

PERSPECTIVE

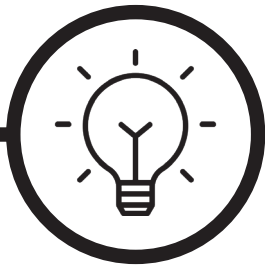
APRIL 2022

WHY A SUNDAY EVENING PRAYER MEETING?

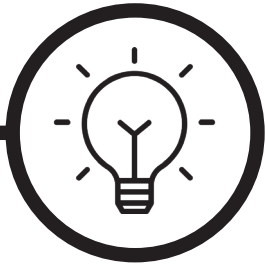
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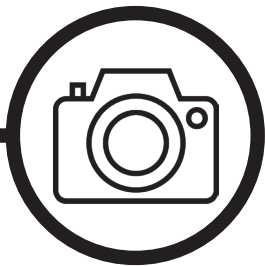
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Why a Sunday Evening Prayer Meeting?

What comes to mind when you hear the word “church”? Any number of (good) answers might be on the tip of your tongue: body of Christ, gathering of God’s people, household of faith, family of God, and so forth. What about “house of prayer”? I suspect this answer may not have immediately come to mind if you’re like me. No need to feel guilty! The above answers are grounded in the New Testament’s expression of what the church is as the blood-bought people of God. Each reveals something glorious about the nature of the church. Perhaps one of the reasons “house of prayer” doesn’t come to our minds is its association with the Old Testament temple.

ISRAEL’S HOUSE OF PRAYER

First Kings 8 records Solomon’s prayer of dedication. In verse 30, he says, “And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place.” A number of references to prayer follow this request: “pray toward this place,” “stretching out his hands toward this house,” “when he comes and prays toward this house,” “pray to the Lord toward the city that you have chosen and the house that I have built for your name,” “pray to you toward their land...and the house that I have built for your name.” The point is clear: the temple was to be a house of prayer for God’s people.

However, it wasn’t long before the people rebelled against God, broke their covenant with Him, and embraced idolatry. This resulted in their exile from the land and the destruction of the temple. Amid this dark chapter in redemptive history, a light is shown on the horizon through the prophet Isaiah: “These I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is. 56:7). One day in the future, God would gather not only Israel to His house of prayer but all peoples.

A NEW AND BETTER TEMPLE: JESUS!

You might recognize the last phrase of Isaiah 56:7 because Jesus quoted this verse as he drove out the money changers from the temple during his earthly ministry (Matt. 21:12–13). The fulfillment of God’s promise through Isaiah was afoot. As Jesus’ ministry unfolds, it becomes clear a seismic shift is about to occur that will displace the temple in Jerusalem with something better. Jesus’ body is the temple (John 2:19–22), and God’s people will no longer pray toward a specific location (John 4:20–24).

How then will Isaiah’s promise be fulfilled? After the ascension, the Bible doesn’t immediately answer this question. Rather, God shows, and then He tells.

FROM JESUS TO THE CHURCH

Acts begins with the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1–2). The church is established and immediately devotes itself to prayer (2:42), and Luke shows us how they did so: “they lifted their voices together to God” (4:24), “when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered was shaken” (4:31). They prayed to set apart men to serve the church (6:6). They prayed when persecution arose (12:5, 12). The church prayed when the Spirit set apart missionaries (13:3) and when elders were appointed (14:23).

It seems no one had to tell the church to pray when it gathered—it was as natural as breathing. And as the disciples faithfully proclaimed the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (1:8), God added both Jews and Gentiles to the church’s number. Indeed, the church had become a “house of prayer for all peoples” through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

What is implicit in the book of Acts becomes explicit in passages like 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 and 1 Peter 2:5: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Cor. 3:16–17); “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). God both shows and tells Isaiah 56:7 is fulfilled in the church. Glorious! It is no bad thing for the church to be known as a “house of prayer.”

A PRAYING CHURCH?

What does this mean practically for the church? What should a house of prayer look like? In what ways should this theological reality shape Mount Vernon? If the church doesn’t pray substantially during its main gathering, can it be said that the church is “devoted to prayer”? I hope the answer is obvious from the verses above. Of course not!

How about beyond the main, Sunday morning gathering each week? Much could be written in response to these questions. If you’ve been at Mount Vernon for any length of time, you know how prominent corporate prayer is during our main gathering every Sunday morning. Perhaps you are part of a covenant group when time is set aside specifically to pray together. We trust you have been

prayed for (and with) by the elders and other members.

How might a church pattern itself after the regular and fervent corporate prayer seen in the book of Acts?

SUNDAY EVENING

I'd like to suggest our Sunday evening service has a role to play. Let me encourage you with three reasons why we believe a Sunday evening prayer meeting—though not commanded in Scripture—is a wise and useful way we can prioritize corporate prayer in our life together as a church.

Corporate prayer unites our hearts in the gospel

Genesis 4:26 records the first time “people began to call upon the name of the Lord.” To understand why, we must see the verse in context: “To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord.” The significance of Seth's family line is tethered to Genesis 3:15, where God promised a seed would be born to Adam and Eve that would crush the head of the serpent. Therefore, Genesis 4:26 has redemptive overtones. God's people were now calling on Him to fulfill what He promised. This pattern would continue until the coming of Christ. Now that Jesus has accomplished redemption through his life, death, and resurrection, God's people are to call on Him to bring it to completion.

In his book, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church*, John Onwuchekwa says,

This hope is shared among all Christians. It's the hope that governs our lives (see 1 Tim. 4:10; Titus 1:1–2; 2:11–14; 3:4–7). This means that hope for the Christian is ours, not just mine. As Mark Dever says, “It's impossible to answer the question *what is a Christian?* without ending up in a conversation about the church—at least, in the Bible it is.” If prayer clings to the hope we share in Christ, then prayer should reflect our togetherness in Christ. If prayer has a gospel shape, then by implication it must have a church shape.ⁱ

Onwuchekwa goes on to highlight the church shape of the Lord's prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) by pointing out the plural pronouns Jesus uses to instruct us on how we should pray: “our Father,” “give us,” “forgive us,” “lead us.” Fundamentally, each one of us is part of God's family, redeemed and adopted by the blood of His Son. By instructing the disciples to pray this way, Jesus places prayer within the framework of the gospel. The coming

of God's kingdom on earth through Christ results in the redemption of a people who are to prioritize prayer together.

Furthermore, Jesus' instruction sets the priority of corporate prayer: the glorification of the Father through the expansion of His kingdom and will throughout the earth. The priority of prayer is the priority of the church (Matt. 28:19–20). Onwuchekwa says this collective prayer pleads “for God to take his rightful position in our church and the world. It recalibrates our compasses and synchronizes our watches, so that we're all headed in the same direction. It brings unity.”

When we gather to pray on Sunday evenings, we pray “your kingdom come” every time we corporately praise God for His glorious grace in saving us. When we ask for His help in applying the sermon, we are entreating God to conform us into the image of Christ so that our lives display the authority of God as King over our lives. Sunday evening prayer meetings help Mt. Vernon Baptist Church unite in the gospel intentionally and regularly. The Spirit has united us in Christ, yet we are to eagerly maintain unity (Eph. 4:3). David Mathis summarizes this well: “So praying together is both an effect of the unity we already share in Christ and a cause for deeper and richer unity. It's not only a sign that unity exists among the brothers but also a catalyst for more.” By God's grace, our church can set aside this time each week to unite our hearts in pursuit of this aim.

Corporate prayer is one important way we wait eagerly for Christ's return

Have you ever eagerly waited for something? A birthday or holiday? A much-needed vacation? A wedding date? Retirement? Jesus tells a parable about servants waiting for their master to come home from a wedding feast in Luke 12:35–40. Throughout the parable, he says things like, “stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning,” “blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes,” “if he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants”, and “you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” The exhortation is for Christ's followers to be alert and attentive for his return and not sleep through our alarm, so to speak. Ironically, Peter, James, and John demonstrate what not to do in Gethsemane when Jesus tells them to “watch and pray” (Matt. 26:41).

In 1 Peter 4:7, Peter connects Christ's return and our prayer lives. He says, “The end of all things is at hand;

therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.” How can a church “stay dressed for action,” “stay awake,” keep their “lamps burning,” and be sober-minded? Any number of biblical answers could be offered. But I would suggest that one of the most helpful and simple ways we can collectively do this as a local church is by scheduling a time to pray corporately.

A Sunday evening prayer service establishes a regular rhythm of congregational prayer that unites our hearts in anticipation of the coming of our Lord and King. Peter’s exhortation is this: the reality of living in the last days before Christ returns is to shape the way the church prays. What better way to be regularly reminded of this than to gather weekly and go boldly to the throne of grace.

Every Sunday evening interview helps us remember our identity and mission together as a church. Every evangelistic prayer request is a reminder that eternity is on the line for our neighbors. Every prayer for gospel fruit from the sermon, equipping matters, covenant groups, men’s/women’s retreats, etc., is a reminder that we need God’s help being conformed into Christ’s image and prepared for eternity with him. Paul’s prayer for the fruit of righteousness in the lives of the Philippians was eschatological (focused on the end) in aim: “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9-10). Yes, we pray for one another’s maturity here and now. Yet, the day of Christ should be ever before us as we pray together Sunday after Sunday.

This world is not our home. We are exiles awaiting the consummation of the eternal kingdom. Indeed, our prayer for His kingdom to come is a sobering reminder that this is to be our supreme desire in life. It’s no wonder Paul insists the church in Ephesus pray “at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance” (Eph. 6:18). Our Sunday evening prayer meeting is one small way we pray without ceasing and “keep alert” as a congregation to persevere until the Lord returns.

God is pleased to command and work through corporate prayer

Every child’s favorite reason to obey their parents is “because I told you so.” Hardly! I suspect adults struggle to follow orders simply because someone in authority tells them to. So why am I closing this article by essentially saying, “a Sunday evening prayer meeting is useful because God said so”? Perhaps because we simply need to

be reminded of the prevalence of God’s command for the church to pray together.

“Be constant in prayer” (Rom. 12:12). “I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf” (Rom. 15:30). “You also must help us by prayer” (2 Cor. 1:11). “The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). “I desire then that in every place the men should pray” (1 Tim. 2:8). This is just a sampling of the Bible’s commands for the church to pray. There is certainly an individual dimension to prayer that can put feet to these commands. However, given the fact that the New Testament letters were most often written to local churches, the thrust of these commands should be understood as corporate in nature.

God is not only pleased to command churches to pray together. He is also pleased to work through prayer to increase thanksgiving among the saints and the glorification of His Name. Paul asked the church in Corinth to “help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many” (2 Cor. 1:11). It would be hard to pinpoint one aspect of ministry at Mount Vernon that is responsible for the increasing health and maturity of the church. Yet, we could rightly point to years of faithful, fervent praying together as a congregation on Sunday evenings, confident in God’s “blessing granted us through the prayers of many.”

Notice also that God uses prayer to help the work of the ministry progress. It appears that mutual participation in ministry through prayer has a multiplying effect upon the thanksgiving of God’s people. Sunday evening prayer meetings allow for sharing requests and answers to prayer that would be hard to do in a Sunday morning gathering. Sunday evenings afford the church time to hear missionaries say, “pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3) or “pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored” (2 Thess. 3:1–2).

CONCLUSION

When you think of Mount Vernon, does “house of prayer” come to mind? The Bible says this is what we are, whether we think of the church that way or not. My prayer is that God might use 2022 in the life of our

church to lead us, not merely to embrace this theological reality, but to live as though it were true. If you haven't made Sunday evening prayer meetings a priority in your schedule, would you consider doing so? Talk to someone who attends regularly and ask how it has encouraged their faith.

Why a Sunday evening prayer meeting? It signals to the church and the world that we are a "house of prayer for all people," eagerly and obediently working and waiting for the Lord's return.

– Chad Ireland

ⁱ John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church*, (Crossway: 2018), 37.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines*, (Crossway: 2016), 114.

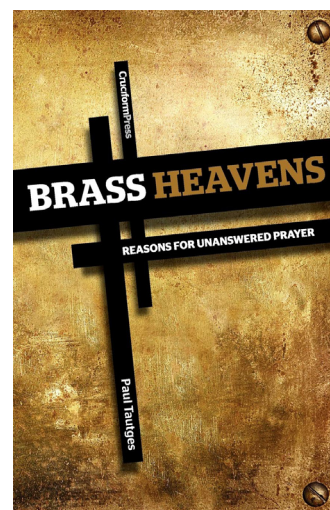
Brass Heavens: Reasons for Unanswered Prayer

Written by Paul Tautges

As our church focuses on the importance of a robust and diligent prayer life this year, one topic related to prayer is perhaps the most difficult to understand and painful to experience. This is the topic of “unanswered prayers.” If you have been a praying Christian for any length of time, you have likely experienced seasons where God feels distant and prayers go unanswered. In the book *Brass Heavens: Reasons for Unanswered Prayer*, the author Paul Tautges explores this topic and provides six reasons for why our prayers may remain unanswered. The book begins with a detailed exploration of the theology of prayer, highlighting the role of each member of the trinity in a believer’s prayer life. The second part of the book highlights “Reasons God Does Not Hear” and describes six potential issues that keep our prayers from being answered. The first five include specific sinful acts and attitudes that Scripture tells us can hinder our prayers. These include pet sins, unresolved conflict, religious sins, inconsiderate husbands, and stubborn pride. The author admits that there may be other sin-related reasons for unanswered prayers, but they are less clear in Scripture. The sixth reason that the author presents for God not answering our prayers is the fact that He tests our faith, which results in His sanctifying work in us. Towards the end of the book, Tautges describes the proper Christian response to unanswered prayers. The answer is to persevere with an attitude of joy and continue to ask in faith while trusting God’s good plan for our lives.

When I was first asked to review this book, I was not comfortable with the topic. However, after reading this book, I found many takeaways that were relevant and helpful. First, the initial chapters on prayer were encouraging, reminding me of the importance of prayer and how God is near to us, listening to our cries and delights and discerning what is best for us. He is near to the brokenhearted. I also found the chapters on the five sins that the author highlights helpful. It reinforced the need to examine my own heart before and during prayer. In addition, the author gave practical advice related to reconciliation and overcoming pride. In the last chapter, Tautges reminds us that the primary purpose of trials, including delayed answers to prayer, is not that circumstances or other people might change. The primary purpose is that we might change and be sanctified. This book was a good reminder to pray fervently, search our hearts, repent, trust God’s plan, and persevere.

– RECOMMENDED BY JOCELYN DAVIS



Excerpts from
the Book

1

“God has a good and holy purpose for these periods of silence. He wants to test our faith that we might see for ourselves just how weak and dependent we are on him for all good things. His goal is nothing less than to heighten our spiritual sensitivities in order to draw us into more intimate fellowship and faithful obedience with him.”

– *The Heavens as Brass*, p. 11

2

“God often leaves our prayers unanswered so that we might become increasingly conformed to the image of His Son.”

– *How Long, O Lord?*, p. 103

3

“[A]s commendable and necessary as our perseverance and endurance, these are not God’s final goal. His goal is to make us ‘perfect and complete lacking in nothing’ (James 1:4), mature according ‘to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13). This goal can only be reached as we, like Christ, learn to endure trials ‘for the joy that was set before us’ (Heb. 12:2).”

– *Persevere by Continuing to Ask in Faith*, p. 113

A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer

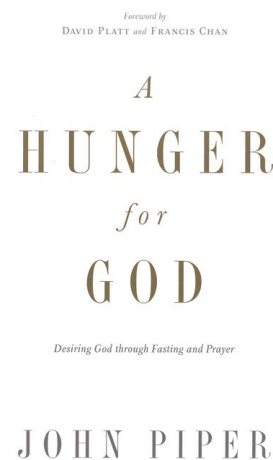
Written by John Piper

A Hunger for God: Desiring God through Fasting and Prayer gets to the heart of biblical fasting from many vantage points. John Piper points out, if not careful, our appetites can be misdirected toward the gifts rather than the Giver. We need fasting not to get something from God but to satisfy our hunger for God, gaining God himself! Fasting is addressed from inward and outward perspectives, both of which are for the glory of God and our satisfaction in him.

Piper uses Scripture to prove fasting is a Christian discipline that should be part of the natural rhythm of church life and an individual Christian's life. Contentment in God rather than food is stressed in the book as an aim for fasting. Our greatest example is Jesus' fasting in the wilderness, where we see what is in his heart—his love for the Father and us. In our fasting, God reveals what is in our hearts: the depth of our sin and our need for him. Piper emphasizes maximizing our enjoyment of God and explains both biblical and unbiblical methods of fasting. He states that, when we fast, our focus should not be merely on ourselves but also on the world—for God's kingdom to reign on earth as it is in Heaven. This kingdom work has been ongoing throughout history, and fasting is often used to strengthen the saints for God's work, which is highlighted as an encouragement for our generation to continue fasting. Praise God he has prescribed the kind of fast that he desires, and we would do well to heed his correction from Isaiah 58: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (vv.6–7)." This kind of fasting presses for the glory of God to fill all the earth. And this kind of fasting leads to our understanding that nothing in this world can satisfy the soul besides God.

Every church member would profit from *A Hunger for God* and, more importantly, from actual fasting and prayer to the glory of God. So, if you desire God and want to be closer to him, dive into this rich book on fasting.

— RECOMMENDED BY BRANDON DAVIS



Excerpts from
the Book

1

"The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts."

— Introduction, p. 18

2

"Fasting expresses, rather than creates, hunger for God."

— Fasting for the King's Coming, p. 85

3

"Prayer is not for the enhancement of our comforts but for the advancement of Christ's kingdom."

— Finding God in the Garden of Pain, p. 136

APRIL

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

April 1	Hebrews 10:1-18	April 17	Matthew 28
April 2	Jeremiah 33	April 18	Matthew 11:28-30
April 3	Jeremiah 31:31-40	April 19	Exodus 34:1-9
April 4	Romans 5:1-11	April 20	Zechariah 9:9-17
April 5	Romans 3:1-20	April 21	Matthew 11:1-24
April 6	Romans 3:21-31	April 22	Isaiah 42:1-9
April 7	Romans 4:1-12	April 23	Matthew 11:25-27
April 8	Genesis 15	April 24	Matthew 11:28-30
April 9	Romans 4:13-25	April 25	Jeremiah 37:11-21
April 10	Romans 5:1-11	April 26	Jeremiah 34-35
April 11	Matthew 28	April 27	Jeremiah 36-37
April 12	Luke 24:1-12	April 28	Jeremiah 38
April 13	Luke 24:13-53	April 29	2 Corinthians 4:1-18
April 14	1 Corinthians 15:1-11	April 30	Jeremiah 39
April 15	1 Corinthians 15:12-34		
April 16	1 Corinthians 15:35-58		

*Sermons in bold

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



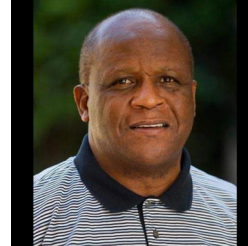
**Joe
Brannen**



**Adair
Broome**



**Cheryl
Francis**



**Wallace
Francis**



Lisa Gable



**John
Lander**



**Julie
Morris**



**Emily
Rodgers**



**Jennifer
Stepp**



**Zack
Stepp**



**Travis
Street**



**Heather
Vernon**



**Timothy
Vernon**



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH