

WHEN THE CHURCH PRAYS

"Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." Acts 12:5.

We rejoice in the fact that our religion is supernatural. God is the source of it and the revelation which He has given us is filled with the evidences of divine power. The opening of the doors of the prison and the deliverance of Peter therefrom is one of the many manifestations of divine power.

When we hear of a Herod we expect to learn of bloodshed. Herod the Great, the grandfather of this man, slew the babes about the time of the birth of Jesus. His uncle, Herod Antipas, slew John the Baptist. Here we have Herod Agrippa stretching forth his hand to vex certain leaders of the early church. He killed the Apostle James with the sword, which was an act of tyranny done to please the Jews.

Perceiving that the murder of James pleased the Jews very much, Herod then cast Peter into prison. To make sure that Peter did not break jail and run away, he was placed in the innermost dungeon of the prison and carefully guarded day and night. Thinking that Peter was a man worth watching, Herod designated sixteen soldiers, in relays of four, to guard him. He was kept in a dungeon made of massive rock, chained to two soldiers, and behind three bolted gates. Surely that was taking great care to hold one unarmed, non-resistant and defenseless man! The care with which Peter was kept was a confession that even Herod was afraid of him.

All that enmity and hatred could do was represented in the fact, "Peter, therefore, was kept in prison." All that the greatest government in the world could do was being done to keep Peter in prison. The soldiers who guarded him were all answerable with their lives for his safekeeping. The "therefore" of this text is explained by the fact that during the paschal season nobody was executed. Peter, therefore, had seven clear days at least during which he would not be put to death.

Peter had committed himself to the Lord, so he laid down and went to sleep. He had no fear of death. For him, as Paul said, "to live is Christ and to die is gain." He was the child of God, the friend and servant of Christ, and he knew that the Lord would take care of him. He could lie down in peace and sleep, for all was well with him. He had a good conscience. There wasn't any outstanding account between him and God. With him it was well for time and eternity. He belonged to the Lord and he wanted Him to do as He pleased with His property. I read about a paralytic who had engraved on a seal an ox standing between a plow and an altar. The inscription on it was "Ready for either." That was how Peter felt. He could drive the gospel plow or he could die on the altar of martyrdom. He was ready to live in Christ's service or to die as Christ's sacrifice, whichever the Lord preferred. Meanwhile Peter slept. God gave His beloved sleep, although the executioner was preparing the scaffold on which Peter was to die a shameful death.

Think about a man going to sleep in that condition, between two soldiers, without a comfortable bed, with chains on his wrists and on his ankles, and without an opportunity to turn over when he desired.

Suddenly, at midnight, the dungeon chamber was flooded with brilliant light. The strange, mysterious and celestial light, which glowed and blazed around the prison cell, came from the form and lustrous garment of a holy angel. The angel smote Peter on the side, and said unto him, "Arise up quickly." Immediately "his chains fell off from his hands," but not so as to awaken the soldiers to whom he had been chained.

After girding himself and putting on his sandals, Peter threw his cloak about him and followed the angel as he was told. When they reached the iron gate which led from the prison court

into the street it swung open and the angel and Peter passed out into the open street. As he followed the angel up the street the latter disappeared as abruptly as he had appeared.

In contrast with all that earth and hell could do, "prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." Peter's fellow believers had not sent a deputation to his Royal Majesty imploring his regal clemency on behalf of the Apostle. Instead, they took to higher ground; they appealed to God in prayer. What else could they do? As is often the case, God either leads or permits His people to come to that extremity where their only hope or remedy is prayer.

While the authorities were trusting in prison walls to silence Peter's voice and to stop the progress of the religion he preached, the early church put their faith in the power of prayer to defeat their purposes. Christianity has made its greatest progress by meeting the powers of darkness in a prayer meeting, and that is the only successful way. Some of us used to hear that beautiful poem that defines prayer:

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Unuttered or expressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

"Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear;
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.

"Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try,
Prayer the sublimest strains that reach
The majesty on high.

"Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gate of death—
He entered heaven with a prayer.

"Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice,
Returning from his ways,
While angels in their songs rejoice,
And say, 'Behold he prays.'"

Oh, how those early Christians prayed! They besought the Lord that their chief pastor might be spared to them. They were anxious for him to be brought back to them, in order that they might hear him preach again the glorious gospel of the grace of God.

I. The Cause Of Their Praying.

On the one hand these early Christians in Jerusalem had been entrusted with a great testimony, that of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. On the other hand they were facing a grave difficulty--the double difficulty of standing up to persecution and of getting on without leadership. One leader--James--had been martyred and another--Peter--had been cast into prison. It was a time of crisis for these men and women who had left all to follow Christ. By a crisis is meant a situation that combines danger and opportunity. Would their testimony be smothered by their difficulty, or would the difficulty become the broken pitcher, as in the case of Gideon's band, through which the flame of the testimony would leap up and out with new energy and light? That was the question, and prayer gave the answer. Long and fervent prayer was offered to God by the church.

When those early Christians confronted a crisis, they made prayer not their last resort but their first. They knew their testimony was needed in the land—the testimony concerning Jesus Christ, His love for all men and His redemption of all life. They knew that enormous difficulty stood in the way of that testimony. They knew the crisis was on, so they prayed long and earnestly and persistently. They prayed until God's power was turned loose in that tense and threatening state of affairs. They prayed until their foes were defeated, their witness was vindicated, and their love was set flowing into new channels. They had cause to pray, and so do we.

There are times in life, critical times, dark days, when hardly anyone thinks of asking, "Is prayer valuable?" They simply can't help praying. Prayer becomes instinctive.

II. The Character Of Their Praying.

1. It was concerned praying.

Their praying poured from hearts that were stirred with the compassion of Christ. Here was Peter in prison. Here was the whole Christian community at Jerusalem in peril. Luke tells us that "long and fervent prayer was offered to God by the church."

Prayer never reaches its highest levels until it springs from an aroused soul. The run-way from which it takes off lies across the field of a loving and sensitive spirit. John Smith, an early Wesleyan preacher, once declared: "I am a broken-hearted man, not for myself, but on account of others; my God has given me such a sight of the value of precious souls that I cannot live if souls are not saved. Oh, give me souls, or else I die." That sort of praying, aroused and ardent, gives God His best opportunity.

It is a concerned God Who is at work in this world and He requires concerned people if they are to do business with Him in prayer.

2. It was continuous praying.

They prayed "without ceasing." Of course, some prayers are answered immediately. Others are pressed and persisted in across many a trying day or year. It is here that we often falter. We frequently lack the faith and courage to continue. Hence the results of the stubborn quest and the patient asking are missing.

An invalid in London, years ago, wanted Dwight L. Moody to come to England for evangelistic meetings. When she read of Moody's work in Chicago, a prayer was born in her heart: "O Lord, send this man to our church." For two years she kept up her conversation with God about the coming of the American evangelist. In 1872 Moody went to England, but without any engagements to preach. While in London he met the pastor of this bedridden young woman whose name was Mariame Adlard. The pastor invited Moody to preach for him. He went to the church and did so. Halfway through his evening sermon the power of the Holy Spirit came strongly upon the evangelist and the congregation. When the invitation was given, scores came forward and gave their hearts to Jesus Christ. Mr. Moody left the next day for Ireland but scarcely reached Dublin when a telegram informed him that a revival had broken out in the church and he must come back at once. Later, after hundreds had been converted, Mr. Moody said, "I wanted to know what this meant. I began making inquiries and never rested until I found a bedridden girl praying that God would bring me to that church. He had heard her, and brought me over four thousand miles of land and sea at her request."

A faint heart and a feeble faith would have given up, and with what blessing lost none can tell. But hers was the superb stubbornness of prayer which God delights to honor.

3. It was corporate praying.

"Prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." "Long and fervent prayer was offered by the church in his behalf." We have here the united voice of the church in prayer. This is a program that will win. When the members of a church lift a united voice in prayer to God, believing in His power and trusting in His love, the chains that bind, the prison doors that hinder, the Herods that hate and oppose will be broken and overthrown. There is no doubt about the outcome to those who claim the promises of God in prayer. He has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." God responds to the faith and fervor of the prayers of His children. He encourages them to go into their closets alone, and after they have shut the door to pray to their Father in secret, but in all general matters, in everything bearing upon the well-being and progress of His churches, God wants the whole company of believers to unite their voices in supplication to Him.

The united prayers of the church as recorded in the book of Acts had power. Doors were opened and new and wider fields of service were made available, and it has been so through all the ages since. New doors of opportunity are opened and new fields of service become available when God's people have united voices in prayer to God. A twentieth century church should do what that first church did—take all their problems to God in prayer.

This first church prayed earnestly unto God for Peter. The word which is translated "earnestly" literally means "stretched out." It gives the idea of a runner who is putting forth every ounce of strength to reach the goal. He stretches himself out to the limit of his strength. This first church put all they had of spiritual strength into their praying.

There is a kind of praying that is irrepresible. There are prayers that cannot be kept back. These are the prayers that take all of the soul in their delivery. Such was the prayer of John Knox for Scotland. On England's throne sat Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII, who had been brought up under the sinister influence of Catherine of Aragon. She had set out to destroy the church. The jails were filled with Christians. The fires of Smithfield were burning. It was a time of desolation for the church. The great heart of John Knox was stirred. Prostrate on his face he cried to God, pleading for the church in Scotland. He prayed until it seemed that his heart would burst with the passion and fervor of his prayer. In one of those seasons of intense, taking hold of God, he got the answer and, springing to his feet, he cried, "Deliverance has come! Deliverance has come!" The announcement came almost immediately from London that "Mary, Queen of England, was dead." That is the kind of praying the first church did. It is the kind of praying we need today.

We must put the power of our whole souls behind our prayers if we would have them reach the ear of God. It is not the arithmetic of our prayers—how many they are; it is not the music of our prayers—how sweet our voices may be; it is not the geometry of our prayers—how argumentative they are; it is not the wording of our prayers—how eloquent they are; but it is the soul of our prayers—how intense they are—in which God is interested.

The one who prays delivers himself to God. There is sacrifice in his prayer. There is repentance in his prayer. There is confession of sins in his prayer. No one can pray if his heart is full of sin, hatred and unforgiveness. There is no use to try.

III. The Consequences Of Their Praying.

1. There was awakening.

Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with chains. The angel came and smote

him and told him to arise quickly. Many of us today, like Peter, need to be awakened, and set free. This kindling of cold hearts, this freeing of fettered lives, will not come unless some of us get in fresh, vital touch with God through prayers.

2. There was astonishment.

When the awakened and released Apostle presented himself at the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where his fellow Christians were assembled and praying for his release, "they were astonished." When he first knocked at the door, the maid who answered thought that she was "seeing things." She fled in consternation. "But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished." Perhaps we ought not to assume that the only thing for which they prayed was the deliverance of Peter from prison. It is possible that they had prayed most earnestly that he be given courage and strength to "take" his imprisonment, and that they be given fortitude and love to meet the persecutions that threaten them.

What is more, the answers to our prayers are always amazing to really humble and devout hearts. Naturally, the greater the magnitude of the answer, the greater the wonder and joy.

3. There was advance.

This comes out strikingly in verse twenty-four, "But the word of God grew and multiplied." Here, by the way, is an extremely interesting sequence. As the chapter opens we find Herod, the persecutor of the Christians, throwing Peter into prison. "But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." Coming to the close of the chapter, we read in verse twenty-three that Herod was "eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." Then, immediately following, in verse twenty-four, these words: "But the word of God grew and multiplied." First, we have the devil's effort at repression. Because of prayer, that effort failed. Then, we have God's movement toward revival. Because of prayer, that movement succeeded.

Do we want "the word of God" to grow and multiply in our lives, individually? Then, we must pray--simply, pointedly, habitually, humbly and trustingly.

Do we want "the word of God" to grow and multiply in our church? Then we must pray--unitedly, lovingly and confessingly.

Yes, there is advance when we truly pray. Shall we miss the happy consequences of their praying--the awakening with which it stabs us, the astonishment with which it often overwhelms us, and the advance which it assures us?