

“PRAY FIRST.”

**Rev. Robert T. Woodyard
First Christian Reformed Church
January 5, 2020, 10:30 AM**

Scripture Texts: Acts 12:5, 11-17

Introduction.

How many of you would say that you prayed as much as you planned to and read the Bible as much as you planned to in 2019? Good, so we have established that we all failed to some degree in our devotional lives in 2019. But here is the more important question, did we give it a good go in 2019? Did we try? Did we make a conscious effort?

In other words, did we fail in the right direction, did we fail going forward?

At the beginning of each year I challenge us to take up the habit of praying and reading Scripture, to renew our efforts, to seek God’s help, to say this is what I will do, God helping me.

I feel a special urgency this year to call us to more faithful prayer. In my mind there is a convergence of several important opportunities for us as a congregation that call for greater prayer. These opportunities fall on top of our already on-going list of prayer needs for families, marriages, children, grandchildren, health, finances, future and any number of causes for anxiety, worry, doubt or just general concern.

Those of you who have cleared out your church box this morning found a book mark with five prayer points on it. This represents a call to specific prayer in 2020. Let me give some foundation for what I am calling us to do.

Let’s return to the scene of a crime that we looked at in Acts 12.

Acts 12.

This is Peter’s third trip to jail. It made me wonder if we would consider a resume from an Associate Pastor who had an arrest record and had been in jail three times?

In chapter 4 Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Jewish council, interrogated, ordered to cease and desist and released. In a prayer meeting the

believers were emboldened in prayer, they saw the hand of God acting in their midst, they saw that God was sovereign even over the rulers and leaders of the day.

Then in chapter 5 Peter and the apostles were arrested again but during the night an angel of the Lord let them out. So the people were further encouraged that the Lord was on their side and coming to their aid.

Now in chapter 12 Peter is back in prison facing a death sentence.

The believers know what to do. They have seen the hand of God at work before and are confident God will hear and answer them again. They have incentive, they have motivation.

I want us to notice four things about their pray and take them to heart, to learn the valuable lessons of prayer from them, from those who have been in the trenches in challenging times.

Notice, first of all, prayer was not a last resort, it was the first resort. They didn't try everything else first, they didn't hire a lawyer, they didn't write letters to their congressman, they didn't protest in the streets over the injustice of the justice system, they didn't appeal to Caesar.

Prayer is not an acknowledgment of defeat, it is an acknowledgment of faith in the sovereign God. They weren't shaking in their boots over the death of James, they weren't wringing their hands, they aren't saying the situation is hopeless. They immediately went straight to God, to the one completely in control of the situation and appeal to Him.

They prayed first. Pray first. Pray, First. Make prayer your first action, your first habit, your first thought. Before you do anything else, pray. Appeal to God. And then do the next thing.

That's the first thing, make prayer your first resort in every situation. And do that with your kids. Let them see the importance of prayer in your life and the power of God at work in your life and in the life of your family and your church.

What should we do first? In every situation, pray first. Pray, First.

Second, the church was together in prayer. They are united, of one mind and heart. There were many who were together in prayer. Not just one or a few.

They were together in agreement on the importance of prayer and the power of prayer. They had their theology of prayer all worked out, that God is sovereign over both the ends and the means, over the outcome and how that outcome is achieved. They knew prayer was ordained by God as a critical part of His overall plan and purpose. Prayer was a central part of what it meant to them to be a church and a central part of their worship.

There is power in a united voice, there is power when many are making the appeal rather than one or a few.

I suggest we do this in our worship time, in our Bible Studies, in our ministry meetings, in our council meetings, when we are gathered together for meal time prayers, when we pray at night or in the morning. Wherever you are gathered with other church members. Where two or three are gathered, and even when you are praying by yourself, knowing many others are as well.

Let's bang on the doors of heaven together, all of us, often.

Third, they were earnest in prayer.

Acts 12:5 Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

It was earnest, fervent, intense. To use that old KJV word of the widow, it was importunate, persistent, even annoyingly insistent. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord, he wouldn't let go until God answered him and blessed him.

Do you think the people gathered at Mary's house just prayed, "Lord, be with Peter in prison." When I say earnest prayer I don't just mean "be with" prayers. Take your prayers to the next level above absent minded, weak, anemic, unimaginative prayers. There are no "be with" prayers in the Bible. I mean prayers with spiritual meat, with Biblical backbone, with specific requests. Pray big prayers, pray Scripture, pray like an apostle. Remember who you are talking to.

God is not like the unjust judge who got annoyed at the woman's persistence. God is actually honored and glorified, because of what your earnest prayers are saying about God. They say you believe God is sovereign, you believe God is powerful, you believe God hears and answers prayers, you believe God cares, you believe we live in an open universe where God actually intervenes in human affairs and arranges and rearranges events, you believe your prayers matter.

Not only is it OK to pray that way with God, He invites it, and even delays to draw it out of us.

Fourth, there are special circumstances that call us to pray more than other times and in more focused ways than other times.

Peter's situation was clearly a crisis, an emergency. In just a day or two he was to be executed.

Our needs don't have a crisis level of urgency to them, but they are very important and much is at stake; our future health and direction depend on God's clear answer, God's clear provision.

God brings opportunities and challenges and things too big for us into our lives to drive us to Him in prayer and to drive us further along on the road of living by faith and living in total dependence on Him.

Luke writes in Acts that the gates to Peter's prison doors opened of their own accord. Well no, the gates don't have an accord, they don't have a will. They opened by the power of God in response to the prayers of His people. There are obstacles before us but they have no will of their own and must submit to the will of God. Let us make our prayers to the God who opens doors and changes hearts.

Very little happens of any significance in life, whether our individual life or our church life that does not involve taking risks, things that only God can accomplish. We have five such risks before us. And on the back of the book mark there is room to add other specific prayer requests God lays on your heart.

Will you join me in praying for these five things this year? Let's seek God together, all of us, earnestly, in the name of Jesus, that God might be the one who is most glorified in our midst.

Part Two of our call to prayer in this new year is this evening with Pastor Al Vander Griend.