

“If you do not know that life is war, you will not know what prayer is for” John Piper (**picture**).

On February 24, 1991, a lightning ground offensive was launched by the U.S. and allied forces in the Persian Gulf War (**pictures**). Its effectiveness shattered the defending Iraqi forces. Within days the world’s 4th largest army was crushed, tens of thousands of prisoners of war were taken and the conflict was ended.

What explains this stunning defeat? For over a month a relentless air campaign had targeted Iraqi forces. Its strategic penetration broke the defenders’ infrastructure and obliterated their power.

That’s an illustration of a powerful truth about prayer. As we seek to take our communities and world with the good news of Christ, we have weapons with *“divine power to demolish strongholds”* (2 Cor. 10:4), as *“we struggle...not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”* (Eph. 6:12) Concerted personal and corporate prayer is our “air offensive.” An effective air campaign comes first. When it’s waged and air dominance established, the ground campaign becomes effective and decisive.

Our theme for 2019 is ***Going forward on our knees*** (**picture**). We’re in a spiritual war. Prayer, personal and corporate, isn’t optional. It’s a necessity! Though you won’t find the term “corporate prayer” in Scripture, this group action permeates God’s Word, particularly in the Book of Acts, where the local church was born.

The dictionary defines corporate as *“united or combined.”* There must be consistent times when a church, groups of believers, come together in united prayer. It’s an air attack against the Evil One, the one Scripture calls *“the Prince of the Power of the Air.”* Prayer is critical. If we’re not people of prayer, united in prayer, we limit God’s work and our effectiveness.

Yet, if there’s any area of my own spiritual life where I feel inadequate, it’s prayer. Many of you feel that way. I feel like I’m barely in Kindergarten when it comes to prayer. It’s not that I don’t believe in prayer, or that I don’t pray. The Spirit has worked in my heart and it’s one area where I am aware of spiritual growth, yet I still feel so inadequate. Though I’ve been a Christian for nearly five decades, I still find prayer to be a challenge.

That’s because prayer is hard work. It involves our mind, heart, and will. It demands concentration. None of that’s easy. I believe that God gives some people the gift of prayer just as He gives others the gift of music. They know how to pray the way some know how to make beautiful music.

So, I take great comfort in the fact that we know that God doesn’t gift all His children in the same way. One teaches, another sings, another serves, another shares the gospel...and so it goes. We aren’t all alike, which is good because how boring and limited the church would be if we were clones. Yet, even if prayer is not our first gift, like evangelism, we’re all commanded to pray. Please turn to Acts 1:12-14 (p. 909).

The local church is commanded to pray together. So, why don’t we pray? Why don’t we pray together? If you’re taking notes...

1. We’ve accepted cheap substitutes for prayer. How many of you have been taken in by a “cheap substitute”? Maybe it looked like a great deal, “too good to be true,” you told yourself. A few weeks later, after it broke or underperformed, you realized that what you got was a cheap substitute.

Maybe it was a pair of shoes. They looked like the expensive brand, same color, shine. Shoes are shoes. But you’re walking down the hall and the heel falls off. Or, the “genuine leather” starts flaking off. But it’s not just in the physical realm, it’s also in the spiritual realm – it’s also in the Church. It’s why we’re often so impotent. Let’s touch on **3 cheap substitutes for prayer**.

Sometimes we substitute programs for prayer. Churches or pastors become convinced that the latest program will bring power (or numbers) into the church. We’ve developed an entire religious industry whose machinery runs smoothly without any need of the Holy Spirit. A. W. Tozer (**picture**) said that if God were to take the Holy Spirit out of this world, *“most of what the church is doing would go right on, and nobody would know the difference.”*

Sometimes we substitute worship music for prayer. Ours is a feeling-driven, emotional culture and the Church has been contaminated. Think of how many times you’ve heard someone say, “they have such a great worship band” or “I loved how I feel when I worship there.” Yet, when was the last time you heard a church referred to as a “praying church.” Please read the New Testament. Music is rarely mentioned. Music is wonderful but it’s an outcome of true worship, not the driving force.

What’s sometimes called “worship” is little more than entertainment, often with poor theology. We trade the beauty of the gospel and God’s story for the excitement of sensory stimulation. Singing personal love songs to Jesus is not the point of gathered worship. Robert Webber (**picture**) rightly defined worship as *“doing God’s story.”*

Sometimes we substitute preaching for prayer. The Bible teaches that preaching is foundational for the church. But preaching without prayer is like trying to run a car without gas. Jesus launched His church, not while someone was preaching, but while people were praying. Preaching followed prayer. After times of revival, churches will come together to pray, but it soon devolves into another time of preaching with prayer tacked on.

Prayer goes against the grain of American culture. Prayer requires humility and dependency. The early disciples were stripped of all the answers, solutions and pride. It was within that context that they prayed together. They threw themselves on God and were totally dependent on Him. We only see the fullness of God's work and power as we grow in dependency on Him.

2. Praying together was a priority for the early church. God has sovereignly ordained the corporate praying of a church, so that His mighty work increases exponentially.

“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying.” The Mount of Olives is on the east side of Jerusalem. When Luke tells us they were about *“a Sabbath day's walk away,”* he's alluding to the Jewish tradition that restricted walking on the Sabbath to about 2000 paces or roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of a mile. So, they returned to “the Upper Room.” It was probably the same Upper Room where Jesus and His disciples met for the Last Supper. If you visit Israel today, your guide may take you to a place called the Upper Room, but it was built by the Crusaders 800 years ago.

What's important is that the disciples obeyed Jesus' command to return to Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5). After Christ's ascension, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Their hearts were full as they wondered what would happen next.

Notice who was there. *“Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James...along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”* This is who was at this first prayer meeting of the Christian era. We can divide the attendees into **three groups**, and learn something instructive from each one.

The eleven remaining apostles. Jesus chose 12 apostles, but Judas defected and betrayed Him. That left the 11 listed here. Peter comes first as always, followed by the two brothers, John and James. John wrote five books of the New Testament and was exiled to the island of Patmos. James was put to death by Herod Agrippa 1 (Acts 12:2). The list includes Matthew the tax collector and Simon the political zealot. Finally, there's another Judas—not Judas Iscariot—but Judas the son of James. Of these 11 apostles, we must note that if Jesus conquered the world through such unlikely men, it wasn't because of anything in them but only by the power of the risen Christ who worked through them. They weren't bad guys, but they weren't high on anyone's list of movers and shakers. Yet, these 11 would go on to turn the world upside down and it's never been the same. It's a powerful reminder that God can do incredible things through the most unlikely people.

Mary and the other women. We can't say for sure who these other women were. We only know from the Gospels that women made up a large part of Jesus' following. Jesus proclaimed a liberating message that lifted women from 2nd class to freedom and fulfillment. In his gospel, Luke mentions that as Jesus traveled throughout Israel, a group of women whose lives He'd changed followed Him from place to place. They provided support for Jesus and His disciples. Apparently, some of those same women were in the upper room praying with the men.

This is also the last mention of Mary in the New Testament. She became a follower of her Son and joined the disciples in worshipping and praying to Him. Just a side note, there's no evidence in the Bible that anyone ever prayed to Mary or called her *“the mother of God,”* or even assigned her a special role in the Church. All of that came long after the ending of the New Testament and rests on tradition, not on anything in Scripture.

Brothers of Jesus. It may surprise you to know that Jesus had brothers. Some Christian groups teach a doctrine called the *Perpetual Virginity of Mary*—the idea that she and Joseph never had sexual relations and that she never gave birth to anyone besides Jesus. This passage, among others, decisively refutes that. For Jesus to have brothers means that after He was born, Joseph and Mary conceived children in the normal way and that Jesus had younger brothers and sisters who grew up with Him. It appears that during His lifetime His family didn't know what to make of Him.

Mark 3:21 tells us that at one point they thought that He was mentally disturbed. In John 7:3-5, His brothers clearly are not yet believers. Evidently they came to faith in the Lord after His resurrection. That tells us two things: **1)** Proximity to Jesus doesn't guarantee faith, so don't take anything for granted. **2)** Those who today are unbelievers may come to Christ tomorrow, so don't never give up on your loved ones or anyone else.

More importantly, notice what they were doing. *“All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.”* While they waited for the Holy Spirit to come, they spent time together praying.

James Montgomery Boice (**picture**) points out that they might have used the time in other ways. They could have gone back to their old occupations or might have started doing the work of evangelism. That's understandable because most of

us are people of action. We want to get moving, to do something, anything, but for goodness sake, don't just sit there, get up and get going. Don't let life pass you by.

While that's usually great advice, it's not always the will of God. Sometimes God says, "I want you to wait." Those times are hard and even discouraging, but often they bring about the greatest spiritual growth. God uses "waiting room" experiences of life to develop our spiritual growth, to redirect our priorities and to develop godly character. In this case God wanted the church to learn how to wait and pray. And not just to pray in general, but to learn to pray together. Their praying was...

Unanimous. Acts 1:14 says they were all together. This is a vital yet often overlooked secret of the church. God blesses and desires unity. Over and over again, Scripture stresses that what they did, they did together. All of them, united and unanimous.

Praying alone, your quiet time or going to a solitary place to talk to God is great. Jesus often did and so should we. We need to pray. For most of us, true prayer begins as we cry out to God from the depths of our soul. But that's not the only kind of prayer the Bible mentions. There must be consistent times and places for believers to come together unitedly and unanimously, crying out to God. Too often it takes a calamity to bring the church to its knees.

Why is united prayer so important? By praying together we can encourage each other to seek the Lord. When one person grows weary, another through prayer can lift him or her up. We help keep each other on the road of holiness by meeting regularly for prayer.

Let me make this personal and practical. Do you have anyone or any group with whom you meet on a regular basis for prayer? If the answer is *No*, please do something about it. You're missing out on a large part of what God wants to do in you and through you. We're starting a weekly prayer time at Grace. Let us be your group for a place to pray together!

Harmonious. Luke uses a particular Greek word to stress the harmony of their prayers. It's the word is *homothumadon*. It's translated with that phrase, "with one accord." It's a musical term that means to strike the same notes together. We all know what it is to listen to a choir sing and the music is lovely and lifting...but then without warning, someone hits a wrong note. The discordant sound sticks out like a sore thumb. When the early church prayed, there were no "wrong notes," no division, ugly attitudes, pointing fingers or complaining spirits.

That's because when people don't like each other, they can't pray together. One of two things happens. Either you get your hearts right, or you stop praying together – you can't do both at the same time.

Continuous. It's what it means when it talks about being "devoted." It means "constantly." It was "continual." The Weymouth New Testament translates it that they "continued earnest" in prayer. It's the idea of "obstinate determination." When they prayed, they were deadly serious about it. Nothing could stop them. They weren't *playing*, they were *praying*. There's a huge difference.

What's the importance of all this? Why the stress on praying **unanimously, harmoniously and continually**? The answer is simple: Acts 1:12-14 gives us a pattern for how the church is to function in every age. Nothing that matters has changed across the centuries. Superficially we're much different than that tiny band. We have so much compared with the little they had. Then, there are billions of Christians in the world today instead of a few hundred. We have libraries filled with Christian books. They didn't even have a New Testament. We have millions of churches today, but they had one just congregation in an upper room.

There's a direct line between that upper room and every church in the world today, between Jerusalem and our area, Burlington and Waterford. When we read Acts 1, we must understand that this is what the local church is to do. We're to wait on God. While we wait, we're to gather together in worship and prayer—unanimously, harmoniously, continually. God blesses united prayer. But there's a flip side to this truth. Listen to the words of Lloyd Ogilvie (**picture**) in his book, *Drumbeat of Love*, on the Book of Acts:

"I have never known a contentious group to receive the Holy Spirit. Nor have I ever seen a church in which division and disunity prevailed receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit...As congregations we cannot be empowered until we are of one mind and heart, until we love each other as Christ has loved us, and until we heal all broken relationships. The price seems high! But it's a bargain price for what can happen through Pentecost power."

We'll never have God's blessing and power without unity. Spiritual power comes when we have "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). True unity is one of God's best gifts to a church. When we have it, our church will be blessed. If we lose it, it's very hard to get it back. God blesses when there is prayer! God blesses when there is unity!

3. God blesses when His people are united and are committed to praying together. Throughout the history of the Church, every great revival has been preceded by serious, united prayer. While I believe that revival is a sovereign work of God sent by Him and not created by us, I also believe that when God wants to do a great work, He usually begins by stirring His church to pray together. Our prayers don't bring revival. They do prepare us to receive all that God has for

us. We desperately need an outpouring of God's Spirit. If we truly want revival, we must pray, prepare for it, and ask God to send it.

That's as much as we can do. After that, we must do what the early disciples did, wait patiently for God to answer. Waiting time isn't wasted if we use it to pray together *unanimously*, *harmoniously* and *continuously*.

Conclusion: We're having a prayer emphasis this week, Monday through Thursday, each night here at 6:30 pm. But it's just the start. Each week after that, every Thursday at 6:30 pm, we'll have a prayer meeting.

Please make it a priority. Join us for one, if not all of the nights this week and in the future. Let me end with *Nine Blessings of Praying Together*.

1. Added Power. Matthew 18:15-20 may be one of the more misunderstood texts in the New Testament. That often quoted promise "*where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them*" comes at the end of a section on church discipline. Jesus is appealing to a deeper principle – the benefit of praying together. He says "*anything*" — "*if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask.*" There's added power when we unite with brothers and sisters in Christ to join our hearts and make our collective prayer requests to our Heavenly Father.

2. Multiplied Joy. When we share the joy of prayer, we increase our joy in prayer. When we make a regular practice of praying together, we avail ourselves of a channel of joy that we otherwise would be neglecting. By praying with others, not only do we add to our joy in God, but also to theirs.

3. Greater Glory to God. Our multiplied joy in God then makes for multiplied glory to God. When we understand gratitude to Him in terms of His glory (Rom. 1:21), we'll understand that giving thanks to Him is connected to honoring Him. Praying together adds power to our requests, it gets others involved and brings more glory for the Giver when He answers.

4. More Fruitful Ministry and Mission. God desires for us to pray for each other in our various ministries and manifestations of our great shared commission. Paul modeled this when he asked the churches to pray for his gospel work. Think about it. Paul was more than able to pray for these things himself, and doubtless he did, he anticipated though that there would be greater fruitfulness in the work when others joined him in prayer.

5. Unity Among Believers. Praying together is one of the single most significant things that we can do to cultivate unity. There's a special unity given to those who are partners in Christ and share spiritual life in Him. Already we have "*the unity of the Spirit*, yet we must be "*eager to maintain*" it (Eph. 4:3). Praying together is both an effect of the unity we share in Christ and is a cause for deeper, richer unity. It's not only a sign that unity already exists, it's a catalyst for more.

6. Answers We Otherwise Wouldn't Get. James 5, and many other texts, imply that there are some answers to prayer that we simply can't get without partnering with others in prayer. God intends for some answers to prayer to only come by waiting with as they join with us in our plea. Often we pray alone for our personal needs and God is pleased to answer. But at times, His means includes a group of believers or a united church coming together to His Throne.

7. To Learn and Grow in Our Prayers. The best way to learn to pray is to pray with others, especially those who have had their prayers molded by God's Word. Listen for those around you who are acquainted enough with God and His Word in prayer to regularly draw others into intercession with Him through their praises and petitions. Give careful attention to their approach to God, how they give Him adoration, confess sin, the things they thank and ask Him for, and how they keep others in mind even in a corporate setting. We grow as we join our hearts with others in prayer.

8. To Know Each Other. One of the best ways to get to know a fellow believer is to pray together. It's in prayer, in the conscious presence of our Heavenly Father, that we begin to let our façades fall away. We hear others hearts in prayer like nowhere else. When we pray together, not only do we reveal what most captures our hearts and is our treasure, but as we pray together, observes Jack Miller (**picture**), "*You can tell if a man or woman is really on speaking terms with God.*"

9. To Know Jesus More. Saving the best for last, the greatest benefit is that we know Jesus better when we pray together.

Do you really want to know Jesus? Spend time in prayer with those who love Him. With our limited vision and perspective, there are aspects of Christ that we're more prone to see with more clarity than others. Our own experiences and personalities emphasize some features of His glory and make us blind to others. As Tim Keller (**picture**) observes, "*By praying with friends, you will be able to hear and see facets of Jesus that you have not yet perceived.*"

The great point of prayer is not getting things from God, it's knowing our Heavenly Father – the One who loves us and gave Jesus for us. Perhaps this benefit alone is enough to inspire you to commit to praying together. Pray for our church! Please pray that we become a praying church!