

Reclaim Broken Cities

Meeting the Challenge on Your Knees

By Dr. Ed Stetzer

The relationship between prayer and cities has been etched in my mind and my ministry from the earliest years.

My wife Donna and I married at a young age, while we were still in college between our junior and senior years. Soon after, we both began to sense the Lord calling us to plant a church somewhere. As we prayed about where to go, we saw the connection between prayer and cities as the Lord guided us to Buffalo, NY.

Believe it or not, when we moved to Buffalo, it was the fastest-shrinking city in America. It was also in the middle of the crack epidemic of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The entire city was struggling, and we experienced it firsthand with drive-by shootings on our very street.

However, we felt the Lord's call to be there and knew that prayer was essential.

How did we know? We asked the Lord, "What is Your plan for our lives?"

Make Us Sure

I graduated from college and started seminary when I got to Buffalo, so I had a lot to learn. But we knew enough to know that prayer was vital, and we began to pray. I remember hearing a pastor say, "Don't go somewhere, don't do something until you are sure God called you to do it."

We prayed, "Lord, how would You make us sure?"

I went to visit Buffalo. Donna was working at the time and couldn't go on the pre-visit trip. I prayed a lot. I remember praying at a certain intersection on Prospect Avenue where it crosses right in the inner city of Buffalo. I said,

"Lord, is this what You have in mind for us?"

The Lord led us clearly.

Back then we didn't have cell phones—or at least, I didn't have one. I got into the car and began to drive home. We had been praying and fasting for over a week at that time, saying, "Lord, we can't do anything without the clarity that You give us. We look to what You did in the Book of Acts. And we look for You to do it in our hearts today."

When I arrived at home, Donna said right away, "I've been praying. God wants us to go to Buffalo."

And I said, "Yes, God wants us to go to Buffalo."

God called us. He called us as we prayed.

Prayer Is Natural Foundation

When you know the Lord has led you to do something, you step out in obedience to what the Lord has in mind for you. Just as in the early Church in the Book of Acts, we went to the Lord in prayer. He gave us His direction.

Two thousand years ago in another city, Jerusalem, they went to the Lord in prayer—and they got God's direction. What does Acts say to us about prayer and cities? As Trey Kent and Kie Bowman show in *City of Prayer: Transform Your Community through Praying Churches*, prayer is central to any city movement.

We can look to the Church in Acts for wisdom. One thing is clear: they met the challenge of their time on their knees. Prayer serves as the natural foundation of the Spirit's work

in Acts. There are at least four ways that the Book of Acts reminds us of these truths.

First, the church was birthed in prayer. Acts 1:14 tells us, “They all joined together constantly in prayer.” Following the Lord’s instruction to His followers after His resurrection, these believers gathered for prayer. Before anything else took place, they prayed together. To this day pastors come together to pray for their cities, following the example of Acts to start with prayer.

In Acts 1 we read how the leaders had to replace Judas, and their initial response was to pray for wisdom for Judas’ successor. In Acts 2:42, Luke says when the church was born: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” In fact, both Acts 3:1 and Acts 16:16 show how daily prayer marked their routine.

Second, the early Church turned first to prayer in times of difficulty. The believers’ devotion to prayer in Acts speaks directly to where we are today. In Acts 4, the early Church faced not a global pandemic but growing persecution. The band of believers faced oppression for their faith in Jesus first by religious authorities and later by Rome. A lame man was healed (Acts 3:1–10) and thousands more were converted, but the religious leaders only saw this as a negative circumstance.

Peter and John stood before the Sanhedrin and their threats (Acts 4:18). They were basically told, “No, you can’t speak about Jesus anymore.” It only got worse: threats started and beatings began in Acts 5, until people started dying for the faith, beginning in Acts 7—starting first with Stephen. After that, a general persecution began (Acts 8:1–4).

When Peter and John were released, they gathered to pray with the believers. Cities today are broken in so many ways. The

first corporate prayer recorded in Acts is in chapter 4, and it's in response to difficult times. They prayed to God as Creator and sovereign, acknowledging how broken their world was (vs. 23–26).

As we pray for our cities, we can't ignore the brokenness as we seek the Lord on their behalf. But just like Peter and John, we also proclaim God's work in redemption (vs. 27–28) and seek the Lord for boldness and power to witness (vs. 28–31).

City prayer leads churches to God's mission. When we start with prayer, focus on a sovereign God, and understand that sin cannot stop God's plan, we turn to the mission.

The passage goes on to describe actual ways they helped the broken and needy (Acts 4:32–37). Like them, our witness brings with the verbal proclamation the implications of serving and standing with those in need. Times of difficulty can either turn us inward (focusing on ourselves and our discomfort), or they can turn us upward then outward, renewing our devotion to the mission, led by the Spirit.

Third, prayer was as important to the leadership of the early Church as preaching. If you are a preacher reading this, I don't need to convince you of the importance of preaching. When we read Acts, we see constant references to prayer. We can think of prayer and preaching separately and not bring them together adequately. Sometimes, we may think the most important thing we do is preaching. But if you read Acts closely, you see that prayer is mentioned far more frequently.

How did the apostles deal with issues that came up in the church? They had the issue of widows being neglected (Acts 6). This was a real problem that needed a good solution. The early Church gave priority to caring for the most vulnerable; we should as well.

But how did the apostles respond? First, *they didn't stop*

doing what God called them to do because there was a need. Every need is not a calling. They didn't overreact, stop everything, and physically meet the need themselves. There is a time to do that, but most of the time this is an opportunity to involve others in ministry as we see in Acts 6.

On the other hand, *they didn't ignore the real need* as an inconvenience or as unimportant. These widows weren't whiners; they had a real need. Peter and John reminded the church of their calling and then sought the Lord for a solution, noting: "and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word" (vs. 4).

Prayer and the ministry of the Word. Both matter a great deal. But it's too easy today to focus on the ministry of the Word and neglect prayer. Could the issues of our time serve as an indictment of our prayerlessness? Do you see prayer as important for impacting your city as you value the ministry of the Word? When we say things like, "Well, there's nothing we can do but pray," what does that really say about what we believe regarding prayer's power?

Finally, the Book of Acts is largely a series of answered prayers. Imagine if this is how your city is described: "What we see happening in our city is largely the result of a series of answered prayers."

Peter prayed for Dorcas [Tabitha] in Acts 9:40 and she was revived. In fact, it was while praying that Peter began to see God showed no partiality. It surprised Peter in the way God answered: "The grace of Christ was available to all."

At the same time, God heard the prayers of Cornelius and sent him to Peter to hear the gospel in Acts 10. In Acts 12 the church prayed for Peter's deliverance, and it happened even though they were surprised God answered it. The church prayed and sent out missionaries in Acts 13:2-3: "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set

apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

Influence Your City

It is worth remembering what S.D. Gordon observed, "You can do more than pray after you pray, but you cannot do more than pray until you pray."

When we begin with prayer, we follow the example of the Church in Acts, and we take the most powerful step to influence our cities. They faced a variety of crises of their own: persecution, being misunderstood, the weighty task of taking the gospel to the whole world, the needs of people in the churches, and more.

We have our own challenges today, but the solution in each case is the same. We begin with concerted, unified, and burdened prayer.

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