

# Making Prayer Your Second Language

## *“The Power of a Praying Church”*

### Acts 12:1-17

The very first promise from Scripture I ever committed to memory is a promise Jesus gave to us as He was teaching about prayer. It is recorded in **Matthew 18:20** and it goes like this. Jesus said, ***“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them”*** (KJV).

I memorized that promise when I was just a kid. The church I grew up in didn't practice any kind of a formal liturgy. We kind of “free wheeled” our way through worship. It was very informal. We didn't begin our services with a liturgical “call to worship.”

But occasionally, as we began a service, our pastor would have the entire congregation recite together this promise of Jesus from **Matthew 18:20** – ***“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”*** Those words stuck in my mind when I was just a child and I have never ever forgotten them.

Something unexplainable and dynamic happens when God's people come together for worship and prayer. Theologically I understand that God is omnipresent—that we are always in the presence of God. I know what the Lord has said to us in His holy Word – ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you”*** (Hebrews 13:5 NIV).

I'm familiar with the words of the **139<sup>th</sup> Psalm**.

**Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you.**

(Psalm 139:7-12

NIV).

And yet, Jesus says, ***“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”*** There is a synergy that

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occurs in Christian community that is unexplainable and yet also undeniable. We are stronger when we share our lives with each other. Horses teamed together can pull more than the sum of what they could pull alone. Embers in a fire fade quickly when they are all alone, but piled together, they burn stronger and hotter and longer. That is synergy.

God made us for community. The life of faith is not an individual affair. Yes, each of us has our unique life of faith, but it cannot healthily exist separate from the community of faith. God isn't looking for rugged individualists when it comes to the Christian life.

We were created for community. When God looked at **Adam**, who was the very crown and glory of all creation, He said, ***“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him”*** (Genesis 2:18 NIV). Life is incredibly empty when it's not shared.

And so He created us to live in families. He created a people, a nation, a holy community whom He referred to as “My people.” And He created the Church, the fellowship of saints, the body of Christ here on earth, the household of faith. No one can say, ***“I am a rock. I am an island.”*** We need each other.

You know, sometimes I wish that our English translations of Scripture would use the word ***“ya'll”*** instead of ***“you.”*** So many of the New Testament commands are given in the third person **plural**, but we read them in the third person **singular**. We think it's saying ***“you”*** and we interpret it very personally and individually when it's really saying ***“ya'll”*** and is to be interpreted very communally and collectively.

**Richard Foster**, the evangelical guru of spiritual formation, suggests that when Jesus says, ***“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,”*** He is indicating that He offers to be present in a special way when we gather together with others; and that as we focus together on His presence, as we look together in the same direction, that deepens our friendship and trust with each other and strengthens our faith.

There is a sense in which Christ is most present in the community of His

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people. And so as we close this series of sermons about **Making Prayer Your Second Language**—becoming proficient in conversing with God and listening to His voice—I want to talk specifically this morning about **The Power Of A Praying Church**.

I won't be satisfied, as your pastor, if we just become a bunch of isolated individuals who are committed to the practice of personal and private prayer. There is a synergy that occurs in Christian community and nowhere is that more evident in Scripture than in prayer.

Let me show you what I mean. Please take your Bibles and turn to the **12<sup>th</sup> chapter** of the book of **Acts**. The church in Jerusalem was facing a real crisis. They were between a rock and a hard place. It probably felt to them like they were in one of those places in life in which there just aren't any options—right smack dab in the middle of a dead end road.

Not only do individuals and families go through times like these in their lives when they just feel like, *“Man, we're not going to make it through this. This is the end. We're not going to survive this!”* So do groups and companies and churches and organizations and institutions! They find themselves in seemingly impossible situations in which the future looks hopeless.

Such was the case with the church at Jerusalem in the **12<sup>th</sup> chapter** of the book of **Acts**. Here is their story beginning with **verse 1**.

**It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.**

**This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.** Acts 12:1-4  
NIV

Let's stop right there for a moment. So there's the crisis facing the church. Their leaders are being picked off one-by-one. First,

**Stephen** is killed by an angry mob—stoned to death by misguided Jews. And then a time of great persecution breaks out against the whole church at Jerusalem. The Bible says in **Acts 8** that Jewish officials went from house to house searching for Christian believers and when they found them they dragged them away, both men and women, and put them in prison.

As you can imagine most of the believers there in Jerusalem, members of the church, fearing for their lives, fled from Jerusalem and scattered all over Judea and Samaria in search of peace and safety—became refugees.

Now, if that wasn't bad enough, suddenly the king of Palestine, a man by the name of **Herod**, a political leader, the most powerful man in the land who had been appointed to this position by the Roman government and who had all of their muscle and might and backing at his disposal, also got into the act and began to attack the church.

He had **James**, the brother of John, put to death by the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he arrested **Peter**, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, threw him in jail and planned to have him executed as well.

When you're a Roman “lap dog,” like Herod was, a subject of Rome but responsible for keeping peace and order in a conquered land, such as Palestine, you do anything and everything possible to keep the people happy. So he, too, persecuted the church.

*Can you imagine what it must have been like to have been a member of that church? You're friends have all left...and you can't blame them...because things are bad. I mean really bad! It's an awful situation. You begin losing your leaders. There's a leadership vacuum. Stephen is killed and then James is killed.*

But you have hung in there. You have stayed. You have persevered. Things haven't been as joyous as they once were. Things haven't been as easy as they once were. It's been hard. At times it's been discouraging. But you have kept on keeping on.

And then they drag **Simon Peter** off to prison. He is the heart and soul of the church. He is the undisputed leader. He's the voice of the

church...and they're going to kill him too! *Wouldn't that be like the last straw, the thing that tips the scales to utter hopelessness? Wouldn't you be tempted to say, "Man, this is it! This is the end. Hope is gone. We're never going to survive this."*

Well, that's where the church was in **Acts 12**. *What do you do when you find yourself at a "dead end" in life?* Let's read on. Notice what the church did – **verse 5**.

**So Peter was kept in prison but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.**  
Acts 12:5 NIV

I want you to stop right now, take out a pen or pencil and circle this little 3-letter word – **“but.”** *“So Peter was kept in prison but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”* This whole story turns on the axis of this innocuous-looking little word – “but.”

It's like a U-turn in the road. Everything seems headed in one direction. It's just one horrible thing after another. Things go from bad to worse. You just know that things aren't going to end well. Disaster looms! Everything looks grim. It's going to be a tragic story...and then suddenly everything turns around.

Instead of darkness and despair there is hope and light. Instead of weeping and wailing there is singing and rejoicing. Instead of defeat and failure there is victory and triumph. *What turns everything around?* **“But the church was earnestly praying.”**

Let's read on – **verse 6**.

**The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.**

You talk about an impossible situation. This was it! No way Peter could ever escape from the enemy, right? He was doomed. He was surrounded on all sides. Not only was he in prison, behind bars, locked up, confined behind massive walls...he was also bound by chains, guarded by two soldiers—one on each side as he slept—plus there were two additional soldiers guarding his cell door.

Herod was going to make sure this guy didn't escape. In fact, he assigned four squads of four soldiers to do one thing and one thing only—watch Peter! *“Don't take your eyes off of him. Don't let him out of your sight. Guard him at all times.”*

Ever wonder why Herod would go to such drastic lengths to guard this simple fisherman? The answer is found in the **5<sup>th</sup> chapter** of **Acts**. This wasn't the first time Peter had been incarcerated in prison. Once before, the high priest and the Sadducees had thrown Peter and the other apostles in prison for preaching the gospel, for stirring up the people, for pointing them to Jesus as the way and the truth and the life.

**“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out”** (Acts 5:19 NIV). And the next morning when the high priest sent the captain of the temple guard to get the prisoners, the apostles, and bring them to him...they were gone. The jail doors were still locked. The soldiers were still guarding the doors but there was no one in there. They were gone. They had escaped

*Do you know where they found them?* The apostles were back at the temple courts teaching the people about Jesus. They weren't afraid. They weren't intimidated. They had been set free by the Lord.

So I suspect that when Herod told the high priest that he had Peter locked up in jail and that he was going to get rid of him, the high priests probably said something like this to Herod, **“Well that's great that you have him locked up behind bars but let me give you a little bit of advice, Herod. An angel or something got this guy out of prison the last time and so you had better guard him well. Just take extra precaution.”**

So Herod assigned four squads of four soldiers to do one thing—guard Peter. But the church prays. Now look at what happens – **Verse 7**.

**Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.**

**Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the**

angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.

They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish People were anticipating.”

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door.

When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”

“You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.” But Peter kept on knocking and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. Acts 12:7-17 NIV

If you don’t get anything else this morning, please get this: **Life is not determined simply and solely by the physical forces around us that we can see and hear and touch. There is an X-factor, an unknown quantity, humanly incalculable, that determines the course of men and nations and history...and that X-factor is prayer.**

Here is Herod with all of his might with the limitless power of the Roman Empire behind him...and here is the church – unarmed, meek, seemingly powerless. But they are a praying bunch. All through the book of **Acts**, every time you see the church gathered together, it seems like they were praying.

In fact, here is how the church is described in **Acts 2**. *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”* (Acts 2:42 NIV). They prayed and miracles happened.

Rome looked so powerful, so unconquerable, so overwhelming. The church looked so weak, so defenseless, so vulnerable. Herod said, *“Look, church, I’m going to crush you. I’m going to destroy you. I’m going to eliminate all of your leaders.”* But the church prayed. And now, two thousand years later, the Roman Empire is gone but the church is still alive and well and thriving.

Someone has said, *“When the outlook is bad, try the up-look.”* The church is always at its best when its people are united together on their knees in prayer. When the church prays at least two things happen.

**First of All - Prayer Changes Things.** In the midst of an impossible situation, when it looked like Peter had no hope at all, that he couldn’t possibly win or survive, that the end had come...the church prayed and things changed.

**William Temple**, one of the greatest Christian leaders England ever produced, used to say, *“When I pray coincidences happen, and when I do not, they don’t.”*

**Oswald Chambers**, a man of deep spiritual insight and understanding whose writings are just timeless, says, *“There is nothing to be valued more highly than to have people praying for us; God links up His power in answer to their prayers.”*

That power may come in the form of **wisdom**—an idea you desperately need and can’t come up with yourself. It may come in the form of **courage** greater than you could ever muster on your own. It may come in the form of **confidence** or **perseverance**, a **changed attitude** toward a spouse or a child or a parent or a friend, a **changed circumstance**, or maybe even an outright miracle, as in the case of Peter here in our Scripture.

But, however it comes, God's prevailing power is released in the lives of people who pray. Prayer changes things! Just ask Simon Peter.

**Second, Prayer Changes People.** When this chapter begins, where do we find the church? They are huddled together in a room (perhaps in fear), the door is shut and they really aren't expecting much to change. *How do I know that?*

Well, when Peter is miraculously delivered from his imprisonment by the angel and he comes to the house where the church is meeting and knocks on the door and the servant girl, **Rhoda**, exclaims with joy, ***"Peter is at the door!"*** the people who have been praying for Peter's release say to her, ***"You must be out of your mind. Man, he's in prison with four squads of four soldiers guarding him night and day. His hands are chained. You must be seeing things."***

And when she insists that he is there, they say, ***"Well, it must be his angel. You must have seen a vision or something because he is in prison."*** But he wasn't in prison. And when the members of this church saw the power of God, saw prayer really does change things, saw that God is ***"able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,"*** something changed within them.

Just a few verses later, listen to what the Bible says about the work and life of the church. **Verse 24 – *"But the word of God continued to increase and spread"*** (Acts 12:24 NIV). *How did that happen?* Well let me tell you where these people weren't. They weren't huddled together in fear in a little room with the door shut.

They were out in the world with faith and boldness telling other about Jesus and the transforming power of the Lord. Prayer changes us. It changes people.

Out in the wilderness, **Moses** became a man of prayer—he encountered God, heard His voice, witnessed His power—and he was changed, prayer changed him, from an insecure, apprehensive introvert into a powerful and dynamic leader.

Prayer changed **Elijah**. He was ready to quit, give up, throw in the

towel; but something happened when he heard the still small voice of the Lord. Something changed within him. Prayer does that. Prayer changes people. And suddenly he found the strength and the desire and the faith and the hope to go on.

Prayer changed **Saul of Tarsus**. He is a destroyer of people. He is a fanatic. He persecutes people, believers. But on the road to Damascus, he encounters God. He hears His voice. Suddenly light, truth, pierces the darkness of his heart. He prays a simple prayer. ***"Lord, what do You want me to do?"*** (Acts 9:6 NKJV). And his life is forever changed—from trying to destroy the church to becoming its greatest advocate.

And prayer changed **Peter**...and prayer changed the faith and the courage and the life of the members of the **early church**. We may take them to task a bit that when God miraculously answered their prayer they were slow to believe, but listen, here's the thing, they prayed. And Jesus said, ***"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you"*** (Matthew 17:20-21 NIV).

We don't have to be people of great faith. We just have to be a people with a little faith in a great God.

And so I call us to be a people of prayer. May prayer truly become our second language. Let the church rise on the wings of prayer because, listen, there is power, dynamic power, incredible power, supernatural power, in a praying people.

During World War II England needed to increase its production of coal. So one day **Winston Churchill** called together all of the labor leaders to enlist their support. At the end of his presentation, he said, ***"I want you to picture in your minds a great victory parade that's going to occur when we win this war."***

***"First will come the sailors who kept the vital sea lanes open. And the people will cheer. And then will come the soldiers who stormed the beaches of Normandy and defeated Rommel in Africa. And people will cheer. And then will come the pilots from the Royal Air Force***

***who protected us in the sky."***

*“And then,” he said, “last of all there will come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner’s caps. Someone will yell out, ‘And where were you during the critical days of our struggle?’”*

*“And from ten thousand throats will come the answer, ‘We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal.’ That’s where the victory is won!”*

And so it is in the life of our church. *Do you know where the victory is won?* It’s not won by your pastor or the Worship Team (as great as they are!) or by anyone up front. We get a lot of the cheers and the accolades but the battle is won by you faithful men and women who have your *“faces to the coal”* in prayer.

There is power in a praying church. Let the thing that distinguishes us above everything else be our commitment to be a praying church.