

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 27th December 2009 - 11:00am

Acts 12:1-24 – ‘God Answers Prayer Beyond Our Expectations’

Introduction

Last Sunday morning we were introduced to a new Church in Antioch, 300 miles north of the Church in Jerusalem. We saw how Antioch was going to become the main centre for cross-cultural mission throughout the rest of the Acts of the Apostles. By Acts ch.13 nearly all the focus will be on Antioch.

But as we finished last Sunday morning the final paragraph of Acts ch.11 took us back to Jerusalem and how it was going to be affected by a famine in the years that followed. We saw how the church in Antioch immediately saw it as their responsibility to send food and other material help to their brothers and sisters down in Judea.

They had received the spiritual blessings of the Gospel from the Church in Jerusalem, so now they saw this as their opportunity to repay them in kind by making sure they had enough to live on materially during this time of famine.

So Antioch and Jerusalem, though they were 300 miles apart would continue to keep strong bonds of fellowship over the in-coming years as they continued to look out for each other & associate with each other in Christian fellowship.

That brings us to Acts ch.12 where again we are back in Jerusalem. In this chapter Peter ends up in prison at the hands of King Herod, who has taken to persecuting the Christians, because it seems to keep the Jews happy. The Church in Jerusalem prays for Peter's release from prison. He does get out of prison by God's miraculous intervention, but the church is surprised when he appears at the door of their prayer meeting! The chapter ends with a record of King Herod's death, and one of Dr Luke's summary verses recording the onward advance of the Gospel. From that point onwards the focus will be on the missionary journeys out from the Antioch Church from ch.13 onwards.

So ch.12 is a chapter which tidies up a lot of loose ends in the story so far, before we get into the missionary journeys of the rest of the book. What can we learn from this chapter on the last Sunday of an old year?

1. The Effects of Persecution (vs.1-4)

We have seen that the Church in Jerusalem was already...

(i) Facing Famine (ch.11:27-30)

The Church in Jerusalem was already facing difficulties of a physical nature. Now they were going to face difficulties of a spiritual nature as well. This took the form of...

(ii) Harassment of Church Members (v.1)

'It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.'

In the persecution that broke out under Saul of Tarsus in Acts 8:1 it was the members who were scattered. The apostles were able to stay in Jerusalem. Now King Herod (not the Jewish religious leaders) but their political leader starts to arrest Christian in order to persecute them. First of all...

(iii) James is executed (v.2)

This time the persecution seems to be aimed particularly at the leaders of the church. James and John were two of the original 12 disciples. James is arrested and put to death by the sword. Jesus had prophesied this in Mark 10:35-41. He was the first of the Apostles to be killed, whereas his brother John, was to end his life as an old man on the island of Patmos – in his 90s. But King Herod notices that the death of James seems to please the Jews, so in order to curry favour with them, he has...

(iv) Peter Arrested (vs.3-4)

Obviously Peter is seen as the leader of the Apostles by this time, so this is the biggest scalp to get as far as Herod is concerned (v.3).

We're told that Peter was arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. So it's coming up to Passover again, which was the same time of year as Jesus himself had been arrested and executed. But so as not to annoy the Jews, Herod kept Peter in prison until Passover would be over. So Peter is handed over to be guarded by four squads of soldiers in a secure prison. Herod's intention was to bring him out for public trial after Passover (v.4).

But it's a church that is facing persecution or difficulty that really learns how to pray and to rely on God alone (v.5):

'So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.'

So here we have...

2. The Example of Prayer (v.5, vs.12-16)

The fact that Herod was going to wait until after Passover to try Peter, meant that the church knew they had at least a week, because the Feast of Unleavened Bread leading up to Passover, lasted for 7 days. So they had at least a week to pray for Peter. First of all we can say that their prayer was:

Constant (v.5) – *'the church was earnestly praying to God for him'*

They prayed earnestly. They prayed for a whole week. And they seemed to be praying night and day too (v.6) – It was during the night.

Have you ever known a church to pray like that?

That's what the prayer meetings were like during the 1859 Revival, 150 years ago. One minister, Rev Samuel Patrick in Drumkeeran Presbyterian Church in Co Cavan (the church that Helen Lowe came from) never got to bed for a whole week (*The Missionary Vision of the Irish Church*, Ian Grant, p.40). He was continually leading prayer meetings, and leading people to the Lord, counselling them for salvation! He was absolutely exhausted by the end of it, and was the only minister who had not yet been able to give a written report of the revival in his area. Prayer was constant, just as in Acts 12. It was also...

Corporate (v.5) – ‘the church was earnestly praying to God for him.’

It was the whole church who were praying for him together.

God wants his church to be a people that pray together.

What touches one of them, touches all of them.

So let's take our prayer life together as a church seriously.

It was constant and it was corporate, but the prayer meetings were also...

Crowded (v.12-15) – ‘the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.’ (v.12)

So they were all packed into Mary Mark's home in Jerusalem.

The picture you get from these verses is of a crowded home, where many were gathered together praying. When were you last in a crowded prayer meeting? That's how the revivals started – in Cambuslang in Scotland, in the little school house in Kells Co Antrim, and in the Revival in Wales also.

Our prayer room here to the front of the church hall has been packed recently with over 60 people meeting for prayer and Bible Study. We have just moved into one half of the main hall, so there is plenty of room for more. Why not make a New Year's Resolution to be at the Prayer Meetings in the coming weeks and months on a Wednesday night for fellowship and prayer?

And what about the prayer meetings before each of our services on a Sunday? It would be great to see more people there too. If we want to see God at work in our meetings, then we need to wait on Him in prayer beforehand. So these times of prayer were constant, they were corporate, they were crowded, and they were...

Concentrated (v.5) – ‘The church was earnestly in prayer to God for him.’

This prayer meeting didn't ramble all over the place. Their prayers were focussed. They had just one prayer topic – and that was Peter's safety! Prayer was offered to God *for him!*

He had been rescued before in ch.5:17-21, so they were praying that God would do it again!

This country has seen Revival before, in each of the last 4 centuries. There is no reason why God couldn't do it again. The question is, do we really believe that he can? Are we praying that he will? Will we believe it when it happens?

So after this special week of prayer, their prayers resulted in...

3. The Escape of Peter (vs.6-17)

According to v.6 it was the night before Herod was due to bring Peter to trial. Peter was sleeping soundly between two soldiers, so he was bound with two chains to the soldiers either side of him. There was no way, humanly speaking that he was going to escape. As well as that, sentries stood guard at the entrance too. But God sent an angel, in answer to the prayers of his people:

The Angel's Actions (v.7) – ‘Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell.’ – So that prison cell was lit up with a wee bit of heaven that night. But Peter was fast asleep. Too tired to notice!

So the angel struck Peter on the side to wake him up.

The Angel's Words (v.7-8) – ‘Quick, get up!’ he said.

And at that moment, the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

Peter seems to be so dazed that the angel has to tell him what to do next: ‘Put on your clothes and your sandals.’ Peter's coming round, so he's able to do so. ‘Now wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’ The angel told him. So here Peter has to co-operate with an angel to see a miracle happen. Sometimes we have a part to play in order to see our prayers answered. Look what happens next...

The Angel's Leading (v.9-10) – We're told that Peter followed the angel out of the prison, but he must have been only half awake, because he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening, he thought he was still dreaming! He thought he was seeing a vision! ‘Am I just imagining this?’

But they were able to pass the first set of guards, and then they passed the second set of guards, and then they were standing in front of the iron gate leading out to the City. How were they going to get passed it? But it opened for them by itself! And they just walked through it! Then they walked the length of one street, and then Peter discovered that he was on his own! The angel had left him. God only performs a miracle as far as is necessary. Now Peter could do the rest himself. Where would he go now? What would he do? It was entirely up to him. That brings us to...

Peter's Decision (v.11-12) – Now Peter finally comes to his senses in v.11. And he said to himself: ‘Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.’ This was all dawning on him as he stood in the twilight a block away from the Prison. But he knew the church would have been praying for him.

He also knew where to find them – so this must have been a regular meeting place for one section of the Jerusalem church at least – meeting in a home - Mary Mark's home.

So Peter decides to go to tell them that their prayers have been answered. So he knocks on the door of the outer entrance – probably a courtyard (v.13). A servant girl, named Rhoda, comes to answer the door.

Perhaps there was one of those little square windows in the door, so she could see out to see who was standing there, but in the dark she couldn't really see who it was, so she says, *'Who's there?'* And when she heard the voice replying to hers, she knew straight away that it was Peter!!

But she must have been a wee bit ditzzy as we would say, because she forgets to open the door, and she runs back into where the church folk were praying. She's so overjoyed and amazed she can hardly get the words out – but she interrupted whoever was praying to say: *'It's Peter – he's at the door!'* (v.14).

Rhoda might have been amazed and astonished, but they were even worse! In v.15 they said, *'You're out of your mind!'*

But when she kept insisting that it really was Peter at the door, they said, Well on second thoughts, *'It must be his angel!'*

Maybe Herod had gone ahead and killed him – maybe this is his angel! They just couldn't believe it was Peter! They just couldn't believe their prayers had been answered, they really were amazed!

But then they heard whoever it was still knocking persistently at the door. So finally someone had the courage to actually open the door, and sure enough, when they saw him, it was him. They were astonished! They just couldn't believe it! (v.16)

Peter's testimony (v.17) – *'Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and then he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of prison.'* He wasn't talking about an angel by this stage, as some might have done, no he was giving the glory to the Lord – **The Lord** had brought him out of prison.

Then he said, *'Tell James and the brothers about this.'* And then he left for another place. He probably went into hiding until Herod had calmed down. This chapter began with James, the brother of John, being put to death by the sword, and now Peter says, *'Tell James and the brothers about this.'* It can't be the same person. This is not the Apostles James. In fact this is the half-brother of Jesus. The same one who wrote the Book of James later on in our New Testaments. You see some people think Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her life. But she didn't. She went on to have other children with Joseph in the normal way, and this James was one of them. We'll meet him again leading the church in Jerusalem in Acts ch.15 at the Jerusalem Council. He was there in the first church prayer meeting in Acts ch.1:14 along with his

mother Mary. That's why Peter told them to tell James – he was the leader of the Jerusalem church by this stage.

But there's something we need to understand from this passage of Scripture. These early Christians believed so much in prayer that they prayed constantly for a week, they prayed corporately – all of them together as a church, they prayed in the crowded home of Mary Mark, and they prayed concentrating on one issue and one issue only – Peter's safety and his escape from prison. And yet when he stood at the door of their prayer meeting, they couldn't even let him in. They believed in prayer so much, that they couldn't believe God had answered their prayers, when Peter stood in front of them!!

But isn't that just like us!?

We say we believe in prayer so much, and yet our actions and our behaviour in practice betray us. Either we don't come to the prayer meetings in the first place, or if we do, and God happens to answer our prayers, we can hardly believe it! (e.g. Baby Mark Gray's Christmas letter!)

When Peter told them all that had happened in v.17 they certainly did realise that they had a God who hears and answers their prayers! And he hasn't changed one bit in 2000 years: We still have a God who hears and answers our prayers today! Let's believe that, with all our hearts, as we step out of 2009 and into 2010 – a whole new decade opening up to us - with God. But fourthly and finally this morning we all see in this chapter...

4. The End of the Problem (vs.20-24)

Not only do we have a God who hears and answers our prayers, we actually have a God (according to Ephesians 3:20)...

'Who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.' We have an amazing God, who goes beyond what we ask for in prayer, so often, to do things that we didn't even ask for, or even believe could happen.

Not only did God rescue Peter, in answer to prayer, but he also got rid of the trouble-maker, King Herod, as well! This was Herod Antipas, or Herod the Tetrarch, who had reigned from 4BC to 39AD. This was the same King Herod who had killed all the boys under 2 yrs old at the birth of Jesus; who had beheaded John the Baptist; who had tried Jesus; who had executed James and had arrested Peter. He was now gone forever, he was slain in vs.18-23.

I wonder had anybody in the prayer meeting dared to ask for that in prayer?! This was the end of an era: Herod was no more; Peter had been spared to carry on the work God had called him to, and as a result we read in v.24 that:

'The Word of God continued to increase and spread'

Conclusion:

And that is our goal too – To spread the Word of God.
But we have seen here this morning that it is only achieved through prayer.

Are we committed to the prayer life of this church
as we set foot into a New Year together?

May God grant us his blessing in the New Year ahead – 2010 - Amen!

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