

The Acts of the Apostles

Sermon Number: 20

Acts 12:1-24

September 4, 2011

Does God Answer Prayer?

Acts 12:1-24

Now about that time Herod the king stretched out *his* hand to harass some from the church. ² Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. ³ And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was *during* the Days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ So when he had arrested him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

⁵ Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. ⁶ And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. ⁷ Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by *him*, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off *his* hands. ⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." ⁹ So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

¹¹ And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and *from* all the expectation of the Jewish people."

¹² So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. ¹³ And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, because of *her* gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. ¹⁵ But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel."

¹⁶ Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened *the door* and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

¹⁸ Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that *they* should be put to death.

And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed *there*.

²⁰ Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's *country*.

²¹ So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. ²² And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" ²³ Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.

²⁴ But the word of God grew and multiplied.

My title for this message is, "Does God Answer Prayer?"

Before we open up the Scripture in Acts 12 where God answers the prayers of the church who were praying constantly for Peter's safe deliverance from prison and then did not believe it when Peter shows up at the door, I want to briefly discuss a few aspects of how God answers prayer.

The answer to the question "Does God Answer Prayer?" is, "Yes, always."

However, God only answers the prayers that He hears.

God does not hear the prayers of lost people.

That's why I don't care for a "moment of silence" where people of all religions or none at all "pray" to the god of their choice and Jesus Christ cannot be named!

God doesn't hear the prayer of a lost person.

Isa 59:1-2

Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened,
That it cannot save;
Nor His ear heavy,
That it cannot hear.

² But your iniquities have separated you from your God;
And your sins have hidden *His* face from you,
So that He will not hear.

The first prayer that God hears from a lost person is when they repent and “call on the name of the Lord” and believe in the Gospel.
Ah, but then they are no longer lost!

The Gospel is Jesus Christ, not the “god of your choice.”

The best example to show this is the story of the Pharisee and the Publican, or the tax collector. “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.”

Luke 18:9-14

⁹ Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' ¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

God did not hear the prayer of the self-righteous Pharisee but God heard the prayer of the tax collector and then he, the tax-collector, was justified.

And a word to those who preach eternal justification, please note that the tax collector, while he was surely one of God’s elect, was not justified until he repented and begged for mercy.

“Justification waits on faith.” E. W. Johnson

So there are the prayers of lost people that God does not hear but He always hears and answers the prayers of the saints.

Rev 8:1-4

When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ² And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. ³ Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer *it* with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. ⁴ And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand.

But you may say, e.g., “I have been praying for years for my child to be saved and I see no evidence that he knows the Lord.”

Sometimes the answer is, “No.”

Sometimes the answer is delayed.

Luke 1:13

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

When the angel spoke to Zacharias, both he and Elizabeth were too old to have a child and had probably given up hope that God would give them a son. But God answered their prayer in a miraculous way by giving them John the Baptist when the time suited God's purpose.

Now let's continue our study of Acts with Chapter 12.

The setting is in Jerusalem during the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, the Jews are celebrating and the church is under persecution by the order of Herod.

Herod has killed James, the brother of John, and now he has put Peter in prison.

We have the church praying for Peter and when God heard their prayers they were not able to accept the answer.

It always intrigues me how God's providence works. Most of the time I can't walk and chew gum at the same time while God is sending a caravan into the desert at just the right time to arrive and rescue Joseph from the pit; He sends an angel to Cornelius and a vision to Peter and causes the timing to work out exactly as He ordained. And God was not strained or stressed in any way.

In chapter 12 we have a tyrant who plans to murder Peter and God sends an angel to answer the prayers of the church and leads Peter to escape from the prison.

Now I am reminded of something that Judy said, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.”

Herod's plans are overruled by God's providential control.

Prayer is mysterious because as Christians we believe that God has ordained all events that will take place, no matter how seemingly insignificant. Nothing happens by chance or outside of God's control. Even tragic events such as storms or the sudden death of a loved one are not a surprise to God.

“God foreknows because he foreordains.” Thunders Martin Luther

Yet, we are encouraged to pray and not to think that something is too certain that God will not appear to re-order His providence.

Peter was facing certain death. Peter was securely guarded by sixteen Roman soldiers, but the church constantly prayed for him.

No doubt the church prayed for James too, but allowed Herod to murder him.

When you know as much as God knows then you can explain to me how all of this works out.

The Man Who Would be a god. Acts 12:1-4

There are six “Herod's” in the bible and the Herod of Acts 12 is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great.

In 41 AD, Emperor Caligula made him “king” over the regions of Judea and Samaria.

Herod was not a Jew by birth but he was Jewish by faith. The persecution of the church suited Herod's political agenda because “it pleased the Jews.”

Peter is Not Going to Escape Acts 12:5

In verse 4 we are told that Peter is under an unusually heavy guard. The normal procedure was to chain a dangerous prisoner to one guard; the prisoner's right hand to the soldier's left hand. Peter was guarded by four squads of soldiers of four soldiers each. Peter was chained day and night to two soldiers with six standing guard inside the cell. The other two squads [8 soldiers] were just outside the cell.

Sixteen soldiers guarding one man chained to two soldiers seem secure enough.

Based on the beginning of the Feast of Passover followed by the Feast of the Unleavened Bread would make it eight days that Peter has been under arrest. But Peter has more help than he knows, the church is constantly praying for him. The Greek word for “constant prayer” means “to stretch out or to exert energy.”

Apparently the church was “agreeing” in its fervent prayer for Peter to be released.

Matt 18:19

“Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.

Peter Was Not Dreaming

Acts 12:6-11

Peter knows that he is about to be executed the next day. The Lord has waited to answer the constant prayer of the church until the night before Peter is to be killed. And Peter is sound asleep!

Would I have the peace of faith in Jesus Christ to go to sleep knowing that it was my last day on earth, especially if I were to be executed?

Wake Up Peter! Suddenly “and angel of the Lord” and several things happened.

Notice that this is an appearance of an angel who has assumed a physical body; can speak Peter’s language; and has supernatural power.

There was a blinding light that filled the cell; the angel kicked Peter in the side and raised him up; Peter was sound asleep. That was truly a “rude awakening.”

The angel told him to “Arise quickly.”

The chains fell off Peter; no keys, no human agency, the chains just fall off his hands. “Put on your clothes; tie your sandals; wrap your cloak around your body and follow me.”

Peter must have been groggy and confused; “Is this another vision?”

So Peter got up and followed the angel as he led him out of the prison.

As they went forward they simply walk past the first and second guard posts and the iron gate just opens without being touched.

The iron gate opened like the glass doors at the entrance of Wal-Mart.

Now Peter is down the street away from the prison and the angel immediately disappears. It occurs to me that the angel has done what only the power of God could do and now Peter can do what a mere man can do. The angel is probably close by to see that Peter gets safely away.

When Peter begins to think clearly he acknowledges that the Lord has sent His angel and delivered him from the hand of Herod.

The “expectation of the Jewish people” was that Peter would be killed by Herod as one who had forsaken Judaism for Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah.

When I say “forsaken Judaism” I mean the corrupted form of Judaism as practiced by the Jews at the time recorded here.

God Does Answer Prayer

Acts 12:12-17

Peter goes directly to the house where he knew the people were praying for him.

The arrangement of this house would be a closed door that opened onto a courtyard that led to living quarters away from the street.

Peter knocked on the door and a girl named Rhoda came to answer. Rhoda recognized Peter’s voice and was so excited she did not open the door but ran inside and announced, “Peter is at the gate!”

“You must be crazy!”

She won’t give it up, “No, it’s really Peter!”

“No, it is his angel.” One of the beliefs of the Jews was that each person had a “guardian angel” that could take on the appearance of the person he protected.

There is some humor and commentary on human nature here. What were they fervently praying for? Peter’s release! What is their response? It can’t be true.

We have been a drought now without rain for several weeks.

If you have been praying for rain where is your umbrella?

Brother Gables, I don't recall if you explored the subject of "guardian angels" in your study of angels? Personally, I can think of two specific occasions when I was delivered from certain death by something that I could not control or even know about. The Lord only knows how many other times I have been spared and not even be aware of it.

Peter keeps banging on the door. I have this picture in my mind of Peter, excited, relieved, scared, impatient, thinking, "You silly girl, open the door!"

They finally open the door and Peter tells them all that had happened and how the Lord got him out of the prison

The reason Peter tells them to go and tell James and the brethren is because this James is the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Then Peter departed and went to another place so the authorities could not find him. Possibly he goes to Antioch. Cf. Galatians 2:11; 1 Peter 1:1.

Notice that in verse 2 we are told that Herod had killed James, the brother of John, but in verse 17 Peter says to go and tell James.

There are two men named James in the NT.

Acts 12:2

James, the son of Zebedee, or **James the Elder**, to whom, with his brother John, our Lord gave the surname of Boanerges (which is a corruption of sons of thunder).

Acts 12:17

Unto James. This, of course, is the same James as is mentioned in Gal 1:19 as "the Lord's brother," and who, in Gal 2:9,12, and Acts 15:12 and 21:18, as well as here, appears as occupying a peculiar place in the Church at Jerusalem, viz. as all antiquity testifies, as Bishop of Jerusalem.

(from The Pulpit Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 2001 by Biblesoft)

JAMES

– (1.) The son of Zebedee and Salome; an elder brother of John the apostle. He was one of the twelve. He was by trade a fisherman, in partnership with Peter (Matt 20:20; 27:56). With John and Peter he was present at the transfiguration (Matt 17:1; Mark 9:2), at the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37-43), and in the garden with our Lord (14:33). Because, probably, of their boldness and energy, he and John were called Boanerges, i.e., "sons of thunder." He was the first martyr among the apostles, having been beheaded by King Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1,2), A.D. 44 A.D.. (Comp. Matt 4:21; 20:20-23).

(2.) The son of Alphaeus, or Cleopas, "the brother" or near kinsman or cousin of our Lord (Gal 1:18,19), called James "the Less," or "the Little," probably because he was of low stature. He is mentioned along with the other apostles (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15). He had a separate interview with our Lord after his resurrection (1 Cor 15:7), and is mentioned as one of the apostles of the circumcision (Acts 1:13). He appears to have occupied the position of head of the Church at Jerusalem, where he presided at the council held to consider the case of the Gentiles (Acts 12:17; 15:13-29; 21:18-24). This James was the author of the epistle which bears his name.

(from Easton's Bible Dictionary, PC Study Bible formatted electronic database Copyright © 2003, 2006 BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

Flustered, Frustrated, and Defeated

Acts 12:17-19

Being assigned the duty of guarding a prisoner in the Roman Army meant that you risked your life if the prisoner escaped. As we have noted, four squads, each with four soldiers; sixteen soldiers, were assigned the job of guarding Peter.

Peter was chained to two of the soldiers.

When the angel came to get Peter, the soldiers were somehow immobilized and when the chains fell off, Peter simply walked out with no resistance from the guards.

When the soldiers came to they were confused and did not know where Peter was or anything about how he had escaped.

Herod "examined" the guards because he thought they had been bribed, and had allowed Peter to get away.

Herod orders the guards to be put to death and departs for Caesarea.

Peacemakers

Acts 12:20

The people of Tyre and Sidon, cities on the seacoast of Phoenicia, back in the days of Solomon had made a treaty with Judea to exchange food for cedar and cypress logs. This treaty had been honored for hundreds of years.

1 Kings 5:8-12

⁸ Then Hiram sent to Solomon, saying:

I have considered *the message* which you sent me, *and* I will do all you desire concerning the cedar and cypress logs.

⁹ My servants shall bring *them* down from Lebanon to the sea; I will float them in rafts by sea to the place you indicate to me, and will have them broken apart there; then you can take *them* away. And you shall fulfill my desire by giving food for my household.

¹⁰ Then Hiram gave Solomon cedar and cypress logs *according to* all his desire. ¹¹ And Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand kors of wheat *as* food for his household, and twenty kors of pressed oil. Thus Solomon gave to Hiram year by year.

¹² So the LORD gave Solomon wisdom, as He had promised him; and there was peace between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty together.

In some way the people of Tyre and Sidon had offended Herod Agrippa and their food supply was threatened. They won the support of Blastus, a member of the king's court, probably with a bribe, to arrange a public meeting between the king and the Phoenicians.

Not too much of a god

Acts 12:21-22

The first century Jewish historian Josephus records this incident.

“After completion of the third year of his reign over the whole of Judea, Agrippa celebrated spectacles in honor of Caesar. On the second day of the spectacles, clad in a garment woven completely of silver he entered the theater at daybreak. There the silver, illuminated by the first rays of the sun, was wondrously radiant and by its glitter inspired fear and awe in those who gazed upon it. Straightway his flatterers raised their voices from various directions – though hardly for his good – addressing him as a god. ‘May you be propitious to us and if we have hitherto feared you as a man, yet henceforth we agree that you are more than mortal in your being.’ ”

Luke's report in Acts tells us that after Herod's speech, the people shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not a man." Josephus' reference to the rising sun reflecting off Herod's silver garments suggests the possibility that Agrippa was deliberately portraying himself as the sun-god, *theos epiphanes*, as early Phoenician rulers had done. Herod was prideful and accepted their deification.

In Roman culture to be proclaimed a god was the utmost level of political power. Herod's glory did not last very long.

The Death of a god

Acts 12:23

Luke writes that "an angel of the Lord struck him..."

He was eaten by worms and died. Intestinal round worms can grow to be 16 inches long and clog the intestines causing extreme pain, vomiting, and death.

Herod's reign as "king" lasted three years and his tenure as a god lasted only a few minutes.

The True God

Acts 12:24

The battle between Herod and the praying church came to an end. With Herod dead, the persecution of Christians abated and Judea was placed under the rule of a Roman governor.

Persecution of Christians never ends, with every generation, being attacked somewhere in the world. Our weapons are ever the same – trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and agree in prayer.

Does God Answer Prayer?

God answers prayers that honor His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

All other mutterings are blasphemy!

Repent and believe in the Gospel.