

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
November 1, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 12:1-11
Lesson Title: The Power of Prayer

Introduction

One need not read far in the Book of Acts before prayer is encountered (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:24; 6:4; 9:11). Prayer meetings were the arteries of the early church. Through them, power and strength was received to carry out the Great Commission and experience spiritual growth. Prayer for the first Christians, was an expression of their desire to seek God. Prayer also indicated the trust they placed in God's ability and power.

The picture of the New Testament church in Acts 12 is both frightening and encouraging. It is *frightening* because Peter is in prison, the Jews are pleased with the persecution of Christians, Herod is on a political roll, and plans to continue killing Christians are moving forward. It is *encouraging* because killing James and imprisoning Peter drove the church to its knees, not in submission, but in prayer. If the Jews and Herod had known how this story was going to end, they would have left the church alone.

The Significance of Prayer (Acts 12:1-4)

Verse 1-2

“Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.”

“Time” is a reference to the period in history when the early church was facing persecution and political opposition from “Herod.” It was historically around A.D. 41-44. This particular “Herod” was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, who slaughtered the male babies at Christ's birth. History records this “Herod” was always on shaky ground with the Roman government and would do whatever he needed to do to gain political favor with both the Romans and the Jews. In this situation, he “stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church” and he “killed James the brother of John.”

“Vex” means “to bring injury, harm, or cause evil upon someone.” His desire was to harass and torment those in “the church.” As a result of his actions, “James, the brother of John” became the first Christian martyr. Herod had him killed “with the sword.” “James” was the first apostle of our Lord to die and “John” was the last recorded in Scripture. Their mother had asked for them to have a special place in God's kingdom and Jesus said, “*But Jesus answered*

and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father” (Matthew 20:22-23). Be careful what you ask for!

The killing of “James...with the sword” makes the persecution of the church a much more personal and violent type of persecution.

Verse 3-4

“And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.”

Seeing his actions “pleased the Jews,” Herod “proceeded further to take Peter also.” “Peter” was the leader of the apostles and more vocal and visible than James. Herod’s thinking is if he cuts off the head it will please the Jews more. Since it was “the days of unleavened bread,” (the weekly feast following the Passover) Herod decided to arrest Peter and wait until after “Easter” to execute him. Each decision by Herod was carefully calculated and planned for maximum impact and effect.

Herod knew Jerusalem would be crowded during Passover, so he planned to bring Peter out before the crowds departed. Peter was “apprehended...put in prison...and delivered to four quaternions of soldiers” to be guarded and “kept.” Peter was committed to the watch of “four quaternions of soldiers.” That is sixteen soldiers total. Each “quaternion” or squad of four soldiers would be on duty for one of the three-hour watches of the night and one in the day. It is militarily and practically impossible to imagine Peter could escape from such security.

*Note: If you carefully read the rest of the details in this story, Peter is being kept by sixteen soldiers on rotation duty, two chains, keepers, an iron gate, and two wards. Escape seemed impossible. What can penetrate that type of security?
Prayer!*

The Season of Prayer (Acts 12:5)

Verse 5

“Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

“Peter therefore was kept in prison” are six words that would cause most churches to disband today. “Kept” is an understatement! Peter had a history of getting out of jail so Herod had everything possible in place to prevent his escape (Acts 5). The circumstances here and the political power in place seemed to place Peter and the church in a helpless situation. Humanly speaking, there was nothing they could do.

Yes, “Peter was kept in prison.” “But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” Peter’s execution order had been signed by Herod “but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” Peter was in prison and the church is praying. This was what happened during the eight days of the “feast of unleavened bread.” While the enemies of Christ and His church were celebrating the death of James and the imprisonment of Peter, the Christians were praying “without ceasing.”

“Without ceasing” is the Greek word *ektenes* {ek-ten-ace}. It means “fervent.” It is a word used in the medical field relating to stretching a muscle. To pray “without ceasing” in this context has more to do with intensity than length of time. They were putting everything they had into praying for Peter. The church was literally “stretched out” in prayer to God for Peter.

“Unto God for him” reveals the direction of their praying. Prayer is talking to “God.” The church prayed “unto God.” They did not pray to Mary, a saint, or some spirit in the sky. Paul told Timothy, “*For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*” (1 Timothy 2:5).

“For him” reveals their praying was specific. If you had been a fly on the wall in the house of Mary the mother of John (Acts 12:12), you would have heard many different petitions, more than anything you would have heard the name “Peter.” What exactly did they pray for Peter? The text does not tell us. Did they ask God to spare Peter’s life or release him from prison? Probably. Did they ask God to strengthen him and protect him while in prison? Probably. Did they ask God to help him be faithful unto death should he be killed? Probably. They had no way of knowing the will of God in this situation, but all of their prayers were heard.

The Sequel to Prayer (Acts 12:6-11)

Verse 6

“And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.”

“And when Herod would have brought him forth” is speaking of the night before the planned execution. Doubtless everything was set for a day of celebration for

Herod. Peter, the leader of the Christian church, who had been such a thorn in the side of Judaism, would soon be dead and Herod's popularity would be at an all-time high. What Herod does not realize is while he is planning the church is praying!

There is a fervent prayer meeting taking place at Mary's house and Peter is "sleeping between two soldiers." This is fascinating when you consider the seriousness of the "night" and what is planned tomorrow. This is another "Daniel in the den of lions" moment (Daniel 6). The ability to "sleep" in this situation must somehow be connected to the prayer meeting taking place at Mary's house. Prayer can shut the hungry mouth of lions and the weary eyes of a preacher (Psalm 4:8).

Verse 7

"And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands."

As a result of the church praying, "the angel of the Lord" is sent to Peter to secure his release (Hebrews 1:14). With the "angel" came "a light in the prison." "Light" is usually associated with angels and is a result of the glory of God with them and around them. Apparently the guards are in a divinely-induced sleep at this point because not even the "light shining in the prison" aroused them. It was a very serious crime for guards to sleep on duty. The penalty was death, as we learn in this case (Acts 12:19). If these soldiers had accidentally dozed off for a moment, they would certainly have been awakened by the "light." Roman guards do not sleep on duty. Chains do not fall off accidentally. God is intervening according to His sovereign plan and the prayers of the church.

The angel "smote Peter on the side, and raised him up saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands." The miraculous is happening and Peter cannot get awake enough to realize it.

Verse 8

"And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me."

Now that Peter was free from his chains, it was his responsibility to put on his clothes and shoes." The angel did for him what he could not do for himself. But it is up to Peter to obey and do what he is commanded.

Prayer works and produces the miraculous, but it also works in the mundane. There is no hurry or worry in all of this. All the angel wants Peter to do is get up, get dressed, put on your shoes and outer garment and "follow me."

Verse 9

“And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.”

Once Peter is on his feet, dressed and ready to go, Peter follows the angel, “and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.” Basically, Peter is following orders but thinks he is seeing things! This was all too good to be true! Answered prayer is often like that.

Verse 10

“When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him.”

The “first and second ward” would be the two sentries on duty. With the two soldiers chained to Peter before the angel released him, they made up the “quaternion of soldiers” on night duty. Apparently these two soldiers at the “first and second ward” were asleep also. Why else would they have let Peter just walk by?

The “iron gate” was a major barrier between a prisoner and freedom. The prison was most likely inside the city walls surrounded by this “gate.” Normally this “iron gate” would have made escape impossible. But the large heavy gate “opened to them of his own accord.” Like an electric eye door the gate swung open as Peter and the angel walked out unnoticed.

After Peter and the angel had walked through the gate “and passed on through one street,” the “angel departed from him.” Again we note the principle God does not furnish divine power or wisdom for what we can do with our own strength and knowledge. Peter was free; he was familiar with Jerusalem and the church, he could find his way from here.

Verse 11

“And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.”

“When Peter was come to himself” or once he was fully awake, he was certain God had “sent his angel and delivered him out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.” Peter knew the plans Herod intended for him and what the Jews expected to happen. He also knew the

Lord had “delivered” him. Through the power of prayer Peter would live another day and continue to preach Christ to the lost.

Standing on the Day of Pentecost, preaching and seeing thousands come to Christ must have been encouraging and miraculous. Likewise, standing alone in the street in the middle of the night, having just been delivered by the miraculous power of God was equally as encouraging.

Conclusion

Which motto summarizes your prayer life? “When all else fails, pray.” Or “Before doing anything, pray.” The first motto views prayer as the last resort when human abilities have run out. The second motto confesses unless God intervenes, human strength and wisdom will never be enough. Based on events recorded in Acts 12, the motto of the New Testament church was “Before doing anything, pray.”

When Peter was set free from prison by the angel, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, where many were gathered together praying. Meeting for prayer must have been a common practice of the early church. They knew the power of prayer.

Think about it: Do you have a regular place of prayer? Does your church pray? Are you a part of church praying? What would it take for your church to call for a prayer meeting? Are you tired of trying to stand on your own? Dropping to your knees in prayer may be the best place to stand!

Amen.