word means "let it be so." When our Lord taught his disciples the pattern of prayer in Matthew's Gospel, he concluded with the word "amen." When someone ends a petition in the fellowship in the place of corporate prayer, swell a loud amen. Let it be know among us that we're following, that we're feeling, that we're pressing those petitions heavenward. Again and again and again we must cry amen, praying audibly.

Is that how you pray? Do you come to the corporate prayer meetings of the church prepared to participate? Why are you silent? Oh, you can talk the leg of a stone outside but why are you silent? Has God not promised a special blessing on those who pray audibly?

Come back to Acts 1. They not only prayed audibly but they prayed persistently. Here's what it says, "These all continued." A. T. Robertson, the great Greek scholar, says it means be stuck to praying. The sense is the same as in verse 13 where we read "they abode." The idea that is conveyed is sticking close to someone, sticking close to anything. They were not spasmodic, they were not erratic, they prayed frequently, they prayed constantly, they prayed perseveringly. Do you remember what the Lord said? "Ask and it shall be given you. Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you." And the tense indicates that we're to ask and go on asking, we're to seek and go on seeking, we're to knock and we're to go on knocking, and we're to refuse to be discouraged.

You say, "Preacher, my children are so hard. My husband is so indifferent." My dear friends, listen, something happens when churches pray. Something happens when saints mean business with God. The power of God is released and sinners are melted by the power of the word of God and by the power of the Spirit of God. They're praying audibly, they are praying persistently. Look at that little phrase in verse 14, they are praying unitedly, with one accord. Incidentally, that's the key phrase in the book of Acts. Time and again you read it, "with one accord, with one accord." It pops up time and time again in the book of Acts. There was a unanimity about the matters for which they were praying and there was harmony and unity between them while they were praying.

Now that's amazing, 11 disciples, strong-willed characters, the kind who argued who will work, the kind who argued who was going to get the best seat in the kingdom of God. The 11 disciples of the Lord Jesus, Christ's brothers who had been so perverse during the Savior's life so as to reject his Messiahship. A whole host of household women, they had come from different backgrounds. There was Mary Magdalene out of whom he had cast seven demons. They had come with different backgrounds, different temperaments and yet all of them were of one heart and of one mind. Is that not the kind of praying that meets with a divine response? When all of our different concerns are thrust aside and our hearts flow into one main stream, this is when the power of God is manifested and people know that God has taken the field. No division. No back-biting. No believers not on speaking terms with each other. Unitedly.

Then if you look at verse 14 again, you'll notice that they prayed fervently. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication suggests of beseeching, the beckoning aspect of intercession. It's the laying hold of God until God responds to our cries.

I've asked myself the question through the week are these elements evident in our corporate prayer meetings? Do we truly pray as though Christ is present and the Father's ear is open? Do we come prepared to pray? Listen to these questions. Do you as a believer in Christ come prepared to pray? Do you come prepared to pray early so that prayer is continuous? Why are there these gaps in our prayer meeting? I'll tell you why: it's because we have not come prepared to pray. Let me ask you the question: would you lapse into time-wasting if you had an audience with some important, some influential person on planet earth this week? Not at all. And yet we time-waste when we come to the place of prayer. Why? Because there's no preparation of heart.

Only a prayer meeting. Only a prayer meeting. Look at the people there. Look at the procedure there. My time is gone. Look at the power there, power through prayer for God's power was released as the result of the corporate praying. In the early church there was power to work with the Lord. They were now workers together with Christ and as workers together with the Savior, the first thing they needed to do was to find a replacement for Judas, so what did they do? Look at verse 24, "And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen." Isn't it right for the church to be called to prayer when they're considering a

pastor? When they're considering elders? When they're considering leaders? When they're considering leaders for the different parts of the work? When they're considering deacons? Do you know what happens when we don't pray? Wrong decisions are made. Man's wisdom is exalted and God's work is thwarted.

There was power to work with the Lord and then there was power to walk as the Lord. You remember John's words, we're to walk even as Christ walked. We'll never do that unless we're filled with the Holy Ghost. And we read in chapter 2, verse 4, "And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost." I don't know about you but I've witnessed a strange transition during my lifetime, it's this: Christians used to desire to be filled with the Spirit of God for power, power, now it seems to me that Christians want to be filled with the Spirit of God for pleasure. People no longer, many people no longer want to be filled with the Spirit of God in order that they might have power in serving, they want to be filled with the Spirit of God in order that they might have pleasure in living. The goal of it all for some Christians is to feel good, to have some subjective experience, to have some ecstatic experience and I'm afraid that we're living in a day and age when people are more concerned with the feeling of the Spirit than with the filling of the Spirit.

My friends, more prayer on our part will mean more power in our lives to show forth the beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you see what happens when churches pray? There was power there. There was power, my dear friends, to work with the Lord. There was power to walk as the Lord. There was power to witness for the Lord, for how powerfully, how clearly, how boldly, how directly Peter preached on the day of Pentecost. Power in the pulpit. Why is it that there seems to be so little unction and authority and power in the pulpit today? I'll tell you. I'll give you one of the reasons anyhow: God's people no longer pray for the preaching of God's word. You remember Paul pleaded with the saints for their prayers? He said to the Colossian believers, "With all praying for us that God would open a door of utterance for us." You remember what he said to the church at Ephesus? He said, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication." And he says, "Don't forget about me and me that utterance might be given unto me that I might open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the Gospel." Paul pleaded for the prayers of the people of God.

I wonder can I count on your prayers? Do you pray that I might preach boldly? Let me give you a word of personal testimony this morning. My heart is often filled with tremendous despair when I come out of that prayer meeting on a Sunday evening and there are so few believers there and there is so little power among us when we are there. It almost seems as if we're going through the motions. Can you not spare a few minutes and come and uphold the preacher's arms in prayer? Can you not spare a few minutes tonight and come and hold our Brother Philip's arms in prayer? Listen, we can organize all the children's missions of the day but unless we're going to hold the speaker's arms in prayer, nothing will ever be accomplished.

Many years ago, several members of Jonathan Edwards' church gathered for an all-night prayer meeting before Edwards preached his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and the next night Jonathan Edwards stood up to preach that memorably



sermon that is still being heard throughout the world today, and such was the presence of the power of God and God was manifest in such majesty and holiness and purity and power that the very elders flung their arms around the pillars of the building and cried, "Lord, save us! We're slipping down to hell!" We have lost it and we need desperately to regain it, power in the pulpit.

And my time is gone. You'll notice that they had power to win through the Lord. Peter's message was preached. They cried, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter says, "Repent and be baptized." So after the 10 day prayer meeting in chapter 1, 3,000 were saved. Chapter 4, that number grew to 5,000. After the prayer meeting of chapter 4, the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly. Campbell Morgan says there were 250,000 souls in the first six months of the early church, all as the result of God's people praying.

I'm still convinced tonight or this morning that wherever the preaching of the Gospel is accompanied by people who really mean business with God, I'm still convinced that people will be saved. Spurgeon was asked on one occasion, someone approached him and said to him, "Mr. Spurgeon, why is your ministry so fruitful?" Here's what he said, "My people pray for me. My people pray for me." I'm not sure if every pastor could say that or not, "My people pray for me." That's why when the young students came on that Sunday afternoon to Spurgeon's Tabernacle, the doors were shut and they were queuing to get out, they were queuing outside, a man came along and said, "Would you like to see the heating apparatus of this church?" They weren't particularly interested. He insisted, took them down the side of the building, showed them a cellar, kicked open the door, 700 souls in the basement of the building seeking the face of God, that God's power might be manifest in the Tabernacle above where Spurgeon was preaching. He said, "Gentlemen, that's the heating apparatus of this church."

Ah, but it's only a prayer meeting. It's only a prayer meeting. I tell you, the early church didn't have the fancy building that Lurgan Baptists have, didn't have the lovely extension that Lurgan Baptist has, but I'll tell you what the early church had: it had got power, the power of God that comes through prayer. No elaborate ritual. No Bible seminary. Hardly any New Testament Scriptures. But the early church had power, the power of God that comes through prayer. I don't know about you this morning, but I wonder do you believe that we need a move of God? Do you feel in your heart of hearts that we desperately need a move of God? That we need souls to be saved, not decisions but genuine conversions? I wonder like me this morning, do you recognize that we need more power in the meetings?

Well, the question is what are you going to do about it? What am I going to do about it for the Lord's counting on you and a love that will share in this burden of prayer for the souls he has bought with his lifeblood and sought to win home yet again. He is counting on you. If you feel him, what then? God forgive us if we get to the place where we say, "It's only a prayer meeting."