

A Foretaste of Heaven

Waiting on the Lord Together

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Imagine the church's first gathering in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension. He had instructed them to wait for the Holy Spirit, and now they were coming together—waiting.

Peter was excited. He knew exactly what to do in the meantime. He ordered a demographic study of those Jerusalem neighborhoods targeted for growth and received a report from the city's planning office about the location of new construction permits.

Nathaniel commissioned a survey of residents, zeroing in on their personal preferences.

Bartholomew was thrilled with the new logo and eye-catching graphics he purchased (at a nonprofit discount) for the church's upcoming communication blitz. Everything was falling into place nicely for the fledgling church to thrive and change the world.

Or was it?

Something isn't quite right with this picture. Not that there's anything wrong with the methods mentioned, as far as they go. It's just that it didn't happen that way. Jesus *had* told His followers to gather in Jerusalem, but they did only one thing while they were waiting: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14).

Why did the leadership of the early Church place such a high priority on meeting together to pray? Was it only because the Holy Spirit hadn't yet been given and once the Spirit came their time would be filled with other more necessary things?

Not according to Luke. He says that after the Spirit was given, "They *devoted* themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42, emphasis added). Luke isn't referring to individual, private prayer. He makes it clear that "all the believers were together" (v. 44).

Praying together was not only one of the first "acts of the apostles" while they waited for the Spirit; it was something they "devoted themselves to" *after* the Spirit had come to empower them for the work they were to do. But why did united prayer matter *so much* that they would *devote* themselves to it?

The Promise and the Presence

Jesus told the disciples, "By myself I can do nothing" (John 5:30). In the same verse He made it clear that His purpose in everything He did was to please the Father who had sent Him. He also said, "Apart from me *you* can do nothing (John 15:5, italics added). So the disciples were to be dependent on Him in the same way He was dependent on the Father. Then, after His resurrection, He commissioned them, saying, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

The earliest Christians understood that they had to be dependent on Jesus every moment if they were going to accomplish the work He had given them. The church would not survive if they didn't. They also understood (from their experience at Pentecost) that God had blessed them deeply when they waited together before Him. Praying together kept them connected to Jesus' presence and power unlike anything else. Jesus assured them (and us), "If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:19–20).

The first Christians remembered that promise from Jesus when they came together to seek His purposes above their own (the meaning of praying in Jesus' name). He would make His presence known in a unique, vital way. Jesus not only promised to be *with* them because He had ascended to the Father's "right hand" (Matt. 26:64), He also assured them their prayers would be answered. As they joined together before the throne of grace, our heavenly Father poured out His power in world-shaking ways.

Martha, Mary, and the One Thing Needed

One of the deepest needs of the American Church today is to rediscover a passion for praying together, seeking the blessings that God so deeply desires to give us in response. Recent research by the Barna Group indicates that “only one out of every five self-identified Christians (21%) believes that spiritual maturity requires a vital connection to a community of faith.”¹

Such individualism would have been unthinkable to the first followers of Jesus. Being actively involved *together* was inseparable from what they believed it meant to be a Christian. In contrast, our understanding of what it means to pray today is heavily weighted toward the personal and private. Churches may be brimming with excellent activities, but it is rare for prayer gatherings to draw similar numbers.

We’re doing good things but missing something better. Our lives as Christians today are marked more by the busy *individualism* of Martha, running from one activity to another, than the *devotion* of Mary who is actually *more* engaged with Jesus by sitting—with others—at His feet. That quiet moment at His feet is the “one thing” Jesus indicates “is needed” (Luke 10:42).

Praying together is spiritual teamwork—the whole, more than the sum of the parts. If, individually, the prayer of a righteous person is “powerful and effective” (James 5:16), the prayers of God’s children, humbly gathered *together* before the throne of grace, have a worth and beauty so precious to God that it surely evokes a special response.

Jonathan Edwards, the brilliant colonial-era pastor and theologian who encouraged fervent united prayer, wrote that God intends united prayer to be “one of the most beautiful and happy things on earth, which indeed makes earth most like heaven.”²

When we humbly seek to love Him and love one another before His gracefilled throne, it’s a foretaste of heaven. As a father, I love spending time, one on one, with my children. But when they are all home and we’re gathered together for a moment as a family, I treasure those times uniquely. The New Testament often uses the concept of family to describe our relationship with God and with each other (Gal. 6:10, Eph. 3:15, 1 Peter 4:17). Our unity matters so much to Jesus that He prayed for it passionately the night before His crucifixion (John 17:22– 23). Because our heavenly Father loves each of His sons and daughters uniquely and deeply desires our unity, our “family times” in prayer together have a precious place in His heart. Each of us has something to contribute, not on the basis of our merits or the words we use, but simply because we are *His* and we are loved.

Giving God the Glory He Deserves

God wants us to treasure our times together in prayer because they bring glory to Him in ways few other things can. It is when we come to the end of our own ability to make things happen that we find ourselves in the place of waiting expectantly for what only God can do. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a gifted preacher, credited united prayer for the explosive growth of his 19th century London church. He encouraged his members never to give up in their efforts to pray together: “May our prayer meetings be sustained in fervor, and increased in number! Praying is, after all, the chief matter. Praying is the end of preaching. Preaching has its right use, and must never be neglected, but real heart devotion is worth more than anything else. Prayer is the power which brings God’s blessing down upon all our work.”³

When Christians lean heavily on God in prayers together and then definitive answers come, He alone gets the credit—and we’re encouraged and inspired to pray all the more. God proclaims in His Word, “I will not give my glory to another” (Isa. 42:8). When progress in the church depends solely on Him and not the giftedness of the pastor, the cleverness of the people, or the excellence of programs, God is pleased. Good things follow.

As a church planter in a challenging city (Durham, NC), I was reminded of this recently in a poignant way. One afternoon I attended a denominational conference at a larger church a few hours down the highway from our own. The church has grown to more than 1,500 members in just ten years. (That pastor also has a heart for united prayer.)

As I looked around the impressive facility, I found myself wishing *our* church had such a wonderful building. Our people had been faithfully praying together for several months for His provision for our building efforts, but God had not answered. I wondered what mistakes I had made. I left the meeting feeling ineffective and discouraged. And on my way home in the car I tearfully prayed Esau’s plea: “Bless me too, my father!” (Gen.

27:38). When I pulled into the driveway at home, I checked the mailbox. In it was a letter from a friend I had not seen since I graduated from seminary more than 20 years earlier. The letter enclosed a check for \$5,000 toward our church's first building, and a factory-sealed card with a verse inside it. I tore open the tab on the card to read: "As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given" (Dan. 10:12). I didn't deserve the answer, but God kindly gave it. This was the first of many encouraging answers soon to follow.

What blessings await as we come before our heavenly Father in humble, united prayer? In what ways does He long to pour out His power afresh? What answers are ready to be released, just for the asking? How will our Father's work progress in ways we could never accomplish in our own strength—if we humble ourselves and pray? Only God knows. But may it never be said of us that we "do not have" because we "do not ask" (James 4:2). This much we *do* know: He alone is our greatest blessing. And if we seek His face *together*, we'll see His hand move as well.

1*Self-Described Christians Dominate America but Wrestle with Four Aspects of Spiritual Depth*, Barna Group, September 13, 2011, www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/524-selfdescribed-christians-dominate-america-butwrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth.

2Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *An Humble Attempt To Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People In Extraordinary Prayer For The Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom On Earth*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 295.

3Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984) 30–31.

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