

Acts 13:1-3 “Learning about Prayer from Paul”\*\*

Main Idea: We learn four insights regarding prayer as we look at Paul’s example in the book of Acts, particularly in Acts 13:1-3.

I. Prayer is essential for the church of God (1a).

A. That was true for the church in Acts.

1. The church was born in a prayer meeting (1:14; 2:1).
2. The church made prayer a core activity (2:42; 6:4).
3. The church responded to challenges by praying (4:24, 31; 12:5).

B. That was true for the church in Antioch .

II. Prayer must be linked to the Word of God (1b).

A. We need to hear God’s Word.

B. We need to understand God’s Word.

C. We need a plurality of teachers giving us God’s Word.

1. In the Bible, God speaks to us.
2. In prayer, we speak to God.

III. Prayer helps us understand the will of God (2).

A. We must deny ourselves.

B. We must submit to the Holy Spirit.

1. The Spirit calls all of us to serve.
2. The Spirit commissions some of us to serve in special ways.

IV. Prayer is vital for doing the work of God (3).

A. Paul and the others prayed in Antioch (3).

1. There’s a connection between prayer and fasting.
2. There’s a connection between prayer and decision-making.
3. There’s a connection between prayer and power.

B. Paul prayed from a jail cell in Philippi (16:13, 16, 25).

C. Paul prayed with church leaders from Ephesus (20:36).

D. Paul prayed with disciples on a beach at Tyre (21:5).

E. Paul prayed with unsaved people on a ship (27:35-36).

The Bottom Line: Paul prayed because he knew he needed God. Do you?

This sermon is for me. In fact, this summer sermon series is for me. I need it. I struggle when it comes to the subject at hand. And I'm not alone.

I have hundreds of books in my library about God. I have tapes, CDs, and MP3 files and listen regularly to sermons and teaching about God. I can turn on the radio or go to a host of websites any time day or night and hear more information about God. I study my Bible and discover wonderful things about God. I prepare sermons and Bible studies and develop page after page of material about God. I sit in a Sunday School class and learn about God. I spend time with Christian friends and both talk and hear about God and His wonders.

And it's all good and helpful. But it's not enough. Learning *about God* is supposed to be a means to something, not an end. What's missing? More than a century ago a wise servant of God, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, observed, "What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more." Learning truth about God, as vital as that is, isn't enough. Teaching truth about God to others, again commanded, isn't enough. Doing things for God, like serving in a ministry, is important but isn't enough. The test of what a person really is—of what I am—is revealed by what I am when I am alone on my knees before God.

J. I. Packer offered this assessment, "I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we can ever face."<sup>11</sup>

Notice the word *how*. Most people pray. That's not the issue. The issue is *how* we pray. To repeat Packer, "*How* we pray is as important a question as we can ever face." My prayer life is a revealer, and so is yours, a spiritual litmus test.

D. A. Carson, at the beginning of his excellent book, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, asks the following probing questions, "Granted that most of us know some individuals who are remarkable prayer warriors, is it not nevertheless true that by and large we are better at organizing than agonizing? Better at administrating than interceding? Better at fellowship than fasting? Better at entertainment than worship? Better at theological articulation than spiritual adoration? Better—God help us!—at preaching than at praying?"<sup>12</sup>

When it comes to prayer, most of us don't pray as much as we ought. But the solution isn't merely to try harder. The issue again is *how* we pray. We need a mentor, someone to tutor us, someone to show us how to pray. And God in His gracious kindness has given us many would-be mentors in His Word. He has preserved for us the prayers of great men and women of God such as Daniel, David, and Mary, but this summer we're going to spend time in the school of prayer with the apostle Paul.

There are at least a dozen or so prayers that Paul prayed which are recorded in the New Testament, and we're going to look at them one by one in the weeks ahead. We'll take them chronologically, beginning next week with Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians which he penned in his letters in A.D. 51. Then comes Paul's prayer for the believers in Corinth in A.D. 55, then his prayer for the Romans in A.D. 57, then a series of prayers that he wrote from prison in A.D. 60-61 to the Ephesians, the Philippians, and the Colossians, followed by some prayers for individuals like Philemon and Timothy. We'll conclude our series, the Lord willing, with a message that looks at what Paul asked people to pray for him.

But before we actually look at the prayers of Paul I want to use this message to go to the book of Acts and see Paul in action. As we look at Paul's example of praying in the book of Acts, particularly in Acts 13:1-3, we learn four insights regarding prayer

## I. Insight #1: Prayer is essential for the church of God (1a).

As you scan the book written by Luke, we quickly discover...

**A. That was true for the church in Acts.** The church in Acts was a praying church. In fact...

1. *The church was born in a prayer meeting (1:14; 2:1).* Acts 1:14 records, “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” And it was while they were in that upper room in Jerusalem, apparently praying, that the Holy Spirit came upon them and birthed the church into existence.

2. *The church made prayer a core activity (2:42; 6:4).* As Acts 2:42 indicates, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” As the church exploded in growth, new ministries developed, such as caring for widows. But the apostles made sure that even valid ministries didn’t distract their attention from *prayer* and *the ministry of the Word*, says Acts 6:4.

Then persecution hit, and...

3. *The church responded to the challenges by praying (4:24, 31; 12:5).* In chapter four, for instance, the authorities forbid Peter, John, and the rest of the church from speaking again the name of Christ. Their response? Verse 24 says the church had a prayer meeting, and verse 31 indicates the prayer meeting resulted in the building shaking, the people being filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking the word boldly.

In chapter seven Stephen became the church’s first martyr. His final activity? While they were stoning him, he prayed (7:59). In chapter twelve James was arrested and beheaded, then Peter was arrested and scheduled for execution. The church’s response? They prayed earnestly and an angel broke Peter’s chains, unlocked his prison cell door, and set him free to continue doing God’s work.

In Acts, prayer was essential for the church of God. And specifically...

**B. That was true for the church in Antioch.** The Antioch church is a significant church in Acts. It began, according to 11:19-26 when some believers traveled from Cyprus to Antioch and preached Jesus, and a great number believed. When the Jerusalem church heard about the conversions, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to do follow-up work. Apparently, Barnabas sensed the work was too big for one man (or ideally suited for another), so he recruited Saul of Tarsus to join him. Together they taught the disciples for a year, after which they took a benevolent offering from the Antioch church to help famine-stricken brothers and sisters in Jerusalem (11:29). After finishing the mission, Barnabas and Saul (also known as Paul) returned to Antioch (12:25).

That brings us to a second insight. First, prayer is essential for the church of God.

## II. Insight #2: Prayer must be linked to the Word of God (1b).

In Acts 13:3 we’ll see the Antioch church *praying*. But the praying was the outworking of something else in the church. Notice Acts 13:1, “In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.”

A praying church will be a Word-centered church. You cannot take the Word seriously and *not* pray, for the Scriptures command us to pray. On the other hand, you cannot pray rightly apart from the Word, for the Scriptures define and direct God honoring prayer. Consequently, like the Antioch church we need to do three things with God’s Word.

**A. We need to hear God’s Word.** Verse 1 says there were *prophets* in the church at Antioch. Like their forerunners in the Old Testament, New Testament prophets were proclaimers, spokesmen for God. At times they uttered God-given predictions (such as Agabus in Acts 11:28, the prophet who revealed a severe famine was coming). More often they delivered God-given proclamations, declaring, “Thus says the Lord!” [\[3\]](#)

We need to hear God’s Word. That’s why God gave the early church prophets. But hearing alone isn’t enough,

which is why God gave the Antioch church *teachers*.

**B. We need to understand God's Word.** "This is what God *says*," was the emphasis of the prophets. "This is what God's Word *means*," was the emphasis of the teachers. The prophet received a message from God. The teachers explained God's message. The prophets were preachers. The teachers were the ones who gave careful instruction concerning belief and practice.

Sadly, in church after church today there's a famine for God's Word. People want experience, not education. They go to church to feel something, not learn something. Should we feel something at church? Certainly! But appropriate feelings are the result of a Word-centered ministry, not a substitute for it. Word-less Christianity is like trying to live on cotton candy. It looks impressive in the package, but it doesn't last long, and it certainly doesn't leave lasting nourishment.

We need to hear God's Word. That's the meat and potatoes of spiritual nourishment. And we need to understand God's Word. I notice something else from the example of the Antioch church.

**C. We need a plurality of teachers giving us God's Word.** The text says there were "prophets and teachers." The words are plural. Luke lists five names. Where did all these teachers come from? We know Barnabas recruited Saul, and perhaps the others as well.

As you examine the churches in the New Testament you'll find the typical pattern included a plurality of leadership. When Paul went somewhere, he took someone with him. When he or one of his coworkers left a church, he always made sure the churches had multiple shepherds to feed and care for them.<sup>[4]</sup>

The church "staff" at Antioch was quite a diverse group of men, a diversity that reflected the city, and beyond that, the Roman world of the day. The city of Antioch, located 300 miles north of Jerusalem, was the capital city of Syria. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (behind Rome and Alexandria), with a population of 500,000. The city possessed a busy port and was a center for luxury, culture, and of course, immorality. It's been well said that Antioch, with its cosmopolitan flavor, was to the Roman world what New York City is to ours.

Look at the teachers listed. There was **Barnabas**. He was a Jewish Levite from the island of Cyprus which meant he understood Greek culture and how to minister in it.

**Simeon** appears next. Luke says he was called "Niger," a Latin term meaning black, perhaps indicating Simeon had black skin and came from the African continent.

**Lucius** was from Cyrene, a city in Libya of north Africa. His name is Latin which would suggest he was raised in a Roman culture.<sup>[5]</sup>

Luke mentions **Manaen** next. Manaen is a Greek form of a Hebrew name, so he probably was a Hellenistic Jew. The identifying characteristic about him, according to Luke, was that he was raised with Herod the Tetrarch, also known as Herod Antipas. If Manaen was brought up in the household of Herod the Great with Herod Antipas (and the term "brought up with" could even be translated "foster-brother"), he was a man of great standing and privilege, with political connections. But here we see him associating with "nobodies" in Antioch. Wiersbe comments, "Not many people of nobility are called, but thank God, some do find Christ!"<sup>[6]</sup>

Luke mentions **Saul** last. Later to become known as Paul, Saul was a Jewish rabbi by training, a Pharisee. He hunted down Christians until God hunted him down, brought him to his knees, and forgave him of his many sins through faith in Christ.

Yes, they had quite a team of teachers in Antioch. And talk about diversity! If the backgrounds of these men reflect the backgrounds of the rest of the church, there were plenty of differences to work through at the First Church of Antioch. We see Greek culture, Roman culture, and Hebrew culture. We see one man with a political background and another with rabbinic training. We see black skin and brown skin and lighter skin.

Did they have differences in Antioch? Indeed. But they functioned as one. How? Their leaders were men controlled by the Holy Spirit, not personal agendas, as we'll see in verse 2. John MacArthur explains, "Unlike many in the ministry today who are busy with shallow activities and programs, the leaders at Antioch understood their spiritual mandate clearly. They patterned themselves after the apostles, who, according to Acts 6:4, devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Those are ever the priorities for the man of God."<sup>[7]</sup>

To put it simply, we need both the Bible *and* prayer.

1. *In the Bible, God speaks to us.* And...

2. *In prayer, we speak to God.* In order for our praying to have substance, it must be linked to the Word.

### III. Insight #3: Prayer helps us understand the will of God (2).

Verse 2—"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" If we are going to discover what pleases God, we must learn to do two things, first...

**A. We must deny ourselves.** Luke says they were "worshiping [KJV 'ministered to'] the Lord and fasting." Fasting is mentioned twice in this paragraph. We don't hear much about fasting these days, yet the Scriptures commend it and Jesus practiced it. Granted, it can be misused, but it can also be used as a God-honoring expression of dependence. When we fast, we deny ourselves. We temporarily don't eat in order to devote ourselves fully to spiritual concerns. If we want to know God's will, we must start with a denial of self. Secondly...

**B. We must submit to the Holy Spirit.** Luke says that "while" they were fasting, the Spirit gave them instructions having to do with a new opportunity for service. What kind of service? The Holy Spirit was very clear. He wanted the church to "set apart" Barnabas and Saul for a new work.

Please notice that God determines both our giftedness and our work. He puts us where He wants us so we can accomplish what He wills.<sup>[8]</sup> And please notice also that ministry is *work*. The Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul *for the work* to which I have called them." Ministry is hard. It's taxing. It takes effort. Thankfully, it's rewarding, too. And don't miss that ministry is related to God's *calling*. "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which *I have called them*."

Allow me to clarify something...

1. *The Spirit calls all of us to serve.* Kent Hughes says it well, "Worship and service go together and should never be separated. If we try to work for the Lord without worshiping him, we will settle for legalistic, self-centered service. And if we worship and never work, we will end up with a form of godliness but no power."<sup>[9]</sup> If you are a Christian, your calling is to serve. In a sense we are all ministers. However...

2. *The Spirit commissions some of us to serve in special ways.*<sup>[10]</sup> The word "missionary" comes to us from Latin just as "apostle" comes from Greek. They both mean essentially the same thing, "one who has been sent out, sent on a mission."<sup>[11]</sup>

It's quite significant here that when the Holy Spirit called for missionaries, He took the *best*, the most-gifted teachers from the Antioch church and sent them to the needy regions of the world. The Spirit chose Barnabas—he was so top-notch the Jerusalem church chose him to go to Antioch in the first place. And Saul—who can question his giftedness as a teacher, the man who wrote half the New Testament books?

But isn't Christ worth it? God sent His Son into the world to save sinners, and by His Son's death on the cross and by His triumphant resurrection He offers forgiveness and eternal life to those who are currently heading to eternal destruction. Isn't Christ worthy of our all? The Antioch church said *yes*.

And don't miss this obvious. The decision that would literally change the Roman Empire, the decision to send the missionary team of Barnabas and Saul into Asia Minor, was the result, not of a planning meeting but, in essence, of a prayer meeting. [12] Maybe we'd see more Spirit-led sending if we were engaging in the kind of Christ-centered worship and self-denying fasting exhibited here by the church in Antioch .

#### IV. Insight #4: Prayer is vital for doing the work of God (3).

Verse 3—"So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." Notice that...

**A. Paul and the others prayed in Antioch (3).** We learn here that, at least in the case of the Antioch church, prayer is connected to three things...

1. *There's a connection between prayer and fasting.* As we deny the flesh we create a greater sensitivity to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

2. *There's a connection between prayer and decision-making.* It intrigues me that even after the Holy Spirit spoke in verse 2, the Antioch church prayed and fasted some more in verse 3. When it comes to God's will, guessing won't do. We want to be sure we're doing what pleases God. Fasting and prayer helped them to be sure. Fasting helped them to be willing to let go of their choice leaders. Prayer facilitated it.

Henry Martyn, former missionary to India and Persia , said, "The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to Him the more intensely missionary we become."

3. *There's a connection between prayer and power.* May I remind you that the Antioch church wasn't very old? There were, no doubt, a lot of young believers involved in this season of prayer.

Today it's not uncommon to hear people say, "But I don't feel comfortable praying in public. My prayers don't sound very well." Wait a minute. Who are we talking to? Prayer isn't about impressing people. Prayer is a God-commanded opportunity to advance His work! Are you glad for what He did in your life? Do you want to see others come to know Him? Then pray! Pray in private, yes, but pray in public, too!

Listen to the following, true story about an African church that discovered the power of prayer:

God sent a young African man named Peter to serve a small church near the lake where only 15 people gathered each week. He was filled with enthusiasm and he had a plan. He organized a door-to-door visitation program and saw many 'results.' People came to church once or twice, but they did not stay. Peter brought in preachers who drew large crowds. Forty people professed faith in Christ. They came back once or twice, but two weeks later, the congregation was back to just 15 again.

Peter was discouraged. Something was missing. He decided to stop the big programs and start praying. People began meeting every Friday for an all-night prayer meeting. The tiny 24' by 12' church began to fill, then overflow. A witch doctor nearby offered to sell his land to the church. God's work was gaining ground, literally, in the area of the gods. The more people prayed, the more they saw God work.

One night, not the witch doctors but the police came to a meeting where youth had gathered to pray. The young believers were beaten and told to stop praying.

The following night was the usual Friday night prayer meeting. Would anyone dare to come? Forty people arrived. This time, police officers and soldiers came. "Stop praying," they commanded. Peter stood his ground; he was ordered to report to the authorities the next morning.

After a night of prayer instead of sleep, Peter arrived before the local officials. "Who told you to pray at night?" they asked roughly.

“There is no law which refuses to allow me to pray,” Peter answered calmly.

When Peter and the church would not agree to stop praying, he was ordered to go into the capital city to obtain a letter of permission to hold prayer meetings at night.

Peter went to the right place and asked the right people, but they could not give him a letter, they said, because there was no law against it.

Peter returned and explained this to the local authorities.

“Are you sure?” they asked. Peter was sure.

The local authorities were disappointed. “Okay, if you insist on praying, could you pray quietly?”

The little church on the shores of the lake, once a church of 15, is now a church of 500—700. Not because of programs; because of prayer. The policeman who led the persecution against them is now a believer. He preaches the faith he once tried to destroy.”[\[13\]](#)

Do we believe that prayer and power go hand in hand? Listen. There’s only one valid test that reveals the answer. It’s not what we *say*. It’s what we *do*.

Some here have never been to a prayer meeting. Others haven’t been to one in years. I’m not interested in laying a guilt trip. My aim is merely to state the facts, and the facts are that prayer is essential for the church of God, must be linked to the Word of God, helps us understand the will of God, and is vital for doing the work of God.

It ought not surprise us then that this isn’t the last time we see Paul praying in Acts.

**B. Paul prayed from a jail cell in Philippi (16:13, 16, 25).** On his second missionary journey Paul went to the Macedonian city of Philippi . Acts 16:13 says he went to the river where he “expected to find a place of prayer.” Apparently, since there were not enough Jews to have a synagogue in Philippi so they met by the Gangites River . On another occasion, when Paul was returning to this place of prayer he met a demon-possessed slave girl, and cast out the demon. The slave’s owners took Paul and Silas to court for this crime, and the missionaries were severely flogged, thrown into prison, and fasted in stocks.

What would you do if that happened to you? Acts 16:25 tells us what Paul did, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” What do you think they were praying in that cell? “Lord, get us out of here!”? I don’t think so. Our text doesn’t tell us, but we have another text that records Paul’s prayer request while in another prison, Ephesians 6:19-20, “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”

The result? God sent an earthquake, the jailor was converted, and the Christians had a platform for gospel ministry in Philippi !

**C. Paul prayed with church leaders from Ephesus (20:36).** While traveling by ship to Jerusalem , Paul called the Ephesian elders to come to Miletus , where he reminded them of their assignment, encouraged them to be faithful shepherds, and warned them that wolves would attack the church. And before he left them, he did something else according to Acts 20:36, “When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.” He *prayed* with them. Later on the same trip...

**D. Paul prayed with disciples on a beach at Tyre (21:5).** Acts 21:5 tells what happened, “But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray.” The Christian life involves saying a lot of “good byes,” doesn’t it? But because we are in Christ, we’re always connected, and through prayer we express that connection. One more example...

**E. Paul prayed with unsaved people on a ship (27:35-36).** Paul reached Jerusalem , was arrested and eventually sent to Rome for trial. While traveling to Rome , the ship ran into a violent, two week long, hurricane-like storm. God made it clear to Paul that they would not die, and so Paul shared this news with his fellow travelers and urged them to eat. We read what happened next in Acts 27:35-36, “After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves.”

Do you pray in public before you eat your meals, not to impress people, but to express to God your appreciation for Him and His provisions? Paul’s example makes it clear we can pray anywhere—in a jail, on a beach, on a ship, *anywhere*—all because we have a Savior who died for us, then sent His Spirit to live in us, and now represents us as our high priest in heaven. In the weeks ahead we’ll invite Paul to teach us how to pray, looking at the content of his prayers one by one.

Robert Murray M’Cheyne was right, wasn’t he? *What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more.* My prayer life is a revealer and so is yours.

The bottom line is this. Paul prayed because he knew he needed God. Do you? Do you realize how desperate you are for God? If we really do, we will really pray.

Communion reminds us that it’s what Christ did that makes prayer possible...

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**\*\*Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Taken from D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p. 17.

[2] D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p. 17.

[3] With the completion of the New Testament, the need for the prophetic office ceased as such. In my estimation the position of prophet was a temporary gift to the church prior to the completion of God’s self-revelation in the Scriptures. Our task now is to proclaim what God has already revealed.

[4] For instance, Paul told Titus in Titus 1:5, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.”

[5] The people who evangelized Antioch were from Cyprus and Cyrene (11:20). It’s possible, then, that Lucius was one of the men who led people to Christ in Antioch .

[6] It’s quite significant when you compare Herod and Manaen. They had the same upbringing. But Herod Antipas went down in history as the man who killed John the Baptist and later became involved in Jesus’ trial. Manaen became a Christian and a leader in the church. How amazing! Two men brought up the same way with such different outcomes.

[7] John MacArthur, p. 5.

[8] The verb “set apart” (aphorizou) is used of three separations in Saul’s life—at his birth he was separated to God (Gal. 1:15); at his conversion he was set apart for the gospel (Rom. 1:1); and in Antioch he was separated for a specific service (Acts 13:2). Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*.

[9] Kent Hughes, p. 175.

[10] God the Holy Spirit commissions certain people to give their undivided attention to gospel ministry, at times supported financially by the local church. Today, we often refer to such individuals as “vocational” ministers (pastors,

missionaries, camp workers, Bible College teachers, etc).

[\[11\]](#) LaSor, *Acts*, p. 192.

[\[12\]](#) I'm indebted to the *NIV Study Bible* for this thought, p. 1671.

[\[13\]](#) *Message*, Summer 2002, p. 10.