

## Acts 12:5

### So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him

The account of Peter's miraculous escape from prison has been an inspiration to Christians

- It was undoubtedly this passage that caused Charles Wesley to write
- My chains fell off, my heart was free/I rose went forth and followed thee
- It is a story that contains so much of what we might call 'the irony of unbelief'
- I don't know if it happens to you but sometimes I am challenged about my beliefs
- It's a challenge that I often welcome – but somewhere in the conversation
- I like to throw in an unexpected question – 'tell me what you believe and why?'
- This is something that the unbelieving critics really do not like
- Confronted with genuine Christian faith the unbeliever must see
- A faith that challenges, a faith that costs and a faith that changes people

Luke, the writer of Acts, points out some who belonged to the church have been arrested

- There is an irony of unbelief about the timing of this
- Because they were arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread
- The Feast of Unleavened Bread was the most important annual festival of Israel
- And was seven nights of feasting after the Passover
- Though the whole feast, including the eve of Passover, was included
- In other words it was a period of celebration not unlike Christmas
- Where after Christmas Eve and Christmas Day celebrations continue until 12<sup>th</sup> night
- Unleavened Bread was Passover Eve, Passover Day and 7 further days
- And celebrated Israel's preservation from the last plague visited on Egypt
- (the death of the firstborn) and Israel's deliverance
- the outward separation (from leaven/yeast) representing spiritual purity
- was meant to symbolise an inward separation from everything heathen
- nevertheless while Herod should have been celebrating, he was plotting
- this is made all the more ironic by the fact that the external celebration was hollow
- for Israel was once again in captivity – this time to the Roman Empire
- and the internal separation from everything heathen was hollow, plotting murder
- murder of the representative of one, Jesus, to whom the festival pointed

Herod was a family name: Herod Agrippa I lived from 10 B.C. to 44 A.D.

- he was grandson of Herod the Great (the one we think about at Christmas)
- his father (Aristobulus) was executed on his grandfather's orders in 7 B.C.
- the masses hated his family so he did everything he could to please them
- politically he wanted stability and thought that Christians would only be disruptive

King Herod showed what he thought of the 'Christians'

- by having James, one of Jesus' first disciples, put to death with the sword (beheaded)
- according to the Mishnah, the book of traditional Judaism
- murderers and apostates were to be beheaded
- Herod, therefore, showed that he considered James to be an apostate (a defector)
- Seeing it pleased the Jews, he imprisoned Peter during the feast of Unleavened Bread
- So that he could bring Peter out for a show trial after the Jewish Holy Days
- He wanted Peter kept securely to avoid the embarrassment of any escape

During this time, the church was earnestly praying to God for Peter

- The critical word is 'earnestly' which literally means 'stretched out'
- The idea coming from hands stretched out to God in prayer
- Giving the impression of wholehearted, urgent pleading before God
- We might also translate the word 'fervently'
- Luke has used this word before when he described Jesus' prayer in the garden
- 'And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly' (Luke 22:44)

The church was engaged in fervent prayer while Peter was fast asleep in prison

- it was a decisive night as the next day Herod intended to bring him to trial
- nonetheless, Peter is sleeping soundly, an angel had to wake him up
- God's direct intervention continued with the angel leading Peter from the prison
- Peter was going along with everything quite happily thinking he was dreaming
- But when the angel left him, realising where he was and the danger he faced
- Peter headed for one of the meeting places of the early Jerusalem Christians
- the home of Mary, John Mark's mother (writer of second gospel, cousin of Barnabas)
- the confusion and joyful humour of the story shines through
- when Rhoda, the servant girl, went to the door she heard Peter's voice
- perhaps she had no authority to open the door at night
- in any event she ran into the prayer meeting to tell them Peter was at the door
- it was the perfect answer to their prayers
- despite the fact that Peter had been released once before
- they thought she was interrupting
- it proved harder for Peter to get into Mary's house than out of Herod's prison

This was not the time for a commotion or celebration

- it was still the middle of the night and Peter motioned for them to be quiet
- Herod's soldiers were doubtless prowling the streets
- Peter must move on to avoid being recaptured – but wants James and others to know
- This James is James the Lord's brother, who, because Peter has been away preaching
- Seems to have become the administrative leader of the church in Jerusalem

The great Methodist preacher of the early part of the last century, Samuel Chadwick said:

- 'Intensity is a law of prayer' – he meant that prayer had to be earnest or fervent
- he gives several examples of earnest, fervent prayer from the Bible
- Abraham pleading for Sodom (Genesis 18)
- Jacob wrestling through the night (Genesis 32)
- The fervent prayer of Moses after the people's idolatry (Exodus 32:11-14)
- The deeply troubled prayer of Hannah (1 Samuel 1:13)
- David's prayer of remorse and grief (Psalm 51)

These biblical prayers are often so different from the kind of prayers we hear today

- As Christians when we meet for worship it needs to be less casual more intensive
- So many of the songs and hymns we sing are prayers
- In worship, we need to focus on the scriptures and on prayer
- We need engagement with a holy God – questioning and pleading
- In prayer and faith (a phrase from the General Secretary of the Methodist Conference)

## I PRAYER AND FAITH CHALLENGE EVERYTHING

Many of us know the story 'The Hiding Place' made into a book and a film

- In the Second World War, in the Dutch city of Haarlem
- An old watchmaker lived with his family, the famous daughter being Corrie ten Boom
- When the Nazis started to imprison or deport Jews
- The ten Boom family made a secret apartment in their home, a sanctuary for Jews
- Eventually the family were betrayed and taken for interrogation to The Hague
- Here even the chief interrogator of the Gestapo seemed shocked
- That the old man, Caspar ten Boom, had been arrested
- He said to him: I'd like to send you home, old fellow
- I'll take your word that you won't cause any more trouble
- But Caspar replied: if I go home today, tomorrow I will open my door again
- To any man in need who knocks
- And so Caspar ten Boom remained in custody and 10 days later died
- In another cell, his daughter, Corrie, added another date to the list
- Scratched on her wall, adding beside it – 'Father released'

It is neither realistic nor biblical to pretend that prayers, even fervent ones

- Always have the outcome for which we hope
- Did the early Christians not pray at all for Stephen – of course they did
- Yet his death, as the first Christian martyr, led to the growth of the church
- Did the early Christians not pray at all for James – of course they did
- Yet he was kept in prison and later beheaded with a sword
- In James' case we see no obvious evidence of triumph
- We want immediate evidence to feel the sacrifices we make are worthwhile
- Why? Did we do it because we trusted God and obeyed him?
- Or did we do it simply to please ourselves – just the same as if there were no god
- Whether we see the answer or reason is neither here nor there
- God might reserve the revelation, the reason why, until we get to heaven

Consider the answer of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to the furious king

- Who was getting ready to kill them

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Daniel 3:16-18

This is prayer and faith in action

- By the time James and then Peter were thrown into prison in Jerusalem
- Things had changed since the apostles enjoyed the favour of all the people (2:47)
- God does not promise deliverance from persecution and death
- But his name is honoured through deliverance and death; for it is honoured by:

## II PRAYER AND FAITH COST EVERYTHING

It is easy for us to live in a generation of cotton wool Christians

- People for whom prayer and faith are apparently just a lifestyle choice
- From the supermarket of lifestyle choices
- Some people choose to play golf, others choose to collect stamps
- Some people choose to play football, others choose to dance
- Some people choose a life of wine, women and song
- Others choose a life of prayer and faith – but what about the cost?

On 8 January 1956, five missionaries were killed by Auca tribesmen in Ecuador

- This is not remote history, this is within living memory
- The five men were working with the Mission Aviation Fellowship
- Nate Saint (the pilot), Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully and Roger Youderian
- Although it was a possibility that they could have fought their way out
- The missionaries had determined not to hurt anyone
- Jim Elliot memorably wrote in his diary
- ‘When it comes time to die, make sure all you have to do is die’
- A week later, their spear-pierced bodies were found downstream
- Two years later, Nate’s sister (Rachel) and Jim’s widow (Elisabeth) reached the tribe
- Rachel lived with them for the remaining 41 years of her life
- One-quarter of the tribe is now Christian
- Seven of the nine men in the spearing party have also come to the Lord
- Later, Steve Saint found out about his father’s death
- At the time the men were being killed the Auca tribesmen saw angels in the sky
- Reminiscent of the death of Stephen the first Martyr, the seed was scattered and grew

Through all of the triumphs and tragedies of life the word of God continues to spread (12:24)

- If that is how it was in New Testament times why should we expect it to be different?
- The growth has gone on unabated – the gospel that began with such small beginnings
- Has now spread to the ends of the earth and will continue to spread:

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

(Matthew 24:14)

When I was a student in Wesley College, Bristol, I often looked at the memorial roll

- Of former students, ordinary boys from Methodist chapels in Britain
- Called by God, trained and sent with the good news of Jesus to foreign shores
- Many of whom died in their 20s after just one or two years of service
- It was at these memorials in Richmond College, near London
- That the great Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, gazed for so long
- Seeing the storm clouds darkening European civilisation and Christian discipleship
- He had prepared many young pastors to give everything in faithfulness to the gospel
- He, himself, was called upon to be faithful to death, hanged in a Nazi cell
- How could these men chart a course where they knew they might die?
- What energy could motivate them?

### III PRAYER AND FAITH CHANGE EVERYTHING

It is true to say that ‘prayer and faith change everything’ because it is focused on Jesus

- That which focuses upon ourselves is not truly prayer at all
- It is that which focuses upon the will of God
- The fervent prayer of Jesus strengthened him to the victory of the cross
- It is the power of earnest, fervent prayer

The pattern of verses 5 and 7 is often repeated in Church history

- A statement of the circumstances is really a gloomy report
- Followed by a vital word – that word ‘but’
- So Peter was kept in prison – but the church was praying earnestly to God for him
- To avoid sounding old fashioned the NIV says ‘Suddenly’ but the word is ‘Behold’
- And that it seems to me is the promise
- If we bring our circumstances before God, with humble and fervent prayer
- The end result will be “behold” – not necessarily the answer we want
- But a victory for God and glory to his name
- Glory to his name with the miraculous deliverance of Peter – but also
- Glory to his name through the death of Stephen with the spread of the gospel
- Glory to his name through the death of James – even though we know not how

Glory to his name through the prayer and faith of Caspar ten Boom

- Who by prayer and faith challenged the Nazi persecution of the Jews

Glory to his name through the prayer and faith of five MAF missionaries

- Who by prayer and faith brought the gospel to the Auca tribesmen

Glory to his name through the prayer and faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

- A pastor and theologian who resisted Nazism, fascism, racism to death

Glory to his name through the prayer and faith of my college colleagues

- Whose memorial plaque has been an inspiration to succeeding generations

Glory to his name through the prayer and faith of the Lord Jesus Christ himself

- The author and perfecter of our faith

who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Hebrews 12:2)

Although Peter was delivered from prison and went into hiding

- Herod Agrippa was still at large, continuing his oppression of the church
- Whatever the case he became enraged with the people of Tyre and Sidon
- On the second day of his visit to Caesarea, he appeared in his royal robes
- The ancient historian Josephus says that his robe was made of silver threads
- The crowd shouted that he was more than a mere mortal and Herod accepted it
- But God showed, with devastating consequences, his mortal nature

Luke's reference to worms suggests an infection of intestinal roundworms

- Which grow as long as ten to sixteen inches
- Eventually bunching in the intestines causing severe pain, vomiting of worms, death
- Luke adds the observation 'the word of God continued to increase and spread' (2:24)

The deliverance of Peter in answer to fervent prayer

- The non-deliverance and subsequent martyrdom of James
- And the grizzly death of Herod
- Are all ways in which God's sovereignty is expressed
- The responsibility of the Christian is to continue in prayer and faith
- Regardless of the outcome of any crisis that we may face
- For God always has the last word

But we should not mistake God's sovereignty for a kind of fatalism

- For the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (James 5:16)
- And God always responds to our prayers
- It is not working against God but working with God
- That sees us at peace in the answer to our prayers

Paul explored the relationship between the sovereignty of God

- And the faithful prayers of his people, in this way
- Imprisoned, he wrote to the Philippians:

For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

(Philippians 1:19)

He saw the prayers of God's people as a key to the effectiveness of his ministry (Eph. 6:19)

- God can and does save his children in times of crisis if it is his will
- But, in whatever circumstances a believer is found, we can know the peace of Christ
- For whatever experiences God's providence permits us to go through
- Our primary commitment must be to obedience
- How can we know if we are being obedient if everything just suits us?
- How can we know that we are really trusting if everything is going well?
- Isn't this the testimony of Job – though he slay me yet I will hope in him (Job 13:15)

It is a matter of deciding in whom or in what we trust

- Earthly treasures and worldly wealth give a measure of security, only for a time
- We must not be a generation without commitment or passion
- Peter saw wonderful deliverance through the intervention of God
- And the word of God flourished
- Stephen and James faced death for Christ and the word of God flourished
- In 1973 Pastor Wang Zhiming was executed in the Yunnan province of China
- Yet today the church there is growing – yet desperately short of Christian workers
- Will you play it safe spiritually (non-negotiables, opt for home and what you know)?
- Or will prayer and faith challenge, cost and change – to inspire now and in the future