

“PETER IN PRISON AGAIN.”

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Scripture Texts: Acts 12:1-19

Prayer: Father, on the Mount of Transfiguration your voice was heard saying, “This is my Son whom I love, listen to Him.” Father, today by the power and help of your Holy Spirit enable us to listen to the word of your Son and to truly hear Him for no one has ever spoken as He did. Give us ears to hear what your Spirit is saying to our church today. In Jesus name. Amen.

More persecution. When God seems absent.

Herod Agrippa I, comes from a long line of Herods. His grandfather was Herod the Great who reigned at the time of Jesus birth, the Herod who order the killing of all the children two and under in Bethlehem. His uncle Herod Antipas beheaded John the Baptist and tried Jesus along with Pontius Pilate.

As the saying goes, the nut doesn't fall far from the tree. He grew up in a world of murder and intrigue, deception and power politics.

Herod is acting out of political expediency, to win the hearts of people who don't particularly like him since we worked for Rome. This is always the danger and temptation of politicians. It is a good argument for term limits on all politicians, then they can do their work and do what's right without always trying to please and appease the masses, and win or worse yet buy votes.

This James is the brother of John, the two sons of thunder. He is the first apostle to be martyred and the only one who's death is recorded in Scripture. His brother John may be the last one of the apostles to die in exile on the island of Patmos.

This is pure selfishly motivated. Herod thinks nothing of shedding innocent blood. And once encouraged by the positive response he quickly moves to repeat. The only thing keeping this sort of thing from being even far worse is the restraining hand of God.

In the face of whatever evil there is in our day, always remember the restraining hand of God is present. Without it sin and evil would be far greater.

I remember being so aware of this as I watched the terrible attack on the World Trade Towers. I remember saying there would be tens of thousands of deaths. On the average working day 50,000 people worked in the towers and over 100,000 people visited the towers

daily. It was the incredible mercy of God restraining great evil that there were only 2,997 deaths. God's grace is present in the very worst of evil whether personal or national.

Luke is painting a picture of a clash of two powers, the world and God.

Since Herod had to delay his evil toward Peter, he took no chances. He assigned *four squads of four soldiers* each to watch Peter in three hour shifts around the clock. This was a maximum-security detail because Peter and the apostles had escaped from prison once before.

This is meant to say, Peter had no chance of escape. His life was as good as over. Jesus had prophesied Peter would die a martyr's death. What could the fledgling church in Jerusalem do against the military might of the Roman Empire?

I can't imagine Passover was very joyful that year, knowing that the day after it was over Peter was going to be killed. Imagine what your Thanksgiving would be like knowing that the next day you have to endure some terrible fate, like Black Friday all day at the Mall.

Acts is written to prepare the church to be strong and courageous. Acts 12 is the third round of persecution. This is how it has always been in history, seasons or waves of persecution, ebbs and flows. Seasons of peace and seasons of persecution. God gives times of calm to strengthen our faith and build courage and to pray for those in the times of trial.

There is no such thing as perpetual peace, no such as lived happily ever afterward. The world is on a collision course with Christ and Christians and the church.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the church of Jesus Christ, the very name of Jesus Christ is an offense to many, to those who love self more than God, who love the world more than God, who love money, sex and power more than God, who love lies more than truth, who love darkness more than light.

You can't soft sell this, you can't tone it down, you can't play nice, they hated Jesus, they will hate His followers. We need to hear this message as our culture becomes increasingly post-Christian and more militant.

As Paul told the churches, through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

Notice the contrast in the weapons of warfare. The world wields the sword, the church wields prayer. This looks like a nuclear bomb vs. a pea-shooter.

Now let's face it, do you think Herod was afraid of a praying church? To the world prayer looks ridiculous, what a sorry, weak thing to do.

I notice in the on-line world after some big tragedy some Christians will post that they are praying for the victims and their families, and other people will write the most mocking posts about pray and God. What good is prayer in the face of people like Herod? The church should be planning a terrorist attack, or kidnap one of Herod's kids to hold for ransom or offer a bribe.

If you are going to be thrown in a furnace wouldn't you be on Amazon looking for a fire suit?

If you are going to be thrown to the lion, wouldn't you want a box of steaks or some muzzles?

If you were David would you be trying on Saul's armor?

Don't the world's ways always seem stronger, more viable? But He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. Which do you trust? Man's ways or God's ways? Prayer is the power of the powerless.

Peter may have felt like he was alone on the frontline, but far from it, the church was earnestly praying and doing spiritual battle for him.

Notice they weren't defeated or depressed or demoralized, they were earnest in appealing his cause before the sovereign God. And Peter seems to have no anxiety as he is fast asleep.

After Peter's first release he had joined a church prayer meeting where they had prayed and acknowledged God's sovereignty over Herod and Pontius Pilate.

By telling us this story Luke wants us to see and understand there is a direct connection between our prayers and God's action, a direct connection between prayer and all the power of heaven, the same power that created the universe, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

We can be absolutely earnest, direct, clear, and still understand and add, "nevertheless, not our will but they will be done." Jesus asked the cup to pass, clear, direct, and also submitted.

When God opens doors that no man can shut.

How often does God seem to answer our prayers at the eleventh hour, just when all seems hopeless or lost? And for what purpose? To test us and try our faith, to enflame our earnestness. To reveal our desperate dependency and humble us.

The details are given to us to show us and remind us of the power of God. God could just as easily have beamed him up and planted him in Mary's living room. But in this instance God shows us deliverance after deliverance to reveal His power against the world's power.

There was no getting out of this alive, except by the pure power and grace of God. Chains fell off, iron doors opened untouched, guards slept through it all and never noticed the bright light or the voice of the angel. God's army vs. Herod's army, which side do you want to be on?

Let's talk about God's army for just a moment. Whenever we come to stories of angels, people always want to know, do we each have our own personal angel?

Matthew 18:10 See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

Psalm 34:7 The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

Psalm 91:11-12 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

12 On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

John Calvin says it is even better than just having one. In Scripture there are cases of a whole legend of angels being sent for the sake of one person (Elisha against Syria, II Kings 6:17).

“John G. Paton was a pioneer missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. Hostile natives surrounded his mission headquarters one night, intent on burning the Patons out and killing them. John Paton and his wife prayed all during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came, they were amazed to see that, unaccountably, the attackers had left. They thanked God for delivering them.

“A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Jesus Christ, and Mr. Paton, remembering what had happened, asked the chief what had kept him and his men from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, "Who were all those men you had with you there?" The missionary answered, "There were no men there; just my wife and I." The chief argued that they had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords in their hands. They seemed to circle the mission station so that the natives were afraid to attack. Only then did Mr. Paton realize that God had sent His angels to protect them” (Billy Graham, Angels).

God will send however many you need, and the situation calls for. The whole heavenly host of heaven is at God's command for the sake of His saints and for the sake of the whole church. Sometimes one, sometimes an army, but always servants for our support and help.

But remember to always do what Peter did, and not praise the angel, but give all the glory to God.

Did you notice the iron gate swung open by itself, “of its own accord (ESV)”?

What stands between you and God’s will for your life? What hindrances or barriers or hurdles are there that seem to impede your progress in the faith, in Christ-likeness, in serving Him? They have no more power in your life than that iron gate. Don’t give it any power in your life, God’s will is greater and cannot be hindered. Whatever there is in your life that you think is like an iron gate, remember everything must obey the will of God.

It doesn’t depend on you and your power or how little power you have. Don’t look at a locked gate or a blocked road and feel hopeless. Seek God, press in and if it is His will for His glory and our good, it will open. What do we not have because we have not asked in earnest?

What are you facing that is impossible, overwhelming? What are you facing that you see no possible way of dealing with? God is the God of the impossible. This story is written for you.

All of this will serve Peter well as he goes on to preach the Gospel and declare the truth to all the saints of God’s presence and power and grace. Imagine Peter’s boldness in preaching and teaching and sharing and witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus after this.

The house of Mary and the servant girl, Rhoda.

Have you ever been surprised by an answer to a prayer? Caught off guard?

What are we to make of this humorous scene? He could walk through iron gates and not get in Mary’s house. Were they praying without faith, and didn’t believe Peter would actually show up? Not necessarily. They may have prayed that Peter glorify Christ in his death as James did. They may have been praying for the whole church that none would waver in their faith and the church would not be scattered. Maybe they prayed earnestly and it’s just that God did above and beyond what they imagined.

But we can be warned that our prayers not be weak or half-hearted. Sometimes we need to pray, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Persevere with earnestness.

Implications and application.

So, I wonder if there is question nagging some of your minds right now? Isn’t there a glaring question facing us in this text? A big, yeah but? A big, but what about James?

Why didn't an angel come for him? Certainly he prayed just as earnestly. Why wasn't there any bright light and chains falling off and doors opening for him? Where was his angel?

This is a question we all face. Why this person and not that person? Why does this person recover from their disease and that one doesn't? Why are some prayers answered one way and others another way?

Because these two stories are told together it means we can definitively declare that James didn't die because God couldn't save him. He had no trouble saving Peter, so that is not the reason. This point is clear, God is sovereignly in control and Herod is not.

James' work was done, Peter's work was not done.
Peter was delivered from prison to die another day.
James was delivered from prison and from death, to live eternally.

Some glorify God through life and others glorify God through death. Both life and death glorify God and accomplish His purposes. The deaths of saints are just as fruitful as the lives of the saints. Remember Jim Elliott and Nate Saint and Auca Indians. They had guns but didn't use them. Later God used their not using guns to bring them to Christ. World's ways vs. God's ways.

May we all have the faith of Job to be able to say, the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.

Why do we think James got the short straw? Jesus let James die because He had something better for him.

Jesus has different priorities for us. Jesus prays a different prayer for us.

John 17:24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

We pray Jesus will prolong our lives and He often does, but one day His prayer will take priority and when we receive what He has prepared for us, we will wonder why we held on to this life so tightly.

Until then may we remain earnest in prayer, confident that He can open any locked door, and overcome any enemy, and may we have eyes to see the hand of the Lord in our lives in ways that conquer our fears and strengthens our faith and embolden our witness.