

EXTRAORDINARY

Acts 12:6-24

The enemies of the Cross did not and have not given up their fight to stop what God is trying to do. After an initial persecution in which the church was scattered to many places in that part of the world there was a time of relative peace. The followers of Jesus shared their faith and the church grew. That growth included Gentiles beginning with Cornelius and his family. Apparently, independently of what Peter had done and later defended to the church leaders in Jerusalem, some other believers who had been scattered to places like Cyprus and Antioch began sharing the gospel with Gentiles and many believed. Word of what was happening eventually got to Jerusalem and Barnabas was sent to Antioch to see what was happening. Barnabas liked what he saw and as he encouraged them, the church in that area grew even more. This prompted Barnabas to go find Saul and get him involved with these Gentiles. The news of the successful growth of the church with both Jews and Gentiles eventually reached the Jewish leaders who incited the Roman officials to take action against the church leaders.

Evidently Herod Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the Great) thought that pleasing the Jewish leaders would make his job easier. The “Herods” were ruthless and evil people who lacked normal human compassion and any sense of propriety. Herod the Great was the one who ordered the murder of the children in the Bethlehem area around the time of the birth of Christ. His son, Herod Antipas, succeeded him and had been responsible for the death of John the Baptist. He remained in power until around A.D. 40 (some references have this 37 and others 41) when his nephew Agrippa I came to power. Rather than doing what was right or fair, he (as his predecessors had done) thought primarily about himself and what would be good for him.

Taking an objective view of these men, it is obvious that they were used as tools of the devil to oppose what God was doing in revealing and making the plan of salvation available to all who would believe. When unprincipled people are in positions of power, the usual outcome is that they are used by “powers and principalities” to turn people away from God. The target of such evil is typically against believers or followers of Christ. It doesn’t take a genius to see that is exactly what is and has been happening in our nation over the past century. Secular humanism has been working to fundamentally change the mind set of our people to rely on or trust in the government rather than put their trust in God.

Many times the easiest way to stop a movement is to eliminate the leaders by either killing or discrediting them. In the case of the early church the opposition was coming from those with political power and since they did not have anyone to hold them immediately accountable they behaved ruthlessly. The thinking of those in that kind of world was that “if we kill the leaders, then the movement will die.” Just the opposite usually happens when the movement is based on sound fundamental principles of righteousness and justice because God is still in control and He will intervene in the affairs of this world to ensure that His will is accomplished.

Not long after Agrippa I came into power he had James the brother of John killed and this action gained him favor with the Jewish leaders. Since he needed the cooperation of the Jewish leaders to maintain some semblance of peace, he then had Peter arrested and was planning to execute him around the time of Passover since he was recognized as being a leader among the believers. Peter was known by the Jews and the Roman to be someone who had escaped from prison many years ago. Consequently, great precautions (he was constantly shackled to guards and extra guards were on the prison gates) were taken to make sure that he did not escape. In

verse five of chapter twelve, we see that the response of the church was summed up in the statement “but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.”

Deliverance – 12:6-10

⁶ On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and woke him up, saying, “Get up quickly.” And his chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” ⁹ And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. Acts 12:6-10 (NASB95)

In the physical realm, the church may often find itself unable to do anything. In the case of the first century believers in Jerusalem, they had no effective weapons of the world and if they had attempted to rescue Peter, the soldiers would have killed him immediately. The weapons of warfare the church has are spiritual and they are strong and effective to fight the real battle against powers and principalities in the spiritual realm.

Interventions of God through visual appearances of angels are rare. However, God does provide protection for us from the everyday dangers we encounter. This dramatic rescue of Peter helps to build our faith by strong evidence of what God is continually doing for us.

We may not be arrested and bound by chains and prison walls, but we can find ourselves trapped in other things which could destroy our influence or keep us from the work of the Kingdom of God. We need deliverance from the affairs of this life and as we awaken out of our sleep we can see the “chains” that bind us fall off. As we are freed from the fetters that bind us to the false security systems of the world, we then must follow the messenger (or message) God has sent to us to be free of the broader prison of a world “mind set” that is all around us.

Some commentators have suggested that Peter was able to sleep soundly the night before his trial because he realized that the believers were praying for him and he remembered that Jesus had mentioned that he would live to be an old man. John recorded this statement when Jesus told Peter that when he was young, he would gird himself and go where he wanted to go, but when he was old he would stretch out his hands and someone else would gird him and take him to where he did not want to go. These words of Jesus may have come to his mind when the angel waked him and told him to gird himself and put on his shoes.

Some commentators have noted that God uses miraculous interventions when nothing else will fix the problem. This divine economy of not “wasting miracles” explains why the shackles fell off and the doors opened but Peter had to “gird himself, put on his shoes, wrap his cloak and follow the angel.” Once Peter was out in the street, then he no longer needed the direct assistance of the angel since he was capable of finding his way to where a group of believers was praying for him. The argument is sometimes made that God will not do anything for us that we can do for ourselves. While this idea is good motivation for us to be involved and take action to do what God has called us to do, this would not explain what happened to Philip after his encounter with the Ethiopian official. Luke reported the following in Acts 8:39-40

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus.

Obviously, we cannot make absolute generalizations rules regarding what actions God will take in every situation.

Delight – 12:11-15

¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.” ¹² And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, “You are out of your mind!” But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, “It is his angel.” Acts 12:11-15 (NASB95)

As God works to free us from the entrapments of this life, we may not realize what has happened until we look back on the events and put them into perspective. It is in examining things that happen to us that we can see the work of God in our lives. Just think of the times that something out-of-the-ordinary was happening in your life. Most of us have a lot of difficulty in knowing what is really going on when it is happening. If we are accustomed to thinking the way the world thinks, then we conclude that we are having a run of bad or good luck. We then try to rationalize that this happens to everyone. Things will turn around and our luck will change and it all sort of “evens out.” When we think this way, we are being influenced by two pagan religious ideas. The first of these is that our lives are controlled by two gods that were part of the Babylonian culture – Fortune and Fate. In today’s way of saying things we would call these Luck and Chance. These two gods were influential with the Jews even before they went into exile in Babylon. Isaiah referred to these in Isa 65:11-12 “But as for you who forsake the LORD and forget my holy mountain, who spread a table for Fortune and fill bowls of mixed wine for Destiny, I will destine you for the sword, and you will all bend down for the slaughter; for I called but you did not answer, I spoke but you did not listen. You did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me.” The other pagan idea is part of Taoism or Chinese philosophy which says that all of life is balanced out and harmonized with equal parts of yin (dark) and yang (light). We would say something to the effect, “We win some and we lose some.”

If the apostle Peter ever thought about life in such terms, then he had his mind changed in a big way. In verse eleven, when he realized that what had happened was not a dream, he said “Wow, I am the luckiest guy in the world!” Not so! What he said was “I now KNOW that the Lord had sent His angel to rescue me.” When we are ever aware that God is with us and in us, then we will be more likely to give Him the credit and not think that life is just a series of random coincidences.

When we are freed from the hindrances of the world, then we should seek out the fellowship and support of believers. The church had been praying and it did influence what happened in a secular world by prayer. If we fail to exercise our influence on the world, we should not be surprised to see that the world is decaying and degrading.

A humorous incident happened when he arrived at the home where people were praying. There were two responses that might be typical of what we might do under similar circumstances. The first response was that of Rhoda who was described in most translations as a servant-girl. The Greek term was also used in reference to children in a family. She was typical of children that, in their excitement, they forget or neglect to do the obvious things they should do. This same thing is seen today in that many Christians get all excited about a new music group, a new Bible Study or a new popular speaker or a particular preacher and, in their excitement, they forget to work in the nursery, to volunteer to help maintain the facilities, to take care of the widows and orphans, visit the sick, and witness to the lost. In their enthusiasm they rush into the prayer meeting and there we find the second response from those who are praying. They have serious doubts and sometimes refuse to believe that the Lord actually answered their prayers.

It is totally ironic that these believers who had seen the effects of the Lord working through the apostles in people being healed and had heard the accounts of what had happened to Philip in Samaria and with the Ethiopian official, what had happened to Saul on the road to Damascus, and to Peter in his encounter with Cornelius, that they would respond the same way people might respond today when they hear about a miracle. People today question whether we are being rational if we claim that God did something miraculous. Things have changed a little in that no one (today) would think that Rhoda had seen the spirit of Peter or his guardian angel. That thought would not even be in the realm of a possibility for most people.

What they refused to believe (that Peter was out of jail) and what they accepted as a possibility (that Peter's angel had come to them) should, at least, give us something to think about regarding what we really believe God can and will do. At least some of them should have remembered that an angel had delivered the apostles from a locked prison on one other occasion. Apparently, they were willing to believe that Peter's angel had come to the house. That response should prompt us to ask a question about what might have happened in their past experiences that caused them to think that a person's guarding angel would appear to other people. Sometime I think that we are simply satisfied to know that we are saved and that all there is and no more. Could it be that sometimes we don't think that God has much more for us that we are totally missing?

An obvious lesson for all of us to take away from this is that those helpless believers who could only pray were stronger than Herod and all the soldiers, the chains, and the iron bars of the prison.

Determined – 12:16-17

¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened *the door*, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place. Acts 12:16-17 (NASB95)

We are seldom prepared for the answers to prayer that God gives to us. He does not always answer in the same ways as before. Though the believers were praying for God to save Peter from the situation, they were not anticipating such a miraculous answer. We must be careful to not limit God by our lack of belief or simply because we have decided how God is supposed to operate in today's world.

At that time, the assembly of believers was being led by James, a son of Mary and Joseph and is usually described as the half-brother of Jesus. This James is also said to be the author of the book of James. The "brethren" could be a reference to the other apostles or could mean all the believers in Jerusalem.

With the increased persecution and the emphasis on eliminating the church's leadership, Peter left the area. When we are in confrontation with the civil authorities, we need to be very wise in selecting the timing and the place of confrontation. A cooling off period is sometimes needed so that rampant emotions can have a chance to calm down. There is no record regarding where Peter went and Luke's emphasis shifted to how God would use Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

Disturbance – 12:18-19

¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers *as to* what could have become of Peter. ¹⁹ When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away *to execution*. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there. Acts 12:18-19 (NASB95)

If the church is unprepared for God's supernatural intervention, the world is even more so. The disappearance of Peter was impossible to explain from their limited view point. The only explanation for them was that the guards were at fault and the pride typical of worldly leaders resulted in the death of the guards.

The Rest of Story – 12:20-24

²⁰ Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and *began* delivering an address to them. ²² The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" ²³ And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. ²⁴ But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. Acts 12:20-24 (NASB95)

Tyre and Sidon were city-states that were under control of the Romans. They were involved in shipping and fishing and depended on trade with the Jews for food. For some unstated reason they had offended Herod and he was capable of putting a trade embargo on these two cities which would have resulted in a substantial economic burden. They lobbied (bribed) Herod's advisor to work on their behalf to make the problem go away.

There was a festival in honor of Caesar that was held in Caesarea and, like the politician that he was, Herod took the opportunity to make a speech. Representatives of Tyre and Sidon and others came to the festivities and they were determined to play up to the narcissistic egomania of this evil man with flattery. They said that he spoke with the voice of a god and they pleaded with Herod to forgive them and treat them well.

The historian Josephus reported "That he did not refuse nor correct this impious flattery; but, presently after, looking up, he saw an owl perched over his head, and was at the same instant seized with a most violent pain in his bowels, and gripes in his belly, which were exquisite from the very first. His torture continued without intermission, or the least abatement, and then he died in the fifty-fourth year of his age, when he had been king seven years." Luke reported that an angel of the Lord struck him and he was eaten by worms and died.

So, in this overall account we find two incidences where an angel struck two different people and the outcomes were totally different for the two cases. One was set free and the other died. We also see how God overruled the actions of an evil anti-God individual. In verse five we saw that Peter was kept in prison, but prayer was made for him. These prayers were answered and God intervened on behalf of the church. At the conclusion of this account we see that Herod died a horrible death, but the word of the Lord continued to grow and be multiplied. God continues to intervene in the affairs of humanity and His plans will succeed.