

“Praying and Believing”
Acts 12:1-19

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Stone Mountain, Georgia
February 16, 2003

This afternoon, prayer packets are going to be delivered to our membership in reference to our capital campaign, **“Faith, Family, Future: Expanding the Legacy of the Smoke Rise Spirit.”** This will be done under the direction of the Spiritual Awareness Committee. I appreciate the leadership of Larry Decuir and the hard work of his committee members and volunteers.

Anytime the church faces a challenge, the most important thing it can do is pray. I have discovered over the years that prayer can make things happen that would not otherwise occur, both in and around us. I can't explain it and don't even feel the need to do so, but connecting with the Holy and seeking God's will in the midst of a challenge can make a difference in how the challenge is perceived and met.

This was certainly the case in the story of Peter's imprisonment recorded in Acts 12:1-19. Allow me to share it with you.

Peter was imprisoned in Jerusalem by the Roman leader, Herod Agrippa. The reason for his imprisonment and impending execution was political. Herod wanted the Jews in Jerusalem to support him and he felt that killing Peter would garner their favor. He knew that the Jews were upset with Peter because he had eaten in the home of the Gentile, Cornelius. To them, this was blasphemous and inexcusable. Peter needed to be punished and prevented from doing this again. So, Herod seized the opportunity to expand his political base and had Peter arrested.

Needless to say, the early Christians were distraught over Herod's actions. They knew Peter would be executed just as James, the brother of John was days earlier. The thought of trying to continue Christ's work without the leadership of Peter greatly distressed them. And yet, how could they prevent this from happening? There seemed to be no way.

So, what did the early Christians do? They gathered in Mary's home and began praying. They appealed to God to help them and deliver Peter. And to their shock and dismay, God did!

I say they were surprised because of the reaction they had when Peter arrived in the middle of the night at Mary's home. Actually, it is one of the most humorous scenes in scripture.

Peter was miraculously freed from prison the night before he was to be tried and executed. Even though he was chained to two guards and carefully watched by two others, he escaped. An angel woke him in the night and revealed to him that the locks on his chains had been opened. He was instructed to put on his clothes quickly and follow the angel to safety, which he did.

Once outside the prison, Peter decided to go to Mary's house. He knocked on the door but the servant, Rhoda, did not open it. Instead, she asked who was on the other side. Realizing it was Peter, the one for whom Mary and the others were praying, she got excited and ran to the room where they were. When she told them that Peter was outside the house, they responded by saying, “You are out of your mind. It must be his angel”

Acts 12:15. It was only after they all went to the door that they realized it really was Peter and their prayers had been answered. Surely you can see the humor in this serious story.

What can we learn from this story this morning? Let me share what it taught me. **When facing a challenge, we need to pray.** We do not need to face any challenge merely on human wisdom and strength. To do so ignores our greatest resource and ally.

A little boy was trying to move a rock. He pushed, pulled and shoved it every way possible, but to no avail. After falling exhausted on the ground beside the rock, the little boy's father walked over to him. "What are you trying to do?" he asked. "Daddy, I am trying to move this rock but I can't," his son responded. "Did you use all your strength?" his father asked. "Yes, daddy, I used all my strength. I even put my back to it and tried to shove it, but I couldn't," he sighed. "No son, you did not use all your strength. I was standing a few feet away watching you the entire time and you never asked for my help," his father said.

How often does our heavenly Father want to have this same conversation with us? Quite often, I think.

Secondly, there is no challenge too big to pray about. I would imagine even some of the early Christians looked upon this small band of believers at Mary's house that night and thought of them as naïve and foolish. What chance did prayer have against a prison? What good would it do to pray for Peter's release and safety in the midst of great odds? Some challenges are just too great to make the subjects of prayer.

To believe this is to limit God and I am not willing to do this. "Hopelessness is to deny God" I heard many years ago and I believe this to be true.

Does this mean that God will suspend the laws of nature and rescue me each time I ask? You know the answer to this question. Of course He doesn't. Like any wise, loving and responsible parent, He decides what is best and will do it. Sometimes it is what we want and sometimes it is not. However, when the answer is not what we want, He will provide what we need to see us through any situation. God will have the final word in our lives and that word will be good. No intimidating challenge can thwart this and I find this very comforting.

Thirdly, the bigger the challenge, the more I need to ask others to pray with me. Martin Luther once said, "I would rather have an army against me than a hundred men and women praying."

Am I implying that the more I having praying for something I want the more likely God will be to grant it? Not necessarily. I believe this miracle could have occurred because of the prayer of just one person. However, the earnest and sincere prayers of many will certainly be heard by God and perhaps allow God to answer the prayer differently because He can use the people praying to be a part of that answer. For you see, a part of intercessory prayer is the willingness to make available to God the very lives of the people praying. The time, talents, resources, influence and energy of the people interceding can be used by God to answer the prayer they are praying. This is why I tell people to handle intercessory prayer carefully. You may be a part of God's answer to the prayer you are praying.

In praying for Peter's release from prison, I have to believe that the Christians gathered in Mary's house that night offered to God their lives for the advancement of His kingdom. They reached a new level of awareness and commitment to God's work in this world. Surely, they laid everything they had, including their lives, on the altar that night

and promised God that they would do everything in their power to follow Jesus and his courageous disciple, Peter. If this was true, and I believe it was, it had to influence what happened to Peter.

The bigger the challenge, the more I need to ask others to pray with me. Now, do you understand why prayer packets are going to be delivered to our membership this afternoon? We need to undergird our capital campaign with prayer. The challenge that has been placed before us is enormous. To raise additional money during a recession and in the midst of an impending war with Iraq will not be easy. It will require a miracle much like the early Christians witnessed the night Peter was released from prison.

Remember what Luke wrote in Acts 12:5, "So Peter was kept in prison but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." They prayed with the same intensity (earnestly) that Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. That's serious praying. That's the kind of praying that produces miracles. That's the kind of praying we need to do in the days ahead.

I challenge you to pray about this campaign and your part in it over the next two months. Lay your life on the altar before God as the early Christians did when they prayed for Peter's release from prison. Seek His will and make a commitment to do it. And then, get ready for a miracle to happen because I assure you it will.