



Central Peninsula Church

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Acts 12

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Anxious Hearts and Answered Prayers

SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

In the summer of 1976 I was working at a Young Life camp in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. My friend and mentor that summer was a man named Jay, who served on the staff of Young Life at the time. One day, Jay took me with him to some property he owned out in the middle of nowhere. He had a little trailer on it and he wanted me to help him build a deck for it. The problem was, as we packed a lunch and headed out, it was raining like cats and dogs. Jay didn't seem concerned. About an hour later, we arrived at his property and, sure enough, it was still raining. Once again, Jay didn't seem to be too worried about it. I kept thinking we'd made the trip in vain. We decided to eat our lunch. Before we ate, Jay prayed. I don't remember exactly what he said, but I remember that he prayed for it to stop raining so we could get some work done. I remember thinking, he's got a lot of guts to pray for that. What are the chances of that happening? But, in the next ten minutes, I almost choked on my ham sandwich, because there was a miraculous clearing of the skies. I was going crazy but, once again, Jay just took it in stride, as if to say, "Well, what did you expect to happen, Mark?"

I have never forgotten that answer to prayer, and I've never forgotten Jay's quiet confidence that God would respond to even the most simple request. Isn't it true that sometimes, though we may pray in the midst of a crisis, we really don't expect God to answer? As we continue our study of the church, we come to this subject of prayer, and we will see that the early church, while devoted to prayer, was sometimes surprised by the answers God gave.

I. HEROD'S TERROR 12:1-4

In Acts 12 the church is facing a great crisis, much greater than the one Jay and I faced that day. King Herod Agrippa I was on the throne. He was the nephew of Herod Antipas who had murdered John the Baptist. His grandfather was Herod the Great who slaughtered the innocents soon after Jesus was born. This man had grown up in Rome. His best friend was Caligula, the son of the Roman Emperor, and he used this friendship to obtain his appointment as ruler over Palestine. He was very popular with the Jews. He was the consummate politician, and it was for this reason he began to strike out at the church. Look what happens in vv. 1-4. **"Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people."**

The first thing Herod did was have James beheaded. This is not the same James who was the half-brother of Jesus

and the primary leader of the Jerusalem church. This James was one of the original twelve Apostles. His brother was the Apostle John, and together they were nicknamed "sons of thunder." Jesus predicted both of these brothers' would suffer martyrdom back in Mark 10. Here we see that James was the first to go.

This had to be a great blow for the church, but Herod didn't stop there. He arrested Peter. He would have had him killed right away, but it was the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which took place on the seven days prior to Passover, and public executions weren't kosher during religious holidays. So Herod decided to wait until the holiday was over. He put Peter in prison and assigned four squads of soldiers to guard him. That's sixteen men. Two of those men would be chained to Peter and two more would guard the doors to the prison. And then every three or four hours a new squad would come in to relieve the old one. Herod wasn't taking any chances!

You can imagine what a crisis this was for those early believers. James is dead, Peter is in prison, and Herod is triumphing. That's how the chapter begins. That's what these believers faced. But, consider this. At the end of the chapter, Herod is dead, Peter is free, and the word of God is triumphing! There is a complete turnaround between v. 4 and v. 24. Now the question is, how did God bring this about? Did the church somehow try to exert political pressure on Herod? Did they try to get one of their more wealthy members to run for office? Did they picket Herod's palace? What did they do?

II. ANXIOUS HEARTS AND ANSWERED PRAYERS ACTS 12:1-24

Look at v. 5. **"So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God."** If you have a pencil, underline those words, "But prayer..." The entire chapter hinges on those two words. You see, here we see two forces at war, each using their own weapons. On the one hand, we have Herod, with all the strength and force that humanity can muster; the power of the sword and the security of the prison. On the other hand, we have the church, stripped of all human power, doing the one thing they believed could make a difference - prayer. Sometimes we mock those who pray only in a time of crisis, but we forget that the essence of all prayer is bringing our helplessness to God, and it's often crisis that brings us to this point of helplessness.

Having said that, this wasn't the only time we see the church at prayer in the book of Acts. In Acts 1 Jesus told the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came. After Jesus ascended into heaven, they gathered together in the upper room, and what did they do as they waited? Did they rent a movie? Did they play Pictionary? No! We're told **"with one mind they were continually devoting themselves to prayer"** (Acts 1:14). Last week we saw in Acts 2:42 that after 3,000 were baptized on the day of Pentecost they were devoted to four

things: learning, loving, eating and praying. In Acts 4, after Peter and John had been arrested and then released, they returned to their friends and the first thing they did was "lift their voices to God with one accord..." The point is that when we come to chapter 12 we can be sure that prayer had become almost as natural as breathing to the early church; it was a staple of their life together.

Now here in chapter 12 we can learn something from how they prayed. Notice that they prayed specifically. It says they prayed "for him..." For who? For Peter, of course. They mobilized to pray specifically for Peter. It's interesting, we don't know WHAT they asked God to do for Peter. Did they ask for his release? Perhaps. Did they ask for God to strengthen Peter whatever the outcome? Perhaps. They also prayed continuously. It says, "prayer for him was being made..." Luke uses a verb tense here that indicates ongoing action. As each day went by, bringing them closer to the execution, they kept on storming heaven for Peter. I believe they prayed day and night. There are times to keep on praying, even when it seems that nothing is happening. They also prayed fervently. It says "prayer for him was being made fervently..." Literally this word means "to stretch out." The idea is that they refused to relax, they stretched themselves in prayer for Peter. Sometimes prayer is hard work. Sometimes we have to agonize in prayer. Finally, they prayed corporately. It says, "prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God." They didn't just take their concerns to God as individuals; they gathered to pray about this.

And God answered their prayers in a most unusual way. Look at vv. 6-11. **"On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, 'Get up quickly.' And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, 'Gird yourself and put on your sandals.' And he did so. And he said to him, 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.' And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. When Peter came to himself, he said, 'Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.'" Notice how God waits till the very last minute to act on Peter's behalf. It's the night before Peter is to be brought forward and executed. Peter knows what just happened to James, and now he knows it's his turn.**

It reminds me of one of the kids I coach in Little League baseball. Last week the opposing team put in the best pitcher in the league to pitch against us in the last inning. This kid does not look twelve! I mean, he's got a two day beard and he talks with a deep voice and it wouldn't surprise me to see him drive to the game. And he throws

the ball about 90 miles an hour and he's wild! My son was the first one to step up to the plate and as he did, the kid who was due up next looked at me wide-eyed and said, "Could you put in a pinch hitter for me?"

That's probably what Peter wanted to say. James went to the plate and lost his head, and now Peter knows that in just a few hours it's his turn, and yet did you see what Peter is doing? Peter is sleeping like a baby! He's sleeping so soundly the angel can't wake him up. You have to see the humor in that! He's chained up to two guards, lying on the cold and dirty floor of a prison cell. All of a sudden an angel appears and a glorious light spreads throughout the prison, and Peter sleeps through the whole thing! Can you believe that! Paul and Silas sang and prayed while they were in prison; at least they stayed awake! But Peter was so unconcerned he couldn't even keep his eyes open. That may be the biggest answer to prayer in this whole story. God can do that for us. He can give us a quiet confidence in the darkest hour.

Finally, Peter begins to wake up. The angel tells him to get dressed and follow him. Peter throws on his clothes and begins to follow the angel. He thinks he's having a dream. He passes by the first and second guard. We don't know whether they were awake or asleep. Either way, it was a miracle, because they didn't see him. They come to the huge iron gate leading out of the prison into the city. How would they get through that? All of a sudden, it swings open by itself. Now they didn't have automatic garage door openers back then. This was a God thing. Finally, they're out on the street and the angel disappears. "Oh, thanks alot, what do I do now?" But, Peter collects himself, puts two and two together and says, "Oh I get it! God just sent that angel to rescue me from Herod." Have you ever done that? Something amazing happens and it's not until it's all over that you stand back and say, "You know, that was amazing. I think God was in that!"

And so, Peter was left out there on the street trying to figure out what to do next. He doesn't say, "I think I'll head over to Krispy Kreme." He thinks of his brothers and sisters in Christ. He knows they're concerned for him. He knows they've been praying for him. And so he wants to tell them what God has done. But where are they? Look at v. 12. **"And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying."**

Who is this Mary? We don't know a lot about her. She was the mother of John Mark who would soon accompany Paul on his first missionary journey. Most scholars agree that Mary was a woman of means. As we'll see, she had at least one servant, perhaps more, and her house was large. And it's because of this that the early church found this to be an ideal place to meet. Believers in those days didn't meet in buildings like this one; they met in homes. And Peter instinctively knew where at least one group of Christians could be found - Mary's house. No doubt there were a number of homes scattered throughout that city where believers met, but Peter went to Mary's home. It could be that he was especially close to the groups who met in there, or that Mary's home was the closest one to where he was when the angel left him. But, that's where Peter knew he would find his friends.

Luke reminds us again in v. 12 of what they were doing - praying. It's so easy for us to forget that this is what church is supposed to be all about. We can get so caught up in the trappings of church, buildings and programs, that we lose sight of the simplicity of what church really is. The church is about people;

people learning to relate with God, to love one another, and to be salt and light in the community. And in the early church the way they did that was through small groups of believers meeting in homes where they could pray for one another and bear one another's burdens. We see right here how they had gathered together that night to pray for their brother, Peter. One of the sad commentaries on the church today is that if this same thing would happen to Peter today, he might not have any place to go, unless it was Sunday or Wednesday night! That's why this church has always emphasized commitment to a small group of believers as an essential part of church life. We've always felt that small groups aren't just programs of the church, they're an essential part of what it means to BE the church. And one of the core purposes of these groups is to pray; to pray for one another; to pray for their unbelieving friends; to pray for those whom they have sent out to other parts of the world.

But, I'm not sure Peter was prepared for what would happen when he got to Mary's house. Look at vv. 13-17. **"When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, 'You are out of your mind!' But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, 'It is his angel.' But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, 'Report these things to James and the brethren.' Then he left and went to another place."**

Don't let anyone ever tell me that God doesn't have a sense of humor! You have to see the humor in this. I'm sure Dr. Luke was cracking up when he wrote this. Peter arrives at Mary's house, still a little shook up. He starts knocking at the door. This one didn't open for him! The believers are huddled together inside. A servant-girl named Rhoda hears the knocking and comes to the door. Back then you didn't just open the door, you had the visitor identify himself. Peter says, "Rhoda, it's me, Peter. Open the door." I can just hear Rhoda shriek with joy. "Peter!" Peter says, "Yea, it's me, Peter, now, please, open the door!" But she's so excited she runs back into the house to tell the others. Peter's still waiting at the door. "Rhoda! Rhoda! Where did she go?" Meanwhile, Rhoda interrupts the prayer meeting and says, "Guess who's outside? Peter! He's been set free by an angel!" But they don't believe her. They think she's gone mad. They get into a big argument. They start discussing the theology of angels. Meanwhile Peter's outside about ready to pound the door down.

Isn't this great!? These guys were just like us. Here they were praying for days with all their heart for Peter and yet, when he is set free, when the answer to their prayers is right there knocking at the door, they refuse to believe it. I'm comforted by these early believers. How often do I pray for something, but deep down I really don't expect God to answer. When he does, I can hardly believe it, or I try to find some other explanation for it. It strikes me that sometimes the answer to our prayers is right there knocking at our door, but we're not listening. We pray but we don't look and listen. And yet, it comforts me to know that God still took their little mustard seed of faith and used it to accomplish great things, and He'll do the same for me.

It strikes me that I'll bet there were some "spiritual

heavyweights" in Mary's house that night, but it was a servant-girl named Rhoda who had all the faith. Don't ever say about anyone, "She could never minister to me; I could never learn anything from her." As soon as you do, you'll eat your words. Did you notice her joy? Her joy came from her faith. Everyone else had questions; she had the joy. Why? Because she believed. Joy always results from believing. In Rom. 15:17 Paul prays that we would be filled **"with all joy and peace in believing."** That's Rhoda.

Finally, they let Peter in. They're transfixed as he tells them the whole story, reminding them to pass the news on to James and the rest of the brethren. No doubt they were meeting elsewhere, also praying for Peter. And then he leaves. He must have felt the need to lay low for a while. Peter doesn't show up again for about a year until Acts 15. The chapter closes with the death of Herod and a brief report about the progress of the gospel. **"On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. The people kept crying out, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark"** (vv.21-25).

In spite of kings and swords and prisons, the word of God continued to grow. Remember, at the start of the chapter, James is dead, Peter is in prison, and Herod is triumphing. Now, Herod is dead, Peter is free, and the word of the Lord is triumphing. And the key to it all is a praying church. Tell me, has anything changed?

Now I want us to step back from this great story and take note of some things that help us understand how it is that God works.

Notice the mystery of God's sovereignty. Herod ruled over Palestine, but God rules over the church. As our king, we affirm that God has the authority to do as He pleases with us. And we delight in that because we know He rules with justice and love. He's not a petty tyrant like Herod. But notice the mystery of how He works. You can't read this chapter without coming away a little bit baffled at God's ways. Why did God permit James to be executed, and then not long after deliver Peter? Some have tried to explain it. Perhaps Peter was more important than James. Or perhaps the church didn't pray as hard for James as they did for Peter. Or perhaps James was just the unfortunate victim of uncontrollable circumstances. But none of these explanations are adequate. It's futile to try to figure out all that God does. Why does this person die of cancer and this other person survive it? Why does God remove that person so swiftly when we need him so? There are many who wrestle with God over these things. It's as if we want to take God to court and put Him on trial. The bottom line is, we can't explain God's ways. He does what He pleases. At times, all we can do is submit and rest in His infinite wisdom.

But notice also the certainty of God's triumph. In other words, though we may not be able to understand why He does what He does now, we do know that in the end His

purpose will be fulfilled. Once in a while, I'll be reading a novel and I'll cheat. I'll read the last few pages and find out how it ends. In a way, though we don't understand all that God does now, He has allowed us to peek and see how the story ends. God has a purpose; God has a plan. Right now we are in the middle of the novel so it's hard to see where it's all going. But, in the end, He will bring **"many sons to glory."** (Heb. 2:10) He is not out of control. His hands aren't tied. He's not powerless to save. Though James is dead, He still had the power to deliver Peter, and to judge Herod, and to cause the truth to spread. Though life can never be understood in the process of living, we don't despair; we know that the same power which delivered Peter from prison and judged Herod will one day deliver all those who trust in Him and judge all those who turn away.

But here is the clincher. The mystery of God's sovereignty and the certainty of God's triumph don't keep the church from using God's powerful weapon - prayer. That's a temptation, you know. Derek Thomas writes, "Once Christians get hold of the doctrine of God's sovereignty it can revolutionize their lives. All at once they see that in every situation God is in perfect control working out his purposes according to his fore-ordained plan. Nothing can prevent God from accomplishing that which he has determined to do. The temptation is to think that God's way of accomplishing his ends is to act irrespective of us." But we see here we are not to be rendered passive by the sovereignty of God. We are to use God's chosen weapon - prayer. It's hard to understand the interplay between God's plan and our prayers, but somehow He allows us to participate in His plan through prayer. Prayer is not about us getting God to cooperate with our plans, but vice versa. Someone wrote, "If I throw out a boat hook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God."

And that's what we do when we gather together to pray. We align ourselves with God. We express our need to him. The world relies on prisons and personalities and the sword; the church relies on God through prayer. Whenever the church relies on anything else, it loses its power. When we rely on gifted personalities rather than prayer, we lose our power. When we rely on the ingenuity of our methods rather than prayer, we lose our power. And when the church relies on its political clout rather than prayer, we lose our power. And so we must pray together. It may not happen for all of us in one meeting in the middle of the week, but you need to have a place where you consistently and diligently pray with others. It may be here on Wednesday nights; it may be with the GO Team once a month, it may be in your Community Group, but we can't expect to see God's blessing without corporate prayer.

Samuel Chadwick said this, "Satan dreads nothing but prayer. His one concern is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks our wisdom, but trembles when we pray."

What's amazing about this story is that even doubting prayer, such as the believers in Mary's house had, is enough to overcome the power of the sword. The point of this story is not to pray better or to pray more, the point is simply to pray. God uses our doubting, fumbling, stumbling prayers to accomplish great things.

Shortly after Dallas Seminary was founded in 1924, it almost went bankrupt. All the creditors were going to foreclose at 12:00 noon on a particular day. That morning the founders of the school met in the President's office to pray that God would provide. In that prayer meeting was a preacher named Harry Ironside. When it was his turn to pray, he said to the Lord, "Lord, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are yours. Please sell some of them and give us the money."

While they were praying, a tall Texan came into the business office and said to the secretary, "I just sold two carloads of cattle in Fort Worth. I've been trying to make a business deal and nothing I do will work, and I feel God is leading me to give this money to the seminary. I don't know if you need it or not, but here's the check." The secretary took the check and went to the door of the prayer meeting. She timidly tapped on the door. Finally, the President came to the door, took the check, looked at it, and discovered it was for the exact amount of the debt. When he looked at the signature, he recognized the rancher's name and, turning to Dr. Ironside, he said, "Harry, God sold the cattle!" God's chosen weapon is prayer. The power of prayer, even doubting, halting prayer, is mightier than all the Herods in our lives, and mightier than Hell itself. "Satan laughs at our toil, mocks our wisdom, but trembles when we pray."

WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer
O what peace we often forfeit
O what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer

Have we trials and temptations
Is there trouble anywhere
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share
Jesus knows our every weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer

Are we weak and heavy laden
Cumbered with a load of care
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee
Take it to the Lord in prayer
In his arms he'll take and shield thee
Thou wilt find a solace there.

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