**Principles of Powerful Prayer in the Book of Acts**

*Malcolm C. Davis, Leeds, England*

**Its Nature and Purpose**

Prayer is always an expression of our complete dependence on God, and often also of our urgent need for help and deliverance. But the primary purpose of prayer is to bring our lives into harmony with God’s perfect will for the whole of His world, not just our own comfort and convenience. Scripture indicates that deliverance from illness or persecution is not always His will. On the one hand, in the days of the early church, God enabled the apostles to perform miraculous signs and wonders, including the healing of the sick and the raising of the dead, to prove to the Jewish nation the truth of the newlyfounded Christian faith. But, on the other hand, Herod was allowed to kill the apostle James early on. Paul left a brother called Trophimus sick at Mileitus, and did not attempt to heal him. And, eventually, all the apostles died for their faith in various ways. So when we pray, we need to accept the overriding importance of the sovereign will of God both for the world and also for our own lives. Our truest spiritual blessing lies in recognizing this.

**Its Necessity**

In the days of the early church the general climate of persecution was against believers and drove them to prayer. Both the Jewish religious leaders and, later, the Roman authorities opposed them. They could not have survived without fervent prayer to God. Although we do not usually see such remarkable signs as occurred then, God still answers prayer for the sick and causes persecutors of believers to release Christians from prison. But perhaps the more comfortable conditions of the Western world have diminished the desire of Christians in these lands to pray, whereas our more persecuted brethren and sisters in the Third world are daily proving the real power of prayer. Let us, therefore, consider our ways, and be wise! For we all need to pray so that we may come to understand and to fulfil God’s perfect will for our lives in this world.

**General Principles**

Firstly, *prayer was offered in the name of the Lord Jesus and acknowledged His Lordship in resurrection*. Peter healed the lame man in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Acts 3. 6. In Acts chapter 4 the early Christians prayed for boldness in witness and for signs and wonders to be done through the name of God’s ‘holy servant Jesus’, v. 30 JND.

Secondly, *prayer was offered in accordance with the scriptures, using relevant quotations from the Old Testament*. This was certainly the case in Acts chapter 4 verse 25, where the believers quoted Psalm 2 verse 1 to support their interpretation of the recent events surrounding the crucifixion and death of Christ.

Thirdly, *prayer was sometimes addressed directly to the Lord Jesus, but never to the Holy Spirit*. The usual procedure in prayer is to address God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus according to the leading of the indwelling Holy Spirit. While it is unintelligent to address the Holy Spirit directly in prayer, since He prompts the believer to pray, it is evidently in order to address our Saviour directly, at least sometimes. Both Stephen and Paul did so at critical moments in their lives; see Acts 7. 59-60 concerning Stephen, and Acts 9. 5-17 concerning both Paul and Ananias.

**Particular Characteristics**

*United*. The phrase ‘with one accord’ occurs a number of times in Acts concerning prayer, especially in the face of persecution. A little more opposition might do us all some spiritual good. It would drive us to the Lord and serve to settle many petty arguments and differences amongst us.

*Urgent*. In Acts chapter 4 the early church convened an emergency prayer meeting in response to the wrath of the Jewish authorities, as they did also in Acts chapter 12, when Peter was in prison and likely to be executed. What a good example for us to follow in times of crisis!

*Unceasing*. Whether there was a crisis or not, the early Christians ‘continued’ in prayer. A regular prayer meeting is a ‘must’ for any assembly that is serious in its mission to the world, or suffering persecution.

*Utterly Sincere*. Their situation in the midst of foes ensured this. There cannot be hypocrisy in true prayer offered with a sense of deep need for help.

*Uninhibited*. A confident boldness and freedom of speech marks the prayers in Acts. There is every reason why Christians should approach God’s throne of grace boldly today, since Christ has made the way into the holiest of all open to us by His precious shed blood, Heb. 10. 19-22.

*Uncomplicated and Understandable*. Although we should be reverent and scriptural in prayer, we do not need to pray in a special language using words that are difficult for any hearers to understand, but in simple and direct terms.

*Under Control*. In Acts chapter 13, the church at Antioch ‘prayed with fasting’ to ascertain the Lord’s will for their lives and future testimony. They were marked by self-denial and self-discipline. Lack of self-control in prayer is no mark of spirituality and receives no answers from God.

*Usually offered kneeling*. This was certainly the case with Stephen and Paul. Kneeling is a sign of true reverence before Almighty God. Other postures are exemplified in the scriptures, such as lifting up the hands, standing to bless the Lord, or sitting quietly in His presence in adoring wonder. But kneeling is the usual posture advocated for prayer, expressing due humility in God’s presence.

*Unashamedly offered in any place*. In Acts chapter 27, Paul gave thanks for food in the presence of the whole ship’s company, believers and unbelievers included. Are we reluctant to own our Lord and acknowledge God our maker in this way when taking a meal in a public place? We should not be ashamed of the One who died to save us.

*Unexpectedly answered at times*. In Acts chapter 12, the believers who had gathered for urgent and unceasing prayer on behalf of Peter in prison were quite surprised to receive the answer they did, namely, Peter at the door in person, miraculously released from the prison. Do we really pray in faith, believing that God can and will answer our prayers better
and sooner than we can either ask or think? He is able to do so, Eph. 3. 20.

_Unlimited in its Power._ We have already referred to the ‘signs and wonders’ that marked the early days of the church, to confirm to the unbelieving Jews in particular the truth of Christianity. Today, we do not usually see such physical miracles, although God does sometimes answer prayer in remarkable and inexplicable ways. But the spiritual miracle of the conversion and new birth of a soul is often witnessed. All over the world, people’s lives are being transformed by the supernatural power of the word of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. ‘His touch has still its ancient power’.

_Universally offered and heard._ Both Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 and Lydia in chapter 16 were God-fearing Gentiles seeking after God, living up to the light they each had, from creation, conscience, and possibly some acquaintance with the Old Testament scriptures. Cornelius’ prayers to God were heard by Him, as were Lydia’s at the riverside, and both these seekers after Him were given an opportunity to hear a clear gospel message concerning Christ from Peter and Paul respectively, and so be saved and included in the church. While it is true that God will not listen to the prayers of a rebellious sinner, He does answer the sincere prayers of seekers after Him who have responded fully to the light they already have.

_Its Effect_

In a word, the prayers of the early church had a quite dynamic effect on their own lives and circumstances, and on the lives and circumstances of those around them. In Acts chapter 4, verses 31 to 33, ‘When they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together’, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and so completely controlled by Him, and spoke the word of God with boldness. Further, they were united and quite unselfish about their possessions. And so the apostles were able to give witness concerning the resurrection of the Lord Jesus ‘with great power’, and, ‘great grace was upon them all’. In chapter 13, the continued prayer of the church at Antioch led to the beginning of the fulfilment of the Lord’s great commission to preach the gospel to all nations, in the call and commendation of Barnabas and Paul as missionaries. The prayer meeting in any assembly is its indispensable control-room, power-house, and weapon against all the opposition of our spiritual enemies. And it also changes us who pray. So, ‘Pray, brethren, pray!’