Acts 2024 Juan Seo (July 14, 2024)

**THE CHURCH WAS EARNESTLY PRAYING TO GOD**

Acts 12:1-24

Key Verse 12:5

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

I thank God for wonderfully blessing our Summer Bible Conference last week. Above all, I am grateful to God for answering our prayers. We have been praying together earnestly to become a Spirit-Filled Community that loves one another and serves God’s mission in unity. God heard our prayers and opened the door for us to become a Spirit-Filled Community through the conference. We need to grow into a Spirit-Filled Community. For this, it is crucial to continue praying. Do you believe in the power of prayer? Do you believe that when we pray to God, He hears our prayers and fulfills His will? If so, we must keep praying and experiencing the power of God, who answers our prayers. Today's message is about the power of prayer.

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them (1). King Herod Agrippa I was ruling the regions of Judea, Samaria, Caesarea, and Palestine. He became king by gaining the favor of the Roman Emperor. He arrested some who belonged to the church of Christ and killed Apostle James, the brother of Apostle John. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he arrested Peter and put him in prison. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Since he did not want to carry out violence during the Passover period, he intended to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover. He assigned four squads of four soldiers each, a total of 16 soldiers, to guard Peter.

James and Peter were significant figures in the church. James, along with Peter and John, was one of Jesus' closest disciples. His influence as an apostle within the church was immense. Yet, he was martyred, beheaded by the sword. When he was arrested by Herod, the church members prayed fervently for him. However, he was swiftly executed. Imagine how shocked and fearful the believers must have been. Following James's death, the top leader, Apostle Peter, was also arrested. He was scheduled to be executed after the Passover festival. The church faced the crisis of losing its top leader. Persecution once again attacked the church, threatening to scatter the believers and dismantle the community. This was indeed a critical moment of crisis. What did the church do in this situation? And if we were part of this church, what would we do?

The early church members could have sought various human solutions. They were a minority group in the Jewish society but a large community with thousands of members. Among them were people with high social status, like Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin. They could have appealed to influential believers to send a petition to Herod or the Roman Emperor to release Peter. Although the church was poor, they could have collected a large sum of money through the offerings of thousands of members and offered a bribe to King Herod for Peter's release, thinking that the politically and secularly minded Herod might accept it. Alternatively, they could have organized a mass protest, marching and demanding Peter's release. Perhaps they considered such attempts, but the Bible does not record any of these actions. The author, Luke, records only one thing they did during that crisis: the early church in Jerusalem gathered together and earnestly prayed to God. Let’s read verse 5 together: ***“Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”*** In the time of crisis, the church earnestly prayed more than anything else. This was because they believed they had no other option but to pray. They believed that only the power of God through prayer could release Peter from prison and save the church from Satan’s attack.

What happened then? The night before Herod was to bring Peter to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains. Peter was scheduled to be executed the next day, yet he was sleeping peacefully. How was that possible? It was because Peter had already prayed a lot to God and entrusted everything to God's hands. So he could be at peace even in the face of death. When we have deep personal fellowship with God through prayer, we can entrust everything to God and be at peace. And God did not just let Peter die. God heard the church's prayers and sent an angel to rescue Peter from prison. The angel led him past the guards and out of the prison. The iron gate leading to the city opened by itself. Peter had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening. He thought he was seeing a vision. But Peter came to himself and realized that the Lord had sent his angel and rescued him from death. Do you believe such miraculous events can really happen? We can learn the following four things from the early church believers who were earnestly praying to God for Peter.

***First, they prayed to God.*** Who did they pray to? This question might seem foolish, and the answer too obvious: "Of course, they prayed to God." But think about it carefully. When you pray, are you truly praying to God or yourself? This question is about whether we are genuinely engaging in deep communion with God when we pray. We often claim to pray but forget the presence of God. We may habitually list our prayer topics, forgetting that we are supposed to be praying to God. Some people have a habit of praying for 2-3 minutes while lying in bed. It's better than not praying at all. However, we should recognize the need for our prayers to become more sincere and serious. We often wish to pray quickly before meals. When we're hungry and have delicious food in front of us, it's hard to focus if someone prays for too long. The food might even get cold. Sometimes, at home, I pray, "Thank God for the food! Amen!" and finish. It is too brief. I believe God understands our hunger. But the important thing is whether we truly remember and thank God for providing the food. During group prayers, we might sometimes get distracted or even fall asleep. Someone might have fallen asleep during the representative prayer time. God understands our weaknesses and still hears our prayers despite these shortcomings.

However, we need to make more efforts to meet God and have fellowship with Him during prayer. We held three Friday prayer meetings while preparing for the Summer Bible Conference. We tried various forms of prayer. Some people found it beneficial to hold hands while praying. Others appreciated the time for personal prayer. Some enjoyed praying while singing praise songs. Others found kneeling and praying together meaningful. When we realize that we have fellowship with God during prayer, we will pray sincerely, seeking his presence. I believe that when we pray sincerely, God hears our prayers. Through fellowship with God, we can understand God's will more clearly and pray according to His will. Jesus intercedes for us as our advocate, and the Holy Spirit prays for us even when we don't know what we should pray for. Let's pray to God, genuinely engaging with Him and experiencing His presence in our lives.

***Second, they prayed earnestly.*** What does it mean to pray earnestly? The word "earnestly" here is from the Greek word "ἐκτενῶς (ektenōs)," which also means continuously, without ceasing. Therefore, some translations state that they prayed "without ceasing." I believe the early church members prayed earnestly and without ceasing. They prayed sincerely, wholeheartedly, and constantly day and night. Through prayer, they desperately relied on God. Even when Peter was released and went to meet them, they were still praying. Praying earnestly and persistently is not easy. In verse 6, we see that Peter was released by an angel the night before the trial. Passover, the most important festival for the Jews, begins on the 14th day of the first month and continues for eight days, including the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which is observed from the 15th day for a week. Therefore, the believers in Jerusalem prayed together for almost a week, and God waited until the night before the trial for them to continue praying. Why did God not release Peter immediately but wait until the last moment? It was because He wanted the believers to earnestly pray without giving up until the end. God wants us to trust Him to the end and pray earnestly without ceasing. We should offer such prayers to God. Even if we have been praying for a long time without receiving an answer yet, we should not despair but continue to trust God and pray to the end.

The story of George Müller praying persistently for the salvation of five individuals is quite famous. In November 1844, he began to pray for the conversion of five individuals. He prayed for them every day without a single intermission. Eighteen months elapsed before the first of the five was converted. He thanked God and prayed for the others. Five years elapsed, and the second was converted. He continued to pray for the others, and six years passed before the third was converted. But two remained unconverted. He wrote, “But I hope in God, I pray on, and look for the answer. They are not converted yet, but they will be.” In 1897, fifty-two years after he began to pray daily for these two men, they were finally converted, but after George Müller died. When we pray earnestly, and without ceasing according to God's will, I believe that God hears our prayers and will accomplish them accordingly.

***Third, they prayed together in unity.*** Who were the ones praying? The Bible records that it was "the church" that was earnestly praying to God for him. The church is a gathering of believers. This means that believers in Jesus Christ gathered together and prayed in unity. James 5:16 says, ***"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."*** The prayer of a single righteous person is indeed powerful and effective. Who is righteous? A righteous person is someone who has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus and is in a right relationship with God. God delights in hearing the prayers of such individuals. Therefore, we need to repent and be cleansed by the blood of Jesus to become righteous persons whose prayers are heard by God. If the prayer of one righteous person is powerful and effective, how much more powerful would it be when many righteous believers gather and pray together? Matthew 18:19 says, ***“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”*** God delights in believers gathering together and praying in unity. Therefore, we should strive to pray together. Look at the early church believers: ***“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”*** (Acts 2:42). This is the verse I shared when I was installed as the pastor of New York UBF. They devoted themselves to God’s word, prayer, and fellowship. As we study the book of Acts, we learn many miraculous works in the early church. The story of Apostle Peter’s release in today’s passage is one of those miraculous works.

Why did so many miracles occur in the early church, but we see fewer such works today? Of course, at that time, the Bible was not yet completed, so miraculous works were more necessary. However, has the Holy Spirit, who performed miracles in the early church, lost His power now? Or does He no longer desire to perform such miraculous works? I do not believe so. I think that we have limited the power of the Holy Spirit with our reason and logic. We do not experience God’s power because we do not believe, and therefore we do not pray. We do not gather to pray together because we think nothing significant will happen. Think about it carefully. Do we truly believe that what we pray for will be accomplished?

As I read the passage, I thought that the disbelief of the church towards the servant girl Rhoda reflects our current level of faith. After Apostle Peter escaped from prison with the help of an angel, he went to the house of Mark's mother, where the believers were gathered. They were still praying for Peter's release. When Peter knocked on the door, Rhoda, the servant girl, came to answer. She recognized Peter’s voice and was so overjoyed that she ran back without opening the door, exclaiming, “Peter is at the door!” But what did the believers say? “You are out of your mind.” They thought Rhoda was crazy. When Rhoda kept insisting, they said, “It must be his angel.”As I read this story, I remembered another story that you might have heard. In a village, it hadn't rained for a long time. So, all the church members went up a mountain to pray to God for rain. Then God sent a heavy rain. The church members were joyful but bewildered because they had no place to take shelter from the rain. At that moment, a little girl opened her umbrella and happily walked down the mountain. The only one who believed that God would send rain was that little girl. God heard her prayer and sent the rain. Rhoda is like that little girl. Rhoda believed, but the other church members did not. We are like them. Because we do not believe in the power of prayer, we cannot experience the power of prayer. And because we do not experience the power of prayer, we do not pray. I pray that we become a church that believes in the power of prayer and continues to pray together earnestly.

***Fourth, they prayed for Peter.*** In other words, they prayed for the church leader who was in danger. They also prayed for the church that was in crisis. Their prayers were not selfish, like “God, please help me to be successful in this world.” They prayed for God's people, God's work, and God's servants. We have many prayer topics. But we know that when we pray according to God's will, He hears us. 1 John 5:14 says, ***“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”*** We need to pray for our coworkers who are suffering from illness. We must continue to pray in faith for their healing. We should also pray that our church follows the guidance of the Holy Spirit and actively participates in God's mission. God's mission is to spread the love of Jesus to this world. We need to pray that we can share the gospel with our families, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and the college students in our mission field. We should pray for this country. Additionally, we must pray for our church leaders and the missionaries who are dedicating themselves to God’s mission. We should pray to support the world mission work, which is Jesus' Great Commission. We will be sending a mission team to Belize to support their Summer Bible Conference from Aug. 9-11. Sam Choi, Sarah Bae, Timothy Han, and Becky Bae will support the conference with life testimony sharing and praise & worship. We must pray to fulfill the mission of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to North America, Latin America, and the entire world.

What happened to the church when it overcame the crisis and achieved victory through prayer? Verse 24 says, ***“The word of God continued to spread and flourish.”*** On the other hand, King Herod, who persecuted the church, died a miserable death. Because he was proud and did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. His end was tragic. He acted as if he were a god and tried to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. However, it was not the church that perished; it was Herod. Meanwhile, the church grew even more. The word of God, ***“God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble” (James 4:6),*** was fulfilled. The proud King Herod died miserably, but the praying church grew stronger. We see that God is the sovereign ruler over the world. God controls human history.

Through today's message, we learn the importance of prayer. Do you believe in the power of prayer? Let’s read verse 5 again: ***“Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”*** Let us experience the power of prayer and become victors in this world by praying earnestly and without ceasing for God's mission. Amen.