

Pray Earnestly

Acts 12:1-14

Oct. 3, 2010

The passage before us today gives a strong rebuke to my prayer life. Even though I consider myself to be diligent with prayer, there is one aspect of prayer that I regularly struggle with. My challenge is the same thing that the Christians in Acts 12 struggled with: *I often lack the faith and expectation that God will answer my prayer.*

I suspect that this happens to all of us at some point. Prayer after prayer, after prayer, comes back seemingly unanswered.

If you are like me, maybe you just shrug your shoulders and quote a verse like Isaiah 55:8 where God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways."

I suspect that we have become so accustomed to not having our prayers answered immediately, we have become so used to not having our prayers answered in the way in which we hoped they would, that *we seldom expect God to do anything when we pray.*

The result is that we end up praying simply because we are told we should. And we end up praying with only a faint hope that God will act on our behalf.

It's not that we are completely devoid of faith, it's just that, despite our prayers, we have seen too many unconverted people stay unconverted. We have seen too many sick people remain sick. We know from Scripture, and we've learned from experience, that in this life we don't always get a happy ending.

Our Scripture passage this morning reminds us of this reality.

Our text begins with the tragic ending of one of the apostles as we read the first few verses of Acts chapter 12, **"Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. He had James the brother of John put to death with a sword."**

The life of James, like the life of Stephen (7:60), and the life of John the Baptist (Mk. 6:28), was cut terribly short.

Surely John the Baptist's disciples were praying for him while he was in prison. Undoubtedly prayers of deliverance were being offered for Stephen and for James. And yet, they were all gruesomely executed.

Now, before you become anymore discouraged about God's willingness to answer your prayers, I need to lead you through the rest of Acts 12. Because here we read about how Peter is miraculously delivered out of prison.

Luke tells us that, shortly after James was executed, Herod had Peter arrested and **"put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of four soldiers each to guard him, intending after Passover to bring him out for public trial"**(12:4).

Herod's plan was to have Peter executed. But it was Passover, and so Herod had to delay the trial and execution of Peter until after the festival.

Peter's situation was bleak--some would even say hopeless. With four sets of four guards taking turns guarding Peter, there appeared to be no possibility of escape.

It is in verse 5, however, where we come to the turning point of our passage: "**So Peter was kept in the prison, *but* the church was earnestly praying to God for him.**"

Peter's situation was dire... "***but* the church was earnestly praying to God for him.**"

The context compels us to infer the obvious—that the church was praying for Peter's release. Notice that these are not token prayers either, but Luke specifies that these prayers were being made "**earnestly (fervently)**". The people of the early Church were praying with a sincere intensity for Peter's release.

Time, however, was running out for Peter. His execution was looming and Peter is in chains with guards at his side and "**in front of the (prison) door**"(12:6).

How was Peter coping with all of this?

Well, we read in verse 6 that Peter was found "**sleeping**". Not anxiously tossing and turning, but sleeping!

Those of us who tend to fret about upcoming appointments, decisions regarding the future, and impending medical procedures, would do well to note Peter's example. Just prior to his scheduled trial and execution, Peter had evidently cast his cares upon the Lord for he was found sleeping.

The miraculous nature of what happens next is unmistakable, but I want to also note some of the humorous elements in this account.

We need to picture here, what the text is describing: "**An angel of the Lord**" appears in Peter's cell and shines a bright light(12:7).

I suppose if you are an angel in a physical environment, stealth mode is not an option.

I don't know about you, but if Allie so much as turns on a bedside lamp while I am sleeping, I immediately wake up. Peter, however, is unstirred by the presence of an angel who is shining a bright light in his cell.

Luke describes how the angel had to actually strike Peter in the side in order to rouse him. And as the angel instructed Peter to get up, we are told that the chains on Peter's hands fell off.

Evidently, Peter was so groggy that the angel even had to remind him to get dressed before leading him past the prison guards and out onto the street (12:8-10).

Peter initially thought he was dreaming, but what he soon discovered was that he had been a part of a miracle--a miracle that was precipitated by *prayer*.

Luke then reports that Peter "**went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying**"(12:12).

Do you remember what they were praying for? That's right--they were praying for Peter's release (12:5). Peter's arrival then, would surely add some excitement to this prayer meeting.

But listen to what happens: "**when (Peter) knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. And 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. And they said to her, 'You are out of your mind!'"(12:13-15).

The irony of this response is potent. The people who were praying fervently and persistently for Peter's release regarded as insane the person who informed them that their prayers had been answered!

While the response of the prayer group is indeed ironic, their response should not entirely surprise us. If Peter was truly at their door, then a genuine miracle had taken place.

Perhaps their prayers for Peter's release followed a more logical train. Perhaps they imagined that their prayer would impact the trial, and that Peter would eventually be found innocent and then released.

If this was the case, the surprise is the extraordinary manner in which Peter obtains his freedom, and how quickly his freedom is secured.

When they finally open the door for Peter, Luke describes their response: "**they saw him and were amazed**"(12:16).

There must have been great excitement and noise when they saw Peter, for Luke tells us that Peter had to motion them to be silent so that he could explain this miraculous deliverance (12:17).

Before we seek to unpack what the early Church did well, we should pause and note the obvious: *Prayer did this*. Prayer worked. Prayer made possible what was otherwise impossible.

Commenting on this verse, 17th Century theologian, Thomas Watson, writes, “the angel may have fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel.”

Don't we long for that to be our experience? Don't we long for it to be the case that our prayers change things?

I realize, of course, that there is a balance--James was not rescued. James got executed (12:2), while Peter got rescued.

I do not attribute the different outcomes here to the faith of those praying because it is obvious that those who prayed for Peter had some serious limitations to their faith!

The balance I'm speaking of comes from the recognition that God's sovereign wisdom gets the final say.

My challenge is that I often lean too much on the sovereignty of God, and I need to recognize that God has sovereignly determined to save, heal, and protect people in response to our prayers.

God is sovereign over all things, and yet He has determined to work through the prayers of His people. In other words, God in His sovereignty has appointed secondary means. For example, God did not simply ordain that there be light, but He employed the sun, moon, and stars to provide that light.

Similarly, prayer is one of the appointed means God uses to redeem people; it is one of the means He employs to further our Christ-likeness; it is one of the means through which God grows a local congregation; it is one of the means through which God heals or rescues a person from harm.

And this is why we ought to be much in prayer.

How then, should we pray? How should our prayers be marked?

Based on what I see in Acts chapter 12, I'd like to offer you 4 principles for prayer.

To help you remember these 4 principles, I have put them in an acronym: **SEET**

S is for **specifically**. The people prayed specifically for Peter, we read in verse 5. They prayed specifically for Peter and for him to be released from prison.

[Provide an example: General prayer for "church growth" vs praying specifically for particular persons, and strategies that contribute to church growth]

The first **E** is for **earnestly**. Luke says that prayer for Peter "**was being made fervently/earnestly**"(v.5). There was a passion—there was an intensity—to the prayers of these people.

I take this to mean that *our disposition* in prayer matters a great deal.

To say a prayer is not necessarily to pray. This is one of the reasons I resist having us pray The Lord's Prayer every Sunday. I am mindful of our ability to say prayerful things from memory, without ever having our heart engaged. I know this to be true, because it has, at times, been true of me.

The second **E** is for **expectantly**. The early church did not model expectant prayer for us. They effectively said to Rhoda, 'Stop being silly. There is no way Peter could be at the door. Stop interrupting our prayer meeting'.

And yet, we are reminded by the deliverance of Peter in Acts 12 that "with God all things are possible "(Mt. 19:26). Since all things are possible with God, Christians should pray expectantly.

And finally, the **T** is for **together**. The first century Christians were committed to praying together. Verse 5 states that the prayers were being made for Peter "**by the church**".

And just so we don't imagine a minister doing all the praying, Luke specifies in verse 12 that, "**many were gathered together and were praying.**"

Praying alone is good and necessary, but Scripture demands that we do more--we must be committed to praying together.

4 principles for prayer:

Pray **s**pecifically.

Pray **e**arrestly.

Pray **e**xpectantly.

Pray **t**ogether.

The early church modelled diligence in prayer, although admittedly, their faith in the power of prayer had some limitations.

Nevertheless, *God's design was to use the earnest prayer of the early church to work a miracle.*

I want you to think about what God might do *here* if we were to step up our diligence in prayer.

How might ministry at the Kirk change for the better?

How might the people of the Kirk be changed for the better?

How might the Kirk's influence upon our community change for the better?

What miracle might God work in response to our increased devotion to prayer?

I want to find out.

Can we commit, beginning today, to be more diligent in prayer?

I urge you...let's commit ourselves to praying earnestly for one another, and for this community. Amen.