

Acts 12.1-18

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. 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.

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

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. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

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

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 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 brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

God is surprising

God does some surprising things. If you've been a Christian even a small amount of time, you'll probably have found this out! Many times God has done things in my life that leave me scratching my head! But God is above and beyond understanding, as the Tim Hughes song 'Almighty God' reminds us. When we read Acts 12, we are left with lots of questions, such as – why did God allow Peter to be arrested; why did James have to die; why did God choose to bring Peter out of prison in this way? He cannot be boxed, we cannot understand what he does. God is beyond anything we will ever invent or see! He is in control of everything and can be totally trusted. But he often does do things that are miraculous, amazing and surprising.

Peter arrested

As the man in charge (and part of the infamous 'Herod' family), Herod Agrippa loved the law, was ambitious and loved to please the people. He arrested James and put him to death 'by the sword'. The Bible tells us that this pleased the people and so Herod then arrested Peter as well. Herod was no doubt going to put on a big show trial, find Peter guilty and have him killed.

Imagine how it felt to the church at the time. One of their leaders had been taken away and would be killed without a doubt. The disciples and followers of Jesus would have expected the worst and felt alarmed. Suddenly, Peter was no longer free but imprisoned in a dirty prison. He was chained up and guarded by 4 lots of 4 troops. Herod wanted to make sure that Peter couldn't escape. Peter found himself unable to preach. He was alone, away from his friends, shackled and his life hanging in the balance. The Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted 7 days and we know that Peter was arrested some time during this, so he would have been imprisoned for more than one day. This would be a long, hard and confusing time for Peter and the disciples.

Application – Sometimes life is confusing. Things happen that are tough and hard. We don't always understand why these things happen. We may question God and what he is doing, or allowing to happen. We ask ourselves whether this is to do with us, with God, or to do with the enemy. We may find that opportunities shut down, or we feel stuck in one place. Maybe we have people abuse us at school, or God seems to shut doors. Sometimes people we love are ill or something bad happens. How do we react in these times? We don't know how Peter reacted exactly, but we do know how his friends reacted. They all met together and they started to pray and cry out to God. The Amplified Bible tells us that, *'fervent prayer for him was persistently made to God by the church..'* This was passionate prayer, calling on God.

Our first reaction when trouble strikes should be to cry out to God, come together with other believers and 'present our requests with thanks' to God. We know that God hears us. But more than this, we should have an on-going prayer 'conversation / relationship' with God, praying on all occasions with every kind of request. As significantly, we should listen to God too. We will see that Peter had ears ready to hear from God (when difficult stuff occurs, this usually happens!) Our ears should always be listening for God's voice, ready to hear and be helped by Almighty God. We also know that Peter was able to sleep. Is our confidence and trust in God so great that even when trouble arises, we trust God enough to be able to sleep!

The Night Before – God moves in power

How many times have you heard and seen God act right at the last minute?! He seems to delight to do this – we then realise only too well that it is God and not us that brings the answer to prayer!!

The Bible tells us that *'The night before Herod was to bring him to trial..'* that God showed up through an angel and delivered Peter. Peter had no way to escape in the natural – he was chained and had a guard either side of him and another two on the door.

But God is a God who operates in 3D, in the supernatural (spiritual) part of life. What we see is not what God sees. What is visible to the naked eye is not always accurate, as there is a spiritual world which is more important. In 2 Kings 6.17, Elisha's servant saw that a great army had surrounded the city. That is what he could see in the natural. But Elisha saw something different and asked God to show the servant what could be seen in the spiritual realm –

'Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.'

Back to the New Testament – in answer to the prayers of God's people regarding Peter, an angel of the Lord was sent to the prison:

'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. 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. Peter followed him out of the prison..'

When God moves because the timing is right, he really moves!! A friend recently went for a job. Despite sending an application at the last minute in a way that wasn't normally allowed, despite missing 2 interview times, despite a PowerPoint presentation not working, she got a job that was exactly what she had prayed for. Exactly. The timing was right and God went ahead and opened the doors.

What Peter did was to obey. He obeyed 3 times, immediately. He quickly got up (suggesting that sometimes a God door opens and we have to be quick to see it and go through it), he put on his clothes and sandals and he wrapped his cloak around himself and followed the angel. He followed exactly and was led out of prison into freedom.

Application – we should expect God to be acting and to act on our behalf. We should expect the unexpected, but should obey precisely what God tells us. Whatever our circumstance, God can lead us out into freedom. This may be a physical freedom, but God will free us emotionally, spiritually, mentally, socially. He acts because we pray and because it brings all the glory and fame to his name and not to us. We should know that it is God who delivers us, sets the captives free and does miraculous things. We must always give God the credit for what he does. Always look to thank and praise God, in every circumstance. Finally, we should recognise that there is a spiritual world out there. Elisha saw something 'in the spirit' that couldn't be seen in the natural by his servant, looking on with 'physical' eyes. Ask God to open your eyes to see spiritually. This is often more

important than seeing things physically and can go before God moving (as it did with Elisha).

Nothing is impossible with God. There is no prison cell (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) that God cannot break you out of, in his way and timing. Not only did the chains fall off, Peter was able to get dressed and leave the prison past all the guards and doors, without waking anyone. Imagine what happened when the guards woke up to find no Peter!! No obstacle, no person, no evil can ultimately stop the plans of God. We can hinder God with disobedience and by refusing to follow his will. But the net result of Peter disobeying may well have been his destruction. When God moves and speaks, always obey. There really is no other way!

Prayer

The church had been praying for Peter and presumably for his release! However, when it happened, they nearly missed it. Peter had been led out of prison by the angel and it was almost like he was in a dream. When he came to his senses, he credited it to God – *‘the Lord sent his angel and rescued me..’* and walked to the house where the believers were (just as well he obeyed the angel by taking his cloak and sandals!)

Many people were praying at that house. Prayer, especially corporate prayer (where everyone is involved) is so important. First of all, we know that where 2 or 3 gather together, God is there with them (Matthew 18.20) and that there is power in agreement and deep unity (Matthew 18.19). There is also great testimony and power in unity (John 13.35). Some friends once prayed for their unborn baby to be healed. Again and again they prayed, but the mother was still ill. One day they asked a group from the church to come around. We prayed for the mother for healing. The next day she went to hospital for a test and had been completely healed. The baby is now a young child and healthy and fit. Praise God! But the power came from people coming together.

We also know one final and exciting thing about prayer.. God knows what we need before we ask him (it’s still good to ask and sometimes persist in prayer).

We learn this in Matthew 6.8 which says, ‘..for your Father knows what you need before you ask him’.

We also learn from Daniel 10.12 when the angel speaking to Daniel says, ‘Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.’

Not only do we know that God hears our prayers, he also acts in response to them. For Daniel, the answer to the prayer was delayed 21 days because of satanic opposition. For Peter, his answer was also delayed.

Application – God always hears your prayers and responds to them. Sometimes, the answer is delayed for different reasons (opposition, you ask with wrong motives, God is working in and on you, God is preparing the ground and the people before you reach the answer, sometimes God has something better in mind). William Barclay said: “when we pray, remember: first, the love of God that wants the best for us; second, the wisdom of God that knows what is best for us; third, the power of God that can accomplish it.”

]Bill Hybels says: "If the request is wrong, God says no. If the timing is wrong, God says slow. If you are wrong, God says 'grow'. But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says go!"

Almost missing the answer

When Peter arrived at the door of Mary's house and knocked at the outer door. The servant girl recognised his voice and ran back to tell everyone that Peter was there, forgetting to let Peter in. It's almost a comical moment. She was so excited that the man who'd just been released from prison was locked out of the house! She was insistent that Peter was there, but the disciples wouldn't believe her. But Peter kept on knocking at the door. Eventually, they opened the door to him, saw that it was him and he was able to say thank you, praise God, kick back and tell his story before leaving (understandably!)

Application – we learn that the people were 'astonished' when they saw Peter. I expect many of us would be. But God does the spectacular. He defies our expectations and usually goes way beyond them! The church were perhaps expecting that when the trial took place, Peter would be found not guilty and freed. But God did something that meant that only he could have done it – he broke Peter out of an impossible situation with an 'impossible' (but for God, perfectly possible) series of events. And the church nearly missed it. When you pray, make sure you open your mind and spiritual eyes to what God may do. Don't miss the answer to prayer when it doesn't happen as you imagined it to! Peter was also key in this. He persisted by keeping on knocking at the door. Keep going in life, keep going in prayer until you see breakthrough. If there's one lesson we can learn from life it is, 'keep on keeping on.' Winston Churchill famously said, "Never give in!" Keep going for and with God and see your life changed and the world change around you through God's power!!