

Peter, Prison, Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn again for a little to the chapter we read in Acts, Acts chapter 12, and reading in verse 5. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

As we know, one of the greatest things that any person can do is to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Because the moment we begin to follow the Lord Jesus, our life changes.

It changes for the good. Because Jesus gives himself to us. You can't have greater than that. That the one by whom all things were made, the creator of the heavens and the earth, the one who gave his life on the cross, he comes by the Spirit to dwell within us.

And it's the most wonderful blessing because we are given what the world cannot give. The world cannot give. The world has nothing to give our soul. Because we've always got to remember that we are body, mind and soul.

The world can give plenty for our bodies, but it cannot give one thing for our soul. And if we never look to feed our souls, then it's not good for our life.

[1 : 1 7] And it is certainly not good for us when we come to die. But when we become Christians, we get peace and love and joy and hope.

These things that the world cannot really give. But also we know that side by side with coming to faith in Jesus Christ, that we come into a world of conflict.

That it's not all plain sailing. We wish it was. And sometimes when we start out, we think it will be. And we get a shock when we discover that it's not. There's conflict within ourselves.

Because there's a new power at work. And the Bible tells us that there's a battle goes on between what is termed the flesh, our natural being, and the spirit.

And like the apostle said, the good that I want to do, I end up not doing. And the evil that I don't want to do, that's what I end up doing.

[2 : 2 0] And we're all aware of that far too often, that we end up doing what we don't want to be doing. But we give thanks to God for the power of his spirit, which is at work, guiding us, showing us, convicting us.

Not only is there conflict within, there is often conflict without. Because we live in a world that does not want. The Bible doesn't want God.

Because when Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden, they didn't just wander out of the garden. They were driven out. And so they were estranged from God.

And that's how we are by nature. We're estranged. We're separate from God. We don't want to. Adam ran away when he heard the voice of God. And if God hadn't come in his mercy, I cannot even begin to think where we would be.

We would be in a world without any hope, without any future. But God in his mercy intervened and he came. And we know that that is all caught up in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[3 : 27] But that means that there is this ongoing conflict. And as a Christian, sometimes it brings us into difficulties. And the church is often persecuted.

I often used to think of the wonderful freedoms when I look back that we had in our own land. But these freedoms are being squeezed all the time. There are so many forces at work that are trying to eradicate the gospel.

And you'll see it little by little by little. So that even people preaching on the street now in some of our cities and so on, the police are called. Because they say straight away that's a hate crime by what they say.

So that didn't used to be the case here. I remember when I was in college, the late Douglas Macmillan, he always wanted, it was part of what he did with us.

He took us out onto the street to preach. I remember at the bottom of the mound there, I remember by the St. James Centre.

[4 : 31] It wasn't easy. But he used to say to us, if you can't preach in the street, you can't preach in a pulpit. That was kind of his philosophy. And it wasn't easy. But it was part of what we had to do way back then.

But as I say, the screws are turning now so that it's not maybe as easy as it once was. Well, this chapter shows us that the squeeze was on.

And we find that Herod, the King Herod here, has raised up his hand against the church. Now, the Herods were a cruel lot.

And the Herods certainly didn't bring any glory upon themselves with regard to their treatment of the church. Because this Herod Agrippa, this man Herod Agrippa, who had James be the Herod of Herod the Great.

And Herod the Great was the Herod that ordered all the babies in Bethlehem to be put to death in order to try and kill Jesus when he was born.

[5 : 37] And this Herod Agrippa here was also a nephew of Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded.

So, as you see, these Herod, with regard to the followers of the Lord, had their hands covered in blood. So, we find here that Herod had taken James and had him executed.

And when Herod saw that this pleased the Jews, and it was a political move that he did, because the Jews did not like the Herods.

And so, in trying to gain favor with the radical Jews, with those real traditional Jews, that's why he took James and had him beheaded.

Because they were so, these traditional Jews who had Christ put to death, were so against Christianity. And this was a great move as far as they were concerned.

[6 : 43] And when Herod saw that this found favor with the Jews, he thought, okay, I'll go straight to the top and I'll go for Peter. Peter, who's the leader of the church. He'll be next. So, Peter was taken, put in prison, and the Passover was on.

But when that would be finished, he'd be taken out for a mock trial. And then he would be executed. So, that was the plan. So, it must have been an awful moment for the church.

Because here's Peter, who is the leader in the church, who is at the very head. Peter is the one who had preached, remember, at Pentecost when thousands were converted. And his message was, very simply, you put the Son of God to death.

Repent. And believe. Do you know, the message is still the same today. To repent and to believe. To repent of our sins. And to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior.

It couldn't be simpler and it couldn't be more difficult. Because so often people get bogged down. And they find, as Paul said elsewhere, the cross is a stumbling block to so many people.

- [7 : 53] It might be a stumbling block to some of you today. Because you're saying, you see, there's this, what we term self-righteousness, where we think we're good enough before God.
- And I know, I've been there myself, I know what it was like, and you're kind of saying, well, I'm better than. I'm not perfect by any shape or manner or means.
- I know that. But then you say, well, I look at some Christians and, you know, I'm just as good as them. And you say to yourself, at the end of the day, God, yeah, I've done a lot of crazy things, stupid things.
- And I know of them, but I'm not that bad. And at the end of the day, God will accept me. He's bound to. No, he can't. You see, we don't understand that God cannot accept us as we are.
- He can only accept us when our sins have been pardoned and dealt with. And where our sin has been put to Christ and his righteousness has been put to our account.
- [8 : 53] That's what happened on the cross. And so that is the only way we can be made right with God. And sometimes it's hard for us to grasp it. But that's the message Peter taught.
- But anyway, Peter's captured, taken, put in prison. And you'd think he was the most dangerous criminal in the world because verse 4 tells us, and when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him.
- And so Peter was in chains. There would be, he'd be chained either side to a guard, and there'd be a couple of guards at the door. And then there would be the changing of the guard after every four or six hours.
- So there would be probably 16 guards involved throughout the 24-hour period of looking after and making sure Peter didn't escape.
- And I'm sure the reason why Herod took this huge security with regard to Peter was what happened to Jesus.
- [9 : 57] Because there was a guard around the tomb where Jesus was. There was a huge stone at the mouth of the tomb. And yet the tomb was found to be empty. And so Herod is taking absolutely no chances.
- So when you look at it at a human point of view, here is the might, the military prowess of Rome, with all their force, with all their brutality, with all their power.
- And here's the church, unarmed with nothing. The only thing they have is prayer. And looking at it from a human point of view, you say, well, the odds are completely stacked against the church.
- There's only going to be one winner here, and it's Rome. But we find what the church does. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.
- Earnest prayer, urgent prayer, incessant prayer, sincere prayer, praying with all the heart. And we've always got to remember that God is a prayer hearing and a prayer answering God.
- [11 : 06] And God loves to demonstrate to his people his sovereign power in answering prayer. And when we pray, we're in touch with omnipotence.
- We're in touch with the power that made this world, the power that upholds this world, the power that will one day bring this world to an end. We sometimes underestimate the privilege that we have in prayer.
- That when you pray, you're speaking to the God, the eternal, almighty God of heaven and earth. And sometimes when we pray, we just go through duties.

We sometimes forget who it is we're actually praying to. Prayer opened. Prayer brought water from the rock, brought fire from heaven, brought bread from heaven.

Prayer closed the mouths of lions. Prayer raised the dead. When you go through the Bible, you will see over and over the incredible responses of God to his people praying.

[12 : 12] Well, we're going to see it here again. And it's interesting, too, when it says that the earnest prayer was made. It was said of Mary Queen of Scots that she feared the prayer of John Knox more than an army of 10,000 men.

Because she could see the result of his prayer life. So the church prayed. And often things come into our lives that drive us to prayer.

If you're a Christian here today, you pray every day. But sometimes if somebody said to you afterwards, what was your prayer? What were you praying about today?

You might have to say, I'm not sure. Sometimes our prayers are more kind of just repetitive. Sometimes they're cold. They're distant. They're more a kind of a duty.

We just pray. But you know when something comes into your life, something that shakes you to the very core, where there's some huge challenge, something urgent, then prayer takes on a whole new meaning.

[13 : 19] You really pray. You're praying as the church prayed there. It's earnest prayer. It's real prayer. You're doing business with God. You're saying to the Lord, Lord, if you don't intervene, if you don't help, I'm done.

I can't see a way out of here. I don't know what to do. I am utterly dependent on you. That's when we really pray. But that's what the church was doing here. The church was really praying.

And God responded, as we see here, by sending his angel. Now, it's something quite amazing in a sense, because when you look at Peter here, here's the night before his execution.

He's going to be taken out the next day, and he's going to be tried, and he knows that he's going to be executed. How do we find Peter? Well, he's sound asleep. And I love that, because I'm sure if I was spending my last night and knowing that in the morning I was going to be taken out, there would be a lot of anxiety, a lot of fear going on.

Because Peter had a wife. We read about that. He had a mother-in-law. He probably had a family. He was the head of the church. He'd be thinking, what on earth is going to happen to all these things?

[14 : 32] What's going to happen at home? What's going to happen in the church community? When I'm executed, all these things. John Bunyan, who wrote the Pilgrim's Progress from his time in prison, he was in prison for his faith, and he said, this parting from my wife and children has been to me in prison, as the pulling of my very flesh from my bones.

So maybe part of what the church was doing was they were praying for Peter to get sleep. Because maybe they were taking God's word. Remember what it says in the Psalms? So he gives his beloved sleep.

So maybe they were saying, Lord, you remember how it says in your word, you give your beloved sleep. Well, get Peter's sleep tonight. That might have been part of their prayer, though no doubt, above all, they were praying for his deliverance.

And as we say, nothing is too small or too great to bring to the Lord in prayer. Remember what it says? In everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.

Everything. And when God says everything, he means everything. And far too often, we don't bother with the menial things, the little things. You know, an example of that is when you lose something.

[15 : 49] Might even be something like you've got to go somewhere, you can't find the car keys. And you've gone through everything, going through the pockets, you're going through the room, you're opening drawers, you're looking absolutely everywhere.

And you're completely lost and it's becoming desperate. And then what do you do? Oh, Lord, please help me to find these car keys. It's at the end. After you've exhausted yourself looking everywhere, instead of at the very start, you say, I don't know where I put the car keys.

Lord, I'm in a hurry. Can you help me to find the car keys? It's just a very simple example. But far too often in life, the Lord is kind of the last resort.

Instead of bringing everything. And when he says everything, he actually means everything to the Lord in prayer. So anyway, the church is here deep in prayer.

But I think Peter was also sleeping on the promises of Jesus. You remember in John 21 when Peter was asking the Lord about John.

[16 : 52] And he said to him, what is that to you? You follow me. But he said to Peter, when you are old, you will be taken in a way that you don't want and your arms will be outstretched.

And as tradition tells us that Peter was crucified and that he was crucified upside down. But the Lord said to him, when you're old, you're going to win the martyr's crown.

Well, Peter would be in prison saying, only very recently the Lord said that to me. And I'm not old yet. And Peter, who knew his Lord and had come to know him at a whole new level after the restoration, would say to himself, well, I don't know how it's going to happen.

But I believe the Lord's going to take me out of this. Because he would be trusting his life on the words of the Lord Jesus. Do we have that kind of trust?

You know, when you're given the faith to lay hold upon God's word, to lay hold upon God's promises. Do you have that kind of faith even when things are going against you and you're being tested?

[18 : 06] Because that's where God tests us. Because often the providence of life will go contrary to his word. That's a real testing time.

But it's through that that our faith grows. And that's where we have to continue to trust the Lord and say, well, Lord, this is what your word says. Do as you have said. The Lord in due time will do exactly as he said.

So we find that Peter is here. He's sound asleep. And we find this angel. The Lord has sent his angel.

And he comes into the prison. And, of course, angels aren't bound by material things. Obviously, by laws of gravity or any of these things.

The angel appears and wakes Peter who was sleeping. Of course, the guards are sleeping as well. And the angel said to Peter. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up.

[19 : 11] In verse 7. Get up quickly. And so, obviously, Peter got up and the chains fell off his hands. Now, I think that's a very important point here. When the angel said to Peter, get up quickly.

Peter could have said, well, excuse me. But I can't. Because I'm tied here by chains. And it's impossible. There's no point.

I can't get up. But it is as he got up that the chains fell off. And I think that's a very important point for us.

Even with regard to the whole way of salvation. Because some people think, well, you know, the Lord, if the Lord's going to save me, well, I'm just going to carry on as I normally do.

And I'm just going to hope that, you know, he'll save me. Well, the scripture doesn't say that's the way it is. We are to seek. And it's through our seeking that the chains of our sin.

[20 : 11] And we are bound, you see, by sin and Satan. And we're helpless. But the Lord will save us. The Lord will deliver us when we seek, when we search, when we look, when we knock.

That's our duty. That's our responsibility. God says, you do that and I'll do the saving. And that's exactly what we have here. The command, rise up.

And when he did so, the chains fell off. And so we find then that Peter is taken out by the angel.

And it's wonderful to think that we have an angelic ministry going on all the time. Because the word of God tells us that the angels are ministering spirits to the heirs of salvation.

If you're a Christian today, you're an heir of salvation. Maybe you're not a Christian yet. You're going to be a Christian in the future, I pray.

[21 : 17] Well, if so, you're still an heir of salvation. And you have the ministry of angels. Now, we don't see them. We don't know they're there. But they are there.

And it's a wonderful thing to know that. And I wonder how often we have actually been delivered. How often we've been protected and known to ourselves. We're very quick to blame the devil.

Oh, it was Satan who made me do that. It's evil. I wonder how often we've been saved and delivered from situations by the angelic presence. Well, anyway, we find that here's Peter being taken out.

And there's a lovely example in scripture of the angelic presence. Do you remember in 2 Kings, in the life of Elisha? Elisha.

And an army was sent to surround the city to get to it. Elisha was looked at as a problem. And Elisha had a servant.

[22 : 17] And the servant said to Elisha, we're done for. We're siege. There's an army all around us. And Elisha said to the servant, there's more on our side than there are out there.

And I think at that moment the servant thought, oh, Elisha, you're beginning to lose it a wee bit. And Elisha made a very simple prayer. He said to the Lord, Lord, open the young man's eyes.

And for a moment, that man's eyes were opened to see the spiritual. And all surrounding them were horses and chariots of fire, a heavenly host.

A little glimpse was given of the presence, the angelic presence that was surrounding. And of course, Elisha was delivered and saved.

And we've got to remember that that, the angel, we sang that, the angel of the Lord encamps round those who fear him. Isn't that a wonderful thought? The presence of God's messenger surround you.

[23 : 21] And of course, the angel of the Lord sometimes is also a description of Christ himself. It can be twofold. So that you have the presence of Christ encamping round you as well.

So we find Peter gets up and we find that Peter thinks that this is actually a vision. But then the angel leaves him and then there's this dawning reality.

This is real. He's probably feeling the houses round about and realizes. And so Peter says, well, there's only one place I can go to. And that is to Mark's house, to the mother of Mark and Mary.

We read the mother of John, Mark. Read that in verse 12. When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark. And of course, this Mark, we believe, is the Mark who wrote the gospel of Mark.

And it is believed that Peter is the one who supplied him with the information. So this woman must have been a woman of means because it's obviously a big house.

[24 : 26] It was possibly the main meeting place because Peter knew straight away where to go. And so he goes there. And what we confront here is almost humorous in a sense.

Because when Peter comes to the door, he knocks at the door. And there's a servant girl in the house called Rhoda. And she goes to the door. And it was a custom back then, when you came to the door, you knocked and you shouted your name.

And so Peter would have knocked that and said, it's Peter. Peter. And she's so full of joy at hearing that it's Peter, that in her joy, she doesn't even open the door.

She goes straight back in and she tells him, it's Peter out there. Peter's there. And what do they say? You're losing your mind.

No, no, it's not Peter. Whoever it is, it's not Peter. And it's almost a humorous situation because here's the church. Here they are praying, Lord, will you please in some way let Peter out of prison deliver him?

[25 : 34] The Lord has answered the prayer and they're not ready to believe it. Has that ever happened with you? And we've always got to remember, sometimes God answers our prayers not in the way that we expect.

Sometimes we don't see the answer to prayer because we're expecting it another way. And sometimes we don't see because of our unbelief.

So when Rhoda insisted it was Peter, they said it is his angel. And very simply, what that means is that back then, many of the Jews thought that a message would come maybe from the Lord, from a person, or a message would come, and that an angel would come in the form of a person.

So they're thinking this is an angel sent in the form of Peter, an angel sent to bring a message, as it were, regarding Peter. But of course, when they go to the door, they discover that actually it is Peter.

And you know, this girl Rhoda, in many ways she had more faith than all the rest of them in there, because she believed straight away it's Peter. You know, a person's position in the church doesn't indicate the level of faith they have.

[26 : 51] There might be a young Christian who's just come to faith who might have more faith than the minister and the elders. It would look like Mary of Bethany had more faith and more spirituality than the likes of Peter, James, and John.

So a position in the church doesn't indicate the level of faith. Well, this girl Rhoda, she believed straight away it is Peter. And then, there are a lot of things that we could say here, but just move on to the end of the chapter.

Because it's brilliant the way God works. You couldn't have a more extreme beginning and an extreme ending. Because everything is turned upside down.

Because we find this man Herod, this King Herod, he goes down to Caesarea. And he's angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon.

And they need him, they need him, dependent on his food. And so he makes this royal oration. And Josephus, in his history, tells us that on that particular day, that Herod was clothed in a kind of a silver.

[28 : 02] His robes were kind of sparkling silver. And that when he was there in the sunshine, it was almost hard to look at him. He would have been glistening. And so the crowd, as he spoke and made this great oration, they said, Oh, it's the voice of a God, not of a man.

Obviously, Herod thought, Oh, brilliant. That's great. Took all the glory to himself. But God sent an angel. And we read what happened to Herod at that moment.

But it says, Immediately, an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory. And he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

Apparently, again, Josephus tells us of how he was in great agony. There's obviously some huge pain in his intestines. And he was in severe agony.

And as a result, he died of it. So at the beginning, it tells us that Herod, the king, laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

[29 : 14] Verse 24. But the word of God increased and multiplied. Peter's released. Herod is dead. Isn't that amazing? But you know, that's the way it works when God's in control.

Yes, evil may be on the rampage for a while. It may appear to be having the upper hand. But God will always, at the end, have the victory.

And when we are on God's side, we too will always have the victory. I pray that all of us here today have our lives in the Lord, trusting in him.

Because one and the Lord is always a majority. You make sure that your life is lived in Christ, so that you rise up in the morning knowing you're secure in Jesus.

When you go to bed at night, you know you're secure in Jesus. When we're secure in Jesus, we have him in life. And we have him in death. Thank you.

[30 : 20]