

## Surprised by the Power of Prayer (Acts 12:12-19)<sup>a</sup>

© 2016 Tony Garland<sup>b</sup>

---

### Context

1. Herod (Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great), killed James, the brother of John.
2. Apprehended Peter, placed him under heavy security, planned a similar fate to James after the Passover.
3. The night before Herod was going to bring Peter out to face who-knows-what, an Angel miraculously intervened and set Peter free.
4. Peter believed it had been a vision, until he finally realized that he was standing alone outside the city gates.

---

### Passage (Acts 12:12-19)

[12] So, when he [Peter] had considered [this], he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. [13] And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. [14] When she recognized Peter's voice, because of [her] gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. [15] But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." [16] Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened [the door] and saw him, they were astonished. [17] But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place. [18] Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. [19] But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that [they] should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed [there].<sup>1</sup>

---

### The (Hard) Reality

1. Peter held under tight security.
  1. Kept by four squads of soldiers.
  2. The threat of death for the soldiers should Peter escape.
  3. Within his cell, bound by chains between to two soldiers.
  4. Outside the cell, additional guards.
  5. Two (additional?) guard posts

2. **In the inscrutable will of God, both Steven and James had already been martyred. Why would Peter necessarily be spared?**
3. **Jesus had prophesied that Peter would die as a martyr (although when “older”, John [21:18-19](#))**
4. **Peter appeared to be facing a dead-end, trapped in a box-canyon.**

## The (Biblical) Reaction

### 1. The situation within the Church

- No influential believers in high places having leverage with Herod.
- No wealthy believers who could perhaps purchase Peter’s freedom.
- Lacking the necessary *physical* resources to do anything.

### 2. Driven by complete inability to the “last possible recourse:” prayer!

- A. Acts [12:5](#), *BUT constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.*
- B. Acts [12:12](#), *So, when he had considered [this], he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.*

### 3. This the THE most uncomfortable position we ever face:

- A. A realization that we are *utterly helpless* in the situation.
- B. Requiring us to *trust completely* in the Lord.
- C. No other avenue of escape.
- D. How long does it take us before we look up? Too often, it is only when we face a box canyon!
- E. A true test of our faith is uncomfortable—we don’t like being without our own (puny) resources!
- F. Illustration<sup>2</sup>

A man was walking along a narrow path, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the cliff. Realizing that he couldn’t hang on for long, he called for help.

- Man: Is anybody up there?

- Voice: Yes, I'm here!
- Man: Who's that?
- Voice: The Lord.
- Man: Lord, help me!
- Voice: Do you trust me?
- Man: I trust you completely, Lord.
- Voice: Good. Let go of the branch.
- Man: What???
- Voice: I said, "Let go of the branch."
- Man: [After a long pause] Is anybody else up there?

#### 4. **Only when we realize our own inability, then in our weakness, we depend fully on God's strength**

A. A most uncomfortable part of the process of progressive sanctification—growing more and more to trust God.

B. The Scriptures reveal that God *purposefully* leads his people into situations where they are without recourse—forced to trust wholly in Him.

#### C. The Exodus

I. After the firstborn of Egypt were struck, God purposefully led Israel out of Egypt and placed them "between a rock and a hard place."

II. Stuck with their backs against the sea with Pharaoh's troops charging down upon them, with no place to go.

III. Why did God allow this?

a. Ex. [14:13](#), *And Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. . . .*

b. Ex. [14:30-31](#), *So the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Thus Israel saw the great work which the LORD had done in Egypt; so the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD and His servant Moses.*

#### D. Gideon

I. His weakness

Now the Angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth tree

which [was] in Ophrah, which [belonged] to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide [it] from the Midianites. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, “The LORD [is] with you, you mighty man of valor!” Gideon said to Him, “O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where [are] all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.” Then the LORD turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?” So he said to Him, “O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan [is] the weakest in Manasseh, and I [am] the least in my father’s house.” And the LORD said to him, “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man.”<sup>3</sup>

## II. The tendency to depend upon our own resources

And the LORD said to Gideon, “The people who [are] with you [are] too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”<sup>4</sup>

## III. The whittling down of Israel’s resources

- a. Fearful depart: 32,000 → 10,000, weaker by a factor of about 3 (Jdg. 7:3)
- b. Drinking method: 10,000 → 300, weaker still by a factor of about 33 (Jdg. 7:7)
- c. Victory by a mere 300, a force 100 times weaker than originally available
- d. God purposefully led Gideon and Israel to a place where it was *impossible*, by human means, to gain victory.

## E. King Jehoshaphat

### I. The multitude of Ammon, Moab, and their allies prepared to attack Israel

- a. 2Chr. 20:1, *It happened after this [that] the people of Moab with the people of Ammon, and [others] with them besides the Ammonites, came to battle against Jehoshaphat.*

### II. Jehoshaphat turned to God in prayer

- a. 2Chr. [20:12](#), “O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes [are] upon You.”

### III. God’s answer

- a. 2Chr. [20:17](#), ‘You will not [need] to fight in this [battle]. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the LORD, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem!’ Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the LORD [is] with you.

---

## The (Unexpected) Result

### 1. Disbelief when Peter shows up at the door (gate) of the outer entrance.

- A. Rhoda - a young girl ([παιδίσκη](#) [*paidiskē*], a female servant or maidservant), recognized Peter’s voice and believed, without having seen Peter.
- B. The praying adults did not believe.
- I. Acts [12:15-16](#), . . . they said to her, “You are beside yourself!” Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, “It is his angel.” Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. (Acts [12:15–16](#))
- C. The simple, trusting faith of a child, unfettered by the “known impossibilities” and dimmed expectations which settle over us as we age.

### 2. How often we pray with half-hearted faith mixed with unbelief!

- A. This plagues our prayer, both in “big things” and “little things.”
- B. James advises those who lack wisdom to ask it of God, presumably in prayer. Yet he also warns against being double-minded—doubting whether God will grant what is requested.
- I. . . . let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind (Jas. [1:6](#)).
- II. As we grow in our Christian walk, we are asking God to grant us greater stability and “staying power” in the midst of situations where we don’t see ready evidence of an answer—at least not according to our time schedule.
- C. How often we find ourselves in the place of the father with the mute son recorded in chapter 9 of Mark’s gospel!

- I. His son was afflicted by an unclean Spirit which endangered his life and caused him to be mute.
- II. This had gone on for many years (“from childhood”).
- III. The father had sufficient faith to ask Jesus for help, yet he was unsure whether Jesus would or could answer his request: *if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us* (Mark 9:22).
- IV. Jesus replied . . . *“If you can believe, all things [are] possible to him who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”* (Mark 9:23-24)
- V. What a blessing for us that such incidents are recorded in the gospels! What encouragement! How we struggle in the same way—even over requests which pale in comparison with the need of this father and son.
  - a. The Puritan preacher [Thomas Watson](#)<sup>c</sup> once observed, “Faith, though it hath sometimes a trembling hand, it must not have a withered hand, but must stretch.”<sup>5</sup>
  - b. It has been said, “Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God.”

### 3. **Even if our faith remains steady, we often second guess the means or the timing by which God will answer.**

- A. When God responds in an unexpected way, we can even fail to realize he has answered at all!
- B. This may also be a contributing factor in the surprise expressed by those praying at John Mark’s mother’s house—perhaps they expected Peter’s release at a different time or in a different way.
- C. A newsletter from *Coastal Missions*—a missionary group working up the Northwest Coast by boat—related the case of a woman living in isolation up the coast who prayed for a Bible.

The crew of *The Coastal Messenger* landed on a shore and met a lady who was overjoyed to learn that her visitors were missionaries. She related how she had wanted a Bible. Living in an isolated place with no opportunity to go to a town, she had prayed for one. Not long after that, a Bible floated in with the tide. Knowing God had answered her prayer, she carefully dried its pages and began reading it. She realized that God had now sent someone to help her understand it.<sup>6</sup>

- I. Who would have thought God would have answered in such a way?!
- II. And that God would bring, not only a Bible, but also missionaries to help her understand what she was reading?
- D. We must allow God to be God and remain open to the likelihood that He may answer at a time or in a way which differs from our expectations.

---

## Related Scriptures

1. ***The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly For the salvation of the LORD (Lam. 3:25-26).***
2. ***May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble; May the name of the God of Jacob defend you; . . . Some [trust] in chariots, and some in horses; But we will remember the name of the LORD our God (Ps. 20:1,7).***
3. ***Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; And attend to the voice of my supplications. In the day of my trouble I will call upon You, For You will answer me (Ps. 86:6-7).***
4. ***[The righteous] cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD [is] near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit (Ps. 34:17-18).***
5. ***Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Php. 4:6-7).***

Sat May 7 20:22:52 2016



SpiritAndTruth.org Scan Code<sup>d</sup>

---

### Endnotes:

1. [NKJV](#), Acts 12:12-19
2. [Ref-0391](#), Faith, Lack of
3. [Jdg. 6:11-16](#), NKJV

4. [NKJV](#), Jdg. 7:2
  5. [Ref-0624](#), 102-103
  6. [CM](#), Roy Getman, *Coastal Missions Newsletter*, October 2005
- 

#### Sources:

**CM** Coastal Missions, [<http://www.coastalmiissions.ca>].

**NKJV** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

**Ref-0391** M. P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989).

**Ref-0624** I. Thomas, *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations* (electronic ed.), (Simpsonville SC., Christian Classics Foundation, 1996).

---

#### Links Mentioned Above

**a** - See [http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts\\_by\\_Tony\\_Garland/38\\_Acts\\_12\\_12-19/index.htm](http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/38_Acts_12_12-19/index.htm).

**b** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.

**c** - See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Watson\\_%28Puritan%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Watson_%28Puritan%29).

**d** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.