

WHEN PRISON DOORS OPEN

by Ray C. Stedman

I invite you to resume our studies together in the book of Acts.

We will look at the twelfth chapter -- a very exciting passage. I am sure that you had not been a Christian for very long before you discovered that the enemy with whom we wrestle has a very disconcerting way of striking when everything seems to be going well. Just when you think the path has smoothed out and that you are having a great time in the Lord, with nothing but blessing ahead -- then everything seems to fall apart at once. That is confirmation of what the Bible tells us is the truth: We are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but we are engaged in a life-or-death struggle against principalities and powers and wicked spirits in high places, who are able to unleash a vicious, lashing attack against us -- just when we think things are going well.

That is what happens in this chapter. In Chapter 11, you will recall, blessing was pouring out as God's Spirit was moving in the city of Antioch to enlarge the Christian enterprise and to thrust the gospel out to the Gentiles. We saw how that city, the third largest in the Roman empire, was being shaken by the presence of these Christians in its midst. Now we come back to Jerusalem and discover that the enemy strikes back with vicious, slashing power against the church there. We may be twenty centuries away from this first century, but we are not twenty centuries away from the book of Acts. This is a very contemporary book because it is the account of the work of the timeless Spirit of God. He is the same in every age, working today just as he did here in the book of Acts.

Up to this chapter we have been seeing the body of Christ at work. Now we shall examine three events which Luke, the writer of this book, puts together, yet which seem somewhat unrelated at first. But no choice of events in the Word of God is ever without significance, and these are very significant for us.

We will go through this chapter rather rapidly, comment briefly on the events, and then think about the questions they raise in our minds. We will try to see why Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit, has chosen these for our instruction. The three events are the murder of James the Apostle, the deliverance of Peter from prison by the intervention of an angel, and the death of Herod the king.

We have, first, the murder of James:

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. {Acts 12:1-3 RSV}

That means that it was during the Passover season, the same period of the year when Jesus himself was taken and crucified. But this is the year A. D. 44. We can date it very precisely because the date of Herod's death, also recorded here, is well known in ancient history. Therefore these events occurred about twelve years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The church has been growing and expanding during these twelve years, spreading out to Judea and Samaria, and then beginning to reach the Gentiles, as we saw in the last chapter. But now the enemy strikes hard, and moves Herod the king to take James the brother of John, and to behead him with the sword. (This Herod is not the one before whom Jesus appeared. This is his brother, known as Herod Agrippa, the father of the Herod before whom Paul will later appear.)

This obviously indicates that James was an important leader in the church, although his name has not been mentioned previously in the book of Acts. His brother was John. You know James and John. How often their names appear together in the Gospel accounts! These were the brothers whom Jesus very affectionately called "sons of thunder" {Mark 3:17} because of their swashbuckling dispositions. They were loudmouths, and

were probably the youngest members of the apostolic band -- in their late teens when Jesus called them. They were firebrands. They wanted to call fire down upon the villages that would not listen to them. They were filled with zeal, and it is interesting to watch how the Lord worked with these two young men. John he particularly loved and drew close to himself, but both were strong in his affections.

It was these two boys who came to Jesus with their mother and asked to be granted positions at the right and the left hand of the throne of glory when Jesus came into his kingdom. Do you remember what he said to them? He asked them a question: "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" {Matt 20:22, Mark 10:38}. By that he meant his violent death on the cross. And, with typical teenage enthusiasm and ardor they said, "Yes, we're able." Jesus told them, "You shall indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father," {Mark 10:39}. In those words, "You shall indeed drink my cup," he indicated that these men would die violent deaths.

James was the first of the apostles so to die and John was the last. So the deaths of these brothers form a parenthesis within which all the apostles lived and labored and eventually died. James' head was chopped off with the sword. We are not told how John died. The tradition is that he was put into a cauldron of boiling oil. But whatever, it was doubtless a violent death he endured because that is what the Lord Jesus predicted.

Now, the church is evidently not too disturbed when James is taken captive. There is no mention of their holding a prayer meeting. Undoubtedly they think that God will release him from prison, as he had on a previous occasion. In Acts 5 we are told that all the apostles were imprisoned, but an angel came at night to open the doors and let them out. Understandably then, the church is not very perturbed.

But imagine the stunning, shattering effect upon them when James is beheaded, actually executed, and the sad news comes to the waiting church that the first of the apostles has laid down his life as a martyr. It is very sobering and the church is stunned. So, when Peter is taken, there is great concern. It is a different story then:

And when he [Herod] had seized him [Peter], he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. {Acts 12:4-5 RSV}

No more fun and games now; the church is very serious. They realize that they cannot count upon the automatic deliverance of God, but that also required is deep concern on their part. And so earnest prayer is made on behalf of Peter. You can see that Herod is afraid of something, too, because he takes special care to see that Peter is held. He details four squads, sixteen soldiers altogether, to watch this one man. Peter is under the guard of four soldiers at all times -- two chained to his wrists and two standing guard at the door of his cell. Herod is taking no chances that this man will be rescued by any kind of strategic coup. But Peter was not afraid, for we read:

The very night when Herod was about to bring him out, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison; and behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your mantle around you and follow me." And he went out and followed him; he did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and passed on through one street; and immediately the angel left him. And Peter came to himself, and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." {Acts 12:6-11 RSV}

What a remarkable story! You can see how unexpected this is. I think Peter really expected to be executed. But, remarkably, he slept. He had been there for several days, and this is not the first time he has been in prison, but it is, as he knows, the last night before his scheduled execution. Yet he is sleeping peacefully,

obviously trusting that God will glorify himself either by his death or by delivering him so that he can live. Yet when the angel comes Peter is taken by surprise.

When we read this account we can see what a supernatural deliverance this was. The angel takes no note of the guards whatsoever, but simply strikes the chains from Peter's arms. The guards were evidently bemused, or asleep. Then he has to tell Peter everything he must do. Notice how bewildered Peter is. The angel has to tell him, "Now get up. Put on your shoes. Wrap your mantle around you." He leads him by the hand out into the city streets. Peter is not sure what is happening. But when he gets outside and sees the iron gate open of its own accord, he knows that God is at work. And the realization suddenly strikes him that God has indeed set him free from prison.

Then we get this interesting and most human account of what happens when he comes to the church:

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and told that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are mad." But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel!" But Peter continued knocking; and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell this to James and to the brethren." Then he departed and went to another place. {Acts 12:12-17 RSV}

Is there anything in the New Testament more human than that? It sounds like one of our prayer meetings, doesn't it? They did not believe it when God answered their prayers. Nothing is more humorous than this picture of Peter, valiantly pounding away at the door, while the girl is inside, having forgotten to let him in, trying to explain to these Christians that God has answered their prayers. But they would not believe her. They thought she was mad, at first, and then they tried to explain it on other terms. "It must be his guardian angel," they said. Finally, she persuaded them to come out and they saw Peter still banging away frustratedly. Then they believed it, and were amazed that God had answered their prayers.

It is strange how weak our faith can be sometimes.

These people were praying for Peter's release and I am sure they were praying in faith. They believed God would do it. But he did it in such a remarkable way, and so suddenly, so clearly supernaturally, that they could hardly believe it when it occurred.

The account closes with the story of the cruelty of Herod:

Now when day came, there was no small stir among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. [That is probably the understatement of the century.] And when Herod had sought for him and could not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and remained there. {Acts 12:18-19 RSV}

Sixteen innocent soldiers die because of this man's stubborn unbelief. He would not believe that God had acted. As the soldiers told their tale, the only explanation he would accept was that these men had betrayed their trust and had somehow connived with Peter's friends to release him. So he ordered their deaths. Cruel tyrant that he was, he had no qualms of conscience over putting sixteen men to death for no reason whatsoever. Then he went down to his headquarters in Caesarea, on the coast. We get the final story of what happened to him:

Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and they came to him in a body, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and made an oration to them. And

the people shouted, "The voice of a god, and not of man!" Immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he did not give God the glory; and he was eaten by worms and died.

But the word of God grew and multiplied.

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, bringing with them John whose other name was Mark. {Acts 12:20-25 RSV}

The Jewish historian, Josephus, also records the death of Herod. He describes this occasion when Herod met with the people of Tyre and Sidon in what we now call Lebanon. These people were dependent upon Judea, and especially upon Galilee, for food. So when the king came out, dressed in his royal robes, they flattered him. When he spoke to them they cried out, "Why, this is a voice of a god, and not a man!" And this pompous, vain king believed them. It is almost incredible -- the tragic, twisted mentality of a man like this, who could actually believe that he had so much power that he had become a god.

But this was not uncommon in those days, nor is it in our own day. This, of course, is exactly what happens in any man's mentality when he begins to think of himself as what we call a "self-made" man. Sometimes you talk to men who own a lot of property and they will tell you, "Well, I worked for it. I produced it all myself. Nobody helped me." They are falling into the same tragic error as this vain and fatuous king who imagined that he had power in himself to operate. But Luke tells us that he was immediately stricken by an angel of the Lord, and he was eaten of worms and died. I do not know what Luke's exact diagnosis is here, but some sudden catastrophe befell Herod and, as Josephus tells us, within two or three days he died.

What does this mean? This is God's way of demonstrating the ultimate folly of the person who thinks that he can live without God, who thinks that we are not dependent people. This is the tragedy of mankind. You can frequently discern from our newspapers or from our television programs that, as a people, we imagine that we have what it takes to produce all that life requires, and that we do not need anyone or anything else -- especially God. The great tragedy of the American nation is that, more often than not, in a sense, we are saying to God, "Please, God, I'd rather do it myself!" We want to do it all ourselves. But God strikes, oftentimes, to remind us that our very life, our very breath, all that we have and are, is coming from him, and that we are fools to think that we can exist and live, act and react, on our own -- that we have some power of our own, apart from him, that we can operate on.

This episode shows how blinded, how distorted, how tragically twisted becomes the thinking of men who depart from a sense of dependence upon God. God oftentimes teaches lessons like this to whole nations. I sometimes think that is the meaning of the tragic assassinations, brought upon us this past decade, of some of our national leaders. It is God's way of saying to America, "You don't have what it takes. You can't live independently of me."

As we review the events of this chapter, there are some questions that come to mind. Why has Luke chosen to put these three things together in this account? And, of course, the pre-eminent question that emerges from this whole story is the one which faces us right at the beginning. Why was James killed, and Peter delivered? Why did God allow the brother of John to be put to death, while Peter he saved by angelic interference? Could he not have saved James as well? There is no question that he could have. Well, why didn't he? The only answer that this chapter suggests is found in Verse 5. It is the key to the chapter.

So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. {Acts 12:5 RSV}

That is the difference. Peter was kept in prison, just as James. But the difference was, "**but** ." (That is always a crisis word. It indicates a change in direction.) "But earnest prayer to God was made for Peter by the church," and as a result, Peter was set free. You say, "What difference does it make? Couldn't God just have set Peter free anyhow? If God determined that James would die and Peter would be set free, what difference did the prayer of the church make?" Many people would say that.

But let us never forget what James (not this James, but Jesus' brother, who wrote The Epistle of James) says:

"You have not because you ask not," {cf, Jas 4:2}. You see, in his wisdom God has designed that his people shall participate in what he does. Though he did set all the apostles free without any prayer, as recorded in Chapter 5, and could have done so with James, nevertheless he is impressing upon his people here that when danger threatens the program of God, or the people of God, it is a call to prayer. God will hear that prayer and answer it and set people free, when he would not have done so otherwise.

This is the great lesson of this chapter to the church. We are not to take the events of our day for granted, as though there were nothing we could do about them. Prayer becomes a mighty, powerful thrust on the part of the people of God, to change events. That, above all else, is what this message is shouting at us. Basically, prayer is the most natural and normal response of a heart that is dependent upon God. If you are really counting upon God to do something, then you will pray about it. You will trust him; you will communicate with him. If you are not counting on him, you will not pray. If you are really counting on something else, or on someone else -- if you think that by your own clever maneuvering you can get out of a situation, or if you are trusting other human beings to come through -- you will not pray. Or if you do, your prayer is but a ritual, an empty form, a perfunctory utterance that means nothing.

The basic motive of prayer is a sense of dependence. If you really think that God, and God alone, can work, and that there are elements of a situation in which only he can change things -- then you pray. This is what happened to this early church. When they realized that James had been put to death, and that this vicious attack of the enemy could be successful, it suddenly crystallized in their minds that they had a part to play in God's program. They were to go to God in earnest prayer that Peter might be delivered. And God set him free in a wonderful way.

This chapter highlights for us several things that prayer does, and they are basic for us to learn today. God works in the same way today as he did in these first century days, and he will respond to our prayers in very much the same way. That does not mean that everything we pray for will be granted. Sometimes God overrules our prayers. But prayer does other things as well, even when the things for which we pray are not granted.

It is obvious, first of all, that prayer has the ability to postpone or to delay the judgment of God -- or the act of an enemy, the victory of Satan, as in this case. James was taken, but Peter's execution was postponed to a later day. This is a primary power of prayer. It can put off something which is impending and threatening right at the moment. It may not remove it entirely, but it can change the time schedule. That is the teaching of the Scripture about prayer, all the way through.

We are facing the imminent appearance of the events predicted in the Bible for the last days. But if you have read human history you know that there have been times in the past when the world has approached the brink of the precipice of the last days. There have been times when it appeared to the whole world that these predictions were about to be fulfilled. Threatening figures have appeared on the horizon whom many have mistakenly identified in their times as the antichrist. And yet each time, because of the grave dangers present, God's people woke up and began to cry out to him -- a spiritual awakening came -- and the world moved back from the brink of extermination and destruction.

Once again in our day we are approaching the precipice. Perhaps we are further over the edge toward the ultimate disaster than we have ever been before. But, once again, God's people are waking up, crying out to him. This is the only hope in our day -- that once more God will turn the clock back a bit, delay the schedule, bring us back from the brink, and allow perhaps another generation to grow up in relative peace and security, liberty and freedom, to know the glory of the gospel in its delivering power. It is my conviction that, in order for God to allow the events of the last days finally to come to pass, he must remove his Church from the earth. In order to take the salt out of society he will remove the Church and thus allow the final display of man's evil and enmity to come to full fruition in the last days. But prayer can delay it.

Is that not the lesson that Hezekiah teaches us? King Hezekiah was lying on his deathbed and God sent the prophet Isaiah to tell him that he was going to die. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and began to pray earnestly to God to spare him. And God stopped Isaiah on his way out of the palace, turned him around and said, "Go back to the king and tell him that because of his prayer, I have granted him an additional fifteen years

of life," {cf, Isa 38:5}. Isaiah was given the great sign of the turning back of the sun's shadow on the sundial as proof of what God would do. Do you see how prayer can postpone judgment? It can do so individually; it can do so nationally.

There is a second suggestion in this passage which related to the matter of the church at prayer. It is the fact that Peter is at peace though he is in prison. How could he sleep on the night of his execution? If you were to be executed tomorrow morning, and you knew it, knew that your head was to be chopped off, would you have a good night's sleep tonight? You'd be ordering Sominex by the bottle from the nearest drug store, wouldn't you? But Peter slept, and slept peacefully. It was not that he was such a great man of faith. Peter was, like us, oftentimes weak and fearful. It was because the church was praying for him. That is where he derived strength. That is why God gave him peace of heart. That is why you find the Apostle Paul urging the people to whom he wrote to pray for him. "Hold me up in your prayers that I might be bold, and that I might have peace," {cf, Eph 6:18-20}. Prayer does that for those undergoing times of difficulty and trouble.

Third you notice that prayer can produce sudden changes, like the death of Herod. I do not think the church was praying for the king to die. We are not told in Scripture to pray that way about those in authority. But the church was praying that God would intervene and work his will. As a result of their intercession, God was, in a sense, free to act in unusual and remarkable ways. This vicious, cruel tyrant, before whom human life meant nothing, was suddenly removed from the scene, because of a people who were responsive to God and dependent upon him, and who cried out to him.

This is what Paul means in Romans 8 when he says that we do not know how to pray as we ought, oftentimes {cf, Rom 8:26}. We do not know what to ask for. The situation is too complicated and intricate for us. How can we understand it? But Paul says that as we pray the Spirit of God helps us in our weakness and awakens deep longings and yearnings in our hearts for which we cannot find words. And God the Father, who knows and can read our hearts, reads there the mind and will of the Spirit, and he answers by sending the very events that are needed to work out the situation according to his purpose. That is what prayer does. There is a mighty, mysterious element to prayer which, even as God's people gather together and open their hearts and share their feelings with God, is somehow creating an atmosphere in which God can work in sudden, remarkable ways.

I just heard a most unusual story about an event that occurred at Woodleaf Young Life Camp a week or so ago when our pastor, Dave Roper, was there. One night at about eleven o'clock the camp trumpeter was practicing out by the creek, all by himself. That is where trumpeters should practice. He finished his practice, put his trumpet away, and came back into camp. But he was seized with an urge to play his trumpet in the middle of camp. Now, any of us can understand that sort of urge, but this boy felt that it was from God. And so, in obedience, he took his trumpet out, put the mute in, and started to play. He thought to himself, "What shall I play?" The thought immediately came to him, "Play 'Taps.'" So he played "Taps" with the mute. Then an inner voice seemed to suggest that he take the mute out and play it out loud. So he did. At eleven-thirty at night, in the middle of the camp, he played "Taps" out loud, put his instrument away, and went to bed.

The next day another young man gave testimony to what had happened to him the night before. He had come to the camp, belligerent and rebellious. He was not a Christian and he didn't like what was going on. He decided he had enough of it, and at about eleven-thirty he was walking out of camp, heading out to the highway to hitchhike home, when suddenly he heard somebody playing "Taps" on a trumpet. "I knew 'Taps' was the song you play when somebody dies," he said, "so I said to myself, 'Who died?' And then the thought hit me, 'Well, I know who died; it was Jesus. Jesus died, and he died for me.'" And he sat down by the road and received the Lord into his heart.

Who can doubt that God was at work to lead a trumpeter to play at such an odd hour of the night? But that is the kind of thing that happens when the church, the body of Christ, is responsive to the Lord who indwells it. That is why communication with our Living Lord is so vitally important within the church.

Finally notice how this chapter ends:

But the word of God grew and multiplied.

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, bringing with them John whose other name was Mark. {Acts 12:24-25 RSV}

The word of God grew and multiplied, despite all the opposition. And two men were there whom God particularly wanted to instruct in how to handle tough situations -- Barnabas and Saul. They were keen observers of all that took place in Jerusalem at this time. Saul would draw upon his experience many times later in his turbulent career -- remembering how God could work to set people free, to open prison doors, to change a situation, to move a tyrannical ruler -- all in response to the believing prayer of his people.

That is what prayer can do.

May God grant that we will find out, in our day, how it can work. Let us close in prayer.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we pray that you will teach us how to pray in days like this. We don't always need to know what to pray for, but we do so desperately need to pray. We need to pray for each other, to pray for our friends, to pray about the dangers that beset us as a nation and as a world, as a people. Lord, help us just to open our hearts and be honest before you. For we know that in the mystery of prayer, a mystery that none of us can fathom, something is happening that makes possible the activity of your Spirit to work in unusual ways, ways that otherwise would never happen. Make us that kind of dependent people, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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