

Acts 12:1-19
Prevailing Prayer
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When we go to the doctor for a check-up, he always checks what are called our vital signs. And one of the most basic of these is our pulse. If we have no pulse, well, that means we are dead. And if we have a strong, regular pulse, that means we are very much alive.

The church also has vital signs, and one of the most significant is the prayer life of the church. In fact, some call the prayer life of the church, the pulse of the church, the heart beat of the church. The emphasis a church places on prayer is probably the best indication as to how much the church really believes that God has the power to bless. The church that believes in prayer will be like Jacob at Peniel near the river Jabbok when he wrestled with the angel of the Lord and said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

In Acts 2, we read that after the day of Pentecost, the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. The Lord added them. The church that believes that will believe in prayer.

Paul told the church at Corinth,

- 1 Corinthians 3:5-7
5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?

- 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.
7 So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.

The church that believes that will believe in prayer.

I am afraid too many churches today are like King Asa in his elderly years. The young King Asa believed in prayer. The Ethiopians came against the young King Asa with a million soldiers and 300 chariots, and King Asa prayed this prayer:

2 Chronicles 14:11

- 11 ... "LORD, it is nothing for You to help, whether with many or with those who have no power; help us, O LORD our God, for we rest on You, and in Your name we go against this multitude. O LORD, You are our God; do not let man prevail against You!"

And so the LORD struck the Ethiopians before Asa and Judah, and the Ethiopians fled. The young King Asa was a man of faith and a man of prayer. But here is what the Bible says about the old King Asa:

2 Chronicles 16:12

- 12 And in the thirty-ninth year of his reign, Asa became diseased in his feet, and his malady was severe; yet in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but the physicians.

Beloved, I fear many churches today are more like the old King Asa than they are like the young King Asa. Their churches have

problems, and so they seek not the Lord but the church growth experts and the public relations experts and the professional entertainers. That is not the way it should be. I'm not saying that a church should never seek some professional advice, but a church should first and foremost seek the blessing of the Lord.

Brian Edwards, an English pastor, made this statement in a book he published in 1984:

"Two things only are needed in our churches today: a praying congregation and a preacher. Everything else will flow from this: pastoral care, living worship, meaningful fellowship, evangelistic zeal, earnest witness and conversions. ... If it is true that the church was conceived in a prayer meeting and came to birth in a sermon, how then will it grow? This generation has yet to see what God will do when it gives up its small ambitions, gets down to the business of prayer and believes once more in the power of the sermon."

Beloved, we need to get back to the basics, and this is basically all a church needs: preaching and prayer. And we are today going to look at prayer, especially prayer as petition. Prayer can involve many things such as praise, adoration, thanksgiving and confession. But we most basically associate prayer with petition, with the offering up of our desires before God, and that is what we will look at today.

Our passage is Acts chapter 12 because here we have an account of a prayer meeting in the apostolic age, and we want to see

what we can learn from it. Let's first review the circumstances of this prayer meeting. The occasion was a renewed persecution of the church, this time by King Herod Agrippa I. His grandfather was the King Herod who spoke with the wise men and who tried to kill the young Jesus at Bethlehem. King Herod Agrippa I shared some of his grandfather's evil characteristics, and after first the Roman Emperor Caligula and then the Roman Emperor Claudius granted him increasing plots of Palestinian territory, his kingdom was as large as that of his grandfather. The Jews naturally hated King Herod Agrippa I because he was raised in pagan Rome and because of his Edomite ancestry. When Claudius made Herod Agrippa I the ruler of Judea, he wanted to gain the people's favor. He thought he could do this by persecuting the Christian church. So he took the apostle James and had him killed.

This was James, the brother of John. The brothers James and John together with Peter were the innermost three of the twelve disciples of Jesus, the innermost circle closest to Jesus. James was the first of the twelve apostles to die a martyr's death. This is interesting because of an event during the earthly ministry of Jesus. The brothers James and John had asked Jesus if they could sit one on Jesus' right hand and the other on His left in the glory of Jesus' kingdom. Jesus replied:

Mark 10:38

38 ... "You do not know what you ask. Can you drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

- 39 They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them,
"You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the
baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized;
40 "but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to
give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared."

Jesus, when He there referred to the cup He would drink and the baptism He would be baptized with, was referring to His suffering and death. Interestingly, James was the first of the twelve apostles to die a martyr's death, and John would live to a ripe old age, though he too experienced suffering for the kingdom. We read in the book of Revelation that John was exiled to the Island of Patmos.

Well, when Herod saw that the death of James did indeed please the Jews, this inspired him to do more of the same. So he arrested Peter, another of the church leaders. He was not able to kill Peter immediately because of the Passover week. Herod had Peter securely imprisoned and guarded for execution after the Passover week. Escape looked impossible.

So at this point, the church met for prayer. Now whom did they pray for, James or Peter? As you probably know, some churches today meet right after someone dies to pray for the dead. We are to pray for the living, and so the prayer meeting was for Peter.

Philippians 4:6-7 says,

- 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;

7 and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

When we are in difficult circumstances, we should channel our energy not into worry but into prayer. And this is what the church did in Acts chapter 12. Verse 12 says that many were gathered together for prayer. This was not just a collection of one or two who met for prayer. Many met for prayer.

Beloved, if I or any of our elders were in danger of being martyred for the faith, I assume many of you would meet together for prayer. But let me encourage you not to wait for such an event to join in our times of prayer on Sunday and Wednesday nights. There are many other matters we should be bringing before the throne of mercy, not the least of which is our desire for God to bless the ministry of our church. The book of James says, You do not have because you do not ask.

Now why do we need to ask? Doesn't God already know what we need? Well, yes, He does. But God has chosen to work through prayer because this method of working keeps us humble and gives God all the glory. Prayer reminds us that we are helpless, and prayer reminds us that God is our help in time of need.

Their prayer was also fervent. Verse 5 says that the prayer offered by the church for Peter was constant, but this word could better be translated fervent. This is the way the word is used in the LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The basic idea behind the word is a stretching out the hand to

get something, an action which symbolizes our zeal and desire to obtain something. A fervent prayer is like the hand of Jacob which would not let go of the angel of the Lord until he had received a blessing. James chapter 5 says that it is the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man that avails much.

Does this mean that the key to prevailing prayer is that we have to want what we ask for fervently? No, there is a little more to it than that. 1 John 5:14-15 says,

- 14 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.
15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

Here is the key. We need not merely to fervently desire but to fervently desire the will of God. We need to have the spirit of Jesus, who said,

John 6:38

- 38 “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.”

We need to pray with Jesus, “Not My will but Yours be done.”

We should ask God only for what is good as defined by the Word of God. And then we should also be willing to submit to whatever God has purposed as that which brings Him the most glory and which does the most good for His Kingdom and people. We should fervently desire the will of God both in the

sense of what God has revealed to be good and in the sense of what God has willed for His own greatest glory.

As the early church gathered to pray for Peter, they had every reason to believe that God could deliver Peter. The Sanhedrin had twice before arrested Peter, and God had delivered Peter both times. The second time God had sent an angel at night to open the prison holding Peter and the other apostles and to free them. I believe the early church gathered together to pray that God would again deliver Peter from imprisonment and death knowing that God could do this. But I think they also prayed as Jesus prayed when He asked to be delivered from the death of the cross. Jesus prayed, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” We are like a little child bringing his desires before the father he loves and trusts. He tells his father what he wants, but he also says, “Daddy, I know you love me, and I know you know what is best for me. I trust you to do what is best.”

I am reminded of the three Hebrew children in Daniel chapter 3 when King Nebuchadnezzar threatened them with death in his fiery furnace. Here was their response to the threat of the fiery furnace:

Daniel 3:17-18

- 17 “If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king.
- 18 “But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”

They knew that God could save them. They just didn't know for sure if that is what God in His love and wisdom had planned.

Similarly, the early Christians knew that God could again deliver Peter, but they did not know if this was what would most glorify God, and glorifying God was their greatest concern. Look at what the early church had prayed after Peter's first arrest:

Acts 4:29

29 “Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, ...”

They didn't pray for protection or safety but for boldness to speak God's word. Their first concern was for God's glory and for the promotion of God's kingdom.

They desired Peter's release, but was that what indeed would work for God's greatest glory and for the greatest advancement of the kingdom? They didn't know for sure. After all, Jesus had predicted that Peter would one day die a martyr's death. And also the work Jesus had given Peter to do seemed to be completed. Jesus had entrusted Peter with the keys of the kingdom, and Peter had had a special role in the opening of the door of the new covenant age, in the ushering in of the kingdom in new covenant fullness. It was Peter who had preached the sermon on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit first came down on the Jewish believers in new covenant fullness. Then Peter and

John had gone to Samaria and had prayed for the Holy Spirit to come there in new covenant fullness. And finally God had used Peter to bring the kingdom in new covenant fullness to Cornelius the Gentile. That had completed the ushering in of the new covenant age. Perhaps Peter's life work was finished. If one's life work is finished, then to die and to go and be with the Lord is gain.

I believe as the early church prayed, they zealously petitioned God to deliver Peter, but with a humbly submissive spirit that recognized that God with his infinite wisdom and knowledge knew what was truly best.

Finally, we see God's answer to their prayers. In Ephesians 3:20, we read,

Ephesians 3:20-21

- 20 Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us,
21 to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

God's answers to our prayers can surprise us because they are beyond anything we expect. That is certainly the case here, because the church at first could not believe that Peter had really been delivered. They had been fervently praying for Peter's deliverance, but then they thought the servant girl Rhonda had gone mad when she claimed that Peter was at the door. That is certainly encouraging, because it indicates that God answers

prayers even when our faith is less than complete. The power of prayer is not in our faith, not in our believing. The power of prayer is in God, the One we believe in.

Let me conclude by exhorting you to become a people of prayer. Begin by praying to Christ for forgiveness of sins so you can be right with God, and by praying to Christ for deliverance from sins so you can be free to serve God. Then pray that God will increasingly give you the mind of Christ so that your will is to do the will of God. And then fervently offer up your sanctified desires to God in prayer, both individually in your prayer closet and jointly in our church's prayer services. Do that, and God will bless our church with new life, for prayer is the pulse, the heart beat of the church.