

How to See the Gospel Spread and Flourish

One of my favorite passages of scripture to read and to teach on is Acts 12. Here we have the familiar story of Peter's miraculous "escape" from prison. We love the story of the angel coming to Peter while he is asleep, chained between two guards, and he tells Peter to get up, the chains fall off and they walk outside. But I wonder if we don't miss some of the important aspects of this story other than the "yeah God" feel good miracle.

As the story opens, King Herod is beginning to seriously persecute the Church. He arrests and executes James—a huge blow to the church, which must have delivered a strong statement to believers. He then goes after Peter and has him arrested. The assumption of the Church had to be that Peter was to be executed too.

What do they do? Get a lawyer and take Herod to court? Whine on Facebook about how bad it is getting for believers in Jerusalem and the government should be more fair? Storm the prison? Nope. Verse 5 tells us that "the church was earnestly praying to God for [Peter]."

That verse hints at two things: 1) This was strong, desperate, corporate prayer—people weren't allowed to take the request sheet home and hopefully remember Peter. They came together, realizing they needed a supernatural solution. 2) I suspect the prayer meeting was focused only on Peter and the growing problem of persecution. It was a vertically focused prayer time, not horizontally focused. By that I mean it was not focused on the needs of the people in attendance, as most of our western church prayer times are. It was focused upward—on God and His purposes.

The Results

I am also fascinated by the results. Consider this: those who were praying didn't even have much faith! Remember what happened when Peter showed up at the door? The servant girl excitedly ran back into the house (without letting Peter in) and told the crowd Peter was at the door. "You're crazy," was the response. That can't possibly be! God answered with a miracle even though it appears they were still expecting Peter to go to trial. They were not expecting God to do something that immediate and miraculous. That gives me great faith, because I am often praying in a way where I can't seem to drum up a lot of expectation.

The second major result most people miss (I did for years). God not only rescued Peter—the immediate answer to their prayers—but He changed the situation by soon removing Herod. The king died shortly thereafter. And then Scripture tells us that "the word of God continued to spread and flourish" (Acts 12:24). God used the agreement of those frightened believers to release a powerful miracle, remove a major obstacle and further His kingdom.

The Message for Us

I think there is a powerful message in here for churches. If we would begin to pray together—in a vertical way, not a horizontal one—things would change in the life of our church. Obstacles would be removed, miracles would happen, and the ministry of your church would "spread and flourish." It baffles me why so many pastors, elders and church leaders in the Western church today do not get that.

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