



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

Commence Prayer

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Dr. Matthew J. Hook

Acts 12:1-17

The passengers were fully aware the airplane was losing altitude rapidly. The copilot was speaking over the intercom to the passengers, letting them know there was difficult weather and difficulty ahead. But after a minute of silence – the kind that lets you know things are critical and people are working and concentrating so hard that they can't talk at the moment, the copilot came back on and with these two words: "Commence prayer."

Two words, when there is nothing left to do. Why is it that we can't think about prayer until we become so desperate we can't think of anything else? Why do we wait?

It actually reminds me of the cartoon Popeye. As a kid, I thought Popeye had to be the dumbest guy around. (And I complain about the cartoons my kids watch today!) First of all, he was always after Olive Oyl, which I could never figure out (have you seen her?), and second, he would never take his spinach until he was in someplace terrible, like being trapped underwater tied to an anvil with an octopus squeezing him inside out. But then, at the last minute, his spinach falls out of his pocket and he gets what he needs to save the day, beat Bluto, and win back Olive Oyl. I could never figure out why he didn't just eat the spinach first. Don't you think God looks at *us* in the same way? Why do we wait? Why is prayer such a chore?

Even for Christians, it is often difficult! For doers, prayer is a chore. It is "wasted time." Even for people who are more contemplative, prayer is a challenge. So much of the time I catch myself saying "Lord, I'm too busy to pray. I can't take "time out" to just sit there with you. There are too many things I have to do! Or I let myself get caught up in everything and don't do more than throw an occasional "Thanks, God" when things go my way. The truth is, you're too busy NOT to pray. Why?

Because when we work, we work. When we pray, God works! God can accomplish more in 5 seconds than we can accomplish in a lifetime of ministry! So, church, commence prayer. Don't wait until the end. Because I believe if we start now, God will not only change your situation and my situation, but he will change our church's situation. God has been preparing Dexter and this whole area for transformation! But it begins with a concert of prayer. And by the way, the pilots were able to control the descent, and the plane landed safely.

I don't know about you, but these days, it feels a bit like we're in a big ole jet airliner, and we're not gaining altitude, we're losing it. Our economy. Our environment. Our heroes, our celebrities, our political leaders. Our savings disappearing. Our plans for the future. 20% unemployment. People looking for bailouts, despite the government spending millions of dollars it doesn't have. Debt. Fighting the battle against becoming a nation of addicts, victims, and extremists. Little talk of personal responsibility from our culture. Let alone fighting (or not fighting) busyness and activities that have replaced time for families let alone our Sunday worship. Which brings me to this: Church we believe we have an answer to life. We believe we have the answer to all of life. And yet from many churches there is a strange, empty silence. *Church, why don't we pray?*

The question for you this week is: **Do we STILL believe the local church is the hope of the world?** That God can intervene from heaven and do supernatural stuff in our lives. The answer is YES. Our leadership

team, we believe that TO OUR CORE. By being here you are opening yourself to spiritual resources being brought to bear in your life and all those you reach. But to do that, we must BE the church to those we worship with, to those who are facing these most difficult days of their lives. You and I must step *up* our praying. Step *up* our serving. Step *up* our generosity, so people can utilize the benevolent ministries of the church. We must live out the 1st Century dream in the 21st Century. This is the kind of church I want to be involved in. There is NOTHING like the local church when the local church is working right. (Of course, there's nothing like the local church when it's not working right either!) ☺

When it comes to our “current future,” I have no answers to these specifics, except to say: Church, we're going to get through these conditions, even though it's a rough time for many people. But as you read through the book of Acts, the first several decades of the church, you see these conditions have existed from the beginning. If you've been reading the New Testament, you know the church was born in a desperate situation, and the church today finds itself in a desperate situation.

Look at our scripture is from Acts 12:1-17. A rouge wave was about to hit the church: *“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. 3 When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. 4 After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. 5 So Peter was kept in prison, **but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.**”*

This was the 3rd wave of persecution against the early Christ-followers. And this time, James the brother of John, one of the 12 disciples, was killed by Herod. This Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled during the birth of Jesus, and the nephew of Herod who held the mock trial of Jesus. James was the first of the original 12 to be killed. It was a terrible time. But as we see...

Things Happen When We Pray In verse 5, Luke writes that Peter was bound, but prayer was loosed! Here's what happens next: *6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.* Peter had 4 squads of 4 soldiers each, and was set for execution the next day. And notice that Peter so trusted God he was able to sleep. That's what happens; even in terrible times, when...

Prayer is a daily relationship. If you're daily about it, when the really hard times come, you already have that relationship and routine. Don't wait until the bad times hit to start this New Testament walk thru. Don't wait for bad times to start a better relationship with God, or this church. Start praying today. You don't have to worry about the right words. It's a relationship, and you are...

Entering the Spiritual World Romans 8:26-27 (which we'll be reading on June 25th) *“the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because he intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”* When you pray, you don't even have to have just the right words, or any words. But you need to let the Holy Spirit in. If you have never trusted Jesus Christ for your salvation, the Holy Spirit can't intercede in the same way.

E.M. Bounds, a writer on Christian prayer says “What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men and women whom the Holy Spirit can use – men and women of prayer, men and women mighty in prayer!”

Jesus said, *“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.”* (Mark 11:17)

John Wesley, founder of Methodism writes “God will do nothing on earth except in answer to believing prayer.”

William Temple “When I pray, coincidences happen.”

E.M. Bounds “Prayer can do anything God can do.”

A.T. Pierson “There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer.”

Look what happened to Peter...

7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. 8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. 9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. 11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." 12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. 13 Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" 15 "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." 16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

Can you see it? Do you see? **Prayer isn't a last resort. Prayer isn't even preparation for the battle. Prayer is the battle.**... for the church in the first century; and for the church in the 21st century. And in the worst of conditions, the Gospel spread, to the glory of God. This week, let us be the church...and pray...and see what God does. Church—commence prayer! Amen!

Are you ready? Let's pray! Heavenly Father, Lord, we thank you that you have not left us alone. Lord, many of us are coming from difficult times. Many of us walked in here heavy laden, troubled with care and anxiety. We have a sense of being lost and alone. So Lord, right now we take all those things and give them to you. We don't want them back. Help us even as we breathe, in and out, in and out, to be in prayer: speaking and listening, speaking and listening. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, trusting that your Spirit intercedes for us when we don't have the words. Amen.

STUDY GUIDE

Acts 17 – 21

Luke, who wrote both Luke & Acts, continues with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the history of the early church.

Monday: Read Acts 17. Starting More Churches. In Thessalonica & Berea (1-15). Again, they begin at the synagogue, non-Jews convert, Jews rile up the crowd, and they have to flee. 2 New Testament letters are written to the believers in Thessalonica. When has your faith led to conflict with other things or people in your life? In Athens (16-34). FACINATING! The culture of Athens is very different from the Jews & God-fearing Greeks. It is very similar to today's intellectual culture: Athens is home to Plato & Aristotle and philosophy. Paul finds an altar made to “an unknown God” (23). He presents this god as the Creator and source of all life. He quotes some of their own Greek poets. Paul puts the Gospel in the people's context. He doesn't change the message of Jesus & the resurrection though. What do you feel God is calling you to do to address your culture? Paul uses idols & Greek poetry. What movies, books, TV shows, or music could you

use to relate to others today?

Tuesday: Read Acts 18. In Corinth, Greece. (1-17) Paul meets Aquila & Priscilla and works as a tentmaker with them. The Jews reject his message, but the God-believing Greeks believe. Many people in this: Silas, Timothy, Crispus, Gallio the proconsul, and Paul. Pray that God would call you to a mission (local or far away, short term or long term). Find a confidant to share this with. How could your present job be “tentmaking” to support your family while you engage in God’s work? Priscilla, Aquila, & Apollos (18-28). Paul gets a haircut (really! v.18) as they go to Syria. Priscilla & Aquila hear Apollos, a gifted leader/communicator preaching about John the Baptist. They invite him to their home and “explain the way of God more adequately.” (26). Some scholars believe Apollos is the author of the NT book Hebrews. What strong or gifted leader could you share Christ with? How might God reach them through you? Will you commit to becoming educated “more adequately” this year?

Wednesday: Read Acts 19. In Ephesus, Turkey. (1-22) Paul arrives at ‘the gateway to Asia.’ The city contains one of the 7 Wonders: the Temple of Artemis. This is a religious center of Asia Minor. Paul finds others who know of John the Baptist but not Jesus. They believe, and the Spirit comes on them. Are there things in your lifestyle you are reluctant to change to follow Jesus more closely? The Riot (23-41). The craftsmen who work for the Temple of Artemis feel threatened by people converting to Christ. How has your faith affected your relationship to our typical ‘idols?’ (success, sports, \$\$, independence).

Thursday: Read Acts 20. Through Macedonia & Greece (1-12). Paul sets sail with others, including Luke! (Notice how the narrative shifts to “us,” beginning in v.5). Cool, huh? How are you like Eutychus? Are you “sleeping” or wide awake, spiritually? Pray to be eyes wide open, and ask God to show you something new today! Paul’s Farewell to the Ephesian Leaders (13-38). Paul says everyone “must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” (21). Would you consider your life to be all about “testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (24)? What would have to change for you to do that? V.35 is the only place where these words are recorded “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Pray to be about giving today, and for the rest of our lives.

Friday: Read Acts 21. In Jerusalem (1-26). Warnings, danger, tears of other believers who are worried for Paul: The question of how committed you are to something is expressed by what it takes to get you to stop: whether it’s exercise, a relationship, or your faith in Christ. Paul stops at nothing, even warnings from other Spirit-filled believers. In your eyes, did Paul make the right decision here? How do you bend for the sake of others, and when should you stand for your principles? Arrested (27-40). Even as he is chained and being arrested, Paul asks to speak to the crowd. In your opinion, what group of people is the most critical of the church today? What would lessen the animosity? What can you do to help?