

Prayer: Week 4

“What does a praying church look like?”



- Welcome (5-10 minutes)

Talk about times when ‘navigation’ has become an issue!



- Worship (10-15 minutes)

*The Church of Christ in every age
Beset by change but Spirit-led
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead!*

F. Pratt Green

- Word (50 minutes)

Over the past 3 weeks, we have talked together about the importance of prayer; that prayer is difficult because it is a spiritual rather than a visible communication and it can be hard going, especially when we do not see prayers answered or when we experience ‘silence in heaven.’ Prayer is often described as a ‘journey’ as each of us encounters God in different ways at various stages along the way.

- Draw a route, showing the significant stages of your prayer-journey. Mark on and label the high and low spots.



Read the following passage:

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. Acts 11 19-26 (NIV)

A description of Antioch places it well within a cultural setting which we recognise in some parts of Britain today. The specifics (Chariot racing) can easily be understood for our own, culturally relevant obsessions!



P 65/66 Coffey

Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, ranked after Rome and Alexandria. It boasted a population of 500 000 people from many parts of the known world – it was a truly cosmopolitan city. It stood near the mouth of the Orontes river, 15 miles from the Mediterranean Sea, and was famous for gambling and an extravagant style of living. One writer paints a vivid picture; “Antioch was famous for her chariot racing and a deliberate pursuit of pleasure which went on literally night and day. To put it in modern terms, we might describe her as a city of sport run mad, of betting, gambling and of nightclubs”.

- The Church in Antioch was growing and successful. Mark on the Bible passage the signs that God was with them and blessing their work.

As we read on in the account in Acts, we discover that as part of their worship, prayer and fasting, Paul and Barnabas, who were important teachers, were to be sent on ‘missionary work’. (Acts 13 1-3) This must have come as a blow to the local church, which had been fed on Paul and Barnabas’ teaching.

- As people, do you respond well to change? Talk about how as a church we embrace, with great joy, the new thing God is *showing* us, *telling* us or the new place he is *leading* us toward.

Where might our confidence come from?

How might we achieve that confidence?

The church at Antioch is an example to us as we see that its reputation grew and stood the test of time. They were a people who understood the necessity of prayer and worship to underpin all they did. They were a church which was open to God’s voice for direction. They were willing to obey God and move at his bidding. It can be easy to see prayer as an end in itself; a function that we might perform. The people in the Antioch church were ignited by the power of the Holy Spirit and blessed by the Spirit-filled teaching of Paul and Barnabas. The presence of the Holy Spirit is a hallmark of a praying church.

But do we really want the gift of the Holy Spirit? Do we dare ask for that gift in prayer? I wonder. The price may be greater than we imagine. I think I would rather play it safe and ask for something less threatening and more convenient, like success or wealth or power. Do I really want the Spirit of God working inside me to change my life?

The experience of the disciples of Jesus adds substance to my concern. Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem until he sent the Holy Spirit. They waited for ten days, praying and fasting. What did they think during those ten days? Could they have imagined what eventually happened to them in the years that followed?

After being filled with the Spirit, they fanned out across the Roman world, telling people about Jesus, healing the sick and serving human needs wherever they found them. Overflowing with love, they became effective witnesses and living examples of what God can do in the lives of ordinary people who belong to him. P166/7 Sittser



A praying church is full of the Holy Spirit and a desire to tell others of the good news that Jesus died and rose again for the forgiveness of all that is wrong within us. A praying church will

engage in effective mission both locally and further afield. A praying church understands the place and importance of worship, fasting and listening to God.

- Look back at the passage from Acts. The followers spread far and wide, bringing the good news to a variety of people. In Antioch there was great need of salvation due to the worldliness which was so prevalent there. A praying church effects change in its location. Talk about the value of corporate prayer. (the prayer of the church body, rather than the individual) How, in the light of what we've learnt recently, does this prayer make a difference in the world?



- The Holy Spirit is the power within a praying church. Spend some time praying for the Holy Spirit's power for each other. Make sure at least one person in the group gently places a hand upon the head of the person being prayed for and together give thanks for that person, then quietly and patiently, ask the Holy Spirit to come and bless and fill them.

- In silence, after the prayers, write down on a piece of paper how you feel about God at that point. Share these with the group if you feel able.

- Witness (20 – 25 minutes)

Antioch was a praying church which saw success in mission due to its commitment to prayer, worship and fasting. They were encouraged by Spirit-filled and Godly leaders who directed them in their living as well as their faith.

Draw a sketch-map of the area around where you are meeting, or around church. Mark on the places of concern. Remember from week one, that we learnt how we have a responsibility for the ground on which we walk as well as the people whom we meet. Pray for the areas that you have noted and then for the people who occupy them.

- Time for refreshments, you've earned them.



Bibliography

Coffey, Ian; *What you always wanted to know about prayer ... but were afraid to ask*; CWR; 2007
Sittser, Jerry; *When God doesn't answer your prayer*; Zondervan; 2003