

Church 1.0
Acts 12:5
“How the Church Deals with a Crisis”

1. Henry Kissinger served as the National Security Advisor as well as Secretary of State during the tumultuous years of the Nixon and Ford administrations. One day, Kissinger is reported to have looked at his calendar, and said to one of his aides, “There cannot be a crisis next week! My schedule is already full.”ⁱ

2. Though we would all like the ability to schedule the crises of our lives, if we could, we would probably never schedule them.

3. Nobody likes emergencies. No one wants to enter those periods in life when it is situation critical, and code red, and down to the wire. However, it is often in those moments of crisis that God is best able to prove His power to us.

4. In Acts chapter 12, after a period of relative peace and prosperity, the early church found itself facing a crisis. Having already lost the Apostle James to execution, Peter was imprisoned and only hours from his own death.

5. In response to this crisis, the church did not organize a protest or plot a prison break – they just prayed. Prayer was their only weapon, and it proved to be their strongest weapon.

6. This chapter from the history of the early church speaks to the church of today and reminds us that all the powers of hell cannot overcome the church when it goes to its knees in prayer.

7. The church in the book of Acts reminds us here of what the Apostle Paul taught in II Corinthians 10:4. That is, when it comes to fighting the battles that we face, “... *the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds.*”

8. Follow along with me as we study this story, and I want you to notice some things about this crisis the church faced, how they dealt with it, and how God intervened on behalf of His people. First of all, notice with me:

I. THE DANGER EXPERIENCED BY THE CHURCH

1. Being the people of God is not somehow an insurance against trouble. In fact, Jesus warned His followers in John 16:33 that “*in this world ye shall have tribulation.*”

2. The church in the book of Acts had experienced a season of peace, but the peace was shattered when Herod, the Roman puppet king of Jews, began to “vex” the church in Jerusalem.

3. This King Herod's grandfather was the Herod who had murdered all the babies at the time of the birth of Jesus. Now, in Acts 12, this same family is used by Satan to endanger the people of God.

4. The church in every generation can expect to be attacked and assaulted in a world controlled by the powers of darkness. There are times when the church will experience dangers and crises that will test their faith.

5. Consider this danger experienced by the early church in this text. Think with me firstly about:

A. What they had previously faced

1. The matter-of-fact style of Luke's writing removes some of the emotion from verse two, but we should try to understand the weight of what is recorded there.

2. Verse 2 says, *"And he killed James the brother of John with the sword."* Now we do not know a lot about this James, especially not as much as we know about his brother. Yet our lack of knowledge regarding him does not take away from his importance to the early church.

3. This James was one of the "inner circle" disciples who walked with our Lord during his earthly ministry. Several times we read of how the Lord spent special time with "Peter, James, and John."

4. He was no doubt a pillar and critical part of the church in Jerusalem. His martyrdom would have been devastating and heart-wrenching for the believers in that church.

5. This chapter ends with the miraculous rescue of Peter, but we must not overlook the fact that it begins with the tragic death of James. It is a reminder that at times the people of God will suffer heartaches and tragedies that cannot be understood apart from the sovereign ordering of God.

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in 1945, while being held in the Flossenburg concentration camp. He was there for speaking out against the Nazi's in his native Germany.

7. For Bonhoeffer, his suffering was not a surprise; it was simply a part of following Jesus. He said, "Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means...suffering because we have to."

8. The church experienced a great victory at the close of this chapter, but they suffered a great loss at its opening.

9. When considering the danger faced by the church in this text, we consider not only what they had previously faced, but also:

B. What they were possibly facing

1. Look again at the text, and notice with me verse 3. It says, “*And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also...*”

2. With little time to weep over James, the church now faces the possibility of losing Peter as well. If Herod goes through with his plan, the church was going to be short two of its most influential leaders.

3. It is hard for us to truly grasp the scope of this crisis. While Peter and all the other apostles would eventually lose their lives for the cause of Christ, at this point there was still work for Peter to do.

4. Here the church faced a crisis that could possibly be disastrous for the whole future of the faith. At least that is how it must have seemed for those believers at that time.

5. There are times in our lives, and in the life of a church, that we face a crisis of faith. Situations begin to grow bigger than our abilities, circumstances exceed our control, and it looks like life itself is being threatened.

6. The early church reminds us that there are times when the mountain is so high we are uncertain of what lies on the other side. Often the dangers ahead of us obscure the hope we have for the future.

7. When these times of uncertainty come, we cannot not let what we do not know cause us to forget what we do know. That is, God will ultimately work out all things for our good and for His glory.

8. As dark as the possibility of losing Peter must have seemed, not even his death could overthrow the ultimate plan of God. Christ is the head of His church, and as long as He is alive, the church will go on!

9. Though your crisis may seem to be the worst possible scenario, remember, God writes the end of the story, and not even a sealed tomb is too much for Him to overcome.

10. Even when James is dead and Peter's in the prison, remember what the songwriter said:

*God can do anything, anything, anything,
God can do anything but fail*

11. Notice something else we find in this story. We see not only *the danger experienced by the church*, but notice also secondly:

II. THE DEVOTION EXPRESSED IN THE CHURCH

1. I draw your attention back to the verse we read at the beginning. Verse 5 presents the scene. It says, *“Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”*

2. I love the little word “but” in that verse. Luke has told us that James is dead, and now he tells us that Peter is in the pen. *But*, the church was still praying.

3. They were not planning for Peter’s funeral; they were pleading for Peter’s future. Their devotion to prayer in this text is a wonderful lesson for the church of today. Notice a couple of things with me about their devotion. First of all:

A. The fact of their prayer is revealing

1. Look again at the text, and notice the description of Peter’s security detail while in the prison. Verse 6 says, *“And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.”*

2. This gospel preacher is locked down tighter than Hannibal Lector. He is chained to two guards, and the door to the prison is guarded by another group of soldiers.

3. Herod was intent on keeping Peter in the prison until he could have him executed. It looked as if that is exactly what would happen.

4. However, Luke says that the maximum security and scheduled execution of Peter did not stop the church from praying for him. The fact that they still prayed for him reveals an undaunted faith on the part of the people of God.

5. The church must pray, not only when there are glimmers of hope, and avenues of possible answers to the problem. The church must pray when the doctor says, “It’s too late”, when that son or daughter seems too far gone, and when time seems to have run out.

6. Yes, Peter was kept in prison, and chained to guards. But, in spite of all that, prayer was being made for him by the church. They prayed kept praying, even during the night prior to his execution.

7. Just a year before her death, Princess Diana was taken off the prayer list at her former church. On November 24, 1996, the phrase, “Prince and Princess of

Wales” were replaced by “Charles, Prince of Wales” in the Church of England’s prayer for the royal family.

8. This change was ordered by Queen Elizabeth II as a necessary following the divorce of Charles and Diana.

10. I fear that at times the church quits praying too soon, and we fail those who need us the most, when they need us the most. The fact that the church was praying at this last hour speaks to us about a devotion to prayer.

11. Notice something further about the devotion expressed by the church in this text. Not only is the fact of their revealing, but notice also that:

B. The form of their prayer is revealing

1. Look again at verse 5. It says, “...*but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.*” How the church prayed in the midst of this particular crisis is instructive to us on how we should pray when we are facing an emergency.

2. First of all, notice their prayer was marked by a partnership. Later on the text, we read in verse 12 that, “...*many were gathered together praying.*”

3. This was a community effort in prayer. Not just one or two believers were calling out to God on behalf of Peter, but many. In fact, if we take verse 5 literally, the whole church was praying for Peter.

4. Their prayer was marked not only by a partnership, but also by a priority. Notice in verse 5 that the prayers were made “for him.” This was a focused and specific prayer meeting. They were praying for Peter.

5. When the church gets serious about one thing, and bombards heaven with that priority, their many prayers become unusually effective. Their prayer was marked by a partnership, a priority, and also a passion.

6. Notice that phrase “without ceasing” in verse 5. It is translated from a word that means to be strained, or to be stretched out. It describes prayer that is offered earnestly, fervently, and passionately.

7. So much of our prayers are dull, flat, and heartless. Yet, when the church comes together, agrees together, and prays together with a sincere passion and earnestness, heaven is moved, and circumstances on earth are changed.

8. David Brainerd was a missionary who gave his brief and feeble life in trying to win the Native Americans of New England during the early 18th century. Brainerd

was devoted to prayer, and at times he would pray so earnestly and passionately for the Indians to be saved, that the snow around him would melt.

9. Most of our heartless prayers are so cold they don't even melt the tears in our eyes. Yet the early church and their devotion to prayer challenge us to face the crises of life on our knees, calling out to our God.

10. Notice a third truth we find in this story. We see not only *the danger experienced by the church*, and *the devotion expressed in the church*, but notice also further that we see:

III. THE DELIVERANCE EXTENDED TO THE CHURCH

1. Warren Wiersbe says, "The phrase, 'but prayer' [in verse 5] is the turning point in the story."ⁱⁱⁱ He is right. The remainder of chapter 12, following verse 5, is a story of divine deliverance given to Peter, and those who loved him and prayed for him.

2. Though in His sovereign ordering, the Lord had taken the Apostle James home, His plan for Peter involved a prison break. Peter was snoozing inside the prison, the peace of God his natural sleep aid.

3. Verse 7 records Peter's unusual wake up call. It says, "*And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.*"

4. The angel proceeded to lead Peter through the prison doors and out into the street. Verse 11 says that when Peter finally realized he wasn't dreaming, he knew that God had miraculously delivered him from Herod, the Jews, and death.

5. As we look at this scene of miraculous deliverance, where God intervened and did the impossible on behalf of His servant and His people, we realize a couple of things. First of all:

A. It took the prayers of the people

1. An old puritan preacher named Thomas Watson, once said, "The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel."

2. God gets all the glory for getting Peter out of jail and saving his life, but you cannot disconnect the work of God from the prayers of the church.

3. John Wesley said, "God does nothing but in answer to prayer." In Acts 12, Luke intends for us to read verse 5 and realize that Peter's escape from prison was a result of the church efforts in prayer.

4. When we realize how little the church is actually accomplishing today, and we see how often we have no help for those in crisis, the problem is not in our programs and ministries. The problem is our prayerlessness.

5. We need to read again James 4:2, *“Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.”*

6. In Mark 9:29, when the disciples asked Jesus why they had been unable to cast a devil out of a boy, Jesus answered, *“This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.”*

7. Oh, that we could lean in and listen to the agony and brokenness of this prayer meeting in Acts 12, as the early church cried out to God hour upon hour, pleading for Peter as he lay in the prison.

8. When is the last time you heard the church house filled with the cries of God's people, broken and burdened as they pleaded with the Lord to intervene? Perhaps we have seen so little of His work because we have done so little of ours.

9. When you observe this deliverance extended to the church, notice not only that it took the prayers of the people, but notice also that:

B. It transcended the prayers of the people

1. This story has an almost comical twist at the end. Verse 12 tells us that when Peter realized what had happened, he headed to John Mark's momma's house, where a large group was gathered praying for him.

2. As Peter arrived, and knocked at the outer gate, a young girl named Rhoda went out to see who it was, and when she realized it was Peter, she got so excited that she left him standing out in the street, an escaped prisoner, and ran back inside to tell the others.

3. Now you would think that these people who were so earnestly praying for Peter would share in Rhoda's joy that their prayers had been answered. However, they didn't believe her story.

4. Look down at verse 15. *“And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.”*

5. Those people had enough faith to prayer for hours on end, yet their faith was not strong enough to believe that God could do something as miraculous as sneaking Peter out of jail without detection.

6. Perhaps they were praying for Herod to change his mind, and let Peter go. Perhaps they were praying that Peter would somehow beat the rap in court. They didn't however believe that God could simply set him free.

7. What I love about this story is that it reminds us that we don't have to have perfect faith to pray. God's answer to our prayers can transcend our weak and shallow faith.

8. That is the beauty of prayer. Though our prayers are required, they are not the real power behind the answer. God is! He is moved by prayer; even when it is not perfect prayer!

9. Some Doctor of Theology somewhere pleads for the atoning blood of Jesus to effect the healing that is needed for his dying wife. A child simply says, "Jesus, make my mommy better." Which one is more effective?

10. Acts 12 reminds us that the power of God can not only unlock prison doors, it can overcome feeble faith!

1. Dr. Ivor Powell said of this scene in Acts 12, "The church did not possess armies with weapons. Compared with nations and kings, the Christians were powerless, but they could pray and say: "If God be for us, who can be against us?"ⁱⁱⁱ

2. I want to remind you of the verse that I quoted in the introduction. In II Corinthians 10:4, Paul says, "*For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds.*"

3. We don't fight our battles and face our crises through human means. Our weapons are not earthly weapons. Our weapons are prayers offered from pure hearts and passionate lives.

4. In Acts 12, the early church reminds that challenges and crises will come. Whether or not we see the deliverance of God in those crises depends on how we choose to deal with them.

ⁱ Kissinger's Calender, *anecdote.com*, accessed 7/23/09, <http://www.anecdote.com/index.php?aid=15595>

ⁱⁱ Wiersbe, Warren, *Be Dynamic*, (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1988), p. 147

ⁱⁱⁱ Powell, Ivor, *The Amazing Acts*, (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987), p. 200