

The Power of Earnest Prayer

Acts 12:1-19

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A week ago, I listened to the Voice of the Martyr's podcast called VOM Radio and learned about Petr Jasek, a believer from the Czech Republic, who was imprisoned in Sudan for 14 months. He served as the Africa Regional Director for Voice of the Martyrs and traveled to Sudan on their behalf. BTW, Voice of the Martyrs is one of our Go Team partners.

Petr tells about sharing a prison cell surrounded by ISIS fighters who threatened to harm him. One of his cellmates was involved in the 2015 beheading of Egyptians on the Libyan shore. In this crowded cell filled with enemies of the gospel, he was able to fall asleep every night at 9pm and sleep peacefully until morning.

After Petr was released from prison, he went back to his church in the Czech Republic to thank them for praying for him. He was moved to tears when he heard them say, *"You know Petr, we agreed as a church that every night at 8pm we were going to set our phones [and] watches...and we were going to pray for you in prison in Sudan."*

Here's the amazing part, 8pm in Prague is 9pm in Sudan! This was the exact time the lights went out and Petr was able to lay down and get a restful night's sleep.

This weekend we're recognizing the International Day of Prayer for Persecuted Christians. I will lead us in prayer for the persecuted at the end of the message. If you'd like to learn more about how you can pray for persecuted believers, check out the Sermon Extras tab on our mobile app or website.

In our passage, we're going to see how another Peter was also able to sleep when he was in prison because God's people were praying for him. Turn in your Bibles to Acts 12:1-19. The main point of the passage is this: *God often does the unexpected when we're earnest in prayer.* I see seven truths from this text.

1. God allows persecution. Verse 1 gives the setting: *"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church."* Last weekend we learned how God often does the extraordinary through ordinary people by celebrating how they were gathering, growing, giving and going with the gospel, all for the glory of God. It's not surprising to see how persecution is unleashed

right after this outpouring of evangelism and discipleship. Jesus actually promised persecution according to John 15:20: ***“If they persecuted me they will persecute you.”***

There were a number of different men named Herod in Scripture, each of whom were wicked and cruel.

- **Herod the Great** ruled during the time of Jesus’ birth and ordered all male children under two killed.
- **Herod Antipas** is the guy who beheaded John the Baptist.
- **Herod Agrippa I.** This is the Herod we meet in Acts 12. He is the grandson of Herod the Great.
- **Herod Agrippa II.** Paul appears before this Herod in Acts 25-26.

Agrippa I was quite a politician and worked hard to curry favor with the Jews. We see this in verse 2: ***“He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.”*** To be killed ***“with the sword”*** means James was beheaded. James and John were known in the gospels as the ***“sons of thunder”*** who along with Peter, made up the inner circle of Jesus.

One interesting episode from the gospels is recorded in Matthew 20:20-22 when the mother of James and John requested positions of prominence for her sons in Jesus’ kingdom: ***“Jesus answered, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?’ They said to him, ‘We are able.’”*** The word ***“cup”*** is a synonym for suffering. While they wanted prestige, Jesus warned of persecution. James was executed while his brother John was exiled. James was the first of the apostles to die and John was the last.

Having received praise for killing James, Herod decided to arrest Peter. His plan was to hold him in prison until feast was over and then behead him. The Jews thought it profane to put someone to death during this 8-day celebration. It would have created a riot according to Matthew 26:5: ***“Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.”*** On top of that, Herod wanted to wait until he had the Jews full attention.

Look at verse 4: ***“And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.”*** Herod was leery of Christians because they kept performing disappearing acts. Jesus left a sealed tomb, Paul was delivered out of

Damascus in a basket, and Peter was supernaturally busted out of prison twice before. To be safe, Herod assigned four squads, made up of four soldiers each, to work 6-hour shifts. Two of these guards were handcuffed to Peter in the cell, while the other two were stationed outside.

2. God’s people pray. The turning point of this passage is found in verse 5: ***“But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”*** When their leader was locked up and on death row, the church turned to the Lord. In the face of overwhelming problems, the church prayed. The word ***“earnest”*** means, *“urgent, unceasing and diligent”* and was used of an athlete *“straining and stretching”* to cross the finish line. It’s only used one other time in Luke 22:44 to describe the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane: ***“And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”***

While Herod was planning Peter’s execution, the church was earnestly interceding. Herod had all the power of the state, but the believers locked into the power of Heaven. Just as Jesus sweat drops of blood when He prayed, so too these first Christians summoned all their resources – body, soul, and spirit to cry out in earnest prayer on Peter’s behalf. They were living out what Jesus said in Luke 18:1: ***“They ought always to pray and not lose heart.”***

Many of us experienced this kind of earnest prayer this past Sunday night when our Mainspring ministry hosted a time of prayer. Over 60 people gathered to earnestly intercede on behalf of our country and community. One person who attended remarked, *“One of the blessings for me personally occurred as we were leaving. In the back of the worship center was a group of eight or so young adults sitting on the floor in a circle praying. Having been part of groups like that over the years that especially touched my heart.”*

Do you pray earnestly? Do you persist in prayer?

God often does the unexpected when we’re earnest in prayer.

3. God gives peace. One unexpected result of their prayer is found in verse 6: ***“Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.”*** Shackled between two soldiers and knowing he was going to be executed in the morning, Peter fell asleep. Not sure I would have been able to do that. But like Petr from the Czech Republic, Peter’s peace came from the prayers of God’s people.

Perhaps he was meditating on Psalm 4:8: ***“In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.”*** Peter was like the older believer who was sleeping through a horrible storm in a boat when his shipmate asked, *“Aren’t you concerned?”* He smiled and quoted Psalm 121:4: ***“Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”*** Then he paused and said, *“If that’s true of the Lord, there’s no sense in both of us staying awake!”*

Perhaps Peter was able to sleep because he was holding on to the promise made by Jesus in John 21:18 that Peter would live until old age: ***“When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”***

Here’s an application. If you struggle to sleep because of stress from the storms of life, ask someone to pray for you and claim the promises of God.

4. God sends His presence. After giving Peter peace, God sends His presence in verse 7: ***“And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell.”*** The sense behind ***“behold”*** is *“Lo and behold!”* It’s the idea of *“suddenly.”* Peter is sleeping so soundly the bright light of the glory of the Lord doesn’t cause him to stir. This makes me think of Luke 2:9: ***“And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.”***

When you’re in a jam, remember God’s angels are standing right next to you. Hold on to Psalm 34:7: ***“The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”***

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5. God displays His power. We see this deliverance through a display of God’s power in verses 7-10. Because Peter was sound asleep, the angel had to wake him up with some force in verse 7: ***“He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And the chains fell off his hands.”*** The word ***“struck”*** means, *“a forceful blow.”* He wasn’t just “touched by an angel,” he was smacked by a celestial being! It’s a good thing Peter didn’t hit the snooze button and brush him off because in 2 Kings 19:35, the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrians!

In verse 8, the angel gives Peter some short and crisp instructions: ***“Dress yourself and put on your sandals...wrap your cloak around you and follow me.”*** The angel had to wake him up and directed him to get dressed and put his shoes on. Then, he led him every step of the way. The phrase ***“follow me”*** means, ***“keep on following me.”*** Peter was told to follow without knowing where he was going.

In the midst of this miracle, Peter is given some practical responsibilities. The angel could have put his shoes on for him, but he didn't. Warren Wiersbe writes, ***“God alone can do the extraordinary, but His people must do the ordinary. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but men had to roll the stone from the tomb.”*** Also notice the angel didn't say, ***“Hurry up! Run for your life!”*** One pastor put it like this, ***“Omnipotence is never in a hurry, for everything was under God's control.”***

In verse 9, we see Peter obeying, even though he was still in a fog: ***“And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.”***

Let's keep reading to see what happened next in verse 10: ***“When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.”*** God's power continues to be on display as they easily passed two other guards, and the thick iron gate amazingly opened on its own. The word here is ***“automate,”*** from which we get automatic. This is the angel of the Lord doing what he did in Acts 5:19: ***“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out.”***

Peter is passive during this jailbreak. This is not a Jack Bauer scene where he knocked out the guards, snuck past security cameras and kicked down the front gate. However, as soon as Peter was freed, the angel immediately left him. This is what angels do. They come on the scene for a specific purpose and then they leave. That's what Hebrews 1:14 says, ***“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”***

After the angel vanishes, verse 11 indicates, ***“When Peter came to himself, he said, ‘Now I am sure that the Lord sent His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.’”***

I wonder if Peter had this encounter in mind when he later wrote these words in 2 Peter 2:9: ***“The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials.”***

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6. God uses imperfect people. Now Peter needs to do what only he can do. Look at verse 12: ***“When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.”*** The angel could have taken Peter to Mary's house, but he let Peter find it on his own, showing God only does the miraculous when it is absolutely necessary.

After considering his amazing release from prison, he remembered the church had gathered to pray for him. Perhaps, he wanted to show them how God answered their prayers. The Mary listed here is the sister of Barnabas, and the mother of John Mark. She must have had a large home to be able to host this week-long prayer meeting. These faithful followers had been up all night praying.

What happened next is both humorous and human because it shows how God uses imperfect people to accomplish His purposes. Verse 13: ***“And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.”*** Her name ***“Rhoda”*** means, ***“Rose.”*** I wonder if this triggered a memory for Peter because he denied Christ to a servant girl according to John 18:17.

Rosie immediately recognized Peter's voice because she had heard him preach before but ***“in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.”*** The word for ***“joy”*** means, ***“glad exultation.”*** She was so excited she quickly ran to communicate the good news that Peter was outside. That makes me think of the women who had an angelic encounter in Matthew 28:8: ***“So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.”***

You'd think these prayer warriors would rejoice at this news, but instead in verse 15, they accused her of being insane: ***“You are out of your mind.”*** The word they use in Greek is ***“Manias,”*** from which we get ***“maniac.”*** Literally, they're saying something like, ***“Thou art mad.”*** They were responding much like the disciples did at the news Jesus was alive in Luke 24:11: ***“But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”***

Rosie had some spiritual spunk: ***“She kept insisting that it was so...”*** This means she ***“vehemently asserted strongly.”*** The tense indicates she ***“kept steadfastly affirming it to be so.”*** They shouted back, insisting, ***“It is his angel!”***

The answer to their prayers was standing at the door, but they didn't have enough faith to open the door and let him in. I like what Warren Wiersbe said about this: *"God could get Peter out of a prison, but Peter couldn't get himself into a prayer meeting."*

Then, they heard the sound of loud banging according to verse 16, ***"But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed."*** Notice the word ***"they"*** is used twice, indicating they all came together to open the door. When they saw Peter, they were ***"amazed,"*** which means they were *"astonished and bewildered."*

I imagine they are getting loud so verse 17 tells us Peter motioned ***"to them with his hand to be silent."*** He's essentially telling them to *"talk to the hand."* He didn't want Herod's henchmen to hear. Then, he explained what the Lord did and gave instructions to tell James and the brothers. This is the James who was the Lord's half-brother, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and who went on to write the Book of James.

Verse 17 ends with a note indicating Peter ***"departed and went to another place."*** From this point on in Acts, the focus shifts from Peter to Paul. He's actually putting into practice what Jesus said in Matthew 10:23: ***"When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next."***

At risk of public embarrassment, here's a little spoken word I put together to capture what happened.

Peter knocked.
Rhoda shocked.
Saints mocked.
Peter squawked.
Peter blocked.
Peter talked.
Peter walked.

Before moving on, don't miss how God used a young girl. God thought enough of her to give us her name. I see at least six qualities we would do well to emulate.

- **Unquestioned serving.** Her job was to answer the door and she did it faithfully, even in the middle of the night.
- **Unusual discernment.** She immediately recognized Peter's voice.

- **Unbounded joy.** She broke out into spontaneous exaltation.
- **Immediate obedience.** She ran and reported the good news.
- **Absorbed criticism.** When adults dismissed her, she remained determined.
- **Exhibited persistence.** She kept insisting Peter was at the door.

Earlier this week, I was struck by a post from Denise Browning after she saw what her 12-year-old son was reading. Here's what she wrote: *"As I walked through the house this morning on the way to my home office, I saw David's little pile for eLearning...I went to grab the mug from his 'desk' and noticed the book he chose to read when done with class work...God thank you for making him a God-seeking, God-loving young man."* The name of the book is "Next Man Up" by Ray Pritchard. He got this book from Pastor Ray when he was here in March. I called David and asked his permission to share this story and he quickly said sure. He told me he's enjoying learning more about Joshua.

On Wednesday, I worked late and had the joy of hearing the Edge Students worship team rehearsing because the Student Center is right below my office. I went down to encourage them, but I think I just made them nervous. After I went home, I tuned into Facebook Live and celebrated the teaching Pastor Kyle was doing. On Thursday, I went back down to the Student Center and saw what he had written on the white board. He was teaching about worship and had given students various passages to look up. Here's some of the insight the students shared.

Exodus 20:3-6 *Worship reserved for God alone; undivided devotion*
 Matthew 22:34-40 *With our whole being; Greatest Commandment*
 John 4:19-24 *Spirit and truth; heart*
 Romans 12:1-2 *Bodies as a living sacrifice; obedience*
 Hebrews 12:28-29 *Reverence and awe*

I love how God has made Edgewood an intergenerational church and am so thankful for all the young people here. Forgive us old and cranky adults for either dismissing you or ignoring you. You are not just the future of the church; *you ARE THE CHURCH right now!* 1 Timothy 4:12 says, ***"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."***

Also, we see how human this encounter is. Rosie left Peter outside the door and the believers didn't believe God answered their fervent prayers. I'm reminded of the church that called a prayer meeting to ask God to send rain to end a terrible drought. Only one person came with an umbrella!

I like what Charles Spurgeon said about this text: *“If the Lord wants to surprise His people, He has only at once to give them an answer. No sooner do they receive an answer than they say, ‘Who would have thought?’”*

Don’t you love that God answers fervent, yet faithless prayers? I sure am because that’s often how I pray. I’m like the dad in Mark 9:24 who said to Jesus: ***“I believe. Help my unbelief!”***

I’m so glad this is in the Bible. Not just because it’s comical but also because it reminds us how people in the early church were just like us. God not only answers prayer, but His power is not dependent on our praying perfectly.

7. God’s purposes prevail. The final point of this passage will be fleshed out more next weekend but suffice it to say Herod was not as powerful as he thought he was. Listen to verses 18-19: ***“Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.”*** The guards had every right to be nervous because a lost prisoner meant they would lose their lives.

No matter what problems come, God always accomplishes His purposes.

Life Lessons

God often does the unexpected when we’re earnest in prayer. Here are four lessons we can apply to our lives.

1. Trust God’s timing. Heaven was silent on Saturday and Sunday. There was no word on Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday. Still nothing on Thursday or Friday. And then Peter was released at the last-minute, in the hours right before he was slated to be executed. Spurgeon said it best, *“God never is before His time; nor is He ever too late; He comes just when He is needed.”*

Remember this: *God takes His time, so we trust Him today and tomorrow.* What do you need to trust Him with today?

2. Submit to God’s sweet sovereignty. I can’t explain why James was killed and Peter was released but I do know God is sovereign. There’s a mystery to prayer,

isn't there? God acts according to His plans and purposes and yet He commands us to pray and tells us in James 4:2: ***“You do not have because you do not ask.”*** James Montgomery Boice says it well: *“God had determined to save Peter, but the way in which God had determined to save Peter was in response to the prayers of the Christians who were praying.”*

Will you persevere in prayer and choose to submit to His sweet sovereignty today, even if you don't understand or agree with what He is doing? Make Job's profession of faith your own as found in Job 1:21: ***“The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”***

3. Ask God to set you free from the prison of sin. I love that phrase, ***“And the chains fell off his hands”*** because it's a metaphor for how God wants us to be free from sin. This makes me think of verse 4 of my favorite hymn, “And Can It Be?” I wonder if Charles Wesley had this scene in mind when he wrote these words?

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

If you are not yet saved, it's time to repent and receive the free gift of eternal life. Jesus was bound so you could be set free. He died so you can live. He was raised so you can be redeemed. Will you go forth and follow Him today?

4. Pray earnestly for the persecuted. Hebrews 13:3 says, ***“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.”*** In other words, pray for the persecuted in prison as you would want them to pray for you if your situation was reversed. Pray like you would if your parent was in prison or your spouse was in shackles. Actually, because they are our brothers and sisters, we are in prison with our family members. If one part of the body hurts, the entire body hurts.

We're going to end by praying specifically for some specific brothers and sisters right now. Join me as we earnestly intercede on their behalf.

- We pray for pastor Wang Ye imprisoned in China to get a good night's sleep tonight.

- We pray for peace in France after three people were stabbed to death by Muslim extremists in a church one week ago.
- We pray for 15-year-old Seng in Laos, who, only days after he was saved, was told by his parents they would kill him or kick him out of the house if he didn't renounce his faith. Seng is now staying with friends with assistance from Voice of the Martyrs. May he remain firm in his faith and grow to maturity in Christ.
- We pray for Kamal in Iran who was arrested and charged with apostasy, along with six others who had gathered to worship in a house church.
- We pray for a man named Mussie who was arrested and imprisoned for preaching to Muslims in Saudi Arabia. He's since been deported to Eritrea where he is in a prison specifically constructed to incarcerate Christians.
- We pray for a 12-year-old and a 6-year-old whose mother was poisoned to death by her Muslim family because of her faith in Christ.
- We pray for over 60 churches in Columbia that have been shut down by paramilitary drug cartels.
- We pray for Bao and Chi, a husband-and-wife team, who minister on the front lines in Vietnam training and discipling believers from 10 different tribes. They have been arrested numerous times. Each time they are released, they get on their motorbikes and return to their ministry. Bao and Chi are two of more than 40,000 front-line workers Voice of the Martyrs serves as they risk everything to share the gospel.

If you want to learn more about the plight of the persecuted in prison, go to prisoneralert.com.

→ New Members

Tyler and Courtney Richards
Ernie and Debbie Manrique