

## ***Corporate Prayer***

*Joel 1:14, Acts 2*

As you know, Faith is participating with other churches and ministries across Manhattan in an effort we're calling the MHK Prayer Movement. For the past four weeks participating churches have been teaching about prayer. And today each church is holding its own prayer event. We will gather back here at Faith at 4:00 for a time of prayer. We'll be using 2 Chronicles 7:14 as a grid for our praying. We discussed this text last week:

14 and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

We will have a time of repentance (confessing our sin - either silently or out loud); we will take time to seek God's face; we will pray for the body of Christ here in Manhattan, for our mission, for this nation, and for the world. We'll employ music and Scripture in this process.

Some of you can't wait to show up and seek God together with others. But others of you are thinking, "Why would I ruin a perfectly good Sunday afternoon by showing up at 4:00 for a prayer meeting?!?! That sounds awkward and uncomfortable. . ." This past week I emailed ten people, asking them about their experience with corporate prayer (praying with other people). Here are some of their responses:

- ◆ I learn from others by listening to their prayers; I learn how to pray better, I hear the fervency and belief of the other person which then bolsters my own faith.
- ◆ I believe that corporate prayer is profitable – it draws to you closer to other believers – you're on the same team working toward something. I will only pray out loud in very small groups, though. I feel very intimidated because most people pray more eloquently than I do.
- ◆ Generally I do find it encouraging to pray with other believers - there are times when I don't want to pray with others but afterwards I usually walk away encouraged by the time I spent doing that. I guess its because I hear what is on others hearts and that is good.
- ◆ At times I have found it less profitable when praying with others I do not know well. It is more difficult for me to be open and honest in those situations. I am probably more honest in my prayers when by myself with God.
- ◆ With a few people that I'm close to and trust, there have been times where it's been incredibly enriching and powerful, but that experience has been few and far between. Mostly, my general experience is that it's awkward, superficial, and forced.
- ◆ Corporate prayer is very grounding like an anchor that keeps me connected to the act of prayer with less internal distraction. The oneness blesses me with a sense of family, it is a foretaste of heaven.
- ◆ It's always awkward when you pray with someone for the first time because there's this sub-conscience guessing game on how spiritual they are. However, once you

break through that, you start to see how the Holy Spirit connects us on such a deep level.

- ◆ There are definitely times when corporate prayer is...weird. Many times this is probably more a reflection of my own heart, my own inability to settle down and focus on the task at hand, my own wandering mind.

As you can see, our experience with corporate prayer varies greatly. Today I want us to consider several passages that illustrate that praying together with other believers is a pattern throughout Scripture.

My goal this morning isn't necessarily to convince every single one of you to come this afternoon. I really want to lay a foundation for corporate prayer upon which we can build for years to come. Long-term we need the conviction that praying with other believers is good and profitable, that it's worth the time and effort (even if it's awkward and uncomfortable at times). We need to get to the place where praying with others makes a lot more sense than not praying with others. Ultimately, I think it's important that believers from different churches in Manhattan get in the habit of praying together for our common witness and for our city. Praying together with other congregations will be a tangible expression of our unity in the body of Christ. Scripture and history confirm that God acts in response to such fervent, united prayer.

A couple of points before we consider several passages: **First**, I don't want to overstate the case for corporate prayer or minimize the importance of individual, private prayer. In Matthew 6 Jesus taught the importance of praying to God in secret, promising that "your Father who sees in secret" will reward you. But when He taught His disciples, "Pray, then, in this way:" He began "**Our** Father . . . Give **us** . . . forgive **us** our sins. . . deliver **us** from evil . . ." Of course we can pray the "Lord's prayer" privately and alone, but it is most natural to pray it in the company of other believers in Jesus.

**Second**, we can experience corporate prayer in numerous contexts: around the dinner table, in our life groups in homes, in weekly worship, and in prayer meetings such as we will experience this afternoon. It may be that you never LOVE praying in large crowds of people. But it will be important that you find some context in which you love praying with other believers.

Let's consider some examples from both the old and new covenant contexts.

### ***Corporate Prayer in the Old Covenant (Joel 1:14, Isaiah 56:7, Nehemiah 9:1-3)***

In the book of Joel we find a very specific application of the promise we studied last week. The people of Jerusalem/Judah were experiencing God's judgment because of their sin. Swarms of locusts were devastating the crops, causing famine. In Joel 1:14 the prophet calls the people to gather at the temple and cry out to the Lord for relief.

14 Consecrate a fast,  
Proclaim a solemn assembly;  
Gather the elders

And all the inhabitants of the land  
To the house of the Lord your God,  
And cry out to the Lord.

In this command we hear echoes of 2 Chronicles 7:14, don't we? Because God is on record that He will hear the prayers of those who come back to Him in true repentance, Joel commands the people of his day to do just that. They would humble themselves with fasting; both the leadership and the people would gather in a "solemn assembly" at the temple; and they would "cry out to the Lord." They would appeal to God to forgive their sin and heal their land. This is basically what we'll be doing this afternoon when we gather. There will be opportunity to pray silently, individually; there will be opportunity to pray out loud with others (if you choose).

Joel saw very clearly what we often miss: God cares about individual **and** corporate holiness. If you read Revelation 2 and 3 you will read letters to churches in various cities; they were disobedient as churches and needed to repent corporately as churches. We can't really quantify obedience and "grade" an individual or a church on whether or not we are "obedient enough." To ask "How obedient do we **have** to be?" misses the point. The point is that repentance is a gift that allows us (individually and corporately) to experience newfound freedom and fulness. Since God cares about our corporate holiness, it's appropriate to gather together and crying out to the Lord for forgiveness and healing.

Isaiah 56:7 is a verse that can give us a vision for corporate prayer. The context is important. In Isaiah 40-55 God promised in very extravagant terms to restore the people from exile. He would make a highway through the wilderness (see ch. 40 - valleys would be lifted up and mountains would be made low). He would provide a Servant who would bear the sins of the people (see ch. 53 - like a lamb led to slaughter. . . He was pierced through for our transgressions). He would invite people to come and receive this salvation purely by grace (see ch. 55 - if you're hungry and thirsty, come eat and drink without money and without cost).

This is obviously great news for Jewish people and for those who met the requirements of the Law. They would be able to come back to the Land and worship God in the restored temple. But what about everybody else? Was there a place for people considered outcasts (eunuchs and those from other nations)? Would they be excluded? To eunuchs (who couldn't have children) God would give them "an everlasting name" (not merely sons and daughters to carry on their name). Speaking of "foreigners" who serve the God of Israel, God says:

7 Even those I will bring to My holy mountain  
And make them joyful in My house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar;  
For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples."

He would 1) bring them to His "holy mountain" (i.e., Jerusalem), 2) make them joyful in His temple (their worship wouldn't be drudgery), 3) accept their burnt offerings and

sacrifices (their sins would be wiped out). I'm sure you noticed God's designation for the temple: "a house of prayer for all the peoples." I love John Oswalt's comment on this verse (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 461): "God had not chosen Israel and given them all that he did in order to shut out the world, but to bring in the world." People from every tribe, tongue, and nation were invited to come to the temple and pray.

This explains one reason why Jesus was so furious when He entered the temple and found that the "court of the Gentiles" was cluttered up with merchandising. It was fine and good for people to have their money "changed" into the right currency and to purchase animals for sacrifice. But that could happen elsewhere and without taking advantage of people. The court of the Gentiles needed to be a place where non-Jews could come and pray. In Jesus' day the temple failed miserably in its' God-given function as a "house of prayer for all the nations."

As you know, the temple was replaced, not with church buildings, but with the Church because "the Spirit God dwells in" us. This is true corporately (see 1 Corinthians 3:16) and individually (see 1 Corinthians 6:19). Wouldn't it be tragic if we did - in the body of Christ - what the Jews in the first century did. . . if there was so much clutter and noise and busyness that there was no space to gather for prayer.

### ***Corporate Prayer in the New Covenant (Acts 1:12-14, 2:42, 4:24-31, 12:5,12)***

Not surprisingly, the early church instinctively gathered for prayer. Let's consider several examples from the book of Acts. In Acts 1:12-14 we read of the original apostles:

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

Notice their unity: "These all ***with one mind***. . ." They weren't scattered and divided; they were united in their thinking. Notice their devotion: "These all with one mind ***were continually devoting themselves to prayer***. . ." Out of all the things they could be doing after Jesus had returned to the Father, they devoted themselves to prayer. They made it a priority to gather and pray together.

Granted, this was a unique time in the life of the church, but their unity of purpose and devotion to prayer is advocated elsewhere in the NT. In Colossians 4:2 Paul wrote, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving."

After the Spirit had come on the Day of Pentecost, we read in Acts 2:42:

42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Corporate prayer was one aspect of their common life. You don't get the impression that they considered this a chore or a dreary obligation. They experienced **life** as they gathered for teaching, fellowship, the common meal, and prayer.

Acts 4 records how Peter and John were arrested and interrogated for preaching about Jesus and the resurrection from the dead (v. 2). Eventually they were released, Peter and John reported to the others what had happened. In response they "lifted their voices to God with one accord" (v. 24) and gave Him praise. They asked God to take note of the threats leveled against them - not so that they could resume their comfortable lives, but so that they might continue "to speak God's word [the gospel] with confidence" accompanied by healings, signs and wonders in Jesus' name. Verse 31 records:

31 And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

They experienced the power of God as an answer to their prayer. Because they were "people of the Word" and "people of faith," they prayed that God would give them power to pursue the mission they'd been given - preaching Christ and making disciples. God gladly answered their prayers in power.

Let's consider one more example from Acts 12. Here we see once again the power of corporate prayer. James, the brother of John, had been "put to death by the sword" (v. 2). When Peter was arrested, the church was afraid that Peter too would be executed by Herod. Notice how the church responded:

5 So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

Verses 6 through 11 record how an angel of the Lord appeared and released Peter from his chains, leading him out of jail and into the city. At first Peter thought he was only seeing a vision. But when he realized he had actually been freed, notice what he did:

12 And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

He had a bit of a hard time convincing them to open the door and let him in. But once inside, he explained what happened. Surely they became convinced that God hears the prayers of His people when they cry out to Him in their desperation. You might resist the idea that you HAVE to gather with others to experience God's power in this way. Doesn't God answer the prayer of one person praying in secret? Yes. But we also see the pattern throughout Acts of God responding in power when His people gather together in unity and cry out to Him. They prayed because they were desperate for God to act and because they believed that the God of the universe acts in response to united prayer.

In his classic book *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (pp. 115-116) Andrew Murray writes this:

*Who can say what power a church could develop and exercise if it would assume the work of praying day and night for the coming Kingdom, for God's power, or for the salvation of lost souls? Most churches think their members gather simply to take care of and edify each other. They don't know that God rules the world by the prayers of his saints, that prayer is the power by which Satan is conquered, and that through prayer the Church on earth has access to the powers of the heavenly world. They do not remember that Jesus has, by His promise, made every assembly in His Name a gate to heaven, where His presence is to be felt, and His power experienced by the Father fulfilling their desires.*

If we imitate the early church, we will devote ourselves praying with each other. Like any other practice, this will require patience and perseverance; but we won't give up because we're helpless without the power of God that comes through concerted prayer with other believers. Over the past six months God has been giving me a greater hunger for corporate prayer. I still find it tedious and awkward sometimes. I've got my preferences about how corporate prayer should work. But I've had some sweet and some powerful times of prayer recently.

One such time was last weekend when the MHK Prayer Movement held 24-hours of prayer at MCC's chapel. I drove down to MCC at about 8:15 on Saturday night. I told Brenda, "I'll be home by 10:00 at the latest." I walked in and sat at a table with four other people I'd never met. We prayed for about 5 different topics, taking a short break in between each one. After a while I checked my phone and it was 10:15.

Two observations from that prayer time. . . First, I prayed more than I would have if I had stayed home. We gathered in that room for the sole purpose of praying for our city and our country and our world. We decided to pray, and we prayed. Lest you think, "Oh, Steve is so spiritual . . ." let me tell you that if I had been at home I probably would have prayed a little bit; but I mostly would have been watching a football game. I prayed more because there was an opportunity for corporate prayer.

Second, I prayed better because I prayed along with some amazing, insightful, fervent Christians. One young man from Africa prayed some of the most profound prayers that I've ever heard. That experience makes me long for such times of prayer. I want to seek out times of prayer instead of grudgingly going to a prayer meeting because I'm supposed to.

I would invite you to join me, our elders, others here at Faith, and other believers across this city and world in "devoting ourselves to corporate prayer." We shouldn't devote ourselves to corporate prayer because we are "supposed to" but because:

*. . . God rules the world by the prayers of his saints, . . . prayer is the power by which Satan is conquered, and . . . through prayer the Church on earth has access to the powers of the heavenly world.*