

Prayer & Deliverance

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[0 : 00] If you could turn with me to that chapter we read in Acts chapter 12, and we shall be looking today from verses 1 to 19.

As I was walking around town this week, I've come across a number of bags which have this slogan, If it's too good to be true, it probably is. I think it's a kind of government warning against these kind of people who would try to rip us off to kind of sell us stuff that we don't need.

And I suppose when it comes to things of the world, it's absolutely true. If it's too good to be true, it probably is. However, as Christians, I think that we're in danger of applying this kind of phrase to God and how he works in our lives.

As Christians, we can so easily reduce God to a kind of pocket-sized little helper in our time of need. We kind of forget who God is.

We kind of forget the magnitude which he has, the glory which is his, and this power which is available to him. And so we begin to realize that as we begin to forget who God is, we kind of reduce him to a little and little and a little less.

[1 : 18] And so he becomes just like one of us. And I suppose that is the danger. That is what we might be tempted to do so often. But from this passage, the encouragement we receive is that nothing is beyond him.

There is no situation in this world which is beyond our God, which is outwith our God's control. And what encouragement we get here is that we can go to God in any situation, in any predicament, and we can go in prayer to him, knowing that he will act and that he will help us in the time of need. What we have read about in this chapter are a people whose prayer has been answered in the most spectacular way. They were not expecting this kind of answer. They were so shocked at the answer that they didn't believe it when they were first told about it.

In fact, when they were first told about it, they just ridiculed the woman as being insane. They thought it's impossible. God could never have done that. But lo and behold, as Peter steps into the room and think, wow, this is the God of the universe.

This is the God who has answered our prayers. And so this morning, I would like to look at this passage under three headings. First of all, verses 1 to 5, a prayer for deliverance.

[2 : 36] Then verses 6 to 12, God's deliverance. And then verses 13 to 17, a doubted deliverance. First of all, a prayer for deliverance, verses 1 to 5.

I suppose we need to get a grip of what the situation is at the time. And so the situation is that Herod the Great's grandson, Herod Agrippa, is on the throne. Now, Herod Agrippa is a tyrant, but he is desperate to be popular.

He wants to be loved by the Jewish people. And he is eager to please the Jewish people. He wants them to be happy. He wants to control them. But he knows that the church is becoming increasingly influential in its territories.

The church is beginning to frustrate the Jewish people. The church is beginning to cause the Jewish people upset because the church is no longer abiding to its rules, to its statutes.

It's no longer following its feasts and its practices. And the Jewish people are increasingly resentful towards the way to the Christians of that time. And it was beginning to be cleared-headed that if he wants to please the Jewish people, what he can do is he can just begin to put pressure on the church.

[3 : 51] If he begins to get rid of the church, he can ensure that he is going to be the popular Herod with the Jewish people. And so, with this in mind, Herod begins the attack, the persecution of the Christian church.

But first of all, he's a bit wary, so he goes in a little bit gently and a bit slowly. First of all, he takes out James, one of the three main leaders of the Christian church at that time.

So he takes James and he executes James, beheads him. And thus fulfilling the words of Jesus to James, that when he declared that James would drink from his cup and be baptized with his baptism in Mark 10:39.

And so Agrippa takes a wee step back for a bit, and he's beginning to see how will the Jewish people react to this? How will they react to James' execution? And after a while, it becomes absolutely clear to Agrippa that the Jewish people are pleased in verse 2 with James' execution. The Jewish people are delighted that one of the main leaders of the Christian church has been done away with, has been executed. Now, Agrippa, sensing an opportunity here, he begins to turn the screw again on the Christian church, and he goes for leader number two, he goes for Peter. [5 : 10] And he knows that one by one, he can get rid of every main leader of the church and thus eradicate the church from his territory. And at this time, when he picks up Peter, when he arrests Peter, it's during the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Jerusalem is awash with Jewish people. The Jews come and flock in to celebrate this feast. They are absolutely packed out the city of Jerusalem. It's the perfect time for Agrippa to show the Jews how much he cares for them, how much he respects them.

But he knows that it's bad form to kill somebody during this feast. So what he does, he arrests Peter and holds him in prison till the feast is over.

And he knows the day after the feast has ended, people are still going to be about, they won't have gone home yet. He will publicly execute Peter, and thus the message will go out throughout the Jewish world that Herod Agrippa is for you, that Herod Agrippa is a person that the Jews can respect, can look to.

And so it's into this situation that we arrive in verse 5. What we have in verse 5 is a church earnest in prayer. What we have in verse 5 is the church's prayer meeting.

[6 : 20] Their leader, Peter, is a dead man walking. He is about to face the executioner's chair the very next morning. There is nothing that can be done to stop it, they think.

It is a hopeless situation to them. It's a situation where their main leader cannot get out of. They assume that the heavily guarded Peter cannot get out, that there is no way back.

There is no more court injunctions. There will be no more last-minute appeals. There will be no daring escape. There will be no way out. They realize that the human situation is hopeless.

In this situation, the church is compelled to pray. The church goes on its knees in that time of distress and trouble. If there was anything the church could have done, they would have done it. If the church could have appealed for its freedom, they would have. If the church could possibly have broken Peter out of that prison, they could have. But they can't. And so they go to the only one that can help in this situation.

[7 : 24] They go to the one who has authority over all authorities. And in this verse 5, we learn three lessons about what corporate prayer was like in that early church. And the three things that we learn about the corporate prayer of that early church was that it was focused on God, that they were united, and they were specific in their pleas to God.

First of all, the prayers were delivered to God. You'd think, that's obvious. That's an obvious one. But the people were turning to the one who had said to them through the Psalms, call upon me in the day of trouble.

They knew that God was their only refuge and strength. They knew from Isaiah that their God was a mighty God. The people knew that God could overrule the situation. The people believed that God reigned and that God himself involved himself in their world, in their distresses.

They knew that a mighty fortress is our God. They went to the one who they knew could help. They went to the one who they could trust. They went to the only person that could deal with their situation.

When we come to God in prayer, do we acknowledge the size of our God? Do we remember how big, how powerful, how mighty, how marvelous, how glorious, how good, how strong our God is?

[8 : 43] Do we remember that God, even in the most difficult of situations and scenarios, that he can be depended on? That in the midst of our most hopeless, helpless situation, we can go to the one who has created the world, who sustains the world, and we can go to him for help.

We would do well to remember that prayer is an audience with God. Prayer is actually us coming into God's presence.

Prayer is us asking our God for help. The second thing we learn about this prayer meeting, that the believers were united. They gathered as one to pray.

At that time, we knew from Acts 4.4, there are probably about 5,000 male believers. So we can expect probably, including women and children, there's probably about 10,000 believers in Jerusalem at this time.

Clearly, there's not 10,000 people in this house. From archaeology of the time, we know that the houses then could probably hold about 50 or 60 people. So when in verse 5, it says the church was praying, did that mean just 50 or 60 people at prayer?

[9 : 56] No. What was happening was throughout the city, the Christians had gathered all together in their different locations, groups of 50, 60, 40, and they were all praying at this time.

They knew that the loss of James and Peter would have been devastating. All the church was praying, but it was praying in its house groups all over the city. What is the value of praying together, though?

In our individualistic age, we kind of think, well, you know, I can pray on my own. My prayer on my own is just as good as me going to the prayer meeting. I don't need to get up, leave my house, and go meet with others.

I can do it on my own. However, the great value in praying together is that we are united with our brothers and sisters in mind and spirit.

It enables us to be brought together in the matters raised during these prayer meetings. Imagine the unity that was enjoyed by these believers, as scattered as they are throughout the city, praying as one.

[10 : 59] Do we long for the day when we all gather together and pray as one in this town, for this town? For the specific situations that face the church. Where we gather, where we pray, and where we pray believing that we come to the God who can help us.

And the final lesson that we learned from this prayer meeting was that it was specific. They named names. They named a situation. They prayed for Peter in his situation. The church prayed for Peter who was about to face death.

And they were very clear on that. They all gathered for this one reason, to enable Peter to be set free. From that situation. Our prayer meetings must be focused. We do not ask God for general helps.

We ask him for specifics. We ask that Jim and John will be converted. We ask that Emily and Rachel will find a new job. We ask for those who are ill. We ask for those who are mourned. Specifically. Because we are one. We are brothers and sisters united in Christ. We must pray for one another specifically. What an encouragement it is.

[12 : 03] When you hear brothers and sisters praying for you in your situation. What an encouragement. To know that the hearts and minds of the church are gathering together to pray for you.

An absolute wonderful blessing and encouragement. First lesson. In the face of a world that was in opposition to the church.

The church prayed. The church gathered together. They were of one mind and prayed fervently and specifically for this one issue.

In a world that is increasingly hostile to the church and our message. We must as a church gather together in prayer. We must pray for the specific situations our brothers and sisters face.

We must pray believing that our God is a mighty fortress and he will not fail us. And he will answer our every plea. Second. God's deliverance.

[13 : 02] Six to twelve. The focus zooms out of the prayer meeting. And we now find ourselves back in Peter's prison cell. And as we view his situation we can appreciate the very real predicament that Peter finds himself in.

He has two guards chained to him. He has two guards standing at the door. This man is being treated as public enemy number one. You would expect him to be a mass murderer, a terrorist or some ilk.

Not a temperamental church leader. What is striking about the situation though. Is Peter's state of mind. Was he up all night worried and distressed about the following morning?

No. He's sound asleep. He is fast asleep. And it's quite humorous what Luke has written. The angel comes and he is beyond a gentle whisper in his ear.

It's not a gentle shake. The angel has to strike him to get him up. So deep as his sleep the angel strikes Peter. Peter is a man at peace.

[14:07] Peter took heed of Jesus' command that he should not worry. He knew that God would look after him whether he lived or died. He knew that God would do all things right.

He was able to cast all his cares upon God. I wonder if Peter had this incident in view when he wrote later on in 1 Peter 5-7. Cast all your anxiety on him.

That is God. Because he cares for you. These are not words to be taken lightly. These are not words penned by a man who knew no suffering. These words were penned by a man who knew suffering to the extreme.

Peter knew horrendous situations. He knew difficulty. He knew persecution. But yet he could pen these words. That he could cast all his cares, all his burdens on God.

Because God cared for him. Are you anxious or worried? Remember to cast all your anxieties on God.

[15:11] On the one who cares for you. On the one who loves you. On the one who is able to help. As his chains fall off and as he glides past the prison guards.

As the iron gates fly open. He is still in a daze. He does not know what is going on. Peter just assumes it is a vision. This cannot be real. He is kind of in another world. What is happening? What is happening to him? And eventually the angel goes. He is left on his own. And then all of a sudden he realizes. That God has delivered.

God has been faithful to his servant. God has rescued the servant. From this seemingly hopeless situation. And we know in our own kind of world. God has done similar things.

Throughout the history of the world. We have different accounts of how God has spectacularly delivered. Those who have been in trouble. Famous Indian evangelist. Sundar Singh describes a time.

[16:10] When God delivered him. Sundar Singh was a famous evangelist in Nepal. And he was busy preaching the gospel. And so upset were the authorities at his message.

That the authorities arrested him. And they flung him down a dry well. And they locked the lid of that well. And as Sundar Singh lay on top of the dead bodies.

Which had previously been flung on. He prayed to his God. And while he was praying. A most miraculous thing happened. He began to hear a noise.

And looked up. He saw a rope being lowered. Which had a loop in the bottom of that rope. So as it got to him. He put his foot in the loop. And the rope was taken up.

And he was carried out of the well. He got to the top. He looked around. And he could see nobody. And the next day. Sundar Singh went back to the town.

[17:05] And began preaching again. He was again arrested. And brought before the priest. Who was the most important official in that place. The people thought that somebody must have rescued Sundar Singh.

But they discovered. That the person who had the key to the seal. Was that priest. Nobody else had that key. And Sundar Singh then realized. Realized that God had delivered him.

That God had rescued him. From his situation. God delivers. And God's work will continue. Even though the situation may look helpless. Imagine if we were in the early church.

And knew about Peter's position. What would we have done? Would we have thrown in the towel? Would we have given up hope? What we learn from this. Is that God delivers.

And that all things are possible through him. However. Though God delivers. Peter. We must temper this with the fact. That he did not deliver James.

[18:07] James is executed. Peter is spared. From the account that we have. Of James. There are times when the expected does happen.

There are times when God chooses not to deliver us from our earthly situation. We may argue. Well. It's obvious. Peter must have had a mighty work to do.

Peter must have had more to do in this church. Whereas the work of James had been done. Had been finished. Well. To an extent. That may be true. But it's noticeable.

After this time. We hear very little about Peter. And his work in the church. The only thing we have written about Peter. In Acts. Is again in Jerusalem.

Where he makes a short speech. And from then on in. It's largely unknown. How Peter worked. And how Peter involved himself. In the church. As we think upon these accounts.

[19 : 05] Of these two very different men. We must remember that God is sovereign. That God is working according to his plan. We must accept his plan.

For our lives. And move forward with a humble spirit. We may remain faithful to him. Even though we may be confused. As to what he is doing in our world.

In our lives. From this account. God chose one to glorify God in his life. And God chose one to glorify him in his death. We must humbly accept.

Whatever God has in store for us in this life. However. Not only do we have a picture. Of how God works in the life of a believer. But we also have a picture. Of how God works in conversion.

Peter's case was hopeless. He was bound. There was no way out. He couldn't save himself. He was in a dark prison. Surrounded by guards. He was changed. He was condemned to die. His situation pictures us.

[20 : 01] In our sinful situation. We are hopeless. We are helpless. We are chained by our sin. There is no escape. The punishment of death is looming. We are in no way able to save ourselves. But Christ breaks in.

The light of Christ fills us. And we begin to see him. And we follow him. We are delivered from the sentence of death. That hangs above us. Charles Wesley's famous hymn.

And can it be. I am certain. Had Peter's situation in view. When he penned these words. Long my imprisoned spirit lay. Fast bound in sin and nature's night.

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray. I woke. The dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth. And followed thee.

If you are still bound by those chains of sin. I would urge you to let the light of Christ. Stream into your life. I would urge you to let Christ lead you to that place of freedom.

[20 : 58] And you will enjoy a freedom that you will never have imagined. And that you can never believe. The second thing that we learn about God from this passage. Is that he delivers.

And that he is able to deliver. Even in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation. Finally. A doubted deliverance. Verses 13 to 17.

As the drama of Peter's deliverance is unfolding. The believers remain earnest in the prayers. They do not understand what is going on in town. As they gather together for prayer. Having realized what has happened to him in verse 12.

Peter then makes a beeline to the house church. He goes to Mary's place. He knows that he can go there. And he will find the believers praying for him. Deep in prayer.

They begin to hear a knocking at the door. You can just picture Mary. Putting her head up. And giving a kind of nod to Rhoda. The servant girl. Go out and get the door. Would you? We're praying in here.

[21 : 59] And as Rhoda approaches the door. She can hear this thick Galilean accent. She knows it's Peter straight away. But she doesn't bother to answer the door. She just runs back and says. Peter. He's at the door. He's at the door.

And so excited was she. That she doesn't mind that she's interrupting the prayers. She just has to let them know this good news. We're expecting the church to be overflowing with joy. We're expecting the church to be amazed.

We're expecting a few hallelujahs. But what do we get? Rhoda you're insane. It can be Peter at the door. And then she persists. He's at the door. She says.

It must be his angel Rhoda. It must be his angel. They cannot believe. That Peter could be at the door. But the knocking persists. And you can imagine. That Peter can't quite.

Get over the fact that they're not letting him in. So being a kind of impatient guy that he is. The knocking begins to become a pounding. And eventually they let Peter in. And they're amazed. They cannot believe how God has delivered Peter.

[22 : 59] So amazed are they that Peter has to quieten them all down. He says. Guys. Listen. Calm down. Listen. And he explains how God has worked in his life. I'm not sure what they prayed for in verse 5.

Maybe they simply prayed that Peter would be at peace in these final few hours. Maybe they prayed that after Peter's death the church would not be scattered. Or maybe they were praying that God would raise up another mightier than Peter.

But the issue of Peter's release doesn't seem to have been on their agenda. They may have prayed for it. But they certainly didn't expect it. I love the fact the Bible is realistic.

It doesn't hide us from the fact that there are weaknesses in every believer. These guys in the church were not some uber Christians.

They were not some mega Christians. They were men and women just like us. With all our faults.

They were sinners who sometimes got it wrong. Do we pray for the unthinkable?

[24 : 00] Do we pray with faith that God can act in spectacular ways? Or do we reduce God to the pedestrian, to the mundane? Though these early believers lacked faith, God answered their prayers.

If their prayer was effective yet unbelieving, why should our prayers not also be effective? This is our great encouragement. Though we are so often weak, so often lacking in faith, God still works in our lives.

Doing us good. Providing answers to prayers that we could never imagine being fulfilled.

Remember that the God who we pray to cannot be limited. He is beyond our understanding.

Even if we are facing a seemingly impossible situation, we go to God and ask for help. We go to the one who can give help in these difficult situations.

Remember, Elijah was a man just like us. But he prayed that it would not rain. And it did not rain for three and a half years.

[25 : 03] In conclusion, we must examine ourselves in the light of this teaching. Are we praying earnestly to God? Are we praying fervently with other Christians?

And do we have specific requests in mind when we come to God in prayer? It is my desire that each one of us can say yes to each of these questions. Amen.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you this morning thanking you that you are a God who delivers.

That you are a God who works in our lives. That you are a God who will help us in the midst of our most difficult times. And Father, we pray that we would see you as you are in all your glory.

That we would simply come to you with our pleas for help. Trusting and knowing that you will help us. That you will be with us.

[26 : 05] And that you will answer us. Lord, help us to accept your answer. Whether we understand it or not. For we ask this in Christ's name.

Amen.