The Power of Prayer Cells

Third in the series: Prayer Power

# Scripture: Exodus 17:8-16; Acts 16:16-40

# Key thought: Bible prayer cells can teach us about the effects of prayer cells.

# Intro:

Billy Graham in a sermon called "The Power of Prayer" admonished us all;

"In this modern age in which we live, we have learned to harness the power of the atom, but very few of us have learned how to develop fully the power of prayer. We have not yet learned that a man is more powerful on his knees than behind the most powerful weapons that can be developed." (LI-PR p. 6)

This morning I would like us to explore another powerful way to practice prayer. When we think of praying, most of the time we think of our personal crying out to God. Even if we are in a group with others, we think of our prayers as our personal communication to God. This is true. It is the basic dimension of prayer, personal communication with God. What happens then when two or more people are agreeing together, united in spirit, lifting up their voices together to God?

That is what I would especially like us to look at this morning. Let’s call it a prayer cell, a time when two or three are gathered together in a small group to lift up their prayers as one. This type of praying is especially powerful. It might be a husband and wife holding hands at the breakfast table praying for a child to college, or grandchild in the military. It might be three friends bowing heads together around the dining room table, sharing a list of prayer requests before God. Maybe it’s a small group of 4 or 5 men kneeling at the altar at church holding up one another, their families, and their church before God in prayer.

# Moses and Aaron and Hur

This little vignette involving Moses and Aaron and Hur is a powerful parable in action regarding the effect of united prayer. There are three dynamics that I would like us to note in this short story of what happened to these three leaders of Israel.

## Moses grew weary alone

First I note in verse 11 that Moses was holding up his hands out toward the battle scene. The purpose of is holding up his hands was to hold his staff which represented God’s presence up in the air. To us, we would say it was to bless the Israelite army as they struggled. The holding up of Moses hands represented an appeal to God on behalf of Israel. But the point in verse 11 is that as Moses attempted to hold up his arms and hands alone, he grew weary.

This is a commentary on what often happens when we pray alone. We lose motivation. There’s nothing wrong with our praying alone. It is powerful when we pray alone. But we easily grow weary without the encouragement of at least one other person joining with us in the task.

## When Moses’ appeal to heaven stopped, the Israelites were losing the battle

What makes this acted parable so amazing is that we get to see the result of Moses’ appeal to heaven in the battle that the three men are watching from the mountaintop. When Moses hands were lifted up in appeal to God for blessing upon Israel, Israel was prevailing in the battle. But whenever Moses grew weary and his hands fell down, then the troops of Israel, scattered out in the valley below them began to fall back in the battle.

In one sense, this is scary for us as we contemplate our responsibility to encourage each other in prayer. How many spiritual battles are being lost because we have failed to pray? How many are being lost because we have failed to pray together, to support a fellow believer in prayer, to join with fellow believers in united prayer. Only heaven will reveal the answers to that question. Contemporary teacher at Boston University look at the positive side of that question.

Peter Kreeft, professor of Philosophy at Boston College, author of 75 books, writes,

I strongly suspect that if we saw all the difference even the tiniest of our prayers make, and all the people those little prayers were destined to affect, and all the consequences of those prayers down through the centuries, we would be so paralyzed with awe at the power of prayer that we would be unable to get up off our knees for the rest of our lives.

## When Aaron and Hur held up Moses’ hands, Israel prevailed

The next movement in this story is that Aaron and Hur who had accompanied Moses up on the mountain overlooking the battlefield began to hold up his hands so that his appeal to God, so to speak, was strengthened, steadied, reinforced. This way, Moses did not grow weary, his hands continued lifted up in appeal to God, and Israel continued to prevail in the battle until they were completely victorious.

I’m reminded of what Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane when he found himself struggling alone in prayer ahead of the upcoming crucifixion. He came back to his three leading disciples and begged them to join with him in prayer. Unfortunately, Peter James and John were too sleepy. So Jesus had to struggle on alone. In his divine strength, and strengthened by angels, he was able to overcome. But if even Jesus desired and saw the need for the encouragement of a prayer group, how much more would such a group be a help, indeed an amazing boon to our prayer lives!

# Paul and Silas (Acts 16:16-40)

## A missions prayer cell

The second passage of Scripture for our consideration this morning comes from the ministry of the apostle Paul. On his second missionary journey, Paul and his missionary companion, Silas, found themselves in jail in the town of Philippi. They had been severely flogged, and they were down in the inner cell of the jail with their feet in stocks. But these men were a team in prayer, not just in mission.

I remember the first mission trip that I went on. Since it was my first trip, I was not the organizational leader of that group. In the evening, the leaders gathered us all together for a time of sharing, and singing and praying together about the work that God had given us to do. We were to be a unity in spirit, in praise, and in prayer, not just a work team.

This was the way it was with Paul and Silas. At midnight, the Bible records, they were singing and praying as they suffered physically in their jail. The other prisoners could not help but listen to them. So here we have another mighty prayer cell, together in mission, united in suffering, joined in praise, and one in prayer.

## Powerful results

What were the results? You know the story. God sent an earthquake. It rattled the walls, and released the prisoners. But it did something more amazing than that. The jailer and all his family were converted to Christ that same night. And even the magistrates in that town completely changed their opinion and ordered Paul and Silas to be released. We read this story over and over, and we forget to think about how God honored the united prayer and praise of Paul and Silas. The power of united prayer is part of the lesson of that incident.

# Prayer cell opportunities today

## Jesus’ promise is for today too

Jesus promised that praying in unity together would have usual results. First of all, he promised that when we prayed together, he would be with us. Secondly, one of the powerful promises of the New Testament granting us answers to our prayers is given in the context of agreement in prayer by two or more praying together. Listen again to the words of Jesus.

“Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” Matt 18:19-20

It is not for us to wonder why not every prayer seems to be answered. Rather, it is our part to grab hold of this promise and continue to seek God’s face even as Paul and Silas did. We should seek God’s face in small groups as well as larger ones. Jesus’ promise is just as much for today as it was for Paul and Silas and the early disciples.

## Our opportunities for united prayer

So how do we put in practice God’s desire that we pray together? There are many ways.

### Pray when the need arises – spontaneous prayer

One of the best ways is to pray on the spot when the need arises. A friend asks for prayer, stop right then and pray for them if at all possible. The two of you joined together reaching out to God concerning the need that has been raised between you. I’ve been known to stop right in the grocery store and discreetly pray with a friend who asks me to pray for something.

### Pray together in task-oriented groups

A second way that I encourage constantly in the churches that I lead is to make prayer a part of the group meetings that already happen. Church people are always having meetings of one kind or another. Here at Copper Hill, we often need to get together as a council, as trustees, as Sunday school workers, as a choir, or for one project or another. So why not take a few minutes of that time to lift up our hearts to God in united prayer. That is been my practice and my encouragement for all the groups in the churches that I lead.

### Make prayer a significant element in Bible study times

One of the very best of these kinds of opportunities happens in Bible study groups. In such groups, we can intentionally take time out for talking to God about the needs of one another, and interceding for others who are not present as well. It helps to bond us together in Christ and give our Bible studies an added dimension of discipleship. If you’ve been a part of the Bible studies that either Joanne or I lead, you know that we always end with a time of prayer. That time not only lifts our requests to God in unity, it also helps to bond the group together spiritually and as friends in Christ. During that time we get to know each other much better too, our joys, our hurts, our families, our travels, etc.

### Special services for united prayer

Even in the days of Israel, before Jesus came, there were times when God called the people of God to gather together for prayer. How much more, now in the age of grace, should we in the church, take advantage of God’s great promises and gather together in services that are dedicated to times of prayer! This is why my wife and I have lead and encourage special services where the main agenda is prayer of various kinds. Another one will be happening on Monday evening, September 11.

### Prayer cells

One of the key reasons for this message today is to encourage us as a congregation to consider being a part of small prayer cells on our own. In each of my previous two churches we have encouraged the formation of prayer cells. We would encourage people to get together in very small groups of two or three, at the most 4 or five for the sole purpose of prayer. We recognized that a married couple could function as a powerful prayer cell, but in the ones we organized, the cells would all consist of people of the same sex. Three seemed to be the ideal number. Less and it’s too easy to cancel; more and the feeling of safety in sharing starts to decline. Remember the proverb that says, “A cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Ecc. 4:12). As pastor, I found that the prayer cells that I was a part of both at Bentley Creek and at Kirkville were invaluable support and encouragement to me. I remember one time in Kirkville I had to go to urgent care with heart rhythm issues. My one prayer partner was the first one other than my wife to be by my side. He was there to pray for me. I observed also that prayer cell members became stronger friends and often provided awesome teamwork in other types of activities as well because of their friendship bond and their spiritual preparation for their work. If you want to raise your friendship to the next level, form a prayer cell. If you need friends, join a prayer cell.

The prayer cells would commit to just a few simple guidelines.

1. Prayer cells would be either all men or all women unless the cell consisted of a married couple praying together. One prayer cell we had in Kirkville consisted of an elderly couple who were founding members of the church who interceded before God together every day.
2. Prayer cell members would seek to meet face-to-face weekly if at all possible. A one hour time frame works well, but many cells took more time. Very few took less. Remember that in Gethsemane Jesus said to Peter, James and John, “Could you not carry with me one hour?” (Mk. 14:37) There were a few, especially two-person cells, or cells that had already met together for a while, that could meet by phone occasionally. But face-to-face meeting is preferred.
3. The meeting place and time is up to you, but it works best if it is the same place and time each week. It will be a burden on the cell each week we have to figure out where and when we are meeting this week. Better to have a designated place and time. Places with some privacy for the group are preferred. Most of the men’s prayer cells I have seen have preferred meeting at church but very few of the ladies’ prayer cells chose that location. My wife’s prayer cells usually met at our house. It’s up to each cell. When I was young and pastoring in Bentley Creek, I was a part of a prayer cell that met at 10 PM. In Kirkville, even in the winter, for a year or two I was in a prayer cell that met at 6:30 am. I doubt I could do either one of those times now. But whatever works for each cell for a time and place is what you want.
4. Prayer cell members should be committed to meeting regularly. Being intermittent in your commitment discourages your fellow prayer cell members. One of the reasons for the number of three participants is that I found, at least among the men, that if I knew that two others were depending upon me as a prayer partner to be there, it was hard to back out. In addition, if one person truly could not come, the prayer cell still happened, as the remaining two would gather and pray.
5. Third, it is very important that the prayer cell members be conscientious about not discussing outside the prayer cell what is talked about inside the group. The prayer cell must be a place where it is safe to share the hurts of your heart. This is part of what gives it its power. If someone has a loose tongue, this trust is destroyed. (About the only exception would be if it had been revealed that someone, either a cell member or someone else, was in danger.)

# Conclusion

In response to this message, I’m praying that some of you feel led to start praying together as prayer cells. I believe it will add another powerful dimension to the prayer ministry of our church. I challenge you to try it until Christmastime and see what happens. I am looking for men who would like to meet with me for such a cell.