**THE CHURCH EARNESTLY PRAYS AND GOD ANSWERS**

 August 7, 2016

Acts 12:1-25

Key Verse 12:5 “So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”

In the last passage we learned how God established the Antioch church as a headquarters for world mission. The church was built on the gospel of Jesus Christ, as individual people accepted the grace of forgiveness of sins and discovered God’s holy mission and high calling. The church grew through intensive Bible study with Barnabas and Saul. The believers were called Christians at Antioch, meaning, “person in Christ.” They loved Jesus and worshiped Jesus and wanted to be like Jesus. They revealed Jesus to the world and brought glory to his name. In light of their examples, each of us must grow inwardly as men and women in Christ. Today’s passage marks the end of the second part of the book of Acts. As the Risen Christ commanded (1:8), the gospel took root in Jerusalem, as recorded in chapters 1-7. The gospel spread to Judea and Samaria, as recorded in chapters 8-12. Then the gospel spread to the ends of the earth, as recorded in chapters 13-28. Chapter 12 begins with the church in a crisis of persecution and ends with the continued spread of the word of God. We can learn the importance of prayer and how God answers prayer. May God renew a spirit of prayer today.

**First**, the church earnestly prays for Peter (1-5). Look at verses 1,2. In a sudden move, King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church. This is King Herod Agrippa I. He was the nephew to Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptist and was the grandson to Herod the Great who unsuccessfully tried to kill the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. In these two verses we see that this Herod Agrippa I continue the brutal legacy of the Herod’s by having James put to death with the sword. This James was one of Jesus’ top disciples. He was the brother to John the apostle. He witnessed the raising of Jairus’ daughter to life and Jesus’ transfiguration in glory. Jesus put a great hope in him that he would be a leader for world salvation work. At the same time, James was ambitious. He and his brother once asked through their mother if they could sit at his right and left in Jesus’ kingdom. Jesus did not promise that, but he did promise that James and John would participate in his sufferings. And so he did. He was arrested and killed for Christ, the first martyr among Jesus’ chosen twelve. From a human point of view, it seemed to be the result of Herod’s ruthlessness. But in fact, it was Jesus’ will to make James a martyr for world salvation. The Risen Christ must have felt pain over the death of James. Still, he was willing to sacrifice James. What a sweet reunion it must have been when James went through the gate of heaven to see Jesus face to face, and was welcomed into the heavenly glory by the angel chorus.

Meanwhile, on earth, this must have had a profound effect on the Jerusalem church. This event must have shocked them. It caused the early Christians to realize just how costly it would be to carry out the task of world evangelization. They also realized their utter vulnerability to the clever manipulation by King Herod. Then Herod arrested Peter and put him in prison to await public trial and undoubtedly, execution. It seemed that their leaders were being taken and executed one by one. They seemed helpless. What could they do? Should they pack up and leave so they won’t be the next ones that are arrested. Or should they stand outside the prison protesting: “We demand justice. Free Peter!” Or should they arrange some kind of suicide rescue mission?

Look at verse 5. “So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for

him.” The words, “…but the church was earnestly praying to God for him,” are indeed meaningful. They remind us that Christians have the privilege to pray in a helpless situation. When everything seems too difficult and there is no human hope, that is the time to pray. In fact, there is nothing we can do except to pray. We must train ourselves to pray when we feel helpless.

Last summer after the Canadian summer Bible conference, Calvin learned that his father has been put in prison, falsely accused by his church member. He did not know what to do. Then I encouraged him to believe according to Luke 7:7, “But say the word, and my servant will be healed.” God answered the crying-out prayer of Calvin, who said, “Say the word, and my father will be freed,” and his father was released.

From verse 5 we can learn the power of earnest prayer. When we think of power, we may think of superman. Verse 5 shows us that the believers have even a greater power at their disposal at all times if they choose to use it. It is called earnest prayer to God. This earnest prayer has been called the thin tendon God has given to man to move the muscle of God. We find in 2 Chronicles 32:20,21 that the prayer of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah is what moved the muscle of God. In response to their prayer, the Lord sent one angel, who annihilated all the fighting men of the Assyrian army that was laying siege to Jerusalem.

During World War II, in May 1940, there was a serious crisis. German army was rapidly advancing and British army of 335,000 soldiers were trapped in Dunkirk. German tank division was within 10 miles. They were in danger of being annihilated. Winston Churchill decided to evacuate them by boats. King George VI requested that Sunday, 26 May should be observed as a National Day of Prayer. In a stirring broadcast, he called the people of Britain and of the Empire to commit their cause to God. Together with members of the Cabinet, the King attended Westminster Abbey, while millions of his subjects in all parts of the Commonwealth and Empire flocked to the churches to join in prayer. The scene outside Westminster Abbey was remarkable—photographs show long lines of people who could not even get in, the Abbey was so crowded! In its hour of deep distress a heart-cry from both the king and people alike was going up to God in prayer. And that cry did not go unanswered. At least three miracles happened. The first was that for some reason—which has never yet been fully explained—Hitler overruled his generals and halted the advance of his tank division. Some people believe that Hitler was confident that he could destroy any ships trying to evacuate soldiers. The second miracle was that there was a terrible storm that grounded all German planes. Hitler obviously did not take the weather into his consideration, nor the one who controls the weather. The third miracle was that despite the storm, the English Channel was very calm which enabled a vast armada of little ships, big ships, warships, privately owned motor-cruisers from British rivers– in fact, almost anything that would float – to go back and forth in a desperate bid to rescue as many as possible. The nation was so grateful for this mighty deliverance that Sunday, 9 June 1940 was appointed as a Day of National Thanksgiving.

It is important that we pray together as a church. Look at verse 12. “When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.” The house of Mary, John Mark’s mother, was a house church. There, many people had gathered and were praying to God. Luke does not mention one or two special prayer warriors, but stresses that the entire church was involved in prayer. The early church members were not individualistic. They did not think that their participation in united prayer was optional or irrelevant. They realized their sacred duty to Christ as part of the church. They prayed with one heart and one mind for one prayer topic. May God bless our 4 weeks fasting prayers for the fall ministry. May God send many University of Toronto and Ryerson students to 1 to 1 Bible study this fall.

**Second**, God answers the believers’ earnest prayer (6-11). Though the church was earnestly praying to God, nothing seemed to happen. The trial date came nearer and nearer and still Peter was in prison. Now, it was the night before Peter’s certain execution. What was Peter doing at this crucial moment? He was sleeping. He was between two soldiers, bound with two chains. There was no way out for Peter. But he was not nervous or fearful. He was full of God’s peace. He could sleep soundly in the prison. What was his secret? He loved Jesus. He must have held on to Jesus’ words, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mk 8:35). Once Peter had tried to save his life in the world. But in his selfishness he had denied Jesus and failed miserably. Then he saw the cross of Jesus, where Jesus’ blood was dripping for him. He understood that Jesus was wounded for him (1 Pet 2:24). His soul was healed from selfishness and he began to love Jesus. Peter also met the Risen Christ. The Risen Christ gave Peter a living hope in the kingdom of God (1 Pet 1:3,4), and clear direction to live as a shepherd for the glory of God. Now Peter was ready to give his life for Jesus with full assurance of eternal life in heaven. So he slept well.

However, it was not yet God’s time for Peter to leave this world. Look at verse 7. “Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. ‘Quick, get up!’ he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.” Peter was sleeping so well that he had to be awakened by the angel. As you know when you just wake up from a deep sleep, your movements are slow; Peter was no different. He just wanted to lie there a few minutes to clear the fog of his mind. He thought that he was seeing a vision. Peter had no idea that all this was really happening. The angel led him past the first and second guard and to the iron gate leading to the city. This gate opened for them by itself and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left Peter. Peter was freed from prison by the help of God. God answers the earnest prayers of the believers. God sent his angel and rescued Peter.

**Third**, the early church struggles to believe that God answers prayers (12-17). The next immediate events that happened are kind of comical. Look at verses 12-16. Peter himself did not realize that God was delivering him from the prison until he was walking around free in the streets of Jerusalem. When this dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark and knocked. A servant girl named Rhoda (which means “rose”) went to answer the door. When she heard the voice, she realized that it was Peter. She was so overjoyed and excited that she did not open the door, but ran into the house where the prayer meeting was going on and announced that Peter was at the door. But the first words out of their mouth were: “You’re out of your mind.” When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.” They literally invent a theology here to accommodate their unbelief. We criticize their unbelieving prayers; they were surprised when their unbelieving prayers were answered. But we are all just as guilty. We should be greatly comforted that God answers such faithless prayers. Peter kept knocking. His knuckles became tender and started to hurt so he used his foot to knock. Finally they opened the door for him. When they saw it was Peter, they were overjoyed and loudly praised God. The women screamed with voices that could wake up all of Jerusalem. Peter had to motion with his hand to be quiet. He described how the Lord had rescued him. His final words before he left to another place were to tell James. This James was one of Jesus’ earthly brothers who later took over Peter’s position as leader of the Jerusalem Church. Peter now slipped away into the underground church. He also slips out of the book of Acts to make way for the Apostle Paul.

**Fourth**, Herod sins and dies (18-23). The escape of Peter caused a great commotion among the soldiers and the government officials. Herod was humiliated. Herod should have realized that he was opposing God and repented. Instead, he blamed the guards and put them to death. Then he went to Caesarea to settle a quarrel with the people of Tyre and Sidon. While he was wearing his royal robes and making a public speech, they flattered him by saying, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.” Herod enjoyed it. He thought he was God. Look at verse 23. “Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.” It is interesting that one angel struck Peter on the side to wake him and deliver him from Herod’s clutches. Now again an angle strikes Herod. This time because that man did not give praise to God, it was the touch of death. Herod died a horrible death accompanied by intense pain; he was literally eaten alive, from the inside out by worms. Stealing God’s glory for oneself may be a greater sin than persecuting the church. Herod’s death warns us not to steal God’s glory, but to glorify God.

**Fifth**, the word of God continues to spread (24-25). Look at verse 24: “But the word of God continued to increase and spread.” This chapter began with Herod issuing ominous threats against the church, and the early Christians crying out to God in prayer. It ends with the death of Herod and the word of God spreading. The spread of God’s word is one of the themes in Acts (6:7; 9:31; 16:5; 19:20; 20:31). Sometimes as we struggle to advance the gospel, it is hard for us to see the progress of God’s work. We need a sense of God’s history, like Luke. Then we can have faith that God’s word spreads without fail. Luke notes in verse 25 that Barnabas and Saul went back to Antioch with John Mark. God will establish Paul as the leader of God’s work as it enters it next stage—to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In this passage we learned that when the early Christians were helpless before the terrible threat of King Herod, they prayed to God. They prayed as a church. They prayed earnestly. They prayed with a clear prayer topic. Then God answered their prayer. May God help us to pray earnestly for the University of Toronto and Ryerson students to raise 12 disciples of Jesus. God answers our prayer beyond our imagination. Therefore, we must never become discouraged and never stop our earnest prayer to God.