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Praying Effectively

Acts 12:1-19

Intro: There had been little persecution of the church after Saul's conversion, at least not recorded by Luke, but that is about to change in [ch12](#). If we take a quick look back, we'll notice "cause and effect" nature of the persecution the church had suffered in the past. On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples testified of God's glory, Peter preached the Gospel and some 3000 souls came to know Jesus as their Savior. A little while later, Peter and John went up to the Temple and healed a lame man along the way then preached again and another 2000 souls were saved. This time, they stirred up a hornets nest. They were arrested and scolded for preaching in Jesus' name and then released with a stern warning. The result was – the church had a prayer meeting where all were filled with the Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness and people continued to be added to the church.

Next, in [ch5](#), the Apostles were all arrested again for preaching in Jesus' name. This time they were beaten for their trouble and released. This resulted in the apostles rejoicing in the opportunity to suffer like their Master but they refused to stop teaching and preaching the Gospel and the church continued to grow. The church grew so big so fast, they had to appoint deacons to help with the daily operations of the church and one of these deacons (Stephan) made a big impression on the community. He was subsequently arrested and then martyred for his witness of Jesus. His death resulted in more believers leaving Jerusalem and more of the Gospel being spread in the surrounding countryside. Saul then took up the cause and began to pursue and persecute those who had left Jerusalem. The result of that action was that Jesus met him on the way and changed his life forever. Things calmed down after this but the Gospel was still spreading, the church was still growing and that growth brought even more problems.

We can see the back and forth nature of spiritual advancement and concentrated persecution. The only question is: which is the "cause" and which is the "effect"? Does spiritual advancement lead to persecution or does persecution lead to more spiritual advancement. It would be hard to say. Acts begins with the wonder and glory of Pentecost but that was

preceded by the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. I guess it doesn't matter which is which. Suffice it to say that one almost always accompanies the other. If you experience some wonderful spiritual victory in your life then you should also at least expect some kind of resistance from the kingdom of darkness. If, on the other hand, you suffer under the weight of a real persecution – if you deal with it properly, in a godly manner – you can also expect to see some spiritual advancement in your life or in the lives of others through your testimony.

1-6 – Here we see a new wave of persecution targeting the church and, true to form; it's probably directly connected to the expansion of the Gospel to the Gentiles. That was the latest spiritual advancement in the life of the church. It started with Cornelius and his family and now there was a large church in Antioch just full of Gentile believers. If you think the Jewish Christians had a difficult time accepting that reality, just imagine how the unbelieving Jews felt about it! They hadn't been influenced by Peter's testimony or the confirmation of the Holy Spirit. All they had to go on was centuries old traditions and extreme religious prejudice and precedent.

What bothered the religious Jews most was the thought that Gentiles could now become Christians without first becoming Jews. Their fear was this would ultimately lead to a time when traditional Judaism would be superseded by a largely Gentile Christianity. Stephen had hinted at this in his testimony before the Sanhedrin and he was martyred for it. Now the Gospel was expanding to the Gentiles exactly in the way he had suggested and renewed persecution had broken out because of it. It began when Herod arrested James and then had him executed.

We should understand that, although the results of persecution are generally all the same, there was a significant difference between the persecution of Saul of Tarsus in **ch8** and this new wave of persecution from Herod. Saul, as wrong as he was, persecuted the church out of sincere religious conviction (tho sincerely misguided). Herod, though, was persecuting the church out of purely political motives. This distinction is important because the vast majority of persecution suffered by the Body of Christ around the world in the last 100 years has been political in nature. There's been some persecution motivated by religion and continues to be, but most of it has been political. We are beginning to see this now in our own country where churches are barred from holding services and pastors

are threatened with arrest if they open up their church for worship on Sunday morning. Don't think that just because society is becoming ever-increasingly secular that persecution will simply disappear.

It seems that Herod arrested James as a test. He was hated by his Jewish subjects and desperately wanted to curry favor with them. Fortunately, Herod found a group of people the Jews hated even more than him and he was quite willing to use this for his own political gain. He must have thought that if the Jews opposed this new sect, he would strike out against the Christians and see what comes of it. So he arrested James and executed him. When he saw that the execution pleased the Jewish leaders, he figured he'd just move on to the next one. So he arrested Peter and planned to execute him too. But, it was the Passover season and Herod didn't want to break any of the rules of this holy time for the Jews so he kept Peter in prison and would bring him out after it was over and then kill him.

Herod couldn't have cared less about Christianity or even Judaism for that matter. He wasn't concerned about truth or doctrine or any of that. He was an Edomite and a pragmatic politician. He was savvy enough to know which way the wind of popular opinion was blowing and use it to his advantage. By arresting Peter, Herod was just trying to improve his ratings. But, his treatment of Peter seems a bit like overkill. Peter was guarded by 4 squads of soldiers when, typically, an important prisoner would only be guarded by 1. There would be a soldier shackled to each arm with 2 guarding the door. It's hard to imagine Peter being as dangerous as all that but he had mysteriously escaped from prison before (5:17-21) so Herod was taking no chances of a repeat performance.

What was Peter's reaction to all of this? Was he anxious or worried? No, he was sleeping! Later in life, when he writes his first epistle, Peter will advise believers to cast "all your care upon Him (Jesus) for He cares for you." (5:7). Obviously, the man who wrote these words practiced them himself. Clearly, he knew what it meant to cast all of one's cares upon the Lord.

7-11 – While Peter was sleeping, having cast his cares upon the Lord, the Lord provided an early release for him. There are some things in this story that are just funny. Apparently, Peter was sleeping so soundly, trusting in the Lord so deeply, that the angel had to poke him in the ribs to wake him up. I wonder how many times he called his name before he frogged him in the

ribs. Peter must have been sleeping pretty hard because even after being so rudely awakened, he was still so groggy that he thought the whole thing was a dream. He didn't even fully come to his senses until he was outside the prison, standing in the street.

There are a few principles to be gathered from this story that teaches us to trust God but not presume upon Him.

1) Deliverance came at the last minute. Peter had been arrested some time before this, possibly by a week. He could have been delivered any one of those other nights but he wasn't. Deliverance didn't come until the last night before he was to be tried and executed.

Many of us find ourselves in situations where we also need deliverance, but we're not always willing to wait for it. God usually intervenes for us at the last moment. Take the area of God's will for example. We'd like God to reveal His will in advance, because we think we'd do a better job of serving Him if we could plan more carefully. But God doesn't usually bow to our wishes. He doesn't reveal His plan to us until almost the last minute. He lets us wait—for the very good purpose of leading us to trust Him and accept His will in advance, whatever it may be.

2) Peter's experience must be balanced with James'. Both were chief apostles. Yet Peter was delivered and James was executed. Why? Luke doesn't give us the answer. Maybe God had more for Peter to do? I'm sure He did but we are not told what Peter did after this. There are no more stories about him in Acts. God is sovereign in our lives and He does what He knows is best. He chooses one to glorify Him by their life. He chooses another to glorify Him by their death. It's not for us to make that determination.

3) It illustrates the nature of spiritual deliverance through the gospel. Peter's case was hopeless, humanly speaking. He was in prison, surrounded by guards. He was asleep. He was condemned to die. His case pictures us in our sin. We are chained by sin and are unable to escape. We are even asleep in sin, insensitive to it until God sends his Holy Spirit to break our shackles and free us. It's a wonderful example of what God does within us through salvation. He sends His light to illuminate the spiritual darkness of our lives and breaks off the shackles of sin so we might be set free to follow Jesus.

12-17 – Peter finds himself out in the streets of Jerusalem in the middle of the night. Now what's he going to do? He knows he needs to leave the city since Herod will just arrest him again. Should he leave right now? He seems reluctant to leave before he could inform those who were concerned for him about his miraculous deliverance. He decides to go to a normal meeting place for the church – the house of Mary, mother of John Mark. Peter didn't know that believers were there praying but we know they were praying somewhere because **vs5** tells us so.

This is a lesson on the importance of prayer. Oftentimes, new Christians question the importance of prayer by pointing to the sovereignty of God. "If God is sovereign, He can do what He wants. If He wants to save John Doe, He will. What does it matter if I pray for John's salvation or not if John's going to be saved anyway?" Some take a different approach. "God is omniscient. He knows what we need. Why should we have to pray at all?" These are valid questions and they have a good answer. Although God is sovereign and does things in His own sovereign way, He still does what He does through means, one of which is prayer.

Witnessing is another means. True, God can save anybody He chooses without us. But He's already chosen to do it through the vehicle of human testimony. Thus, it's correct to say, "If God's going to save John Doe, God will save him." But it's not correct to say that God will save John Doe anyway, apart from your witness to John Doe, if God has determined that it's by your witness that He will save him.

When we apply this principle to prayer we can say (with James), "You do not have because you do not ask" (**4:2**). We fail to receive because we fail to ask. By contrast, we do receive something else because we actually ask for it. Why is that? It's because God has ordained the means as well as the ends. So when He ordains an answer to prayer He also ordains that the answer be obtained through the channel of prayer, which is the case here. It would be presumptuous to say that God would have delivered Peter anyway if God had determined to deliver him in response to the prayers that the Christians were praying. Without their prayers, Peter wouldn't have been delivered. But he was delivered through their prayers because that's the way God had determined to save him. The story is a lesson about the importance of prayer. But it's also a good lesson about the nature of prayer.

There are 4 considerations:

1) They were praying to God. But wait, aren't all prayers offered to God? Well, not actually. Some are eloquently addressed to the audience. Ministers will often fashion prayers for the sole edification of their attendees and it usually goes no further than that. More commonly, "believers" will offer prayers to a god of their own making – an idea or concept of a god they want to exist, but is not based on any actual revelation of God found in scripture.

Prayer is actually meeting with God. When we start to realize that prayer is having an audience with God, actually coming into the presence of God and asking and getting things from Him; it will transform our prayer lives. Instead of prayer being an irksome duty, it will become one of the most highly esteemed privileges of life.

2) They were praying together. This is united prayer: Christians meeting together to pray in harmony. There's great value in that! The value is in the unity of mind and spirit that corporate prayer brings. Too often we think of the quantity of prayer instead of the quality. We assume if 1 prayer is good then, 2 must be better. If 10 prayers don't do the trick, get 20 people praying. If we want something important from God, we start a prayer chain. For us the value of an all-night prayer vigil is not in the seriousness and fervency of the prayer but in the fact that we're able to get more prayers offered that way and offered around the clock, in case God's not paying attention during regular hours. That is not a Christian concept. It's pagan. It has more in common with the worship of Baal than of Jehovah. The value of united prayer is that the minds and hearts of God's people are being brought together on that matter.

3) They were praying earnestly. How earnestly? When Peter was released in the middle of the night, when nearly everyone else in the city was sleeping, the Christians were still gathered together praying. They had been praying all night. It was late and they were still praying. If Peter hadn't come, they'd have gone on praying until morning. That is a good biblical example of earnest prayer—something we know little about today This type of prayer brings revival.

4) They were praying specifically. They were praying to God "for him [that is,

for Peter]” (5). It never hurts to be specific in our prayers. We know we sometimes pray wrongly, we ask amiss, as James says, especially when we pray for ourselves or something we want very much. We tend to get our selfish desires mixed up with our proper desires. We have a much better chance of praying rightly and therefore getting what we pray for when we pray for someone else or when we pray for spiritual rather than material or physical things.

One more thing to be considered: although this is a great example of what true prayer should be, it was still mainly an unbelieving prayer. Why’s that? Because, when Peter was knocking on the door, nobody believed it was him. They accused Rhoda of being outside her mind. Then they thought maybe Herod had executed Peter and this was his angel (ghost?). I’m sure Peter wasn’t knocking like a ghost – he was probably banging on it like a federal agent.

Even though they were praying rightly, they didn’t strongly believe that God would answer their prayer.

But here’s the good part: despite their lack of strong faith – God still answered their prayer! If their prayer was effective, even though it was unbelieving, why should our prayers not be just as effective? They were the same kind of people we are. The Bible says of Elijah, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for 3 years and 6 months (James 5:17).

The questions for us are: Do we really pray? Do we pray to God? Do we pray with other Christians? Do we pray fervently? And do we have specific requests in mind? We are still in the throws of a worldwide pandemic that has forced many of our people to stay home. Thankfully, they can still participate in the teaching via the internet but what they are really missing out on is the blessing and benefit of corporate: worship, prayer and fellowship. There is no online equivalent for that because it all must be experienced in person. It’s difficult to maintain a personal relationship with someone you can’t be with, personally.

One last observation: we live in an unprecedented time in human history where any schlub can log onto any social media platform and declare to the world (on that platform) their strongly held opinions and beliefs. It’s amazing how the internet phenomena has cemented into the collective minds of our

society that everyone now not only has the right but even the responsibility to declare their opinions – to stand on their beliefs. Now, I don't have a problem with this at all. If someone insists on spouting complete drivel for all the world to see – at least you have an accurate picture of what's in their mind.

But, here's why I think it's important to bring this up. Instead of insisting on standing up for your beliefs, wouldn't it be wise to first find out if your beliefs can stand up for themselves? Are your beliefs strong enough to stand on when tragedy hits? Are they strong enough to stand on when the fickle winds of popular opinion turn against you? Are they strong enough to hold you up and comfort you when you, like Peter, begin to be used as a political whipping boy? If not, then maybe you are holding onto the wrong beliefs. 😊