

18. Miracles by the Sovereign God

December 8, 2013

The word 'Miracle' is cheapened. Its definition is "an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause; such an effect or event manifesting or considered as a work of God."

People use this word 'miracle' in just about anything and everything . And it is not an appropriate use of the word. In other words, finding a parking spot right in front of Wal-Mart during the Christmas shopping season is not considered as a miracle. However, our assistant pastor Jack using a computer should be considered a small miracle. Without the Lord's intervention that poor soul would still be in the dark ages, living in a cave, and using smoke signals.

God's miracles that are recorded in the Bible shouldn't have to be explained away or excused as some sorts of accidents. They were precisely delivered by the Sovereign God according to His timetable for His purposes and glory . He does not owe an explanation to us or anyone for that matter. Besides, if a miracle can be explained by human logic, it is not a miracle.

This happened to be Peter's third time in prison. I am sure that by now , he and the prison guards were on a first-name basis. But this time was a little different. By king Herod's order, he was supposed to have a quick trial and certain death.

Years later, when Peter wrote his first letter, he may have had this miraculous experience in mind when he said this:

1 Peter 3:12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

I believe that this verse summarizes the portion of the Scripture we are going to study this morning. But at the same time, if we take this verse into our hearts, it will give us three wonderful assurances to encourage all of us in the difficult days of life, especially during this Christmas seasons.

A. GOD SEES – For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous

Acts 12:1-4 Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. 4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

Nothing escapes from the all seeing eyes of God. The Lord watched and noted what this crazy selfish king Herod Agrippa I did. Unless you are a history buff, you might confuse this Herod with the other Herod who wanted to kill Baby Jesus.

Let's get off on a side track for a minute to know about this seriously dysfunctional murderous family. This evil man was the grandson of Herod the Great, who ordered the Bethlehem children to be murdered in order to eliminate any future king; and the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded and ridiculed Jesus during one of the kangaroo courts Jesus had to endure before His crucifixion.

This Herod Agrippa I knew that he was not popular among the Jews because he was an Edomite, so he did something that might please the Jews – executing one of the Christian leaders, James.

This James was a brother of apostle John and was one of the three, the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. He became the first of the apostles to be martyred.

Knowing Peter had mysteriously escaped from prison previously, Herod didn’t take a chance with a pair of handcuffs. He assigned a high- security detail to guard Peter – two guards chained with him and two at the door .

B. GOD HEARS – His ears are open to their prayers

Acts 12:5-17 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. 7 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, “Arise quickly!” And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and tie on your sandals”; and so he did. And he said to him, “Put on your garment and follow me.” 9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.” 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. 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.

When every prison gate is shut and locked, the gate to heaven is wide open for the prayer of the followers of Jesus Christ. Our God hears every prayer of all of His followers. I am sure that the believers of the first century Jerusalem church were praying for the deliverance of Peter with all the fervency they could come up with.

James 5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

Let’s talk about the fervency of our prayer briefly. When we pray, do we actually know that our God hears us and do we expect that God would do according to His will? Listen, much of our prayer is powerless because it lacks fervency. Too often we almost pray with the attitude of wanting God to care about things we really don’t care too much about or the attitude of obligation we are forced to fulfill without our hearts behind it.

Fervent prayer has power not because it in itself can persuade a reluctant God. Instead, it demonstrates that our heart cares passionately about the things God cares about, fulfilling Jesus' promise.

John 15:7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

1 John 5:15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

Two secret arsenals of true prayer warriors are:

- 1) They believe in God and His promises without a doubt in every aspect.**
- 2) They are fervent and passionate in their prayers, not in length of prayer, nor the fancy flowery words of prayer.**

Some people think that if we want to get our God's attention, we have to have extraordinary prayer and fasting going. Extraordinary prayer and fasting are not tools to get whatever we want from God. They are demonstrations of radical submission and surrender to God's power and will.

How would you like to have an angel as an alarm clock? I bet that you would not push his belly button as a snooze button when he wakes you up. Besides, if you don't get out of the bed immediately, either his light would come right through your closed eye lids or he will whack you on the side to get you out of the bed fast like he did to Peter.

Don't you wonder how Peter could sleep when his execution was pretty much written on the wall? What gave Peter such confidence and peace? It is because Peter believed what Jesus said to him before.

John 21:18-19 Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." 19 This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God.

And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me."

The Lord Jesus meant that Peter would die on a Roman cross when he was older, not beheaded like James. Peter simply laid hold of that promise and committed the entire situation to the Lord and God gave him the peace that passed all understanding. He did not know how or when the Lord would deliver him, but he knew that it was coming.

It is good to know that, no matter how difficult the trials or how disappointing the news that we get, God is still on the Throne and has everything under control. We may not always understand His ways, but we know His sovereign will is best.

We have to wonder why the Lord allowed James to be killed, at the same time Peter was spared. Both of them were dedicated to the Lord Jesus and needed by the church. The only answer is the sovereign will of God. It was the King of kings in Heaven that was in control, not the little puny king on earth.

By the way, this deliverance took place at Passover season which was celebrated by the Jews to remind themselves their Exodus from Egypt. The Greek word 'delivered' in v11 is "exaireo". It also was used in Acts 7 when Stephen was speaking about the Exodus from Egypt. Peter was experiencing a new kind of "exodus" in answer to the prayers of God's people.

Speaking of the prayers of these God's people, it is almost comical. The answer to their prayer was standing at the door, yet they didn't have enough faith to believe and open the door for Peter. God got Peter out of a prison door, but Peter couldn't get himself into a prayer meeting that was for him.

The believers' prayer was fervent, but their faith was not. Because they put what the Lord can do in the box of their limited mentality like we often do. The Lord graciously honors even the weakest faith, but how much more He would do if only we would trust Him.

Some of you might be confused about James in v17 as a typo. This is not the same James who was executed at the beginning of this chapter, rather this is the half brother of Jesus, who was the leader of the Jerusalem church and he was the author of the Book of James.

Except for a brief appearance in Acts 15, Peter walks off the pages of the Book of Acts to make room for Paul and his missionary ministry among the Gentiles.

C. BUT GOD DEFEATS – *But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*

Acts 12:18-24 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. 20 Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. 21 So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. 22 And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" 23 Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. 24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

Can you imagine what it was like for the new shift of guards who came to the cell and found the four guards who were faithfully guarding the empty handcuffs and making sure that they would not escape?

The people of Tyre and Sidon, who depended on the Jews for food, got on the bad side of Herod and they were about to lose his favor which meant no more food supply. That meant that the delegation from Tyre and Sidon had to butter up Herod with flattery – including calling him 'god' which boosted up Herod's vain pride.

This event is more than a slice of ancient history, because it typifies the world and its people today. The world still lives for praise and pleasure. Man has made himself his own god. The world still lives on the physical and ignores the spiritual. It lives by force and flattery instead of faith and truth, and one day it will be judged.

Romans 1:25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

While God does not always judge evil officials this quickly, we can be sure that the Ultimate Judge of the universe will do what is right in the end. Another thing we can be sure is that our Lord always watches over His people and hears their prayers without missing one word out of their prayers.

At the beginning of Acts chapter 12, Herod seemed to be in control and he considered the first century Christians less than a worm, but at the end of this chapter, he was eaten by worms and died and the Word of God grew and multiplied.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Remember this: God works when churches pray, and Satan trembles when he sees the weakest Christian upon one's knees.

2) Remember this: God sees your troubling situation; He hears your desperate prayers; and He will defeat His enemy who causes all this havoc according to His time. Keep your chin up and knees down.