

Several years ago, I read a book on prayer that described an experience at a church in Phoenix in which they wanted to evaluate a potential correlation between praying for people and the impact on their lives. This experiment took place back in the day of the phonebook. Some of us remember the days of phonebooks. For those under thirty, think of a phonebook as a prehistoric Google, except it weighed fourteen pounds and you had to physically turn every page. The experimenters went to the white pages, chose 160 names at random, and then separated them into two groups with 80 names in each. One group of 80 names was prayed over every day for 90 days by the people in their church. The other list they did nothing with. After three months, members of their church called all 160 people and asked if they would be willing to allow Christians from their church to come to their house to share the gospel. Out of the group that wasn't prayed for, only one person out of 80 said yes. Out of the group that was prayed for, 69 out of 80 said yes. I don't know if their experiment met the qualification for an official scientific experiment, but it is a powerful testimony of the importance and power of prayer and how prayer paves the path for God's work in people's lives.

We are in week four of our study on the book of Acts, and we are continuing to see how God moves in power through prayer. What we are going to see today in Acts 10 and 16 is that prayer prepares the way for the gospel.

The first way we see this is in Acts 10. Up to this point, many people had heard the gospel and been saved, but almost all of them were Jews. Some of them were Samaritans, who, ethnically speaking, are half Jewish. One person from Africa, a convert to Judaism, was saved. The family of God was growing, but it was all connected to Judaism. Everything changed in chapter 10, where we meet a man named Cornelius. If you have your Bible, turn to Acts 10. Cornelius was a 100%, true-blue gentile. But he wasn't simply a gentile; he was a commander in the Roman army, a gentile who worked for an evil empire. Even though on the exterior he had many marks against him, in his heart he feared God, he gave generously to those in need, and he prayed. One day as he was praying at 3:00 in the afternoon, God gave him a vision: an angel told him to send for a man named Simon Peter. Cornelius was a military leader, so he sent men to get Peter.

Just as God had spoken to Cornelius, God spoke to Peter, too.

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." (Acts 10:9-14)

Peter was starving, and he decided to pray while lunch was being prepared. While he was praying, he had a vision of many kinds of animals, including birds and reptiles, and he was told in this vision to kill and eat. And he said, "Surely not, Lord!" No way, God. Peter was a Jew through and through. He had stuck to a strict kosher diet his entire life. You've heard the phrase, "That went over like bacon at a bar mitzvah." Jews don't eat "unclean" food. They have a very clear line of what is acceptable and what is not, and Peter could not, would not, eat unclean food. But in verse 15, "The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'" You get the sense that the food was pointing to something beyond itself. Peter had this same vision three times in a row.

As Peter was reflecting on this, the men Cornelius sent—you remember, Cornelius the Gentile, Cornelius the unclean person with whom Peter would never have any interactions with—knocked on the door and said, “While Cornelius was praying yesterday, an angel appeared and told us to come get you. Will you come with us?” God nudged Peter to go, so he went.

Two days later, Peter made it to Cornelius’ house. “(Peter) said to them: ‘You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean’” (Acts 10:28). In other words, “I’m not supposed to be here. I’ve never stepped inside a gentile’s home before. I’ve never sat at a gentile’s table before. But God told me to come.” Cornelius told him, “God spoke to me, too. I’ve invited all my relatives and my closest friends.” “Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us” (Acts 10:33). These were gentile people, unclean people, but their hearts were open, humble, and receptive.

Peter went on to preach the gospel to them, telling them that if they placed their faith in Jesus, their sins would be forgiven, and they would be saved. They believed!

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised (Jewish) believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44-46)

This was an outward sign, a visible proof that God had given them the Spirit, that they were now in God’s family. “Then Peter said, ‘Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:47-48). For the first time in the history of the world, gentiles were saved and welcomed into the church, and the family of God began to welcome all people everywhere with open arms. How did it all start? With a simple prayer. Cornelius prayed. The next day, Peter prayed. Prayer prepared the way for the gospel. Prayer was the instigating factor.

We learned in Acts 10 how the gospel made its way to the gentiles. Now turn a few pages to Acts 16. We’re going to see how the gospel made its way to Europe. The Apostle Paul, the man who would eventually write 13 books of the Bible, was on a missionary journey. He went from town to town where there were literally zero Christians. At that point, no one in these towns had heard about Jesus. Paul was the first person to tell them. He would stay for a while, help a church get planted, and then move on. One of the challenges at that time was knowing where to go.

Sometimes our challenge as Christians is the opposite. Research shows that once a person has been a Christian for more than two years, the number of meaningful relationships in their life who aren’t Christians declines to the single digits. You get so engaged in “Christian activities” that your entire social calendar looks like a church directory. We’re not around people who need Jesus anymore. This happened to me, even as a pastor. About a year into our marriage, Keren told me that she was disappointed I was not leading our family toward helping people get saved. I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “We are in all these Bible studies, you are in all these prayer meetings, you preach all these sermons, we have all these people over to our house. It’s a ton of ministry, but everyone we are connecting with already knows Jesus. I want our marriage to help bring new people to come to know him.” Honestly, that was a really challenging thing to hear from my wife. But she was right. We were doing lots of good things, but I had not led us to engage on mission with those who needed the Lord. I had to ask her forgiveness, and I had to repent before God, that our circle had become all believers, and there wasn’t intentional time for those who needed to hear about God’s love for the first time.

Maybe some of you are in a position like that and there needs to be some humble prayer and strategic thinking about how you can engage relationally in the mission of God. Is it at work, is it with neighbors, is it with family members, is it on the ball field? There are many avenues to choose from. The only option we can't choose in good faith is none of them.

Paul's problem wasn't that there were so many Christians; it was that there were so many non-Christians. One would assume anywhere he went would be right. North, south, east, or west—there were zero Christians in all the towns! But as he prayed, the Spirit of God kept him from going to certain cities. Not Satan, but God kept him from certain cities, even though there were no Christians there. Finally, through prayer, God guided him to the city of Philippi, the first town in Europe Paul was able to visit.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized. (Acts 16:13-15)

They were looking for a place where they could go and pray. The river seemed like the perfect spot. Like most of us, Paul felt a connection to God, and closer to his creator, when he was in creation, so he went to the river. Other people were there who believed in God, but who didn't know what God had done in the world through Jesus, how they could place their faith in him, follow him, and have their sins forgiven, and have the promise of eternal life. Paul shared the message, and Lydia was baptized right there in the river. A church started to meet in her house! It was all set up by prayer.

Later, in the same town,

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her. (Acts 16:16-18)

Yet again, this powerful, life-changing interaction happened when Paul was doing what? When he was on his way to pray. In a posture of prayer, there was a profound movement in the spiritual realms. When Jesus entered into the presence of people who had demonic spirits, the spirits would shout: "We know who you are, you are the son of the most high God." Demons could not keep from recognizing and declaring the power and majesty of Jesus. The same is true for these servants of Jesus—the evil spirits recognized that they were servants of God.

An observation I have made repeatedly in my life is that those who truly commit themselves to a life of prayer are able to shine the love of Jesus in such a way that those who are far from God can see. They may not be able to explain it, but they can't mistake it. Prayer is a key component. My kids have a few toys that glow in the dark. If they are left in the basement for days and then the lights are turned off, you can't see them. But if those toys are placed in direct sunlight for an hour and the lights go out, they could help light up a runway for planes to land at night. Sunlight is what makes all the difference, and that's what happens in the spiritual realms when Christians pray. The light of Christ shines more brightly in us. Before the gospel is declared through our words, it is displayed through our lives. The light cannot be mistaken. Sometimes people seeing the light of Jesus in you prepares them to experience the light of Jesus as well.

That was the case for this woman! Though this slave girl was set free, her owners didn't like it. When that evil spirit left, so did their ability to make money on her. So they stirred up a crowd and caused a riot. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown in stocks in the inner cell of the prison. Not only was the inner cell the most secure, but it was also the place without plumbing, where all the human waste from the other prisons went. They were there in chains, with open wounds, in the darkest, dingiest, nastiest, least desirable place you could imagine. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25). I get praying next to the river. I get praying when it's Sunday morning and you are making your way to church, ready to worship. But they had just been arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison. They had open wounds, they were chained up, it was the middle of the night—and they were praying there, too. While they were praying, a miracle happened.

Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. (Acts 16:26-27)

In the ancient world, if a prison guard allowed prisoners to escape on his watch, he incurred their sentence. The guard was going to die anyway, and he wanted to take the fastest way out. "But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We are all here!'" (Acts 16:28). How could that be? Why hadn't they escaped: "The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas" (Acts 16:29). He knew this was a miracle, that God really was at work!

He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. (Acts 16:31-33).

As in Acts 10 with Cornelius, here another entire household who heard the Word of the Lord, who believed, were baptized and saved! We always want to focus on the celebration—an entire household came to believe. But what came before the belief and salvation? What precipitated it? In the middle of the night—they prayed. Prayer was the linchpin. It was prayer that moved the rock that sent the boulder down the hill. Prayer prepares the way for the gospel.

Observations:

- (1) *Prayer is a way of life.* Most devout Jews prayed three times a day, morning, noon, and night. What was Cornelius doing when he heard from God? Praying in the afternoon. What was Peter doing when he heard from God? Praying in the middle of the day? What was Paul doing before he met Lydia? Looking for a place to pray. What was he doing when he met the slave girl? Looking for a place to pray. What was he doing in the prison at midnight? Praying! Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray. It was integrated into every aspect of their lives. We eat food three times a day, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We order our lives around getting the calories we need and nourishing our bodies. The early followers of Jesus ordered their lives not around food, but around prayer, because they knew man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. What might this look like for you? Praying in the morning? Prayer walks in the evening? A prayer journal you use at night? Praying while in the car? *We can customize prayer, but we can't compromise prayer.* If you want a life connected to God and consequential for the kingdom, prayer is the fuel that makes the engine run.

- (2) *Prayer prepares people who need the gospel.* Sometimes Christians are eager to share about Jesus with others, which is wonderful, but before talking to people about God, we must first talk to God about people, to pray for God to be at work in their heart. I had a chance this week to meet a person who needed Jesus. The moment the meeting was set, I found three fellow pastors at the church and asked them to pray. When we were done praying, I called Keren and asked her to pray. Praying prepares other people for the gospel in the way that a plow prepares the soil for seed. Farmers don't just cast seed on a brittle field. They break up the earth so it can receive the seed. Praying for people does the same thing. The Bible teaches that God wants all people to be saved, and as we pray for people, we are agreeing with God's love for them and asking that his desire for their salvation would become a reality. We all know and love people who do not yet know and love God. Put their names on the dash of your car, or next to your nightstand, or on the mirror in your bathroom, or in your journal, so that you habituate the practice of bringing them before God constantly, asking for the Lord to move.
- (3) *Prayer prepares people who share the gospel.* When we pray, just like Peter and Paul prayed, God gets us ready to share. Paul asked people to pray for him (Ephesians 6), that every time he opened his mouth, the right words would be given to him, so that he could make the gospel known to other people. Do you remember what Jesus said to the disciples when they saw the crowd of thousands of hungry people? He said, "You give them something to eat." They had no idea what to do! "How can we give them something to eat? We don't have that kind of money!" But that Jesus took a meal, blessed it, and gave it to them to give to others. That's what evangelism is. You see people whose souls are hungry. You know that on your own there is nothing you can do, so you plead with Jesus, "Use me, give me the right words, that they could know your love."
- (4) *Prayer opens doors.* Billy Graham, a pastor who preached to over 200 million people in his life, and helped lead over three million to first time decisions for Jesus, said: "Three things are necessary for a successful crusade: prayer, prayer, and prayer." Prayer is like walkout music for the gospel. When a batter steps up in a major league stadium, the stadium darkens, his custom song blasts over the speakers, and everyone knows: *something big is about to happen*. When you pray for your neighbor, your co-worker, or your kid before you ever speak a word about Jesus, you are queuing up the walkout music for God. You are asking Jesus to step up to the plate and hit a home run in their heart.

Remember the story we started with? A church put 160 names at random into two groups and prayed for some but not the others. Seemingly miraculously, most of those who had been prayed for were open to conversations and connections. We want to do that right now. We are going to pray for someone who needs Jesus. Pray for God to till the soil, to open doors, to use you or anyone else who would be a better messenger, to share God's love with them. Consider committing to this for 90 days to see how God would move.