



Central Peninsula Church

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Acts 12:1-24
Mark Mitchell
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Anxious Hearts and Answered Prayers

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

I heard a story about a businessman who was late for an important meeting and couldn't find a parking space. As he frantically circled the block, he got so desperate that he decided to pray. Looking up toward heaven, he prayed, "Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking space, I'll go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life, and not only that, I'll give up drinking." Miraculously, a parking space appeared. He looked up again and said, "Never mind, Lord. I found one."

Isn't it true that sometimes, though we may pray in the midst of a crisis, we really don't expect God to answer, and then if he does answer, we find some other explanation? As we continue our study of the book of Acts, we'll see that we're not alone in that. The early church, while devoted to prayer, was sometimes surprised by God's answers.

I. HEROD'S TERROR 12:1-4

In Acts 12 the church is facing a great crisis. 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 popular with the Jews; 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 isn't the same James who was the half-brother of Jesus and the main leader of the Jerusalem church. This James was one of the original 12 Apostles. His brother was the Apostle John, and together they were nicknamed "*sons of thunder*." Jesus had predicted both of these brothers' would suffer martyrdom. Here we see that

James was the first to go.

This had to be a great blow for the church. It was one thing to have Stephen killed, but now one of the Apostles! 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, 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 (16 men) to guard him. Two of those men would be chained to Peter and two more would guard the doors to the prison. 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 the 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 storm Herod's palace? What did they do?

II. ANXIOUS HEARTS AND ANSWERED PRAYERS

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. Without that, they were helpless.

We can learn something from how they pray. Notice that they prayed specifically. It says they prayed "*for him...*" For who? For Peter, of course. The 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 ther

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 passionately. 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 an 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.'"

God waits till the very last minute to act on Peter's behalf. It's the night before Peter is to be executed. Peter knows what just happened to James, and now he knows it's his turn. He had to be frightened, but did you see what Peter is doing? He's 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. The psalmist wrote, **"I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety"** (Ps. 4:8).

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. They didn't have automatic garage door openers back then. Finally, they're out on the street and the angel disappears. "Oh, thanks a lot, 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!"

So Peter was left out there on the street trying figure out what to do next. Then he thinks of his brothers and sisters in Christ. He knows they're concerned for him; they've been praying for him. And so he wants to tell them what God has done. 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 join Paul on his first missionary journey. Mary was a woman of means. As we'll see, she had at least one servant, perhaps more, and her house was large. 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. 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 group 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 at the center of 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. This is why we've always emphasized commitment to a small group of believers as an integral part of church life. One of the core purposes of these groups is to pray. Sometimes people ask why we don't have a prayer meeting. Well, we have dozens of prayer meetings every week in our small groups.

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.”

You have to see the humor in this. I'm sure 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 about the theology of angels, while Peter is 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. This comforts me. 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 looking or listening. 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.

I'll bet there were some in Mary's house who were "spiritual heavyweights." 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 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.

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

III. LESSONS ON PRAYER

A. The mystery of God's sovereignty: Notice the mystery of God's sovereignty. Herod ruled over Palestine, but God rules over all. 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, but 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? We wrestle with God over these things; it's like we want to put him on trial. The bottom line is, we can't explain God's ways. He does what he pleases. Philip Yancey writes, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived. Prayer offers no ironclad guarantees—just the certain promise that we need not live that mystery alone."

B. The certainty of God's triumph: 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're in the middle of the novel so it's hard to see where it's all going. But, in the end, he wins! He's 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.

C. God's most powerful weapon: 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 foreordained 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're not to be rendered passive by the sovereignty of God. We're 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."

That's what we do when we gather together to pray. We align ourselves with God. 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. So we must pray together. We all need to have a small group where we consistently and diligently pray with others. We can't expect to see God's blessing without this kind of prayer.

CONCLUSION

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 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.

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."

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