

January 5, 2003 by Steve Brandon



Priorities for the New Year (part 2)

Acts 2:42

1. You should pray with the church
2. You should pray by yourself
3. You should pray with your family

My sermon this morning is entitled, "Priorities for the New Year, Part 2." Last week, I exhorted you to think about the upcoming year and the spiritual priorities which you will place before yourself during this time. In order to understand what our priorities should be, we looked carefully at the things to which the early church devoted itself. The priorities of the early church are worthy of our consideration, especially because each of these priorities are so often repeated throughout the entire New Testament. These priorities are clearly listed in Acts 2:42, so please open your Bibles to that verse this morning.

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

The verse begs for us to have four points: 1) The Apostles' Teaching 2) Fellowship 3) The Breaking of Bread 4) Prayer. Last Sunday, we only had time to examine the first three of the four priorities given in our text.

First, I encouraged you to be "continually devoted" to the "apostles' teaching." Most of you have the contents of the apostles' teaching resting on your laps, open before you. As an application, I encouraged you to read your Bibles all the way through this year. I gave you a Bible reading plan that I personally will be following, and I encouraged all of you who were not currently following another plan to join along with me. (Click [here](#) to view the reading plan.) I have received good feedback from many of you regarding your affirmation that you are planning on reading through the Bible this year. Even some of the children have pledged to do this as well. I mentioned that the handout of the Bible reading plan I gave you last week was small enough to fit in your Bibles. Alec Garden kindly pointed out to me that the handout would not fit in his pocket-sized Bible. So with the use of modern printing technology, I managed to shrink the handout down to a page that is a few inches long. If you need one of these copies, just let me know!

If you are not going to read through the Bible this year, please let me ask you a few questions. Are you going to read through any other books this year? Are you going to read any books about the Civil War, about gardening, or about cooking? If you are, will you give the Bible lesser importance than to another book? Is there anything more important for the use of your time this year than for you to read through the entire Bible? Are you too busy to read the Bible? It takes only 15 minutes per day reading it out loud. I would strongly encourage you to make the Bible the top priority of your reading this year.

Second, I encouraged you to be "continually devoted" to "fellowship." As you recall, "fellowship" means "sharing." Last week we looked through about 15 of the 50 "one anothers" which are included for us in the New Testament. I told you how these commands describe and explain the meaning of true "fellowship." Do not think that you can experience true fellowship at Rock Valley Bible Church by simply coming Sunday morning and quickly leaving after the church service. In order to share our lives together, we need to be with one another throughout the week. I would strongly encourage you to share your life with those at Rock Valley Bible Church this year.

I was encouraged that some of you have caught the thrust of my message last week. Last Sunday, Dan and Christina Scott dropped something off for me in my mailbox. Apparently, we had not checked our mail in the previous day. So Dan wrote me, "We noticed that there was quite a backlog of mail [in your mailbox]. We wondered if maybe you got so busy that you decided you could not spend time reading both your Bible and your mail, so you decided to stop reading the mail. If that is the case, we'd be happy to engage in some fellowship to meet your needs by organizing a group to screen your mail for you." This idea of meeting one another's needs is a picture of the church in action.

Third, I encouraged you to be "continually devoted" to "the breaking of bread." In Acts 2:42, this phrase "breaking of bread" is most likely an allusion to celebrating the Lord's Supper. The key to any celebration of the Lord's Supper is a focus upon the death of Jesus Christ for our sins. This year, I would encourage you to often remember the work of Christ upon the cross. Reflect upon Jesus and remember Jesus. He alone is the One who can forgive all of your sins. He alone is the One who can strengthen you when temptations come. A look to the cross is what contains the solutions to all of your problems. I would strongly encourage you to reflect upon the life of Jesus Christ and remember Him.

Finally, this morning, we will look at the fourth priority which ought to be yours in 2003. As the early church was "continually devoting themselves ... to prayer," so also prayer should be a priority for your life in 2003! Like last week, my message is going to be extremely topical, because I have only one word to exposit this morning: "prayer."

As we begin, let me ask you: Do you think that prayer is important for your life? Is prayer a priority for you? I have explained what I am going to preach about this morning. You know that I am going to speak for the next 40 minutes or so on prayer. As you anticipate listening to me speak, what is your attitude? What is stirring in your heart right now? Is prayer so important to you that you are eagerly anticipating this

message? Or, is prayer a topic of which you give little importance in your life? Let me simply tell you all that I am burdened about your prayer life. My desire is to see Rock Valley Bible Church filled with praying people. Two years ago, when we were in the process of transitioning from Kishwaukee Bible Church to Rock Valley Bible Church and were planning for me to come on staff at RVBC, I put out a paper entitled *Envisioning the Future*. On the last page, I listed several of the "needs for the future of Rock Valley Bible Church." On this list, you will see that I specified that our first three needs were the following: 1) Prayer 2) Prayer 3) Prayer. Further, I wrote that "God will build His church. We need to plead with Him to build Rock Valley Bible Church." (Click [here](#) to read the full text of *Envisioning the Future*)

This has always been my burden for Rock Valley Bible Church: that we would be a group of praying people. I have tried to figure out why I am so burdened. Why is it that I should care deeply about this? When I see people who are prayerless, my heart often breaks. J. C. Ryle helped me crystallize into thoughts my own burden when he wrote,

"Never be surprised if you hear ministers of the gospel dwelling much on the importance of prayer. This is the point they want to bring to you. They want to know that you pray. Your views of doctrine may be correct. Your love of Protestantism may be warm and unmistakable. But still this may be nothing more than head knowledge and party spirit. They want to know whether you are actually acquainted with the throne of grace, and whether you can speak to God as well as speak about God." (J. C. Ryle, *A Call to Prayer*).

The essence of being a Christian is knowing God. The personal, intimate knowledge of God is the distinguishing mark of the New Covenant. Jesus prayed, "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee" (John 17:3). Jeremiah said, "They shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them" (Jer. 31:34). The knowledge of God manifests itself in your prayers to God. If your relationship with God is stiff, formal, and distant, then your prayers will manifest themselves in rote and regulated prayers. Or maybe your prayers will simply be non-existent. But if your relationship with God is personal and dynamic and heart-felt, your prayers to God will be natural, spontaneous, earnest, and passionate. You will be eager to pray. When Christ transforms a heart, He also places in it the desire to know Him and to commune with Him!

There is more to it than this. If your mind is set upon the things above (Col. 3:2), then you will be eager to pray, for that is how you commune with the things above. But if your mind is set upon earthly things, then you will have little interest in prayer, because prayer, by its nature, takes your mind off of the earthly things. So, I am burdened that we would be a church that prays. I take heart that I am not alone in this matter. Jesus is also burdened that we would be a church that prays. At one point in the ministry of Jesus, he told a parable, "to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Paul also told the church to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) and to "pray at all times in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18).

Here in our verse we are told that the early church did this! They were continually devoting themselves to prayer (Acts 2:42). Some translations point out that the word used here in verse 42 is not *prayer* but *prayers*. The early church was "continually devoting themselves ... to prayers." This probably refers to a carryover from their former Jewish life. The 3,000 people who were added to the church were all Jewish. As such, they were accustomed to having appointed seasons for prayer. Even Peter and John continued to visit the temple during the appointed hour of prayer (Acts 3:1). Yet, a quick survey of Acts will demonstrate that these prayers were far from any sort of ritualistic type of prayers which we might think they would be. We certainly can understand their devotion to prayers as a devotion they had to pray.

When we think about prayer, we may find it extraordinarily difficult to truly define! Various definitions and descriptions abound. Here are a few that I found:

- Prayer is a cry to God.
- Prayer is a product of a transformed heart.
- Prayer is an expression of a saved soul.
- Prayer is communicating with God
- Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God.
- Prayer is the pulse of the spiritual life. (Andrew Murray)
- Prayer is personal, individual contact with God. (Andrew Murray)
- Prayer is a true wish sent Godward. (Phillips Brooks)
- Prayer is the contact of a living soul with God. (E.M. Bounds)
- Prayer is asking God to do for us what He has promised us He will do if we ask Him. (E.M. Bounds)
- Prayer is conforming our will to God's will and not the other way around. (Irv Busenitz, Master's Seminary Classroom, 4/18/91)
- Prayer includes the worship of God.
- Prayer includes praise to God.
- Prayer includes thanksgiving.

Scores of books are written about prayer. We could talk about prayer all day long and long into the night. This morning, I simply want to give you three simple ways you should pray. These are not mind-boggling. They are very simple and straightforward. But I trust that they will be good for your soul to hear, as you evaluate your priorities for 2003.

1. You should pray with the church

Look back at **Acts 1:14**. After Jesus ascended back to heaven, the disciples gathered together, somewhat clueless about what the future would hold for them. They were depending upon the Lord in every way. We read, "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). The 11 remaining disciples were praying along with Mary, Jesus' brothers, and some other women. Just as in Acts 2:42, they were "continually devoting" themselves to prayer. Paul tells us in Col. 4:2 to "devote yourselves to prayer," using the

same word in this case as well. Here is my point: notice that we find that they were "all with one mind." The idea here is that they were a tremendously united group of people, praying with one purpose. They all were praying together. They were all praying to the same end and with the same purpose. There were many people, but they were all praying the same thing. Their prayer meeting was like a bus ride with many people. People on a bus may be doing many different things, but they are all headed in the same direction. They are all going to the same place. So likewise, at this prayer meeting, they were seeking God, as if they were "one mind" in praying.

We see this same thing in **Acts 4:23-24**. In that passage, Peter and John were standing trial before the "rulers and elders and scribes" (Acts 4:5). They stood before "Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high priestly descent" (Acts 4:6). After explaining their case, they were released. We read in verse 23,

"And when they had been released, they went to their own companions, and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, ..." (Acts 4:23-24).

The picture is the same as it was in chapter 1, verse 14, where we read that they were "with one mind." Here the NAS translates this, "with one accord." It is the same word in both cases. What has happened is that a bunch of people gathered together. When they heard the news of the release, they prayed to God, "with one accord." That is, they were all on the same page as they were praying. They were united in their purpose of prayer, praying with one voice to God. The church was praying together.

Let us look at another example of their corporate prayer together. In **Acts 12:2**, we find Herod the king putting James, the brother of John to death with a sword. This pleased the Jews, so Herod arrested Peter and probably planned on doing the same to him (verses 3-4). Look at verse 5, "So Peter was kept in prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God" (Acts 12:5). The church was laboring in their prayers. The church was passionate in their prayers. The church was praying fervently. Notice that the church was not scattered. Rather the church was assembled together. In verse 12 we can read that there were "many" gathered at this prayer meeting for Peter's safety and release.

These are but a few of the examples we have of the early church praying together. We could look at many others. For example, the leaders of the church at Antioch were praying together (Acts 13:1-3). The elders of the church at Ephesus were praying together (Acts 20:36). The church at Tyre prayed with Paul, and the Bible specifically states that wives and children were included (Acts 21:5). The point of our text this morning as well as all these other examples is obvious: **as a church we ought to pray together!**

You may wonder, "How does Rock Valley Bible Church pray together?" We do it in several ways.

1. Morning worship

In our morning worship service, much of our worship and praise time is prayer together. If you examine some of the words to the songs that we sing, you will see that they are prayers to God. Additionally, in almost every service that we have together, we normally allocate some of our time specifically to prayer like Gordy did a few minutes ago.

2. Prayer meeting before each service

Also, we do have our prayer meeting before each service. In case you did not know, we gather for prayer every Sunday morning at 8:45 in the library. We spend some time in worship. We spend some time sharing items for praise. We spend some time sharing requests for prayer. And we spend time praying together as a church.

3. Prayer sheet

We also provide a prayer sheet each week in your bulletin. Ruthie does a wonderful job in emailing this out to everybody by Sunday evening. If you do not get this email, you can certainly speak with her and she can add you to the list. There is a sense where we are united in our prayers as we pray for the same things together as a church.

Those are some of the ways we pray together as a church. But **how can Rock Valley Bible Church excel still more in praying together?** I can think of a number of ways. I am concerned that we do not take as much advantage of our prayer sheet as we ought to. Do you pray through this prayer sheet every week? Or, has it become your church newsletter? Personally, I use the prayer sheet each week, as I download it onto my Palm pilot and carry it with me throughout the week. I have neglected to lead my family in using it. Yvonne and I spoke this week and agreed that we ought to start printing out a copy and using it at meal times and for our family worship, because those are two times when we pray together as a family.

Another area where we can improve praying together as a church is in our worship service. We can excel still more by coming with greater anticipation to engage in our worship together. When we worship in song, sing out with your whole heart. Work hard to pray with those who lead us in prayer. Yet another area we can improve in is with our prayer meeting. I would encourage you to see the need for this time together. Peter Deyneka recognized the need for the church to pray together. Mr. Deyneka founded the Russian Gospel Association in 1934, which later became the Slavic Gospel Association. He wrote,

"If a church does not have a regular prayer meeting it cannot prosper and grow spiritually, because prayer is the power behind the program of the church. Even as machinery does not work well without oil, the activities of the church will not go forward as they should without the oil of the Holy Spirit which comes through prayer. ... I have noticed in my travels that the praying church is the growing church. You will always find it that way. The praying church is doing something for God. It is a missionary-minded church." (Much Prayer, Much Power, pp. 62-63).

For those of you who are attending our prayer meeting, I would like to encourage you to come with more anticipation. Perhaps you could come with specific things written down. Perhaps you can resolve to bring to the meeting an item to share of praise to God and an item for

which to pray.

For those of you who are not attending our prayer meeting, may I encourage you, as gently, and as lovingly as I know how, to make that time of prayer each week a priority. I know that for some of you there are genuine difficulties in arriving at that time. Some families have dietary difficulties. Some families have scheduling difficulties with little ones or older ones at your home. Some work later on Saturday evening, and every minute of sleep on Sunday morning is needed in order to stay awake through the sermon. I understand these things. And I trust that I have (and will be) gracious to you concerning these things. The last thing that I ever want to be as a pastor is an arm-twister, who forces people to come to things, because of my manipulative abilities. Others may play that game, but I will not, because it does not help anything. Sure, it may get external results where people will come or do something for the church, but such results are wood, hay, and stubble. If you have a genuine difficulty in coming to the prayer meeting at 8:45 on Sunday mornings, do not feel obligated to come. But if you simply have not made attendance at our prayer meeting a priority for your family, I would ask you to consider your priorities for the upcoming year.

Personally, I am very encouraged and excited with the number of families who have made this commitment to come and pray with us each Sunday morning. Several families have made clear commitments and sacrifices in order to attend. I simply want to do what I can do to continue to propagate a priority within our church to pray. I believe that **this prayer meeting is a very important meeting** in the life of our church.

I can think of a few other ways in which we can excel in this matter of prayer. Here in Acts 12, the early church gathered because of a crisis. Peter's life was at stake. Perhaps we should be more aware of the crises in the lives of those around us. When we have a major sickness in the church, or when someone is undergoing surgery, or when someone is unemployed, or when we have a specific event at the church, then perhaps we should consider gathering to pray at that time. For instance, we recently had a Children's Christmas program. Perhaps we could have had a special meeting to pray specifically for the lost who will hear the gospel at that event. Pray that God would open their eyes. Perhaps we should have had a special meeting afterwards to pray for those who heard the gospel presented. Would you and your family attend if we did this? If you would attend, I would love it. It would be a genuine expression of your zeal toward God. If you would not attend, perhaps it is because you do not believe that it would do any good anyway.

The desire to pray together was the attitude of the early church. Let me finish the story from Acts 12. You remember the situation; Peter is in prison. The next day he is going to be brought before Herod, who had just murdered James. Peter is sleeping between two soldiers. He is bound with two chains. Soldiers are guarding the door (verse 6). Then, an angel appears before Peter and wakes him up (verse 7). Peter's chains fall off, and the angel says, "follow me" (verse 8). Peter did not know whether he was dreaming or whether it was real (verse 9). He walked right past two sets of security guards and when he came to the iron gate leading to the city, it opened up automatically for them (verse 10). He then travels to the house of Mary. It is at Mary's house that "many people were gathered together and were praying" (verse 12). He knocks on the door and a girl named Rhoda comes to the door and recognizes his voice (verse 13). She is so excited to see that it was Peter that she did not let him in (verse 14). Rather, she runs to the people and "announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate" (verse 15). First they said, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept on insisting. Then they said, "It is his angel." So it seems as if they were saying, "Yeah, right", or "Ho-hum", or "Rhoda, stop bothering us, we need to pray that Peter will be released from prison." Finally, Peter was let in and everyone was amazed!

The early church was not perfect in their prayers. Neither are we. We can at least try! At this point, I want to quote a relatively obscure preacher (myself). In a sermon last February, I said,

"My greatest desire is for us to look at Rock Valley Bible Church in ten years and say, 'God built this church.' Perhaps someone will come to one of us and say, 'How do you know that God built your church? Was it not your skills and talents?' We'll be able to say, 'No, God built it, because we have been on our knees together as a church pleading His mercy. This has been our constant heart-beat. We are a praying people.'" (Feb. 17, 2002, "The Needs of Rock Valley Bible Church.").

If we are going to be able to say this ten years from now (in 2012), then prayer together needs to be a reality **this year**. Will 2003 be a year when you commit yourself to praying with the church?

We have talked about the need to pray with the church. I want to turn our attention now to the second way that we should pray.

2. You should pray by yourself

We see this point modeled in the early church as well. Let us examine **Acts 9:11**. This is the story of Saul of Tarsus, who was wondrously converted on his way to Damascus to pillage the church. You remember how "a light from heaven flashed around him" (verse 3) and blinded him (verse 8). You remember how Jesus appeared to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (verse 4). Saul was led by the hand into Damascus where he neither ate nor drank (verses 8-9). Then, the Lord appeared to Ananias and said,

"Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying." (Acts 9:11)

The idea here is that Saul was now a converted man, who was praying to the Lord. The Lord told Ananias to go see Saul, precisely because he is praying, "for behold, he is praying." We can only imagine that Saul is praying alone. Though he is in the house of Judas, we hear nothing of him praying with his household. Saul was praying alone, trying to figure this blindness thing out.

Let me give you another example, this time from **Acts 9:40**. There, we see Peter in Joppa attending to a disciple named Tabitha (verse 36), whose name in Greek was Dorcas. Dorcas had died (verse 37). Peter went to her home, where he found many widows weeping over her death (verse 39). Then, in verse 40 we read,

"But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body said, 'Tabitha, arise.' And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up."

Here, again, we find someone praying alone to God. In this case, it is Peter who is praying alone. Before he prayed over Tabitha's dead body, he "sent them all out" of the room. Then, he "knelt down and prayed." Praying alone was a practice of Peter. In **Acts 10:9**, we read that "Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray." Peter was on the roof alone praying. His servants were in the house, making preparations for the meal (verse 10). But Peter was praying alone.

Perhaps it is an obvious point that you should pray by yourself. But I feel that it is necessary to mention it because private prayer is the foundation to public prayer. Unless you pray by yourself, then your prayers with the church will be fruitless. Praying in public without praying in private is like running a marathon without training. Praying with the church without praying by yourself is like trying to stop a forest fire with a garden hose. It is well known that Hudson Taylor's goal as a missionary to inland China was to "move man through God, by prayer alone." Hudson Taylor did this. You need only to read a biography about him to discover all of the ways in which he trusted in God's Sovereignty to move in man's hearts to accomplish what he could never accomplish alone. Perhaps what is not so well known is that Hudson Taylor's father, who spoke so often of the necessity of maintaining the life of the soul by prayer and Bible study, "arranged for every one in the house to have at least half an hour daily, alone with God" (The Growth of a Soul, p. 49).

It is important to carve out some time for yourself to pray to God. In the first six verses of Acts 6, we see the first problem arise in the early church. The "disciples were increasing in number" (verse 1). The apostles could no longer administrate everything that was going on in the church. The Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food (verse 1). The apostles could not do everything. So, they assigned the task of serving tables to seven qualified men. Look closely at verse 4, "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

It is very true that we are to be constantly praying to God in everything that we do (driving the car, home-schooling your children, weeding your garden). That is the only way that you can obey Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). It is the only way that Paul could write, "we give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers" (1 Thess. 1:2). But, there is another truth that you need to catch: the apostles did not think that they could pray and serve tables at the same time. This demonstrates their devotion to individual prayer. John Piper points out,

"If [the apostles] had thought of prayer as something you do while washing dishes or cooking, ... they would not have seen table-serving as a threat to prayer. Prayer was a time-consuming labor during which other duties had to be set aside" (John Piper, Brothers, We are NOT Professionals, p. 61).

They understood that an important aspect of prayer is to pray alone, by themselves, uninterrupted and unencumbered by the worries of the world. They knew of the importance of Jesus' words, "When you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matt. 6:6). I know that this is hard to do.

For you ladies, I realize that your time at home when your husband is gone is your time. I know that there is a lot to do. But I would encourage you to carve out some time every day for what is important: Bible reading and prayer. Make it like clockwork. I appreciate how Yvonne has carved out this time for our children and for herself. Every morning, immediately after breakfast, the children are in their room for their quiet times for 30 minutes every day. For each child this means something different. For some of our children, it means listening to one side of a Bible tape, which lasts for 30 minutes. When the tape is finished, quiet time is finished. For Carissa, she spends much of this time reading her Bible. Yvonne has this time alone as she reads the Bible and enjoys her hot tea. This quiet time has become such a habit in the lives of our children. Yvonne was gone recently in the morning, but Carissa asked me, "Dad, since we are on vacation and mom is not home, do we still need to have our quiet times?" For the most part, if the phone rings during this time, she does not answer it. You tell me, what's more important, talking with God or talking with a telemarketer? Ladies, please make the time. Perhaps one of your children will be the next Hudson Taylor!

For you men, it is probably more difficult. You leave early for work. You are buried with things to do at work. You come home late and all of the demands of the home are all around you (your wife, your children, your house repairs, your yard, your automobile, and so forth). Sometimes you bring work home or have to work in the evening. For some of you, it is worse than this, because your schedule is constantly changing, and you cannot depend upon a regular time everyday. Perhaps you have time during your lunch break. You could head to the car or something; I used to do that at times. You could find a quiet room that perhaps nobody is using where you work. I have done that. Perhaps you should come home a half an hour later. Perhaps you should get up early before work. Perhaps you should be disciplined with your children's bedtimes, so that you can have time with the Lord at night. I am going to tell you to somehow find the time to be "continually devoted ... to prayer," as the early church was. "He who is too busy to pray will be too busy to live a holy life" (The Complete Works of E. M. Bounds on Prayer, p. 342).

For me, you may think that finding time to pray alone is easy, but I struggle in this regard as well. My job description as a pastor of this church is found in verse 4: "I will devote myself to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Devotion to prayer and the ministry of the word is my life! Certainly it should be easy for me, then, right? Well, that is not quite the case! Each morning, first thing on my agenda is a prolonged period of systematic Bible reading, totally unrelated to anything I'm teaching. I do this so that I do not neglect any part of God's word. I do this in Hebrew, Greek, and English. Each morning, after my Bible reading, the next thing on my agenda is a prolonged period of prayer. Here is my struggle. It is simply one of faith. Each morning, I face this mountain of work that I need to do in preparation for the week. This includes my Sunday sermon, Equippers material, our worship Schedule, church newsletter, and so on. Additionally, I may have a meeting or two with some of you. I have some phone calls to make. I have some emails to send out. Each day, I evaluate what I need to do. There are days, particularly near the end of the week, when my hours for accomplishing it all is quickly fading away. I am faced with a dilemma, and it is strictly an issue of time. Do I spend an hour praying and therefore have an hour less in which to accomplish all that needs to be done? Do I

reduce my praying time? Do I skip it all together? Here's why I say that it is a matter of faith: Do I believe that God can make me more productive when I devote myself to prayer first? Or, do I trust in my own strength to accomplish everything that I need to do without prayer?

Prayer is such a fascinating thing. It is filled with contrasts. On the one hand, it is so easy and so simple to praise Him, to speak with God, to pour out your heart before Him, to wait on Him, to meditate on His word, and to give thanks to Him. Even a child can do these things. It is not hard. But on the other hand, it is so hard to convince ourselves that time spent in this manner is worth our while. When we set aside time dedicated to prayer, we appear as if we are doing nothing. It seems as though we are accomplishing as much as if we were relaxing at the beach. Yet, in the truest sense of the word, when you are praying, it is some of the greatest labor and toil that you will ever experience. For me, the struggle goes like this: I am on my knees in my office praying. I am pouring my heart out before God. I am going through the lists of prayer requests I have received. The whole time my mind is saying, "Steve, you have more important things to do." I hear myself thinking, "Steve, you have better things to do." Or maybe it is "Steve, remember that phone call you need to make and that email you need to send?" The big contrast in prayer is that we do nothing, but wait on God to accomplish everything. And I happen to believe that God is "able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us" (Eph. 3:20). Do you? Will 2003 be a year when you commit yourself to praying by yourself?

I have one last point, which I will not have a chance to develop this morning. Perhaps another day I will. I can only mention it this morning.
3. You should pray with your family

Do not think that when you have prayed by yourself and with the church that your task of prayer is done. It does not stop there! Our **families** need to be praying centers. I tell you this for your own good. The happiest family is the family that prays together. The most secure family is the family that honors God. The Bible tells us that "Those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed" (1 Sam. 2:30).

O give us homes where Christ is Lord and Master,
The Bible read, the precious hymns still sung;
Where pray'r comes first in peace or in disaster,
And praise is natural speech to every tongue;
Where mountains move before a faith that's vaster,
And Christ sufficient is for old and young.

In these past two weeks, I have spoken to you of four priorities for the new year:

1. The Apostle's Teaching
2. Fellowship
3. The Breaking of Bread
4. Prayer

I know that I have given you a lot to apply. It will only happen as you "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" (Deut. 6:5). It will only happen as you daily trust on His goodness and grace to help you. It will only happen as you look to Christ for your strength. The early church was "continually devoted" to these things, can we not do the same?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 5, 2002 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

APPENDIX -

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

Rock Valley Bible Church
"Envisioning the future"
February 25, 2001

History of Rock Valley Bible Church

The Pearsons began attending Kishwaukee Bible Church early in 1997. Later that year, the Sosnowskis began attending KBC. In February of 1998, the Iversens began attending. A few months later, the Belongers began as well.

With four families from Rockford beginning to attend our church in DeKalb, we had a meeting in the Spring of 1998 at Frank Yonke's house after church one Sunday in which we discussed our desires to begin a Bible study in Rockford, with the goal of perhaps it blossoming into a church.

Calling ourselves, "Rockford Bible Fellowship," we began a Bible study in the Pearsons' home on July 2nd, 1998, which we established to glorify God and to exalt Jesus Christ.

We produced a brochure, which read, in part, "The Rockford Bible Fellowship is an outreach ministry of Kishwaukee Bible Church. It is our desire to see God raise up a local church in Rockford to carry out the mission of the church as described in this brochure." Our brochure describes the two-fold work of the church in Rockford:

To be a body of disciples

To do the work of making disciples

For the next two years, we met in their home for the first 3 Thursdays of the month.

On July 2nd, 2000, we began renting Valley Baptist Church.

We have been seriously praying about the establishment of a church in Rockford this whole time. We have taken steps to this end – we have done more and more things in Rockford.

- Ladies night out has come to Rockford

- Men's equippers has come to Rockford

- We now meet every Sunday night.

- We now meet in a public place.

(Visitors have come that probably wouldn't have come in the Pearsons' home)

- We have established an official name for ourselves, "Rock Valley Bible Church."

Tonight, we are taking an opportunity to communicate, in real practical ways, how we, as elders, would envision the continued establishment of Rock Valley Bible Church.

Next Steps for Rock Valley Bible Church

As we stated in our annual meeting report on Feb. 4, 2001, "We are praying and planning to send Steve Brandon and his family to Rockford to work on this full-time." We are considering this move to occur this summer.

Several factors have given the elders unity with regard to this decision....

1. The demonstrated faithfulness of those attending KBC and RVBC.

Those in Rockford have demonstrated 3 years of faithful dedication to this work.

2. The financial status of Kishwaukee Bible Church

Kishwaukee Bible Church is able to begin supporting a third pastor!

(We discussed the financial details at the annual meeting on February 4th).

Steve and his family would be supported as missionaries from KBC until the time in which Rock Valley Bible Church could be self-supporting. When we begin collecting an offering in Rockford, the offering will go directly into the Missions Fund of KBC, and will support the effort in Rockford.

3. Steve's work contract expires on May 1, 2001.

The practical effects on Rock Valley Bible Church....

1. The Brandon family will move to Rockford as soon as possible after Steve quits his job.

2. We will continue to meet on Sunday Evenings for a season.

The format of our services will continue to be the same. However, we understand that a church meeting only on Sunday nights has its limitations. So, one of Steve's first tasks will be finding and securing a location for us to meet on Sunday mornings. During this time, Steve would like to visit several churches in the Rockford area to get a first-hand feel for the "pulse" of the churches in Rockford. Others ought to feel free to continue attending KBC on Sunday mornings, or join the Brandon family in their Sunday morning activities, whether gathering for prayer or visiting another church in the area.

3. Depending upon God's provision for a Sunday morning meeting location, we could begin meeting on Sunday mornings sometime in the fall of 2001.

We will probably have some activity on Sunday evenings (i.e. flocks, prayer groups, children's memory programs, ...). Much of our Sunday activities will be driven by the size of our church, the needs of our church, and the access to buildings (or homes).

4. We will continue to have Men's Equippers as well as Ladies Night Out.

Steve's proposed future activities...

1. Being devoted "to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Steve is planning on having an office in his home. As such, in searching for a house, this will be a consideration.

2. Discipling as many in the church as possible, without forsaking priority #1 above.

3. Evangelizing as much as possible, without forsaking priorities #1 and #2 above.

This will require that Steve being involved in community activities. Current thoughts include such activities as playing basketball, coaching little-league teams, attending community events, writing newspaper articles...

4. Administering church activities. This includes such activities as planning service schedules, producing newsletters, delegating tasks, maintaining biblical content on our future web-site (www.rvbc.cc), ...

The practical effects on Kishwaukee Bible Church....

1. Ministry opportunities will be created with people leaving: music, nursery, Sunday school, leadership, ...

2. Steve will continue to meet regularly with the leadership of KBC and will continue to submit to their leading and guiding. This will formally cease when God raises up a plurality of elders at RVBC, though our desire is to continue to labor together with KBC in our ministry to the body of Christ.

3. Finances from KBC will initially support RVBC, until RVBC can be self-supporting.

We especially need to pray for the strength of KBC during this time. We need to pray that any holes created in our leaving would be filled and that God would raise up more elders and deacons.

Needs for the future of Rock Valley Bible Church

We need to keep in mind that Rock Valley Bible Church is NOT for our glory or comfort, it's for God's kingdom and glory. We are ALL missionaries (not just Steve and Yvonne) sent from Kishwaukee Bible Church to their "Judea."

Initially, Rock Valley Bible Church will not be a self-supporting local church, though it is our great desire to be a self-supporting church in the future. To get to that point, it will require work from all of us. The whole body must work together or else, the whole body will hurt (Acts 6; 1 Corinthians 12). It's not easy, and we need God's strength.

Several observations regarding this statement are appropriate. In many of these, RVBC is doing well, and we would encourage you to "excel still more."

1. Prayer.
2. Prayer.
3. Prayer.

God will build His church. We need to plead with Him to build Rock Valley Bible Church.

4. A servant's perspective.

We need to cultivate an attitude that we are here for the church, and not that the church is here for us. It is time for everyone to rise up and take ownership of the church by serving and working together. When opportunities are presented, jump at the chance to serve. Practical things now (for our services) include such items as nursery workers (we need nearly everyone who is able to help out with this), nursery schedule coordinator, building set-up, sound, treasures, clipboards, meals coordinator, ...

5. Be faithful in your attendance.

The RVBC family does a great job in this. When you make a commitment to be in attendance at events, as much as possible, your attendance is such an encouragement to others. This perspective flows from a servant's desire ("my attendance isn't for my benefit, it is for others, who will be encouraged to come"). Additionally, it is helpful for visitors to see a large group of people.

6. Look for opportunities to spread the word.

We need to be actively sharing the gospel with the lost and finding hungry believers, who are interested in attending our church in Rockford. People cannot come to church if they do not know about church. Be on the lookout for strategic ways to "advertise" (ie. Halstrom school ad; radio station publicity; possibly other Christian schools, bookstores, etc.).

7. Welcome and love visitors!!!!!!

8. Commitment to Kishwaukee Bible Church

Our relationships with people at Kishwaukee Bible Church, will naturally, over time, be reduced. You will find that going back to KBC is a genuine joy, because so many will ask and inquire into the work being done here. Feel free to attend any gathering of KBC in the future that you would like to attend (i.e. Sunday mornings, youth group, Keepers at Home, ... or even Flocks, when we go to Sunday morning services). But keep in mind that a focus on RVBC is needed greatly, especially at this early stage of things.

9. Fellowship

The more we are together, the more we will love each other and be genuinely interested in the work in Rockford. Create excuses to be together (i.e. the big game, holidays, children's events, ...).