

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Acts chapter 4. It's a privilege to speak to our whole church this weekend. The holidays are far behind us now, but at our house one of the lingering reminders of Christmastime is the stack of Christmas cards we received. We keep them by our kitchen table throughout the year as a reminder to pray for our friends and family. We love those cards, and yet, they can be a bit deceptive. Because Christmas cards usually depict people at their best. Everyone is smiling, hugging, and dressed up nicely. But we all know that's not the whole picture.

For example, if you saw the picture we sent around this year, you'd see a nice, happy family. But you can't see how cold we all were standing out in the 30-degree weather. You can't hear Kristen and I asking the kids to hang in there for one more photo. And you certainly don't get a complete picture of what life is like in the Wetherell house. A Christmas card contains an ideal picture. And in the book of Acts, we get a few ideal pictures of the early church. If these passages were all we had, we might be tempted to think their church was perfect. But of course, that's not true, and we get plenty of less-than-ideal pictures of the church in the book of Acts as well.

Still, the ideal pictures are helpful, because they show us a vision of what the church can be at its best, giving us something to strive for within our own church family. For example, listen to Acts 2:42. It says this regarding the early church: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers* (Acts 2:42).

This is a church at its best! Devoted to the apostles' teaching—the proclamation of the gospel grounded in the Scriptures. Devoted to fellowship with one another in worship and community. Devoted to the breaking of bread, receiving the Lord's supper. And devoted to the prayers, which may refer to their personal prayers, but certainly refers to their times of corporate prayer as well. I look at this ideal picture of the early church, I compare it with our church, and I feel a profound sense of gratitude. By God's grace, The Orchard is a church devoted to the Word and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. But we can always grow in our devotion. And in this message, I want to speak about our devotion to corporate prayer.

In recent months, our Board, our campus pastors, and I have felt a growing desire to strengthen our prayer services across The Orchard. And today, I want us to see a biblical model of the way a church can pray together, and the kind of blessings God bestows in response to his people's prayers, so that we might pray in the same way seeking the same blessings for our church today. So, let's turn our attention to Acts 4, and the first thing I want you to notice is...

1. The way the church prays

In Acts 4, we get an excellent example of corporate prayer. We see the church praying with voices lifted up, Bibles opened up, and requests offered up. This is the way to pray. First, with...

A. Voices lifted up

Look with me at Acts 4:23. It says, *When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them* (Acts 4:23).

We need a little context to understand what's happening here. To make a long story short, Peter and John were in the temple where they healed a crippled beggar and then proclaimed the gospel to many astonished witnesses. They declared the good news, that Jesus's power goes far beyond the ability to heal someone physically, that Jesus can heal a person spiritually. That he shed his blood upon the cross to blot out our sins, that he rose again that we might live forever with him, and that he will save everyone who puts their faith in him.

Friends, that was the good news for people in the 1st century, and that's the good news for us today. But this preaching infuriated the temple priests and Sadducees who arrested the apostles, interrogated them and threatened them, warning them to stop talking about Jesus before finally releasing them. Now, Peter and John have returned to their friends, their church, and told them the story. And what does this family of believers do in response to this threat? They pray!

Look at verse 24: *And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them..."* (Acts 4:24).

Notice how their prayer begins. They address their God, acknowledging him as their Sovereign Lord and the Creator of all things. Clearly, they believe that he is listening to them, that he is there among them, and so they speak to him. Now, this might sound like the most obvious thing you've ever heard in a sermon. Of course, they lift their voices to God as they begin to pray! Who else would they be talking to? But if we're honest, we all know that it's possible to "pray" without really speaking to God. Sometimes our prayers are so routine that we don't even think about the words as they come out of our mouths. In these cases, we're offering a mere recitation, not real communication to our Heavenly Father.

Or we might be thinking very carefully about our words, but not because we're concerned about how our words sound to God, but because we're concerned about how they sound to the people around us. In these cases, our prayer becomes little more than a self-serving performance. Surely, we want to fight against this, in our personal prayers, and in our corporate prayers. We never want to lose sight of the awesome reality that when we come together to pray, God is in the room. We want to pray with voices lifted up! Speaking to him! And we want to pray with...

B. Bibles opened up

Look at verses 24-26, the church prays, *Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed"—* (Acts:24-26).

They are quoting Psalm 2, speaking God's words back to God in prayer, because in recent days, they have seen this Psalm fulfilled in Jesus. Look at verses 27-28: *for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place* (Acts 4:27-28).

Psalm 2 said the nations would rage against the Lord and his anointed. They have seen this happen to Jesus. *And* now it's happening to them as well. Remember, Peter and John were just arrested and threatened by powerful people. The whole church is in real danger. But they are allowing God's Word to speak into their present circumstances. They see in this Scripture a reminder that as long as they stand with God's anointed—Jesus Christ—there will be people who stand against them. And therefore, as we'll see in a moment, their prayer is not, "Lord, make all the resistance stop!" Because God hasn't promised that. Their prayer is, "Lord, help us endure."

They are allowing the Word of God to speak into their present circumstances *and* to guide their prayers. And that's the way to pray! When we come together, we want to speak to God in response to what he has spoken to us. As one writer says, "Prayer is answering speech. The first word is God's word." So, faithful times of corporate prayer involve voices lifted up, Bibles opened up, and then...

C. Requests offered up

Look at verses 29-30: *And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus*" (Acts 4:29-30).

What does this church want God to do? They want him to *look* at what's happening. Because, as one author writes, "When the God of the Bible looks upon a human situation, he acts." And how does this church want God to act? They want him to give them power so that they will keep speaking the word with boldness. And they want him to manifest his power in the world so that more people might turn to Christ. Those are beautiful, biblical requests.

Church, when we gather for times of corporate prayer, we want to lift our requests up to God. And there are many beautiful, biblical things we can ask for.

- We can ask for strength to continue speaking his word with boldness.
- We can ask for God to manifest his power, leading more people to faith in Jesus, in our families, in our cities, in our country, and across the globe.
- We can ask for forgiveness, healing, provision, and peace.
- We can cast all our desires and all our anxieties upon him, because he cares for us.

After all, he is our Father and we are his children. This is the privilege of prayer! We can bring our requests to God, and he will respond. Watch his response here in Acts 4, and...

2. The blessing the church receives

They asked for power, and God gives them...

A. Power

Look at verse 31: *And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31).*

God shows his power by physically shaking the place they are in. And God shares his power by filling these believers with the Holy Spirit who emboldens them to keep speaking the word and remain faithful to Christ. Here is something very important for us to know: Every Christian receives the power and presence of the Holy Spirit from the moment he or she believes. And he never leaves us, he is our constant companion, and our greatest help in this life. But we also see throughout the Bible that there are certain times when the Spirit fills believers with courage and conviction, which is what is happening here, in direct answer to their prayer. And church, we know that we could use courage and conviction. As the world around us seems to grow more apathetic, and even antagonistic toward our faith, we need power to stay with the Lord and to speak boldly about the Lord. And God will give us this strength, as we pray.

I recently came across a story of three churches, located in New England in the 18th century. And these three churches committed to a rhythm of corporate prayer. They had regular times of prayer personally, in small groups, and among their own congregations. But in addition, a few times a year, all three churches came together for a larger prayer gathering, seeking the Lord's power, protection, and blessing. They did this faithfully and consistently for an entire century. And during those 100 years, they experienced at least two wonderful things:

First, they saw many people converted and coming to faith in Christ.

Second, though many churches in New England were being swept away into theological error, losing their confidence in the gospel, these three churches remained faithful and continued to speak the word with boldness.

But then, for some reason, after 100 years of prayer, the churches stopped. It was around the time of the Civil War. Perhaps other matters simply felt too pressing. But they should have persevered, because within just 5 years of ceasing their prayers, all three of these churches had capitulated to the spirit of the day and abandoned the truth of the gospel. So, Ben Patterson—who told this story in an article—writes, “In times of intense spiritual conflict, simple, unified corporate prayer can literally be the difference between [a church's] life and death.”

Brothers and sisters, there is no question we are living in times of intense spiritual conflict. And so, we must pray for power! For perseverance! And the Lord will answer that prayer, as he did in Acts 4, where he also blesses this praying church with...

B. Unity

Look down at Acts 4:32, which comes right on the heels of our passage today. It says, *Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul* (Acts 4:32).

In this world full of division, we want to be a united church! United in truth, but more than that, united in heart and soul! So, how can we foster unity? There are many answers to that question, but surely one answer is corporate prayer. Remember, back in verse 24 we read how this church... *lifted their voices together to God* (Acts 4:24). Charles Spurgeon writes, "Prayer is a grand cement; and lack of prayer is like withdrawing the force of gravity from a mass of matter, and scattering it into so many separate atoms."¹ In other words, prayer binds the church together, and if we stop praying, we'll be sent flying in all different directions.

Valentine's Day is coming up and maybe you've heard it said that couples that pray together stay together. Amen! Well, churches that pray together stay together too. These are some of the blessings of corporate prayer: power, unity, and third...

C. Fruitfulness

The early church was not perfect, but it was fruitful. Throughout the book of Acts, we read verses like Acts 2:47 again and again. It says, *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved* (Acts 2:47).

Don't we long for that here at The Orchard? Don't we desire to see our friends, our family, our neighbors, and coworkers coming to faith in Christ? Don't we want to see more people find forgiveness through his shed blood? Hope through his resurrection? Comfort through his Holy Spirit? And fellowship among his people? Can't you picture the faces of people you love who have yet to believe? Don't you yearn to see them saved? Well, how does it happen?

We can plant and we can water, but only God can give the growth. So, let's ask him! This church in Acts was devoted to prayer, and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. Let's ask him to do the same thing among us. Let's ask God to use our church, when we are gathered like this for corporate worship, and when we scatter throughout the week, to lead others to Christ. And let's ask him to continue his work among us, growing our faith, our hope, and our love that we might live in a way that honors Christ. Let's ask him to make us fruitful.

Here's Spurgeon one more time, speaking to his church words that can surely apply to us. He says, "As a church, we have been specially favored; but we have not exhausted the possibilities of prosperity, or the resources of heavenly power. There is a future for us, if we pray. Greater things than these lie behind the curtain; [yet] no hand can unveil them but the hand of prayer."² In times of corporate prayer, the church comes together with voices lifted up, Bibles opened up, and requests offered up. And God responds with the blessings

¹ *Only a Prayer Meeting*, 147-148.

² *Only a Prayer Meeting*, 155.

of power, and unity, and fruitfulness. This is why our Board and our campus pastors and I long to see The Orchard increasing in our devotion to this kind of praying. So, let me offer three applications today regarding our prayer services. First...

3. Three Applications

A. Come

This year, we're going to begin a new pattern of prayer services here at The Orchard. Like the New England congregations I mentioned earlier, we are going to continue regular prayer services at each of our campuses, but we are also going to gather for prayer as a whole church a few times a year. Our first gathering like this actually happened last year, when we came together to pray in Glenview for our North Shore congregation, asking God to bless them with a permanent home. We believe God is working to answer that prayer, so keep praying!

But our next all-church prayer service will take place on March 1, in Arlington Heights. Then, our plan is to gather for prayer again in the summer and the fall at two other campuses. And I want to encourage you to make these times of corporate prayer a priority. Whether it's a prayer service at your campus or with our whole church, I want to encourage you to come. Maybe you're a regular at prayer services, maybe you've never been before, or maybe you stopped going because you felt they weren't for you. Come in March.

We are going to work hard to plan a worshipful, meaningful, joyful hour of singing, reflecting on the Word, and of course, praying. We're going to seek God's blessing, asking him to fill us with power, to strengthen our unity, and to make us fruitful. We're going to pray for our church, for our world, and for the glory of his name. I hope you'll be there. And when you come, be ready to...

B. Engage

Again, these prayer services will be a time for us to lift our voices together in singing and praying, responding to what God has spoken to us in his word. And I know that some of you are hearing this right now, and you're sold. You're there. And you're ready to pray in any way you are asked. But I also know that for others, times of corporate prayer can be difficult. For example, if you ever feel self-conscious when you pray in front of others, or even scared, you're not alone.

When I was serving as pastor of our Itasca Campus, I had many conversations about our prayer service with members of the congregation. I asked those who didn't come regularly, to share honestly about what kept them away. Do you know what the most common answer was? Again and again, people told me, "I don't like public speaking." That was so helpful to me! Sure, we want to grow increasingly comfortable praying together as believers, but I understand how that might be intimidating, especially praying in front of the whole congregation.

So, here's our promise to you: when we gather for these prayer services, you will not be asked to pray in front of the gathering, unless you have agreed to do so in advance. But you will still be asked to engage. The songs we sing are corporate prayers set to music. We may pray the Lord's prayer all together. And yet, even when only one person is praying out loud, we will not sit by passively, we will pray with them in our hearts. This is one of the gifts of corporate prayer.

As Kent Hughes says, "True engagement in corporate prayer affords our souls the benefit of riding the prayers of others to places we might not otherwise go, and of expressing thoughts beyond our normal capacities."³ And when we find our hearts resonating with the words someone else prays, we will give our "Amen!" The word "Amen" simply means, "Yes, Lord! I agree! That's what I want too!" So, come. Engage.

And here's the very last thing:

C. Watch

One of my favorite verses on prayer is Colossians 4:2. It says, *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving* (Colossians 4:2).

As we devote ourselves to prayer, with voices lifted up, Bibles opened up, and requests offered up, God will respond. He will grant us power, unity, and fruitfulness. And we should watch for it, taking note of his answers, and giving him thanks. Let's join our hearts in prayer to him now.

³ *Worship by the Book*, 163.