

**Sermon – Spirit-Empowered Prayer**  
**Sunday October 8, 2023**

The book of Acts follows the early church as they continue the movement Jesus started. But how do they do this? The church is small - only 120 people. But we soon find out how quickly it grows.

The church grows in numbers. Throughout Acts, we read statements like:

**... three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:41)**

**And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)**

**So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples... increased rapidly... (Acts 6:7)**

The church also grows in its impact. History records how this movement of Jesus followers swept through the Roman Empire. And as it does, it transforms the very culture itself by living the kingdom way of life that Jesus taught.

This small church that was persecuted by the mighty Roman Empire actually outlasts them. You only read about the Roman Empire in history books now but the church is still going strong. This small church that started with 120 people is the largest religious group in the world with almost 3 billion followers.

How is this possible? How did the early church grow? Was it because they had power and influence? Wealth and resources? Education and intelligence?

No, the early church had none of these things. They were ordinary Christians like you and me. But while they didn't have resources and influence, what they did have was more powerful: a passion to pray.

The early church was a praying church. **The church grew because it prayed and it prayed because it grew.**

Last week, our Executive Team shared a State of the Union update. They talked about the tremendous growth Cornerstone has been experiencing. We've been growing in numbers. And these numbers represent people.

- People like you who've come to Cornerstone looking for community.
- People like you who want to heal and get a new start.
- People like you who want your children and family to grow together in the faith.
- People like you who want to make a difference for Jesus.

But how do we do that?

- How do we take this growth and momentum we've been experiencing and move forward in the mission God has given us?
- How do we not get spiritually stagnant but grow deeper in our faith?
- How do we not merely passively consume "spiritual services" but instead actively engage in the life of the church so that we can build each other up and reach our community for Jesus?

Today we start a new sermon series called *A Church that Prays*. We're studying the book of Acts and looking at how the early church prayed. Because there was something special about their prayers. When

they prayed, they grew. And when they grew and faced the inevitable challenges that come with growth, they prayed.

**The church grew because it prayed and it prayed because it grew.** And as a result, the church kept growing and reaching more people for Jesus.

How many of you would love to see that here at Cornerstone?

What I want to do today is talk about prayer by exploring two questions. First, Why is prayer essential? And second, How did the early church pray?

First, **Why is prayer essential?**

At the beginning of Acts, the resurrected Jesus spends time with his disciples. He teaches them about the kingdom of God and then he tells them:

**...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)**

So before he ascends into heaven, what does Jesus do? He gives the church its mission.

- To bear witness to him.
- To share their faith.
- To live God’s kingdom life.

Where are they to do this? Starting in Jerusalem and then moving out into the whole world. This would be a world-wide movement!

But here’s the problem. How are they supposed to do this? They have no manual, no resources and they can’t Google it (Google hasn’t been invented yet!).

You see, you and I are people of action. We like getting things done. Many of you have done well for yourselves because of this. So if Jesus left you with this mission, what would you do?

- Maybe you’d brainstorm and strategize with your team.
- Conduct a focus group to get stakeholder input.
- Hire a branding consultant to create a great image.

That’s what you and I would do. And Jesus knows this. He knows our instinct is to get things done on our own. He knows our instinct is to rely on our own abilities. But he also knows that we don’t have what it takes. We don’t have the ability to carry out his mission in our own strength. We need power. That’s why he tells his disciples:

**“Do not leave Jerusalem, but *wait* for the gift my Father promised... <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with<sup>[a]</sup> water, but in a few days you will be baptized with<sup>[b]</sup> the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:4-5)**

Jesus gives his disciples one final command. And it isn’t Figure out how to do this. It isn’t Make it happen on your own. It’s simply this: Wait. Wait on the Father. Wait on his promise. Wait for the power you’ll need to carry out my mission.

So that’s exactly what the church does. They gather together, they put their trust in God and they wait.

### **They all joined together constantly in prayer... (Acts 1:14)**

Then in Acts 2, something amazing happens. It's the day of Pentecost – the Jewish festival held 50 days after the Passover. And on this day, God sends his Holy Spirit. The believers begin speaking in other languages. They're filled with God's power. And Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit preaches an inspiring sermon.

It's an incredible day. The believers are transformed, people are baptized and the church grows by 3,000 people.

Pentecost is the day the church was born. But how was the church born? Was it born out of human initiative and effort? No. The church was born out of waiting and trusting. The church was born out of prayer.

That's why prayer is essential to doing God's work. Because **When we wait on God in prayer, God gives us the power we need to do his work.**

You see, you can do many things without God's power. You can get good grades. You can have a great job. You can build a large company.

And did you know that churches can also do many things without God's power too? It's true. They can build impressive buildings, put on impressive services and run impressive programs.

But here's the thing: Jesus doesn't call us to impress others. Jesus calls us to be witnesses, to reach the world for him. So how do we do that?

- By becoming like Jesus in our character.
- By serving others with his love.
- By bringing healing and justice.

And we can only do this when the Holy Spirit changes our heart. We can only do this when we receive God's power.

Pastor John Stott says, "Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit and no effective witness without his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead."

Jesus said it like this: **I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)**

In other words, Jesus is saying, apart from my power to change your heart, apart from my wisdom and guidance, apart from my strength and inspiration... all your human efforts will amount to... nothing.

That's why prayer is essential to doing God's work. Only when we wait on God in prayer, will we receive the power we need to do his work.

Pentecost was a one-time event. We don't need to pray for the Holy Spirit to come. It's already here. But we do need to pray for a *fresh* filling of the Holy Spirit, for a *fresh* anointing, for *fresh* power.

Charles Spurgeon said, **“Whenever God wants to do something great in the world, he first stirs his people to pray. Prayer is always the first stage in God’s plan to change the world.”** (Charles Spurgeon)

### Cornerstone Story

The dream for Cornerstone Centre also came about through prayer. When Cornerstone was still meeting in rented facilities we were discerning what kind of building we should build. The leaders got together and entered into a season of prayer and fasting. During that time, there was a strong sense that God was calling us to build a community centre-style facility.

This wouldn’t be a building we would use just for ourselves. It would be a building we would open up to the community. A place where people could come use the building, enjoy recreational programs and build relationships with others. We would call this building, *our gift to the community*.

We shared this idea with the congregation. We then held special events where we prayed about it. And through this process, they also affirmed that God was leading us to do this too.

The only problem was, this was a huge undertaking. According to our consultants, a church our size didn’t have the numbers or the resources to pull it off. It was a great idea but it simply couldn’t be done. It was impossible.

Except for this. That we serve the God of the impossible. And the time we had spent in prayer gave us confidence that God was in this. Calling us to this God-sized vision. Calling us to build this unique church facility. So we moved forward in faith.

In the years that followed, we would see God answer prayer after prayer. He connected us with consultants who had done exactly what we were trying to do. He led us to people who donated professional services and equipment. He helped us find favour with banks, contractors and politicians. He convicted many of you from our congregation to donate significant savings over and above your tithe and give up vacations and major purchases to fund the construction.

None of this would have been possible without God. But he made possible what the experts said was impossible. Through prayer, not only did God give us the vision for this building, he provided all we needed and more. By the end of the construction project, we came in on budget and get this - we still had \$400K in the bank!

We had a grand opening of Cornerstone Centre and we grew right away. Our congregation was a relatively small church before, about 300 people. But after we opened, we quickly grew. Within 6 months, we had grown by over 60%

Cornerstone also grew in its impact. We used our space to serve our community, we expanded our outreach efforts and we built more partnership with local agencies.

As we shared last week, Cornerstone has experienced tremendous growth. We don’t know what’s ahead – whether it’s launching a third worship service, developing a leadership institute, planting another campus or something else God has in store.

But what we do know is that we serve a big God. And as we pray, God will show us the next steps. And he’ll be faithful to lead us and provide for us in the future, just as he has in the past.

We wouldn't be where we are today if we didn't pray. Prayer is essential for doing God's work because when we wait on God in prayer, God gives us the power we need to do his work.

That's why the early church was so effective in living out God's mission. That's how they grew and made the world-changing impact they did. So how did the early church pray?

### **They all joined together constantly in prayer... (Acts 1:14)**

There's a lot to unpack in this Bible verse. I'd like to look at three lessons we can learn from the early church that can help us to faithfully live out God's mission.

The first lesson is **The early church prayed together.**

Acts 1:14 says **They all joined *together* constantly in prayer... (Acts 1:14)**

The Greek word for together is used 11 times in the New Testament. And get this - 10 of those times are in the book of Acts. This tells us a lot about the early church. The word together means being of one mind and purpose. It's a picture of a group of people coming together for a common goal. It's a picture of people coming together to pray.

The New King James Version, translates this verse: **These all continued with *one accord* in prayer <sup>[b]</sup>and supplication... (Acts 1:14, NKJV)**

Here's an interesting fact. Throughout church history, many have wondered, what kind of car did the disciples drive? Bible scholars have studied this text and they all agree that the disciples drove a Honda. Why? Because they were all in one accord.

The point is, the early church prayed together. Of course, the early Christians prayed on their own and cultivated their own personal prayer life. But on top of that, they also prayed with other Christians.

We live in a culture that's much more individualistic than the culture the early church lived in. Our lifestyle is different and we don't spend as much time in community as people used to do. So what are ways you can pray with others?

You can **Pray with your small group.** At Cornerstone, we encourage you to get connected in a small group. A small group consists of 8-10 people who are committed to growing in their relationship with God and with each other.

Small groups meet regularly to study the Bible and pray together. They serve together and meet socially for fun outings.

Small groups are a great place to pray together for your needs as well as for the church. If you're not currently in a small group, we're running our **Group Launch** event next Sunday.

**Note: Show URL and create QR Code for <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/smallgroups>**

It's a great way to meet others and get connected in a group. If you're interested please sign-up soon using the information on the screen.

Another way you can pray with others is **Participate in our Monthly Prayer Ministry Service.** Each month, we set aside time at the end of a Sunday worship service to have Prayer Ministry. If you have any

prayer needs, you can simply come up to the front during this time to one of our Prayer Ministers, and they'll be happy to pray for you. If you wish, you can also stay in your seats and pray together with the people around you.

And finally, you can pray with others by **Connect with Cornerstone's Prayer Ministry**.

**Note: Show URL and create QR Code for <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/prayer>**

If you go on our webpage there are different ways you can get involved with our prayer ministry. You can:

- Submit a prayer request.
- Attend our monthly online prayer meetings
- Join our prayer team
- Download helpful prayer guides, worksheets and resources to help you grow in your prayer life

These are just some ideas but the first lesson we learn from the early church is that they didn't just pray on their own, they prayed together.

The second lesson is **They made prayer central to the life of the church**.

In the NIV, Acts 1:14 reads, **They all joined together constantly in *prayer* (Acts 1:14)**

But in the NKJV, the word prayer is translated *prayer and supplication*. That's because there are two words in the original Greek. Luke makes this emphasis because he wants us to know that the early church was praying all kinds of prayers. They were praying all the time. It's another way of saying they made prayer central to the life of the church.

The word prayer is used 19 times in the book of Luke, 15 times in the book of Matthew, 10 times in the book of Mark and 5 times in the book of John. How many times do you think the word prayer is used in the book of Acts? 32 times!

The early church made prayer central to the life of the church.

- When they were being persecuted, they prayed.
- When they faced leadership challenges, they prayed.
- When their leaders were imprisoned, they prayed.
- When they needed guidance, they prayed.
- When they needed healing or a miracle, they prayed.
- When they needed boldness, they prayed.
- When they began new ministries, they prayed.
- When they faced growth challenges, they prayed.

In every situation, they didn't try to figure it out, they didn't assume they knew what to do, they didn't try to do it on their own. What did they do? They prayed.

The early church made prayer central to their ministries, central to their leadership, central to their gatherings. In other words, the early church made prayer central to the life of the church.

As the Group Life Pastor, I came across a fascinating study. Researchers studied the most effective small groups. They wanted to know, what was it about the leader that contributed to a healthy small group. Do you know what they found?

They found that the healthiest small groups had nothing to do with how much knowledge, experience or charisma the leader had. Do you know what the healthiest groups all had in common? A leader that prayed.

As the Group Life Pastor I set aside a day each month to pray for our groups and leaders. I send out a monthly email to leaders asking how I can pray and then I'll pray for them.

You can do that too. If you're a leader in this church, the most important thing you can do is pray for your ministry and people. Make this a regular part of your ministry. Not only will God honour and bless your prayers, he'll use them to shape your heart as a leader.

Even if you don't lead a group or a ministry, your prayers for the church are vital to the mission of our church. So if you consider Cornerstone your church, can I ask you to do something? Can I ask you to commit to praying weekly for the church. Cover the leaders, the people, the services, the ministries in prayer. Pray for the people, pray for our community.

Can you guys do that? We want to cover the church in prayer because the early church made prayer central to the life of the church.

The third lesson from the early church is that **They persevered in prayer.**

**They all joined together *constantly* in prayer (Acts 1:14)**

The Greek word for *constant* means to be resolute and persistent. In other words, the church persevered in prayer.

It can be easy to get excited about prayer at the beginning but drop off over time. We do this:

- When our prayers don't get answered right away.
- When things don't work out for us the way we want.
- When we get bored, tired or discouraged.

When that happens, it's easy to give up on prayer. That's why the Bible is full of reminders to persevere in prayer.

Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:16-18)

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. (Romans 12:12)

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. (Colossians 4:2)

The Bible is full of examples of people who persevered in prayer.

- Nehemiah prayed for 5 months before he brought his petition before the king.
- Hannah prayed for years before God blessed her with a child.
- Samuel prayed for the people for years even though their hearts had hardened, even though they had turned away from God.

- The early church continued praying despite persecution, setbacks and challenges.

As a church, things will get hard and we will face challenges. Over time, it will be easy to lose passion and momentum. That's why we need to persevere in prayer. We need to keep lifting up prayers, we need to keep trusting, we need to keep praying and not give up.

Some of you are feeling discouraged right now. You've been praying for a long time for something or someone and it doesn't feel like things are changing.

Jesus once talked about a persistent widow who didn't stop pleading her case. And then he turns around and tells his disciples, Always pray and don't give up.

Turn to your neighbour and tell them: Always pray and don't give up!

Persevere in your prayers. Because we know that God is good. God is faithful. He hears the prayers of his people and is working even now in ways we don't know. So keep praying and don't give up!

The early church joined together constantly in prayer. They prayed together. They made prayer central to the life of the church. And they persevered in prayer.

S.D. Gordon said, "We can do many things once we have prayed, we can do nothing until we have prayed."

So let's close our time together now in prayer. I'm going to ask you all to stand. A prayer is going to come up on the screen and we're going to pray it together.

### **Responsive Prayer**

LEADER: Dear Jesus, You have set us apart and called us to yourself: to be your people, shining as a light for you in this world; bearing witness to your hope and healing; living in this world as citizens of your kingdom; loving our neighbours and those around us.

PEOPLE: We offer ourselves again to you and your mission.

LEADER: For your faithfulness to us over the years; for leading and guiding us; for providing for our every need; for protecting us and preserving our unity...

PEOPLE: We give you thanks O God.

LEADER: As we look ahead to this year, we pray for a fresh filling of your Spirit; we pray for fresh power; we pray for a fresh anointing.

PEOPLE: Fill us afresh Holy Spirit.

LEADER: Continue to faithfully lead us, guide us, provide for us and protect us.

PEOPLE: We fix our eyes on you Jesus.

LEADER: We pray all this not for ourselves but for your glory and for the sake of your mission.

PEOPLE: Amen