

GOD OUR HELPER

Acts 12:1-17

If any man ever suffered from frustration, it was Herod Agrippa I. Sharing the murderous propensities of his grandfather, Herod the Great, who ordered the slaughter of the babes of Bethlehem about the time of the birth of Christ, and of his uncle, Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist, this dissolute and self-seeking king determined that he would eliminate certain leaders of the early church. Having decided to try his hand at murder, "He killed James the brother of John with a sword." His daring crime in slaying James, one of the three most prominent apostles and the first one of the twelve to die, was greeted with enthusiasm by the Jews. Evidently Herod's primary purpose in persecuting the Christians was to curry favor with the Jews. Ever careful to remain loyal to Rome, Herod also did many things to cultivate and increase his popularity with the Jews and to win their affection.

I. The Detention of Peter. Acts 12:3-5.

Perceiving that the murder of James pleased the Jews very much, Herod decided that he would execute Peter also. Herod had Peter arrested on the false charge of being a disturber of the peace and of setting forth teachings which conflicted with Jewish traditions. He had him cast into a dungeon for safekeeping. Thinking that Peter would bear close watching, Herod designated sixteen soldiers to guard him, and thereby prevent his escape.

These soldiers were divided into four squads of four each, because the day and the night were divided into four watches, each of three hours duration. Each squad was on duty for three hours at a time. As a rule, a prisoner was chained by his right hand to the left hand of his guard, but Peter was chained by each hand to a guard on each side of him, while the remaining two soldiers of the quaternion on duty kept watch at one of the three bolted doors or gates. The care with which this unarmed and non-resistant man was kept evidenced the fact that Herod was afraid that the Apostle might escape. The soldiers who guarded Peter were answerable with their lives for his safekeeping.

Since capital punishment was not administered during the Passover, Herod fully intended to execute Peter after the festival, in such a manner as would guarantee an increase in his popularity with the Jews. He thought that when the Jews who were in attendance at the Passover learned of his great zeal for the Mosaic Law, as indicated by his persecution of the apostles, his prestige would be enhanced greatly. Oh, the lengths to which some people will go for selfish reasons! Firmly believing that his prisoner was secure, and that he would be forthcoming on the day when he intended that he should be executed, Herod made the tragic mistake of failing to take God into account. Many of us unfortunately are like Herod in that we, too, frequently reckon without taking God and His will into our calculations.

Through the centuries God's obedient children and faithful witnesses have encountered strong and bitter opposition from fallen human beings who have been under the influence of Satan. Many of His devoted servants have been the victims of animosity, persecution, and violence because of their loyalty to Him and to the teachings of His Word. Christ told His followers to expect this sort of thing. For their encouragement, however, He said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Moreover, it is good and helpful to know that the Lord never forgets, fails, nor forsakes those who suffer physically, mentally, or emotionally for Him.

II. The Deliverance of Peter. Acts 12:5-10.

No pains had been spared by Herod to make the escape of Peter seem to be an utter impossibility, but he failed to take God into account. The death of Peter appeared to be imminent and inevitable, but God had been left out of the plans. In planning the execution of Peter, Herod had overlooked the power of earnest prayer unto God on the part of the Christians. While Peter was chained to the soldiers, after being locked within a dungeon, the members of the church assembled and prayed earnestly unto God for his release from prison.

As best we can, let us attempt to visualize the entire situation. There was a great emergency in the life of the church. The church was threatened with the loss of one of its most conspicuous leaders. It was the night before the planned execution of Peter. Triumph appeared certain for those who had contrived the arrest of Peter and had planned his execution. With the life of the leading apostle at stake, it appeared that the continued existence of the church might also be in peril. Doubtless everything was in readiness for a great celebration of the execution of Peter. Probably several were already gloating in anticipation of that event. It was quite obvious to the members of the church that their church was in imminent peril.

What could the members of the church do in this desperate situation? It was no use for them to appeal to Herod, for his decision had already been made and his mind had been closed. They did not have any advocate at court. Neither did they have any money or any political influence to use in an attempt to secure the release of their leader. But they did have a direct access to the throne of God's grace.

While the enemies of Christ were celebrating the detention and imprisonment of Peter, and were anticipating his execution, the members of the church assembled for a special prayer meeting in his behalf. There were various Christian homes in Jerusalem, where groups of believers met from time to time for prayer, fellowship, instruction, and exhortation. Here we are introduced to one of these homes, that of Mary, the mother of John Mark and the sister of Barnabas. It is believed that, at that particular time, Mary was a widow. Most likely Mary was a woman of some wealth, for evidently she owned a house of considerable size, because it was adequate to accommodate a sizeable number of church members. The fact that these Christians carried their cause to God in earnest prayer did not mean anything to the wicked people who opposed Christ and His followers. They considered it a joke, but, as is often the case, when Christians get the ear of God in their behalf, their enemies are made to tremble. Mary, queen of Scots, remarked that she feared the prayers of John Knox more than she feared the armies of England.

Prison walls and chains confined the body of the Apostle, but they could not keep the prayers of sincere hearts from ascending to the throne of the omnipotent God. We do not know exactly what they asked God to do for Peter. Doubtless they asked Him to give Peter the comfort and the strength which he needed so much while he was confined in prison, and to enable him to meet death courageously in case of that eventuality. Evidently they also prayed for his deliverance from prison. It was perfectly clear to them that there was not any hope of Peter's deliverance from prison apart from God. Without any hesitation, they offered earnest, definite, united believing, fervent, persistent, and intercessory prayers in behalf of Peter. Their intercession resulted in one of the most astonishing manifestations of divine power and deliverance catalogued in the New Testament. It furnished a splendid illustration and example for all time of the fact that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16).

The hope of those early Christians was in the mighty power of God, and they firmly believed that they could lay hold on that power through their prayers; they did just that.

In the midst of their great emergency, the church members gave themselves without reservation to earnest and unceasing prayer for their leader. After all, a fundamental function of any church is prayer. It is the duty of every church member to pray, both at home and in the worship services. It has become the tendency in the present-day churches when some need arises in the church, to either create another organization or employ another person to do the job. There is always the danger of our coming to think that we can do what should be done ourselves. But we cannot do anything as it should be done apart from God. Prayer must be made unto God. Preaching, or any other phase of the Lord's work, cannot be done effectively unless the members of the church personally pray earnestly and persistently unto God. Before Peter preached at Pentecost all of the church members prayed. Because they prayed as they did, his sermon was effective and three thousand were saved and added to the church. Prayer must be made unto God by the members of the church, if the services are to be effective. You have no right to expect the blessings of God to come to your church unless you pray for them. How many of you prayed definitely for this service before you came? How many of you were able to say, "I am going to church just to see what God will do today in answer to my prayers?"

When those early Christians contemplated the difficulty, of getting along without their capable leaders, and the strong possibility of being subjected to bitter persecution themselves, they gave themselves unreservedly to fervent praying. They put all of their spiritual strength into their praying. They were trying their very best by prayer to break the bonds which stood between Peter and liberty.

In planning for the execution of Peter, Herod had overlooked the power of earnest prayer unto God on the part of the Christians. This is another good illustration of the fact that things do not always work out in accordance with the plans that people make. Quite often the visible bases for our hopes are cancelled.

When Herod began to interfere with and to persecute the men of God, his doom was settled. For these things God smote him with a loathsome disease, and he was eaten by worms, and he died. We don't know whether his death was immediate or that it took place days or weeks after God smote him. But the fact is that his death came as a stroke of divine judgment upon him because of the way in which he treated the Lord's men who were His leaders in the early church.

Informed people now know that the days of persecution have not ended by any means. All who have been instructed in and are loyal to the Word of God know that, as time passes, the persecution of those who are obedient to Christ and who follow Him whithersoever He goeth will become more intense and fierce. But it is most encouraging to remember those lines from the poem, "The Present Crisis," by James Russell Lowell:

"Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
But the scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadows
Keeping watch above His own."

Those who know the history of the Lord's churches understand full well that God's judgment is as certain to fall upon every person who mistreats one of His servants as the night shall follow the day. Nobody has ever gotten by indefinitely with that sin, and none should ever expect to without suffering the consequences.

It is also startling to learn that, during the night before Peter was to be brought forth for execution, he was sleeping with utter composure. No doubt he was quite aware of the fate awaiting him in the morning, but he had committed his soul and life into the keeping of the heavenly Father, so he did not let the thought of an impending death prevent him from sleeping soundly. One thing was perfectly clear, namely, he was not afraid to die. Having committed himself to God, he had all of the resources which he needed for this trying experience. With his faith based on the knowledge that he was serving a living Christ, Who had been raised from the dead, Peter did not fear anything that man could do to him. He was ready to travel whatever road the Lord had chosen for him. What a testimony to the transforming power of Jesus Christ in his life!

Even though the death of Peter appeared to be immediate and inevitable, there came a hitch which Herod and his men had not anticipated. As it often happens in the cases of those who are opposed to the Word of God and the proclamation of its message, God intervened and thwarted the plans of His enemies. He allows men to go just so far, and there He stops them. Most of them have sense enough to know when God has stopped them, but there are some who keep on struggling. You will recall that, in the case of the infant Jesus, men purposed, plotted, and ordered His destruction, but when the killers went to get him he was not there. His would-be murderers discovered that they were fighting against God, and that is a losing battle for any person. When they finally put Christ to death on the cross, they really thought they were putting an end to the whole Christian enterprise, but that was only the beginning of the real expansion of Christianity. In this case before us, Herod and his associates had planned well, but they overlooked one factor of vital importance, and that was God. Through the imprisonment of Peter, Herod stumbled to his own undoing.

Hands of men often get into the affairs of God to their own hurt. Herod put forth his hand to vex certain members of the church, but he vexed himself instead. Many times men become bold in their opposition to the work of the church, but such forces soon spend themselves and the opposition reacts upon the opposers. Herod put forth his hand and slew James, but the death of that man of God gave new inspiration and courage to the rest of the disciples. Herod had Peter arrested and imprisoned, but that dastardly deed became the source of tremendous embarrassment to the king. He would have given anything if he had not mistreated the Apostle, but he could not undo what he had done. He had to suffer the consequences of his own wilful sin. He also had to answer to God for it, just as all others will have to do. Like many others in every generation, Herod thought he could take matters in his own hands, and do as he pleased, and get by with it, but he learned from experience that God would not allow him to do so.

In response to the prayers of the members of the church, God sent an angel to the prison where Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, to whom he was chained. The fact that the angel stood beside Peter was a token of the fact that God was protecting him. Neither the Apostle nor the guards were awakened by the celestial light of the angelic presence. The angel had to strike or nudge Peter in the side to arouse him out of his deep slumber. When

he had awakened, the angel said to him, "Arise up quickly." As Peter obeyed, God removed the chains or unshackled him, and enabled him to do what he had been commanded to do. Peter was set free to know and to do God's will. The angel also said, "Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals." Now, that Peter had been liberated from his chains, it was up to him to wait on himself. It is ever true that God does not do for us what we can do for ourselves. God had wrought a wonderful deliverance, but His power had not been substituted for what human wisdom and strength could do.

As soon as he had attired himself, Peter was ready to go outside the prison. As he meekly followed the angel, he was still pretty much in a daze. It all seemed too good to be true. In modern parlance, Peter thought he was seeing things.

"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" automatically, or without the touch of a human hand. When the angel and the preacher stood in the street, Peter knew that his escape was real, and he was equally sure that it was the work of God. What a sense of triumph must have flooded Peter's soul as he walked along the streets of Jerusalem as a free man! He knew that he had been delivered through divine intervention in order that he might render further service and be an example or instrument of God's power to thwart the purposes of wicked men.

Peter presented himself at the door of the home of Mary in which prayer services were in progress in his behalf. When Rhoda, the maid, answered his knock at the door, she cautiously inquired who was there. With palpitating heart she listened to learn who was seeking entrance at that hour of the night. When Peter spoke, Rhoda immediately recognized his voice. She was so excited and overwhelmed with joy that she forgot to open the door for Peter. Instead she rushed back into the room where the people were praying and made the startling announcement that Peter was at the door. They stopped their praying long enough to declare that Rhoda was out of her mind. When she kept insisting that Peter was at the door, soon they said it must be his angel. Some people find it easier to believe in ghosts than they do that God will answer prayer. Peter had a harder time getting into that prayer meeting with his friends than he did in getting out of the prison of his enemies. When the door was finally opened, and Peter stood there in their midst, the church members were amazed and astonished to see him. They could hardly believe that he was free. When Peter related the thrilling story of what God had done they could hardly believe what they heard, but there was the undeniable proof that God had performed a miracle and restored to them their beloved leader. Answers to the prayers of God's children are often amazing to humble and devout hearts. The greater the blessings in answer to prayer the more wonder, gratitude, and joy there is in their hearts.