**Let Us Talk With God Together**

**Acts 12:1-19 (ESV)**

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Today, we’re going to be in Acts chapter 12. This is a great story that reveals the early church’s example of talking with God together, of them gathering together. It was late in the night, likely after midnight that they were still praying, and there were many, many believers there in this early church gathered in Mary’s house. The house was packed. And so we want to learn some things about corporate prayer, communal prayer through Acts chapter 12. We’re always excited to hear God speak to us, and as we mentioned last week, the Word of God is living and it’s active. In other words, we ought to have an anticipation that God is truly present here. He is an invisible God and we don’t expect an audible voice from heaven, but nonetheless, He is truly present and He is actively speaking to each one of us and to our church, together. So let’s consider that we’re not just reading a text of Scripture, but we’re listening to the voice of God, personally. He has something to say to each and every one of us this morning. Let’s have ears to hear Him.

***1*** *About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.* ***2****He killed James the brother of John with the sword,* ***3****and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.* ***4****And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.* ***5****So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.*

***6****Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.* ***7****And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands.* ***8****And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.”* ***9****And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.* ***10****When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.* ***11****When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”*

***12****When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.* ***13****And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.* ***14****Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.* ***15****They said to her, “You are out of your mind.” But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, “It is his angel!”* ***16****But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.* ***17****But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.*

***18****Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.* ***19****And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.*

May God encourage us through His Word!

One day, a student of God’s law asked Jesus a question:

**Matthew 22:36-40** “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus is teaching us that the whole sum of the Christian life is relationship. He uses the word “love” to describe the first two great commandments. The first great commandment--love God. Be in right relationship with the living God. And then love one another. And later in the New Testament, God is even going to define how important it is not just to love our neighbors, but particularly, our brothers and our sisters in Christ.

So, life’s purpose is bound up in relationship. What can we do to reorient our lives to this priority of relationship--relationship with God and our relationship with one another? In our flesh, we are prone to neglect relationship or even to pursue some other purposes and some other goals at the expense of relationship. In order to accomplish a goal either in our personal life or even in a church, it’s possible for us to run over one another and dismiss one another, and belittle one another, and treat one another poorly. And of course, in doing this, we miss out on the whole of the Law and the Prophets. The whole of Scripture is pointing us to relationship. Good, solid, healthy, genuine, sincere, authentic relationship first with God, and then with one another.

So what can we do in order to press into relationship? Well, at its very essence, relationship is driven by communication. It’s driven by listening and by speaking. And as we learn of God from God, we discover that He is this great relational God who speaks and who listens. And that’s a marvel! He’s been speaking and He’s been listening from all eternity past because He is Triune. So, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in relationship with one another, in the one Godhead, speaking and listening throughout all of eternity past. So, it’s no wonder that when He creates us in His image, one of the first things He does is He speaks to us.

Last week we pressed into this means of grace, this great gift that God has given us of His Word. And we began to think about what it meant for us to listen to God together in community. Today, we’re going to press into another vital means of grace. And that is prayer. And the message is entitled this morning *Let Us Talk With God Together*. Nothing is more vital to the joy of our souls than for us to learn how to listen to God individually and then corporately together. And then second, is for us to learn to talk with God together. It’s the Word and it is prayer.

The emphasis this morning is not merely upon private praying, though I hope and pray that our time in Acts 12 will strengthen our private communication with the living God. But the emphasis this morning is upon our praying in community with one another. This morning I hope to convince you all of the vital importance for us to talk with God together. We open up our Bibles this morning to Acts chapter 12, where we see God’s people doing just that. It is one of these great examples in Scripture of God’s people joining hands together and meeting in the same place to say, “We need to talk with the Lord together.”

If you’re taking notes this morning, the first point that I’m going to address is not really from Acts 12, but it’s foundational to everything we’re going to say about prayer.

**I. The Gift of Prayer: Jesus opens the door to conversation with God.**

We learn from the beginning of the pages of God’s Word that no one would be qualified to talk with the Lord were it not for Jesus’ reconciling work upon the cross. Each one of us stand before God as hostile enemies to God, separated from God, alienated from Him and from His life. So Isaiah the prophet would write:

**Isaiah 59:2** but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God….

God is absolutely, perfectly holy and we are totally, spiritually and morally depraved. We are lacking in all that is needed for us to have a right relationship with God. Our sins have made a great separation between us and God. How great is that separation? Well Isaiah continues:

….and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

Were it not for Jesus’ reconciling work, we could pray every moment of every day and it would be completely fruitless. It would avail nothing because God would not hear us. God does not hear us because of our goodness. He does not hear us because of our fervency. He hears us because Jesus bore in the cross our sins upon His own body. He received and endured the punishment that was deserved by us and that brought us peace. He bore that for us so that now our sins are separated from our soul. When we now approach God, we approach Him dressed in the righteousness of Christ, with Jesus as our Savior, having done a preliminary work that enables us to talk with God in such a way that He will listen, that He will hear. And that’s a marvelous, amazing gift! Jesus opened the door for us to commune with God as a friend communes with a friend.

**Hebrews 4:14** Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God,

That’s a remarkable statement telling us that Jesus, the second Person of the Godhead, the very Son of God, who is our Savior, is our High Priest. He stands before God representing us before the Father, having made a sacrifice before the Father that is complete and sufficient. And since we have this great High Priest, here is the encouragement or exhortation.

**Hebrews 4:16** Let us then with confidence draw near the the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

So what is prayer? Well, in its simplicity, it is talking with God. This verse in Hebrews 4:16 provides us with such a sweet description. The description that Hebrews presents to us is that prayer is confidently drawing near to the very throne of grace. When God invites us to draw near to the throne of grace, He is inviting us to draw near to Himself in personal communion. God is the One who is sitting upon the throne in sovereign power, in perfect holiness. And Jesus has completed a work as our High Priest that provides us with access, indeed, more than access, more than an introduction for this Holy God. Jesus has provided us with the means by which we can actually draw near in intimate relationship with the living God. And that’s what eternal life is all about. Eternal life is not so much about getting a “Get out of Hell” card. Although that’s a wonderful benefit of salvation. But eternal life is all about knowing God. It is about drawing near to Him and having fellowship with Him and communing with Him.

Jesus uses another word picture to describe prayer as an offer of intimate fellowship in Revelation 3:20.

**Revelation 3:20** Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

I love that! It’s the invitation of Supper with God Himself. And this invitation is offered by Jesus and by His finished work on the cross. What an amazing picture this is of this sweet, intimate fellowship with God Himself that is happy and hopeful and heartfelt!

Notice that Jesus is patiently and gently knocking. Keep in mind that Revelation presents Jesus as this powerful, almighty ruler and king, the Lion of Judah. It presents Jesus as the One who holds all the keys in the world. Now when we have a key that we own, it indicates that we have the right to go into the place where that key will unlock. So, if I have the key to my car, I have the right to go into that car. If I give my son Jackson the key, he has the right then because he has the key. If he steals the key, he doesn’t have that right. But if I give the key, he has the right to take the car.

Keys mean that we have authority. Jesus is presented as holding all the keys in all the universe, to every door. And yet, what do we find Jesus doing here in Revelation 3:20? He is standing outside and He is knocking. He has every right to put the key that He possesses in His sovereign authority as King of kings, into the door of our heart and say, “Okay. Sit down. We’re going to have a talk.” But He doesn’t do that because His call, His invitation is to warm, loving fellowship around a meal.

Now Jesus is speaking to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3 and the big problem in Laodicea is that the believers had become lukewarm. Lukewarmness is a condition of the heart where we are indifferent and carelessand apathetic to a personal communion or relationship or fellowship with God. The members of Laodicea had become half-hearted in their love for God. They lacked warmth and energy and zeal. And this lukewarmness is no minor malady. It is a very, very serious disease of the soul. In fact, Jesus says “If you stay lukewarm, I’m going to spit you out of my mouth.” It sickens God, this condition. For God to humble Himself and offer relationship and we say, “Yeah…Maybe!” He says, “I’m going to spit you out of my mouth.” A lukewarm soul is one that cuts itself off from intimate communion with the Lord. And so we ask ourselves the question as we approach Revelation chapter 3: Is my soul lukewarm to the Lord, or is it zealous? Is it passionate for communion with the living God?

Hebrews 4 again says:

**Hebrews 4:16** Let us then with confidence [We’ve been given an invitation to] draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Jesus is persistently and continuously knocking.

Bible commentators are not in agreement over to whom this invitation is given. Is it unbelievers or is it believers? And my answer to that question is, yes. If you are an unbeliever who has never invited Jesus, the living God, into your heart for personal fellowship and relationship so that you would know God, know that Jesus is knocking. Your lack of knowledge of God is not because God is so distant or God has not invited you into that relationship or God has shut you out. It’s because you’re not opening the door to the One who can provide you with this amazing personal knowledge and relationship with God.

However, if you are a believer and there was a time when you opened the door, this is picturing Jesus persistently and constantly. It’s not enough for us to have opened the door and said, “Man, I was really in zealous, vibrant relationship with God last year. That Supper last year was fantastic!” Or even last month. Or even last week. It is an opportunity for us to connect with the living God each and every day.

Now, the responsibility to open the door rests upon us. And what is the means to opening the door? Well, I believe the means to opening the door is us simply drawing near to God through prayer. Jesus enters into our lives in a real personal way and dines with us and gives us access to the living God so that we can enjoy Him. So prayer is simply talking with God, but it’s talking with God with a specific purpose. And that purpose is that we would talk with God in such a way that we would draw near to God in joyful fellowship.

Many distort the meaning of prayer by their practice. Some make prayer, for instance, to be sort of a formal recitation of some spiritual sounding words. And so they talk about *saying* a prayer instead of praying. Others make prayer to be a reading of a wish list to a God that they really don’t care to know personally, but a God that they want to act in such a way as to make this present life more pleasant. That’s not what prayer is. Still others make prayer to be a very formal event. They say the right words, sort of in a stiff fashion, but their heart is not in it. They’re not connecting in a real way in relationship. The act of prayer is drawing near relationally to God so that we can enjoy Him, and so that we can receive mercy and grace from Him.

Later in the Book of Hebrews, we’re going to be given this same exhortation.

**Hebrews 10:22** let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,

Prayer is the means that we draw near to God. It is the means by which we enjoy communing with Him, by which we enjoy dining with Him, supping with Him. This is not just for New Testament saints, but it’s for Old Testament saints as well. Consider Psalm 34 where the Psalmist writes:

**Psalm 34:8** Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

That’s a person who is not coldly engaging with God, but a person who is zealous in engagement with the Lord.

**Psalm 42:1-2** As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

He’s asking, “When can I get into your presence and talk with You, and fellowship with You?”

So we consider the gift of prayer. What a gift it is! It’s a gift by which we have access to God Himself in relationship.

**II. The Need for Prayer: Crushing enemies oppose God’s grace and glory.**

Prayer becomes a lifeline by which we can receive God’s mercy and receive God’s help in our time of need. Each one of us as believers, as children of God, have enemies that want to destroy our lives and destroy God’s grace and glory in our lives. And these enemies are overwhelmingly powerful in reference to our own strength. In other words, were we in our own strength to confide, all of our striving against these enemies would only be losing. There’s not one of us that would be able to be victorious against these enemies were God not enlisted for His help and His grace. We see that here in Acts 12, don’t we? We see a human enemy, but I believe he is satanically inspired. When I’m thinking of the enemies of God, I’m thinking first of Satan and his minions, but oftentimes they join hands with wicked people as well.

***1*** *About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.*

Why would he do that? Because of Satan’s inspiration to hate God’s glory in the church, to hate God’s Gospel.

***2****He killed James the brother of John with the sword,*

He executed him, beheaded him.

***3****and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.*

He was politically emboldened by this. He wanted to do the very same to Peter. Here in this story, we discover a major truth about the enemies that oppose God and His grace. And that truth is simply this: God’s enemies hate God’s Gospel and they work tirelessly to silence it.

Here in this story, it is King Herod Agrippa I who is the human agent opposing God and His gospel. Now just as a brief history lesson, it’s difficult to keep all the Herod’s straight in the Gospels. So the first Herod we are introduced to is Herod the Great, who was ruling when Jesus is born. And when Jesus is born, this Herod the Great is very, very old and he is about to die. But you’ll remember, this Herod the Great also is satanically inspired and he hates the gospel so much that he had all the baby boys in the vicinity of Bethlehem murdered. All the baby boys two years and under were murdered because he wants to put an end to this King of Righteousness. This King who God had sent to the world to set up His own kingdom of righteousness, joy and peace. So that is King Agrippa I’s grandpa. Then we find another Herod in the story of John the Baptist. That Herod has John the Baptist beheaded. And that is this King Herod’s uncle. So there are some family traits that aren’t very impressive. So this King Herod now has James, the brother of John, beheaded and he puts Peter in prison, wanting to do the very same thing.

The point here is that God’s enemies are everywhere in this world and they seek to destroy the work of God’s Gospel.So if your life is centered upon the Gospel of Jesus, you should expect crushing opposition to confront you in your life. Now, wemay not be thrown in prison or beheaded like Peter and James were. But we will certainly be opposed in other ways if the Gospel is the center of our heart and if as the result of it being the center, we are laboring to communicate it to a world of darkness that needs light.We should expect mistreatment. We should expect to be gossiped about and slandered and ridiculed. We should expect various social punishments. We should expect strong temptations that would ruin our witness, to come against us. We should expect career troubles. We should expect a broad and wide assortment of crushing expressions of opposition. Because God’s enemies have one agenda, and that is to silence the Gospel, a Gospel that brings glory to God. It is a glory that Satan yearns and is jealous for himself and desires to destroy in reference to God.

The Apostle Paul picks up on this theme at the end of his letter to the Ephesians.

**Ephesians 6:10** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

If we’re strong in ourselves, we’re going to lose. So every day, Beloved, we need to

**Ephesians 6:11** Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

And he begins to list some of the parts of that armor that God has provided for us.

**Ephesians 6:17** and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,

And at the end of this long list of various pieces of armor that God has provided for us through Christ, he says:

**Ephesians 6:18-19** praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth to boldly proclaim the mystery of the gospel,

To the end of prayer, of talking with God and talking with God together, keep alert! Stay at this. Don’t relax, because the enemy is not relaxing! We need to pray with each other and for each other. Paul is saying, “Pray also for me. I need intercession. I, the Apostle Paul, am not strong enough to stand against Satan and his minions. So pray for me. Pray specifically that the Gospel would be advanced through me, because that’s what Satan opposes. Pray that words might be given, the opening of my mouth to boldly proclaim the mystery of the gospel.”

Now I want you to notice what the church did when Peter was under such Satanic assault.

***4****And when he had seized him, he put him in prison,* [this is Herod Agrippa] *delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.* ***5****So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.*

If you’re prone to marking in your Bible, you want to underline that last sentence, because that’s the turning point in this whole story. It seems dark. It seems discouraging. It seems almost even overwhelming and crushing and despairing until we see this great line: “but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” God’s people said, “We’re going to pray together for Peter. He is being opposed by Agrippa and by Satan. He could lose his life. We’re going to get together and we’re going to pray and talk with the Lord together so that we might receive grace to help us in our time of need.” So how did God respond?

**III. The Response of God to Prayer: God intervenes in our lives.**

He intervenes actively and specifically.

***6****Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers,*

That tells you a lot about Peter’s faith. It’s likely the last night he would live on this earth, from a human standpoint, and he is sleeping. The two soldiers aren’t sleeping, but he is sleeping.

*bound with two chains,*

He had to be uncomfortable, yet he’s resting well in that prison.

*and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.* ***7****And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell.*

But Peter was sleeping so soundly that he didn’t see the light at first. He wasn’t awakened by the light. So what happened?

*He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands.* ***8****And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.”* ***9****And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.* ***10****When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord,*

It’s like the Holy Spirit has a garage opener. He pressed a button and on it’s own, this huge iron gate just opened of its own accord.

*and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.* ***11****When Peter came to himself,* [he’s been in a bit of a sleepy stupor] *he said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”*

They were expecting him to be executed. And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary. Why did he go there? The answer is because he knew that was where the church was gathered to pray. It was, again, likely after midnight, and he knew that they would still be there praying.

***12****When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.*

Many were gathered together. And what were they doing? They weren’t pacing the floor, worrying and talking about politics and how bad Herod is. They were praying. They were talking with God together because they knew that God is sovereign over every affair in this world. God is in absolute control of all things that happen in His creation. Ultimately, Peter was not in prison because Herod designed a plan to put him there. Ultimately, God was working out the counsel of His own will, using wicked Herod for the end purpose of bringing Himself glory through Peter’s release. God’s providence placed Peter in that dungeon. This truth does not make Herod less responsible for his sins, but it does declare that God is not Herod’s victim. Peter understood that God is sovereign and He trusted God even in prison. That’s why he is sleeping between the two soldiers. He’s not tossing and turning. He’s sound asleep.

Peter later is going to write a letter to believers who are suffering persecution. I want to read you some verses from Peter’s letter. I think he probably was thinking back to this very event as he’s writing these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

**1 Peter 4:16** Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

In other words, it’s all about God’s glory. Let’s keep that ever in view.

**1 Peter 4:18-19** Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Let’s trust ourselves to God during this time because God is sovereign. He is in control.

**1 Peter 5:6-7** Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

God is in control. It’s all about His timing. He will exalt you. Place yourself under His care. Trust in Him. Believe in Him. Lean into Him, that He might exalt you. I know it’s tempting to be anxious by the enemies that we face in this world and by the brokenness in this world. But cast all your anxieties upon Him. Why? Because the sovereign creator of the universe, who controls everything that happens, cares for you. That’s why. Because He cares for you.

Peter is not speaking as a seminary professor, sitting behind a comfortable desk in a warm Study. He’s speaking as a person who lived out persecution and knew what it meant to be tempted by fear and anxiety. And he knew what it meant, also, to be strengthened by the Lord in personal communion.

Please note that the same sovereign design that purposed for Peter to be released also purposed for James to be beheaded. It’s important for us to notice this. This is not a promise that any time we’re in prison, we’re going to be released from prison. It’s a promise that God knows what He is doing. He acts according to wisdom and according to power and according to love and according to purposes that will bring absolute joy to us and glory to Himself.

We ask the slippery question: Why was James beheaded and Peter released? And it wasn’t because Peter was more faithful to God, or Peter trusted God more, or Peter had more favor from God. The answer is hidden in God’s mind and heart, that He doesn’t share with us. But there is some way in which God is more glorified by Peter’s release. And God is, in some way, glorified more by James’ death.

Now, let me tell you, the moment James was beheaded, he was not the one asking the question “why?” anymore. He’s not saying, “Well how come, God, You let Peter go free?” No, he’s saying, “I am the blessed one. I get to be here immediately and now.” And so there will be a day when we’ll have greater understanding, but as we live in this world, on this plain, we trust that God who is sovereign will provide us with mercy and He does so through a means of grace. Through prayer!

God’s sovereign plan for our suffering is often difficult when we are under the throes of pain and trouble, but Peter says, “Humble yourself.” In other words, place yourself under His sovereign plan, under His wisdom, under His kindness. Place yourself under His care and He will exalt you. Take all that care that you’re wanting to manage and that you’re wanting to fix, take all that care and just cast it upon Him because He cares for you and He’s the sovereign God of the world.

**Isaiah 26:3-4** You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.

The big matter in front of us in the instrumentality of prayer. God is sovereign over all things. But the God who ordains the ends is the same God who also ordains the means. And that’s important. One of the means that God ordains to carry out His sovereign plan, is the means of His people praying. God’s sovereignty does not lead us to a fatalistic view of life where we say, “Que Sera, Sera. What ever will be, will be. Whatever God wants, that’s going to happen anyway. So we don’t have any influence over anything in this life.” No, that is not Biblical Christianity. That is not faith in God’s sovereignty.

Faith in God’s sovereignty says, “I have a God who is in control, who loves me, who has a great and good purpose, who is all-wise in every way. I can trust Him and He tells me that when I have a need, I need to ask Him. And that when I ask Him, He graciously gives me mercy and grace to help me in my time of need, grace that is sufficient for that need. That’s His promise. I’m going to trust Him. I’m going to pray.”

***11****When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”* ***12****When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.*

The way that Luke tells the story, he wants us to see the connection between Peter’s release and the praying of the church. He talks about the praying of the church, earnest prayer in verse 5. He talks about the praying of the church, earnest corporate prayer in verse 12. In between is the story of Peter’s release. Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wants us to see the instrumentality of prayer in accomplishing God’s good purposes. God teaches us a cause and effect relationship between prayer and His sovereign working.

Now, let’s get to some real practical thoughts. There are four features of fruitful prayer that are given here. James would say

**James 4:2** You do not have, because you do not ask.

There is such a huge cause and effect relationship between God’s working and our praying. We must see that, or we miss out on the teaching of Scripture about prayer.

**1. Communal.**

That’s not to say that we ought not to pray in private. We should and that’s an important part of our life. But a huge portion of our life ought to be devoted to prayer in community with God’s people.

***12****When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.*

Couldn’t they have just stayed in their home? I mean, it’s a lot more convenient. It seems to be a cold night. Peter was told to get his coat. Who wants to go out in the cold and stay past midnight with other believers when you can pray by your own fire, in a comfortable room by yourself? Who wants to do that? Answer: The church does. They say, “It’s important for us to be together because the Lord wants to be glorified through our seeking Him together.” Why does God care whether we pray privately or we pray corporately together? Because God receives more glory when we worship Him together. The Gospel is more boldly advanced through communal prayer. Faith in God’s church is strengthened when we pray in community. Humble dependence upon God in the church is deepened when we pray in community. Love for one another is made more fervent when we’re praying and talking with the Lord together in community. Unity of purpose, what we’re about as a church, that we’re about the glory of God, we’re about advancing His name and His Gospel. Unity of purpose is embraced by us through communal prayer. And praise to God is multiplied through communal prayer.

They all heard the answer together. They didn’t hear it in pockets. And everyone, again, who goes to a sports arena knows it’s always more fun to bring praise in a crowd of people giving praise. It was such a noisy celebration that Peter said, “Hey, you guys! Be quiet. You guys have to be quiet. Do you realize it’s after midnight? We’re going to wake up all the neighbors. So you guys have to be quiet.” Because their joy was multiplied. I guarantee you none of them left there without the rest of their life, talking about this night. “Do you remember when we were together praying and we were praying for Peter? And we didn’t have enough faith even to believe that he was going to be released. And Rhoda comes out and tells us that Peter’s knocking on the door and we didn’t even believe her.”

Now, before we criticize this group of saints for not believing Rhoda, not believing that God was going to release him, let’s have some time when we have the faith to gather together with a group of other believers and pray past midnight. I can understand, there’s a little bit of criticism even from the text, from this group of people. But before we do, let’s recognize that they had enough faith to believe that God was listening to them when they got together and talked with the Lord. Corporate prayer is a commitment of God’s people from the beginning and founding of His church.

**Acts 2:41** And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Seventeen times in the book of Acts, corporate prayer is mentioned by example or by precept. Seventeen times! We ask the question: How often do we ask for other believers to talk with God with us? Remember, Jesus did this in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is the Son of God and He said, “Won’t you pray with me? This is a hard time. I need someone to pray with me. Would you pray with me?” And then of course as our High Priest, He offers to pray with us. It’s two-way. It’s always two-way. We ask people to pray with us because we need it, but then we offer as a loving expression to pray with others because they need it too.

Opportunities for talking with God together abound. We try to have some corporately here, sort of established at church together. Small Groups, ABC’s, prayer meetings. We pray as a leadership team among the elders. We spend a deep season of prayer before every Elder Meeting together. The Elders invite you to call them to pray for you. Next week we’re going to be praying with someone who has been diagnosed with a very difficult disease. We’ll be praying in the Prayer Room before church with them. So we do that. But informally as well, let’s think about some ways. There’s of course, family times to talk with God together with your children, your wife, your husband. So meal times are great opportunities, bed times, etc. But really, all throughout the day. It should be part of the natural relationship of life. Just as we talk with others we can see, we want to talk together with God, include Him. To say, “Let’s just have a season of prayer together. Let’s pray over that.” It doesn’t have to be long. It doesn’t have to be drawn out. Just say, “Let’s talk with the Lord and let’s bring the Lord into our community.”

I love it when I see people praying out in the Fellowship area and in the hallways. They get into conversations and say, “Would you mind if we talked with the Lord together over this matter?” It might be something spiritual, it might be something physical, it might be emotional. So, it’s communal.

**2. Earnest.**

***5****So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.*

In other words, it’s prayer that is marked by zeal and energy. It’s not boring. It’s not listless. It’s not staid. I know all of us present our zeal in different ways. Some are more expressive than others. So, we’re not even looking for an external mark. But we’re looking internally at our own heart. And we have to ask the question, “When I talk with God, is my heart on fire? Am I revved up? Or am I almost falling asleep every time I talk with the Lord?” It’s okay to go to sleep talking with the Lord at night, but prayer, as we talk with Him, ought to be marked by zeal. “I’m engaging with the living God. We have a need here.”

Jacob expressed this kind of zeal when he grabbed onto God in Genesis 32. He said, “I’m not going to let You go until You bless me. My life depends upon You blessing me and I’m holding on to you.” Too often, our prayers are cold, lifeless, and passionless.

Phillips Brooks writes, *“As a painted fire is no fire and a dead man is no man, so is cold prayer no prayer. Cold prayers are as arrows without heads, swords without edges, birds without wings. They pierce not, they cut not, they fly not up to heaven. Cold prayers do always freeze before they get to heaven. Oh that Christians would chide themselves out of their cold prayers.”*

And really, we’re the only ones that can chide ourselves. We can’t have someone else chide us. But we can chide ourselves for cold praying. And by the way, parents, just a word of encouragement and caution to you. Please be careful that you do not teach your children to pray cold prayers. Do you realize that if you lay them down to sleep at night and it’s sort of a rote, formal thing, “God is great, God is good…” You know, “Pray your soul to keep. Amen.” and then walk out of the room. Do you know that that cold praying actually does more harm than it does good? That’s true over your praying at meal time. It’s fine to have even a rote prayer like the Lord’s Prayer. It’s not the words, but it’s the heart. As long as your heart is engaged in whatever you’re saying, that you have a conscience that says you’re talking to the living God and this is an awesome opportunity, but we must not disciple our children to pray coldly.

**3. Helpless.**

These folks had no human plan to provide for Peter’s escape. They depended completely upon the LORD. They were desperate. They lost all self-sufficiency. I believe it’s our neediness, our helplessness that is the fuel that drives our praying to the Lord, our praying together and our praying privately. When do we need God’s grace to help us? Well we think often of physical needs, physical health, physical provision. But we also have needs of our soul that are even greater--needs for forgiveness of sin, for sanctification, for spiritual power to overcome temptation, for spiritual life, for us to enjoy God daily. We also have many needs for relationships-- relationships in the church, relationships in our homes. You know, it’s tragic that many marriages begin to move south and the couple doesn’t come to the point and say, “Hey! Can we just talk to the Lord together? Our relationship is slowly grinding into darkness and death. We need the Lord. So let’s call out to the Lord together. Let’s set aside our conflict and just say, ‘Can we talk to the Lord and say, God, help us! We are so very needy.”

**4. Evangelistic.**

Did you notice at the end of the story in verse 17,

***17****But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.*

He wanted to tell the story. He said, in other words, “Talk about what God is doing as a result of our praying.” Let’s talk about the grace and glory of God. Let’s not forget this. Because we don’t just pray to God to get our needs answered, we pray to God that He would be glorified. So when God does something, let’s be evangelistic about His goodness in our lives.

I just want to close with some practical advice for corporate prayer.

1. Focus on God and upon His glory as you pray together.

So consider again the truth that He is a real Person and we’re talking in a real way with real conversation. It’s so easy to get distracted in prayer. This past week, I read a funny story that Isaac wrote on his Facebook page about his conversation with his son, Kai, who is age 5. They were praying at night and Kai was praying at the end. I love children because children don’t pray cold prayers. Have you noticed that? We have to teach them how to pray cold prayers. Children pray some of the most amazing, lively prayers and kind of surprise you. But sometimes they get distracted, and here’s little Kai’s prayer. Toward the end of his prayer he said:

*"…and thank you, God, for sending Jesus to save us from our sins. Because that was awesome…sooo awww-summmmm.…awesome possum. Possum. Possums climb trees. And they hang upside down by their tails. In Jesus name we pray, Amen."*

You see this little guy’s thoughts. “This is so awesome. Awesome Possum. Possum.” And our attention span isn’t much different. So focus upon Jesus and His glory. It’s easy to get distracted.

2. Make communal prayer as short as it needs to be.

In other words, long drawn-out prayers can be kind of the death of communal prayer. I think it was D.L. Moody in his encouragement for public praying he said, “Cut both ends and set fire to the middle.” And that’s pretty good counsel.

3. Pray in a manner that expects God to respond.

In other words, have your eyes open saying, “I wonder what God is going to do?”

4. Pray more for spiritual and relational needs than physical ones.

Now, it’s right for us to pray for physical needs. Don’t get me wrong. It’s right for us to pray for physical needs. We’re instructed but most of the prayers of Scripture are over spiritual and relational matters.

5. Keep a prayer list.

I would just urge you to write down requests and what you hear people say to you as you pray together. There is one godly man in our church who shared with me that a while ago, he began keeping a prayer list. And he said he started it very small. He’d set aside a half hour every day to pray for people. But he said that as he began doing this and he’s been talking to people, that list began to expand from 20 names to 30 names. And he said “now it’s 200 names that I pray for. It takes me an hour and a half every morning just to pray through these people. It’s the greatest part of my day!” That’s a situation of private prayer, but I thought that was such a good example to me.

6. Be transparent with each other.

It’s important that we encourage intercessory prayer by being transparent with other brothers and sisters about the real needs we have. So for instance, if we’re facing temptations, we’re right to ask our dear friends. Now, I realize it’s not wise to make a public announcement of all of our temptations. But it’s right for us to share with some guys or gals that we know and trust and say, “Hey! I’m struggling with this. Would you pray for me?” If there’s a conflict in a relationship, “Here’s what I’m dealing with in my relationship with my wife or my husband. And here’s how I want you to pray for me. I’m not just saying this to complain about the other person. But I’m saying that I need to see more of my sin. Would you pray that I would see more of my sin?”

Brothers and sisters, let us talk with God together!