

Acts Series Part 13

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[0 : 00] What happens when God's people pray? Tonight we want to find out.

We want to, in the passage that we've read, the second passage that we've read, find an answer to that question. What happens when God's people pray?

Now, if we were to read only verses 12 to 16 of Acts chapter 5, and I would encourage you to have your Bibles open at that point, if we were to read those verses in isolation, we might ask, well, how will we find an answer to that question in this passage?

No doubt there is much of interest in this passage, but in what way do we identify an answer to that question? What happens when God's people pray?

One of the advantages of reading through and studying through any book, and particularly a book like Acts, that follows a historical sequence, is that we begin to identify connections that perhaps otherwise we wouldn't have so clearly seen.

[1 : 13] And that is the case in point here in this passage in chapter 5, and onward verses 12 to 16. There is a sense in which this passage serves as a summary passage to what has been going on and the moment that the church in Jerusalem was living.

But the first words in verse 12 are the words, I think, that jump out at us and help us to identify the connection with something that has gone before. Well, what are the words there in verse 12?

We read, The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. It's a statement of fact. It's a description of what was going on.

It tells us what the apostles were doing. But these words, I think undoubtedly are connected to what we read in chapter 4 and what we considered a few weeks ago.

And I refer to the prayer of the people of God as recorded for us in chapter 4 and particularly from verse 29.

[2 : 22] We've already read the passage, but we can read it again now. What were God's people praying? Well, we have it before us. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable Your servants to speak Your Word with great boldness.

And the prayer of God's people continues, Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.

So the people of God had come to God with this request. They had come to God with this plea, with this cry, Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders.

And then we read in chapter 5 and in verse 12, and in this section that is our concern this evening, the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people.

Well, yes, indeed, they did so because they had prayed that this would happen and God heard the prayer of God's people and He answered. And so they performed these signs and wonders.

[3 : 28] What happens when God's people pray? Well, God answers their prayer and here we have an example of it. And indeed, not only the beginning of this section that we just noted there in verse 12, but I think the whole section from 12 to 16 can be considered in this light as the manner in which God answered the prayer of His people as they had gathered to pray to Him in the face of persecution and difficulty and they cry out to God.

And here we have His response, a summary of how God responded, how God answered the prayer of His people.

So let's consider this passage in that regard or from that perspective with that question in mind. What happens when God's people pray?

And we do so perhaps for one particular reason that our consideration of the passage would be a consideration that would challenge us and encourage us and enthruse us to be a praying people.

We could, of course, consider the passage and go through the content of it and try and determine what is being said and what is meant. And there is a sense in which that is what we're going to do. [4 : 46] But we're going to do it from this perspective. What happens when God's people pray? That we would indeed be encouraged to pray and encouraged to pray expectantly that He would also, as He has promised, hear and answer us.

So that is the perspective from which we are approaching the passage. But before we can go on to answer the question and identify different elements in regard to that answer of God to the prayer of His people, it is only right to introduce what we might call a word of caution or perhaps more accurately, clarification.

The book of Acts that we're considering week in, week out over these months. And this is a point that we've made previously. The book of Acts is a historical account of what happened in the early days of the Christian church.

It is largely descriptive rather than prescriptive. It says this is what happened. It doesn't say this is what must happen always. It is simply saying that this is what happened at this time of God's dealings with His people.

And so we have to take care and not say, well, if this is what happened then, this is what must happen now. If we're going to be a church that's alive and if we're going to be a church that is blessed by God, we want to see all the things that happened there, that would be to misunderstand the purpose of the book.

[6 : 20] The book describes what God did. Now it may well be that there will be things that are described that God will also do. Not, it may well be, it will be. But not in every detail.

And so also as we consider this passage and answer the question, what happens when God's people pray? It would be wrong to say, well, if only we prayed passionately, if only we prayed more urgently, if only we spent more time praying, then all of these things, as we find them here, we would also experience here in Bon Accord, in our particular context.

That need not be so. Yes, God will answer. Yes, there will be principles that we will derive from here that will help us and I hope challenge us.

But it is worth noting that word of caution, I suppose, as we approach the passage from this perspective. Answering the question, what happens when God's people pray?

Well, what does happen when God's people pray? Well, perhaps a very obvious thing to say, and indeed all that we will continue to say works on this premise, but it's worth just noting, God answers.

[7 : 36] When God's people pray, God hears and God answers. We're going to see the manner in which He answered, but it's worth just stressing that very simple but important point, God does answer.

But moving on to the passage and what we find in it, perhaps the first thing I would stress in answering the question, what happens when God's people pray? It is this, that God works, that God moves, that God does great things.

And I make that point as I compare the phrase with which this small section begins with the prayer that the people of God had lifted up to God in chapter 4.

You see, in chapter 5 and verse 12, we're simply told, the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. The focus is on the apostles as the authors, in a sense, of these things.

They are the ones who are on center stage. The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. If you'd asked the witnesses and said, well, who are doing these things?

[8 : 46] They would say, well, the apostles. Indeed, that is what Luke does as a historian. He records these things. Signs and wonders were being done among the people. And who were doing these things? Well, the apostles.

And yet, notice how the people had prayed. And notice the contrast. What had God's people, the very people who are now performing these things, the apostles together with the believers, what had they actually asked?

Well, in verse 30, we've already read it in chapter 4, in verse 30, what do they pray? They say, stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus.

You see, the people asked that God would stretch out His hand, that God would move, that God would work, that God would do these things. That is what they requested. This is their desire.

This is what they cry out for in the face of difficulty and persecution. Stretch out your hand. And of course, that is exactly what God does.

[9 : 48] What we have before us is, if you wish, the manner in which He does so, the instruments He uses, the apostles, and yet it is the prayer as it was prayed that is being answered, stretch out your hand.

And God is indeed stretching out His hand through the apostles to perform many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. The one who is at work fundamentally at this time of blessing, at this time of a very evident work of God is of course God Himself.

God is at work. God's people pray. God's people cry out to God, stretch out your hand. And God stretches out His hand. God stretches out His hand and does great and marvelous things.

What happens when God's people pray? Well, God is pleased to hear and to answer and to work and to move and to do great things. And of course, as we consider ourselves in our own situation, this must be our great desire and indeed our great petition that God would work as we would pray and as we would gather to pray, we cry out to God or that ought to be our emphasis and priority. Stretch out your hand. You work. You move. You do great things amongst us. We are willing servants. We are willing to be involved in your work in the manner in which you choose to involve us.

[11 : 25] But we are conscious that the one who must work is God. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs.

God heard. God answered. And we have the answer there at the beginning of our passage. The apostles perform many miraculous signs and wonders among the people.

So what happens when God's people pray? God hears and God answers and God works. God moves. But of course, He moves and He works.

He chooses so to do through His people, through His church, through the apostles, through the believers. Indeed, the verse that begins our section, verse 12, in the version that we have before us, presents the first sentence in this way.

The apostles perform many miraculous signs and wonders. But it's interesting to note that the literal expression used by Luke, translated in this way, an entirely legitimate way, but the literal expression used by Luke is this one.

[12 : 39] By the hands of the apostles, many miraculous signs and wonders were done among the people. By the hands of the apostles. The apostles were the instrument.

The apostles provided their hands. that God's hand that was being stretched out might do these things. God's people are His hands and His mouth in performing and in bringing about those things that He has determined to do.

Through the hands of the apostles, many miraculous signs and wonders were done among the people. well, we here this evening gathered are God's people and we too have hands at God's disposal.

We too have a mouth at God's disposal. And if we are to pray with the church in Jerusalem, stretch out your hands to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders.

Stretch out your hand to work in our midst. We must do so with that disposition that these hands are available, that this mouth is available, that this tongue is available.

[13 : 51] It should be God's instrument in doing that which He would do. And that He would indeed, through us, perform signs and wonders.

Now, we've already made the point that what we have before us is descriptive of what happened in Jerusalem at this particular moment in redemption history. The signs and wonders that will be performed today may well be different to those that were performed at this time in Jerusalem.

It is God's prerogative. We do not pretend to impose on Him what He will do and the manner in which He will do so. But it's entirely reasonable to recognize that the signs and wonders that He will perform may be different.

They may not be miraculous in character as they very clearly were by the hands of the apostles. But we most certainly should expect to see signs of the kingdom as we cry out to God that He would stretch out His hand as we place our hands as available at His disposition.

Signs of the kingdom as lives are transformed as we would place these hands at the disposal of those who are in need. At the disposal of the homeless and the lonely and the addicted and the stranger and the foreigner and all those who are in need of God's caring love and tender care.

[15 : 24] As these hands would be made available to God then as we work and as we minister and as we serve there will be visible signs of God's kingdom. Visible signs that God is at work amongst us and through us.

What happens when God's people pray? Well God's people those who pray must also be the ones who are available to be used by God that their very prayers would be answered.

What else can we say in answer to the question what happens when God's people pray? What happens when God chooses to hear and to answer the prayer of His people in a special way and move in a particular way at a particular time?

Well on this occasion we can say this that God places His people at the very heart of the city where they are. He places them in the very midst of the people.

We read that in verse 12 in the second half and all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's colonnade. Now without getting into the details of the temple complex Solomon's colonnade was part of that very large complex in Jerusalem.

[16 : 45] But the point that I want to make is that the temple complex itself was a very central point in the city. It was in a sense the central point of the city.

Not only of the religious life of the city but of the city in every sense. This was very much the public square. This was the most visible place to be.

And the apostles and the believers gathered in this very visible and central location to proclaim their message and to minister to those in need.

They were extremely visible. Their presence was a very public presence. when we would ask of God that He would stretch out His hand to do great things in our midst we must be conscious that in answering that prayer it is very likely that He will answer by prodding us and pushing us and saying you too must be in that public place.

You too must be at the center of the life of the city that you seek to minister to. Not on the edges not on the fringes not hidden away invisible but rather at the very heart of the city that you seek to serve and seek to transform.

[18 : 03] It speaks in a sense of the expectation that we have concerning how God will answer. Do we really believe that God will get to the very roots of our city? That God will transform the very heart of our city?

Or are we working at the edges hoping for the ones and twos and the encouragements here and there which I am in no way seeking to minimize we know that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.

But are we also conscious of God's purposes for the city as a whole that at the very heart of the city the kingdom and signs of the kingdom would be visible.

The apostles met in this central public place that they would be seen and that they would be heard. What happens when God answers the prayers of his people he pushes us to those important strategic places that our voice would be heard.

We cannot remain hidden if we genuinely desire to see God work and to be used by God in his purposes.

[19 : 09] What happens when God answers the prayers of his people? We can also say this, that when God answers the prayer of his people and begins to move in a particular, in a special way we might say two things and we'll then have to explain what we mean by them.

Some are emboldened and some are afraid. When God begins to move, some are emboldened and some are afraid. Now let's work around this and let's try and get to that point by considering these verses before us.

When we read the passage, it seems a fairly straightforward passage. There don't appear to be many difficulties in understanding what's being said, but I just want to, in a sense, share with you some of the difficulties that there are in understanding what is being said here, especially in verses 12 and 13, and the difficulties revolve around who are being referred to.

Those difficulties are not evident in our version because the translators have sought to solve the problem. Let me explain. In verse 12, in the second half of the verse, it says, and all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's colonnade.

Now, what it actually says is that all used to meet together in Solomon's colonnade. And those who have translated have sought to explain that all by introducing the word believers.

[20 : 35] They've understood it as given. It doesn't actually say that. And so we can't with absolute certainty say that that is what Luke is saying. It could be argued that the reference here isn't to all the believers but perhaps to all the apostles, those who were performing these miraculous signs.

And then the difficulties continue because then in verse 13 it says, no one else dared join them.

And the question is, who does that refer to? No one else dared join them.

Who are afraid of joining them? And the word join here means to associate with, not to join in the sense of becoming Christians or becoming part of the community, but simply to be seen with them, to associate with them.

It says, no one else, well, who are the no one else? Of course, the answer to that question is related to what we decide is meant by the first part, and all used to meet together in Solomon's colony.

And then, in a sense, the mystery, if you wish, continues because in verse 14 it says, nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord. Multitudes of men and women believed in the Lord.

[21 : 45] So, on the hand, we're being told that no one else dared join them. They didn't even want to associate with them. They were afraid to be seen with them, and yet, in the same breath, we're being told that multitudes believed, and not only associated with them, but joined them in that more fundamental sense of becoming Christians, becoming part of the believing community.

And so, there's a great deal that we need to get our heads around, in a sense, to understand really what's being said, and what is going on. Let me suggest one way of understanding this, and as I do so, it will help us then get to the point of recognizing why I say that when God answers the prayers of his people, some are emboldened, but some are afraid.

It seems to me that what is being said here is that at Solomon's Colonnade, all of the apostles, and we might say that group of committed members of the believing community, gather.

Those who are willing and have the courage to identify themselves plainly with Jesus in a public place, they are there, in this public place, conscious of the danger that that might involve, yet there they are.

But I would suggest that even from within the community, at the edges, at the fringes perhaps, there are those who choose at this point to not be there in that public place.

[23 : 16] There is a fear that is becoming part of the life of the community. Now this is something we've already noted at the end of the preceding passage.

In verse 11 we read, great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. and it would be entirely artificial not to recognize that that verse must be connected with what we read in verse 13, no one else dared join them.

Why this fear? Why this awe, as it were, in the face of the apostles? Well it clearly must be connected with this previous event, the death of Ananias and Sapphira.

Great fear, we're told, seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. Within the believing community there are those who are beginning to think, well this is heavy stuff.

It was great being part of this believing community when those who were in need were being provided for and when there was this great generosity. It was great to be part of this community when the sick were being healed but now we have people dying.

[24 : 25] We have people dropping dead because they have broken a commandment of God. This is getting heavy. This is getting scary. Do I actually want to be part of this?

Maybe I'll be next. So there is this fear, not only in the sense of awe and respect towards God but a fear in the sense of knowing, well what's going to happen next?

So when God begins to move and I would suggest that when God's people cried out to God that he would stretch out his hand to perform miraculous signs and wonders there is a sense in which the judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira, though that may not have been the intention of the believers in praying this prayer, is in part an answer to that prayer.

God is stretching out his hand and doing marvelous signs, frightening, terrifying signs, but signs nonetheless. And this produces in the community a variety of responses and reactions.

some are emboldened. Some are emboldened. They recognize that God is at work. They are seeking to serve God with a clean conscience.

[25 : 36] They are not afraid that this same fate will come upon them because in all their limitations and sins no doubt they are conscious that their genuine desire to serve God and as they see God at work in judgment and in healing and deliverance they are emboldened.

They are emboldened to serve Him to go to these public places to the very heart of the city and to proclaim their loyalty to King Jesus. And there they are.

But there are some who are afraid. Not only of the population at large though they too that is what we are told in verse 11 all who heard about these events were seized by great fear and no doubt when we are told no one else dare join them well it does refer to many within the population at large who chose not to associate with these men who were identified with these terrible acts of judgment terrible in the sense of frightening and dreadful producing dread some are afraid and that includes some I would suggest within the believing community them When God begins to move among His people and in His church, that church can become a very exciting place.

It can also become a very frightening place. And many will respond in different ways. Some will be challenged to greater commitment. Some will be challenged to a greater courage in their service for God, in their witness for God.

But others, perhaps, will choose to turn aside and to go away and to say, this is not for me. What happens when God answers the prayer of His people?

[27 : 33] But the passage gives us considerably more information, as it were, or a wider description of what is going on as God moves in answer to the prayers of His people.

We're told there in verse 13, no one else dared join them. We've given some thought as to what that might mean. But then it goes on to say, even though they were highly regarded by the people.

Now here the matter is clearer. The people is a clear reference to the community at large, to the population, to those who lived in Jerusalem. And we're told that the believers were held in high regard by them.

The people are impressed by the church community. Now, why? Why did they hold the Christians in high regard? What was it that produced in the population this impression, this opinion of the Christian community?

Was it the signs and wonders that they were performing, or that the apostles certainly were performing? Well, no doubt that did have a great impact. That was the intention, that it would have an impact, that it would draw a crowd, that it would grant a seal of authority on the verbal message that was being proclaimed.

[28 : 50] Yes, that no doubt did impress them, but I think it's entirely reasonable to say that this high regard in which the whole community was held goes beyond simply the signs and wonders that were performed.

Is it not that the whole dynamic of a community that was so radically different in every way causes this impression?

The manner in which they loved one another, the manner in which they served one another, the manner in which they sacrificially gave of their belongings, that none might be in need, as we have noted on another occasion, there was no need among them in the church there in Jerusalem.

All of these things must surely also have been instrumental in producing this impression among the population. They were highly regarded by the people.

And what we can certainly say, if the population at Lord had formed this opinion, what we can certainly say is that they were noticed. They were noticed. If they weren't noticed, then there would be no opinion, neither positive nor negative.

[29 : 57] But there was an opinion, it was a positive opinion, because God's people were noticeable. They were visible. And that too is a challenge for us. Maybe we are concerned, we should be concerned as to the opinion that those in the community around us have of us.

But I wonder if our primary issue isn't so much if they have a good opinion or if they have a bad opinion. Our concern should be, do they have any opinion?

Are we visible? Do they even know that we exist? Are they able to form any opinion? Do they have any elements upon which to come to a conclusion? Or are we so invisible that it's very difficult for them to have any opinion at all, be it positive or be it negative?

But here we find that the people are impressed with what they see. But then we continue. And notice what else is said here.

As we consider the manner in which God answers the prayer of His people as they had cried out, stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

[31 : 10] How does God respond? What else do we find? Well, we're told in verse 14 that though, yes, there were many who were afraid to associate with them of the population at large,

nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

The church grows. The church grows. The church grows. Fearful and in awe and yet drawn irresistibly to faith as the Holy Spirit moved and worked amongst them.

And the church grows. And we're told multitudes of men and women believed in the Lord. What happens when God's people pray?

God answers and God draws to Himself. Those who would believe. But then as we continue just noting one or two final elements that we have before us in these verses of chapter 5, we can say also this, that when God's people pray and God answers that prayer and God begins to move in power in the midst of His people and through His people, great expectation is generated among those who are looking on.

In our passage, the level of expectation becomes really very remarkable. There in verse 15, we read this, in a sense, rather strange description of one feature of this expectation.

[32 : 45] As a result, we're told, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.

Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem and so on. But without going into the details of what is being said here, and again, what Luke is doing is describing what the people did. It's interesting that Luke doesn't actually say if they were healed. It seems to me reasonable to think that they were, but he doesn't actually specifically state whether they were.

It would seem that his primary concern is to illustrate, to describe the expectation. He's saying, the people were so expectant that they even did this.

You can imagine, they even took their sick and laid them on the pavement that when Peter passed by, there was this expectation that they would be healed. Now, we could analyze this in great detail.

[33 : 45] We could say, well, what's going on here? Is this reasonable behavior? Is this not rather just superstition on the part of those who were doing these things? Well, it may be that it was. It may be that in God's grace that he was willing to even be of a mind to bless them while they acted in a way that was born, perhaps, of a measure of superstition.

I'm not saying that was the case, but it's one way of interpreting or understanding what the people are doing as they lay their sick on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.

My primary concern isn't really to come to a definitive conclusion as to whether this was a reasonable thing for the people to do or even to conclude whether they were healed or not, though I suspect they were.

My concern really is to note the great expectation that there was. The people did these things because they were expectant. They were very persuaded that God would work, that God would respond, that God would manifest Himself through Peter and through the apostles, through the believing community.

There was great expectation concerning the power and the disposition to help and to heal those in need. And while we would not, I think, in any reasonable way expect something similar to this to happen in our day and in our context, I think we can draw from this a desire, a healthy desire, that as God moves amongst us, that would generate expectation in those who are looking on, in those who are observing, in those who are seeing the manner in which God's people live and relate and serve their God, that there would be expectation not only among us, but among those who look on from the outside.

[35 : 49] But then we can say one final thing as we consider this passage and from this perspective, answering the question, what happens when God's people pray?

Well, the Word spreads. When God answers and God moves, the Word spreads. In verse 16, crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

People passed the Word on to their friends and to their relatives. the good news spreads quickly. Without the need for any modern technology, the Word spreads to the neighboring towns and villages, and the people gather.

The people gather that they too might be blessed, that they too might be served, that they too might be ministered to by God's people. And no doubt of these crowds, there were those who went away grateful for the healing that they received, and perhaps that was as far as it went.

showed no other interest in spiritual matters. But no doubt, also there were those who perhaps come in the first instance to see what's happening, to receive something, as it were, but who, as they do, so they are challenged by the message of the Gospel and are among those men and women more and more who believe in the Lord and are added to their number.

[37 : 12] when God's people pray, when God answers that prayer, the Word of God's work and of God's hand stretching out through His people to do great things, the Word spreads and others come.

So what happens when God's people pray? And as we do close and as we maybe draw from this one particular challenge and lesson for us, it is surely this.

Independently of how God may choose to answer our prayers, independently of how God may sovereignly determine the answer that He will give, the lesson for us is surely this, that it is in our hands and it is our responsibility to cry out to God.

That we too with the church in Jerusalem would cry out to God, stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

That is what we must do. We must cry out in this way. Stretch out your hand and as we do so, that these hands that are ours would be available for God to work. And we leave it to His sovereign prerogative, the manner in which He will respond.

[38 : 27] But here there are principles, here there are certain characteristics I think we can reasonably look for in our own circumstances and that so God might answer us.

But let us be a praying people. Let us be those who cry out in this fashion. And as we do, let's wait and see expectantly the manner in which God will answer us.

Let us pray.