

*Survey:*

## PRAYER IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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Mention of prayer is made so often in the book of Luke "Acts of the Apostles" that it occurs to one to think that demonstrating the importance and power of prayer is a sub-theme of this historical work. Let us look into the text to locate the theme in different contexts, where it occurs.

The first mention of prayer occurs in 1:14, following verse 13 that lists the names of the eleven disciples of Jesus, and it reads: "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers." The verse does not state what they prayed or made supplication for. In the context of the reported words of Jesus, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (1:8), we may presume that they were praying for the power of the Holy Spirit, with which they were to be witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

The second mention of prayer occurs when Peter proposed about a hundred and twenty disciples gathered in the upper room, that they choose one person, to fill the vacancy created by Judas's treachery and tragic end, from among those who had accompanied them all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among them, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from them, so that he must become a witness of His resurrection with the eleven. It was when the gathering proposed Joseph, called Barsabas, surnamed Justus, and Mathias, that they made their decision with the prayer: "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place." After their prayer, they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Mathias. He was, thus, numbered with the eleven apostles (1:15-26). They prayed before a decision, which was both symbolically and

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substantively important to the group's ministry of witnessing to Jesus. Though they pray, the place where they recognize the divine mind and will manifesting itself is the lots they themselves cast. Prayer, therefore, did not stop them from acting on their own accustomed ways of making choices or decisions. Divine intervention in this case is taken as operative in and identical with their conventional way of making choices and decisions. But there was no room for favouritism in the casting of lots.

Chapter two of Acts, which narrates the story of the disciples being filled with the Spirit, descending on them as wind and fire, does not explicitly relate it to their prayer, but is silent on it. Was the power from above given them because it had already been promised or in answer to their prayer? Peter traces it all in the Acts, to the promise of God, as stated in prophet Joel, to pour out His Spirit on His menservants and maidservants on "the last days," so that they should prophesy (2:18). The prophecy here is the testimony of the disciples to the resurrection of Jesus. This is what Peter is presented as giving in his whole speech in Acts 2. He does it the whole time by citing the prophets, particularly Isaiah and the Psalms attributed to prophet and King, David. The refrain of his speech is that God the Father gave Jesus the Holy Spirit He had promised through the prophets, and seated him on His right hand, making him Lord and Christ, who, in turn, pours out that Spirit on all to whom it has been promised by him and God the Father. This is what the disciples have received. Peter announces the promise as made to his hearers and their children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call. Luke's narrative states that as many as three thousand souls, who gladly received Peter's word of testimony, were baptized and added to the number of the disciples (2:22-41).

Though there is no explicit word in all this about prayer, the citation from Psalms 68:18 and 110:1 in Acts 2:34-35, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool,'" can be construed as an implicit allusion to the state of the church and its prayer as a time of waiting in eager expectation and hope-filled anticipation of the fulfilment of the promise and its own holy desire for it. That was the state in which the earthly life of Jesus had been all his earthly life long. The very next verse 42 of chapter 2 returns to the refrain of prayer once again: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

The last 5 verses of chapter 2 would go to reinforce the impact of prayer, in the sense referred to above, on all that the church was experiencing of fulfilment and realization of its patient waiting in long-suffering: namely, of the fear (of God) that came upon every soul, and the many wonders and signs done through the apostles, all who believed being together, selling their goods and possessions and dividing them among all according to need, having all things in common, so continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, eating their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people, the Lord adding to the church daily those who were being saved (2:42-47).

How it was related to their prayer is not made explicit. Seldom would an experience be explained in theoretically analytical terms in a school or house of prayer. It would only be addressed to the experience of the newcomers, calling upon them to discover for themselves how everything hangs together with prayer as desire, search and discovery or experience of what was sought. It is as experience and not as theory that it is communicated. Therefore, only in and as experience it can be appropriated, integrated and understood. If we today have difficulty to understand and integrate it, it is because our life style and possessions are no longer in common as it was in the early church. Both individually and institutionally we are too possessive, un-sharing with and un-caring of one another and of the outsiders in our thought and practice to experience the Spirit, which makes us all one in Christ. Our very prayer is too narrowly individualistic. The more we possess and privatise, the less can we feel the power of the spirit of Christ and of his resurrection, which heals the sick, as a sign of greater things to come.

It is striking, and could not be by chance or coincidence, that chapter 3 of Acts, which deals with the healing of the born-lame man by Peter and John, is situated in a context of prayer, prefaced with the words, "Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour." At the healing, the lame man responds with prayer of praise to God (3:9). Peter attributes his healing to faith in the name of Jesus, and attributes that faith itself as coming through Jesus (3:16). It is, therefore, most likely that he is referring to prayer of faith in Jesus' name.

Being detained and warned by the chief priests and the Sanhedrin not to speak in Jesus' name, the two disciples report the matter to their

companions, whose response Luke records as prayer to God with one accord: "Look, Lord, on their threats, and grant to your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word, by stretching out your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (4:29-30) Luke hastens to add, "When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness."

If the church prayed for signs and wonders to heal the sick, it surely believed the miracles to be the result of and related to prayer. Implicitly then, Jesus' own acts of healing are attributed to the power of his prayer. It is in this background that Luke is able to report a little later in his narrative, "through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch... And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them ... and they were all healed (5:12-16). The apostles were even miraculously freed from the common prison where the high priest had placed them (5:17-20).

Prayer figures prominently once again as the apostles' role, together with the ministry of the Word in the context of the complaint of the Hellenists about their widows being neglected as against the Hebrew ones, in the daily distribution of food. At this the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables." So they asked the brethren to choose seven wise men of the Spirit whom they would appoint to table duty, while they would give themselves "continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word" (6:1-4).

Prayer ruled not only life, but also and even more death in the church. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, serves as an illustrious example of it. It is amidst a Jesus-like prayer of forgiveness for his murderous assailants that Stephen die of stoning for his Christian witness (7:60). It is a special kind of prayer, namely one for one's enemies and persecutors, one very close to Jesus' own teaching and example.

The next instance or kind of prayer, which figures in the Acts, is one of intercession for a sinner from within the community of believers or the baptized. It relates concretely to the case of Simon, the magician of Samaria, who had also received baptism from Philip. Then the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to pray over the baptized of Samaria that the Holy Spirit might come upon them. When Simon saw their power, he asked to buy that power from them. Upon Peter rebuking him to pray God for forgiveness for his wicked thought, Simon himself requested the apostles to pray for God's forgiveness over him (8:14-24).

One of the most dramatic instances of prayer reported in the Acts relates to the conversion-conversation of Saul with Jesus, who appeared to him on his way to Damascus to arrest the believers in Jesus' name. Dramatic about this instance is not only the suddenness of its unexpected quality, but also its conversational character with Jesus, whom Saul spontaneously or unwittingly addresses as Lord (9:4-7). This is what makes that conversation an implicit act and exercise of faith and, therefore, also prayer. Saul is turned to him whom he was trying to chase or kick out of Jewish and human history.

Such a radical and deep imprinting mystical encounter with Jesus converted a persecutor into an eventual missionary and apostle of Jesus. His persecuting fervour against Christians must have been fired by the same zeal for the truth as he later demonstrated for the name of Jesus, when once he came to repose his faith in it. Prayer must have been the most natural and spontaneous thing to him, like the air he breathed to keep himself alive. Even as a Jew, he must have been in continuous conversation with God in history. His openness to experience was the hallmark of his openness to revelations and prayers of a mystical order. It is disarming of him that he confessed to them in his most intimate self-revelations.

It is again by reason of Saul's "praying," according to Luke-Acts, that the disciple named Ananias is persuaded by God to go to inquire about him in the house of Judas. In words that are reminiscent of the story of prophet Jonas being sent to Nineveh, Saul's prayer is the argument God himself is said to have given Ananias to persuade the frightened and reluctant disciple to go to him (9:10-16, especially verse 11).

9:31 speaks of the churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria having peace and being edified, walking in the fear of the Lord and multiplying in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and may in all probability be a reference to the church gaining strength through continuing in prayer. Peter raising the dead but charitable Tabitha of Joppa to life at the request of the Christian widows helped by the dead woman of good works, is again attributed to his kneeling and praying over her dead body (9: 40). It is a story exactly reminiscent of Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus. The conveyed message is that prayer can and does work wonders.

Another story, which would confirm and in part resemble what I said about Paul praying, as the cause and explanation of his conversion, is that of the Gentile centurion Cornelius of Caesarea, to whom an angel of God appeared in a vision about the ninth hour of the day (prayer time, as already referred to in Acts 3:1). It is implicit that Cornelius was praying when he received the vision, which instructed him to send for Peter at Joppa, who would tell him what he must do. Luke makes this implication explicit in the words put into the angel's mouth: "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God" (10:1-6; see especially verse 4). Verse 2, " a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always," makes it clear beyond doubt that what is meant is habitual prayer.

In a corresponding parallelism to the vision of Ananias in the story of the conversion of Saul, Peter receives a vision in prayer again, at the sixth hour and on housetop, reminiscent of Joseph's dreams, as to what he is to do next. The vision and the arrival of Cornelius's messengers coincide (10:9-22). If Paul was a man of prayer, Peter was not less of it. They both received in prayer their inspiration and instruction as to what they are to do in and for the church and the faith. Peter was able to use the fact of the vision in prayer to justify his action in living and eating with Gentiles (11:5-18). This was an important and decisive moment in the life of the early church. What the book of Acts establishes is that if the Lord worked with and through the apostles, it was because prayer stood at the heart of all significant decisions in the early apostolic church.