

## The Weekly Prayer Meeting

*Derek Thomas*

Should the weekly prayer meeting be part of my Christian life? ‘The advantages of a well conducted prayer-meeting,’ wrote John Angel James, ‘are great and numerous.’ But what might these advantages be?

I will suggest twelve reasons.

1. The church was conceived at a prayer meeting. What were the members of the church doing in those days prior to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost? Having been expressly told to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-8), the disciples, the Lord’s brothers and the women met together in an upper room and ‘continued with one accord in prayer and supplication...’ (Acts 1:14). The New Testament church was born as a result of a prayer meeting including the women. Two factors are worth highlighting. They prayed ‘with one accord’. Luke uses a word (*homothymadon*), a favourite word of Luke’s, which elsewhere means ‘united’ (4:24; 15:25). They also ‘continued’ in prayer. Luke uses a word (*proskartereō*) a word which means to be ‘busy’, or ‘persistent’. Paul echoed the idea by using the same word in two of his letters, exhorting the Romans to continue ‘steadfastly in prayer’ (Rom 12:12), and to the Colossians ‘to continue earnestly in prayer’ (Col 4:2).

2. The New Testament church continued as it had begun. Immediately after Pentecost the church is described as continuing ‘steadfastly...in prayers’ (Acts 2:42). Later, when the Sanhedrin arrested Peter and John and warned them not to preach any more in the name of Jesus it appears that the rest of the church were in a prayer meeting elsewhere in the city (possibly the same upper room as in Acts 1). After the two apostles were released, they went and joined with the rest of the church and ‘raised their voice to God with one accord’ (Acts 4:24). Before Peter and John resumed their preaching work again, they held a time of prayer (Acts 4:31). When Peter was eventually imprisoned for preaching the gospel, the church responded with yet another prayer meeting (Acts 12:5,12). Before the outset of the first missionary journey, the church set aside time for a prayer meeting (Acts 13:1). In appointing church elders and other workers prayer meetings were held (Acts 6:4-

6; 14:23). Paul and Silas continued the practice, holding a midnight prayer meeting in a prison in Philippi (Acts 16:25). And before saying farewell to the Ephesian elders on the shores of Miletus, Paul knelt down and prayed with them (Acts 20:36). When Paul was returning to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, the ship on which he sailed stopped at Tyre to load cargo. Paul spent the night in the company of the church there and before parting the next day, men, women and children held a prayer meeting on the beach next to the ship (Acts 21:5). And in a storm on another ship which ran aground, Paul organised yet another prayer meeting (Acts 27:29).

3. The prayer meeting is the power by which God’s kingdom advances. When Jesus saw the multitudes, ‘He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few” (Matt 9:36-37). And his request to the church? ‘Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest’ (Matt 9:38). The kingdom of God advances by prayer meetings in which the blessing of God is implored. Souls are won by prayer. The Church grows and prospers through the corporate praying of God’s children.

A wonderful illustration of this is provided for us in Exodus 17:8-13. God’s people were in battle with the Amalekites. The Israelites were greatly outnumbered. Moses told Joshua to choose men and go out to fight the enemy. But he also said that he would stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in his hand and pray with Aaron and Hur. As long as Moses held up his hands in prayer, the people of God prevailed in the battle below in the valley. But, when Moses’ arms grew heavier, and fell from their position of intercession, then God’s people began to lose in their battle. So someone found a large rock and put it under Moses as a seat, and Aaron and Hur supported his arms, one standing on either side of him. The three constituted a prayer meeting of intercession on behalf of their soldiers below. The prayer meeting was the deciding factor.

4. Our Lord Jesus felt the need for prayer meetings. It is surely an amazing fact that in the Garden of Gethsemane, when our Lord was facing the consequences of his Father’s will that he should die as the sinner’s substitute, that he should have expected the prayer support of his closest disciples (Matt 26:40). As the unfolding revelation of what lay before him became clearer, he felt the need for the prayers of sinners to uphold him! How much more do we need the support of one another in prayer meetings as we struggle against the principalities and powers that are set to destroy us. When the apostle Paul exhorted the Ephesian Christians to pray ‘with

all prayer and supplication in the Spirit...for all the saints' he surely intended that they should gather together for prayer (Eph 6:10-20).

5. Prayer meetings demonstrate our covenant relationship. Initially God's covenant was essentially individual. God said to Abraham: 'And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant' (Gen 17:7). But at Sinai, all the people redeemed from Egypt entered into covenant with the Lord. God's covenant at Sinai secured the nation of Israel, the people of God (Exod 19:5-6). That is why so many of the psalms are prayers expressed in the plural 'we'. David's troubles were the troubles of the people of God; his joys were the joys of the people of God (e.g. Psalms 44, 46, 60, 67, 68, 74, 75, 80, 85). These psalms tell us that we belong together; we are the body of Christ; we have similar needs and fears.

Corporately, at prayer meetings we express our needs and concerns to God. Thus, prayer meetings remind us that as Christians we belong to the same family. In a sermon on 2 Samuel, John Calvin reminded his Genevan congregation that every time we say the Lord's Prayer, repeating those words 'Our Father' we are reminded of our obligation to pray together. When we pray to him, although we do so individually, we say: 'Give us this day *our* daily bread, and forgive us *our* debts' (Matt 6:11-12). The request is not: 'Lord give *me* my daily bread'. We pray in unity with others. We are the family of God. Together, we are the body of Christ. We were meant to gather together and talk to our Maker in prayer meetings.

6. The 16<sup>th</sup> - century Reformation can be attributed to committed and disciplined prayer. Recent studies of the cause of the Reformation have highlighted major influential factors in medieval Europe. What happened in October 1517 was the result of preparatory factors in the lives of individuals and churches in the preceding centuries. Among them, the *Devotio Moderna*. This was a reform movement which grew out of the Brethren of the Common Life. This was initiated by Gerard Groote and spread all over northern and eastern Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. This movement was characterised by an effort to regain the type of Christianity seen in the early chapters of Acts. The movement emphasised fellowship (almost communal in nature) and prayer as a means to advance reform in the Church. This was one of several movements that focused on prayer for reform in the period before the Reformation. Our prayer meetings may, in God's providence, pave the way for reformation in the future; we may not see it ourselves but we may well have a vital part in bringing it about.

7. Prayer meetings have been God's way of bringing about revivals. One of the most encouraging examples is the prayer revival which began in New York City in 1857. Born in 1809 and converted in 1842 Jeremiah Calvin Lanphier became a city missionary. He advertised a midday prayer meeting in Fulton Street in downtown New York. At the first meeting he was the only one present for thirty minutes. Gradually six came. A week later twenty attended. After that the numbers escalated. It then became a daily prayer meeting. Subsequently this turned into a revival rather like the rising waters described by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 47). Within six months 10,000 businessmen were praying for revival. Within two years it is estimated that some two million people had been added to the Church.

This period turned out to be a widespread revival. An example is Ballymena in Northern Ireland where a certain Mrs Colville had been used by God in the conversion of a young man called James McQuilkin. He in turn led three of his friends to Christ. The four met together in an old schoolhouse during the winter of 1857 and 1858 in order to pray for revival. By the end of 1858 the numbers meeting had grown fifty. In 1859 it is estimated that some 100,000 were converted throughout Ireland.

In Isaiah we read, 'I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth' (Isa 62:6-7).

8. Prayer meetings have led to the fulfilment of missionary expansion as envisaged by the Great Commission.

The movement of God known as 'The Forgotten Revival' took place in the UK from about 1790 to about 1830. Jonathan Edwards treatise, 'A humble attempt to promote extraordinary prayer' took time to take hold in England. This small book expounding Zechariah 8:20-23 made its way via Scotland through John Erskine (1721-1803) to John Ryland Jr (1725-1825) who shared it with John Sutcliff (1752-1814). John Sutcliff took the message to heart and made a call to prayer to his denomination in 1784. This call was for prayer for one hour the first Monday of every month. In his call he said, 'The grand object of prayer is to be that the Holy Spirit may be poured down on our ministers and churches, that sinners may be converted, the saints edified, the interest of religion revived, and the name of God glorified.'

Prayer spread and after several years of faithfulness God sent a revival, not only to the Calvinistic Baptists, but to churches across England. Special prayer meetings were organised. This had an extraordinary outcome for the Calvinistic Baptists. From that time doctrinal reform took place and missionary effort (William Carey) was inspired. Calvinistic (Particular) Baptists tripled in number in the next fifty years while the Methodists experienced even greater growth from 72,000 in 1791 to 360,000 in 1850. In his call Sutcliff had a call that comes to us today, too: 'Surely we have love enough for Zion to set apart one hour at a time, twelve times in a year, to seek her welfare.'

9. Prayer meetings change history. We may think that in a world as complicated as ours, our prayer meetings are going to accomplish very little. This is the reasoning of unbelief. In 1 Chronicles, in an otherwise rather dull chapter full of lists of genealogies, is the mention of a man called Jabez whose faithful praying changed the course of his life. He asked for help: 'Oh, that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that your hand would be with me, and that you would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!' (1 Chron 4:9-10). His simple and direct praying changed the course of his life. The collective praying of God's people uttered at a prayer meeting can do likewise. In time of national strife, our prayer meetings ought to be full!

In the time of Queen Elizabeth I the Spanish were planning to invade and among other things, enforce Roman Catholicism on the newly reformed Protestant Church. As the Spanish admirals gathered hundreds of ships in preparation, God's praying people prepared another task force to meet them. In congregations all over England they fell to their knees in urgent prayer. The Armada set out in the spring of 1588, but never landed in England. After several skirmishes in the English Channel, terrific storms came up which scattered the Spanish fleet, driving many of the ships so far off course that they returned home by sailing around the north of Scotland!

10. Prayer meetings deal death blows to the enemy. In the time of good king Jehoshaphat, a large number of enemies had poured in against Judea (2 Chron 20). Although God's people were outnumbered, they were still trusting him and had decided to go out and fight for all they were worth. Jehoshaphat mobilised the army, but he also asked the people of Israel to fast and pray before they took action (2 Chron. 20:3).

Assembling the people for battle, he did an interesting thing, a very odd thing! He ordered the women and children to come out and stand in front of the army (made up of their husbands and fathers). Next, he had the priests and the temple choir come out and they led the congregation in praise. As they began to sing and to praise God, his power fell and the soldiers in the enemy army began to destroy one another. The plan of Satan had been to wipe out Israel and thus prevent the coming of a Messiah who could bring salvation. But he was foiled by the praises sung by tiny children! Satan's troops were routed by killing one another! When God's people came to the scene, all that was left were the heaps of dead bodies, laden with so much spoil that it took three whole days to carry it all away!

How could a thing like that happen? The key is given in Psalm 22:3 which says: 'But you are holy, who inhabit the praises of Israel.' In other words, when God's people pray and praise him there is a sense in which a special presence falls from heaven with power to expel evil. It is said that the Devil hates to hear singing and prayer. Perhaps he cannot sing a single note! It is certain that he never prays. Prayer meetings ensure his defeat.

11. Prayer meetings release blessings already in store. Why pray? Everyone has asked that question at some time or another. Speaking in terms of absolute reassurance to God's people in captivity, God promises them that they will return to their land again. God will bring it about in his sovereign power. The thing is certain. And yet he says to them: 'I will also let the house of Israel inquire of me to do this for them' (Ezek 36:37). Again, the clear implication seems to be that God expects his people to gather for collective prayers of intercession. Zechariah illustrates a similar situation, assuring his listeners of God's blessing, and at the same time informing them that God will hear their prayers (Zech 10:6). God has promised us many things, but he still wants to hear us ask him for them. We should not disappoint him by our neglect of the Prayer meeting.

12. Prayer-meetings are the best means of encouraging ministers of the gospel. Ask any preacher what he desires most of God's people and he will tell you that it is the prayers of the congregation. Paul requested prayer-support from the Roman Christians immediately after telling them of his travel plans: 'Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you' (Rom 15:30-2). Several things are worth

noting about this passage. First, that Paul ‘exhorts’ (‘begs’ in NKJV; the same word, *parakaleō*, as in 12:1: ‘I beseech you therefore, by the mercies of God...). Second, that he uses an extraordinary verb *sunagonisasthai* (‘strive together’) emphasising the fact that it was the corporate prayers of God’s people that the apostle desired. Every preacher would echo these sentiments. They are powerless and ineffective without the blessing of God upon their ministries and prayer meetings are God’s appointed means of obtaining these urgently needed blessings.

For these reasons, every Christian should make every effort to attend a prayer-meeting.