

“Weak Faith”
Acts 12:1-19
(Preached at Trinity, March 15, 2006)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we entered into **Chapter 12** the scene abruptly changes and we find Herod persecuting the church. It wasn’t that he had strong feelings against the church and the Gospel. He knew the Jewish leaders hated the church and he was vying for their approval. First, he captures James and has him executed with the sword. Seeing this pleased the Jews he quickly had Peter arrested.
2. Since Jewish law prohibited executions during the Passover (the word translated “Easter” in the KJV should be translated Passover) Herod temporarily postponed Peter’s execution.
 - A. On a side note, the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread included the purging of all leaven from their homes symbolic of the purging of sin and evil. How meaningless this was since at the same time they were plotting to kill an innocent man.
 - B. Religion void of the holiness of Christ is nothing.
3. When the church heard of Peter’s arrest they became greatly concerned. He was much loved by the church and his life was in grave danger. At the end of Passover he would be delivered to the people who would insult and abuse him and then put him to death.
4. Nothing short of a miracle could save him. He was being heavily guarded in prison and his death was probable. The church immediately began praying around the clock for him. **Acts 12:5** – “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”
5. We know nothing of such persecution. We’ve never experienced one of our members being arrested and sentenced to death for being a Christian. We’ve never prayed earnestly for the deliverance of a brother from death. We have, however, prayed for a brother or sister facing death through illness. We’ve also faced times of adversity in which we have earnestly prayed.
6. Although the church prayed – prayed earnestly, they had doubts and fears that led them to wonder if Peter could actually be saved from certain death.
7. Tonight I want to examine this account where God’s faithfulness was greater than their faith.
2 Timothy 2:13 – “If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself.”

- I. The important thing to note about the church is they prayed.
- A. They were gathered together –
V 5 – “but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”
V 12 – “Where many were gathered together praying”
1. They were gathered together at Mary’s house – she was Barnabas’ aunt
 2. The use of the word Church in **Verse 5** points to the unity of prayer – prayer was being lifted up by the Body of Christ – this is the great tragedy of the church divided today.
 3. The church must be a united church – a praying church
 - a. Corporate prayer is important because of God’s people united together.
 - b. God is present when His people are unified together
Matthew 18:19-20 – “Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”
 - c. It isn’t the quantity of people praying that is important – somehow we think that if we can get more people to pray the increased numbers will increase the power of the prayer. It isn’t the numbers. It is the oneness and unity of the people bowing in prayer.
 4. Acts shows corporate prayer to be a consistent reality in this early church
Acts 2:42 – “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”
- B. It was prayer unto God – **V 5** – “prayer was made . . . unto God”
1. They knew their dependence upon God. Their fervent prayer was directed to God. The early church continually sought Him in prayer –
 - a. When Peter and John were delivered from the hands of the Sadducees they returned to the church and they prayed
Acts 4:31 – “And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.”
 - b. They gave themselves to prayer and fasting before commissioning Paul and Barnabus for their missionary journey
Acts 13:2-3 – “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. ³ And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid *their* hands on them, they sent *them* away.”
 - c. They gave themselves to prayer and fasting before the ordination of elders
Acts 14:23 – “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”
 2. They knew that it was not of their power to deliver Peter from prison

- C. It was a fervent steadfast prayer - “prayer was made without ceasing”
1. “without ceasing” is a paraphrase of a word literally meaning “intense”
It is the same word that describes Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane
Luke 22:44 – “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”
 2. The death of James stirred them to urgency. Sometimes God brings about certain events to stir his people to prayer.
 3. Peter was released in the middle of the night - everyone else was sleeping, yet the church was still praying – if Peter had not come they would have likely continued until morning.
 4. It is likely that they had prayed in groups the entire week of Passover
 5. Hour after hour they poured their supplications out to God
- II. It was a prayer mixed with doubt – They weren’t really expecting God to deliver Peter
- A. Humanly speaking, Peter’s deliverance was an impossibility
1. Peter was placed under heavy guard
 - a. He was placed under four squads of four soldiers
 - b. He was chained to a soldier on each side and there were soldiers outside guarding the door
 2. James had earlier been executed
 3. They had little evidence for hope
 4. Perhaps they were praying that Peter would be strengthened to endure his suffering and remain faithful.
 5. They would have also prayed for Peter’s release but doubted this would happen.
- B. When they received the report that their prayers had been answered they didn’t believe it
- Acts 12:13-15** – “And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. ¹⁴ And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate. ¹⁵ And they said unto her, Thou art mad.”
1. They couldn’t believe it. Even when they saw him they were astonished
 2. Sometimes God hears our prayer in spite of our weakness
 3. God’s mercy is greater than our weakness
- C. Are we not guilty of the same prayer of unbelief?
1. Someone is dying and we pray, yet we don’t expect the healing
 2. Our prayer list is full of names, yet we are surprised when we see a positive result to our prayers.
 3. We should pray with a confidence that He hears and that He has the power to answer our prayer and we should pray with an expectation that He *will* answer our prayer.
 4. We must earnestly pray understanding that God’s answer to our prayer may not be exactly as we thought it would be. We must be open to all the possibilities while knowing that God *is* answering our prayer. The problem with their prayer for Peter was that they had excluded Peter’s deliverance as one of the options.

III. God's power and authority cannot and will not be overthrown

A. God's almighty power is described here

1. We've already seen the extent of Peter's incarceration – but it is was a small thing for God to release him
2. **Verse 7** – an angel comes and awakens Peter.
 - a. Apparently he was sleeping so soundly the angel had to jab him in the side. This is testimony to Peter's faith. On the eve of his execution he was sleeping soundly – He undoubtedly had been praying and had found God's peace
Philippians 4:6-7 – “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”
 - b. As he stands his chains miraculously fall from him
 - c. The soldiers were either kept sound asleep or God made them unable to respond
3. **Verse 10** – They made it past the first four soldiers, then the second four. Then they came to an iron gate that miraculously opened – it probably closed also.
4. This was all a small thing for God
Acts 12:11 – “And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and *from* all the expectation of the people of the Jews.”

B. God's deliverance is always according to His sovereign purpose

1. God waited until the end of the feast to deliver Him
Why didn't God deliver Him at the beginning of the week?
2. Why was Peter delivered yet James was executed?
This is the mystery of God's will – who can know the mind of God?

C. Although God works according to His purpose He usually works through the use of means or second causes. God often works through the means of prayer

1. Prayerless people should not expect God's intervention
James 4:2 – “. . . ye have not, because ye ask not.”
2. God demands that we come to Him in faith
James 1:6-7 – “But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. ⁷ For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.
3. Those who pray in faith see the great power of God
James 5:16-18 – “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. ¹⁷ Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.”

Conclusion:

Two final things I want to point out.

1. First, we need to see in this passage how God protects His church
 - A. Herod would not have stopped at James and Peter. There would have been a great slaughter had God not stopped Herod
 - B. God's restraining grace and protective wall still protects us today. If all of this world's hatred of Christianity were allowed to manifest itself we would quickly be exterminated.
2. Second, this passage tells us of God's favor upon his church that gives us great encouragement in our own prayers. This church had lingering doubts about whether or not Peter would be delivered, and yet God blessed their prayer.
 - A. God demands that we trust Him and pray in faith.
And we are told that faith affects our prayers.
 - B. This church, however, had lingering doubts. But they were fervent in prayer, steadfast in prayer – and God heard them.
Their doubt was not sinful unbelief but human weakness.
Their doubt was not so much if God *can* as if God *will* save Peter. In their heart was the confidence that God *can*.
Thomas Manton – “Fears come upon us only when means fail and the blessings expected are most unlikely; which argueth that it is not the uncertainty of God's will, but the misconceit of his power, that maketh us doubt.”
 - C. These believers were not as those spoken of by James
James 4:3 – “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume *it* upon your lusts.”
 - D. They prayed earnestly out of their love for Peter and God heard their prayer.
This should give us encouragement through our own times of doubt.

