

Main Idea: If we’re going to experience all that God intends for us in 2012, we need to be people of the Book (that was last week’s message) and to be people of prayer (that’s this week’s message). Today I want to look at a model of a praying church in Acts 4:23-31 where we see a specific kind of prayer marked by four elements. To aid our memory and assist you in application, I’ve put the four points in an acrostic using the word *pray*. When we pray we should *praise, remember, ask, and yield*.

The Setting: The church faced a challenge (23).

- I. When we pray we should begin with *praise* (24).
 - A. The church acknowledged God’s sovereignty.
 - B. The church acknowledged God’s authority as Creator.
- II. When we pray, we should *remember* (25-28).
 - A. The church rehearsed what God said in the past (25-26).
 1. They quoted Scripture.
 2. They interpreted the present in light of Scripture.
 - B. The church rehearsed what God did in the past (27-28).
- III. When we pray, we should *ask* (29-30).
 - A. The church didn’t ask God to remove the challenge.
 - B. The church asked God for help in fulfilling the mission.
- IV. When we pray, we should *yield* (31).
 - A. God did something to the place.
 - B. God did something to His people.
 1. They were filled with the Holy Spirit.
 2. They spoke the Word boldly.

Implications: In order to be people of prayer in 2012...

1. Every morning, pray over your Bible.
2. Every evening, pray over your day.
3. Every week, pray with your church family.
4. Every challenge, pray with your mission in mind.
5. Every answer to prayer, give God the glory.

I don’t want us to just coast into a new year. There’s too much at stake, namely, that we will give an account to God Himself for how we use the time He has entrusted to us. I want us to maximize the year, for His glory which will be then for our fullest joy and good. What’s it take?

It’s really not complicated. To put it simply, if we’re going to experience all that God intends for us in 2012, we need to be *people of the Book* (that was last week’s message) and *people of prayer* (that’s this week’s message).

Today I want us to look at a model of a praying church. If you scan the book of Acts you’ll find several indications that the early church was made up of people of prayer.

For instance, did you realize that the first church started in a prayer meeting? Acts 1:14 says, “They all joined together constantly in prayer,” and God the Holy Spirit showed up at Pentecost! Acts 2:42 says, “They devoted themselves...to prayer.” The first leaders insisted that their priority tasks were prayer and the ministry of the Word (6:4). The first martyr, Stephen, died praying (7:60). The first outreach to Gentiles was launched while Peter was praying (10:9; 11:4). Peter escaped from prison while the church was praying for him (12:12). The first missionary journey grew out of a prayer meeting (13:1). Paul finished his ministry with the Ephesian elders by praying with them (20:36).

^{**}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 This message was adapted from a message preached previously at WBC on 3/25/01 which was part of an expositional series through the Book of Acts.

So one of the core distinctives of our spiritual ancestors was prayer. The church in the book of Acts was a praying church. That was the secret to their power. They certainly were people of The Book, but they were also people of prayer, and they have much to teach us.

I want us to look at one particular prayer story this morning. It's in Acts 4:23-31, and it's here we see once again that the early church moved ahead on its knees. But it's not just the fact that the church prayed that's compelling. It's what they prayed, and what they were facing when they prayed it, and what happened as a result of their praying, and how we're so prone not to pray the way they prayed.

The Setting: The church faced a challenge (23).

Allow me to set the backdrop. A couple of months had passed since Jesus returned to heaven. The Holy Spirit had come, and the followers of Christ had begun to fulfill their mission of making Christ known to the world.

One day Peter and John healed a crippled beggar at the Temple, and used the event to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the crowd. Consequently, the church grew to some 5,000 men.

Motivated by jealousy, the Jewish leaders arrested Peter and John and put them on trial. Peter used the court setting, once again, as an occasion to proclaim Jesus. This infuriated the Sanhedrin, who told the apostles to stop preaching Jesus. In fact, the court commanded them to be quiet.

What happened next? Luke tells us in verse 23, "On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people." Stop there for a moment. That's an interesting way to refer to the church, isn't it? They went to "their own people" (KJV, to their "own company"]. Peter and John had just been with the *world's* people and felt their hostility. Luke told us how the world's people treated them in verses 5-22. In fact, he named some of them in verse 6: Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander. They are part of the *world's* people. But once released, Peter and John went to their *own* people, that is, to gather with the church family.

Is that how you think of the church, as *your people*? Sadly, some who profess Christ have no meaningful relationship with the church because they don't view the church as *their people*.

My friend, if you are a Christian, God's Word calls you to value the church, not because it's a place to get goods and services, but it's the eternal family to which you belong. It's in the church that your Savior intends for you to find your *own* people.

What did Peter and John do once they assembled with the church? Verse 23 continues, "And reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them." So they told the rest of the church about the threats, specifically about the prohibition of speaking in Jesus' name (18).

So the church had a problem on its hands. The Lord told them to do something that the world now told them not to do. In Acts 1:8 Jesus said, "You will be My witnesses." This wasn't a suggestion, but a mandate. *Go, tell the world about Me.*

But the Sanhedrin said, *Don't tell.* This, too, wasn't a suggestion, but a command. "Don't speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus!"

Any time God says one thing and man says the opposite, you've got a problem on your hands. When God's Word says that we are here by the six day work of our Creator, and man says we are here by evolutionary process, we've got a problem. When God says marriage is supposed to be for life, and man says it's okay to do whatever makes you

happy, we've got a problem. Are we going to give allegiance to God's Word or man's word?

What should we do when we face challenges like this? We ought to do what the early church did.

Think of what they could have done. They could have called an emergency church business meeting. Just imagine the discussion from the floor...

"Oh, no! What are we going to do about this public relations problem? Maybe we should write our Congressmen and see if he can put some pressure on the court system. No, that won't work. We don't have a Congressman.

Well, then, maybe we should get a petition together and send it to Caesar. No, that won't work. Caesar doesn't like Christians. He wants everybody to worship him.

Well then, what are we going to do? Maybe we should just lie low for a while and cool it on the Jesus-talk, at least until things settle down a little."

But that's *not* what this church did. They didn't call a business meeting. They called a prayer meeting. And you may be surprised at what they prayed.

In Acts 4:23-31 the church under attack turned to God with a prayer marked by four elements. It's the kind of praying we need to do as a church, as families, and as individuals when we face challenges. To help us memorize and implement these four elements, I'm going to give you an acrostic. When we pray we should p-r-a-y, *praise, remember, ask, and yield.*

I. When we pray we should begin with *praise* (24).

Notice verse 24, "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. 'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.'"

When this church met, they had a prayer meeting, and I mean, they had a *real* prayer meeting. These people engaged in vibrant, meaningful conversation with God.

And note, verse 24 indicates they *all* prayed, not just the leaders. "They raised their voices *together.*" How did they all pray together? It's hard to imagine that they uttered aloud the following prayer in unison. One commentator suggests that possibly early Christian congregations repeated prayers one phrase at a time following a leader.² Perhaps one person spoke as a representative for the whole congregation. Perhaps several participated vocally while they all prayed in their hearts.

One thing is for sure. They *all* prayed, and here's why. It was crisis time. If God didn't act, the church would perish.

What do you do when you face a crisis? Before they did anything else, the early church prayed. We can learn from them. Before us is one of the most amazing prayers in all the Bible. What are the elements of God-pleasing, God-connecting prayer? It begins with *praise.*

Notice the first words of their prayer, "'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.'"

When we pray we mustn't just flippantly rush into the presence of God. These believers began their prayer by acknowledging who God is, and they did so by calling attention to two of His attributes.

A. The church acknowledged God's sovereignty. They called Him, "Sovereign Lord." The Greek word is *despota*, an uncommon title for God in the New Testament.

² I. H. Marshall, p. 103.

The term appears only five other times (such as in Luke 2:29; 2 Tim 2:21; Jude 4), and is the word from which we get our English word “despot.” It signifies that God is the absolute master. He is the Lord.

Let that sink in. God-pleasing prayer doesn’t tell God what to do, but begins by affirming that He is the Sovereign Lord who has the power to do whatever He wants to do. And let me tell you, He has quite a resume of past accomplishments! Notice the one for which the church praised Him in verse 24, “You made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.” So in their praise, they acknowledged God, not only for His sovereignty, but also for His *authority as Creator*.

B. The church acknowledged God’s authority as Creator. Why did they begin their prayer telling God what He had done? Had God forgotten? No, but we often do.

Friends, if God made everything in heaven and on earth, then two things follow. One, He deserves honor from it all. And two, if He could make the universe, then there’s *nothing* He can’t do.

So here’s the right way to begin a prayer, with praise that affirms who God is. Jesus taught the same truth, instructing us to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name (Matt 6:9).” Right here, perhaps, is one of the reasons why our prayers seem so wimpish at times. We begin with a wimpish view of God. What a difference it makes when we begin our prayers, whether in private or public, *with praise!*

II. When we pray, we should *remember* (25-28).

Remember what? The church in Acts 4 called to remembrance two things.

A. The church rehearsed what God said in the past (25-26). They prayed in verses 25-26, “You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’”

Do you ever struggle to know what to say to God? Is it ever hard for you to find the right words? It is for me. I find some very practical help right here. Notice what these believers did.

1. *They quoted Scripture.* And in so doing...

2. *They interpreted the present in light of Scripture.* They actually recited back to God the first two verses of Psalm 2.

People often say that in prayer, we talk to God, and in the Scriptures, God talks to us.³ And while that’s true, don’t miss this. We need the Scriptures to show us how to talk to God.

This is key. The believers in Acts 4 are combining these two spiritual disciplines, aren’t they? They’re putting Bible and prayer together, and so should we. If we want to learn to pray rightly, then we must pray the Scriptures. And if we want to study the Scriptures rightly, we must pray. We need to keep these two friends together. Being people of the Book and people of prayer go hand in hand. More about that when we talk application.

So this church prayed Scripture, but why Psalm 2? It wasn’t coincidental. Psalm 2 was a royal psalm. It was originally composed for the coronation of Israel’s kings. When a new king was installed in Israel, it was cause for celebration, and for potential rebellion.

³ James Boice, *Acts*, p. 88.

The political transition from one king to another gave surrounding nations an opportunity to rattle their sabers. If the new king didn't have enough power, they might resist him—or even attack him.

You see, then as now, the world was hostile to the Lord and His people. And that's why the early church identified with the beginning of Psalm 2, "Why do the nations rage...against the Lord and His Anointed One?"

William Barclay explains, "The word translated *rage* is used of the neighing of spirited horses. They may trample and toss their heads; in the end they will have to accept the discipline of the reins."⁴

It's no different for men. They may rage against God and God's people, and while in the end God will prevail, that doesn't keep them from raging.

Beloved, the battle isn't new. It was raging ten centuries before Christ in David's day, so he wrote Psalm 2. It was raging in the days of the early church, so they prayed Psalm 2.

By the way, the rest of Psalm 2 (which the early Christians knew well, though they didn't mention it in this prayer) talks about how God responds to man's opposition. Do you know what He does? Psalm 2:4 says, "The One enthroned in heaven *laughs*." He laughs! Not because it's funny but because it's tragic. Which is why verses 5-6 say, "He rebukes them in His anger and terrifies them in His wrath, saying, 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.'"

Do you see what these early Christians are doing? When they pray, first they praise, then they rehearse what God said in the past in the Scriptures. Then they remember something else...

B. The church rehearsed what God did in the past (27-28). "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

The world's antagonism isn't anything new. Jesus Himself faced it as this church affirmed in their prayer.

Why did Jesus die? These believers told God why, because Herod and Pontius Pilate formed a wicked coalition, along with the Gentiles and Israelites. They conspired against Jesus and killed Him.

But that's not the ultimate reason Jesus died. The church prayed the ultimate reason, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Would you note that the early church affirmed their conviction in God's sovereignty over suffering?⁵ Who's responsible for Jesus' death? Sure, Herod and Pilate are. And the Jews are, too. And so are we, for our sins put Him on the tree. But the church in Acts 4 prayed it right, didn't they? God orchestrated it all.

Friends, God purposed that His Son would die and rise again so that sinners who were dead in sin can live again. That's why, no matter how great your sin, if you repent and put your trust in Jesus today, you can have eternal life.

We're learning how to pray, especially in the midst of a challenge. We need to start with *praise*. Praise God for who He is. Then *remember*. Rehearse before God what He said in His Word, and then rehearse what He did in the sending of His Son. He's pleased

⁴ William Barclay, *Acts*, p. 42.

⁵ In fact, the sovereignty of God is a vital theme throughout Acts (1:16; 2:23, 39, 47; 3:18).

when we remember the Book and remember the Gospel, and affirm to Him our belief in those great realities.

III. When we pray, we should *ask* (29-30).

Take a look at what the church asked God to do in verses 29-30, “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

John Bunyan once said, “You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”

Beloved, if we’re going to pray biblical prayers, we need to express in clear, specific language what we need God to do. And please notice something about what this church asked.

A. The church didn’t ask God to remove the challenge. They didn’t ask Him to change their circumstances. They didn’t ask Him to put their enemies out of office. They didn’t ask Him to cause the persecution to ease up. Their concern wasn’t for personal well-being or comfort. Rather...

B. The church asked God for help in fulfilling the mission. You’ll notice they brought three requests to God and they all had to do with fulfilling their mission.

1. *Give ear to the opposition.* “Consider their threats,” they said.

Martin Luther faced severe opposition many times. Once the pope’s envoy threatened him with what would happen if he didn’t stop preaching the Word. They warned him that in the end he would be deserted by all his supporters. “Where will you be then?” demanded the envoy. Luther answered, “Then as now, in the hands of God.”⁶

2. *Give us boldness.* Not relief. “Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”

Why did they ask for boldness? So they could speak the word, the message of Christ. Why did they want to do that? Because that’s what God told them to do, and that’s also what the Sanhedrin just told them *not* to do.

Know this. It’s always right to ask God to help you do what He commands. We need to learn to do what the believers did, and that is to approach God on the basis of His character and Word, and then to ask God to help us do what He has commanded us to do.

Augustine said, “Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as though everything depended on you.” Phillips Brooks wrote, “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Prayer for powers equal to your tasks.”⁷

That’s how the early Christians prayed. They didn’t ask for protection here. They asked for power, for boldness to speak. Their third request?

3. *Give evidence of the power of Jesus.* “Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” That’s what God had just done, right? In the name of Jesus, He’d just restored the limbs of a forty year old cripple. Now they were asking Him to do more of the same. Why? To confirm the message.

Does God still do “signs and wonders” today? He can do whatever He wants. I do believe that God did signs and wonders to confirm the message of the apostles during the

⁶ William Barclay, *Acts*, p. 42.

⁷ In Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, p. 418.

transition time prior to the completion of the New Testament (Heb 2:4), and that since there are no apostles today, there's no need for signs and wonders per se.

But that doesn't mean God doesn't still do amazing things, even miraculous things, to get people's attention and authenticate the truth of His Word. He does. He can restore broken marriages. He can set people free who've been enslaved to alcohol addiction. At times He gives physical healing. At other times He gives grace to die well. He can do whatever He chooses to do because He is the omnipotent God.

In fact, every time God saves a sinner, He's giving miraculous evidence of the power of Jesus' name. No one is too far gone for Jesus. No one.

Beloved, I believe we ought to be asking God to do great things in our day. Not to make life easy for us, but so we can fulfill our mission, to make disciples of Christ in this community and in every nation.

When I read this text, I get the sense that the early church was desperate for God. The essence of their prayer in Acts 4 was, "If you don't help us, God, it's all over!"

Let's be honest. Too often we lack that kind of holy desperation. We act as though we don't need God's power, if our treatment of prayer is any indication. Why is it that in the typical American congregation (and our numbers fit the statistics), of those who attend church on Sunday morning, only one-fourth return for the mid-week prayer meeting?

Beloved, we won't experience God's power if we don't ask Him for it. It's not complicated. He says, "Ask, and you will receive."

It's possible that some of you have never asked God to save you. Why not? God promises He will save your soul if you will but ask. So I'm inviting you *to ask*.

And that first step of asking is just the beginning. The Lord wants us to keep asking, not for salvation, but for power to live and fulfill our mission. Every day we need power to get rid of things that displease Him, and power to do things that please Him, and power to influence others for Him, and power to open doors, and power to overcome obstacles. And the power is there, if we just ask.

When we pray, we should p—*praise*, then r—*remember*, then a—*ask*. Finally...

IV. When we pray, we should *yield* (31).

By *yield* I mean we should leave the results in God's hand. In Acts 12 wicked King Herod arrested James and then Peter. Acts 12:5 says the church prayed earnestly for Peter, and an angel set him free. I would assume the church prayed for James, too. But James was executed by sword.

We mustn't try to manipulate God when we pray. Our aim isn't to force His hand. We should *praise* Him, then *remember* His Word, and *ask* Him for bold things in light of His Word. And then we should *yield* to the outcome of His will, whatever that may be.

Now, notice the outcome in Acts 4. Verse 31 says, "The place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." Did you catch that? God put His power on display in two ways.

A. God did something to the place. The building shook. That was one of the signs of a theophany in the Old Testament (Ex 19:18; Isa 6:4). God gave them a physical manifestation of His presence, just like He did at Pentecost. He wanted them to know He'd heard their plea, so He did something to the place.

B. God did something to His people. Namely...

1. *They were filled with the Holy Spirit.* And the result was...
2. *They spoke the Word boldly.*

This wasn't a "second Pentecost." There can't be another Pentecost any more than there can be another Calvary. Pentecost was a one-time historical event. The Holy Spirit came to earth and formed the Church one time, and He hasn't left since.

But His filling is different. We experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit one time, the moment we trust Christ. But we can experience His filling more than once. This was a fresh filling in Acts 4:31. Some of these very people were filled back in Acts 2:4, but they needed a fresh filling for the task at hand.

Don't miss the connection. The evidence of the Spirit's filling was the people's bold speaking. And the bold speaking was the direct answer to the petition they brought to God in verse 29. They asked for boldness to speak, and God gave it!

So what was the outcome of this prayer meeting? You see it in Acts 5. More miraculous signs by the apostles (12). More people being saved and added to the church (14). And more opposition from the authorities, too, resulting in more arrests (10), resulting in an angel opening a jail door (19), resulting in more preaching (21), resulting in the preachers getting flogged (40) but rejoicing at the privilege of suffering for the Name (41), which resulted in still more preaching, as the final verse concludes, "They never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ (41)."

In fact, you have to read the rest of the book of Acts to see the full effect of this prayer meeting, for in spite of persecution and untold challenges, the early church moved ahead and literally filled the Roman Empire with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now it's our turn. Friends, the mission isn't finished yet, and now *it is our turn*, and if we're going to meet the challenges of 2012, we too must be people of prayer.

Implications: In order to be people of prayer in 2012...

I challenge you to do five things.

1. *Every morning, pray over your Bible.* As we've just seen, when the early church prayed, the Scriptures came flowing from their lips. Does that happen when you pray? Do you pray Scripture back to God?

Last week I challenged you to begin your day in the Book. Now I challenge you to do something specific with that Book every morning. Pray over it.

This has helped me so much in my prayer life. From reading Georg Mueller's biography, by Arthur Pierson, I learned that this was one of the secrets of the life of a man who, a century ago in England, built orphanages and eventually was feeding over 2,000 orphans every day without ever asking anyone but God for their food and clothing and other necessities. Mueller was a man of prayer, but what was the secret to his prayer life? Something very simple. *He read the Word of God on his knees.*

What's that mean? In Mueller's biography, Pierson explains, "The prayer habit, on the knees, with the Word open before the disciple, has thus an advantage which it is difficult to put into words: It provides a sacred channel of approach to God. The inspired Scriptures form the vehicle of the Spirit in communicating to us the knowledge of the will of God."⁸

That's what made George Mueller tick. Pierson concludes, "It was habits of life such as these, and not impulsive feelings and transient frames, that made this man of God what he was and strengthened him to lift up his hands in God's name, and follow hard after him and in him rejoice."⁹

⁸ Arthur Pierson, *George Muller*, p. 138.

⁹ Arthur Pierson, *George Muller*, p. 139.

You say, “I want to be like Mueller. I want to really connect with God in prayer this year and see Him do great things for His honor.” Then do what Mueller did. Begin your day on your knees before the open The Book. Read the Scriptures, and then pray back to God what you read.

When you read a divine attribute, praise God for it. When you read a command from God, affirm your commitment to do it. When you read a provision from God, offer thanks for it. When you read something that convicts you, confess your sin and forsake it. When you read an invitation from God (like “call upon Me”), do it. And most of all, when you read a promise of God, claim it.

[See below as Pierson talks about the blessings of Scripture guided praying¹⁰]

So here’s challenge. Every morning, pray over your Bible. Then...

2. *Every evening, pray over your day.* Don’t just drop into bed at night. Take time to finish the day by praying over it. Do it individually, then do you with your kids, then do it as a couple.

A journal might help you. What did you see God do in your life that day? Thank Him for the provisions. Turn the unresolved challenges over to Him. Express your love for Him. Again, I recommend you do this with The Book open. The Book will help you assess the day rightly, and pray rightly.

3. *Every week, pray with your church family.* We’re people of the Book, so I’m glad you’re hear this morning to hear the Book proclaimed. But the Book calls us to be people of prayer, and not just private prayer either, but corporate prayer too. He tells us to gather together and pray (see 1 Tim 2:1-3).

We give focused attention to corporate prayer in our Sunday evening service, and in our Wednesday evening service, and during our pastor’s prayer partner time for men on Sunday mornings at 8:15. I challenge you this year. Every week carve out time for corporate prayer.

And for those who lead ministries, children’s groups, Bible study groups, Sunday School classes, make sure you spend time praying following the model of *praise, remember, ask, and yield.*

4. *Every challenge, pray with your mission in mind.* We’re going to face challenges this year. Health challenges. Job challenges. Financial setbacks. Maybe even the challenge of authorities telling us not to preach the Word, as in Acts 4. What are we going to do? Yes, pray, but let’s not just pray the way we’re prone to prone (“Lord, take away the challenge!”). Let’s pray with our mission in mind. Let’s ask God to show His power so that Christ is made known through us in the challenge. And one more...

5. *Every answer to prayer, give God the glory.* No matter what that answer is. Let’s yield ourselves to Him, and give Him the honor for how He works in and through us in 2012.

¹⁰ Pierson writes, “Perhaps the greatest advantage will be that the Holy Scriptures will thus suggest the very words which become the dialect of prayer. ‘We know not what we should pray for as we ought’—neither what nor how to pray. But here is the Spirit’s own inspired utterance, and, if the praying be molded on the model of his teaching, how can we go astray? Here is our God-given liturgy and litaney—a divine prayer book. We have here God’s promises, precepts, warnings, and counsels, not to speak of all the Spirit-inspired literal prayers therein contained... We turn precept and promise, warning and counsel into supplication, with the assurance that we cannot be asking anything that is not according to his will (1 John 5:13-15); for are we not turning his own word into prayer?” Arthur Pierson, *George Muller*, pp. 136-8.