

Call up 2 or 3 people to join me in throwing pennies into a “Wishing Well.”

How do you see prayer? If we were honest, most of us would have to admit that we see prayer as little more than throwing coins into a Wishing Well. But that’s not a biblical picture of what the Bible teaches about prayer.

One of my favorite stories about prayer is about a Baptist church in a small Texas town. A bar began construction of a new building to increase their business right next door to the church. This Baptist church started a campaign to block the bar from opening with lots of prayers and prayer meetings. Work progressed right up till the week before the bar was supposed to open when lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground.

After losing his building the bar owner sued the church on the grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the demise of his building. The church vehemently denied all responsibility in its reply to the court. After looking at all the facts, the judge commented, “I don’t know how I’m going to decide this, because it appears that we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer, and a church that doesn’t.”

Do we believe in the power of prayer? Does your practice of prayer affirm that God unleashes His power when you pray? We’re beginning a new series, **Building Changed Lives Together**. We want to see God work. To be totally candid, we’re desperate to see God work. We believe that He’s leading us to move forward with a new building, a new tool to replace our 1955 one. But the most critical steps forward aren’t physical or financial steps, they’re spiritual ones. If we’re going to be successful in **Building Changed Lives Together**, we must first start on our knees together.

It’s my prayer today that this study on prayer will encourage, motivate and propel us to pray with power together. Before we begin, let me be very candid and say that I feel woefully inadequate in the area of prayer. I don’t want this message to convey that I’ve got it all together because I certainly don’t. I am a fellow struggler with you.

So how do you see prayer? Let me ask a vital question: ***Have you ever experienced a dead end in life?*** Have you ever been faced with a problem that seemed impossible to solve? It made you feel overwhelmed, like this was it, that there was no way out...you were going under.

For example, has a doctor ever shared the results of medical tests that confirmed the presence of cancer or some other grave illness, and the prognosis was guarded at best? As you walked out of his office you felt a wave of despair and thought, “I’m not going to make it. This is the end.”

Or, perhaps you’re like millions of people who’ve felt their marriage had reached a dead end. The intimacy is gone; the fights and tension are so bad you just know it won’t last. The situation seems impossible to resolve. You’re sure the next thing you’ll do with your spouse is go see a lawyer.

Maybe your “dead end experience” concerns your finances. Bills keep growing and growing, and it seems there’s no way out. You’re headed for the shame of bankruptcy. Maybe it’s child-rearing that’s made you feel this way. You used to have a great relationship with your son...daughter, but when they hit adolescence things changed. Now, all you do is fight. From your perspective your relationship is down the tube. You feel like quitting.

Perhaps you feel this way about work, your boss or co-workers make your days miserable. It's so bad it affects life outside the office. And you just don't see how it could ever get better. It's a dead end that you can't avoid.

If any of these situations describe your life now or in the past, if you've faced or are even now facing a hopeless, impossible situation, then be sure and listen to what I'm going to say today. Turn in your Bibles to one of the church's first prayer meetings, Acts 12:1-19 (p. 920). **(Picture of Peter in prison)** This section in the book of Acts records a time in the life of the church when Christians in Jerusalem faced a seemingly impossible situation, a state of affairs that looked hopeless. The way they dealt with this seemingly unstoppable nightmare highlights truth we need to hear, truth that will help us face the inevitable "dead ends" of life. It reminds us of a too easily forgotten fact, **Heaven hears the church that prays together.**

This chapter of the history of the early church begins with King Herod initiating a persecution of the church. Herod was a typical politician. He worked very hard at cultivating the good graces of the Jewish people he ruled by meticulously keeping the Mosaic Law and all Jewish observances, and it worked. He became very popular with the Jews, especially the religious leaders. But he didn't do this because he loved the Jews. No, he was appointed to this "kingship" by Rome and wanted to please his Roman masters. He knew that one thing they wanted was a peaceful Palestine. Rome wanted happy, non-rebellious subjects, so their "lap-dog" Herod, worked to keep the Jews happy. And he did a good job at this. He was popular with the Jewish people.

Our passage in Acts says that, in efforts to gain even greater popularity, King Herod decided to take steps to attack the rivals of the Jewish rulers, the Christian Church and its leaders. He arrested some Christians and discovered that among them was James the brother of John. Remember? Together they were called "*The Sons of Thunder.*" Perhaps James was leading a prayer gathering of a group of Christians when soldiers sent by Herod broke into the room and arrested them all. Then King Herod used his seemingly endless power to order that James be executed and it had the effect he wanted. His approval rating with the Jews soared, so he tried to raise it even higher by arresting Peter, who was well-known as the leader of the Jerusalem church, Jesus' right-hand man. But this time Herod didn't have Peter killed immediately as he did James.

This temporary stay of execution wasn't due to some hidden streak of kindness in Herod's nature. No, it was simply another example of Herod's desire to be popular with the Jewish religious leaders. Scripture says that Peter was arrested during the Passover, the feast of unleavened bread. According to Jewish Law no trial or execution could be carried out during this week. So Herod couldn't kill Peter until the week had passed, or he'd risk losing the popularity he'd gained by arresting Peter in the first place. And perhaps Herod thought that waiting to kill Peter after Passover on that Sunday the Christians claimed Jesus had risen from the dead would particularly please the Jewish religious leaders!

Note something else important here. Peter was guarded by four squads of soldiers and, a squad, or "*quaternion*" as the Romans called it, was made up of four soldiers. There were four such squads assigned to guard Peter because both the day and night were divided into four watches, each lasting three hours. If you were one of these soldiers then during the day, you'd have been on duty three hours and off nine. Then, when night rolled

around, you were again on three and off nine more. This was to insure that the soldier's would be awake, attentive and on their guard!

Normally a prisoner was chained by his right hand to his guard's left hand. But Scripture says Peter was chained by both hands to a guard on each side. Each of the remaining two guards in the quaternion kept watch at one of the two gates leading to his cell.

Why would Herod go to such lengths to guard this old fisherman? Perhaps it was because of something that happened seven chapters earlier. Acts 5 records an incident in which the apostles, including Peter, were preaching and healing in the temple courts. This ticked off the high priest and so with the help of the jealous Sadducees, they arrested Peter and the other disciples and put them in jail. But during the night an angel opened the prison doors and brought them out. Perhaps the high priest heard that Herod had arrested Peter and said, "Listen Herod, it's great that you have Peter behind bars but let me give you a little advice. An angel got this guy out of jail the last time. So you'd better guard him well."

Look at verse 5 again. This verse is the climax of this entire chapter so pay attention to its words. It says that Peter was in prison the night before his trial, at which time Peter was sure to have been sentenced to death. Then notice that next word, "**BUT...**" You might want to draw a circle around that little three letter word! These are three very important letters forming a powerful little conjunction! I don't know about you but I love this word because many times it introduces something that's highly significant. Time and time again, history turns on this little word: "**BUT**"

To help you see this, let's review the situation. On one side we have bloody, wicked, powerful Herod on the throne backed by the seemingly limitless power of Rome. He's out to persecute and destroy the young church there in Jerusalem. On the other side is the church—unarmed, meek, seemingly powerless. Plus, remember, Herod seems to be way ahead in this "battle" he's waging against the early church. He's already killed James. Imagine how those Christians must have felt when that happened! They were still reeling from that great loss. James was one of the inner three that Jesus took with Him everywhere: *Peter, James and John*. James had seen Jesus do things that only two other people had seen. He'd heard Jesus say things that only those other two had heard. Now James is dead. James, someone who'd literally experienced an intimate walk with Jesus. The fact this giant of the faith was killable must have been a severe shock to their confidence and stability! And now things have gotten even worse.

Peter, their leader, is in prison. Plus, it's not just any prison! No, Peter is being held in the Antonia Fortress, the same fortress in which Jesus was held before His crucifixion. He's not in just one cell. Luke is very precise. He tells us that not only was Peter being held behind the massive iron gate that served as a "front door" to this fortress, his cell was located deep within this impenetrable prison behind two other locked gates. And there was not just one soldier guarding him, Peter was shackled between two soldiers, chained so that they sleep and eat with him. He's not even alone in the bathroom. Plus, there was a guard watching each gate.

Think of it this way. Peter is on death row. In the morning Herod is sure to kill him as he did James. Peter's about to be executed so in modern correctional parlance, he's had his last meal and his head is shaved! The situation looks grim indeed and then that little three letter word pops up, "**BUT.**" It pops up to remind us that there was something else on the other side of the ledger.

If you learn nothing else today then let this little word teach you that life is not always determined by the reality of what we see, feel, and hear. The happenings of life aren't always determined by those massive physical forces of evil that move about in this fallen world. There's more to be factored into any impossible situation! Whenever we view a problem as being impossible, we're actually falling into a subtle trap, the trap of focusing on externals. Paul told the Corinthian believers, "*You are looking at things as they are outwardly.*" (2 Cor. 10:7a). We do the same thing when we see only the impossible situation and not our God, Who is absolute Lord of every situation!

But let's get back to the text. The situation is grim. It looks bad for Peter, "**But!**" It seemed to be an impossible dead end, like there's no way out—BUT, BUT...BUT WHAT? The church was in prayer! Verse 5, "*So Peter was kept in prison BUT the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*"

Prayers were being uttered by the church for Peter and this situation! Before we go any farther let's pause and consider another very important truth. The Bible says that the church was united in praying for Peter. That's the way it's supposed to be, the members of a church should pray together!

When Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the Temple, do you remember what He said? "*My house shall be a house of prayer and you have made it a den of thieves.*" Jesus taught that one primary purpose for us to gather in this place, His house, is to pray together!

One thing you'll notice in the book of Acts is that it's impossible to imagine the members of the early church not gathering to pray with each other. Praying was one of the reasons they gathered together. Meeting together with other Christians in the days of the early church and not praying was unthinkable.

Congregational prayerlessness should be just as unthinkable for us today because when two or three, or two or three hundred pray together they experience an unbelievably powerful unity through which God can and will do amazing things. Prayer gets us on the same wavelength. It unites us as one. It gets us all plugged into God's power and His way of thinking. If you've ever prayed with a group of Christians on a regular basis, then you know what I mean. When Christians pray together they experience a unique bond through which God can and will do great things.

T. W. Hunt, the author of *Prayer Life* said, "*If we examine the expansion of the church in the Book of Acts and the Epistles, we see convincing proof of the power of prayer. The early church had innumerable obstacles. Christianity was unknown and it was opposed by the authorities wherever it spread, it suffered constantly from false accusations and rumors...but by the end of the first century, it had spread in exactly the geographic pattern commissioned by Jesus—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria,...and the uttermost parts of the earth. This rapid geographical and ideological shift could have been accomplished only by supernatural forces. The instrument of expansion was the church and the force the church was using was prayer.*"

From the earliest days, the church has always been at its best when its people have knelt together to pray. If we want to see the power in Grace Church that was in the early church, then we should pray as they prayed. We should look at prayer as they did, as an indispensable source of unbelievable power.

Acts 2 says the early disciples "*gave themselves continually to prayer.*" We must give ourselves to it as well, in our small groups, in Sunday Morning Live classes or small

groups or any time we gather together. If we're going to be a *powerful* church, we must be a *prayerful* church.

So on the one side of this situation was mighty Rome and wicked Herod. "**BUT**" on the other side of the ledger was the church, the people of God praying for Peter.

Some may say, "Well, there is a lack of realism to think that a little band of people praying could change the force of the Roman government and change the destiny of nations and break open prison doors..." And it's hard to believe that prayer can be that powerful, but it can and is! Prayer is the most powerful force in this world. As someone has wisely said, "*Prayer is the force that moves the hand that moves the world.*" This all leads us to the **first truth, the first fact** I want us to take from this study.

1. Prayer really does changes things. In life when it looks like everything is against us, when it appears we can't possibly win, when it looks like it's the end and we're about to be overwhelmed; it's then that we need to remember that prayer really does change things because prayer releases God's power. 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. It may come in the form of confidence or perseverance, a changed attitude toward a spouse or a child or a parent, a changed circumstance, or maybe even outright miracles. But, however it comes; God's prevailing power is released in the lives of people who pray. Prayer really changes things.

That's certainly the case in Peter's situation. God sent an angel to free him. This angel led the sleepy-eyed apostle through the vast fortress and past guards. Doors opened all by themselves. It was so amazing Peter thought it was all a dream and didn't wake up or come to his senses until he was a couple of blocks away from the fortress. Maybe the exposure to the cool night air woke him up or maybe he stubbed his toe on a rock, but when he "woke up" and realized what had happened, he hurried to John Mark's house.

What happened next is nearly comical. He knocked and a servant girl named Rhoda answered. She recognized Peter's voice but got so excited she left him standing there exposed to re-capture and ran upstairs to tell everyone. When she entered the room she said something like, "Peter's here! He's out of prison!" and they replied, "That's impossible! Don't interrupt us again! Can't you see we're praying? Now, let's see where were we?" "Oh yes, 'God, we know You're able to free our leader Peter. Do so Lord.'" But Rhoda insisted, "Listen, it's Peter. I'd know his voice anywhere." They still refused to believe and said, "Come on Rhoda, get real. It must be his ghost!" Rhoda said, "But it is Peter! Oh my goodness! I left him standing outside!" So she rushes back to the door to let Peter in.

This shows God answers our prayers even when we don't fully believe He can. That's in line with Scripture. Jesus said that we don't need a great deal of faith when we pray. Remember in Matthew 17? Jesus said that if you only have, "*faith as small as a mustard seed nothing will be impossible.*" The fact is that our prayers, even if our faith, is so weak that all it enables us to do is ask. Our prayers really change things. God acts in us and through us in response to our prayers. God wants us to cooperate with Him and often He'll not act through us without our asking.

Why...why would our almighty God act in this way? Why would He wait on our prayers? Because He created us for fellowship with Him. We were made to partner with Him. This

is what Jesus meant when He told Peter in Matthew 16:19, *“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

Our prayers make a difference; God acts in response to them! Prayer changes things! One of the best biblical pictures of this amazing truth is found in Revelation 8 where John describes a scene in heaven after the seals have been broken on the scrolls, scrolls that tell the story of human sin and violence and God’s judgment. At this point in the narrative a remarkable thing happens. John writes that *“there was a silence in heaven for about half an hour.”* During this time an angel with a golden censer comes to the altar and offers a golden pan of incense, which is a representation of prayers arising from earth. Revelation 8:4 says, *“and the smoke of the incense, with the **prayers** of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.”* Next in Revelation come great acts of judgment on the earth, pictured by rumbles of thunder, flashes of lightening, and great earthquakes. What is most striking is that these powerful actions come in response to the prayers of the saints.

Usually, we think of events on earth being interrupted because of actions taken in heaven but here in Revelation it’s the other way around. All of heaven comes to a standstill. The endless songs of praises of heavenly hosts are suddenly silenced. *Why?* Someone is praying. All of heaven stops to hear the prayers of the saints, your prayers and mine, every one of them rise before God. They’re heard. They matter. Prayers uttered by real people, like you and me, even prayers of desperation, interrupt heaven and what happens next on earth happens because people pray because prayer really changes things. Walter Wink puts it this way, *“History belongs to the intercessors; those who believe and pray the future into being.”*

When Thomas Merton was a young man, pursuing great success in a career in literature, he spent an extended amount of time living with a religious community of men who devoted much of their days to prayer. He wrote that when he left the community after several months, at first he was struck by the haste and anxiety of “normal” life. He says, *“My heart sank within me. I thought: ‘What am I getting into? Is this the sort of thing I myself have been living in all these years?’”* The thought occurred to him that in some real way those few men devoted to prayer, “are doing for their land what no army, no congress, no president could ever do as such: they are winning for it the grace and the protection and the friendship of God.” Merton was correct. Prayer changes things because God acts in response to our requests.

We may never know how many people were strengthened because we asked God to encourage them, or how many people have received healing or how many spiritual runaways have come home. We will never know the difference our prayers made until we get to heaven but we do know this. Walter Wink is right. History does belong to the intercessors. That’s a fact! Then, the second fact I want us to take from this study is that...

2. Prayer really changes people. This is a comforting truth because if people don’t change what good would it do to change things? Well, prayer does change people. Acts 12:24, *“But the word of God increased and multiplied”* and in the following verses and you’ll see a great example of this in the lives of these early believers. Remember that before this answer to prayer they were huddled in a room fearing for their lives. After this though they were so bold in their witness that the Word of God spread.

They changed because of the power of prayer. The answer to their prayers, the miracle of Peter's release, became a watershed, forcing the unbelievers toward greater despair and the believers toward greater faith.

Here are some more Biblical examples of this principle. Prayer made shy Moses into a leader. It softened the cruel heart of Pharaoh. It kept discouraged Elijah from quitting. It turned the fanatical persecutor Saul into a globe-trotting apostle. And it changed Peter. Remember? While imprisoned, Peter was so full of faith and peace that he could sleep deeply, even though he thought he'd be killed the next day. A few years earlier, he'd been a different man. He'd lied to avoid imprisonment. He'd fled because of his fear, but not anymore. After this experience he was even more fearless because he headed to Rome, the very seat of Roman power to boldly share Jesus' love. All this because prayer changes people!

Prayer in which we open our hearts to God and listen for His response makes us more like Him. As someone has said prayer enables us to *"think His thoughts after Him."* Plus, prayer opens our eyes to our sin and shows us how we need to change to be more conformed to His image.

During the Great Awakening, when the Spirit of God revived much of our nation's early faith, Jonathan Edwards was presiding over a massive prayer meeting. Eight hundred men prayed with him. Into that meeting a woman sent a message asking the men to pray for her husband. The note described a man who'd become unloving, prideful, and difficult. Edwards read the message in private and then, thinking that perhaps that the man described was present, made a bold request. Edwards read the note to the 800 men. Then he asked if the man who'd been described would raise his hand, so that the whole assembly could pray for him. And when he asked this, three hundred men raised their hands. Prayer changes people!

Richard Foster writes, *"To pray is to change. This is a great grace. How good of God to provide a path whereby our lives can be taken over by love and joy and peace...and patience and kindness and goodness and self control."* Yet the greatest example of this prayer truth is seen in conversion, in becoming a Christian, which only happens in response to prayer. As the great prayer warrior, E. M. Bounds, said, *"Salvation never finds its way to a prayerless heart. The Holy Spirit never abides in a prayerless spirit."*

If you're here today and you're not a Christian, then I urge you to let the power of prayer change you...right here...right now. The Bible says that *"When any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away. Behold all things have become new."* Will you let God make you new today? He will. All you have to do is pray!

Maybe you're worshiping here today and are facing some horrible thing in your life. Some things that seem hopeless. If that's true, I encourage you to pray right now, talk to God about it. I promise you that He wants nothing more than to answer your prayer, to show you that things aren't always as they seem. Remember you can pray about anything. Philippians 4:6 says, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God and the peace of God will be yours."* Wouldn't you like to know that peace today? Pray right now. We don't need to be timid in our praying. Heb. 4:16 says, *"Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

Conclusion: The early church prayed together and God really changed things. He wants to do the same for us. Next week our co-chairs, Robert Leafblad and Susan Riddle are going to be leading us on a journey of prayer. I hope you'll join us.

Why should our church pray together? There are many benefits of our church praying together, but let me share *three* significant ones with you.

1. Praying together invites the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. There's a different atmosphere in churches that pray together and who have praying people. Worship seems more powerful. There is a sense of connection with God that is not there in non-praying churches. He will do that as we pray together as a congregation.

2. Praying together increases the faith of a congregation to trust God more. In Matthew 17 and Mark 9 there's the account of the father who brought his demon-possessed son to the disciples. They couldn't cast it out. The boy was taken to Jesus, who spoke a word and the demon left. Later the disciples come to Jesus and they were baffled. Why? Jesus said two things: "*because you have so little faith*" (Mt. 17:20), and "*this kind can come out only by prayer*" (Mk. 9:29). The most significant thing that is lost in a church that does not have corporate prayer is faith. The main reason most churches are stagnant and don't see God at work in wondrous ways in their midst is that they don't pray. Most churches and individuals don't know what it is to pray in faith anymore. Faith grows as we pray together.

3. Praying together moves people from seeking their purposes to desiring God's purposes. Most people's prayers seek the best fix for a situation. We typically pray whatever we're told to pray for a situation, with no real thought of "*What does God want to do here?*" Something happens to that dynamic, however, when people pray together. They start to let go of their desires to see their purposes fulfilled and start to open themselves up to what God wants. The value of this to a church is huge when it comes to ministry and decision making.

If people pray together over an issue, even if people come to prayer thinking they know what the church should do, praying together opens them up to God's desire. People who are disgruntled with decisions a church has made usually haven't prayed with the church body over that issue.

As we pray together, we'll see our faith and unity grow. Jeremiah 29:11-13 is a powerful promise written to a corporate body of people. "*For I know the plans I have for you,*' declares the LORD, *'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.'*" The "*all*" there is numeric—God is saying if all of you would seek me, you'll find the plans I have for you.

If we want to see God's blessing in our church, if we want to see Jesus' transforming power, the dynamic ministry of the Holy Spirit in our midst, then we must pray together. **Heaven hears the church that prays together.**

Will you join us? Will you pray with us as we seek God's will and leading in our ***Building Changed Lives Together*** campaign?