

Sunday, April 25, 2021

# Surprised by Prayer

(Reimagining Church Series; Message 24)  
(Marks of a Believer)  
Acts 12:1-19

**Review (Slide):** We're continuing our series on Reimagining Church...

*August - focused on prayer and waiting...*

*September - focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...*

*October - focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer*

*November - focused on the Church's mission*

*January - focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership*

*February and April - focusing on the marks of a believer - a personal relationship with Jesus, being in community, a wall-break and bridge builder, a balcony person...*

## Scripture:

*It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup>He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

*<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.*

*<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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.*

*<sup>11</sup>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."*

*<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup>When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"*

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

*<sup>16</sup>But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup>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.*

*<sup>18</sup>In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup>After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.*

## **Message:**

**Some years ago, a Rodeo-Chediski forest fire devastated Arizona consuming nearly a half-million acres.**

Firefighters labored valiantly to save the American Indian Christian Mission but were forced to leave when the blaze became too dangerous. Churches all over the state began to pray together asking God to spare the mission.

When it became safe to return, they noticed the fire had come within a few feet of the mission on three sides - but not one building was touched. On the fourth side near the entrance there were three crosses. Only one cross was burned - the one in the middle. They saw that as a sign that Jesus had saved the mission...

**The conversion of Cornelius had a **dramatic effect** on the early church.**

The church was **growing** rapidly; walls were being broken and bridges were being built; **unbelievers** were being converted; Gentiles were being embraced; the geographical borders were expanding.

Jewish leaders were becoming increasingly **concerned** with this upstart group so Herod Agrippa (the son of the Herod that Jesus appeared before and father of the Herod that Paul would stand before) arrested some church leaders to appease the Jews. Herod had James, a son of Zebedee, one of the “sons of thunder”, the brother of John, **killed**.

James and John had asked if they could have the places of honor at Jesus’ right and left hand. Jesus responded: “*Are you able to drink the cup I drink?*” They responded: “*Yes! We are!*” Jesus said, “*And you will!*” James becomes the first disciple to “drink the cup”; his brother John will be the last disciple to die.

The Jewish leaders accepted Herod’s gesture, so Herod had Peter arrested and **imprisoned**; his trial was set for after **Passover**.

**Judaism, centered in Jerusalem, wasn’t prepared for this “challenge” to their faith.**

Peter had shared how **Gentiles** had received Christ as Messiah; how he had eaten with them, and how he had baptized them (without circumcising them first!). This increasing repudiation of traditional Judaism spread like a wildfire across dry timber - to the Church (still primarily Jews), to the Sadducees, to the Pharisees, and to Herod himself.

The Church was taking on a **persona** of its own; this “new faith” was not just a new form of Judaism; this was emerging as an entirely different faith!

Before Cornelius, most Jewish leaders were willing to tolerate this new movement because they still kept the Torah, still worshipped and prayed in the Temple, and still celebrated the Feasts. But this “sudden” blatant disregard of Torah-keeping by Peter was changing everything.

Herod, a direct descendant of the Maccabees (through his mother Mariamne) who endeared himself to the Pharisees by meticulously keeping Torah, embraced this opportunity to enhance his popularity and control among the Jews and had James killed. With the Jewish leaders approving of James’ elimination, Herod was now going after their leader – Peter.

## **PRISON**

**The question isn’t “*Why did this persecution ramp up so suddenly?*” the question is, “*Why weren’t Christians’ more intensely persecuted from the start?*”**

Today, if some said, “Messiah has come” and others said “No, Messiah has not come” we’d have a major rift in the Church; but this conflict has to do with

**Torah.** The Torah is the foundation of the Jewish faith. It is the Torah that holds the Jewish faith together.

Torah represents God's revealed will for his people; it was to be obeyed. Period! Torah comes in four nuances. Sometimes it is understood as 1) the Ten Commandments; sometimes as 2) the first five books of the Bible; sometimes as 3) the whole Old Testament, and sometimes as 4) the oral law (i.e., the *Mishnah*, the accumulated traditional teachings for proper living).

Alec Vidler: "*Belief in the Messiah was not the essential mark of Judaism. It was the Torah, the Law, that was the essential bond of all Jews; the Torah held them together however much they differed on other matters, including even how the Torah was to be interpreted.*"

Initially, Christianity was considered a **subset** of **Judaism** that believed Jesus was Messiah; other Jewish groups had believed in other messiahs before. And... Judaism was already a collection of groups: Sadducees, Pharisees, Hellenists, Essenes, Zealots - so one more, Christians, was no big deal...*until*...

**Peter violates Torah and Herod is eager to appease the Jews, so he has Peter thrown into prison.** And Herod is taking no chances – he has heard the stories; Peter is bound in chains, guards on each side of him; a total of sixteen soldiers assigned to watch him.

Luke writes (**Acts 12:6**), "*The (very) night before Herod was about to bring him to trial...*" Luke implies in the Greek that Peter's "execution" is imminent. The assumption in this text (and the common understanding) is Peter will soon be executed.

Peter knows he is about to **die**; but it appears Peter is at **peace**; he is sleeping. He doesn't seem to fear his impending death; he's not angry with God for this sudden turn in his life; there is no outrage at the apparent victory of evil. Peter knows his only comfort in life and death is that he belongs to his faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus is what, Jesus is who, holds Christianity together.

I've wondered if I were in a similar position if I could sleep. Do I really trust Jesus with my life? Am I at peace whether I die like James or live like Peter?

In this entire story, Peter appears **passive**; he's not expecting an angel; he's not pleading on his knees for deliverance; the angel has to poke him in the ribs to wake him from his sleep.

Peter needs angelic encouragement to get dressed, to put on his sandals, to wrap his mantle around himself, and to follow the angel out. He's in a daze. It feels like a dream. Luke wants the reader (us) to know this is entirely **God's work** (the answer to the prayers of God's people!).

**So how does Peter get out of prison?** What does the surveillance video show? Herod would have said, *“It was a carefully planned and executed inside job.”* William Barclay, the British commentator, says, *“In this story we do not necessarily see a miracle. It may simply be the story of a thrilling rescue”* (Really?!).

Luke is convinced this is divine intervention: *“Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shown in the cell.”* It’s reminiscent of: *“An angel of the Lord appeared, and the glory of the Lord shown around them.”* (**Luke 2:9**) This is the Gospel story retold again: the world and our lives are a mess but God graciously steps into the mess with us to help us.

## **PRAYER**

**Meanwhile, back at John Mark’s mom’s house, the church has been praying together; they’re also not taking any chances; they’re doing what they’re supposed to do, what they’ve been told to do, and what they were trained to do!**

This is **intercessory** prayer - i.e., they are praying specifically about another’s needs. When we intercede, we normally ask God to do something, to change something, to rescue and/or rectify a certain situation; to make sense of what appears to be nonsense.

We perceive a gap between what is and what we think should be; who they are and who we think they should be; what they have and what we think they need, or what they’ve done and what they ought to do. So we *“stand in the gap”* (**Ezekiel 22:30**) and ask God to fix it. We’re asking God to intervene because we realize we can’t make it “right” and we’re praying (hoping, expecting) God can and will.

Interestingly, Luke never actually tells us how or for what they prayed...

...No doubt they prayed Peter would remain strong as he faced death (remember James had just been beheaded and they assumed Peter would be as well).

...maybe they prayed Peter would share the Gospel in the prison and the guards would believe.

....maybe they prayed for Peter’s miraculous release (God had done it before).

...maybe they’re just praying God’s Kingdom will come, his will would be done.

This is **corporate** prayer - Luke says the *“church was earnestly [fervently] praying to God for him”* (**12:5**) and *“many had gathered and were praying”* (**12:12**).

This isn't just a few intercessors or prayer warriors; this is the Church interceding; the people of God in prayer. (**The impact of a congregation seldom rises above their passion for prayer.** The North American church has neglected prayer, so it is not surprising it's relatively powerless). Praying together is like multiple logs on the fire – they burn longer, they burn brighter. No prayer; no power; no power, no impact; no impact, no transformation; no transformation, no witness; no witness, and we do not have a church.

In North America, we hold to this crazy heresy that prayer is **primarily** a **private** matter; problem is, Scripture doesn't support that idea anywhere. Almost all the pronouns used in connection with prayer throughout Acts (and New Testament) are plural. When was the last time you joined with fellow believers to pray for each other? For Covenant? For this community? For Christ's Church? For our world? For God's Kingdom?

**This is fervent prayer.** The church is fervently praying for Peter. Fervent prayer is bold, audacious, persistent prayer.

As Christians, we've always said "*prayer is foundational to those who are followers of Jesus*"; yet, as someone said to me, "*There isn't much interest in coming together to pray...*" The Church is increasingly under attack in North America. Slowly, our protections, our impact and our spiritual authority as we follow Jesus and live Biblical lives are being stripped away... Millions have simply figured, "If you can beat 'em; join 'em" and have sold out.

What holds us together? Is it Jesus or is it someone or something else? If it is Jesus who holds us together, if we're fully devoted to Jesus, we need to learn how to intercede fervently together. Paul will remind us we're to put on the armor of God and pray in the Spirit (**Ephesians 6:18**).

**Jesus invites us to come together and pray - especially when the church experiences trouble. The (North American) church is in trouble.** Prayer is the normal response of a heart/life that is fully dependent on God and fully committed to following Jesus; the early church trusted God and prayed!

Prayer was not the last resort but the first thing the early church did; it came naturally; it was in their DNA. The early church was a praying church.

## **PETER**

**When Peter realizes he is part of a divine intervention ("*Then Peter came to himself*"; 12:11), he heads to John Mark's mom's house and knocks on the door.**

Rhoda, a servant girl, is designated to go and discover who is interrupting their prayers! (How dare he!) She discovers it's Peter! She is so overjoyed she

forgets to let Peter in and runs back to tell the others. Peter – the answer to their prayers - is left standing at the gate.

Their response to Rhoda's excitement: "*You are crazy!*" (i.e., You just imagined it!) and "*It must be his angel!*" (i.e., They believe more in ghosts than in answered prayer).

**It would appear the first century church is so engrossed in praying they forgot to look for God's answers!** Our expectations are limited to our preconceptions of what God can and will do.

This is the Church, remember that has seen God at work in remarkable ways and that, after all, is celebrating at Passover the time of Jesus' resurrection. These are people of "great faith." So their response is rather surprising.

Let's be fair. Persecution is rampant here; James has just been beheaded; why would they assume it would be any different with Peter?

Some years have passed since the church prayed for power and the room was shaken; have they already forgotten how God answers prayer? (Israel did, regularly). Their praying lacks **expectation**.

They are **surprised** by the answer to their prayer! Either they weren't praying for Peter's release (and that's hard to believe) or they really didn't expect God could or would answer their prayer. They talked about the unlimited power of God but apparently, they didn't actually believe it.

Luke is allowing us to see the early church - not as a bunch of great, perfect heroes and heroines of the faith - but as the same kind of muddling, sometime believing and sometime wondering, faith focused one minute and doubting the next, sort of Christians we all know (and regularly see in our mirror).

Some are afraid to pray bold prayers because they don't want to be embarrassed by an answer they consider less or different than what they've prayed. Do we really think we need to protect **God's reputation** and track record? Should we only pray prayers that have overwhelming odds of actually coming true? **Unprayed prayers are (always) unanswered prayers.**

When we pray for someone to be healed, do we walk out of the room mumbling, "*I don't think she's going to make it.*" Have we stopped praying for our neighbor to find faith because he's too far gone, it'll never happen? Have we stopped praying for revival because it's been a hundred years? Have we asked God to save us from our sins, but we're not convinced; and if we're not really sure, are we afraid to die?

**It appears the Church is so occupied with praying they don't anticipate an answer and don't recognize it when it is literally knocking at the door.**

There is the old story of a man's home swept up in a flood; he climbs to the roof and asks God to save him. A man on a jet ski comes by - hop on. No; you already have three people on it. God will save me. A man in a small boat comes by - jump in; no, one more and your boat might sink. God's will save me. A helicopter comes by, lowers a rope ladder. Climb up. No, I'm afraid of heights, and besides, God will save me. The water rises and he drowns; He meets God at the door of heaven: "I asked you to save me, and you didn't." God says, "What do you mean? I sent a jet ski, a boat and a helicopter!"

God often **interrupts** our prayer time with his **answer** right in front of us! People earnestly pray for their church to grow but have never invited anyone to come to their church. Parents pray their children will grow up to love Jesus but spend little time with them, never pray with them, or talk with them about Jesus. Church members pray to be forgiven but still harbor resentment and bitterness toward fellow members. People pray for their church, but never give toward it or volunteer. People pray for their pastor, staff, and leaders, but never have an encouraging word for them.

Sometimes the answer is already standing here right at the door, and we **don't believe** it; we just keep asking for God to answer...

**It also appears when the answer arrived, they never enjoyed or celebrated the answer.** I imagine Peter walking from the prison to John Mark's house thinking, *"I can't wait to see their faces when I show up! God is so amazing!"*

I'd imagine an incredible celebration: God answered our prayer!! Peter is freed; safe; home! A son in a terrible accident; he is alive. We celebrate! A pregnancy after years of infertility. We celebrate! So when Peter escapes a certain death sentence, where is the celebration?!

Luke never mentions anything about **thanksgiving** or **praise**; where's the doxology? How much **joy** have we missed because we've failed to pray, failed to see God's answers, or failed to acknowledge what he's done? How much prayer have we set aside because we really don't trust Jesus, aren't really interested in discerning his will and really aren't fully committed to following him?

## **POSTLUDE**

**After Peter describes how the Lord brought him out of prison, he says, "Tell James (i.e., brother of Jesus) and the brothers and sisters about this" (12:17).**

**Why?** Because James is now the leader of the Jerusalem church; because James, Jesus' brother, will also drink Jesus' cup; in 62 A.D., he would meet the



same fate James the apostle did. Peter wants James to know about the power of prayer, because...

Sometimes prayer saves us from the cup (like Peter) and sometimes prayer gives us the strength to drink it (like James). But Jesus holds us together. **This story (passage) is designed to offer confidence and comfort to Christ's Church (i.e., to us) that Christ is still in charge even in a messy world.**

Robert Murry McCheyne: *"If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet, distance should make no difference. He is constantly praying for me."*

**Paul writes in Romans 8:26** - *"We do not know what and how we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes on our behalf with sighs too deep for words."*

Jesus prays. The Spirit prays. Church is called to pray because it is what Jesus does and because God answers prayer.

**Luke begins Acts talking about the Church in prayer (1:14, 24) and now he concludes this first major section of Acts with a story about the Church in prayer.** Prayer bookends the move of God's Spirit in His church.

This first part ends with *"The Word of God grew and multiplied"* (12:24). There is a direct correlation between a healthy, **growing church** and **prayer**. A healthy church is a praying (together) church; a praying together church is a healthy church.

In spite of arrests, executions, and persecution, God continues to build His Church on Jesus through the prayers of his people.

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