

When Chains Fall Off

Acts 12

DT- God will do more than we ask... if we ask more.

We will be wrapping up our sermon series on the Acts of Peter today. In our text today a miracle will occur, but I want our focus to be on how and why that miracle occurs. God is going to move in some pretty amazing ways throughout this passage, and I hope when we're done you will be convinced or reaffirmed that God can still move in some amazing ways today. Let's pray.

PRAY

I once heard a story, you might even call it a testimony about the power of prayer. A lady had just put a pie in the oven when the school nurse called and said your son is sick and you need to come pick him up. She picks him up and he's running a fever, and the school nurse says you better take him straight to the doctor his fever is pretty high. She takes him to the doctor, and the doctor says give him this medicine right away.

She takes the child back home and then heads for the pharmacy. While she's there she locked her keys in the car. This was before cell phones so she goes back inside and somehow comes up with a coat hanger to try and unlock the car. At this point she's getting frantic. She has a pie in the oven about to explode, a feverish son who needs this medication, but she's locked her keys in the car and can't get home. She's really starting to panic.

Finally, she cries out to the Lord, "Lord you got to send somebody who can break into my car." About that time a really scruffy looking guy comes walking by and says, "Mama, why are you crying?" She said, "I need someone who can break into my car." He said, "Give me that." It took him about 2 seconds to get the car unlocked.

She said, "Oh my goodness, thank you. You're such a good boy. You must be an angel or at least a Christian." He said, "I'm not a Christian, an angel, or a good boy. I just got out of prison for stealing cars." She said, "Praise God, he sent me a professional." Church when we pray we should expect the extraordinary. God will do more than we ask... if we ask more. We are going to see the truth of that statement play out in our text today.

The beginning of Acts 12 doesn't start out with much hope. The future of the church seems to be in jeopardy.

1. The future of the church seems to be in jeopardy.

Thankfully things are not always as they seem, but in this moment the church is feeling the pressure of persecution. Acts 12:1-4 begins like this, "About that time King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church. He had the apostle James (John's brother) killed with a sword. When Herod saw how much this pleased the Jewish people, he also arrested Peter. (This took place during the Passover celebration.) Then he imprisoned him, placing him under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover."

We know the exact year that this happened, it was AD 44. Sometime in the spring because it was Passover. What strikes me first is how short a description we get of James' death. In Greek it's just 7 words. The first Apostle dies and he only gets 7 words. He barely made the news. The church is beginning to transition from Apostles to Elders. James was beheaded and when Herod saw how much the Jews liked that he arrested Peter.

Peter has a total of 16 guards watching him. That seems like overkill but here in a minute we'll find out that the amount would never have mattered. Herod was polite and decided to wait until after Passover to bring Peter out for a public trial. There's really no guessing about what would happen on Sunday. They were going to execute Peter. Things don't look good for the church. They certainly don't look good for Peter.

Then Luke writes Acts 12:5, "But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him."

If you were to translate the Greek of Acts 4 more literally, it might read like this, "On the one hand; on the other hand." On the one hand Peter is in prison. On the other hand the church is praying. It's going to be okay because the church is praying. It doesn't matter what's in that other hand, because in this hand the church is praying. When we are people of prayer, God's will is accomplished.

In Peter's first letter he quotes Psalm 34. I wonder when he wrote that if he wasn't thinking about this experience in prison as he waited to be executed. Here's what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:12, "The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right, and his ears are open to their prayers. But the Lord turns his face against those who do evil."

After this initial scare, and the future of the church seemingly in jeopardy, God moves exactly how Peter describes it here in his letter. Watch how the rest of this chapter unfolds just like this Psalm that Peter quotes. Peter says the eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right. God sees what we're going through.

2. God sees what we're going through.

I hope that's an encouragement to you today. The tough things you might be going through, God sees that. He knows what you're facing. He is watching over you, and he watches over Peter here as well. While the church is praying earnestly, Acts 12:6 says, "The night before Peter was to be placed on trial, he was asleep, fastened with two chains between two soldiers. Others stood guard at the prison gate."

Pause right there. Peter was going to be executed the next morning and what was he doing that night? Sleeping. In fact he's sleeping so well and so deep that what begins to happen next he thinks is a vision instead of reality. I just picture Peter yawning and saying, "Boy I'm pretty tuckered out, I think I better get some rest because having your head chopped off sure does take a lot out of you."

It's amazing that he's sleeping. Then Acts 12:7-8 says, "Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter. The angel struck him on the side to awaken him and said, "Quick! Get up!" And the chains fell off his wrists. Then the angel told him, "Get dressed and put on your sandals." And he did. "Now put on your coat and follow me," the angel ordered."

He is sleeping so hard that the angel must strike Peter to get him awake. We should probably learn something from Peter's calm and restful demeanor. Try not to get too overwhelmed by the things of life. God sees what you're going through. We need to trust God and then live like we actually believe that. If Peter can sleep soundly the night before his execution then you and I can make it through the tough situations of life as well.

Peter also wrote this in 1 Peter 5:7, "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you." He does care. He sees what you're dealing with. Are you handing those worries over to him. Philippians 4:6 says, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done."

God will do more than we ask if we ask more. The church is praying and Peter is getting dressed to make his escape. Acts 12:9-11 says, "So Peter left the cell, following the angel. But all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn't realize it was actually happening. They passed the first and second guard posts and came to the iron gate leading to the city, and this opened for them all by itself. So they passed through and started walking down the street, and then the angel suddenly left him. Peter finally came to his senses. "It's really true!" he said. "The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jewish leaders had planned to do to me!"

Peter has made his drowsy escape and is shocked to find out the vision was real. For Peter he knows now that God sees what we're going through. He knows in the morning that Herod will be after him, but before he leaves he just has to tell the church what happened. I think we all understand that. For the church that was earnestly praying, even while Peter was escaping, they are about to be reassured that God hears our prayers.

3. God hears our prayer.

They had no idea how God was going to answer their prayers but when Peter shows up at the house where they were praying they figure it out pretty quick. Peter now knows it's not a vision and Acts 12:12-16 says, "When he realized this, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered for prayer. He knocked at the door in the gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to open it. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the door, she ran back inside and told everyone, "Peter is standing at the door!" "You're out of your mind!" they said. When she insisted, they decided, "It must be his angel." Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking. When they finally opened the door and saw him, they were amazed."

Why do they have a teenage girl as a lookout. Because when a teenage girl is scared or even just startled they scream. They are really good at screaming really loud and the lookout doesn't need to stop anyone or beat anyone up, they just need to scream loud enough to warn everyone else. Rhoda does her job, but the people gathered for prayer don't believe her.

Peter keeps knocking until they finally open the door. The text says he motioned for them to be quiet because he is a fugitive on the run. Peter tells them what happened and then leaves for another place. In this instance God persevered the life of Peter but he didn't preserve the life of James. Why? I would assume the church was praying for James as well. Why Peter but not James?

We have to remember that our relationship with God through prayer is not a genie in a lamp who is there to grant our wishes. Sometimes our prayers go unanswered because what we think is good and right might be different from what he knows is good and right for us. Other times our prayers go unanswered because God is waiting for us to be obedient. It could be that you are asking for something, but the timing isn't right. It could be that God has something better for you than even what you are asking for.

The truth is when God says no, it hurts. It doesn't mean that God doesn't hear our prayers, or that he doesn't love us, but it's hard to receive the no when you were really hoping for the yes. The best advice I could give when God says no, is to trust him.

As parents we have to tell our kids no, even though that makes them sad. But we are older and wiser and understand the bigger picture. Sometimes kids respond to “no” by throwing a tantrum. I wouldn’t suggest that. Sometimes God says no to protect us. Sometimes God says no to prepare us. Sometimes God says no to pushes us into a deeper faith and trust in him. Isaiah 55:8 says, “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.”

I don’t always know why God answers with a no sometimes. Why Peter but not James, I don’t know? But I will trust him because I know he hears our prayers. If you think God wants it, ask for it. God will do more than we ask if we ask more. In this passage God does one more thing. He turns his face against those who do evil. We are reminded in this last portion of Acts 12 that God will handle our enemies.

4. God will handle our enemies.

Herod was of course upset about the escape of Peter. If a Roman soldier lost a prisoner they received the punishment that was coming for that prisoner. Which means 16 men lost their lives. Perhaps Herod thought there was an inside rebellion. Herod leaves Judea and heads for Caesarea. While Herod was in Caesarea he makes this speech and Acts 12:22 says, “The people gave him a great ovation, shouting, “It’s the voice of a god, not of a man!”

Herod certainly was no God and he definitely didn’t speak for God so Luke tells us this in Acts 12:23, “Instantly, an angel of the Lord struck Herod with a sickness, because he accepted the people’s worship instead of giving the glory to God. So he was consumed with worms and died.”

By the way Jewish historians record this same event. After the initial pain in his abdomen, he died 5 days later. I won’t go into the details of how you get intestinal worms and how you die of intestinal worms because it will turn your stomach. It is a harsh way to die. Herod was 45 years old when he died and had reigned for 7 years, that’s it. God will handle our enemies. Romans 12:19-21 tells us how we should handle our enemies where it says, “Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, “I will take revenge; I will pay them back,” says the Lord. Instead, “If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads.” Don’t let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.”

I heard the phrase "kill them with kindness" many times growing up, but I first heard the phrase from my grandmother when she was counseling me about how to handle a bully. She was right, because she was speaking scripture, or at least her translation of Romans 12. The early church didn't fight physically, they fought back spiritually, through the power of prayer. Luke tells us the end result of their prayers with a short update on how things are going for the church when he writes in Acts 12:24, "Meanwhile, the word of God continued to spread, and there were many new believers."

When chapter 12 opens James is dead, Peter is in prison and Herod is King. When chapter 12 closes Herod is dead, Peter is free, and the word of God reigns. How did that happen? Through the power and persistence of prayer. Futures are built on the foundation of prayer. So much of what happens in the book of Acts is accompanied by, surrounded by, or fueled by prayer.

If you have some big plans then pray some big prayers. Don't be afraid to ask him for what you need. His eyes watch over those who do right. His ears are open to hear our prayers, and He will be the one who turns his face against those who do evil to us.

I've been in some type of paid or volunteer ministry now for 20 years. In those 20 years I'm not sure I have ever seen a mistake made by a group of elders who bathed a decision in prayer. I've seen elders make mistakes and I've made my fair share as well, but when real, faithful, authentic prayer was involved before, during, and after I can't think of a time or a situation where that decision failed.

I don't want to get to the end of my life and wonder what could have been if I had just asked the Lord. I don't want to walk into a heavenly library and find a volume of books titled "The life and ministry of Ross Frisbie"; only to have the librarian come and tell me that those books are all the things God wanted to do through you. These are the stories of what God wanted you to ask of him. This trifold pamphlet over here is what you actually asked of him.

I don't want that to be the story of my life, and I hope you don't want that to be the story of yours, because it doesn't have to be. Our God is a God who loves to answer earnest prayers. Powerful things happen when the church prays. Ephesians 3:20 says, "Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think."

Church, always remember that God will do more than we ask... if we ask more.