

09/11/11

Living Life Together by Praying with Hearts of Faith

- This past week I've had the privilege of speaking in chapel at Baptist Bible College and Seminary in Clark's Summit, PA...
 - that's where I went to college and 5 of our other pastors have either received or are working on degrees in either the college or seminary or both...so our ties there are strong...
 - I also had the added joy of having our worship team with me so we served together for 3 days in both the college and seminary chapels and they did a fabulous job...
 - I was a student there from 1978-1982...and just going back on campus brought back such a flood of memories...it was a fascinating experience...
 - Several weeks ago I mentioned my first Christian service assignment and this trip made me think about that some more...
 - it was at a little extension Sunday School ministry on a gravel road called Island Plains...
 - at the beginning of my sophomore year I had a car so I asked the leaders of the church if it was OK if I drove up on Saturdays and started doing so door to door visitation and inviting our neighbors to come...
 - the older members there were fine people in many ways and they had a great impact on the college students who came to help them...but the response I sensed to my question about door to door visitation was something like -- sure, but do you really think that's going to work?...
 - we talk about reaching others for Jesus Christ...
 - and we pray about it...
 - but the unspoken response seemed to be -- but we're not expecting to actually like...happen...
 - of course I was young back then...and what I found pretty quickly was that the neighbors who were scattered up and down that gravel road knew where the little church was -- you had to pass it to get to their houses...it was the only way to get out to the blacktop road, as they said...
 - so they knew where it was -- but no one had ever invited them to come...
 - and the folks from the church knew where they lived, but never took the time to invite them...
 - and it was amazing when the Lord started blessing those humble efforts and neighbors started coming on Sunday morning...
 - I honestly believed many of the folks there were genuinely surprised...
 - almost like....we talk about this, and we get together and pray about this...
 - but we never actually do this...because we never expected anything to actually happen...
- now, before we react too strongly to those dear folks...can we all admit this?...it's very easy to simply go through the motions...
 - we pack up our Bibles and we come over to the church house but do we really expect to have a divine interaction with the God of heaven who will use His Spirit and His Word to provide the real direction we need to change and grow in practical ways in the coming week?
 - or we sit down and pray as individuals or as a group, but do we really expect anything to come of those prayers?...

- or we talk about sharing the gospel but do we really expect anyone to repent and believe?....
- see, it really is possible to just go through the motions, isn't it?...
- and when you broaden that out to our church family -- if you have a whole group of people simply going through the motions, that's a recipe for powerlessness for sure...
- but on the other hand...when people are participating in the spiritual disciplines with joyful expectation that our Living God is actually going to do something as we live for and serve Him -- that's an approach to living life together that really deserves to be called...living.
- the question is -- which one are you, and which one are we?
- with that question in mind, please open your Bible to Acts chapter 12
 - page 102 of the Bible under the chair in front of you....
 - our theme this year is Living Life Together...
 - right now we're focusing on what we can learn from the book of Acts about the way the early church related to one another that can help direct us have closer relationships as a church family...
 - the passage we're looking at today is sort of a mixed bag...
 - there were some aspects of the way they were living life together that were very good -- we should emulate that...
 - on the other hand -- there were certainly other aspects of this story that should make us shake our corporate heads and say -- let's not every let that happen here...
- we're talking about **Living Life Together by Praying with Hearts of Faith.**
- read Acts 12:1-25
- so we're talking about Living Life Together by praying with Hearts of Faith...and with the time we have remaining, let's look for **three principles to guide the way we pray for/with one another.**

I. Understand that there will Always be Opposition to God's Plan for Us as Individuals and as a Church.

- if you have been part of this study from the very beginning, you might start concluding -- this group of people have had challenges and problems from the very beginning...
- and that's exactly right -- they have faced significant opposition from day 1...
- let's break these verses down and see if we can understand the nature of what they were facing...

A. For the early church.

1. Herod the king laid hold on some from the church to mistreat them - v.1

- the word Herod in the Bible can be confusing because we might think this is speaking of the same person every time we read it -- and you start asking, how old was this guy?...
- the answer is -- it's not the same person...
- it's a title -- more like our word "president..."
- so there are several different Herod's in the Bible....
- for example, the man who was the ruler during the time of Christ was named Herod the Great...

- he was incredibly bloodthirsty -- for example, he had all the Jewish males in and around Bethlehem murdered when he heard that Jesus the Messiah had been born there...
- remember -- the wise men told him they had seen a star in the east and come to worship Him and when he learned it had been prophesied in the OT that the Messiah would be born in the little town of Bethlehem -- that was his solution to erasing this threat to his throne -- so that was--Herod the Great...
- this man in Acts 12 is that Herod's grandson -- he's also known as Herod Agrippa I...who reigned from 37-44AD...
- now if all of that lost you -- that's OK -- the main point is that the church is now facing opposition by this secular ruler who is searching them out and mistreating them...

2. He had James the brother of John put to death with the sword - v. 2.

- this is the first recorded martyrdom of one of the apostles...we've already had the murder of the first deacon, Stephen...but now the apostles are being killed as well...
- verse 3 explains the dynamic -- Herod realized then that this kind of opposition to the early church pleased the Jews...
- and there's all sorts of politics that play into all of this -- I'm going to bypass most of that for sake of time...but the issue is, the church is facing full-blown opposition for sure...

3. Then he arrested Peter and held him until the end of the Passover - v. 3

- the plan was to make a big show in front of all the Jewish people who were in town for the feast of the Passover...
- but he knew Peter had already broken out of prison once...so he not only locked him up--but he also posted soldiers to guard Peter around the clock...
- that's the nature of the opposition they were facing...
- please don't just think about this in some ethereal way -- Peter knew what had happened to James...and from all appearances; he was next in line...
- and of course all of this was finding its source in our adversary the devil who would love to do nothing more than stamp out the testimony and the power of the church of resurrected Christ...
- He can't do anything about the fact that Jesus is alive...but He can certainly, to the degree that God allows it, torment and oppose the people and plan of God...
- and that wasn't just true way back then...it's true...

B. For our church today.

- we can always expect opposition...you can just mark that down...
- **1 Peter 5:8 - Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.**
- Paul would later tell the church at Ephesus...**Ephesians 6:10-12 - Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.**
- the fact of the matter is -- our adversary the devil would love nothing better than to destroy your life, and destroy your family, and oppose, thwart, hinder, and destroy every aspect of this church...that is the business he's in...and he's fairly good at...

- so the church has to decide how we're going to live life together in light of that fact...
- well, what did the early church do with that?

II. Face Opposition with Fervent Prayer.

- **Acts 12:5 - So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.**
- please keep in mind that the church is a relatively new entity but they are definitely getting an important part of the puzzle correct -- they know that you fight a spiritual war using spiritual methods...
- just a moment ago we mentioned Ephesians 6:10-12 about the kind of opposition we face as believers in Christ...
- well, if you know your Bible, you know that's not the end of that story...because Paul went on to explain...**Ephesians 6:13, 18 - Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm...With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.**
- and the early church got that -- at least to a point...so here they are in Acts 12:5 -- they are praying fervently for Peter's release...that's the way they were Living Life Together...
- well, what exactly does that mean?

A. The meaning of fervently.

- **Fervently - ektenos - "a medical term describing the stretching of a muscle to its limits"**
- you may remember this passage recorded in Luke's gospel about Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane (and remember, Luke is also the author of the book of Acts) -- **Luke 22:44 - And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.**
- it's fascinating that Luke selected that same word to describe the way the church family responded to Peter's arrest...prayer that is similar to the stretching of a muscle to its limits...
 - when's the last time you or I or we prayed like that?...but that's what they were doing...
 - now the rest of the text makes it quite clear that there were significant deficiencies in what they were doing...but at least they were doing something...
 - apparently they agreed with what James would eventually write -- **James 5:16 - The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."**

- now Luke also goes out of his way to point out:

B. The impact on Peter.

- **Acts 12:6 - On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.**
- I mean -- you have to love this -- Herod has his plan -- he's going to bring Peter out right after the Passover for maximum effect...and he's not going to let Peter let away this time so he has Peter bound to two soldiers with chains, along with some guards at the front door...
- and what's Peter doing?...sleeping between the soldiers...
- no wonder Peter would later write -- **1 Peter 5:7 - casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.**
 - apparently Peter really believed that, huh?

- because on the night Herod is going to bring him out...and remember, James has already been murdered by this point...Peter is sound asleep...
- and you might say -- well, but how do we know he was sound asleep?...
- because even after the angel appeared, and a brilliant light filled the cell...that didn't rouse Peter at all...
- and you can almost picture this poor angel -- if they're good at anything, it's dramatic appearances...
 - so he does the startling appearance with brilliant light thing...and...nothing...
 - so finally he has to strike Peter on the side and tell him to get up quickly...
 - this isn't time to be yawning and stretching and rolling over and hitting the angelic snooze button..."could I just get 5 more minutes here?"...
 - the angel even has to tell him to get dressed -- I mean Peter is so out of it because he was sleeping so soundly....
- don't you love that?...it reminds you of the old testament story of the lions in Daniel's den...and that is the way that story ended up...where the king has Daniel thrown in this den of lions and Daniel has a delightful evening with those critters...
 - you can almost picture Daniel having several of the lions bunch together so he can sleep on their soft fur...
- and the point is -- this kind of fervent prayer provides peace both for the persons praying and the person being lifted up in prayer...
- we see that around here all the time -- when you pray about things, you don't worry about them...
 1. We are constantly bringing prayer requests for you regarding our missionaries and things that are happening around the world...
 - and in some cases that involves family members of people from our church who are serving Christ in foreign countries...
 - but what happens next?...as we live life together it produces great peace...and we don't sit around sinfully worrying about our missionaries because we know we've done our part of praying...
 2. The same is true with this project over at Purdue...
 - we've been working on that for a long time...and as I mentioned last Sunday-- tonight we'll be considering the purchase of our third possible site...
 - but I don't see/hear people becoming sinfully anxious about that issue...we just pray...
 - which is why we have a committee of people who pray for that regularly....
 - that's why we had our day of prayer and fasting...
 - personally, I've prayed for that project on a practically daily basis for a couple of years now...
 - and where that gets you -- in a position to sleep really well instead of being consumed by worry and anxiety and fear...
- now, what was the result?

C. The powerful result.

- **Acts 12:10 - When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and**

they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

- all of this is helping us see what Living Life Together looks like...the opposition was becoming more and more intense...their main leader humanly speaking appeared to be facing certain death...
- so they began fervently praying and God chose to answer their prayer by miraculously delivering their beloved servant Peter...
- all of this should also help us greatly appreciate the privilege of prayer that was purchased by the precious blood of Christ...
- remember, He told the disciples before His crucifixion....**John 16:23-24 - In that day you will not question Me about anything. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.**

- now, this is one of the many places in the Bible where it would be great if the story ended right here...
- but it doesn't...because Peter knocks on the gate, and this little servant girl named Rhoda comes and hears Peter's voice...and she's so excited that she leaves Peter at the gate and runs upstairs and tell everyone Peter has been released from prison and is standing outside...
 - and what did they say?...
 - praise the Lord that He has answered our prayers?...
 - that doesn't surprise us at all because we have been asking the Lord for that?...
 - what else can we pray for?...
- **Acts 12:14-16 - When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened *the door*, they saw him and were amazed.**
- do you think the Lord is trying to make a point to us as we attempt to live life together, friends?...is it something like...

III. Don't Ever be Surprised if God Chooses to Answer Your Prayers in Powerful Ways.

- see, some of us don't even get to the "praying fervently" place...
- others pray...but somewhat like the dear folks in this text...not really expecting anything to come of it...
- now, let me ask you to think about two very specific applications that correspond to two important votes we'll be taking tonight...
- I'm doing this to be sure you've had time to consider these matters....because regrettably both of them are on a very tight timeline...
- I also believe there are clear applications between these verses and the decisions we're making...

- however, I want to be very careful because I recognize leaders can use the Word of God to justify about anything in the world...you'll have to decide what you believe the Lord may be up to and vote accordingly...
- the first has to do with Faith Global Missions...
 - you may or may not know that several years ago our church went through a legal reorganization process...
 - that resulted in the creation of ten separate legal entities under the heading of Faith Ministries...
 - all of this is ultimately owned and controlled by our church but there are legal firewalls in place to separate our assets from our risks...
 - one of this entities is Faith Global Ministries...in its legal description, it anticipated that we could possibly serve as a missionary sending agency...or a mission board...
 - all of those legal documents were made available to our members at the time, but I fully understand if you didn't read them...
 - so we could take the position that we don't even need to vote on this...but I have always had the view that it would be wisest to have one vote too many as opposed to vice versa...
 - here's what's happened in a nutshell...
 - for many years there was a mission board in Kokomo...Evangelical Baptist Mission...
 - they moved the Indianapolis several years ago...
 - you may remember a few weeks ago I was in Brazil with a ministry team from our church...then I came back on Thursday, led the rehearsal for my daughter Karis wedding to Austin...then did the wedding on Saturday...then fulfilled my regular responsibilities on Sunday...
 - just before leaving for Brazil...I received a call from EBM inviting me to an emergency meeting on the following Monday...
 - there was no way I was going to add another meeting to my schedule....so I asked David Selvey to go and represent us...David leads FGM...
 - what he learned at that meeting and eventually shared with me is really hard to believe...
 - the mission board escrows money for their missionaries...their work funds, their emergency funds, other cash that really could not be safely held in places like Africa or other certain parts of South America, etc.
 - several years ago, apparently the mission started running a deficit budget to pay for their regular monthly staff and expenses for their home office...so they started spending money from their missionary's accounts...
 - you can decide what you think about that -- that's beyond our purpose right now...and we weren't involved in any of that...
 - but when all of this came to light...it was determined that the mission was broke and had actually spent two million dollars of their missionaries' money and it was all gone...
 - their board brought in some legal advisers who told them to close the mission as soon as possible and then organize a bankruptcy type arrangement where all the creditors might receive a small amount of what was owed to them, and if the missionaries wanted to retrieve any of their money, they would have to sue the mission...
- so what that meant was -- these missionaries were about to receive notification that all their money was gone...that their mission board would be closing its doors it 10 days, their

- health insurance would be covered for one more month...and they would have to find a new mission...
- and understand--for many of them they couldn't come back to the states and make an orderly transition...because all of the money they had in savings for their family to travel back and forth had been taken...
 - now, we pray for missions all the time, right?...and we ask God to help us be a blessing to missions and missionaries around the world...
 - well friends -- Rhoda may be running into the room...
 - and I want to be very careful how I use this text...but we're not going to ignore the timing of all of this...
 - and one proposal you'll hear tonight is that FGM begin providing services to some of these missionaries...with an emphasis of putting the lion's share of the responsibility back on the local churches who sent them...but handling the responsibilities that a smaller local church would not be able to handle...and doing that for free for 6 months to help them get back on their feet, and then offering a lower cost option if they want to stay with us...
 - we'll answer more questions about that tonight -- but that's the nature of the vote...
 - but part of the lesson is -- we better not pray about things...unless we expect God to answer our prayers in rather astounding, dramatic ways...
 - the second issue is the purchase of the Champs site...
 - we started across the street from Mackey...that as deemed too small...
 - then we bought Smitty's -- we thought that might allow us to not only do student ministry, and have a biblical counseling center--but maybe even student ministry housing...
 - but that site has a plume of solvents under it...
 - so we kept praying and kept praying...that's how we've lived life together...
 - Rhoda may be running into the room...
 - and what intrigues our leadership about this site is that it could allow us to do a whole lot more community based ministry there than we had originally envisioned...provide more student ministry housing...and possibly construct a facility that could someday be used as a satellite church site if that's what our congregation believed was necessary...
 - everybody here will have to decide what you believe the Lord is up to -- and we don't have to figure it all out tonight -- but we do have to decide if we are going to authorize the committee to purchase this property if they deem it advisable to do so...