



Devoted to Prayer

Acts 1:12-14

1. The Place of Prayer (verse 12)
2. The People of Prayer (verse 13)
3. The Passion of Prayer (verse 14)

In recent weeks, we have been working our way through the book of Acts. Last week, we looked at the Ascension (Acts 1:9-11). When Jesus rose up into the clouds, the disciples were on the ground. Our text this morning picks up what the disciples did after Jesus ascended into heaven. They did exactly as Jesus had told them to do. Before Jesus left, "he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). The promise of the Father is the promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told them that they "will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon [them]" (Acts 1:8). But they had to wait. They had to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come.

In our text this morning, we find the disciples traveling to Jerusalem, where they waited for the Holy Spirit to come. And while waiting, they are praying. We see this in verse 14, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). My message this morning is entitled, "Devoted to Prayer," because, this is what the early church was committed to doing. And that's really the point of application for us in the text today. Are you "Devoted to Prayer?" Does that phrase, "Devoted to Prayer," describe your life. Does this phrase describe Rock Valley Bible Church?

Before we get to verse 14, let's set the scene, ...

Acts 1:12-14

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

My first point is this:

1. The Place of Prayer (verse 12)

We see the place where described in verse 12, "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away."

As I mentioned last week, the ascension of Jesus took place on "the mount called Olivet." Sometimes, this is called, "The Mount of Olives," because olives grew there. In fact, there are currently some very old olive trees there today. Some think that these are the same trees that were around at the time of Christ. The Mount of Olives is a ridge to the east of Jerusalem. It isn't far from Jerusalem. Luke tells us in verse 12 that it's a "Sabbath day's journey away." This was how far the Pharisees determined it was lawful to walk on the Sabbath without doing "work." It was probably less than a mile away.

Jesus and his disciples were familiar with the Mount of Olives. It is a place where Jesus often spent with his disciples. It is there that Jesus told them about future events. It is there that Jesus was arrested, in the garden of Gethsemane, which was on the hill of the mount.

Verse 12 tells us of the travel the disciples took from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. One can only imagine the discussion that took place as the disciples took the short stroll back to Jerusalem. In some ways, it must have been like the discussion of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus after the resurrection. They were traveling along the road, filled with confusion, but grounded in hope.

Do you remember that discussion? Two men were walking on that road, talking about all that had happened in Jerusalem. Jesus came up to them, unrecognized by either of them, and asked, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" (Luke 24:17). Looking sad, they stood still and looked at Jesus, asking him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" (Luke 24:18). Jesus, pretending not to know, asked, "What things?" (Luke 24:19). And they replied, ...

Luke 24:19-24

"[The things] concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

At that point, Jesus rebuked them, ...

Luke 24:25-27

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

And as Jesus continued to walk with them, and talk with them, their confusion was reducing. And their hope was increasing! They were beginning to understand everything! The light was dawning. They were understanding that Jesus had to suffer and die. It was prophesied in the Scriptures. His sufferings were necessary! Later, they described their feelings as Jesus was talking with them. "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (Luke 24:32).

I can only imagine the discussions that the disciples were having after the ascension on their walk back to Jerusalem. Certainly, they were mulling everything over in their minds, thinking about what Jesus taught them about the kingdom of God, pondering what exactly it will be like when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Surely they were considering how they will be witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!

Now, unlike on the road to Emmaus, I don't think that there was sadness for these disciples. Rather, I think that they were gladness. I say this because of what Luke tells us at the end of chapter 24.

Luke 24:50-53

And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.

The demeanor of the disciples was totally different on the road to Emmaus and on the road back to Jerusalem. On their travel back to Jerusalem after the ascension, the disciples were filled with hope. They were filled with joy. They were filled with excitement. As they were walking on their way back to Jerusalem, surely, they were talking about Jesus going up to heaven. It's not every day that you get to see such a sight. But they got to witness a miracle! And they saw the clear hand of God! Perhaps everyone gave their perspective.

I remember in college playing on the basketball team. And after a game, there would be a gathering in the dorms, many on the team would be there. Many of our friends would be there who watched the game. And there would be this banter, talking about the game, especially if it was a big win. Everyone there would be giving their input on what took place. They would bring up some big play or shot that was made. They would ask about what the coach instructed us after a certain time out. They would comment on some questionable call by the referee. They would laugh at the hairdo of an opposing player or at some guy's crazy socks. It was always an enjoyable time reliving our memories and cementing them in our minds.

Surely something like this was happening as they traveled back, with everyone giving a perspective of their experience. Each of them could have shared what they saw. They could have shared the moment that they saw Jesus lift off the ground, or whether they expected to see Jesus return from the cloud. They could have shared their shock when the men dressed in white showed up, or how they couldn't help but to look up again and again, seeking to see Jesus.

But for all the joy and excitement, surely there was still some confusion in their minds. Do you remember their question in verse 6? "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus said, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). In other words, they didn't have any idea when the Spirit would descend upon them (Acts 1:8). They didn't understand fully about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). They didn't know how long that they would have to wait in Jerusalem. Yet, they believed it, so they were expectant.

Now, verse 13 tells us where exactly they went in Jerusalem. "They went up to the upper room." They went to **"the"** upper room. It's almost as if this room is famous. Almost as if the room was well known among the disciples. Now we don't know where this room is. But, it seems as if Luke knew where the room was. And perhaps, even Theophilus knew where this room was.

The best guess we have is was the room where Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples. Do you remember that scene? During the Passion week, Jesus send Peter and John on ahead to the city prepare the Passover. They asked, "Where will you have us prepare it?" (Luke 22:9). Jesus said, ...

Luke 22:10-13

"Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters and tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there." And they went and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

We don't know anything about the room, other than it was large. It was large enough for Jesus and the 12 disciples to celebrate the Passover. It's large enough for a meal to be cooked and prepared. It's large enough for 13 people to sit and have a dinner together. And this may be where we see the people gathered for prayer in our text this morning. And we see, in verse 13, how many are in the room together.

Acts 1:13

And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James.

I'm calling this ...

2. The People of Prayer (verse 13)

If you count up all of the names, you come up with 11 men. That is, the 12 disciples, minus Judas. But these aren't the only people in the room. At the end of verse 14, Luke also mentions some others who were in the room.

Acts 1:14

All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

We have some women. We don't know how many. My guess is a few. We often think of the ministry of Jesus only with the twelve men. And indeed, Jesus poured himself into men. However, there were some women who were close to him in ministry as well. In Luke's gospel, chapter 8 and verses 1-3, he lists some of the women who were with Jesus in his ministry. He lists three of them by name.

Luke 8:1-3

And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

So, maybe there were three women. Maybe one or two more? But also, there was Mary, the mother of Jesus. So maybe there were four women. We don't know, but probably a handful.

Also in the room are some of Jesus' brothers. Again, we don't know how many, but there was more than one, say a handful. So, in all, you have some 11 disciples in the upper room, with a few women and a few brothers of Jesus. You count it up and you have perhaps 20 people? And they are praying together (verse 14).

The only significance of the numbers is that it sets this scene apart from the next scene. In verse 15, we see Peter standing up among the brothers. Luke tells us that there were about 120 of them at that time. Which means that this time of prayer (in verses 12-14) is a separate occasion of the time when they replace Judas (in verses 15-26). So, it would make sense that we would deal with these things on two different Sundays.

Now, what I find extremely helpful from this list of disciples, is that they weren't the greatest prayer warriors in the world. Rather, they were inept in their prayers. And this is super-encouraging for me. I trust that it will be super-encouraging for you as well. It's often helpful to see people who are bad at things that you are bad at. It stirs us on. Although we may feel that we are poor in our prayers, we can take comfort that others are the same way.

Do you remember what happened just a few weeks before they were praying together in the upper room? Jesus was entering into his hour of temptation in the garden of Gethsemane. He knew what lay before him. He knew that he was about to be stretched out upon the cross. He knew that he would experience God's wrath for us. And Jesus was in torment. Listen to how Luke paints the scene:

Luke 22:39-46

And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation."

Here were the disciples, in Jesus' hour of greatest need, sleeping, and not praying. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus asked them, "Could you not watch with me one hour?" (Matthew 26:40). They couldn't last in prayer for a single hour. These disciples of Jesus were no prayer warriors. This is so encouraging for me, because I know how hard it is to continue in prayer.

Further, the disciples knew how poorly they prayed. At one point in their time with Jesus, they saw Jesus pray. They knew that they didn't know how to pray. So, they came to him and said, ...

Luke 11:1-4

"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

And [Jesus] said to them, "When you pray, say:

'Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread,

and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation.'

What do you think that they were praying in the upper room? I think that they were praying, "Our Father, ... who art in heaven, ... hallowed be thy name. ..." Whether or not they prayed these exact words, we don't know. But they certainly followed the example of the Lord's prayer, focusing first upon God and his majesty and his kingdom, expressing submission to the will of God. Only after acknowledging the Lord, bringing out their needs. I say this, because later in Acts, we get to hear what they prayed. And they prayed along these lines. In Acts,

chapter 4, after Peter and John were threatened and released, they prayed in this way, ...

Acts 4:24-30

Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

We see in this wonderful prayer of the early followers of Jesus, an acknowledgement of God's greatness and a submission to his will in their lives. Only then, did they turn to their greatest needs, boldness to speak and God's presence to bear witness to their preaching. And we read in Acts 4:31, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." God was faithful to answer their prayers!

Here in our text this morning, we find them in the upper room, surely praying for much the same thing. They would have praised God for the ministry of Jesus in their lives, for the death of Jesus, that paid for their sins, and for the ascension of Jesus, to sit at God's right hand. Then, they surely prayed for their need at the moment. For the Holy Spirit to come, just as Jesus promised. Perhaps their prayer went something like this:

“Lord, we praise you for sending Jesus, your Son. He did good among us. He showed us the path to life. He commanded us to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. We are waiting. Please send the Holy Spirit. May he come upon us. May all know that he has come upon us! May the Holy Spirit give us the promised power.”

I think that this is what they were praying, or something like this. And what is so encouraging, is that they had a promise that their prayer would be answered. Back in Luke's gospel, just after the disciples had asked Jesus to teach them to pray, just after Jesus told them to pray the Lord's prayer, he followed up with a promise to send the Holy Spirit. Consider to what Jesus said.

Luke 11:5-13

“Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Jesus here argues the kindness of God. He is way better than a friend. If we but ask and seek and knock, it will be opened to you. In recent days, Yvonne and I have had some needs. And we have been praying daily for months on behalf of our children. For our son we have prayed that he might find a steady job before he gets married (in a week) where he can use his video editing skills. He has been freelancing, but struggling. He was close to taking a minimum wage job. But God has been faithful to answer with a great prospect of a video editing job. We have asked and have received.

For our daughter, we have prayed daily that God would give her direction in life. She's going to Mexico after our son's wedding to help out at a school for missionary children. But her passport was delayed, because of the governmental slowdown due to coronavirus. So we have prayed daily for a few months. God has been faithful to give the passport in time for her to leave. It came just over a week ago.

God is better than a friend. He is our loving, heavenly Father. But did you notice exactly what Jesus told his disciples?

Luke 11:13

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

I think that's what they were praying to God. They were asking for the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised in his ministry to send the Holy Spirit upon those who asked (Luke 11:13). These people who prayed, prayed passionately. This is our last point this morning. We have seen (1) The Place of Prayer (verse 12); (2) The People of Prayer (verse 13) And now, we see ...

3. The Passion of Prayer (verse 14)

Acts 1:14

All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.

Note that this is "corporate prayer." That is, they all were "with one accord" in their prayers. They were together. They were in the upper room in one place. This wasn't, "OK, everybody go to your rooms and pray. We will come back together in 30 minutes." No, in verse 14, we see everyone in the room involved in praying. They were praying together.

That's not to say that there isn't a place for individual prayer. There certainly is. Remember what Jesus said about prayer?

Matthew 6:5-6

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Prayer ought never to be something that is done for show. And much of our prayer should be done in secret, where no one knows, except for you and God. But that's not what we see here in verse 14. In this verse we see "corporate prayer." Everyone together. They were "with one accord."

Literally, they were "with one passion." That's where I get the verbiage of my third point, "The Passion of Prayer ." Because, they were passionate in their prayer. And it wasn't merely one passionate soul, and everyone else along for the ride. They all were together in their passion.

Now, when we think about passionate prayer, we often think about the one who is crying out to God, with loud voices and with sighs and tears. We often think of Jesus, who "in the days of his flesh, ... offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" (Hebrews 5:7). That was true in the garden. But Jesus didn't always pray "with loud cries and tears." Yet, he was always passionate in his prayers. One example is John 17, which is often called, "The High Priestly Prayer." This prayer is full of passion, but it's hard to see it with "loud cries and tears."

But here in Acts, we see "corporate prayer." They were together. They prayed with passion. And the obvious question is this: do we see this at Rock Valley Bible Church? I asked this question to everyone who attended last Sunday evening at our outdoor small group. I love the answer that someone gave: "In theory." I would totally agree with this. "In theory," we have passionate corporate prayer together. But "in practice," we fall far short.

The application here for prayer is a corporate meeting of prayer. We have scheduled a corporate prayer meeting on Sunday mornings. We schedule this on Sunday mornings, so that you don't have to sacrifice another night out on some other night. We do this right before our Sunday morning worship, to help smooth the way for you to come. We try to remove all barriers We used to meet at 9am, an hour before our worship service. But now, during these days of coronavirus, we have moved it from 9:00 to 9:30am to reduce the mingling time after the prayer time. To attend the prayer meeting, you simply need to arrive at church a half an hour early.

And yet, sad to my soul, is that still so few come. Oh, before the coronavirus came to America, we would have 15-30 people show up. But recently, we have been more like 5-10. At least we are together. At least we are praying. I only wish that more of you would be "devoted to [corporate] prayer."

Now, there are several things working against us. I get it. First of all, prayer is hard. Talking to our invisible God is hard. I sympathize with the disciples who couldn't tarry in prayer for an hour. It's difficult.

Second, prayer can be repetitive and boring. We pray for the same old things. We pray with the same old words. And God, in his sovereignty, is slow to answer. Yet, the promise of Jesus stands true, "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (Luke 11:9-10).

Third, and perhaps most revealing, we lack a great need in our lives. The early church clearly knew their need. Their leader was gone. They needed some help. They needed direction for their lives. They knew that they were on the cusp of something great. But they just didn't quite know how it would all work out. So, they prayed. I do believe that if we had some major crisis come upon us, we would have more people gather corporately for prayer.

Suppose we had some great persecution come upon us, where this morning, hundreds of non-Christians from the neighborhood planned to show up in protest against our church building here. We are talking placards and loud, angry chants, wanting our building torn down, wanting us to move away. "We don't want you. Don't meet here anymore!" Do you think we would gather in corporate prayer to pray? I think so.

Perhaps our lack of prayer is because of our lack of need. I guess, I would say, "perceived need." Because we have great needs. We just don't see them. For our church to flourish, we need God to show up. For people to come to Christ, we need God to show up. For us to grow in godliness, we need God to show up. For us to be bold in our witness for Jesus, we need God to show up. And God shows up when we ask him to. Perhaps we are not asking.

Those in the early church were asking. And God showed up! Three thousand people saved at Pentecost! That's God showing up! "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). God was showing up!

Those in the early church were desperate. That's what we read in Acts 2:42, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They were committed to being together (fellowship). They were committed to learning together (apostles' teaching). They were committed to sharing their lives with each other (breaking of bread). They were committed to praying together (the prayers). This word in Acts 2:42, "devoted" is the same word in verse 14 of our text.

The people of the early church were "devoted to prayer." That is, they continued steadfast. They persevered. They continued on. I think it

was because they saw their need. They saw their dependence upon the Lord to continue his work!

If you could only go with me to a foreign land, and be with those in the church, who have nothing in this life, nothing but Jesus. If you could be with those who have a great need, you would see those “devoted to prayer.”

There is something about us in America, we think our needs are small. And in some regards, they are. We have great wealth in America, far beyond all countries. Yet, in these days of civil unrest and racial divide and political divide and divide about how to hand the coronavirus, we are a country in great need. Of any time for the church to arise and be devoted to prayer, it is now.

The big question for us is this: Are we “Devoted to Prayer”? Will we be “devoted to prayer”?

I have given one application of this: Our corporate prayer meeting. But perhaps there are other ways that you can pray together. You can pray over the phone with some friends. You can pray over zoom with some friends. You can pray together at the gym before work. All of these are legitimate applications of our text. Perhaps we are doing well in all of these. I don't know. My suspicion is not.

Lest we are coming to church today thinking that all is well, and we are doing well. Perhaps today is a day, when we acknowledge our lack, when we acknowledge our need for God.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 27, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.
