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## Prayer Problems

### Acts 12:1-24

***How many of you know the story of Pilgrim's Progress? For those who don't, let me say this about it. It was written in jail by John Bunyan in 1677 who, like his father, was a tinker by trade with no formal education except 3 years of grammar school. And yet, it became the most widely read book in history, next to the Bible.***

***The story is an allegory describing the journey of Christian from this world to the world to come. My favorite scene from it is Christian locked up in the dungeon of Doubting Castle with Giant Despair guarding him and Hopeful by his side. Finally he makes a long overdue discovery and as I read it to you, ask yourself the question: What's the key supposed to symbolize in this story? Christian says—***

***"What a fool I've been to lie like this in a stinking dungeon when I could've just as well walked free! In my chest pocket I have a key called 'Promise!' that will, I'm persuaded open any lock in Doubting Castle.' Then said Hopeful, 'That's good news, my brother! Do immediately take it out of your chest pocket and try it!'"***

***"Then Christian took the key from his chest and began to try the lock of the dungeon door, and as he turned the key, the bolt unlocked and the door flew open with ease, so that Christian and Hopeful immediately came out."***

So what does the key represent? The promises of God hidden in our hearts giving us freedom from our doubt and despair! Last week we looked at the most important promise of God which is His promise to answer our prayers. Jesus said in John 14:13, "Truly, truly I say to you, whatever you ask in my name that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it." And yet, in an effort to be real, I asked the question at the end of our study that usually arises when we talk about prayer: Why does God answer some prayers right away while others never seem to be answered or only after a long period of praying and waiting? I'm thinking, for example, of my wife who prayed every day of her pregnancies for our children to be healthy and whole, and they were! While other godly women pray the same thing and their children are born with special needs. Or why is it that we'll pray for one person to be healed of cancer, and their healing is complete and miraculous, whereas we pray just as much for someone else with the same disease and they eventually die from it?

I don't pretend to have the answers to all of these things, but what I do want to do this morning is take us to a passage that provides some of the answers to the prayer problems we face—prayers that go unanswered or take months and years before we get an answer. Only God knows for sure why that's the case, but I do think the church's experience in Acts chapter 12 provides a clue that can keep us from getting discouraged and giving up in our praying. You'll remember Jesus put a high value on perseverance in prayer urging us: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the

door will be opened to you. For whoever asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened to him.” Turn with me in your Bible, then, to Acts chapter 12.

Here we find 3 answers to our prayer problems, and the first answer is this—

**1. God often waits to answers our prayers in order to increase our faith and bring greater glory to Himself.**

Luke writes starting with verse 1: “It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison handing him over to be guarded by 4 squads of 4 soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.” How long did God wait to answer the church’s prayers? Until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour just before Peter was about to be tried and executed. Why? To develop their faith and bring greater glory to Himself by saving him at a time when it was clear that only God could do it.

But then that isn’t unusual, is it? Another example that comes to mind is the resurrection of Lazarus. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus saying, “Our brother who you love is sick.” But instead of leaving right away, it says He waited two days to make sure he died. And his sisters couldn’t understand that! When He finally arrived at the grave, they said to Him, “Lord, if you’d been here, our brother wouldn’t have died!” But it wasn’t that He didn’t care about them because it says when He saw them crying, Jesus wept. So why did He let their brother die? For the glory of God and the increase of their faith! He said to them as they stood weeping at his grave, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God!” Then He gloriously and miraculously raised him from the dead even though he’d been in the grave four days! The same is true of Peter. Jesus leaves Peter in jail until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour to reveal God’s glory and remind us that He is able to deliver us even in the most hopeless circumstances if we trust Him. Do you believe that about the circumstances of your life—that God can take what others mean for evil and use it for His greater glory and your greater good?

***Can I tell you a little more about John Bunyan? After all, he is one of the great heroes of the faith that you’re going to meet one day if you’re a follower of Christ. At age 15, he suffered his first great loss when both his mother and sister died within weeks of each other from the same disease. Then 6 months later, still grieving, he was drafted into the army where he saw his best friend’s head blown off by musket fire. Then upon his release from the army, he married and had four children. Mary, his oldest, was born blind. So began his search for God. He said it took him two years to accept the fact that God forgave his sin. But once he did, he immediately felt the call to preach, something he did every chance he got, quickly becoming the most popular preacher of his day. 24 hours notice was all it took to draw a crowd of over 1,000 to hear him preach at 7:00 o’clock in the morning on a workday. The great Puritan theologian John Owen was asked by King Charles why he, a great scholar, would go to hear a poor tinker preach. His answer: “I’d willingly exchange all my learning for the tinker’s power to touch men’s hearts.”***

***Then with four children under the age of 10, his wife died. But God in His mercy gave him a wonderful second wife in Elizabeth. A year later, pregnant with her first child, Bunyan was jailed for preaching without state approval—the first time for 12 years and then a second time for 6 years, something that was a source of great anguish for Bunyan. Elizabeth miscarried due to the crisis, and Bunyan wrote: “Parting with my wife and poor children has been to me like the tearing of flesh from my bones because of the many hardships and miseries they suffer with-out me, especially my poor blind child who lies nearer to my heart than anything.” Bunyan did earn a little money weaving shoelaces and preaching to a prison congregation of 60 inmates, but his suffering was long and hard.***

So let me ask you. What keeps a man’s faith strong as the days and weeks and months drag by? It was his faith in the sovereignty of God, his love for the glory of God, and his daily time in the presence of God. He wrote: “In times of affliction, we commonly meet the sweetest experience of the love of God. My times of prayer are more precious than treasures of gold and silver. They open the heart to God and is the means by which the soul though empty is filled with God.” But then Bunyan was never forced to remain in prison. He was free to leave whenever he wanted. All he had to do was stop preaching! But he refused to do so. He said, “I have determined, the Almighty God being my help and shield, to suffer until the moss grows on my eyelids rather than violate my faith in Christ.” The lesson: The call to follow Christ isn’t a call to comfort and ease. It’s often a call to wait long and suffer loss before He grants us the desires of our hearts. And yet, as we’re about to see, the answers do come for His glory when the time is right.

That’s the first lesson to glean from this story. The second lesson is that—

**2. God’s will, not our faith, is the greatest factor in answered prayer.**

Verse 7 says Peter was sleeping surrounded by soldiers when “suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell.” Did you know that a lot of God’s 11<sup>th</sup> hour deliverances involve angelic intervention? I’m thinking now of Sennacherib’s attack on Jerusalem and how he warned Hezekiah not to believe the word of his prophet Isaiah. But Isaiah 37:36 says: “That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp. So Sennacherib broke camp and returned to Assyria.” And I believe the same thing is often true of us. Verse 7 goes on, “He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists. Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.”

Peter was surprised because he really didn’t think God would deliver him. He knew that God could deliver Him, but he wasn’t sure what God’s will in this situation was, so he didn’t really know what to believe. And that flies in the face of everything the health and wealth preachers tell us. “No!” they say. “Words are very powerful. So if you want this or that to happen, you have to name it and claim it. Otherwise it won’t come true! Those in the signs and wonders movement say something similar—the reason we don’t see more people healed is because we don’t have

enough faith, because if we did, all we'd have to do is speak the word and miracles would happen!" There's a good theological word for that. Baloney! Peter knew Jesus could save Him, but he wasn't sure what His will was at this point. After all, didn't Jesus tell him earlier in John 21 that he was going to glorify God by the way he died? So he wasn't sure. Maybe God would glorify Himself by rescuing him out of Herod's hand or maybe he'd glorify God by dying for Him. Either way, Peter knew that God would be glorified, and that's all that really mattered to him. Bunyan's attitude was very similar. He advised his flock: "If therefore when thou hast fled, thou art taken, be not offended at God or man: not at God, for thou art his servant, thy life and thy all are his; nor at man for he is but God's rod and is ordained in this to do thee good. Hast thou escaped? Laugh. Art thou taken? Laugh. I mean, be pleased whichever way things go, for the scales are still in God's hand." Amen? Do you believe that?

Nor did the church expect him to be saved. Verse 12 says: "When this dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people were gathered and praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, 'Peter is at the door!' 'You are out of your mind,' they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, 'It must be his angel.' The Jews believed that each person has a guardian angel and that his angel can take on the appearance of the person he's guarding. So maybe it's just his angel! Isn't that amazing? Here they've been praying and praying but they find it easier to believe it's Peter's angel than Peter himself. "But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. 'Tell James and the brothers about this,' he said and then left for another place. In the morning there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed."

The church prayed for Peter's release, but they didn't really believe it would happen. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been so surprised when he showed up at the door. But then it doesn't really matter how small our faith is, does it, because God has a plan and God's always trumps our faith or lack of it? God's will, not our faith, is the #1 factor in determining if our prayers will be answered. Don't misunderstand me! We need faith! The Bible is clear about that! But how much faith do we need for God to answer? Only enough to keep praying! The point is this: God had a plan, and Peter was an essential part of that plan. Jesus made that clear when he said to Peter, "You're going to be one of the foundation stones on which my church is built!" And we need to remember the same thing. We need to study and remember what God promises in His Word, so that we can pray accordingly. They had faith no bigger than a mustard seed, but that was enough, because it was focused on the right thing. That's the promise of 1 John 5:14, "If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us, and if we know that He hears us whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we've asked of Him."

***It's hard to pray and wait, isn't it? Cheryl and I have had to do that a few times in our relatively easy lives—4 years commuting to seminary in Portland every week while Cheryl stayed and worked in Tacoma so I could return Thursday nights and continue leading the youth***

***ministry, waiting for Heidi's surgery and the final biopsy to come back saying she was free of cancer, every 6 months in Romania waiting for our visas to be renewed. It isn't easy to pray and wait. That I know!***

***For you, it may be a job loss and unemployment, waiting for the doctors to diagnose the pain in your body, or praying for a loved one to come to Christ. Hard things, no doubt, but dare I say it—relatively mild compared to the suffering of the great saints who've gone before us! So accept this hardship as your opportunity to testify to Christ's goodness and demonstrate your love for Him this side of heaven.***

***That was John Bunyan's counsel to his family again and again during his 18 years in prison. "Let us wait upon God, walk with God, believe in God, and commit ourselves, body and soul, to the care of God." And one more point to ponder—***

### **3. God delights to answer our prayers beyond what we ask or think.**

***Three years ago, I started praying for a dog. I always wanted a yellow lab, but I wasn't sure the timing was right or if I ought to spend the money on one. So I began to pray about it instead—for one year I prayed—so when I saw the email from our friend—"Purebred, yellow lab, 7 months old, in need of a good home"—I knew it was God's answer to my prayer, responded immediately, and the owners not only gave me a free purebred dog, they also threw in a kennel, and praise God, I'm now the happy owner of the best canine companion on God's green earth!***

***Are you learning to do that too? To pray before you buy that dog, that car, that boat, or that house you've always wanted, asking Him: "Lord, is this your will for my life?" Or do you rush ahead of Him only to regret your decision later?***

***A better example is our return from Romania—emotionally burned out, no savings, no plan for the future, and two girls about to start college. About the only thing we had going for us was prayer: "Show us, Lord. Show us what you want us to do next!" Those were hard days, but God is faithful! He led us to this church, helped us get our girls through college without going into debt, and with a couple small inheritances, we were also able to invest in 3 small rentals which is our only real retirement. God has been good to us, and why! He is good to us because He is good and delights to answer our prayers beyond what we can ask or even think.***

Acts 12:19 is a good, if gruesome, example. Luke says: "Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. He'd been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." And the point is this: The church didn't ask God to kill Herod. He chose to do that Himself as a way of protecting His fledgling church from destruction, which ought to tell us something else about prayer. We don't have to specify the exact manner in which we want God to answer when we pray to Him. He's wise enough to do that without any advice from us. All we need to do is pray, and He will answer because He is good and delights to answer our prayers beyond what we can ask or even think.

And finally, notice the by-product of their prayer. Verse 24 says: "But the word of God continued to increase and spread." That's important because that's what the Lord cares about more than anything else—not only here at home but to the uttermost parts of the earth. He wants His church to grow and His lost children to be found. That's also why Peter, John Bunyan, and countless other great saints like them have been willing to face prison and even death. In the case of Bunyan, what was the outcome of his suffering? It softened his heart and gave him such a deep love for his people that he became by far the most beloved pastor of his day, the church exploding with growth as a result of his ministry. He led a flock of 4,000 which was totally unheard of in that day, planted 30 churches, and in addition to Pilgrim's Progress, wrote 60 other books to encourage his people in the midst of persecution. I finish with one more excerpt from his autobiography—this time his description of his wife, Elizabeth's efforts to secure his release from prison.

***Standing before the court, the first question the judges asked her was: "Will he stop preaching?" "My lord, he dares not leave off preaching as long as he can speak." "Then there's no more need to talk!" "O, but my lord, there is need," she said, "for I have four small children that cannot help themselves, of which one is blind and we have nothing to live on but the charity of good people."***

***Mr. Hale, one of the judges, asked with pity if she really had four small children. "My lord, I am but their stepmother, having not been married to him yet 2 years. Indeed, I was with child when my husband was arrested but being young and dismayed at the news, I fell into labor and so continued 8 days, and was then delivered, but my child died." Mr. Hale was touched by her answer, but the other judges were not and spoke against him. "He is a mere tinker!" "Yes, and because he is a tinker and a poor man, he is despised and cannot get justice."***

***Mr. Chester, another judge, was enraged, "Bunyan will preach and do as he wishes!" "My lord, he preaches nothing but the word of God!" Mr Twisden, in a rage, said: "He runneth up and down and doeth harm." "No, my lord, it is not so. God hath used him and done much good through him." Twisden continued: "His doctrine is the doctrine of the devil." Elizabeth said, "My lord, when the righteous Judge appears, it will be known that his doctrine is not the doctrine of the devil!"***

***He concludes: "Elizabeth Bunyan was but a simple English peasant woman, and yet, she couldn't have spoken with more dignity had she been a queen!"***

So I ask again: What is it that gives us strength in our suffering and courage to stand firm for Him in spite of our circumstances? It's our faith in the goodness of God, our devotion to the will of God, and our love of the glory of God—all of which is the result of our time in the presence of God. Bow with me as I pray for those things, please—