

The Answer Came Knocking

Acts 12:1-9

Introduction

I ran across a story that I would like to share with you. Tracy Daniels is a sixteen year old daughter of a pastor. She wrote,

One winter night, an unexpected sound woke our household at 3:00 a.m. My father dashed down the hall, sniffing the air. My sister and I scurried to our bedroom door. When Dad came back upstairs he said, "I don't understand it."

He breathed a sigh of confusion, then returned to his room. I couldn't go back to sleep. I went to my parent's room and said to my father, who couldn't sleep either, "Are you sure? Did you check . . .?"

"Yes, Tracy, I checked everything," said Dad.

I started back to my room, but as I reached the door, my mother suddenly cried out, "The coffee pot! I think I left the coffee pot on at church."

Earlier that evening, my mother had served coffee at a church gathering. Now, in an instant, Dad was gone. Mom and I waited at home.

I could tell Mom was terribly afraid that she might've been guilty of burning down the church. Ten minutes later my father returned. He let out a relieved sigh and said, "The coffee pot was on – it was burned empty and just beginning to smoke. Now I understand."

And what, a half hour earlier, had awakened us? The smoke alarm in our own house; a house that didn't have any smoke.

The eighteenth century poet, William Cowper, penned these famous lines:

*God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders
to perform,*

*He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides
upon the storm.*

I like these words because they remind us of the sovereignty of God – whether the story has a happy ending or not; whether the waves are smooth and calm or raging wild and stormy.

Chapter 12 in the book of Acts provides both scenes – panic and providence; chaos and contentment.

The Death of an Early Pioneer

The scene in Acts, chapter 12, opens with the death of an early pioneer. Look at verses 1 and 2.

*Now about that time Herod the king laid
hands on some who belonged to the church
in order to mistreat them. And he had
James the brother of John put to death with
a sword.*

Now the main point of chapter 12 is the deliverance of Peter. This note about James is a footnote; a brief obituary in the inspired record.

You would think James, one of the twelve apostles, would get a little more coverage than a one sentence obituary (only seven words in the Greek text). But, as I thought about the abruptness of this, as with any obituary, it is not so much what is said about them as much as whether or not you knew them. If you knew them, nothing really needs to be said, except that they are gone.

For those who knew James, Luke's brief statement would be enough to bring on tears and grief.

And, the grief would be felt throughout the entire church.

One man would surely grieve deeply – his brother John. If you have read the gospels, then you know that whenever one of these young men is mentioned, the other one is nearby. It was always, “James and John . . . James and John”. They, along with Peter, formed the inner core of Christ’s friends – which was usually, “Peter, James, and John”.

You may remember how James and John coerced their mother into requesting that James and John be allowed to sit on either side of Christ in the coming kingdom. The other disciples did not like that, not because they thought it was prideful, but because James and John thought of it first!

These two brothers were inseparable. Now one is beheaded. James becomes the first apostle to die a martyr’s death.

While the Bible does not mention a trial, historic writings do. Clement of Alexandria, in the early second century, wrote that as James walked from the courtroom to the place of execution, the soldier escorting him was so deeply moved after witnessing the trial and James’ testimony of his faith in Christ before the Roman officials, that he confessed Christ as well! As a result, the soldier was led out to be executed together with James.

It was tragic news to the church that James, one of the three closest apostles to Jesus Christ, had been killed.

The Detention of the Apostle Peter

It was only going to get worse. Notice verse 3.

When he [Herod] saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread.

Now, when the biblical record gives you such an obvious indication of a time period, you, the Bible student, need to be alert. There may be something to be uncovered by those willing to dig.

Two significant points about the days of Unleavened Bread

Let me share two things I dug up as significant about this time period and you can take it from there.

The days of Unleavened Bread are the days of the Passover Celebration

1. First, the days of Unleavened Bread are the days of the Passover Celebration.

During the celebration, all the faithful Jews searched their homes from top to bottom and threw all the leaven away. Leaven was the symbol of evil and disobedience. They were sweeping out the leaven from their homes.

Therefore, in a symbolic way, the faithful Jews are purging sin from their homes, and yet, at the same time, they are allowing sin to remain in their hearts. They are about to demand the death of another Christian.

The nation Israel is getting rid of the outward symbols of sin, yet the inward secrets of sin are welcomed.

The timing of Peter’s arrest during the days of Unleavened Bread affected him

2. The second thing that this brings to my mind is how this timing must have affected Peter.

Earlier, in John’s gospel, the resurrected Lord had told Peter that he would die a martyr’s death. Peter’s hands would be tied and he would be taken where he did not want to go. Now the Lord did tell him that this would occur when he was old. And Peter is at least fifteen to twenty years older at this point. Also, when the Lord later indicated that Peter was to follow Him, implying perhaps that Peter would die in a similar fashion to Christ, I find it fascinating that Peter is about to be executed on the very anniversary of Christ’s own crucifixion – Passover!

I tell you this because I believe that as far as Peter was concerned, this was his final night on planet earth.

The Determination of Fervent Prayer

Continue in Acts, chapter 12, and look at verses 4 through 6.

When he [Herod] had seized him [Peter], he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. So Peter was kept in the prison,

but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.

Luke adds all of these details to show Christians that this was a hopeless case. The executioner was sharpening his sword. It was only a matter of hours before dawn!

I encourage you, however, to mark the hinge of this entire narrative. It is two words found in verse 5, . . . *but prayer [!]* . . .

The Holy Spirit, through Luke, does not want us to miss the contrast:

- Peter has been intercepted, but the church is interceding.
- Peter is in prison, but the church is in prayer.

Now, as we will discover in a moment, the church then and now, has a lot to learn about prayer, but the church was praying.

The word translated “fervently” in verse 5, can be literally translated “stretched out”. Perhaps they were praying on their faces before God.

Herod thinks he is bigger than the church, but he does not know the church. He thinks he is more powerful than God, but he does not know God.

Herod did not kill James because God was caught off guard; James was killed because God wanted him home. I have no doubt that the church prayed for James’s release as well, but God had other plans.

The Deliverance of the Apostle Peter

Now notice verses 7 through 8.

And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and woke him up, saying, “Get up quickly.” And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.”

Stop at this point. Why in the world would we have an entire verse on Peter getting dressed? The angel takes him through it step by step. This is like

me with my three-year-old, “Now Charity, put your socks on. That’s right. Now put on your shoes. That’s the wrong foot. That’s right! . . .”

“Peter, put on your clothes. Now put on your sandals. Now wrap your cloak around you . . .”

Why?

One reason is that Peter thinks he is dreaming. It will not be until he is out of the prison that he fully realizes he has just been involved in a miraculous escape.

Yet perhaps, there is another point to be made. Several commentaries I read make the point that even when God performs a miracle, He will not do what that person can do.

Think about it, why not just automatically dress Peter? God can slip chains off, surely He can slip a cloak on. So, why didn’t He? Because Peter can dress Peter. Peter cannot take off his chains – only God can do that – but Peter can put on his sandals.

I could not help but think of Ephesians, chapter 6, where God provides for us the armor we need to wear to fight the battles of spiritual life. The helmet, the shield, the shoes, the belt . . . God has provided every piece for every believer. Yet, the apostle Paul tells us, in verse 13a,

. . . take up the full armor of God . . .

The present tense indicates you do not put it on just once, you put it on every day.

By the way, this has nothing to do with becoming a Christian, but with behaving like a Christian.

Perhaps you are wondering, “Why doesn’t God just take away my habits; my addictions; my ungodly thinking . . . ?”

God is waiting for you to read the Bible – and throw away the magazines, videos, CD’s . . . He waits for you to dress yourself in certain ways. Some of you need to put on the sandals and the cloak and then, there is no telling what deliverance you will experience.

Notice verses 9 and 10a.

And he [Peter] went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city . . .

(by the way, this gate was massive and took several men to open; it was made of iron and had a huge bolt),

. . . which opened for them by itself; . . .

The Greek word for “opened . . . by itself” is “automatos,” which gives us our word “automatically”!

When I read this verse, I thought of the wonderful testimony of an African student I knew in Bible college. He had been accepted at the university and was coming to prepare for the ministry. His village had little of the technology that we take for granted and he would see sights and experience things he had never dreamed possible.

When his plane touched down in the states, he had to gather all his bags and go outside the terminal to catch a taxi. His arms were loaded down and as he walked toward the exit, he realized that getting through the doors would be a problem. He was afraid to take a few bags at a time and leave them on the sidewalk outside the airport while he returned for the rest of the bags for fear of someone stealing them. As he became a little overwhelmed about the whole thing, he breathed a quick prayer, “Help me, Lord.”

Just then, he stepped on the rubber mat and the glass doors swung open. He shouted out loud, “Thank you, Lord!”

One problem that we have is we so often explain things away to chance or luck. There is no telling what God does in our lives every day that we miss seeing.

Continue to verses 10b through 11.

. . . and they went out and went along one street; and immediately the angel departed from him. When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”

By the way, what happened to the angel? He disappeared as fast as he had appeared! He did not stay and have a cup of coffee with Peter and tell him some interesting news from heaven; he did not offer Peter counseling on some issue or help him make a decision – that kind of stuff only happens on television. In real life, those things are the responsibility of the Holy Spirit and the word of God.

I do not expect any prime television time to be devoted to that.

The Disbelief of Earnest People

Look at verse 12 of Acts, chapter 12.

And when he [Peter] realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

Now remember, these believers have been praying for Peter’s deliverance! Continue to verse 13.

When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer.

Rhoda is Greek for Rose. We would call this servant girl Rose or Rosie today. Continue to verses 14 and 15a.

When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, “You are out of your mind!” . . .

Imagine this scene. Rosie rushes back into the prayer meeting and says, “He’s here!”

“Who is?!”

“Peter . . . he’s standing outside the gate.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I am not. I heard his voice.”

“Well then, you’re hearing things. Now don’t you realize we’re in the middle of a prayer meeting here? Now let’s see, where were we? Lord, we beg you to deliver our beloved apostle!”

Isn’t it encouraging to know that people who hung around the apostles, who hung around the Lord, had not figured out how to pray either?

They were intense, but they were also convinced they knew what God would or would not do.

Isn’t that just like us? We know what God might do if He wanted to, but we are convinced He will not.

Now notice verse 15b.

But she kept insisting . . .

(literally, “leaning on them; nagging”),

. . . that it was so. They kept saying, “It is his angel.”

They believed this was, “his guardian angel.” The Jewish *Talmud* rather superstitiously taught that a

person's guardian angel could assume the appearance of the person they protected and serve as their double. It seems that since the believers would not believe the truth, they were left with no other explanation than a superstitious answer.

Because of what happened next, I have a feeling that Rosie might have asked this question, "Listen, if that's an angel out there, then why in the world is he bothering to knock?"

That quieted them down – because they were all able to hear. Notice verse 16.

But Peter continued knocking; . . .

(the answer to their prayers is knocking at the door!),

. . . and when they had opened the door, they saw him . . .

(notice the change from singular to plural – they all went to the door together),

. . . and were amazed.

Rosie is probably saying, "I told you so!"

The Description of God's Providence

They all began to praise God, shout and cry at the same time. Look at verse 17.

But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place.

By the way, this is a different James than the apostle who has been executed. This James is the stepbrother of the Lord, who also wrote the book of James. Continue to verses 18 and 19a.

Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. . . .

Application

Let me give several lessons that we can learn from those in this text.

Lessons learned from Peter

1. First, let me give a couple of lessons that we can learn from Peter.

In the midst of impossible circumstances, it is possible to be content

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I found it interesting, that on the night before he was to die, Peter was asleep.

It reminds me of what David wrote when he was running from his power hungry son Absalom. Absalom, would kill his father, should he catch him. David wrote in Psalm, chapter 3, verse 5,

I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the Lord sustains me.

I once heard and have never forgotten, "There is no softer pillow than the sovereignty of God."

Sometimes God brings us to a dead end before He shows us the way out

- Sometimes God brings us to a dead end before He shows us the way out.

It is as if God wants to make sure that we have exhausted everything we can try or think of, so that when deliverance comes, there is no mistaking who the source is; there is no opportunity to take any credit.

I can imagine Peter being asked, "Peter, what were you doing at the moment the angel arrived? Singing? Praying? Witnessing to the guards? What Peter?"

"Sleeping."

In other words, Peter had nothing to do with his deliverance.

Lessons learned from the church

2. Secondly, let me give a couple of lessons we can learn from the church.

Prayer that focuses on the will of God does not depend on the faith of the one praying in order to be answered

- Prayer that focuses on the will of God does not depend on the faith of the one praying in order to be answered.

I am so grateful for that!

Sometimes expecting the worst hinders us from seeing God's best

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To the credit of these believers, we have to remember that James was dead; Peter was in prison; Herod was on the throne, and it appears that there is going to be another funeral tomorrow. They were so convinced that the story was going to have a sad ending that they refused to see the happy ending.

Have you found yourself that way at times? You are convinced that there is only grief and sadness; that this is what God will do. You overlook what He has done for you; you forget the blessings and answers to prayer that have come. You are so focused on expecting the worst in this situation that you fail to see the best that God has already accomplished in your life.

Truths discovered about the Lord

3. Thirdly, let me give a couple of truths we can discover about the Lord.

He is full of surprises

- He is full of surprises.

God was full of surprises for Herod; for the soldiers; for sleepy-eyed Peter; for a roomful of believers who had already concluded that Peter was a "gonner".

Why not just whisk Peter out of prison and plant him in the middle of that prayer meeting? That would have been surprising, but God chose to perform little surprises that added up to a big surprise. He performed little surprises – guards unaware; chains falling off; doors opening automatically – instead of surprising the saints with one miracle.

John Calvin wrote, "He gave the saints several miracles to talk about for generation after generation."

We still talk about these surprising miracles in our generation.

He is fully in control.

- He is fully in control.

Yes, there is a fresh grave outside the city with James' name on it. The church has suffered physical losses. A Christ-hating, Christian-killing King Herod sits on the throne. Is God in total control? Yes! His plans are unstoppable; His will is irreversible.

With this thought in mind, near the end of my study of this passage, I took time for an overview. I could not help but notice that no one is fully in control, except God. Herod is not in control, even though he is flexing every muscle. The church does not have it together – they are praying with preconceived conclusions. Peter is not in control – he is not even fully aware of what is going on as he stumbles into the street. Peter has made no request for deliverance, and in fact, is dazed and in a fog. This is so clearly:

- God managing;
- God initiating;
- God moving;
- God ordaining;
- God controlling each step of the way;
- God in total sovereignty over the events of life.

This story is here to remind us, at this particular point in our lives as believers, that God is in total control over the events of our lives as well.

In fact, if you want to underline a verse that summarizes this message, underline verse 24, which says,

But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

That is another way of saying that the purposes of God for His children and His church are not in ruins – then or now! His plans are right on schedule.

God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform,

He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/22/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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