

“THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”

“Prayer Changes Things”

Scripture Reading – Acts, 12:1-16

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. 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. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

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”. 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.

Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognised Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”. “You’re out of your mind”, they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel”. But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

‘For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’

I Peter, 3:12, NIV

This series, based on THE BOOK OF ACTS, is entitled ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’.

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The reason I want to call this series ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’ is that we need to look back in order that we might really look to the future. The OLD TIME RELIGION needs to become the NEW TIME RELIGION because it is the ALL TIME RELIGION. If we get back to the basics of life in the Christian Church, we might better understand what the Holy Spirit can do through us today.

THE BOOK OF ACTS is the story of success; the story of a church triumphant.

It is the story of a small group of uncultured and generally unlearned people with meagre resources – very little money, no prestige, and no church buildings. This small group of people went out to tell the story of a publicly executed Jew. They went out against three obstacles – the imperial might of the Romans, the intellectual sophistication of the Greeks, and the religious bigotry of the Jews. They turned the world inside out and upside down for Jesus Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of a church on fire with evangelism and growth...

“PRAYER CHANGES THINGS”

In his book **“CONNECTING WITH GOD”**, Herb Miller tells the story of a Gentleman’s Club opening on Main Street in a small town in America. Upon hearing the news, the only church in the town organised an all-night prayer meeting. Eventually, the members asked God to burn down the club. Within a few minutes, it was struck by lightning and raised to the ground. The owner sued the church, which denied responsibility for the destruction of his business. After hearing both sides, the judge declared: ‘IT SEEMS THAT WHEREVER THE GUILT MAY LIE, THE NIGHTCLUB OWNER BELIEVES IN THE POWER OF PRAYER, WHILE THE CHURCH DOES NOT’.

My question for us to consider is this: ‘DO WE REALLY BELIEVE IN PRAYER?’.

If the same thing were to happen to this Church, our Corps, would we be ready and willing to take responsibility for the answer received to a prayer like that?

Reuben A Torrey wrote: ‘WE ARE TOO BUSY TO PRAY, AND SO WE ARE TOO BUSY TO HAVE POWER. WE HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF ACTIVITY BUT WE ACCOMPLISH LITTLE. WE HAVE MANY SERVICES BUT SEE FEW CONVERSIONS. WE HAVE MUCH MACHINERY BUT PRODUCE FEW RESULTS’.

When the Early Christian Church prayed together, they saw results.

The lame walked, the blind saw, the dead were brought back to life, rooms were shaken, prison doors were opened, chains were loosened, boldness was given, the Gospel was preached and multitudes were converted. Oh, that we would have the same boldness and faith that they had!

Billy Graham said: ‘HEAVEN IS FULL OF ANSWERS FOR WHICH NO ONE EVER BOTHERED TO ASK’.

How embarrassing it will be if, when we arrive in heaven, we discover all the riches God would have sent down to us – if we had only bothered to ask him.

Imagine waking up to a miracle and having an angel for your alarm clock!

That is what happened to Peter when he was in prison for the third time, awaiting trial and certain death. Years later, when he wrote his first letter, Peter may have had this miraculous experience in mind when he quoted **Psalms, 34:15-16**. That quotation certainly summarises what God did for Peter.

It reveals to us three wonderful assurances to encourage us in the difficult days of life.
And there are at least five lessons I want us to learn about prayer that changes things...

1. THE FREEDOM OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

'PETER WAS KEPT IN PRISON, BUT THE CHURCH WAS EARNESTLY PRAYING TO GOD FOR HIM'

Everything seemed hopeless for Peter. He was in a deep, dark dungeon. He was such an important prisoner that King Herod had personally assigned sixteen people to guard him. In addition, Peter was chained on one side to one Roman soldier and on the other side to another soldier. There seemed to be no escape for him. Death looked the most likely outcome for him.

'The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous.'

I Peter, 3:12a, NIV

God watched and noted what King Herod Agrippa I was doing to his people.

This evil man was the grandson of Herod the Great – who had ordered the Bethlehem children to be murdered; and the nephew of Herod Antipas – who had John the Baptist beheaded. A scheming and murderous family, the Herod's were despised by the Jews, who resented having Edomites ruling over them. Of course, King Herod Agrippa knew this – so he persecuted the Church to convince the Jewish people of his loyalty to the traditions of the Fathers. Now that the Gentiles were openly a part of the Christian Church, Herod Agrippa's plan was even more agreeable to the nationalistic Jews who had no place for pagans. Herod Agrippa had several believers arrested, among them James, the brother of John, whom he later beheaded.

James, the brother of John, was the first of the Apostles to be martyred.

This act gained Herod Agrippa so much popularity with the Jews and the enemies of the Christian Church that he thought he would become even more popular if he did the same to Peter. Herod Agrippa had already announced that Peter would be executed. Everything looked bleak – and Peter's outlook looked very black. That is why death looked the likeliest outcome.

What was the Church going to do? How could they get possibly get Peter out of prison?

They could have organised a mob and stormed the prison – but they didn't.

They could have organised a petition to free the innocent one – but they had no influence.

They could have tried to bribe King Herod – but they had no money, no silver or gold.

They could have... but they did the only thing that they could – they prayed!

Whilst some may sneer when the Church prays, Satan never does.

The Devil may do many things to inhibit you, but there is one thing that he cannot do – he cannot stop you from praying. Even when there are closed doors all around you – you can still pray. Even when there are chains all over you – you can still pray. Even when there are people rallied together against you – you can still pray.

Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees.

William Cowper, SASB 646:3a

Have you heard of an animal called the gnu? A gnu is a large African antelope with a head resembling that of an ox, a short mane, a beard, downward curving horns, and a tufted tail. When a gnu is attacked he simply drops to his knees. Should not we as Christians do the same thing? Surely, the Church of God should immediately drop to its knees when it is under attack!

Prayer should not be our last resort; it should be our first opportunity.

Wherever we are, and whenever, we have the opportunity and the freedom to pray.

2. THE FAITHFULNESS OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

'PETER WAS KEPT IN PRISON, BUT THE CHURCH WAS EARNESTLY PRAYING TO GOD FOR HIM'

The Church was praying constantly, praying without ceasing.

In other words, they prayed and they prayed and they prayed some more. They never stopped praying. They were not put off praying when it seemed that God had not answered their prayers immediately. They prayed constantly; they prayed frequently and they prayed faithfully.

'Constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.'

Acts, 12:5b, NKJV

I have no idea why it is that God does not answer all our prayers immediately.

I have no doubt that he has the power to do just that if he so wished, but sometimes we need to learn an important lesson about prayer. Jesus taught his disciples a parable in order to show them how they should pray and not give up...

"In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary'. For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

'And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"'

Luke, 18:2-8, NIV

'To persist in prayer and not give up does not mean endless repetition or painfully long prayer sessions. Constant prayer means keeping our requests continually before God as we live for him day by day, believing he will answer. When we live by faith, we are not to give up. God may delay answering, but his delays always have good reasons. As we persist in prayer, we grow in character, faith, and hope.'

"LIFE APPLICATION BIBLE", Study Notes

"KEEP ON ASKING... KEEP ON SEEKING... KEEP ON KNOCKING".

‘Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened”.’

Matthew, 7:7-8, NIV

Robert T Kendall described this verse as ‘THE ASCENDING SCALE OF URGENCY’.

The fact that Jesus moved from ‘ASKING’ to ‘SEEKING’ implies that there will be times when our prayers are not immediately answered. If prayer is not answered after ‘ASKING’ then we need to make ‘SEEKING’ God a life-sentence. When we ‘SEEK’ God’s face, we want to be aware of his presence and his approval. If prayer is not answered after ‘SEEKING’ then we need to make ‘KNOCKING’ a life-sentence. When we ‘KNOCK’ we are very serious about gaining access to God.

Jesus told his disciples to be persistent in pursuing God.

People often give up after a few halfhearted efforts and conclude that God cannot be found. But knowing God takes faith, focus, and follow-through, and Jesus assured us that we will be rewarded. Do not give up in your efforts to seek God. Continue to ask him for more knowledge, patience, wisdom, love, and understanding. He will give them to you – at once or eventually!

In prayer, God’s delays are not God’s denials.

We should be prepared for the long haul in our constant believing prayers.

3. THE FERVENCY OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

‘PETER WAS KEPT IN PRISON , BUT THE CHURCH WAS EARNESTLY PRAYING TO GOD FOR HIM’

The Early Christian Church prayed fervently.

In the Book of Hebrews, we read that when Jesus prayed it was **‘WITH STRONG CRYING AND TEARS’**. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we read that when Jesus prayed the perspiration, his sweat, was like drops of blood upon his brow. Jesus was so intense in his praying that the minute capillaries ruptured in his brow and his blood was actually shed in prayer.

Prayer is hard work.

It is harder to pray than it is to read the Bible. It is harder to pray than it is to study the Bible. It is harder to pray than it is to sing God’s praises. It is harder to pray than it is to preach the Gospel. It is harder to pray than almost anything else because prayer is hard work. Prayer is warfare. When you pray, you enter into the battles of spiritual warfare. When you pray, you enter into the heavenly realms and therefore Satan will oppose you when you are praying.

Do you ever feel opposition when you pray? Of course you do!

The flesh does not want to pray. The Bible says the flesh is enmity against God. There is that old nature that just does not want to pray. Not only do you have that INWARD PREDISPOSITION AGAINST PRAYER in your flesh, but you have an OUTWARD OPPOSITION AGAINST PRAYER. The Devil will cause your mind to wander. The doorbell will ring. The telephone will ring. It does not matter what will happen, but something will in order to keep you from praying. Why? Because prayer is spiritual warfare.

The Devil does not mind what we do so long as we leave out prayer.

He is happy for us to spend our time making an impact in the community. He is happy for us to be holding a Holiday Club and starting a Parent & Toddler Group. He is happy when we hold our Luncheon Club, Over Sixties Club and Get Smart Club. He is happy when we have our Sunday School, Sunday Worship and Bible Studies. He is content that we have them all – so long as we leave out the power of Almighty God that comes to us only through fervent prayer.

In Tibet, they have what they call ‘A PRAYER WHEEL’.

The Tibetans write their prayers on slips of paper and put them in a little cup, or a little dish and they balance that dish on the end of a stick, which they whirl around above their heads. Every time the dish goes around that is supposed to be a prayer. They call it ‘A PRAYER WHEEL’. You say, “THAT IS JUST SILLY”. Well, I know of Salvationists who do the same thing, only the wheels are in their heads. I mean they just repeat the same prayers – prayers which they have learned by rote. I am sure that these prayers mean very little to them and perhaps even less to God.

When we pray with half-heartedness it is an insult to God.

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Jeremiah, 29:13, NIV

‘PETER WAS KEPT IN PRISON , BUT THE CHURCH WAS EARNESTLY PRAYING TO GOD FOR HIM’

The Church was engaged in the spiritual warfare of prayer.

This surely challenges us that if it was prayer that made the Christian Church so powerful so long ago, then prayer needs to be made for our Church, for our Corps. Our prayers must be more than, ‘LORD, BLESS US’. They must be true fervent and intense prayers. Everything we do must be saturated with our prayers. The Corps should run only on the engine of prayer.

There must be a fervency in our fellowship for prayer.

The devil sneers at our organisation, he laughs at our personalities, but he fears our prayers.

4. THE FOCUS OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

‘PETER WAS KEPT IN PRISON , BUT THE CHURCH WAS EARNESTLY PRAYING TO GOD FOR HIM’

The members of the Early Christian Church were not praying to impress.

They realised they were coming into the very throne room of Heaven in order to speak with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. One of the thoughts that should stagger us is so simple as to be profound is that ‘GOD ANSWERS PRAYER’. The one who made the Universe, the God of all Eternity can hear me, and I can have influence in his court. He promised he would listen to me.

‘For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’

1 Peter, 3:12, NIV

What a thought it is that we have the privilege to pray to God, who hears us!

If it is not true and if God does not answer prayer then we should stop playing games and go home now. But, if it is true – and we say that we believe it to be true – then we had better learn how to pray with fervency and with faith.

“Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.”

Jeremiah, 33:3, NIV

*Thou art coming to a King, large petitions with thee bring,
For his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much.*

John Newton, SASB 563:2

‘PETER WAS KEPT IN PRISON, BUT THE CHURCH WAS EARNESTLY PRAYING TO GOD FOR HIM’

The Early Christian Church made Peter’s situation the focus for their prayer meeting.

Peter was in prison. The execution was scheduled for the following morning. The Church prayed specifically for his situation. Many of us pray such generalised prayers that we never have to admit whether God heard our prayers or not. We say ‘GOD ANSWERS PRAYER’ but we are sometimes lost to say what specific prayers he has answered because they are too vague.

“Lord, save the lost... heal the sick... comfort the bereaved.”

Somewhere, somehow, somebody who was lost is going to get saved; somebody who was sick is going to get well; and, someone who is bereaved will be comforted. The problem is that you will never know if it is an answer to your prayers or not. Only when we are really specific will we truly know for certain that ‘GOD ANSWERS PRAYER’ and ‘PRAYER CHANGES THINGS’.

You can always tell when someone is serious, because they are specific.

If you see someone and they say to you: *“One of these days you will have to come over for tea”*, you know that they do not really mean it. But when they say to you: *“Come over for tea on Tuesday afternoon at about 5.00 pm”*, then you know they are serious. When the some time becomes a specific time, then you know that what they are saying they truly do mean.

*When we replace “Lord, save the lost” with “Lord, my neighbour really needs Jesus,
help me to talk to him today about my Saviour”, then God knows that you mean business!*

5. THE FORCE OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

“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. 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. Peter followed him out of the prison.”

Acts 12:7-9a, NIV

What happened to Peter?

If you were chained to two Roman soldiers and facing the possibility of being executed the next day, would you sleep very soundly? Probably not, but Peter did! In fact, Peter was so sound asleep that the angel had to strike him on the side to wake him up! The fact that Peter had been a prisoner twice before is not what gave him his calm heart.

What gave Peter such confidence and peace?

To begin with, many believers were praying for him, and kept it up day and night for a whole week; and this helped to bring him peace. Prayer has a way of reminding us of the promises of God’s Word, and this was the main cause of Peter’s peace – the knowledge that King Herod could not kill him. Jesus had promised Peter that he would live to be an old man and end his life crucified on a Roman cross (see **John, 21:18-19**). Peter simply laid hold of that promise and committed the entire situation to the Lord, and God gave him peace and rest. He did not know how or when God would deliver him, but he did know that deliverance was coming soon.

This was no ordinary prison breakout.

The angel brought light and liberty into the prison cell, but the guards had no idea that anything was going on. However, if Peter was going to be delivered, he had to obey what the angel commanded. The angel commanded Peter to put on his clothes and sandals. These were certainly ordinary tasks to do while a miracle was taking place!

God alone can do the extraordinary, but his people must do the ordinary.

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but the men had to roll the stone from the tomb. The same angel that removed the chains from Peter’s hands could have put the clothes of Peter’s back and sandals upon his feet, but the angel told Peter to do it. God never wastes miracles.

God opened the way for Peter, but the time came for him to use common sense.

Since it was the prayers of God’s people that had helped to set him free, Peter decided that the best place for him would be in the prayer meeting at Mary’s house. Furthermore, he wanted to report the good news that God had finally answered all their prayers.

God could get Peter out of a prison, but Peter could not get into a prayer meeting!

When you remember that many people were praying, they were praying earnestly, they prayed night and day for perhaps as long as a week, and their prayers were centred specifically on Peter’s deliverance, then the scene that is described is almost comical. The answer to their prayers was standing at the door, but they did not open the door and let him in.

Never underestimate the power of a praying church.

‘The angel fetched Peter out of prison but it was prayer that fetched the angel.’

Thomas Watson

When we depend on organisation, we see what organisation can do...

When we depend upon planning, we see what planning can do...

But, when we depend on prayer, we see what only God can do!

“WHEN THEY OPENED THE DOOR AND SAW HIM, THEY WERE ASTONISHED!”