

Praying Earnestly

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Acts 12:1-17

Last week we finished chapter 11 when we saw how the Holy Spirit working all over, from Jerusalem, to Caesarea, to Phenicia (Lebanon), to Cyprus, to Cyrene (Libya), to Antioch (Syria). The Good News of the message of Jesus Christ was spreading despite persecution and opposition. The Spirit of the Lord was reaching out to many cities and nations.

Today we start again with opposition: **Herod Agrippa**

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. (Acts 12:1,2 NIV11)

“This king was not the Herod who slaughtered the infants at the time of the birth of Jesus, Herod the Great. In fact, it is the grandson of Herod the Great, the first Herod Agrippa.”¹

Herod Agrippa lost his father when he was child. His mother took him to Rome, and he was raised there. After many years, when Herod came to Jerusalem, he became aware of the “sect” called Jewish-Christians. He knew that this movement was spreading, and he wanted to demonstrate his power. Besides arresting Christians, he arrested **the first apostle who was executed, James**, the brother of John, the child of Zebedee.

- The first martyr was Stephen. He was not apostle; he was a disciple and deacon.
- The first apostle who was martyred was James.

-The Arrest of Peter

When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. (Acts 12:3-4 NIV11)

Herod, a typical politician, appeasing the crowd, finds out the crowd was happy by the execution of James. Next in line comes Peter. So, he puts him in jail waiting to execute him. Why did not execute him right away? It was Passover time; “Jewish tradition did not approve of an execution during Passover feast”.²

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (Acts 12:5 NIV11)

While Peter was arrested, the church was on their knees in prayer, earnestly, without ceasing, constant prayer (*ektenēs*).

The early church understood the power of prayer.

We sang the song, *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...”

-The Angel of the LORD at work

The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

⁸ Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. (Acts 12:6-10 NIV11)

Luke describes in detail how God rescued Peter. God uses here an angel who leads Peter step by step and shows him what to do.

First, the angel unlocks the chain; Peter was in maximum security prison, chained to two guards.

Then the angel opens the doors of the prison: guards at the door could not see it. All the “locked” situations are being unlocked one by one: “chains, guards, doors...”

I observe as well, how **Peter obeys** the Angel of the Lord without understanding what is going on, “Get up, wrap your cloak, follow me...”

Although Peter is confused, is this a dream, or reality...yet, he obeys.

-Back to the House of Prayer (Mary's House)

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place. (Acts 12:11-17 NIV11)

Peter is in the city. The angel leaves him, and he decides to go to the house of **Mary** home, the mother of **John-Mark**. Christians did not have a sanctuary; they met in people's home, especially larger homes that could host more people. We will see later who John-Mark is.

-The story that is described here is a funny one. I have preached a sermon about **Rhoda** (*The lesser known characters of the Bible*) the young servant who heard the knock, went to open the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, instead of opening the door, she went and informed the "many people" who were praying. They did not believe her; they said you lost your mind; it is not Peter, maybe an angel...

But Peter kept knocking... and eventually they opened the door, and they were astonished...

Why?

Isn't it funny, we pray for an issue, and when God answers, we are astonished...

-When Peter entered the house, he asked them **to be quiet**, they were all excited, then he said: "**Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this...**"

Who is this James?

“Peter was talking about a different James--not James the brother of John, but James, who, by the time we get to Acts 15, has become the presiding leader of the church in Jerusalem. James, the fraternal brother of Jesus himself, wrote the book of James.”³

-Conclusion: There are many things one can learn from this passage. I would like to focus on the power of prayer.

1. God answers prayers.

No prayer is ignored by God. Do you think the early church did not pray for James not to be executed? I am quite sure they did pray for that as they prayed for Peter’s release. God did answer both prayers. God is not deaf. We can cry out, David did and many other prophets. That is fine, we can open our heart to our Father, to our Maker, to Jesus who intercedes for us, to our friend Jesus... We need to trust in His answers. And sometimes we don’t like His answers. I get it.

“Prayer is not for the enhancement of our comforts but for the advancement of Christ’s Kingdom.” John Piper

So, in that process things can happen that are not the way we want. I surrender to Jesus... I don’t get it; I accept His will....

2. Pray Earnestly

There is another lesson I learn from the early church. When James was captured, I am quite sure they prayed for his release. He was executed.

When Peter was captured, what did church do?

The church did not give up from praying. They prayed earnestly, without ceasing...

Please notice, prayer changes us; we need prayer.

Thus:

3. Ask for Wisdom

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. (James 1:5 NIV11)

I am not sure prayer for wisdom will be first on our agenda when we are in trials, but it is very helpful...

What to pray for? What words should we say?

I hear this most of the time from you and sometimes from me.

ASK for WISDOM.

What kind of wisdom is James asking for?

Wisdom from ABOVE, as James would say.

I think James is talking about the wisdom that can help us shape our character.

In fact, chapter 3 describes this wisdom:

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. (3:13 NIV) ... the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” (3:17 NIV)

Asking for wisdom means asking for character change, asking God to make me “pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive (to the will of God), full of mercy...and sincere, without hypocrisy...”

God is interested in hearts that are willing to change and not just demanding this or that. (Sometimes our prayer is just a list of things.)

-We find in Jesus’ teachings he encourages us to have these characteristics: pure in heart, merciful, meek, peace-lovers... Jesus was interested to see change of hearts which means characters.

“Wisdom is not being merely good. It is God’s gift of rare beauty to our souls – what scriptures call ‘the beauty of holiness’- and it always looks best against the dark background of deep suffering,” said David Roper.⁴

Here is Young Augustine wants change, but delays. He prays, “Make me pure, Lord, but not yet!” Do we pray like this?

Today is Pentecost Sunday; it is also Memorial Day, and historically the Armenian Independence Day May 28, 1918.

There are wonderful opportunities to thank God, to ask His Spirit to come burn your tongue, your heart, your mind, your soul, to purify you.

- Pray privately (Matthew 6:6)
- Pray honestly (Philippians 4:6)
- Pray specifically (James 5:17-18)
- Pray persistently (1Thessalonians 5:16-18)
- Take action. Create a journal “My request” and “God's answers” (Robert Jeffress)

1. R.C. Sproul, *You Will Be My Witnesses to the End of The Earth*, P 176

2. R.C. Sproul, *You Will Be My Witnesses to the End of The Earth*, P 177

3. R.C. Sproul, *You Will Be My Witnesses to the End of The Earth*, P 181

4. David Roper, *Growing Slowly Wise Building a Faith that Works*.

-I will finish with a prayer that is new to me. It is called the Prayer of a Confederate Soldier:

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.

I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things.

I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy.

I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.

I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.

I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among all men, most richly blessed.