

## THE CHURCH EARNESTLY PRAYS, AND GOD ANSWERS

Acts 12:1-25

Key Verse: 12:5

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

In the last passage we learned how God established the Antioch church as a headquarters for world mission. The church was built only on the gospel of Jesus Christ, as individual people accepted the grace of forgiveness of sins and discovered God’s holy mission and high calling. The church grew through intense Bible study under the teaching of Barnabas and Saul. The believers were called Christians at Antioch, meaning “people in Christ.” They loved Jesus and worshiped Jesus and wanted to be like Jesus. They revealed Jesus to the world and brought glory to his name. They were also a giving church. In light of their example, it is imperative for us to remember the grace of Jesus, to study the Bible deeply, and to practice a giving spirit. Most importantly, each of us must grow inwardly as men and women in Christ.

Today’s passage marks the end of the second part of the book of Acts. As the Risen Christ commanded (1:8), the gospel took root in Jerusalem, as recorded in chapters 1-7. The gospel spread to Judea and Samaria, as recorded in chapters 8-12. Then the gospel spread to the ends of the earth, as recorded in chapters 13-28. Chapter 12 begins with the church in a crisis of persecution and ends with the continued spread of the word of God. We can learn the importance of prayer and how God answers prayer. May God renew a spirit of prayer in us today.

First, the church earnestly prays for Peter (1-5).

Look at verse 1. In a sudden move, King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church. This is King Herod Agrippa I, one of five rulers named Herod in the gospel accounts. According to historians, Herod Agrippa I grew up in Rome as a close friend of the imperial family. Later, he received the favor of emperors until his territory rivaled that of Herod the Great. His reign—marked by violence and corruption—was short, ending abruptly with his dramatic death. He arrested Christians to persecute the church. He wanted to please the Jews and consolidate his power. He had James the Apostle put to death with the sword. James was one of the top leaders in the Jerusalem church.

James was one of the first disciples chosen by Jesus. He had followed Jesus closely and been part of Jesus’ inner circle. He witnessed the raising of Jairus’ daughter to life and Jesus’ transfiguration in glory. Jesus put great hope in him, that he would be a leader for world salvation work. At the same time, James was ambitious. He once asked through his mother for the best seat in Jesus’ kingdom. Jesus could not promise that, but he did promise that James would participate in his sufferings. And so he did. He was arrested and killed for Christ, the first martyr among Jesus’ chosen twelve. From a human point of view, it seemed the result of Herod’s ruthlessness. But in fact, it was Jesus’ will to make James a martyr for world salvation. The Risen Christ must have felt pain over the death of James. Still, he was willing to sacrifice James. What a sweet reunion it must have been when James went through the gate of heaven to see Jesus face to face, and was welcomed into heavenly glory by the angel chorus.

Meanwhile, on earth, this must have had a profound effect on the Jerusalem church. This event must have shocked them. It caused the early Christians to realize just how costly it would be to carry out the task of world evangelization. They also realized their utter vulnerability to the clever manipulation of King Herod. Then Herod arrested Peter and put him in prison to await public trial and, undoubtedly,

execution. It seemed that their leaders were being taken and executed one by one. They seemed helpless. What could they do?

Look at verse 5. "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." The words, "...but the church was earnestly praying to God for him," are indeed meaningful. They remind us that Christians have the privilege to pray in a helpless situation. When everything seems too difficult and there is no human hope, that is the time to pray. We must train ourselves to pray when we feel helpless. We learn several things about prayer from the early church.

In the first place, "the church" was praying. It was not one or two people but the entire church which was praying. We can picture how they did so in verse 12. The house of Mary, John Mark's mother, was a house church. There, many people had gathered and were praying to God. Luke does not mention one or two special prayer warriors, but stresses that the entire church was involved in prayer. The early church members were not individualistic. They did not think that their participation in united prayer was optional or irrelevant. They realized their sacred duty to Christ as part of the church. They prayed about this problem together. Not long ago, we had united prayer meetings for the Midwest Region Summer Bible Conference. We prayed together every night, Monday through Friday, as a church. Then God poured out his blessing abundantly on the conference. Since the departure of our beloved shepherd, Dr. Samuel Lee, one of the daily challenges we face is to maintain the spirit of unity for the sake of united prayer. Each of us must remember that we are precious members of the church of Christ and our prayers and oneness with the entire body of Christ is priceless.

In the second place, the prayer of the church was earnest. When we carefully study this narrative, we find that while the rest of Jerusalem was sleeping, the church members were praying. They were praying all night. They were praying with cries and tears. Prayer was not a hobby; it was a matter of life and death, and it was all they could do. They must have had fasting prayer, two by two prayer, person by person group prayer and united prayer. Maybe they dozed from time to time. But they were doing their best to pray as a matter of life and death. This is the kind of prayer that Jesus hears and answers.

In the third place, the church was praying to God. This may seem to be obvious. But it is important that they prayed to God. To pray to God they had to have God in their hearts and they must love God. Before she was changed, one great woman of God used to pray, "Dear Todd," thinking of her boyfriend, instead of "Dear God," thinking of her Creator God. It was because she loved her boyfriend most. But now she prays, "Dear God," because she loves God most. Earnest prayer is possible by those who love God.

In the fourth place, they had a single prayer topic in which they were united. It was for Peter. Perhaps some prayed for Peter's release. And others prayed for Peter to be strong in grace and rejoice in his suffering. Perhaps some prayed that Peter would be restored to them to continue leading the church, while others prayed for Peter to reveal God's glory through his martyrdom. But whatever they might have prayed, they prayed for Peter. They were united as one in their support of Peter in prayer. They prayed together with one clear prayer topic.

Second, God answers the believers' earnest prayer (6-11).

Though the church was earnestly praying to God, nothing seemed to happen. The trial date came nearer and nearer and still Peter was in prison. Now, it was the night before Peter's certain execution. What was Peter doing at this crucial moment? Peter was sleeping. He was between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. There was no way out for Peter. But he was not

nervous or fearful. He was full of God's peace. He could sleep soundly in the prison. What was his secret? He loved Jesus. He must have held on to Jesus' words, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mk 8:35). Once Peter had tried hard to save his life in the world. But in his selfishness he had denied Jesus and failed miserably. Then he saw the cross of Jesus, where Jesus' blood was dripping for him. He understood that Jesus was wounded for him (1Pe 2:24). His soul was healed from selfishness and he began to love Jesus. Peter also met the Risen Christ. The Risen Christ gave Peter a living hope in the kingdom of God (1 Pe 1:3,4), and clear direction to live as a shepherd for the glory of God (Jn 21:19). Peter had done so through much suffering. Strangely, through suffering, his love for Christ grew all the more. Now Peter was ready to give his life for Jesus with full assurance of eternal life in heaven. So he slept well.

However, it was not yet God's time for Peter to leave this world. Look at verse 7. "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." Peter was sleeping so well that he had to be awakened by the angel. The angel was like a mother helping her sleepy child to get up and get ready for school. He said to Peter, "Put on your clothes and sandals." Peter did so. Then the angel told him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." And Peter followed him out of the prison. But Peter had no idea that all this was really happening. He thought he was seeing a vision. The angel led him past the first and second guard and to the iron gate leading to the city. This gate opened for them by itself and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left Peter. Peter was free from prison by the help of God. God answered the earnest prayers of the believers. God sent his angel and rescued Peter. God answers the prayers of his people.

Last Friday we reviewed the early history of UBF ministry through a wonderful lecture by Shepherd Joshua Lee from Korea. We learned that God has led UBF ministry through his people's prayer. In 1971, on a Sunday afternoon, Dr. Samuel Lee gave a prayer topic to sleepy Korean students, "Let's have a summer Bible conference in Niagara Falls in ten years." They began to pray enthusiastically. But at the time there was not one missionary in America. Dr. Lee had second thoughts and prepared a lecture, "Idealism and Reality," explaining that the ideal does not always match reality. Students did not accept that lecture. They continued to pray earnestly for a summer Bible conference in Niagara Falls in ten years. In 1981, there was a UBF summer Bible conference at Niagara Falls and over 400 people attended. God answered their prayers.

Again, in 1985, Dr. Lee gave a prayer topic to send missionaries to Russia within ten years. At that time, it seemed impossible. Most of us could not believe, but we prayed because Dr. Lee gave us the prayer topic. We ate Russian bread, drank Russian tea, performed Russian dances and listened to "Moscow Nights," again and again as our prayer for Russia. In 1990, the first permanent missionaries went to Russia. Since 1991, there has been a summer Bible conference in Russia every year. Later, Dr. Lee asked us to pray that the Russian government might return land to the people. Recently, a new law was passed, and Russian coworkers purchased land and a building as a Bible study center. In addition, UBF was recognized as a church and given freedom to evangelize in Russia. Surely, God answers his people who pray earnestly.

Third, the early church struggles to believe that God answers (12-17).

Peter himself did not realize that God was delivering him from the prison until he was walking around free in the streets of Jerusalem. When this dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark and knocked. A servant girl named Rhoda went to answer the door. When she heard the

voice, she realized that it was Peter. She was so overjoyed and excited that she did not open the door, but ran into the house where the prayer meeting was going on and announced that Peter was at the door. But the praying people told her, "You're out of your mind. It must be his angel." They were praying, "Lord, set Peter free. Lord, intervene on behalf of Peter." But when they heard that Peter was at the door, they did not believe it.

Peter kept knocking. And finally they opened the door and saw him. They were astonished. They must have wondered if they were awake or dreaming. But it was indeed Peter standing there. God had answered their prayer. Here we learn that even though we don't fully believe God will answer, God answers the prayer of his people.

When they did realize that it was Peter, they were overjoyed and welcomed Peter and praised God. They were so exuberant that Peter had to quiet them with his hand motion. Then he described how the Lord brought him out of prison. He concluded, "Tell James and the brothers about this." Then he left for another place. This is the last we see of Peter in the book of Acts, except for his address to the Jerusalem church in chapter 15 defending Gentile ministry. James, the brother of Jesus, became the leader of the Jerusalem church and Peter went out pioneering. It was time to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Fourth, Herod sins and dies (18-23).

The escape of Peter caused a great commotion among the soldiers and the government officials. Herod was humiliated. Herod should have realized that he was opposing God and repented. Instead, he blamed the guards and put them to death. Then he went to Caesarea to settle a quarrel with the people of Tyre and Sidon. While he was wearing his royal robes and making a public speech, they flattered him by saying, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Herod enjoyed it. He thought he was God. Look at verse 23. "Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." Stealing God's glory for oneself may be a greater sin than persecuting the church. For this, God put Herod to death. Herod's death warns us not to steal God's glory, but to glorify God.

Fifth, the word of God continues to spread (24-25).

Look at verse 24. "But the word of God continued to increase and spread." This chapter began with Herod issuing ominous threats against the church, and the early Christians crying out to God in prayer. It ends with the death of Herod and the word of God spreading. The spread of God's word is one of the themes in Acts (6:7; 9:31; 16:5; 19:20; 20:31). Sometimes as we struggle to advance the gospel, it is hard for us to see the progress of God's work. We need a sense of God's history, like Luke. Then we can have faith that God's word spreads without fail. Luke notes in verse 25 that Barnabas and Saul went back to Antioch with John Mark. God will establish Paul as the leader of God's work as it enters its next stage—to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In this passage we learned that when the early Christians were helpless before the terrible threat of King Herod, they prayed to God. They prayed as a church. They prayed earnestly. They prayed to God. They prayed with a single prayer topic. Then God answered their prayer. May God help us to pray earnestly that God may make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, and send 100,000 missionaries to Muslim countries and North Korea and the ends of the earth by 2041.