



Challenging your thinking!

Addressing Ideas that Influence Revival

An Effective Prayer Meeting

By Dr. Rick Flanders

Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people. Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. (Acts 12:1-5)

All of the Herods in the Bible were bad men. All of them were in the same family of Edomites, and all were despised rulers who gained their offices through the intrigue of Roman-Empire politics. One Herod attempted to murder the baby Jesus, and another participated in the crucifixion of Christ. In Acts 12, we read of the Herod who killed the Apostle James, the fisherman son of Zebedee and the brother of the beloved Apostle John. It is ironic that James was the first of the twelve to die and his brother John was the last to die! When Herod saw that the murder of the Apostle James “pleased the Jews,” he arrested Simon Peter and prepared to deal with him after the festival.

The great church at Jerusalem was again faced with persecution, and more notably, with the impending execution of another apostle! The

way they met this crisis is instructive to churches of our day. They called for prayer meetings. Verse 5 says, “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

Prayer meetings are not common in God’s churches today, except for midweek services that are called “prayer meetings.” Many of them, however, have come to minimize the praying on Wednesday night and have added many things to the midweek program other than corporate prayer. As a result, millions of Chris-

tians are unfamiliar with a real prayer meeting, and uncomfortable with it. Furthermore, most preachers have no idea how to direct one.

Acts 12:5, thankfully, gives us an understandable pattern to follow when conducting a prayer meeting. The gatherings for prayer that met during Peter’s incarceration were genuinely effective because they got him out! Read the whole chapter and see how it happened. The test of a prayer meeting is whether or not the goal is attained, the need is met, the prayers are answered. We may legitimately speak of the fervency, the solemnity, or the feeling of a prayer meeting, and we may give God praise for His apparent blessing and His presence while the prayers were being offered. However, the purpose of prayer and of a prayer meeting is to get something from God. Jesus said, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you . . .” (Matthew 7:7)

So a prayer meeting is effective if the prayers are answered! The Acts 12 prayer meetings were definitely effective, and verse 5 shows us why.

The prayers were intense.

It says that “prayer was made without ceasing.” There are disagreements over this part of the verse regarding the meaning of “without ceasing.” The Greek word has the idea of “stretched out,” and may refer either to praying over a long period of time or to praying with great emotion. In either case the idea is intensity. James 5:16 says “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” It matters to God if we “mean business” when we pray for something. The Psalms speak of “supplication” (begging God) in prayer (as in 6:9), and of “when I cry unto Thee” (18:1-2). There are references to prayer when the psalmist’s “spirit was overwhelmed within me” (142:3). The prayers of the Psalms are often intense, and we should follow their example.

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Just as James 5 commands “fervent” prayers, Luke 11 commands “*importunity*” in prayer (see verses 1 through 13, and note especially verse 8). Importunity means “shameless persistence.” Perhaps this is the idea intended by “*without ceasing*.” Clearly the effective prayer meetings of Acts 12 involved intense and serious praying. If we are going to meet to ask God for something, we ought to be serious about it. Years ago I was reading the Book of Jude in my office when I came across the phrase, “*praying in the Holy Ghost*.” I was struck by the phrase and also by my own need for the Spirit of God to help me in my praying. Soon I was asking the Holy Spirit to energize my prayers and to bring me

right into the throne-room of God! The intensity we should have in our prayers will come from the Holy Spirit.

The praying was united.

Acts 12:6 says that “*prayer was made without ceasing of the church*.” The word “church” in the Bible always means the congregation—the people rather than the building in which they meet. Our verse is saying that they prayed corporately, as a group.

We are reminded of the instructions and promises Jesus gave His disciples about corporate prayer as they are recorded in Matthew 18.

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

The Lord said that we are to keep the church purified and unified in order that it may remain powerful in its corporate prayers. The promise that whatever we bind or loose on earth will have the backing of Heaven (v. 18) is mentioned also in connection with the first reference in the Bible to the church (in Matthew 16:18-19) where it is described as “*the keys of the kingdom of heaven*.” These keys can be used by a local congregation when they “*agree. . . as touching any thing that they shall ask*” (Matthew 18:19). In the original Greek this means more than just

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agreeing about what should be requested. “*As touching*” has the idea (as also does “*agree*”) of symphonizing in a desire for the same object. In other words, when the church is united in heart and mind that a certain thing is something God would be pleased to grant, they can claim the promises of Matthew 18:18-19 and use the keys of the kingdom! This unity of heart and mind is achieved humanly by settling issues of sin between brethren, and divinely through the very presence of Christ in the meeting (Read again verses 15-17 and verse 20). See in James 5 how this goal is to be achieved in a gathering to pray for a sick person.

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

When the congregation is united in asking for something they are convinced God wants to grant, there is a strong indication that the Spirit of God is directing them. Remember that Romans 8:26 says, “. . . *the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.*”

When everybody in the group thinks that God is leading them to pray in a certain way, it is evidence that He is. United prayer is critical to an effective prayer meeting.

It should also be noted that if a group is to pray together, they must follow a leader. To stand and lead in prayer is not wrong. When Jesus condemned hypocrites for loving to pray publicly (Matthew 6:5), He was speaking against their motive: “*that they may be seen of men*.” The hypocrite prays to be seen and heard by other men rather than to be heard by God. However, Jesus prayed in public (See John 12:28). When groups pray to God, there must be a leader. And they will have to pray out loud.

Those leading in prayer at meetings ought to follow a few guidelines in order to lead us effectively. First, they must speak loud enough for everyone to hear so that we can join in the prayer and say “Amen” (so be it) in our hearts. Secondly, they should pray short prayers so that our minds will not wander. Pray for one or two things and then let somebody else lead. Thirdly, they should continue the prayers as a flowing conversation with God. Individuals may lead in prayer more than once in a meeting, and some may not pray out loud at all. The usual practice of “praying around” in a prayer meeting is certainly a mistake. Participants pray aloud one after another, and the meeting ends when the last one has prayed. Usually the same petitions are repeated over and over again, and the whole talk with God is stilted and formal at best, or

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hypocritical and contrived at worst. Don't do it that way. Pray as if you are talking as a group to the Lord—because you are.

One other issue about united prayer is the question of whether it matters how many show up. Speaking of the prayer meeting on the great day of Pentecost, Acts 2 notes that “they were all with one accord in one place” (v. 1). They were all there. Does God care about how many come to a prayer meeting?

If the President of the United States sent word that he was coming in person to the courthouse at your county seat to hear from citizens who want to express their concerns, would it matter to him how many attended? If the time of his arrival were advertised widely, and he arrived on time with his entourage, but only a half-dozen people came to present their views, what would he think? Would he not conclude that the community had little interest in seeking his help? Would he not also assume that they regarded his office and his visit as unimportant? What an unimaginable situation! Only six showing up to meet with the President! How disrespectful and downright silly we would consider that community to be! But most church members stay away from a prayer meeting! What must this disregard indicate to the Lord? Acts 12 says that “many were gathered together praying” at a meeting that got Peter out of the prison (verse 12). Attendance at a prayer meeting ought to be large.

The prayers were real.

Acts 12:5 says that prayer was made “unto God.” Although this may seem to be the only way to pray, since prayer is defined as asking God, the fact is that many so-called prayers are not directed to God. In Matthew 6, we read about hypocrites who pray to impress people (v. 5) and heathen who repeat memorized prayers (v. 7). Jesus taught us never to pray either way, because these are not real prayers. We must pray to God! Have you noticed how many Christians at prayer meetings lead in prayer like hypocrites or like the heathen? Do not think that Baptists will not use “vain repetitions,” because they do. Many times church people use the same phrases and even whole sentences every time they stand to lead in prayer. Their minds are not engaged before their mouth begins to work. And it is not funny! It is an offense to our Father in heaven. The reason young Christians think they “can

not pray” in church is because they have heard so many prominent members orate and wax eloquent in their supposed prayers. Much public praying is done for human ears. Have you ever heard a preacher preach and pretend it is praying? When he says, “Lord, help us to remember how important it is for us to come back for the Evening Service,” do you think he is really talking to God?

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Really seeking God's face will make a big difference in a prayer meeting. II Chronicles 7:14 says that if we seek God's face and turn from our wicked ways, the Lord will hear from heaven. You see, whenever we seek God's face in reality, we will turn from our wicked ways! Repentance is essential in dealing with a holy God. And repentance is

pressed upon us when we are really praying to God. Often it is good to pause for a moment before you speak, when you lead in prayer, so that you can be sure you are talking to God.

The prayers were specific.

The Bible says that “prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him” (Acts 12:5). For whom did they pray? For Peter, of course. Their prayers were not as general as our prayers often are. At those gatherings we probably would not have heard much about God “blessing this day” or “being with us.” Most of the time we could never tell if public prayers were even answered, because no particular thing was requested! But at effective prayer meetings, specific things are sought. The great promise in Philippians 4:6-7 tells us to “let your requests be made known unto God.” God is pleased when we believe him enough to ask Him for particular blessings.

Certainly the Acts 12 prayer meetings called on God to spare Peter's life and get him out of prison. And this is exactly what God did. When he was miraculously delivered, Peter went right to a place where such a meeting was happening. At first the people inside the house could not believe it was Peter (read verses 11 through 17). They did not seem to have much faith when they prayed, but they had enough to rescue Peter by their prayers! Hebrews 11:6 says,

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

We can see in this important verse that faith that pleases God can consist of two simple beliefs: (1) that God exists and (2) that God responds to earnest praying. If we have enough faith to seek the Lord about a problem, we have enough faith to obtain a miracle. Jesus said that it takes only a little faith to move a mountain (Matthew 17:20). It is not so much the greatness of our faith that matters as it is the greatness of the God in Whom we put our faith. The faith it takes to attend a prayer meeting can be enough to rescue a preacher from death! As the Holy Spirit directs, be bold and specific in your prayers at a prayer meeting.

Our faith in God must be revived if we are to have the spiritual revival the Lord's people really need today. In a sense, revived faith in God will require reviving faith in prayer. And faith in the power of prayer will produce renewed faith in prayer meetings. Let us meet the challenges and fight the battles that face our churches in the way the Jerusalem church did: through effective prayer meetings characterized by intense, united, real, and specific praying!

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