

Acts 12:1–19

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[0 : 01] that place you on the verge of desperate measures. Troubled times give way to desperate measures.

The troubled times in the church are certainly there in verses 1 to 4. It doesn't take but a second grade education to read it once and to see it.

And Herod the king had laid hands on some who belonged to the church. The church was in the midst of external pressures that were exerted upon it.

It made life very difficult. It goes on to indicate the first death of one of the 12 disciples outside, of course, of Judas Iscariot, who took his own life.

Here is James, the brother of John, already in this early moment in the history of the church, departed from the scene, taken violently.

[1 : 09] This one whom Jesus called a son of thunder, who had much to give the world, was now silent.

Beyond that which was happening to a number of people, and beyond that which had happened to one of the leading apostles and disciples, when it was seen that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.

So the pastor of the people was now incarcerated, himself unable to be productive on behalf of his Lord.

It says that it happened during the days of unleavened bread, which, if you read the Old Testament scriptures, mean that the events of this text more than likely take place over a week-long period.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a seven-day event, and the text will make clear in the following, that on the very night when that celebration would have been over, this divine rescue takes place.

[2 : 32] But, in 1-4, it's simply a narrative description of troubled times. The desperate measures really follow in verse 5.

So, Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. It seems to me that only when, well, not only, but prayer meetings happen in consequence of troubled times.

When things are difficult enough that you come to the end of your own resources. When things finally become in the interior world of your own soul hopeless.

You find yourself to be helpless. You find yourself powerless to actually release yourself from your situation.

What a wonderful church this would have been. For we know that they had already in chapter 2 devoted themselves to a life of corporate prayer.

[3 : 57] prayer. They had developed this pattern of gathering not merely in their own closet or in their own home with a few folk, but together corporately while they waited on the Lord.

We know in chapter 2 of Acts that that pattern of life continued not merely in a season of waiting, but in a persistent devotion that was the ongoing characteristic of that community.

And so here it should not surprise us that when troubled times fall that pattern continues. So here they are.

A whole church family that feels helpless, hopeless, and powerless and while Peter was kept in prison, the church gathered for prayer.

Prayer, corporate prayer, more particularly intercessory prayer, that is prayer for others who are in a hopeless state was the hallmark of their gathering.

[5 : 19] Intercessory prayer was corporate. The phrase here, earnest prayer, is interesting. Literally, woodenly, it was great straining.

That's why I use the phrase desperate measures. It was a sense that there was really nowhere else to go.

God delivering me, but experientially it was felt in the very fiber of the church.

There was literally nowhere else to go. Not simply through the apprehension of mind, but through the gathering visceral strength of soul. That without a pouring out to God, without God delivering me miraculously, supernaturally, divinely.

Indeed, the church was in a helpless state. So there was this prayer meeting that was marked by great straining.

[6 : 37] when you hear it, it is something to behold. To hear somebody lift up their voice verbally in your presence on behalf of another with this desperate pleadings for divine intervention.

a crying out, a passion that is expressed audibly, but it's rooted in two things, the strength of the situation and the understanding that if God does not act, then the circumstances will not change.

Intercessory prayer has been described as by one person loving our neighbor on our knees.

neighbor and there's a lot of discussion today about loving your neighbor. There's a lot of activity swirling in the church on the care of and for our neighbor as there rightly should be.

I'd like to suggest though that there comes a time in the life of the church and in the lives of individuals within the church where the greatest do-gooding hope you can bring is to love your neighbor on your knees.

[8 : 40] They may not be with you when you're praying for them. they might not be present to hear your straining of soul pouring out to God.

But nevertheless when the church gathers corporately having rightly understood the hour and having earnestly persistently corporately audibly verbally communally thrown its voice heavenward.

It is finally in the right place. What occurs next is these troubled times which give way to desperate measures are met by the most surprising deliverance of God.

my dad lost his dad from a head-on collision with a drunk driver in 1962.

My father at the time was 29. I was one. My grandma survived miraculously but from then on her mid upper 50s until she passed at age 95 she was restricted by use of a cane and only got around with great difficulty.

[10 : 28] When she in those early days was reflecting upon the death of her husband and the troubled times in which she found herself she told me and Lisa once on a visit some years ago now that she continued to ask God why?

Why had she been spared and her husband taken? Why was she here and he gone? And what was she to do with the now limitations that would dog her for nearly 40 years?

And she expressed to us that in the quietness of those prayers she sensed well you can pray and so she prayed.

My grandmother for the better part of 40 years sat in one chair had an empty chair across the room and would you know not mystically or anything I hope you understand she ascended to the throne where Christ sits at the right hand through faith but visually in her own room she would invite the Lord to that empty chair and she would pour out her heart on behalf of others.

What my grandmother did in the solitude of her own person is what the church needs to do in the assembly of itself gathered for there are in this room alone troubled times difficult days situations that have dogged people circumstances that are discouraging people life needs that are being unmet and yet until we actually know we're helpless and hopeless and powerless!

[12 : 35] We won't be where we're supposed to be. Just look at the way this text then answers that question.

The narrative shows the surprising answer to that prayer. It shows it with all humor almost as if the individual who's reading is so overwhelmed with their own situation and circumstances so choked so much eyes filled with tears and believe me if you could see the tears in this room that fell from those during the course of the week if those tears were stained like indelible ink you would see visually the hopelessness the helplessness the powerlessness in our own midst and because you can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there and so the humor in the narrative almost for me is that moment of an individual who has been overwhelmed with tears of desperation yet at the same time wiping wiping them in the laughter of deliverance and exaltation notice it came this answer to prayer to the surprise of Peter to the surprise of Rhoda to the surprise of the entire church

God used the prayer meeting not only to teach the church about prayer he used the prayer meeting to surprise them with the truth that he answers prayer just a couple things on Peter and the surprise don't you love verse 7 an angel of the Lord stood next to him and a light shone in the cell well that's always the the first indication that something might be happening arise the light of the the light and glory of the Lord may shine upon you a light shone in the cell in other words in the midst of the darkness when the pastor himself had no way out somebody turned a light on but notice it wasn't enough he struck

Peter on the side and woke him I love that in other words Peter was in the midst of a situation in which he himself had no expectation of deliverance now remember this is the very night that he should be anticipating Herod's move upon his own life in the morning now you might say wouldn't it be nice to have your life on the line and sleep like a baby but it seems to me that the man who was asleep in Gethsemane is asleep here in the same sense he has no real internal awareness expectation of what is happening and so the light is turned on the angel got to get over there brush up that wing poke him on the side tell him to get up God is actually here the surprising narrative notice what happens throughout is that this disciple was delivered without any recognition that he was being delivered think of it

God is saving him and he doesn't even know that comes certainly there in verse nine he didn't even know that what was being done by the angel was real there's no recollection!

[16 : 52] that God was at work until he actually got out and finally verse 11 wonderful phrase when Peter came to himself he finally said now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod when did he know he'd finally been delivered in retrospect because in the midst of it there was no recognition nor expectation think of how many men and women here today in the smallness of this auditorium need God to rescue them and it may come while they have no expectation that anything can happen that would alter their life it may come that even as the answer is being provided they have no recollection that it is taking place what you find in the text the burden of the text is the surprise of answered prayer think of it today well let me move on verse 12 when he realized it he went to the house many were there praying when he knocked on the door the gateway the servant girl named

Rhoda came to answer recognizing Peter's voice in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate not only was prayer answered on behalf of one that had no idea God was actually rescuing him but here's an indication that someone is so surprised by joy that she doesn't do the natural thing you would think and by opening the door and let him in now she knew who was on the prayers were answered she was so overwhelmed by it her first response was joy and not rationally what should I be doing here oh you would like in in other words it is so surprising it is so surprising that God answered prayer that she lost herself in the moment not only that but the same is for the church you're out of your mind here's the church praying this is not some half hour prayer meeting this is not some once a month one hour prayer meeting this is the feast of unleavened bread multiple days prayer on behalf of

Peter and while the text does not indicate that they were praying for his release it does indicate that they were earnestly praying for him and now here he is at the door and the entire congregation says well you're out of your mind that door closes after the call to worship and he's not here and he's not can't possibly be in other words they did not expect him to be released but motioning to them then what happens is she kept saying well they kept saying to him it's got to things girl but Peter continued knocking and when they opened they saw him and there's the phrase they were amazed that's the burden of the text nobody actually expects God to work life's too tough my situation is too hard my circumstances have gone on too long oh pastor if you only better in the wake if you only knew the number of restarts that

I had if you only knew how fallen off the table my situation is let me ask you here today are you on the verse today did you come today hopeful but not really expecting to think that God could do a work in your life or the life of this church I want to say for the church that God can do something there was a young pastor who had a mediocre ministry and then all of a sudden experienced 10 years of growth he was called to the bedside of an elderly woman who she said pastor I'm about to die I've called you here for one reason who do you have to replace me to which he said

I don't understand what you're talking about she said well I came to this church 10 years ago and every Saturday night since then I prayed all night long that God would bless your ministry now I'm going to die who you got to fill my shoes some of you have children that you really wonder is it possible truly possible for God to do a work in their life some of you have strained marriages with with with like a one of those wakeboarding boats with sandbags in the back that tear up the bottom sand and you feel like there's no real way for what's back in my wake to find rest

[23 : 19] John Newton who wrote Amazing Grace and who was a slave trader had a mother who in the midst of his early rebellion in life began to pray earnestly for him and thank God decades later actually lived long enough to see his own conversion some of us have you know there is in our midst alcohol addiction drug addiction a life of powerlessness the text is indicating that whether it be your church or your family or your marriage whether it be your children whether it be whatever you think is beyond hope that the prayers of someone else on your behalf could actually be effectual

I love what Peter says on the back side he says hey you know go tell James it's got to be probably James the brother of Jesus go tell the other brothers I love the fact that he departed and went to another place and that he went down from Judea Caesarea in other words Peter was smart enough to know I got out of jail once I'm not I'm not sure you're going to get me out next time so I'm glad for the answered prayer but let's keep this on the down low because I'm going to take I'm getting out of town in other words he got out of Dodge not out of a lack of faith but there's a realism here for the one who's delivered the one who's truly delivered at times got to step away what do you do with the sermon

I'm calling this congregation to desperate measures because these are troubled times I'm not talking about going home in your prayer closet I'm talking about a corporate gathering tonight at 730 above Salonica coming with an expectation to pray but I'm talking about more than that I'm talking about some people many people in this room who feel helpless hopeless and powerless to come and to stand before the congregation and to say I'm going to give you one minute on my helpless hopeless powerless situation and I'm going to plead for you to pray and other people will with great straining tonight bring it to the

Lord in prayer if you're part of Holy Trinity Church it's a congregation wide call to either pray on behalf of others or sit down this afternoon and determine by God's grace I will make known my condition that others might plead my case before a merciful Father our heavenly Father we do pray for this simple word that it would continue to teach us not only to devote ourselves to prayer to persist in it but it would teach us the surprising truth that you answer prayer bring hope to many even this day bring joy retrospective reality bring amazement do some good to many here who feel helpless in Jesus name amen to to to to to!