

Peter and Prayer

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As human beings, one of the things that we most love to do is to try to make sense of our surroundings. The natural sciences represent an attempt to reduce all the things that we see around us in creation to a series of simple, predictable laws, and we want things to follow those laws. When we throw a ball up in the air, we want the ball to come back down so that we can catch it, not hover in midair, and if a ball did start hovering, that would make us unhappy.

It's no wonder, then, that we want our interactions with the spiritual realm to be just as consistent and predictable. This is particularly true with respect to prayer and God. Some part of us would like to reduce God to just another natural force. Just like we put a dollar in the Coke machine, and out comes a Coke, we want to pray to God, and out comes the answer to our prayer. To us, that would be a very satisfying prayer life to have.

However, God does not feel bound to do something just because we want Him to do it. One day, He might graciously grant the prayer we present to Him; the next day, He might deny what is essentially the same prayer. I was talking with James Hensley the other day, and we got on the subject of the Stage 4 colon cancer he had almost 20 years ago now. Stage 4 colon cancer is usually deadly, but by this point, we know that James is almost certainly cancer-free. James and all of us certainly give God the glory for that, but if God knew He was going to heal James, why did He allow James to get Stage 4 cancer in the first place? It's the sort of question that makes our human heads spin.

As the Scripture tells us, our brethren in the first century often had equal cause for bewilderment. They had to learn, as we do, to trust God and not try to figure everything out. Let's look at this in the story of Peter and prayer.

Peter's Situation.

If we want to understand what's going on in the story, we first must spend some time looking at the **BACKGROUND**. This begins in Acts 12:1-2. Like so many of the stories of the New Testament, this one begins with a bad guy named King Herod. However, all of these Herods aren't the same guy. Instead, they're members of a dynasty. This particular Herod is Herod Agrippa I. He is the grandson of Herod the Great, who slaughtered all the babies of Bethlehem in a vain attempt to kill Jesus. He is also the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded.

Clearly, Herod Agrippa does not come from the most righteous family tree, and he lives down to his reputation when he snatches the apostle James, brother of John, and has him beheaded. It's not clear from the text why this happened. Herod only realizes that this is a way to curry favor with the Jews after James is already dead. It's entirely possible that James, like John the Baptist before him, had criticized the sin of the king and paid for it with his life.

This would have been a tremendous blow to the early church. We often think of Peter and John as the apostles closest to the Lord, but when we go back to the gospel accounts, James was right there with them. For example, he was one of the three who saw the glory of Jesus revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration. And yet, God allowed this righteous man, a pillar of the church, one of the dearest disciples of the Master, to be slaughtered like a common criminal.

Nor does the march of disaster end there. Herod's evil eye falls on **PETER** too. Look with me at Acts 12:3-5. For no better reason than to please the Jewish mob, Herod arrests Peter and throws him in prison. It happens to be the season of the Passover, so Herod plans to keep him in prison until the festival is over, and then have him publicly executed. This, of course, is not the first time that arresting Peter has been tried, and judging from the precautions that Herod takes, it seems likely that he knew of Peter's miraculous escape in Acts 5. It's not enough for Herod to toss Peter in the slammer. Instead, he assigns four four-man squads of soldiers, called quaternions, to guard him. All of the soldiers were awake in the daytime, and each quaternion in turn was responsible for guarding Peter through a three-hour watch of the night. Basically, they had him in a box Houdini couldn't get out of, and they were going to kill him in a week. Peter's situation was as bleak as it could be, except for one thing. Earnest prayer was being made for him by the church.

In response to that prayer, an **ANGEL** appears to Peter. We learn about this turn of events in Acts 12:6-8. As the Scripture makes clear, this is a hairsbreadth escape. The Passover has already taken place, the seven days of the feast of unleavened bread have passed, and on the very next morning, Herod is going to present Peter to the multitude and murder him. Obviously, it would make Herod look bad if this were not to happen, so the soldiers are doing everything they can think of to keep Peter from escaping. As he is sleeping, two soldiers are literally chained to him and standing guard, while the other two are manning sentry posts in the hallway. However, all the precautions that human cleverness could devise were not enough to keep an angel out, nor to keep the chains from falling off Peter's hands.

When we look at this story, what's impressive to me is not how much has changed, but how little. God still answers prayer, and Hebrews 1 tells us that God still sends His angels out to help His people. The only difference is that we don't get to see the angels. However, I'm certain that the same power that enabled them to veil the eyes of the guards

and strike off the chains of the prisoner would also enable them today to steady the hand of the surgeon or nudge the child out of the way of an oncoming car. These powers are unfathomable to us, but we can access them through prayer.

With that kind of angelic assistance, it's no surprise that Peter is able to **ESCAPE**. Luke tells the story in Acts 12:9-11. The guards at various sentry posts throughout the prison are no harder to fool than their fellows who had been chained to Peter. Peter breezes right by them, the iron gate of the prison swings open right as he reaches it, and the man whom everyone expected to be executed tomorrow morning is suddenly free. This comes as a surprise to everyone, not least Peter. He had quite obviously already made his peace with God, so when the angel appeared to him, he assumed that he was only seeing a vision in a dream, and that he still had an appointment with the executioner once the sun rose. The whole time that Peter was following the angel through the prison labyrinth, he was firmly convinced that he was going to wake up in his cell, still chained between two guards. He only realized the truth once the angel had left him and he was standing free on the street outside the prison. Only then did he thank God for what He'd done.

We too ought to remember, friends, that when we pray, we are seeking the help of a God who is able to do more than we ask or even think. God's power and His answer to prayer is not limited by our imagination. It's not up to us to measure what sort of response we think we will see and pray accordingly. Instead, we should pray for what we want and allow God to answer that prayer in His own way and time. The results may well astound us.

The Results of God's Help

Peter's path next takes him to an encounter with a servant girl named **RHODA**. We meet her in Acts 12:12-14. After he realizes his situation, Peter goes to the house of John Mark's mother, a woman named Mary. This gives us some interesting insight into personal relationships in the first century. Obviously, this was the group of brethren to whom Peter felt closest. Much later on, in 1 Peter 5, Peter describes Mark as his son. This Mark is the same man who is generally credited with writing the gospel of Mark, and this decades-long association lends credence to the idea that Mark's main source of information for the gospel was Peter. Regardless, in Mark's mother's house on this night, a number of Christians are gathered praying for Peter. The servant girl Rhoda is obviously one of them, and she gets so excited when she sees the answer to their prayers standing in the street that she just leaves him there.

Like these early Christians, we must remember never to give up in our prayers. God didn't rescue Peter from prison until the last night that it was possible, and He may likewise delay His answer to us. It's entirely possible that it will take us years to find the job we've been praying for, or decades to persuade a loved one to obey the gospel. However, God often waits years or decades to give us what we've been seeking. We must learn to pray, and not lose heart.

However, the effect that the news of Peter's escape has on the **OTHER CHRISTIANS** is quite comical. We see the story in Acts 12:15-17. When Rhoda tells them that Peter is at the door, they don't believe her. First, they tell her that she's out of her mind, and second, they suppose that what she's seen must be Peter's ghost. They only believe that Peter has escaped when he continues knocking and they open the door and actually see him standing there.

What a strange story this is! Here, we have people who loved Peter enough and had faith in God enough to spend the night before his execution in a vigil praying for him. However, when they receive the evidence that their prayers have been answered in the most definitive fashion possible, they can't believe it. Most likely, they thought that the outcome of their prayer was going to be that Peter joined James in paradise. This illustrates how unwise it is for us to form expectations, either bad or good, about what God is going to do in answer to our prayers. We are only able to perceive the visible creation, but God sees the invisible reality, and He makes His decisions accordingly. We may never know why He says yes one time and no another, but we can be sure that he is always working for our eternal good.

Of course, God wasn't working for the good of the **GUARDS**. We read about their fate in Acts 12:18-19. Apparently, they didn't realize that Peter was gone until day came. Herod shows up at the prison to collect the morning's entertainment, but soon realizes that the entertainment is nowhere to be found. He tears the prison apart looking for Peter, to no avail, and soon his suspicions turn to the guards themselves. After all, if a prisoner chained to two guards manages to escape, and the guards say they didn't see anything, surely they must be in on it, right? Ultimately, all the guards are tortured and executed. Part of us wants to feel sorry for the guards, who didn't stand a chance against the angel, but we must remember that these men were willing to help imprison a man they knew was innocent. The excuse, "I was just following orders" didn't absolve them of blame for that, and they were punished accordingly. Just like they did, we too have the responsibility to do what we know God wants us to do, even in difficult circumstances.

The Scripture goes on to tell us that **HEROD** gets his comeuppance to. Let's read together from Acts 12:20-24. Herod appears at a public function, doesn't correct the public when they start praising him as God, and the real God strikes him down with worms so that he is essentially eaten from the inside out. He dies in great agony, and after his death, the gospel he fought against continues to multiply. Even if we feel some sympathy for the guards, we feel none for Herod. He was cynical and evil, and he got what he deserved. As powerful as he was, he could not hope to fight against Jesus and win, and the same holds true for us today. If we oppose God in our lives, we are certain to lose.