

GOD DOES ANSWER PRAYER! (Acts 12)

In this past week the Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt ordered a review into the plight of persecuted Christians around the world. According to the Foreign Office, something like 215 *million* Christians faced discrimination and violence last year. They reckon an average of 250 Christians are killed every month ... and the numbers are increasing. ... If it was any other organisation or institution it would have been wiped out long before now. But persecution has been a phenomenon threatening God's people from the outset.

The background to our study ... **Acts 12:1** Now about that time ... That was in 44 AD when a great famine came upon the land, cf. **Acts 11:27** And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch [*c.290 miles*]. **28** And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. **29** Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: **30** Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. ... Under such conditions the enemy set itself *hard* against the people of God, **Acts 12:1** Now about that time Herod the king [*Herod Agrippa I*] stretched forth his hands to vex [*oppress, afflict, harm, maltreat*] certain of the church [*ἐκκλησία*]. ... Already some of its main leaders had been told not to preach, and there had also been Stephen's martyrdom. ... King Herod was the grandson of the infamous Herod the Great who ordered the Bethlehem children to be murdered, and he was also the nephew of Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptist ... so he came from a bad family!

Since the Day of Pentecost, the church had grown, - thousands were saved. So, Herod was feeling threatened, and he courted the Jews who were worried about the influx of this new sect. And, of course, he was further concerned the Christians might bring a rebellion.

So, he started off by killing **Acts 12:2** James the brother of John with the sword. ... **3** And because he saw it pleased the Jews [*i.e. killing the disciples/apostles of Jesus*], he proceeded further to take Peter also [*... with the intention of killing him too*]. (Then were the days of unleavened bread [*i.e. Passover time*].) **4** And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers [*a 'quaternion' was a 'shift' of four soldiers, therefore, sixteen soldiers watched over Paul, i.e. four 'shifts of four soldiers*] to keep him; intending after Easter [*πάσχα, Pesach*] to bring him forth to the people. ...

Herod did not kill Peter just then because it would not have had the same impact as if he was to kill him *after* the Passover ... and that is why he put Peter in the prison for the few days before it. And to make sure the Christians wouldn't come and free him, Herod assigned four guards of four soldiers to watch over him and make sure it didn't happen.

So, Peter was locked in the cell ... soldiers guarding him 'round the clock' ... he is bound in chains ... Herod intending to kill him, and yet he's asleep between two soldiers! ... How could he sleep?! He could sleep because he knew people in a prayer meeting were praying for him, [v.5 prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him \[Peter\]](#). ... They were holding a special meeting to pray for Peter in prison. They met in the home of John Mark's mother, praying late into the night. ... These were dangerous times ... So far, Stephen had been killed, James the brother of John had been killed, Peter was in prison ... if these Christians had been found they could suffer the same fate ... Nevertheless, they did not know to do anything else in the circumstances *but pray!*

Unbeknownst to the people in the prayer meeting, God had sent an angel to Peter's prison cell, ⁷ And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. ⁸ And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. ⁹ And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. ¹⁰ When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. 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. ... Peter exits the prison and walks through the darkness along the streets to the home of John Mark's mother. Inside, they were praying.

One of the people inside was a young servant girl (παῖδίσκη), - a 'youngster', - and when he knocked on the door she heard him, and she recognised his voice. Instead of opening the door and bringing Peter in, she turned and ran back into the room and told all the people in the prayer meeting, "It's Peter! It's Peter, and he's standing outside the front door wanting in! Our prayers have been answered."

Why didn't she let him in?! ... She is too excited! Her and the other people in the prayer meeting were crying out to God for Peter's life to be saved ... and now he's standing outside unable to get in! ... Look again at those two words in v.5, *but prayer* ... and *that* is what brings us to the turning point of the story. Thomas Watson said, "The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel".

And this young girl Rhoda gets up from the prayer meeting, where God is listening to the earnest prayers of His people ... and she goes to answer the knock at the door. ... But wait a moment, it's dark outside (v.6) ... it could have been anybody, - ... it could have been Herod's soldiers coming to arrest the whole lot of them!

Yes, she would have been frightened, - naturally, - but when she heard the voice of Peter ... not only *should* she have opened the door, but the whole meeting should have been up off their knees and opened the door! ... *The Lord had answered their prayer!* ... Peter was standing outside the home where the people had been upholding him before the throne of grace, and he was there to show them *God answers prayer!*

You know when you have been praying for something, and you haven't given up praying about it ... and then suddenly God answers your prayer. ... Sometimes we are like Rhoda and the people in that meeting – we are *amazed* when God answers. ... But, that is what He has promised ... When we pray in His will He answers, **1 Jn. 5:14** *And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: 15 And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.* ... And He had already begun to answer even before Rhoda arrived at the door. ... When she ran back and told everyone who it was, they didn't believe her, "It's an angel", they said. They were praying, yet not truly believing.

What we pray about ... do we believe God can make it happen? When we believe we are asking from God something which is in His will, do we believe God is able to answer our prayers? ... We are careful what we pray for. We would not pray for anything contrary to how His Word teaches, and we trust we are praying as guided by the Holy Spirit ... "Peter is at the door!" "No, he can't be!" ... Is that not what these people in this prayer meeting were praying for?! ... The thing for which they had been praying ... and they did not believe Rhoda! ... **13** *And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate* ... and he is *still* knocking, **16** *But Peter*

continued knocking ... It was not until Peter was welcomed in and standing in the middle of the prayer meeting, telling them how he was delivered, that they joyfully acknowledged the Lord's answer to their prayer.

In some ways, it's quite ironical God could get Peter out of a prison but Peter found it hard getting into a prayer meeting! ... God had less obstacles to contend with in the prison than in the prayer meeting ... Is there a lesson here for us? Are we praying for God to work amongst us, but are we holding back from believing He can? God **Eph. 3:20** is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,

... **16** But Peter continued knocking: and when *they* had opened the door, and saw him, *they* were astonished. ... It was when the people in the meeting recognised the power of God that not only the door of the house opened, but also the 'door' of their minds and their hearts. God showed them He hears and answers prayer.

After the prayer meeting Peter left them (v.17b). Herod was still in a 'strut' (v.18-19) and yet he continued to set himself up as invincible (v.21,22), but the Lord dealt with him (v.23). Meanwhile, in answer to the prayers of God's people, **24** the word of God grew and multiplied.

Rhoda and the people in the prayer meeting were witnesses to what God can do. ... When He hears us pray, He hears more than we say, He answers more than we ask, and He gives more than we could imagine ... He answers in His own time, in His own way, and in His own will.

The whole situation looked impossible ... the prisoner was chained, the prison doors were locked, soldiers on guard inside and outside the prison and *still* the Lord answered the prayers of His people. ... There are no obstacles to what He can do. He can take a little fellowship like ours and He can do a work beyond our expectations ... but He needs to see the earnestness of His people at prayer.

The prayer meeting remains the most important meeting for it is where God recognises the desires of our hearts, the ultimate of which ought to be for His Glory, **Mt. 5:14** Ye are the light of the world ... **16** Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. ... Yes, God *does* answer prayer, and He *will* honour those who honour Him.