

Peter: release for prisoners!

Acts 12:1-17

Pressure refines the saints but crushes the religious! The Bible is full of heroes of faith who had a fresh and unique encounter with God, which changed them and made them into a person God could mould, fill and use. Whilst we should not go looking for persecution or creating such pressure, we should welcome it as an opportunity for refining and humbling. Holy desperation, (the kind that Hannah, the women with the issue of blood, Bartimaeus, and the apostle John exhibited) is always rewarded.

And so in our Acts journey to Peter, a saint in training but under pressure, who finds himself in prison. Jesus had adopted the manifesto of the Messiah that Isaiah prophesied in chapter 61 which included the proclamation of freedom for the prisoners and release for the oppressed (Luke 4:18) and so here and for the third time Peter experiences release from prison but this time it's not just the result of pragmatism in the Sanhedrin as in Acts 4 and 5, it's the clear result of answered prayer by the saints.

Thus far in Acts Luke has described one conversion after another: 3000 followed by another 2000, the Samaritans turning to Christ through Philip, then the Ethiopian. Saul and Cornelius follow, then the Antioch church is born of the Fools for Christ pushed out of Jerusalem by persecution: as Joseph in Genesis 50:20: "you meant it for ill, but God used it for good". In concentric circles the Word of God spreads and Luke is about to describe the giant leap forward of the first missionary journey, but first a serious setback. James, the brother of John, becomes the second martyr (his brother would later be exiled to Patmos) & Peter is thrown into prison. Herod Agrippa (not the Great @ Bethlehem (GF), or Antipas @ the trial (Uncle)) unleashes a double assault on the Word of God (Comment on Word of God). But Luke chooses to chronicle

this not as a grave crisis but by telling us of the rescue of Peter by God. The destructive power of Herod against the saving power of God was no match: the promise of Jesus was clear "the gates of hell shall not prevail" against the Body of Christ.

Herod was a people pleaser (v3) and when he saw that James' death pleased the Jews he seized Peter also. He then proceeded to put him in maximum security in the Antonia fortress with no less than 16 guards: a show trial would follow after the Passover was over and then execution! The situation looked bleak: what could the early Christians do? Smite the Shepherd and the flock would be scattered: surely this was not what the Lord wanted? Peter's previous escapes from prison had been from the Sanhedrin (4:3, 5:18) not the Romans. After the 1st release they had prayed "Sovereign Lord" (4:23), in the second example an Angel had opened the door (5:18). I guess they hoped and prayed: do it again Lord!

So those early Christians under pressure choose to pray: v5 tells us that Peter was kept in prison but the church was earnestly praying for him: the Greek word 'ektenos' translated earnestly is the same word used of Jesus as he prayed with intense agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and its better translated unremittingly! They believed for a miracle: (it was the world (authority of Herod, power of the sword, security of the prison) v the church (who prayed: as Paul & Silas did later in the Philippian jail with worship in Acts 16:25))

And so to the Angelic answer: the night before the trial Peter was sleeping between two guards and in chains, and sentries were on guard. An Angel appears to him (translated a messenger from God): perhaps a sympathetic guard? Remember that Angels can take human form! A light shone in the cell: perhaps a torch? He struck Peter on the side: Quick, get up, put on your clothes, follow me! "Oi You! (nudge nudge) Quick, get up, put on your sandals, wrap your cloak around you

and follow me. Am I dreaming this?" thought Peter (v 9 he thought he was seeing a vision). It would make great TV: Mission Impossible. One lot of guards then another, and the gate opens automatically! Outside: end of street, angel leaves. Was it God, Peter (coming to himself) clearly thought so.

So Peter then heads to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (author of the Gospel and cousin of Barnabus see Col. 4:10) and young leader in the infant church. The house was where the saints were praying! Peter knocks but I guess there was quite a fear of the Sanhedrin's secret police. Rhoda, a servant girl, hears the knock, asks who it is, recognizes Peter's voice but leaves him outside while she goes back to report. She tells the praying saints that "Peter is at the door" to which they respond "your out of your mind": she keeps insisting and they say, "it must be his angel (i.e. guardian angel)". Believing Prayer? I don't think so! They had been praying for Peter's release and when it happened they didn't believe: so there is hope for us yet!! Rhoda's simple joy shines brightly against the background of the churches incredulity. Eventually Peter who kept knocking is let in and they are astonished. Peter gives his testimony to encourage them, tells them to let James the leader know and goes into hiding.

Here's a saint under pressure who has learnt to trust God: what happened was totally God. Notice Peter's passivity born of trust: peaceful enough even to be asleep (the angel had to nudge him), his chains fell off, and he dresses by numbers, and then affirms in v17: How the Lord had brought him out of prison! Here are saints under pressure praying with a rare passion for God to intervene: He does, they apart from Rhoda don't believe it! Saints don't always get it right!

So the Lord as per His manifesto gives freedom to prisoners and release to captives. But is it just physical prisons and prisoners that the Lord wants to bring freedom to? Are we not held captive in many other ways? Was not Herod Agrippa

imprisoned by his pride? Were not the early Christians earnestly praying yet not expecting the answer: imprisoned perhaps by a religious spirit?

The Body of Christ need to pray earnestly for our cities and for new approaches to release a new generation into creative work and hopeful futures: we have a gospel which speaks of release for captives and freedom for prisoners and we need to actively re-enter the areas from which we have departed and once again offer hope and a future in the name of Christ.

But prisoners and captives are not just descriptions reserved for disgruntled young people. Some of us have been imprisoned by our past, our sin, our unforgiveness, and our history: to us Jesus says Be Free! How? Because He has paid the price of our rebellion and for our freedom on the Cross. Some of us are held captive by an addiction or an unhealthy co-dependant relationship or by our low self-esteem: to us Jesus declares release and freedom. The power of the cross can break any yoke of addition, heal any unhealthy relationship, and lift you out of low self-esteem into the full height of humanity and human potential. Because of Jesus we are no longer subject to those things that crush us: now we are raised with him to all that we has planned we can and should be. That's the gospel of grace and its Good News! For much of the past few centuries since the evangelical revival we have also defaulted to a gospel which denies our emotional side, and plays down the full humanity of Jesus: subsequently we have not offered the full gospel and many have gone away disappointed. Freedom in Christ is Gods gift to all His Children: and maybe this course beginning in two weeks time is for you?

Also opportunities exist to support Christians imprisoned for their faith through Release International and Barnabus Fund. These are real Saints (indeed whole households and congregations) under enormous pressure and often imprisoned but who are remaining true and to and faithful to Jesus. No

embassies are being burned nor riots just powerful and believing prayer and action through writing letters of support for them and to them.

Peter experience might seem surreal and exceptional but actually there are countless testimonies down the centuries of similar deliverances. The principle remains strong. Saints under pressure trust God whatever the circumstances say. Saints under pressure testify to eternal life in the here and now, having already died to self and begun living only for Jesus. Peter eventually was martyred: he asked to be crucified upside down because he didn't want any focus to be taken off Jesus.

So Chapter 12 of Acts begins with Herod on the rampage, arresting and persecuting Church Leaders: James is martyred, Peter is imprisoned, and Herod is triumphing. But be the end of the chapter: Herod is struck down and dies in a particularly gruesome way that won't sit well with your Sunday lunch, Peter is free and in summary Luke says that the Word of God increased and spread. The general summary to us Saints: The Lord says Trust Me!

Pastor David

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