

When Jim Cymbala became the pastor at Brooklyn Tabernacle, the church was on its last legs. The congregation was dwindling. The neighbourhood was increasingly difficult to minister to, and the congregation had lost its way. Jim had come as a young man full of hopes and dreams, only to face constant discouragement.

Jim tells the story in his book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* that he almost gave up. But in an act of desperation, he cried out to the Lord in prayer, begging God for a breakthrough. That's when Jim sensed God's leading to build the church on the foundation of prayer. With this focus, the church made their mid-week prayer the most important gathering of the week. They wouldn't make their focus to attract newcomers, to build a culturally sensitive ministry, or to have a dynamic worship experience. They would make their aim to encounter the living God.

And something began to change. This handful of people began to experience life change unlike they had experienced before. There, in the midst of a multi-ethnic community, God began to do something extraordinary as they sought him.

These stories are similar to the book of Acts. A church focused on prayer is a church that knows the presence and power of God. In Acts 4:23-31, we read about how God loves to use prayer to display his power. So let's think about how we can know the power of prayer.

Who do we pray to?

When we come to Acts 4, Peter and John have just been released after being harassed by the religious authorities. They had seen a 40 year old man who was lame and was at the temple. When they approached him, God brought about a miraculous healing. As a result, Peter and John began to preach about Jesus and his resurrection. This caused the religious authorities to be upset, detain them, and tell them not to speak about Jesus any more (4:18)

But the church would not be silenced by threats. Instead, they turned to God, the Sovereign Lord, their Master. What I find interesting is that they spend more time reminding themselves and praying to God than they ask for prayer requests. Notice how they pray to God and how they do it together, with one voice in agreement.

First, they pray to the God who has created all things. They pray to God and remind themselves of the God who has made everything – the heavens, the earth, the seas, and all that is in them. This is the God who has the power make everything by a simple word. From the roar of a lion to the thunder that crashes, from the waterfall that cascades down majestically to the heat of the sun, they pray to a God who is stronger, more powerful, and more gracious because he has made all these things.

Second, they pray to the God who reveals. They turn back to Scripture and they quote Scripture back to God, specifically the words of David from Psalm 2. This psalm is a reminder that God is not threatened by political forces that oppose his plans. He laughs. He still rules in heaven. Unbelieving nations can rage, but God's King will not be removed from his throne. God is all

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powerful and he has revealed his power by keeping his promise to have a royal Son who will rule forever.

Finally, they pray to the God who rules and redeems. He sent his Son into this world, and the religious leaders and political leaders killed his royal Son. But this was God's plan from the beginning. God had sent his Son to suffer and die and rise again to show that the power of sin and death and injustice and evil cannot stop God. Evil does not thwart God's plan. Instead, God makes evil serve his purposes.

So when we pray, are we spending more time praying about our requests or recalling and praying to know the presence of the all-powerful God?

What do we pray for?

What is striking about the prayer of these believers is what they don't ask for. After facing persecution and threats to their safety, they aren't asking for things to be easier for them. In fact, this prayer has been contrasted with King Hezekiah's prayer in Isaiah 37:14-20. When King Hezekiah faced the threat of annihilation from the Assyrians, he prayed to the Lord for protection for the city. He asked that God would spare the city from ruin. But these disciples pray differently.

While they quote Psalm 2 and mention that the Gentiles rage against the Lord and his anointed One, they do not pray for God to laugh at their opponents (Ps. 2:4); terrify them (Ps. 2:5); break them to pieces (Ps. 2:9); or that their enemies would perish (Ps. 2:12). Instead, they pray for three things.

First, they pray that the Lord would consider the threats of their enemies. Literally, they ask the Lord to look at their threats. In asking God to look, the church was not asking God to do something that he wasn't willing to do. Rather, they were asking him to notice the injustice that was being done and for God to act in a way that would enable the believers to remain faithful. God is a God who is concerned about justice, and so it was right for the church to ask that God would notice this injustice. The disciples had been thrown into prison not because they had done anything wrong, but because they were showing the mercy of the resurrected Christ. And this message of Christ's resurrection caused great offense and caused the Jewish believers to act as unbelievers (as Psalm 2 makes it plain that those who act against the Lord are "Gentiles").

Second, they asked the Lord that they would be his servants to speak the word with boldness. They recognized that they were God's servants, and so they were to act in a way that showed that the Lord was their master. As servants, they needed boldness since they had been told not to speak of the name of Jesus (4:18). But because they are the servants of God and not of the political and religious establishment, they prayed that they would continue to speak the message that Jesus had come to save sinners from their sin. And to oppose the elites meant they needed boldness to do so.

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The third thing they asked for was for God to bring a ministry of mercy. They are asking God to continue to heal the sick in contrast to the threats of the religious leaders. They want God's power to act mercifully; they aren't asking God to use his power to bring harm. Peter and John had brought the message of the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection after the lame man at the Beautiful Gate was healed. And now, the church prays for more healings as well as signs and wonders to happen so that they could continue to have reason to explain why God acts mercifully instead of judgmentally.

In all of these requests, the church is asking for the mission of the gospel to go forward. They want compassion in the face of opposition; healing in the face of persecution; regeneration in the face of destruction. They want justice so that mercy prevails. They want God to notice so that ministry advances. Is this what we pray for?

What does God give?

God loves to answer the prayers of his people when they ask according to his promises. And here we see what God gives. In v. 31, Luke tells us three things that the church received from their prayers.

First, he gives his presence. We are told that the place they were gathered was shaken. In the Old Testament, when God came and was among his people, one of the effects that sometimes happened was that the place where God appeared was shaken. Consider Isaiah when he is in the temple and as he is praying, God comes and the place is shaken (Isa. 6:14). Or remember how when Israel had come out of Egypt and they were at Mount Sinai. Moses had been called up the mountain to meet with the Lord and we are told in Exodus 19:18 that the mountain shook. God shakes the heavens as he shakes the earth in response to prayer because he wants his people to know that he is with them. In the 4th century, the great preacher John Chrysostum explained why the place they were praying was shaking: "The whole place was shaken and that left them all the more unshaken" (quoted in Thomas, *Acts Reformed Expository Commentary*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 114).

Second, God gives his Spirit. In the face of opposition, God fills his people with himself so that they would have their mouths filled with his words. While the Jewish leaders might try to muzzle these believers, God will not be gagged. God fills his people so that their mouths are filled with his message.

And that results in the final thing that he gives them – boldness. Here is a church ready for mission. They have God's presence, God's message, and God confidence so that they can go. People might say "Don't speak of Jesus here!" but the word of God – the very message of Jesus Christ who came to save sinners – cannot be stopped.

How can I pray corporately?

What I want us to see is that the church experienced the power of God as they came together corporately. We need to see that the engine of the church is prayer. We need to be praying the Word of God with the people of God for the power of God.

There are several ways I want to encourage us to make 2024 a year of prayer. These are not long times of corporate prayer but they are regular times. I want to encourage you to choose one of the first four of these opportunities.

On Sunday mornings, we have a time of pre-service prayer. You can come and join Peter Vanderlay in the east meeting room where the red chairs and couches are. This is a time to pray for God to work in our Sunday morning service and gives us an opportunity to prepare our hearts.

On Wednesday morning at 9 am, Peter Vanderlay is also leading a prayer time in the same room. This is a time to pray for the mission of the church and personal prayer requests that are on your heart.

Every other month, we have a time of Praise & Prayer. This happens on a Wednesday during our family ministry time. If you've never been to a time of corporate prayer, this is a great way to start. We sing and pray, and our prayers are short and focused. I know many people who have come to these times and not only found them very encouraging but also found them to be a great opportunity to learn to pray. If you haven't been to a prayer time before, I want to encourage you to start by coming out Wednesday night at 6:30 pm in the youth room

A fourth way to grow in prayer is in a life group. Life groups are small groups where people study the Bible and encourage one another in the Christian life. These are great places to grow in trusting relationships and learn to pray with others and for others.

Finally, in our services on Sunday we aim to pray. One of the things that doesn't happen in a lot of churches is prayer. Prayer times are used as transitions for the music team to sneak up on the platform while everyone has their eyes closed! But we aim to pray when we have our call to worship, a pastoral prayer for others, and a prayer after we have heard the word of God so that we could act upon it. We also pray a prayer of confession with people throughout history so that we can learn how others have prayed biblically and remind ourselves that we don't always have to pray spontaneously but can pray written prayers because we often get stuck in ruts.

So as we begin 2024, what is our greatest need? Isn't it to know God? To know his presence? To come before him with dependence? Won't you join me in making one of these times of prayer a priority?