

God's will, then mine \* Acts 12

June 24, 2020 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

If I were to make a movie out of the book of Acts, one of the best scenes I think would be the passage we're going to look at today. It has it all – tension, drama, high stakes and daring escapes – it even has a little comic relief.

But that doesn't mean that this is just a mindless summer blockbuster – this passage invites us to ask some very important questions about our prayer lives. What are our priorities in prayer? And do we spend as much time praying for God's will as we do praying for our own?

Join me in Acts 12 and we'll look at a really neat episode in the life of Peter and the church.

Acts 12 begins on a sad note – King Herod (not the Herod from the Christmas story but his grandson) – King Herod arrested James the brother of John and had him put to death for being a believer. When he realized put him in good with the Jewish elite, he decided to curry a little more favour with them and had Peter arrested too, intending to kill him as well. And so Peter was thrown in jail, with four squads of soldiers guarding him.

Meanwhile though, verse 5, the church was earnestly praying to God for him. They were gathered together in someone's home, fervently praying for Peter. Now we don't know exactly what they were praying for, but I think we get some clues in a few verses, so just hold onto that thought.

Now, verse 6 - 6 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.

Now that's a fascinating insight into Peter's trust in God. Sometimes I have a hard time falling asleep the night before vacation, and here's Peter sawing logs the night before he was supposed to be executed. He was so certain that God knew what He was doing, that he could sleep soundly, even facing death.

And apparently he WAS sleeping soundly because -

7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. (I think of this a little like those scenes in comedies where they're trying to wake a person up and they finally just get a frying pan and whack 'em). He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

8 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 is in such a daze, just roused from sleep, that the angel has to tell him what to do. In fact, he wasn't even sure that this was happening, he thought it was a vision).

9 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.

10 They passed by two sets of guards and then came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them like the sliding doors at the grocery store and out they went.

They walked about a block and the angel left and then suddenly Peter realized what had happened and he said – 11 "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."

God delivered Peter from Herod's hands.

12 When this had dawned on him, he went to John Mark's mother's house, where he knew that people would be praying.

And here another comic moment occurs, because he goes to knock at the door, and a servant girl named Rhoda comes to answer it. She hears Peter's voice and is SO excited to realize that he is still living that she leaves Peter standing at the door and runs back into the prayer meeting to announce that Peter is alive!

They don't believe her though; they say 'you're out of your mind! It must be his angel.' Meanwhile, Peter's still there banging away on the door saying 'Guys, let me in!' and they finally do and they rejoice because Peter is alive.

Now, what I want us to think about is what the church was praying for. What exactly were they praying for? Why were they so slow to believe that Peter was standing at their door? Were they praying that God would deliver Peter but then didn't really believe when He answered that prayer? I don't think that's the case.

I think that they were praying for something much broader than Peter's deliverance. I think that they were simply praying that God's will would be done. That if it was God's will that Peter be delivered, then good, but if not, then that he would be steadfast and faithful in the midst of this life-and-death situation.

I suspect that they were praying that God would give him courage; that God would work through him to bear witness to the guards and the politicians; that God would advance His kingdom through Peter's life, whether he lived or died. I'm sure that they were praying that God would deliver Peter, but they were willing to submit their will to God's if Peter's death would advance the Kingdom. I really think that's why they were so certain that it was 'his angel;' they knew that God had answered their 'kingdom prayers' and just assumed that Peter was already gone.

That's not to say that their will and God's will were mutually exclusive; clearly they weren't. It's just that they prayed for God's will first and then their own.

And that I think is the lesson that we need to learn from the church in this passage – We pray for God's will first and then our own. Our prayer priorities should go 'God's will,' then mine.

We often pray for our own will first, don't we? We ask God for the things that we want, the things that we think best. But the church here reminds us to pray first 'Let your will be done.' And then, just like the church here, we pray 'give us our daily bread, the things we desire;' 'deliver us from evil' but we pray those things out of a prior commitment to 'let Your will be done.' We say first 'God, I want to see your will done, whatever it is, because I know that it is good and perfect.' And then 'I pray that if it aligns with your will, you would do these things that I desire.'

God's will, then mine.

I would love to see us do this in our prayer times at church. I mean, it's very important and very biblical for us to pray for peoples' healing in our pastoral prayer time, but I also think that we should be more intentional about praying for the Kingdom, that God would work through missions, through us, to share the Gospel with the world, to bring healing and hope in dark places. I'll try to be intentional in that and I would encourage you to keep your ear to the ground – where is God at work in your life and family and how can we pray for His will to be done in those circumstances?

Let's pray for God's will first and then our own.