

"A DEATH AND A DELIVERANCE"

The book of Acts can be divided into three main sections that correspond to what Jesus said in Acts 1:8 about how his disciples would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. In the first section of Acts, we see the gospel being preached in Jerusalem. The second section shows how the gospel spread throughout Judea and Samaria. And the third section shows the gospel going all the way to Rome, the most important city in the world at that time. This shows us that the overriding theme of the book of Acts is the geographical spread of the gospel. But there is something else that is very interesting about this. Each of these sections ends with a description of serious opposition to those who were preaching the gospel in these three geographical regions. The first section ends with the martyrdom of Stephen. The second section ends with the martyrdom of James and the arrest of Peter. And the third section ends with Paul under arrest in Rome. Luke does not candy-coat things. He makes it very clear that the church can expect to face serious opposition as it carries out its mission. But this does not cause Luke to have a defeatist attitude. On the contrary, he ends the book of Acts by noting that even though Paul was under arrest, he preached the gospel "with all boldness and without hindrance." As Paul would later write to Timothy from his prison cell,

“But the word of God is not bound!” (2 Tim. 2:9) All of this shows us that opposition does not hinder the advance of the gospel. And it demonstrates what the Lord said through the prophet Zechariah: the church is built “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6)

Opposition

Our passage begins by telling us that Herod had James executed and Peter arrested. There are several Herods in the Bible. There is Herod the Great, who ordered the slaughter of the innocents when Mary was pregnant with Jesus. There is Herod Antipas, the Herod to whom Pilate sent Jesus on the night of his arrest. And there is the Herod mentioned here, Herod Agrippa, who was the grandson of Herod the Great and the nephew of Herod Antipas. Agrippa was given control over a considerable amount of territory in Palestine due to the fact that he had been childhood friends with two men who eventually became Roman emperors: Caligula and Claudius. Agrippa’s actions in this passage indicate that he was trying to curry favor with the Jews in order to further solidify his power.

Luke tells us that Herod had James the brother of John killed with the sword. As with the name Herod, there are several men named James in the New

Testament. There is this James, who along with his brother John and Peter formed the inner circle of Jesus' twelve disciples. He was present with Jesus at the transfiguration. There is also Jesus' brother James, who is mentioned in verse 17. He became an important leader in the Jerusalem church and was the author of the epistle of James. And lastly there is James the son of Alphaeus, another of Jesus' twelve disciples. The only thing we know about him is his name.

The fact that the life of James the brother of John ended the way it did is something that is worthy of our reflection. As I just said, of the twelve original disciples, James was one of three who enjoyed an especially close relationship to Jesus. He was still a relatively young man -- probably in his thirties. His brother John lived for another fifty years! Yet James' life ended just as the gospel was beginning to go to the Gentiles.

We might be tempted to look at this and see it as a tragic example of a life cut short. Just think of all of the things that James could have accomplished for the Lord if he, like his brother, had lived for another fifty years. He might have penned additional books of the New Testament. At the very least, he would have been a significant leader in the early church. What a tragedy that he died so young!

We tend to think this way. But the fact of the matter is that James' life was not cut short at all. He lived a complete life, the life that the Lord ordained for him. For reasons known only to God, James was not given as much time on this earth as his brother John was. A glance at church history shows us that there have been other godly men and women who died young. There was David Brainerd, the pioneering missionary to the American Indians who was held in high esteem by Jonathan Edwards. There was Robert Murray M'Cheyne, the Scottish minister whose sermons so effectively called people to faith and repentance. There was Jim Elliot, missionary to the Auca Indians of Ecuador and probably the most famous martyr of the 20th century. Each of these men died before the age of thirty. But none of them had their lives cut short. As the psalmist writes, "in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me." (Psalms 139:16) This is true for you and for me. The Lord knows exactly how long each of us will live. There is no possibility that our days will be cut short.

Luke tells us that when Herod saw that his execution of James pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter and put him in jail, with the intention of putting him to death as well. He had to wait to execute Peter because the feast of Unleavened Bread had just begun. It would have been offensive to the Jews to have an

execution during the feast. After the feast, however, would be the perfect time to execute Peter, since there would still be a number of zealous Jews in the city. Herod would have seen it as a golden opportunity to score more points with the Jews.

How did the church respond to Peter's arrest? Luke tells us that they offered earnest prayer for him, asking the Lord to deliver him. There are a couple of things to note about this. First, it reminds us that true prayer, prayer that is acceptable to God, needs to be *earnest*. It has to be sincere. It has to be offered from the heart. This is why many of us find it difficult when someone asks us to pray for a friend of a friend of a friend who is going through some difficulty. Have you ever had someone ask you to pray for their niece's cousin's husband's sick mother? It is hard for us to pray for things like that, especially when the person making the request doesn't even know the person they are asking us to pray for. It is hard because true prayer needs to be earnest and sincere.

The other thing that we can learn from what Luke tells us in verse 5 is that prayer should be our first response in times of trouble. The church did not stand outside Herod's palace with picket signs. They did not try to find a Christian in the government who could use his influence to get Peter released. They went to the Lord in prayer. We need to learn to respond to our troubles in the same way.

Rescue

In the next part of the passage, we see how the Lord answered the church's prayers by miraculously rescuing Peter from prison. And the first thing to note about this is that God waited until the last moment to do so. Herod was going to bring Peter out to be executed the very next day. God could have delivered Peter from prison right away. But he waited until the end of the seven day feast of Unleavened Bread. Why? Well, we are not privy to all of the reasons why God chooses to work out his purposes in the particular ways that he does, but one thing that we can say about this is that it tested the faith of Peter and his fellow saints. The Lord wants us to persevere in faith, and he wants us to express that faith by persevering in prayer. There are times in our lives when it may seem like our prayers are to no avail. But we need to keep trusting that God is with us, that he hears the prayers that we offer to him, and that he knows best how to answer our prayers.

On the night before Herod was going to bring Peter out and have him executed, the Lord sent his angel to Peter's prison cell. When the angel got there, he found Peter sleeping so soundly that the light that flooded into the cell did not even wake him up. The fact that Peter could sleep so soundly under such

circumstances testifies to the peace that he had with God. His conscience was at peace. He knew that his life was in God's hands. The question of whether he would live or die was out of his hands. What good would it do to worry? When we see things in this light, we can face up to even the darkest of trials with the peace that surpasses human understanding.

Luke's description of the angel's rescue operation conveys a significant degree of detail. And the point that is underscored in all of this is that this was a miraculous deliverance and that Peter was not expecting it. The angel had to shake Peter awake. He had to give him detailed instructions about getting dressed. Peter's chains simply fell off, the guards were asleep, and the gate into the city opened of its own accord. And through it all, Peter thought he was seeing a vision.

Prayers Answered

After the angel left him, Peter finally realized what had happened. He saw that the Lord had rescued him. So he went to the place where he knew many of his fellow believers would be gathered, the house of Mary, the mother of Mark. The scene that follows is probably one of the most humorous passages in all of

Scripture. I am not going to retell it in my own words, because it would be impossible to say it any better than the way Luke does. It is a wonderful scene.

I do want to point out two lessons that we can draw from this part of the passage. First, we are told that the Christians gathered at Mary's house were praying together. It was a prayer meeting. This is what Luke was talking about when he said that the church was earnestly praying for Peter. Peter had been arrested at some point during the seven day feast of Unleavened Bread. Days had passed by, the feast was now over, and Peter was still in jail. But the church kept right on praying. They understood their dependence upon God, and they expressed their dependence in prayer.

Prayer is the power source for the church's ministry. No church can survive without prayer. This is why prayer meetings are an important part of the church's ministry. Charles Spurgeon went so far as to say that "We shall never see much change for the better in our churches in general until the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians."

The second thing that I want to call your attention to is the fact that the church's prayers for Peter were effective. There was a connection between their prayers and Peter's rescue by the angel. This is why Luke is careful to call our attention to the fact that the church was praying earnestly for Peter. God

answered their prayers. And the funniest thing about this was that they couldn't believe it. Rhoda came and told them that Peter was at the door, but they responded by saying that she was out of her mind. Maybe they even said something like, 'Rhoda, stop interrupting us. Can't you see that we are earnestly praying for the deliverance of our dear brother Peter?' What an example this passage is of how the Lord "is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think." (Ephesians 3:20)

Why did the Lord save Peter but not James? We do not know why. But this passage shows us that it is sometimes God's will for his people to glorify him by going through suffering and that it is sometimes his will for us to glorify him by being delivered from suffering. It was Paul's understanding of this truth that enabled him to write these words to the Philippians from his prison cell in Rome: "for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." (Philippians 1:19-20) Paul believed that the prayers of the saints and the help of the Holy Spirit would

ensure that his suffering would ultimately be for his good and for Christ's glory.

We can believe this too, because we belong to the same God.