

Suffering-Deliverance

by Carl Armerding

The sermon explores the themes of suffering and deliverance through the story of Peter's imprisonment and the power of prayer in the early church.

Duration: 40:49

Scripture: Matthew 20:20-23, Acts 12:1-11, Romans 4:4

Topics: "Deliverance"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the danger of pride and how it can lead to destruction. He uses the example of the king of Babylon who boasted about his own greatness and was ultimately brought down. The preacher also shares a personal story of a man named Federico Castellano who was influenced by the preacher's calmness in the face of persecution. The preacher encourages the audience to trust in God's protection and challenges young people to be dedicated to spreading the gospel. The sermon concludes with a reminder to pray for God's servants.

Transcript

Favorite chapter in the Book of the Acts, I'm referring to chapter twelve, the twelfth chapter of the Book of the Acts. I think when we've turned to it, you'll recognize it as a very well-known chapter because of the subject that it presents. Acts, the twelfth chapter.

Now, about that time, Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church, and he killed James, the brother of John, with a sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. Then were the days of unleavened bread.

And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him, intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people. Peter therefore was kept in prison, but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains, and the keepers before the door kept the prison.

And behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison. And he smote Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.

And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.

And he went out, and followed him, and wished not that it was true which was done by the angel, but thought he saw a vision. And when they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city, which opened to them of his own accord. And they went out, and passed on through one street, and forthwith the angel departed from him.

And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews. And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.

And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate. And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so.

Then said they, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking, and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished. But he beckoning unto them with a hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.

And he said, Go, show these things unto James and to the brethren. And he departed and went into another place. There are two scriptures in the Gospels which we need to keep in mind when we study a chapter like this.

The first of those is found in Matthew chapter 20, where you have the story of the mother of Zebedee's children coming to the Lord and asking that her two sons might sit, one on his right hand and the other on his left. And the Lord Jesus replied to that by saying, Ye know not what ye ask? Are ye able to drink the cup that I shall drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And without a moment's hesitation they said, We are able. And the Lord Jesus says, Ye shall indeed drink the cup that I shall drink.

And in the opening verses of this chapter tonight, we get the record of that, at least so far as it concerned James. John isn't included here at this time. But James certainly knew what it meant to drink the cup that our Lord drank.

We understand, of course, that our Lord is there using the term cup in its figurative or symbolic sense. It stands for sufferings that he had to take for us. And we frequently use the same figure of speech.

One of our hymn writers has put it very plainly when he said, Death and the curse were in our cup. O Christ was full for thee, but thou hast drained the last dark drop, left but the love for me. So this was a cup.

Our Lord, you remember, in the Garden of Gethsemane likewise, he prayed that this cup might be taken from him, and was so happy for the words which followed when he said, Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done. I mention these to show you that the term cup is used in a symbolic sense. And the Lord said to these two, James and John, ye shall indeed drink.

And here James is drinking the cup. Herod stretches forth his hands against certain of the church, and he kills James with a sword. You know, of course, that our Lord had two apostles by the name of James.

The other one is mentioned here in the seventeenth verse of this same chapter. But here is the brother of John, who is sent into eternity, into the presence of the Father, into the presence of his Lord. And one looks at these things with deep admiration, to think that these men were willing to lay down their lives without any resistance whatever, with no appeal to any higher governments, not saying, You ought to give me an opportunity to defend myself and so on.

They simply took it. They bowed their heads, and they took it. We thank God for the courage of these men in the first century of the Church's history.

But now we come to Peter, and here we need to keep another text of Scripture in mind, and that is in the last chapter of John's Gospel, where Peter is told by the Lord that when he was young he went where he wanted to go. But he says, When thou art old, another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not. And the next verse says, This he said, signifying, By what death he would glorify God.

And so, having taken James, and having killed him, it looks as though he intended, in fact, it says he intended to do the same thing to Peter. And since Peter had already been in prison two times before this--remember earlier he was in prison, and they released him in the morning. The second time he was supernaturally, miraculously delivered from the prison.

And here he is in prison for the third time. About nine years, as I understand it, between the second and the third imprisonments here. Nine years had passed.

But there were those words of the Lord Jesus. Yes, you're going to die a martyr's death. This, as someone has said, is the only text we can cite to show that the Lord's coming could not take place until Peter himself had been martyred.

And now the time seems to have come for that. And we're going to look at the reaction of the Church for a moment, for this is one of those classic texts that we have in connection with our prayer life, both individually and corporately. You notice in verse 5, Peter, therefore, was kept in prison, but, but prayer was made.

This has always been the recourse of the Church. They never gave up. They never said, well, there's nothing you can do about it.

They didn't say, well, prayer is just one of those emotional exercises that you have that makes you feel better. But they were led to believe, and they knew from experience, that here was a method by which the God himself could change things. And I wouldn't be surprised, but what they had in mind, not only that prophecy of our Lord Jesus, to which I've referred in the twenty-first chapter of John's Gospel, but they were also thinking of Peter in his weakness.

In that time of stress, you remember, after saying that if all forsook him, Peter says, I won't. And the Lord says, Before the cock shall crow, thou hast denied me thrice. And of course he did.

And you may be sure that things like this were not forgotten. And I wouldn't be surprised that this is one of the things that was before them as they gathered here for prayer for this man, Peter. For you read here, prayer was made without ceasing.

They didn't just simply say, well, let's mention him and let's go home. But they just kept this thing up. There was something fervent about this.

Indeed, the margin of my Bible says it was instant and earnest prayer was made. If you have one of the older Schofield Bibles, you'll see this in the margin. I don't know whether it's in the new edition or not.

I'm using the older authorized version, you see. And in the margin here we have the literal meaning of the original word, that it was instant and earnest prayer was made. And the thing was made by the whole church.

It wasn't simply a few individuals who gathered, but the whole church. This was a unified appeal to God himself. And it was made unto God, not merely to the congregation.

Years ago I read the story of a prayer made in the city of Boston, and the editor of the newspaper said it was the most eloquent prayer that had ever been offered to a Boston audience. Well, dear friends, here's a prayer to be offered to God. One wonders sometimes just how many of our prayers are sort of horizontal affairs, you know.

They reach out to the people that we like to communicate with, but we haven't got the nerve to face them. And so we talk about that certain brother, you know, or that certain sister. But here is something that goes straight up to God himself.

And then those last words, for him. Notice it doesn't say that they prayed for his deliverance. It simply says that they prayed for him.

And it so happens that we have a passage which fits right into this. I'd like you to keep your place here in Acts 12 for a few minutes and turn back with me to the Gospel according to St. Luke, to find an almost exact expression here in Luke chapter 22 and verse 31. Luke 22 and verse 31.

And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you. That word you is in the plural. And as we say in the Southland, you all.

That's what it really is. Satan hath desired to have you all, that he may sift you all as wheat. But now notice the change of number.

But I have prayed for thee. As much as to say, Peter, Satan wants all of you. But I'm just going to use you as an example.

You know, sometimes we hear something about the primacy of Peter. Our Roman Catholic friends refer to this when they speak about Peter as the first Pope. But they never seem to refer to this, the primacy of Peter, that the Lord was using him here as an example and saying to him, Satan wants all of you, but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.

And I'm just wondering if this was what was in the minds of the Church when it says, And prayer was made without ceasing unto God for him. I'm persuaded they weren't praying for his deliverance. Because later on when he's delivered, they're surprised.

I know sometimes some preachers take this as a lack of faith on their part, but as a matter of fact, I don't think they were really looking for this. Because as already said, Peter had this prediction from the Lord that he was going to die a martyr's death, and he'd been delivered miraculously before, and now doubtless his time had come. You see, James was dispatched, and what was going to keep Peter? What was going to keep Peter? But I'm sure they must have thought about Peter's defection in the days of the Lord Jesus.

And my beloved friends here tonight, I just want to make a point of this with all of us. You know, it's so easy for us to see the weakness of a brother, a sister, and do nothing about it. We realize that they're in a precarious position.

And then after they have fallen, that the expected thing has happened, they go around and say, yes, I expected it. I knew it would come. But it need not have come.

I lay it upon your hearts tonight, beloved, because everywhere we go we have pictures just like this. There's so many like Peter. In fact, one has to confess that he's very much like himself.

How wonderful to think that we had those who prayed for us, lest our faith should fail. I believe I had parents who did this for me. I'm sure that I had others among God's people who did this very thing for me.

I know when time came and was an opportunity to go to the University of New Mexico. I know how my father was warned and urged to keep me away from the school of higher learning, because some of our young people had gone into these schools of higher learning, and they had come out, if not atheists, at least agnostics. And so people had their fears about me.

I never learned till years later what my father replied to some of them. But one of them told me that he said, well, I realize that my son is human, just like every other man's son. But he said one thing about him, he's got on the helmet of salvation.

That'll protect his brain. He's got on the breastplate of righteousness. That'll protect his heart.

And friends, thank God for this dual protection that we have. But how thankful we should be that we have those who pray for us, as the Church here gave itself to prayer for Peter. Now, he didn't get immediate release, because we read here the details of the story, and Luke the historian is very faithful in recording all the details here, as to how they had taken extra precautions to be sure that this prisoner did not escape this time.

They remembered that he did escape before. But this time they got four quaternions of soldiers, which I take would be about sixteen, and probably two more to sleep with him right there in the prison, to whom he was chained in his sleep. It eminently had never bothered him.

He didn't have to take any barbiturates or salmonex or anything else. He's off. No tranquilizers necessary.

To me, this is very wonderful. And when we read here that he was sleeping between these two soldiers, that's in verse 6, and I don't read that he had any sleeping pills at all. And, beloved, we won't need these things either.

You say, well, it's easy enough for you, preacher, standing up there tonight to talk this way. Have you ever been in such a situation? Well, if you'll allow one to be a bit personal tonight, yes. We've known what it meant on at least two occasions to face our would-be assassins, look them right in the eye.

Once in Honduras, in South America, and once in Columbia, in South America, hearing men calling for one's blood. In Honduras, I stood alongside of a fellow worker. In Columbia, I stood all alone.

But I had this wonderful thing some thirty years after the first experience in Honduras. I went again to Honduras under the auspices of the Moody Bible Institute and the Central American Mission, of which I'm a member now. And I went to the very city in which I had lived, in San Pedro Sula, in Honduras.

And I had the privilege of preaching in what was then the largest Protestant church in all of Central America, a church built by the Evangelical and United Brethren. And in my audience that night was a man whose eyes fairly bored through me. I just couldn't get away from him.

I like eye contact with my audience. But this time it really bothered me. I tried several ways to get something between me and him, but it didn't work.

He just kept his eyes glued to me. And after the service, he was the first one to come forward to shake hands and ask me if I was the man who had been stoned down in Colinas de Santa Barbara. And I said, yes.

And he said, I was one of them that stoned you. And I thought he'd come to finish the job. He looked, his face was solemn.

And then he went on to tell me of an incident later when he went to hear me preach in another little village in Honduras. I had walked to the place because there was nothing for our animals to eat because of a grasshopper plague. And he said, that night the Lord spoke to me.

He said, I can tell you the text on which you preached. I said, what was it? And I began to fish around my own memory. He said it was the fourth chapter of Romans.

And it was. And he told me, he said, that night the Lord spoke to me, brother. He says, I've been waiting these 30 years to tell you.

Friends, it really pays off. But I said to him, calling him by name, Federico Castellano. I said, Federico, what was it that seemed to influence you? Well, he said, when I saw the way you and your companion took the stoning in Colinas de Santa Barbara.

He said, your faces never registered a bit of fear, of anxiety. You seemed to be peaceful. You were masters of the situation.

We didn't think so at the time, but we must have been. Friends, the Lord can do this. He does it.

He did it for Peter. He can do it for you. And mind you, as we see things going today, it may be that before the Lord comes, we too may see a wave of persecution, even in our country.

Remote as that seems tonight to some of you, it has happened. It has come. But here Peter is in such a dead sleep that when the angel comes into the living room, naturally he has to, well, he turns on the light, there's a light here, and then he slaps him on the side and wakes him up and gets him to dressing himself.

He doesn't even want to leave his sandals behind. Everything has to be done in perfect order. And all the while Peter doesn't know whether this is a vision or whether it's the real thing.

He doesn't realize until he's out there in the street, had passed through the iron gate which leads to the city, the scripture says he came to himself and realized that this was the real thing. The real thing. Yes, we like to think, dear friends, that God can do just that for us today.

This is the real thing. These stories are not fictitious. This is the history of something that actually happened.

And one is sorry when you go to the city of Rome, for example, and you never hear about this. Oh, you hear a great deal about the bones of Peter. I remember the guide who took us through the St. Peter's Church there in Rome.

He was more concerned about the size of the church. They had marks on the floor to show where St. John, the church of St. John the Divine would come and where St. Paul's Cathedral would come if it stood on the same ground. And this man who could speak English with an accent said, we have here the biggest and the richest church in all the world now.

And what's more, he said, we have here the bones of San Pietro. They say they've got the bones under that altar which was built by one of the great Italian sculptors. But they haven't got his skull there.

His skull is over at St. John's Lattern. In fact, some people say they have two skulls, one when he was a baby and one when he was a man. But anyhow, I repeat that for what it's worth.

Yes, I suppose it's like a snake shedding its skin. But no, Peter had to go through none of this. The time of his martyrdom had not yet come.

He could have said like his Lord said, my time is not yet. Now is your time, the power of darkness, yes, but God sets the time when his servant is going to yield up his life for him. And so now he comes to the church which is gathered for prayer, gathered in the home of John Mark, and they're in there praying.

And I repeat, I don't believe that they actually thought he would be delivered. I believe the most that they could think of praying was, oh Lord, keep Peter from denying his Lord tonight. They wouldn't have been surprised that they'd heard in the morning of his martyrdom, but oh, just to know that he had laid down his life for his Lord as he said he would.

And of course it took a lot to convince them that he was actually there. Rhoda is persuaded of it right now. Sometimes these young people have better ears than we have, haven't they? She recognized Peter's voice and they couldn't shake her from it.

They said, oh, you're mad. Oh, you've seen his angel. That is, you've seen his spirit.

No, she said, it's Peter himself. And sure enough, there it is. He's there.

Comes in and makes himself known. Now this is exceeding abundantly of all that they asked or thought. That's just the way God would do it.

But that isn't the end of the story. We left a few verses to read at this point so that we might see the bonus that God gives here to a prayer meeting like this. Things that they never thought of asking for.

I've already suggested that they didn't think that Peter would be delivered on this occasion, but at least we've got this scripture for this. We notice here in verse 18 of our chapter, Acts 12, verse 18, As soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers what was become Peter. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded they should be put to death.

And he went down from Judea to Caesarea and thereabove. That isn't the end of the story. God isn't through with this man.

This man who had taken the life of his choice servant James, God isn't through with him. So we read here in verse 20, And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon. See, what's this got to do with the story? Well, this is the way it's brought in here to show you how God allows this man to express what's in his heart.

And here are these people, he's displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon, but they came unto him with one accord to him, and having made blast of the king's chamberlain, their friend, they desired peace, because their country was nourished by the king's country. And upon a set day, Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, made an oration unto them. Notice how the Lord lets this man go the limit.

Just like he did Nebuchadnezzar in an older day, you remember? Nebuchadnezzar could walk around the walls of Babylon and say, Is not this great Babylon that I have built? And friends, that's a dangerous moment for anybody. That's a dangerous moment for anybody. Don't think that this is put here merely to inform you how this man blew himself up like a frog on a wet night.

None of this. This is a lesson for us. Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

Pride goeth before destruction, so the word of God teaches us. And here we see a perfect illustration of it. And so he made this wonderful oration, and the people gave a great shout, verse 22, and said, The voice of a God and not of a man.

And immediately the same angel, I suppose, that slapped Peter on the side and set him free--perhaps he probably was around there, you know, the Lord didn't have to order another one down to take care of this--an angel of the Lord smote him because he gave not God the glory, and what an awful death, eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. As you see, that's wonderful. They didn't even ask for this, but they got it.

That isn't the end of the story. You know, I'm so glad that those who divided this book up into chapters didn't stop at this point. But let's see what happens in verse 24, and this is what interests me, dear friends, so much.

When I think of those who have laid down their lives in the service of the King, it says here, But the word of God grew and multiplied. Now the question is, how does the word of God grow? Does it mean that we have a bigger Bible, or we'll have a bigger Bible tomorrow than we've got tonight? I suppose we could use that expression in this sense, that a person who's making discoveries in the Bible would say, Well, my Bible means a lot more to me today than it did yesterday. But I think we have another answer to the question, is how does the word of God grow? You know, when you and I were born again, dear friends, it was because a certain seed had been planted in our hearts, and that seed grew.

And today it expresses itself, and in the case of some of us, for long years it's there. And we trust bearing fruit for God. In this sense, the word of God is growing.

As you and I sow the seed, and we see it taking root in the hearts of men and women, boys and girls, this is the way the word of God grows and is multiplied. And this, again, I repeat, beloved, is over and above anything that they asked for. They didn't pray for this.

All the Scripture tells us back then, the early part of the chapter is that they prayed for Him. And yet God gave them all these extra things. He judged--He not only gave them more than they asked for in the case of Peter, but He also judged the man who would have put Peter to death if he'd been allowed to.

And the same one who permitted him to take the life of James says, You can't take the life of Peter yet. Wait for that. God has His own time, even for those who lay down their lives as martyrs.

I believe every one of these things is divinely timed, dear friends. When the news came to us about the death of the five martyrs in Auckland, I remember we were in Wheaton having listened to the shortwave radio coming back from the field with these tragic news, because these five lads were well known to us. In fact, one of them was really a distant relative of mine.

I'm referring to Jim Elliott. His mother and I are rated as cousins. Not exactly first cousins, but there's a relationship there.

And so this did something to us, to hear that these men, these young fellows, probably had died and did die a tragic death. And we had Mr. McCulley there and others. Oh, yes, we heard about that.

I can't tell you the weight that was upon College Church that night when this news came. Everyone in that church felt as though a member of the family had been taken. It was just that weight.

I saw men and women weeping together as the news came. And yet we read a story like this. We said, well, our times are in his hand.

He times all of these things. He timed the death of these men. He times the death of James, whom Herod killed with a sword.

He times Peter's death, which came later. But, oh, out of it all comes these wonderful fruits. And I'm sure that those who are in eternity now looking back upon the results of their labor and realizing that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, they thank God for having had a part in this.

Friends, I would that we might in this day have more young people who would step forward for just this kind of thing. I'm glad that we have some. For example, in Operation Mobilization, I'm thanking God for some of these young people.

It's true that they make their mistakes. But, oh, I thank God for the martyr courage. I have a niece, a graduate of Moody Bible Institute, who was given two years of her life just now when it would be important to her to be making plans for marriage and so on.

I don't even know that she has a boyfriend. But, Betty Ann Taylor is given two years of her best years of her life to see that the gospel is spread in countries like Spain and Italy. Friends, we need to challenge our young people these days.

I believe this is one of the reasons why we have so many people going off into these strange things like taking drugs and one thing and another. They haven't been challenged with anything that's big enough. To claim everything that's in them.

These men had that stamina. Peter, yes, arrested three different times. That didn't make him flinch.

He's going to be caught once more before this. We don't have the record of it in the Bible, but we have the prophecy of it. So, we thank God for a man like Peter tonight, and we are encouraged to pray.

I trust you will be encouraged to pray for God's servants as they go forth. As I said to you, friends, I speak feelingly on this subject, for my bones might well have laid in either Honduras or Colombia. But God has

been pleased to spare me till now for reasons that only He knows.

Who is there tonight in this audience to whom God is speaking about some dangerous path of service? I challenge you to live dangerously for Him. Let's turn to hymn number 331. 331.

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home. Number 331. Tell me why.

O God, our hope in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home. We thank Thee that in my prophecy, and I have included this chapter in mine, we thank Thee, Lord, for the encouragement to our faith, as we think of many of our dear brethren who are standing in places of danger tonight. Lord, we are not concerned about the color of their skin.

We are thinking about those in China who are on the firing line. We are thinking about those in Africa who are on the firing line. We are thinking about those in Mexico and Central America and South America who are on the firing line.

And those in Europe, and especially in Russia and Spain. O Lord, give us a fellow feeling for them, that we may feel what Thy word says, that when one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. So Lord, we pray for our suffering brethren tonight, and we pray, Lord, that if there be one person here present this evening whom Thou can still challenge with a life like this, we pray, Lord, that Thy word may not be lost upon that heart.

But that Thou mayest use it this very night to speak to that one about the possibility of laying down his life for the Lord Jesus. So we commit to Thee Thy word and all who have heard it, in the precious name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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