
ACTS 12:5 : THE PRAYER THAT FETCHED AN ANGEL

No. EE26

An angel freed Peter from a prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel! When we consider the promises in the Bible concerning prayer, we are faced with an obvious dilemma: Why are many of our prayers not answered? One question is obvious: do we pray as we should?

Acts 12 gives us an example of an extraordinary answer to prayer!

A CRITICAL SITUATION

It is the day before Peter's trial. James has already been executed (2). What hope is there for him?

He is in chains in a prison guarded by soldiers. He has to sleep with a guard on either side of him. And this was before the days when guards came off scot-free if a prisoner escaped! (19).

Humanly speaking the situation is hopeless, but the church refuses to throw in the towel. Do the members storm the prison? Do they draw up a petition? Do they try to bribe Herod? *No, they have a prayer meeting!*

A PRAYER IN LINE WITH GOD'S PLAN

1. God sometimes does immeasurably more that we ask for or imagine (Eph 3:20).

The church prayed "for him" - for Peter. They brought their burden, by name, before the Lord. Yet it would seem that they did not pray for Peter's release, because they did not believe that he was the person knocking at the door after his release by

the angel (13-16). They probably only prayed for the Lord to strengthen and protect the apostle.

Some people think that we do not get an iota more than what we pray for - limiting God, as it were, by the short-sightedness of our prayers. Such a view is neither Scriptural nor borne out by our experience. Yes, let us pray as specifically and as freely as our conscience, the Word and the Holy Spirit allow (at the same time guarding against presumption). Yes, it is true that our prayers have been woven into the outworking of God's council. But He is by no means dependant upon the strength of our faith or the boldness of our prayers.

2. They prayed to God.

You will probably say that this is obvious. Everything but! To many people prayer is nothing but subjective meditation. It does not matter to them who or what is at the receiving end of their "prayers". That which they call God is nothing but a mere focal point for their thoughts.

I once knew an old man, bed-ridden with cancer, who constantly prayed, but with his eye firmly fixed on an empty beer can on a shelf across the room!

No! Genuine prayer is directed at the real, living, personal, conscious God. He knows each of us personally. And He has revealed Himself as the One who hears our prayers, the One who is omnipotent and faithful, the One who can and will do everything that He has promised.

However, there are two qualifications.

Firstly, we only have access to the Father on the basis of the perfect mediatory work of His Son, Jesus Christ: "Therefore, brothers, ... we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus" (Hb 10:19).

Secondly, our prayers are carried, so to speak, to the Father's throne by the Holy Spirit: "For through him we both (Gentiles and Jews) have access to the Father by one Spirit" (Eph 2:18).

3. They prayed in all earnestness.

The Greek word *ektenos*, translated as "earnestly"

in v. 5, is an interesting word. Literally it means "stretched out". Often it refers to intensity and passion rather than duration in time.

The meaning of the word is best illustrated by its use in Lk 22:44 in connection with the prayer of the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane: "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly (litt. *more stretched out*), and his sweat was like drops of blood ..."

I think it is correct to say that God's Word is concerned with the intensity rather than the duration of prayer. So, for instance, we read in Jer 29:13: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart".

When in Rm 15:30 Paul exhorts his readers to "*join me in my struggle* by praying to God for me", he uses another meaningful Greek word, *sunagonidzo*, which could be translated literally as "to agonize together". It conveys the meaning of fighting or wrestling or struggling together.

The old Puritan Thomas Watson said, "How can I know my prayers are prompted by the Holy Spirit? When they are not only vocal, but mental; when they are not only gifts, but groans."

Which brings us to the question of how I too can pray so fervently. There is only one answer: I need to be empowered by the Spirit. The apostle urges us to "pray *in the Spirit* on all occasions" (Eph 6:18).

It was the church that prayed

There is much power in individual prayer, but special power when a church prays together in unity of heart and mind.

There is a popular conception that power in prayer is dependant on numbers as such, as if that would intimidate God! This is wrong. We need to take note of two things here.

Firstly, in this particular case, it was God's church that prayed. And they are the apple of His eye. They are His Son's bride. However, we need to understand that a church is not just made up of a large number of saved and unsaved people, kept together by tradition. No, the New Testament church is made up of true Christian disciples, intimately

joined by their common loyalty and great attachment to their Lord.

Matthew 18:19-20 sheds light on this: "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth *agree* about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Unity amongst those who pray together is therefore of the utmost importance. The Lord uses a word which literally means *to harmonise* (Gr. *sumfoneo*) from which we derive our word *symphony*. All therefore need to have the same passion and longing. Squabbling and bad relationships quench the Spirit.¹

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF TRUE PRAYER

❑ It is directed primarily *at the Father*, offered in the *name of Christ* - on the basis of His merit as Mediator - *in the power and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit*. Everything that may grieve the Spirit must be removed. Above all there must be unity.

❑ It must be *in harmony with God's revealed truth*, and in step with Christ's intercession on our behalf.

❑ True prayer is offered in *dependency and faithful expectancy*. Without faith in God's trustworthiness, we cannot please Him. He rewards those that earnestly seek Him (Hb 11:6).

❑ True prayer is characterised by deep *respect*. Let us never forget with whom we are dealing.

❑ We must approach the Father with *confidence*. Christ is the perfect Mediator.

❑ True prayer springs from a *passionate heart*. Cold prayers freeze before they reach heaven!

1. Although Jesus makes this pronouncement with reference to excommunication in the church dealt with in the preceding verses, it does not take away from the fact that we have to do here with a general principle.

❑ There is often need for *persistence* - like that of the widow who would not accept the judge's refusal (Lk 18).

WHEN WE PRAY TOGETHER

❑ *Never be in a hurry*. Trust the Spirit to guide.

❑ Accept *responsibility* for your role in making the time before the throne of grace proceed smoothly. Passive hangers-on make things boring for themselves and harder for the rest.

❑ Pray *creatively*, but with *childlike honesty and sincerity*. Talk to the Lord normally but without banality and familiarity. Avoid prayers which are a mere stringing together of prayer clichés - a meaningless repetition of words.

❑ *Avoid the excessive use of the Lord's name*. Some people repeat the Lord's name in almost every sentence, to the discomfort of their hearers. We would never do this in a normal conversation. It is a mannerism which may even be a violation of the third commandment.

❑ *Wait for each other*, so that everyone gets an opportunity to pray. But at the same time avoid uncomfortable silences. If necessary don't hesitate to pray more than once. Having said this, there may also be from time to time periods of awe when nobody dares to say anything. These times of holy silence will later be remembered as most precious.

❑ *Link your prayers*. We all stand before the throne of grace together - not as individuals, each with his own, separate agenda. Listen to the prayers of others and build upon their requests and arguments. This makes for cohesion and allows the Holy Spirit to lead us into praying for things that we would never otherwise have thought of.

❑ Without being presumptuous, we should *be as*

specific as possible in our prayers. On the other hand, if you are uncertain about whether you should pray about a specific matter, approach the throne of your heavenly Father very carefully, as it were. Consider the teaching of God's Word, and be sensitive to the Spirit's leading. There is such a thing as a pulling in of the reins. But precious beyond words are those sudden and unexpected moments of release and boldness.

LASTLY, SOMETHING ABOUT PRAISE

Our prayers should always be saturated by praise. Think of who God is. Think of His names. Think of His attributes: His eternity, holiness, sovereignty, omnipotence, unchangeableness, omniscience, omnipresence, grace, love, faithfulness, patience, justness, wrath.

Think of His great deeds through the ages as recorded in the Word and reflected in the history of the church. Praise and thank Him for those deeds and their implications.

But do not leave it at the abstract. In Ps 139 David reflects on the character of the Lord, but he does not only pray about it on an intellectual level. He meditates on the practical effects it has on his life - and praises God for it.

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