

“The Church Was Praying”

The Story of Peter’s Escape from Prison

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Rev. William A. Huegel

Wallingford FBC

*1 It was about this time that **King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.** 2 He had **James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.** 3 When he saw that this **pleased the Jews,** he proceeded to **seize Peter also.** This happened during the **Feast of Unleavened Bread.** 4 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.*

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

*6 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.** 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.***

*8 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. 9 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.** 10 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.*

*11 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.**"*

*12 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.** 13 Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14 **When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"***

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

*16 **But Peter kept on knocking,** and when they opened the door and saw **him, they were astonished.** 17 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.*

18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 19 After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Theme: Often, when God answers prayer, we are surprised.

Text: *14 When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" 15 "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."*

Introduction: **Did you ever pray for something and then have that prayer answered as you had prayed? And were you then surprised? That's happened to me.** Forgive me, I know I shouldn't be, but I'm always surprised when God answers prayer. My only consolation for such a pathetic lack of faith is that there are stories of people just like me in the New Testament. This is one of them.

King Herod was the nephew of Herod Antipas who had beheaded John the Baptist and tried Jesus. None of them were good guys. **The suffering and persecution that Jesus had predicted had already begun. Herod had James killed** and it was so popular with certain Jewish leaders that Herod had also gone after Peter.

You can imagine the deep concern that the Christians had. Peter's life was now in jeopardy. He might well have been tortured or killed for his faith in Jesus Christ. After all, he had been even more outspoken than James, the brother of John. John the Baptist had been killed years earlier. Now Peter's life was in very serious danger. **And what do Christians do when they are concerned? They pray!**

And pray they did. Verse 12 says that when Peter, who had been dazed by the whole experience, realized he had just been miraculously delivered by an angel, he went to the **house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many Christians had gathered and were praying.**

Peter knew exactly where to go in the middle of the night. He knew the Christians would be praying for him. How wonderful! **I can't think of anything better, when you are going through hard times, than to know that Christians are praying for you.**

- Often we have people here who are going through health issues for themselves or of some family member and they thank us profusely for their prayers. They say, I don't know how I would have gotten through all that without your prayers.
- When we go to the D.R. with 65 people, we set up a prayer team and assign our prayer warriors with individuals to pray for. We want you to take that seriously and set aside some time each day, specifically to pray because it means so much to us. It is a marvelous thing to know people are praying for you.

Debbie remembers a woman from Wallingford from another church who had gone to the D.R. with us. When she found out that someone would be praying for her specifically everyday while she was in the Dominican Republic, she was deeply moved. God answers prayer. It is a very exciting ministry.

- Last Tuesday night a couple of us pastors and our wives got together with Sister Gardinette, the wife of Pastor John with whom we work in Les Cayes, Haiti. **As we sat around**

talking, we spoke of the intense prayers offered on our behalf when any of us go to Haiti. Many of the Haitian Christians really know how to pray. We also spoke of what wonderful answers to prayer we received. We used to drive from the capital city, Port-au-Prince, to Les Cayes, and the vehicles we drove in were often not in the best of condition. They **were** overworked, often over-loaded, and under-cared-for and they **had** been know**n** to break down.

In America if there is a problem with my car, I simply call a mechanic and he fixes it. But they are not so blessed in Haiti. **One night, our van simply stopped running about 10:00 o'clock at night in the pitch-black darkness in the middle of the mountains.** There was no one we could call and not much we could do. I remember laying my hand on that van and simply praying, **"Lord, heal this van."** The van started up and we drove it all the way home. The mechanic in Les Cayes worked on it the next day. It needed a new fuel pump. We have many such stories. But what you don't know is that those dear **Christians in Haiti had been praying for our safe arrival for days. Some had even been fasting and praying.** They believed that the devil didn't want us to come, but God did. And they believed that God **would** over-power the works of the devil if they pray**ed**.

There is nothing better than knowing that Christians are praying for you. When I go on these mission trips I believe I am constantly **traveling under an umbrella of prayer.** Because that is true, I know nothing can happen to us unless it is in the direct will of God. Now sometimes God calls upon us to suffer for His name's sake so He may be further glorified. So, sometimes seemingly bad things happen. But **if God is in it, and if God is glorified through it, I'm OK with that.**

There was Peter who had been thrown in jail by King Herod and the king's motivation was entirely political. Verse 3 says he did it because he wanted to please the Jews – meaning the Jewish leaders. It was political. He was **a people pleaser.** It was the **F**east of Unleavened Bread – in other words it was the Passover. Jesus had been crucified just before the Passover and now **on the anniversary of Jesus' death,** the disciple Peter was thrown into jail. Herod would have **wanted him tried and killed** right after the Passover had ended. It would have been a popular thing to do. Jewish leaders applauded him.

So, Christians prayed. **Do you know what happens when Christians pray?** God hears and answers those prayers. Sometimes they are answered dramatically and sometimes the answers that come are not quite so dramatic. But that is always God's choice, not ours.

This time Herod sent an angel to deliver Peter. But **Herod didn't make it easy for the angels.** He had put **4 squads of 4 soldiers each** to make sure he didn't escape. But, **Herod hadn't counted on one thing.** Verse 5 says, "Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." **Herod didn't know about the power of the church when the church earnestly prays.** Had he known, maybe he would have put 4 squads of 40 guards over Peter to make sure he didn't escape. But 40 wouldn't have been enough. 400 wouldn't have been enough. When the church prays, it doesn't matter what sinful men may do. God is always greater than that.

Now please picture this. The text says that **Peter was sleeping in prison, between two soldiers to whom he was chained.** And two more soldiers were guarding the doors of the locked prison cell. It was a good plan. They were making sure Peter didn't go anywhere. But the plan wasn't good enough. The only way Peter could have escaped **was** if someone drugged the guards and made them go into such a heavy sleep that they wouldn't wake up. But, with God, that's no

problem. God can put 4 guards into a heavy sleep – or 40 guards – or 400! It’s not a problem for God.

The text says, that suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to Peter, poked him in the ribs, and said, “**Peter wake up, you’re outta here! Get your jacket and your shoes on and hurry up!**” The angel **released his handcuffs**. He **passed the first guards, the second guards**, through the **locked jail**, and onto the streets of the city. Locked prison chains and locked prison doors are no problem for God.

When Peter got to the end of the street on which the jail was located, the angel disappeared. Gone! Peter didn’t need the angel anymore. **Angels only show up when you need them**. If you don’t need them, they’re gone. There stood Peter, alone, in the middle of the night, still dazed by it all, but absolutely free of the chains that bound him. Peter was a free man. And then he got it: “**Wow! I’ve just been a part of a miracle! I’m not dreaming. I’m awake. And I’m free. I guess I’ll go to the prayer meeting.**”

Now, **Peter may have been sleeping in prison, but the Christians weren’t sleeping at Mary’s house**. Mary was the mother of John Mark, where many Christians had gathered. **They were engaged in an all night prayer service** out of their deep concern for Peter who had been thrown in jail by Herod. They knew the kind of danger Peter was in. **His life depended upon a miracle of God. So, they were praying all night.**

It’s a wonderful thing to know that people care so much about you that they are praying all night for you.

E.g.: Sometimes my wife wakes up in the middle of the night and the Lord has burdened her for someone in the church who is sick or someone is going through a hard time. And she spends an hour or two praying for that person.

There are others here who do the same thing from time to time.

Sometimes I do that, but usually God let’s me sleep until 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. and then I’ll pray. But it’s a wonderful gift we give to people. **When God’s people are so concerned they would rather pray than sleep, it is a wonderful gift**. The Christians who do this are always glad to do it. They never say they wished they could sleep. They are glad God is using them in prayer. It is a very precious and wonderful gift. **Lives have been literally saved by that gift of intercessory prayer.**

I take such things very seriously. When someone says to me that God has burdened their heart and **they felt that they must go into serious prayer and intercede for me**, whether at night or by day, **I am deeply moved**. It doesn’t happen often, but it has occurred a couple of times. It has happened at least once while I’ve been ministering here in this church. I deeply value this gift of prayer. I don’t know all the details, but **I may be alive today because someone prayed**.

Peter’s church friends were praying all night for him. Such a gift! God so wonderfully answered prayer! **So, Peter thought he should go tell them about how wonderfully God answered prayer. You should always do that. Let people know how God answers. It will greatly encourage them.**

What happened was an amazing thing. Peter went to the house, knocked on the door and the servant girl answered. Her name was Rhoda. Rhoda recognized this was Peter – the very guy for

whom the gathered church was praying and she was so excited she forgot to open the door and let him in.

Rhoda went running into the prayer room and said,

“He, he, he’s here!”

“Who’s here, dear?”

“Peter! The one we’ve been praying for. He is here at our door.”

“No, no dear! Peter’s in jail. We wish he was here. But he’s in jail. They probably have him in a locked cell, chained to two guards, and a couple more at the door. They will let him out in a couple of days and then there will be a trial, dear. We pray that God will help him then.”

“No, no! He’s here. He’s knocking at the door”.

“No dear! You’re very sleepy. You should probably go get some rest. You’re seeing things, dear. It’s not Peter. Maybe it’s his ghost, maybe his angel – but it’s not Peter”.

“Would someone please go to the door? Would you show sweet little Rhoda that no one is really there”?

They did! But Rhoda was right. Peter was there. He finally came into the room. **Wouldn’t you have loved to be there? The prayer meeting turned into a surprise party.** Only they weren’t surprising Peter, Peter was surprising them. **Can you imagine the gasping of breath, the big eyes, and finally the shouts of “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”** Peter had to quiet them down. After all, it was in the middle of the night and neighbors may have been trying to get some sleep.

The truth is that while they were earnestly praying for Peter’s release, they didn’t really believe God would do it. At least, not quite so dramatically! Maybe Peter was go to trial and common sense would prevail and they would let him loose. That would have been OK, too. **But they didn’t believe God would actually open prison doors for Peter. They were totally surprised.**

Me too! That’s me! I pray half believing and half doubting, I think.

- When someone is really sick and God heals them, I’m so surprised.
- When I pray that God would use me for his purposes and then He really does, I’m just amazed that He did.
- When God answers prayer, I’m always taken back. I’m always excited and encouraged.
- I know I should be a man of greater faith. But I’m not. I’m always surprised by the way God answers prayer. I’m not surprised so much **that** God does answer prayer, but I’m surprised **by the way** He answers prayer.

Of course I have to tell you that sometimes I’d like to tell God exactly how to do it. And then **when God does it His own way, I’m not as happy.** I really want God to answer my way. But He never did leave me in charge.

Sometimes I pray for God’s healing and God heals the believer by letting them die. That’s never my choice. That’s almost never what I ask for. Oh, sometimes a dear loving family will come to me and say, you know, she’s lived a good life. She’s old now. And she’s suffering terribly. I just want God to take her home. I understand that. I think God does. **I pray that God will relieve her of her suffering and receive her to Himself. And, in time, God in His mercy does just that.** But usually I pray for healing – and I want the person to be healed and live here where I can be with them on earth. But, sometimes God calls them home.

I’m often surprised by the way God answers prayer. Aren’t you?

This morning, as you come to the Communion Table, would you come thanking God for answered prayer? Would you also come with a spirit of submission to God – to the will of God – for you, for those you love? Would you tell God that He’s in charge of your life? When you reach out for the bread, would you reach out of His complete will to be done in you? When you reach out for the cup would you be willing to say again to the Lord, “Not my will but thine be done? This is not easy. But it’s good. God’s will for you is good. Trust Him! If God sends you to jail, He will go with you. If He sends you over rough mountain paths, He’ll be there. If He sends you into troubled waters, He’s an expert at calming troubled waters. He’ll be there. “Not my will but Thine be done!
Let’s pray!