

The Answer's Knocking at the Door

Acts 12:1-19

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Prayer is God's idea. We're able to pray because God wants us to pray. Prayer starts with God, draws us into involvement in what God is doing, and then returns to God as we offer ourselves and our prayers.

God wants to teach us to pray. There's a progression in our prayer life. We can grow and learn and develop. In praying, we don't try to change God's mind. There is real interaction in our relationship with God, but mostly we seek to discover what God wants and learn to pray according to God's will. In our relationship with God we learn to desire what God desires and pray for what God wants to give. We begin to discover and cooperate with what God is doing already. Last week somebody said to me, "Acts sure is busy." That's partly because Luke focuses on events and activity in the early church. Also, Acts is busy because God is active. God is on the move in the church and in the world. Prayer is one way we get in on what God is doing. Prayer helps us get aligned with God. We want our hearts aligned with God's heart, our wills aligned with God's will.

The earliest Christians were learning about prayer as they grew in their relationship with God. This story in Acts 12 shows how God can surprise us in prayer.

What do you expect from God when you pray? How would you react if you got what you ask for? Let's explore this story and see how it can help us develop in our praying.

King Herod Agrippa was persecuting the church. Much of his success was due to his ability to keep in favor with the Jewish people. The church had become unpopular because it was seen as a false and dangerous sect. So Herod went after the church's leaders. First he had James beheaded. This was the Apostle James, brother of John, son of Zebedee. Because this execution pleased the people, Herod also had Peter arrested.

It was the time of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, so Herod didn't execute Peter immediately. Instead, he had him put in prison under heavy guard. Peter was locked in a cell and chained to two guards

with more guards at the door. These extra precautions were probably to prevent an escape like Peter had made earlier (5:18-26). At that time, an angel set Peter and the other apostles free so they could continue proclaiming the gospel. Herod wasn't going to let Peter get away again.

So Peter was imprisoned during the feast that celebrates deliverance from bondage. The emphasis on Peter's captivity and the heavy guard shows the human impossibility of the situation. There was no way he could escape. *But while Peter was in prison, the church earnestly prayed to God for him.*

It'd be interesting to know just what they prayed. But the fact that they prayed shows their dependence on God. They were accustomed to bringing all things to God in prayer. And they kept praying—persistently and earnestly. Don't give up too quickly or too easily. Keep praying because things are happening that we can't see.

While the church was praying, God was at work. Peter would likely be executed soon. He was sleeping in his cell, chained between two soldiers. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell.

The angel may have whispered, "Peter!" But Peter was sleeping so soundly it didn't rouse him. So the angel struck his side and said, "Quick! Get up!" As he said that, the chains fell from Peter's wrists.

The angel told Peter to get dressed and follow him. Still in a sleepy stupor, Peter did as he was told. The angel led him out of the cell, past the guards, through the gate and into the street. After they had gone about a block, the angel disappeared. And Peter realized this was not a dream or a vision—he was really out of prison! Finally fully awake, Peter recognized that the Lord had rescued him.

But he needed to get off the street and he wanted to share what had happened to him. So he went to the church's meeting place—the home of Mary, John Mark's mother. This is possibly the site of the Upper Room that was so important for the early church.

Many people had gathered at Mary's house and were praying—praying for Peter. The house had a courtyard surrounded by a wall with a door in it. Peter began banging on the door.

Here are the people praying: "Lord, bless Peter. Protect him. Give him strength. Deliver him." Who knows what they were praying? Then they hear KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK! A servant girl name Rhoda went to see who was at the door interrupting their prayers.

"Who is it?"

"Quick, let me in!"

When Rhoda recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed—their prayers were answered!—that she ran back to tell the others and forgot to open the door for Peter. She burst in on the prayer meeting and said, "Peter is at the door!"

And did they rejoice and give thanks and welcome Peter in? No, they said, "Rhoda, you're crazy! Peter's in prison. There's no way he could be here." She kept insisting, "Yes, it is Peter. I recognized his voice." So they said, "It must be his angel." They may have thought that Peter's guardian angel had left him to come comfort them. They might even have thought that Peter was already dead and that's why his angel was at the house instead of taking care of Peter.

What a reaction. The answer to their prayers is knocking at the door and they don't believe it. Are we ever like that when God tries to answer our prayers? Are we so busy praying and talking and worrying that we don't recognize God's answer or receive it? Sometimes we act like we don't really want an answer. We're so content with our familiar problems that we don't want whatever changes God's answer might require.

While the prayer group was arguing with Rhoda, Peter stayed outside. He may have been getting nervous. Herod's soldiers could come down the street any minute.

So Peter kept on knocking, pounding at the door, maybe thinking, "Where are they? What's going on?" Finally, someone had the idea of going and opening the door. And there stood Peter in the flesh, released from prison—the answer to their prayers. They were astonished. I imagine their mouths dropped open and they stood and stared.

But as Peter came in, they all started babbling their astonishment as well as praising God. Peter motioned for them to be quiet. Then he told

them the story about his release from prison and asked them to tell the story to the other leaders. Then he slipped out and got away.

The next day, Luke says, "There was no small commotion among the soldiers." I'd guess not! Somehow this Galilean fisherman had walked out of prison past all those guards without being noticed. After an unsuccessful search for Peter, Herod had the guards executed.

This is an amazing story. And it should encourage us as I'm sure it encouraged the early Christians. God is at work and our prayers are part of that work.

But this story also challenges us. What answers to our prayers are knocking at our door and we refuse to receive them? What's God trying to say to us? What people in our lives are gifts from God but we fail to see them as gifts? What answers to prayer are staring us in the face? We need to accept them so God can get on with the rest of his work in our lives.

It is hard sometimes to accept what God wants to do or wants us to do. A man slipped and fell off a cliff. On the way down, he grabbed a vine that was growing on the side of the cliff. Now he was hanging too far down to climb up and a hundred feet from the bottom. He called out, "Is anybody up there? Help me!" And a voice came from on high: "I'm here and I'll help you. Just let go. Trust me." The man held on for a little while, then he said, "Is anybody else up there?"

We also need to notice that prayer is not just for our individual needs or those of our immediate family. Certainly God cares about those needs and we should pray about them. But God also wants to get us in on what God's doing in our church, our community, and all over the world. God wants to expand our praying and use our prayers to bless people in all kinds of places. God wants to use our prayers to challenge evil and injustice wherever they're holding people captive.

The church in Acts used its power—the power of prayer—against the power of Herod, who commanded soldiers and governments. Think about that little group of Christians huddled behind closed doors, fearful of the evil hand of Herod and his soldiers, doubtful that any power, maybe not even the power of God, could overcome such power. But then a free man bangs at the door of the church to tell the gathered disciples that powerful

Herod is powerless to stop the gospel. God opened Herod's door to let Peter out, but the church needed to open its door to let him in (Will Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary*).

Will we, can we open the door of the church to receive God's answer to our prayers? Will we open the door in our lives to experience what God sends our way?

How is God guiding your prayers for the church? What do we expect God to do with our church? What answers to prayer are knocking at our door? Will we open up and let them in?

I like this prayer that another pastor shared:

Lord,

Give us the vision to see the church you have called us to be;

Give us the passion to desire your vision;

Give us the wisdom to find the path to your vision;

Give us the strength to move on toward your vision;

Give us the joy to celebrate your work being done!

In the name of the One who called together those first disciples to do the work of the kingdom we pray. Amen.

(Susan Southall, Enid FUMC)

When God answers and starts knocking at our door, let's open up to the Lord who is busy carrying out his purposes.