

Over the last few weeks we have been working through what church is and our part in it. We use the word church in different ways – but very often it is to describe the building. What we need to remember is that church is primarily the people of God. Week one saw that it should be a worshipping church. Last week we saw that it should be bible-based. Today we're going to think about the next characteristic:

I dream of a praying church:

Where prayer is seen as a privilege rather than a duty,  
Where people expect God to hear their prayers,  
Where husbands and wives pray together,  
Where church members pray with and for each other,  
Where the leaders pray regularly together,  
Where the services are prayed for but where the needs of the world are not forgotten.

This is an area in which we have struggled over the years. Lots of people tell me they pray at home – but every survey of Christians suggests they pray much less than they think they do. The other significant thing is that when people spend time praying on their own it provokes a desire to pray with others. So, the research shows that where there is no desire to pray together it is usually because people are not actually doing it on their own!

So, praying at home is good but we are told we need to pray together.

Our next prayer and praise evening is on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> September and it would be great to see more people there worshipping God and responding in praise.

I was having a conversation the other day about the fact that when I was growing up I wanted to be a pathologist. I didn't do well enough at school to be able to study medicine, so that was that. Turn to the person next to you and tell them what you wanted to be when you grew up. Maybe you wanted to be a rock star when you grew up and sing in a huge auditorium. Or maybe you wanted to be an athlete who scored the winning try in a Calcutta Cup match, or maybe you wanted

to be a doctor who cured cancer. But almost all of us, I think, would say that when we grew up, when we were kids, we wanted to do something out of the ordinary.

I don't think many of us would have said as a child, "You know, I really want to grow up and live an ordinary life, and to have an ordinary family, have an ordinary career, and eventually die an ordinary death and not make a ripple in life." If you're like me, what I wanted most, as a kid, was to do something extraordinary with my life – and I still do!

That's one of the reasons I love the book of Acts in the Bible because the book of Acts is about very ordinary people...people like you, people like me. They were fishermen. They were blue-collar workers. They were accountants. They were stay-at-home mums. They were career people...just ordinary, everyday people. Something happened in their lives that they suddenly became extraordinary. They did extraordinary things. In fact, by the end of the book of Acts, someone describes this group of people as having turned the world upside down.

In the early sections of Acts we see that the disciples met together and decided that they would pray about what to do now that Jesus had gone and they were on their own. In chapter 2 we see that they weren't on their own – Holy Spirit came and filled them. Then the Bible says, "Tongues of fire sat on each of their heads." They started speaking in languages they had never studied, that they didn't know. People outside the room heard them speaking in languages and they started gathering around. Then Peter, this fisherman, who had never been to college, had no rabbinic teaching, stands up and gives this amazing sermon...first sermon he has ever preached in his life. Thousands of people commit their lives to Christ and become a part of this community. Something extraordinary begins to happen.

At the end of Acts, chapter 2, there is a description of the community that begins to build. It's an amazing community. Acts, chapter 2, verse 44, says, "*And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings*

*and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*

They are living for Jesus and everyone likes these guys. They have favour with everybody. Everybody they talk to wants to know more about Jesus. People are committing their lives to Christ. They're giving away things. They're generous. I mean this sounds like a lot of fun.

In Acts, chapter 3, things begin to turn. Peter and John go to the Temple to pray and as they're walking up to the temple, there is a man lying beside the gate. He's a guy who has been there every single day. In fact, everyone who regularly goes to the temple knows about him. He's just a regular guy. He's lame. He lies there. He asks for handouts every day. On this day, Peter does something different – he heals the man! The man gets up and runs inside the temple. He starts running around in the temple, jumping up and down saying, "I'm healed! You guys know me. I'm the guy who lies by the gate, and now I can run and I can walk." People start gathering around. Well, what happens any time there is a preacher and a crowd gathers? What's the preacher going to do? He begins to talk about the fact that this man was healed in the name of Jesus.

Well, when the authorities in the temple hear about this disturbance that's going on, and they hear that someone in there is using the name of Jesus, the guy they had put to death a few weeks before, they said, "Wait a minute. This...no, no, no. This isn't good." At this point, things change forever for this group of believers because for the first time, they're in trouble. So, they arrest Peter and John and because it's night and the court doesn't meet until the next morning, they throw them in jail. They spend the night in jail.

The next morning, they bring them in. They bring them into the chamber where this tribunal meets. It's the high priest. It's the high priest's relatives. It's some of the scribes...the lawyers. It's the

Pharisees. They all meet in this religious council. When they bring Peter and John in, they know where they are. They are very familiar because just a few weeks before, when Jesus was arrested, this was the room He was brought to. Peter and John had followed along and John had been in that room. John had seen Jesus face this exact same council of men.

Acts 4:8-14 *With that, Peter, full of the Holy Spirit, let loose: By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the One you killed on a cross, the One God raised from the dead, by means of his name this man stands before you healthy and whole. Jesus is 'the stone you masons threw out, which is now the cornerstone.' Salvation comes no other way; no other name has been or will be given to us by which we can be saved, only this one."*  
*They couldn't take their eyes off them—Peter and John standing there so confident, so sure of themselves!*

They want to stop Peter and John but there's the guy who couldn't walk leaping about the place – so they had a meeting to work out what to do. Vs 18-22 *They called them back and warned them that they were on no account ever again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John spoke right back, "Whether it's right in God's eyes to listen to you rather than to God, you decide. As for us, there's no question—we can't keep quiet about what we've seen and heard."*

*The religious leaders renewed their threats, but then released them. They couldn't come up with a charge that would stick, that would keep them in jail. The people wouldn't have stood for it—they were all praising God over what had happened. The man who had been miraculously healed was over forty years old.*

This isn't the village synagogue. This is the temple in Jerusalem. The high priest is the one who has told them, "Don't speak about Jesus anymore." This would be like a Catholic being before the Pope, and the Pope saying, "I don't want you to say that ever again." This is a major thing. You see if they disobey the high priest, if they disobey this council, not only will they be in trouble, their family will be in trouble. Their extended family will be in trouble. It's conceivable that

their grandparents could be kicked out of the synagogue, and their children could be kicked out of the synagogue.

Not only that, but these men have the power to arrest them and hold them in prison. In fact, they've shown with Jesus that these same men have the ability to manipulate the Roman court system. They could have them put to death.

So let's think about that in our own context. What would you do...what would I do if I were called before a judge, and the judge told me, "Don't say the name of Jesus again. If you do, we will take your house. We will take your car. We will arrest your mother. We will put your children in jail, and you will go on trial for your life. Do you understand?" What would you do?

We'll pick it up in verse 23, "*When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God.*" So they tell this whole group of believers, "Here is the deal. We have been threatened to not ever use the name of Jesus. What are we going to do?" They said, "Well, let's pray."

Isn't it interesting that they don't ask for safety. They didn't say, "Lord, we've been threatened. Please protect us from their threats. Please keep us from being put in jail." Now, I'll be honest with you a lot of my prayer is focused on safety – I pray for my family to be safe.

They didn't pray for comfort either. This was a very uncomfortable situation, but they didn't say a word about the Lord making it easier and more comfortable for them.

I mean how often do we pray for our comfort? There is nothing wrong with that, but how much of our prayer is focused on, "Lord, take away this thing that hurts. Lord, help me get this job. Help me get this house. Help me get this car. Help me move ahead in life. Lord, help me stay comfortable." Again, nothing wrong with praying for comfort, but the question is...Why didn't these people pray for comfort?

The other thing they didn't pray for...they didn't pray for victory. They didn't pray to win. This was definitely a contest, and we know in a contest we pray to win. In this case there were definite good guys and bad guys. There was no doubt about that. Even at that, they didn't pray, "Lord, let these rulers be put to shame. Lord, let us triumph. Let us win. Let us be the conquerors and the victors in this battle." They didn't even pray to win. They didn't pray for revenge. Think about it. These are the people who arrested the Son of God. These are the people who had Him beaten to within an inch of His life. These are the guys who took Jesus before the Roman rulers and had Him crucified and put to death. And yet, there is not one word in this prayer about...Lord, put them to shame. Lord, bring harm to them. Lord, pay them back for what they did to You and to us.

Why is that? Well, let me be careful here. There is nothing at all wrong with praying for comfort and safety. There is nothing wrong with praying that we win over evil. Those are all important things. The problem is when that becomes the sum total of our prayer. When my prayer basically could be summed up as this, "Lord, please let me keep my comfortable, ordinary life. Lord, please restore the ordinariness of my every day existence. Lord, I just want things to be the same and safe and comfortable." That's the mistake we make. That's what these guys would not pray for.

Let's look back at their prayer one more time. It says in verse 29, *"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."* What did they pray for? They prayed for three things, didn't they? They prayed for boldness. Now, what got them in this predicament in the first place? Peter was too bold, wasn't he? Peter talked about Jesus in places he shouldn't have talked about Him. They said, "Okay, make us bolder to proclaim Your name."

What else got them in trouble? Peter healed the wrong guy. Peter healed a guy everybody knew...a guy who couldn't keep quiet about it. What did they pray for? "Lord, let us heal more people. Let us do more healing. We're in this predicament because we were bold. Let us

be bolder. We're in this predicament because Peter healed someone. Let us heal more people."

Then they said, "Lord, let's go beyond that. Lord, let us do signs and wonders in Your name." Why did they pray like this? It's because these people had been ruined for the ordinary. They had been with Jesus. They had seen resurrection power. They had been filled with the Holy Spirit. They had seen what God could do, and they could not imagine going back to their ordinary lives and their ordinary business and their ordinary home and their ordinary family, and so they prayed an extraordinary prayer.

This is effectively what they prayed, "Lord, let us live such extraordinary lives that they can only be explained by the power of God. Let people look at my life and say, 'I can't explain him. I can't explain what he does. I can't explain how this happens, except for the power of God.'"

I want to take a little detour here back into the Old Testament. In 1 Kings there is a story about Prophet Elisha. Elisha was an amazing prophet. He followed Elijah. He did all kinds of miracles. He advised kings. God worked through him in amazing ways, but at the end of his life, he is on his deathbed. In fact, the Bible tells us this is the end for him.

As he is almost breathing his very last breaths, the king, at that time, named Joash come to Elisha...come into his bedroom, and says, "Elisha, I'm desperate. I have to get some input from you. I have to get some advice from you. We're facing the Assyrians, and I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what God wants us to do. Elisha, you have to advise me. You have to help me."

Elisha raises himself up off his deathbed, and he gathers his last strength. He says, "Okay, Joash, here's what I want you to do. I want you to take an arrow, and I want you to put it in a bow, and I want you to open that window. I want you to draw the bow." So Joash put the arrow in the bow and then he drew it back. Then Elisha feebly got up and he reached around him, and he put this hand on the bow and he put this hand on Joash's hands, and he said, "Okay, shoot the

arrow." So he did. He shot the arrow. There was something about that that didn't sit well for Elisha. He said to Joash, "Joash, I want you to do one more thing. I want you to take some arrows, and I want you to bang them on the ground."

You can tell that Joash's attitude was like, What is this about? Elisha says, "Just do it." Joash pulls out the arrows, and he bangs them on the ground. The Bible says he bangs them on the ground three times. You know, I'm really not into this. I have to lead the army. I have to do this deal. I'll do it. Elisha, you said...there you go. Bang the arrows. Now what? Elisha gets angry at him and he says, "Why did you stop? Why did you stop after three times? If you had banged the arrows five times or six times, you would have won this war, but you know because you gave up after three times, you're going to win the battle, but you're not going to win the war." That's kind of odd but I think that when Elisha reached around Joash, he could tell there wasn't a passion. There wasn't this desire to win...this desire to be extraordinary as a king. He could feel, in Joash, there was just a reluctance. Then when Elisha asked him to bang the arrows on the ground, apparently Joash just took the arrows and said, 'You know, I'll do it. I'm not that into it. Here you go, I did it.' Elisha was saying, 'Joash, if you had just grabbed those arrows and banged them on the ground, just showed your passion and your fire, and that you really, really wanted to make this happen, something amazing could have happened through you. But Joash, you just weren't into it.'

Here's my fear. This congregation is a good place to attend but I sometimes get a feeling from some of you that you're just not totally sold out. You are here regularly but there is a reluctance, a hesitancy for more of God. Sometimes you walk out of the doors saying, "It was okay...nice sermon. Music was okay" - and that's it for another week.

Let's look what happens when these believers pray this prayer. Verse 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.*"

So...what is your prayer today? I mean is your prayer focused on...God, fix this problem. God, heal this need. God, keep us safe. Make me comfortable. Nothing wrong with those prayers unless they are in the place of praying, "God, I want to live such an extraordinary life that it can only be explained by your power at work in me."