

There is a pattern in the progress of the early church, as recorded in the book of Acts. It seems that persecution follows nearly every victory that Luke records. In the latter portion of chapter eleven, we read of the spread of the gospel to the gentile world, to people who had no ties to Judaism. Christian Jews began to reach out to the whole world, recognizing that Jesus' sacrifice covered the sins of all people who place their faith in Him. As Jesus Himself said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

The church flourished. The Gentile Christians sent relief to the Jewish churches. Barnabas and Saul had a thriving ministry in Antioch, which became their home base, and from which they later launched their evangelistic campaigns throughout the Roman Empire. If we stopped at chapter eleven, we might conclude that all was right in the Christian world, but as we read in tonight's passage, while there were victories in one area, there was great opposition in other areas. This is a pattern that continues today, therefore we can gain some insights from the history of the church as it is recorded in Acts 12:1-19.

Immediately, in the opening verses of this passage, we see the contrast between the love of the church in Antioch, with the hatred of the Jews towards the church. King Herod, mentioned in verse one, is Herod Agrippa, a descendent of Herod the Great. While he was not fully Jewish, he ruled over the Jews. He ruled in such a way as to try to strike a balance between pleasing Rome, and pleasing his Jewish subjects. To please Rome, he had to stamp out any unrest, and send in the collected taxes. We have no indication in scripture that the Christians wanted a confrontation with the Jews, but we see a consistent opposition of the Jews towards the Christians.

It was politically expedient for Herod Agrippa to appease his subjects by siding with them against the Christians, so he killed James, the Apostle of Jesus, and a central figure in the early church in Jerusalem. The bible says that when he saw that this pleased the Jewish leaders, he proceeded to arrest Peter as well, intending to kill him after the days of the feasts passed.

Here in the United States, we are in the middle of the political season. Candidates typically say what they think their supporters want to hear. The more conservative candidates try to appeal to people with Christian values, while the more liberal candidates say things to appeal to people with a secular worldview. Whether or not they have true convictions about their talking points, if they say something that resonates with the people, they try to drive that point home in order to win support.

Herod Agrippa was a politician. He killed James to win support of his constituents, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter also. I see in these verses a remarkable similarity between Peter's situation and the arrest of Jesus. They were both arrested during the feast season. Their executions were planned around the feast days, and the law. Pilate succumbed to political pressure, same as Agrippa.

If you recall, back in chapter five, we learned that the Sadducees arrested the Apostles, but an angel of the Lord delivered them, so that they were able to continue to preach the gospel in the temple. The Jews did not know how they made their escape, so Herod did not take any chances. He put four squads of soldiers, 16 men in total, in charge of guarding Peter to insure that he could not escape. Peter was bound with chains to a guard on either side. There were sentries who guarded the door to the cell. There was no possible means of escape.

Since we know the rest of the story, it is easy to gloss over what a dark time this was for Peter and the church. While we hear of atrocities against Christians in other parts of the world, for the most part we have no sense of what it means to face imprisonment, or death, because of our stand for Christ. Perhaps Peter found comfort in the words of Jesus recorded in John 21, where the Lord indicated that Peter would live to an old age. It seems to me to be more likely that Peter was frightened and uncertain.

The circumstances of life can leave us frightened and uncertain as well. Things don't always go the way we hoped or planned, in our personal lives, or on the world stage. The global situation looks bleak to me. The uncertainty in the economic community is a danger sign for our country's future. The Middle East is a powder keg ready to explode. We expect that terrorism will be a part of the American lifestyle from now on. Godless despots are acquiring nuclear weapons. There is no one running for president that I trust.

But praise God; my hope is not in the things of this world. My hope is in Jesus Christ and the promise of scripture. I know how things are going to end, because I have read the word of God. I understand that in this life we will have trouble, but we also have hope, joy, peace, confidence, and assurance, through faith in Jesus Christ.

In this dark time in Peter's life, the bible says that the church was making prayer earnestly to God for him. I imagine that Peter was also spending some serious time with the Lord in prayer. Prayer, in conjunction with Scripture, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, is our source of intimacy with Christ. I don't know what is going to happen in this dark world, but I have a connection with the One who is sovereign over all things, and who can do something about whatever concerns my heart. I go to Him in prayer, ask in faith, and entrust every concern to His care. I believe that God hears and answers my prayers, and I know He always does what is best.

Do you think that God would have delivered Peter if no one prayed? It is a hypothetical question, so there is no definite answer, but all of us should understand from personal experience that the power of God is released into the circumstances of life when they are covered in prayer. Peter was a man of prayer. The church prayed earnestly, and God responded according to His will and purpose.

The text seems to indicate that Peter wasn't fully aware of his circumstances the night of his delivery. It was as if he were half awake and half asleep. He could not discern if what was happening was reality, or a vision. The Holman Christian Standard Bible takes a liberty by inserting that this was on the night before Peter was to be executed. These words do not appear in the Greek text, but are added because of the context. On that night, an angel of the Lord appeared and filled the cell with light.

Apparently the light of God appeared only to Peter, because there is no indication that the guards perceived this event. The angel gave Peter specific instructions: get up, dress yourself, and follow me. Peter did as he was told, but what if he ignored what God told him to do? He would not be delivered. He would remain in jail, and probably lose his life.

This reminds us that obedience to what God reveals is essential, if we hope to receive His deliverance. If we pray about something, but live in defiance of God's revealed will, we cannot expect to receive the outcome that we hope for. But if we live the best we can, according to God's revealed will, not only can we avoid many of the dark circumstances of life, we can experience the supernatural hand of God in our lives.

Everything about Peter's escape was supernatural. The chains fell off of his hands. He walked right past the guards, through secured bars and doors. God restored his freedom for future service, supernaturally. Much of science today rests upon the premise that there is a

natural explanation for everything. This idea has led to much scientific discovery, but there are some truths that are beyond the reach of science.

If you do not believe in the supernatural, you cannot believe in the bible, or hold to the hope of a sovereign God who is able to do things that are unexplainable by natural means. If there is not a God who is above nature, then our hope is in vain. If Jesus was not supernaturally raised from the dead, then what do we really believe?

Did the earth form from a cosmic accident, or did God, in the beginning create the heavens and the earth? Does the fossil evidence indicate that the earth is billions of years old, or does it warn us of a sovereign God who judged and destroyed the earth by a worldwide flood? When you were in your mother's womb, were you a mass of lifeless tissue, or were you fearfully and wonderfully made, where God knew you already when He knit you together with a plan and a purpose for your life?

Peter came to his senses and realized the Lord's deliverance. Whenever God answers our prayers, we need to also come to our senses and see His hand at work, and give Him the glory He deserves. Peter immediately went to Mary's house where the local church met. Her son's name was John Mark. He is the same man who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but returned home before the completed their mission was completed. He is also likely the author of the gospel that bears his name, and might have been with Jesus and the disciples on the night of His arrest.

Inside, the church is fervently praying for Peter. Outside Peter stands at the door, knocking. Rhoda, a servant girl goes to answer the door, and she recognizes Peter's voice, and runs back in to report that it is Peter, without letting him in. Obviously she was excited, bewildered, and unsure of what to do. Probably the church met in secrete, for fear of the Jews, and was hesitant to let anyone in. The people praying for Peter tell Rhoda that she is out of her mind. Peter is in jail, facing execution; he can't be at the door.

The scriptures are brutally honest, and they convict us that we sometimes pray without having the faith we ought to have. They prayed, God answered their prayers, and they were amazed. I too am amazed at how God has answered so many of my prayers. I rejoice in the testimonies of my brothers and sisters in Christ who tell of answered prayer. We pray about situations that are beyond our control. We pray hoping that God will do what we cannot do. When He answers, we are amazed. But this amazement inspires awe, when we realize what God can do, and it helps us to grow in our faith.

When they let him in the house, Peter gave testimony of God's deliverance, and gave details of how the Lord worked in his circumstances. This is our biblical model. When we pray, and God delivers, we should give Him the glory, by sharing our experience with one another. We call this our personal testimonies. This is what God has done in my life. It defies explanation by natural means. It is the supernatural work of God in my life and circumstances.

After giving his testimony, Peter says tell these things to the James and the brothers. James here would be the half brother of Jesus who became the senior pastor in the church in Jerusalem. We know this because we read earlier that Herod killed James the Apostle. The idea is to share the wonderful, powerful things that God has done so that others may be encouraged.

When Peter escaped jail with the other Apostles in chapter 5, they went immediately to the temple to preach the gospel. This time Peter departed and went to another place. Sometimes it is essential that we stand our ground, and other times it may be God's will that we retreat and live to fight another day. This requires discernment of the Holy Spirit on the part of the saints.

Herod of course was furious. He lost political capital with the people, when he lost Peter. He held the guards responsible, and had sixteen of his best men put to death, then left for Caesarea, the capital of his government.

This passage teaches us that we should expect that dark and troublesome circumstances will come to our lives, even if we are living for Jesus, to the best of our ability. We cover everything in prayer; give God the glory for answered prayer, and then life goes on. We either live our lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, or we follow the ways of the world. The decisions we make, and the actions we take will have consequences. Next time we will read of God's judgment on Herod Agrippa as a result of his sin and disbelief. In chapter 15 we will read of Peter's defense of Paul and Barnabas, as Peter was able to continue in fulfilling God's will for his life. For the rest of the book of Acts we will read of the advance of the gospel to the whole known world, as a consequence of all that has happened to this point.

We need to remind ourselves that no matter what happens, life goes on, and God is trustworthy. When we live in the center of God's will, our lives will be blessed, regardless of our circumstances. The road to life in the center of God's will begins with trusting Jesus Christ into your heart as Savior and Lord, then submitting every area of your life to His Lordship. If there is anyone here who would like to know how to make this relationship with God a reality in your life, we will be happy to answer your questions, and lead you to our Lord.