

PRAYER IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Geoffrey R. Kirkland

Christ Fellowship Bible Church

Prayer is the life of the Christian. A Christian must pray just as a human being breathes. Just as a body needs oxygen, so the body of Christ must constantly pray. An accurate indicator of the health of a local church is to examine the church's corporate prayer meeting. Who gathers? Who prays? How do they pray? What do they pray for? If prayer is, in fact, one of the greatest duties in every Christian's life *individually* and in the body of Christ *corporately*, then the prayer meeting should have a high priority in the life and culture of a local church. To meet and pray is to take hold of God corporately, to ask God to move mightily, to rend the heavens and come down sovereignly, so that He may receive glory preeminently!

This article will examine prayer in the local church from a number of various perspectives.

1. The importance of prayer

Prayer is what breathing is to human life. Without breathing there is no life. Without a heartbeat, there is no life. Prayer sustains, prayer energizes, and prayer strengthens Christians. To pray is to fellowship with God. To pray is to meet with God. To pray is to take hold of God. To pray is to wrestle with God and to beg God to act, to move, to revive, to restore, to forgive, and to sanctify. If one gives up communicating with his spouse, the marriage will suffer quickly; and so it is in the believer's relation to Christ. When communication lacks, the relationship suffers quickly. As a newborn knows but one thing to do when he is born, and that is to cry for his mother's attention, so a newborn babe in Christ knows but one thing to do, and that is to cry out for his Father's willing ear. Prayer is the life of the soul. Prayer is the highway to heaven. Prayer gives fervency to Christianity. It gives power to Christian piety. Prayer is the pulse of one's spiritual state. To lack prayer is to lack life. To neglect prayer is to attempt to find life elsewhere. To give God the scraps in prayer is to attempt to live on a few abnormal, scattered, and weak heartbeats. Only a matter of time before that person will die. Let the importance of prayer drive every believer to fervent prayer, to regular prayer, to constant prayer, to daily prayer, to believing prayer, and to Christ-exalting, Spirit-empowered praying! Nothing in all the world is so important than for the child of God to pray to the Father, through Christ, by the Spirit incessantly.

2. The power of prayer

Jesus said that true faith and powerful prayer can move mountains (Matt 21:21). Elijah prayed that it would rain for three years and six months (James 5:17) and God heard him. Moses prayed and the fire of judgment died out (Num 11:2). Elisha prayed that God would strike the Syrians with blindness and God answered (2 Kings 6:18). Peter prayed and raised Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:40). The Apostle Paul prayed and healed Publius' father on the island of Malta (Acts 28:8). Prayer works. God hears prayer. The Bible says that God was moved by prayers for the land (2 Sam 21:14). Even the heinously wicked, idolatrous, murderous, and blasphemous Manasseh, when he humbled himself before the Lord and came to God in prayer, God was moved by his entreaty (2 Chron 33:13). Prayer is spiritual power. Prayer is like spiritual electricity that gives light, brightness, force and energy to one's life. The weakest saint on his knees is mightier than ten thousand of the world's leading armies combined.

3. The providence of prayer

God has declared the end from the beginning. Every moment of time, every second of world history, every event that has occurred, and every molecule that runs its course all obeys the sovereign directive of God Almighty. God rules preeminently. God reigns providentially. God actively works out His plan in and through all things. God works all things according to the plan of His will. God has decreed what shall happen, when it shall happen, for whom it shall happen, and by what means it shall happen. Prayer is the means of God working out His sovereign will. God gloriously, wonderfully, and sovereignly works through prayer. Prayer moves God and prayer prompts God to act (2 Sam 24:25; 2 Chron 33:13). One cannot forget that God uses prayer providentially to bring about His purposes. When believers gather to beg God to act in a certain way, God receives glory in responding to that prayer, answering that prayer, and manifesting His power so that all the saints who prayed rejoice and thank Him (cf. Acts 12:12-17). God uses prayer as a means of the outworking of His sovereign will. When people pray, God forgives (2 Chron 7:14). Even a whole nation repented and prayed and God heard, relented and forgave them (Jonah 3:3-10). Prayer works because God uses every prayer as a way of working out (providentially) His glorious plan in and through His people for His own glory.

4. The effectiveness of prayer

Prayer is power. Prayer works. Nothing so captivates the heart of a loving Father than His children crawling into His lap and whispering into His ear. He hears and He answers. He hears and He responds. Abraham prayed to God that He might heal Abimelech and God heard and answered (Gen 20:17). Moses interceded and prayed that God might not destroy His grumbling and complaining people (Deut 9:26). Hannah, a barren woman, prayed for a boy and the Lord heard her prayer and answered her entreaty (1 Sam 1:27). Elisha prayed to the Lord and raised a dead boy back to life (2 Kings 4:33). Hezekiah prayed and asked God to remember His covenant so that Sennacherib and the Assyrians might not destroy Judah and God heard and answered (2 Kings 19:20-32). When the early church prayed together in times of severe opposition, the place where they gathered was shaken and they all had great boldness (Acts 4:31). Elisha prayed that it might not rain and God withheld rain for three and a half years (James 5:17). Then after praying again that it might rain, God heard Elijah's request and granted rain (James 5:18). Prayer is effective. The people of God who take hold of God and wrestle with God in prayer see God act mightily for His Name's sake. Indeed, the prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness (James 5:16).

5. The Trinity in prayer

Jesus alone is the way to God the Father. There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. Believers pray to God in the Name of Jesus Christ and by the power of God the Spirit. Thus, believers pray to God through Christ and by the Spirit. The Trinity is always actively involved in the believer's prayer. Jesus Christ, by means of His propitiatory sacrifice and atoning offering to God, has provided access into the Holy of Holies for all those who are clothed in His righteousness by faith alone. The Scriptures say that a believer does not even know what to pray for at times. During these moments, the Spirit of God intercedes with silent groanings, that is, inter-Trinitarian communication and prays on behalf of the believer to the Father and He always receives an affirmative answer. Thus, in all the prayers of God's people, there are four parts involved in this concert of prayer: the Father who hears all prayer, the Son who gives the access to pray, the Spirit who prays for and on behalf of the believer to God, and the believer who presents his requests to

God. The blessed Trinity receives praise, honor, glory and adoration when His elect come into the throne room of grace to pray, adore, worship, thank and present petitions.

6. The revival from prayer

Rend the heavens and come down! So prayed the prophet Isaiah exclaimed (Isa 64:1). He called upon God to descend with power so that even the mountains might quake at God's almighty presence. The psalmist prayed that God would revive "us" (His people) so that God's chosen ones may rejoice in Him (Ps 85:6). God receives glory in reviving His people for the tasks, the callings, and the duties that He has given (Hos 6:2). Habakkuk prayed for God to "revive Your work" (Hab 3:2). Revival begins with God's people in the inner recesses of the heart. Then, through God's people, revival spreads like wildfire to those in surrounding areas and to the lost as they observe the people of God aflame with Christlike zeal and passion. Fervent praying for revival should come frequently from the mouths of God's people. Prayer takes hold of God. Prayer moves God. When the church returns to corporate prayer and expository preaching, God works mightily, powerfully, gloriously and unmistakably. Pray for revival!

7. The influence of prayer

The prayer meeting is like a wildfire. When one piece of wood is on fire, it may quickly die out. When more wood is added to the fire, it continues on longer and hotter. When one adds much wood to a fire, the fire grows bigger, it grows more visible, it becomes much hotter, and it endures much longer. The more people that gather to pray, the more influence there is on each other to remain steadfast, resolute and fervent in pouring out the heart to God. One person who 'prays in his praying' impacts another who will desire to say like the disciples did: "teach us to pray." O that the men of Christ's church would pray more! O that the shepherds would pray more! O that God's people might influence others who struggle with prayer and those who treat prayer lightly to wrestle with God in prayer, to see the power of prayer, and to see the unspeakable delight that comes in crawling into the Father's lap and praying into His open ear.

8. The edification from prayer

One believer's prayer life stimulates greater fervency in another believer's Christian journey. One person prays and builds up another. As believers listen to others pray and as Christians hear God's children cry out to Him in prayer, they are edified and they are encouraged to pray more. Prayer in the local church empowers the church and it also edifies the church. Prayer fortifies believers. Prayer strengthens the saints. Prayer sustains suffering Christians through hardships. Prayer reminds God's children of His promises. Prayer recalls God's Word and applies it to various situations and calls God to act based upon the promises of His Word. This edifies believers as it promotes spiritual growth in the area of prayer.

9. The preaching and prayer

Preaching without prayer is like a home without electricity. One may plug items into the electrical socket but there is no energy there; no power; no force. Fire is needed. The house may look good, the lamps may be in place, the electrical units may appear to function properly but without electricity, the house lacks power. And so it is with preaching without prayer. A man who preaches a spectacular sermon without first meeting with God in prayer is prideful and powerless. He manifests pride since he feels as though he can preach apart from God's enabling grace. He exerts powerlessness since he preaches without the only power that can penetrate deep into the sinful man's soul. In the local church, the preaching ministry must continually be bathed in prayer. God's

people must constantly pray for the teachers, the preachers, the elders, those who instruct regularly in the Word of God. Without prayer, the preaching is void. Without the divine aid and supernatural empowering, all preaching is worthless and impotent. The best way a flock can pray for their pastor is to daily, fervently, faithfully pray for him and his preaching, his sermon preparation and his soul, and his sermon delivery and the unction of the Spirit.

10. The Spirit and prayer

Prayer takes hold of God and beckons Him to magnify Christ through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. The Christian must long to commune with the Tri-une God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Believers must cultivate a mindset of ‘entertaining the Holy Spirit.’ Considering the Holy Spirit as a permanent resident in one’s soul, all Christians should strive to entertain him as one would entertain a guest. Treat him with respect, love, care. Talk with him frequently. Give Him honor, preference, and a welcome place of residence. The Spirit of God takes the believer’s prayer and communicates to God through silent groanings on behalf of the believer — even when he does not know how to pray. The Spirit of God guides the believer as he prays, edifies the believer as he prays, groans for the believer as he prays, and guarantees the best answer to the believer. Prayer is by its very nature inseparably linked with God the Spirit. All believers must pray in the Holy Spirit, that is, they must pray in accordance with, in harmony with, and according to the will of the Spirit of God.

11. The spirituality of prayer

Since the believer wages war not with flesh and blood but with spiritual forces of wickedness, the believer’s warfare must comprise of spiritual weapons. Paul notes that the weapons of the believer’s warfare are not fleshly but they have divine power to destroy strongholds and mighty fortresses. The mightiest weapon available to the believer in the spiritual battle consists of prayer. No physical instrument, no manmade stronghold, no physical location, no material possession can protect one from the spiritual enemy. The greatest weapon in the Christian’s arsenal is prayer. The crowning essential in the armor of God is for believer’s to pray in the Spirit so as to stand strong against the wily schemes of the devil. None can withstand the raging fury of the ravenous lion in his own strength. Rather, every believer can resist the devil and his temptations, schemes, and attacks (no matter how gruesome or severe they may be) as long as he lives in the power of prayer.

12. The necessity of prayer

Of utmost importance in the believer’s life, of inestimable worth, and of towering necessity is a life of prayer. Believers must meet to pray together so as to open God’s treasure, storm into the depths of His great wealth and power, and take hold of His mighty arm, His sovereign hand, and His eternal decrees. Prayer works. Prayer changes things. Prayer moves God to action. A Christian without prayer is like speaking of a person who does not breathe; it cannot happen! A believer who does not pray is a person without a heartbeat. He can’t live without it. Believers may allow enemies to take houses or lands, goods or possessions, money or riches but no believer can live without prayer. Prayer is the very highway on which the believer travels to heaven. Every biblically faithful local church must affirm the necessity of prayer in the life and culture of the ministry. A church that does not value the necessity of prayer is a church that overvalues its own manmade, human, independent self-styled strength and abilities. This underscores the unspeakably rich value of the corporate prayer meeting so that believers will gather regularly to pray, to remind one another of the power of prayer, to encourage one another in the continuance of prayer, and to model and disciple one another in the necessity of prayer.

13. The dependence on prayer

To pray is to trust. Only humble men pray. Proud men mock at prayer. Self-elevated and self-appointed charlatans see no need to pray since they can accomplish their organizations in their own efforts and with their own resources. Many in other parts of the world and especially in persecuted countries elsewhere in the world marvel that the American church can so often accomplish so much without the Holy Spirit — and, without the power of and dependence upon prayer. To pray is to cast oneself before the throne of God Almighty and cry out: *Help!* To pray to God manifests one's reliance upon God's mighty arm to act, to work, to save, to sanctify, to change, to convict, and to bless. When Elisha prayed to the Lord and humbly, totally, and radically trusted in God, God supernaturally intervened and struck the Syrians with blindness (2 Kings 6:18). When Manasseh humbled himself and prayed to God in full reliance upon and dependence upon God through prayer, God was 'moved' by his entreaty and God heard his supplication (2 Chron 33:13). Nehemiah led the Jews to depend on God in prayer when enemies mocked as they trusted in God's faithfulness and awesome greatness (Neh 4:9-14). Every child of God depends on prayer just as an infant cries to his daddy to move his heart.

14. The cross and prayer

The introduction that every believer enjoys into the immediate presence of God has been granted through Jesus Christ and His substitutionary work at Calvary's cross. Prayer's efficacy comes through the cross. The cross of Christ is what guarantees the listening ear of God in every prayer. Those for whom Christ died always have the Fatherly ear of God open, available, willing to listen, and eager to act. To pray God-exalting, and Christ-centered, and cross-centered prayers is to magnify the gospel in one's heart — and in the hearts of the corporate body that has gathered during the prayer meeting. No greater subject exists for believers to meditate upon, pray through, and recall to mind than the glorious and saving work of redemption. To pray to Jesus Christ who died on the cross for sinners, who rose from the dead for their justification, who ascended to the Father to intercede for their security, and to sit at the Father's right hand with all authority is to reflect on the greatest person and the greatest event and the great God and the great redemption of human history that all converged together at the cross.

15. The church and prayer

The power of a local church begins with its commitment to and adherence to prayer. The local church will thrive when prayer drives everything about it. Prayer must drive every ministry — the preaching, the teaching, the shepherding, the biblical counseling, the discipling, the pastoral visitations, and evangelism. A church devoted to prayer is a church tapping into the fountain of delight. A church committed to prayer has opened the treasury of God where all joy, all satisfaction, and all supreme glory is found. Every church should tirelessly be devoted to prayer. Believers should pray in adoration to the Triune God and His sovereign work of salvation. Believers should confess sins one to another and to the Lord. Believers should beg God to revive Christians (beginning in their own hearts and in their own flock) so that revival would spark and spread like wildfire. Believers should pray for Christ's kingdom to come. Believers should pray for the upcoming sermon, that the minister would preach with Spirit-empowered unction, supernatural power, and supreme passion as he heralds the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Believers should pray for one another to prepare adequately and early for corporate worship, to persevere and focus during the preaching, and to diligently and faithfully practice the sermon after it has been preached. Every church must live, breathe and function in prayer. Believers should pray together.