

Visitation

by Jim Cymbala

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit in breaking chains and opening doors to freedom and opportunity.

Duration: 21:41

Scripture: Psalm 50:15, Jeremiah 33:3, Matthew 7:7, Mark 11:24, Acts 2:42, Acts 12:5, Acts 16:26

Topics: "Holy Spirit"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker recounts the story of Peter's miraculous escape from prison. Peter was imprisoned and guarded by four groups of soldiers, but the church fervently prayed for his release. God sent an angel to rescue Peter, and as they approached the iron gate leading to the city, it miraculously opened by itself. The speaker emphasizes the power of prayer and the supernatural abilities of God, encouraging the audience to have faith and trust in Him.

Transcript

We all have church experiences. The only trouble about that is they can mislead us into traditional ways of thinking according to the church we grew up in, like someone there might be from Minnesota somewhere or Wisconsin, and they saw certain things in church, and the way they think church is is because of what they saw in their church. But that might not be what God intended church to be.

I grew up in a church, I can assure you, God never intended church to be the first one that my mom and dad drug me to because it was full of racism. They wouldn't have wanted a minority person within 100 yards of that church. But they were praising Jesus and making all kinds of noise and praising God, but just full of just unloving attitudes and just not pleasing to the Lord.

Now, when you study the Bible, you see the instincts of the early church, the Christian church that the Bible tells us about in the book of Acts. And you see the way they reacted to things, and it makes you scratch your head and say, well, wow, I never saw that. Or wow, did they really believe in that? And we focus a lot now on praise and worship and music and Bible study, and that all has its place in preaching.

They had that all, I'm sure, in the discipleship. There's a time for everything under the sun. But there's some times when you gotta shut everything down and just flat-out call on God in prayer.

Since we're in a prayer meeting, I thought this story might be inspirational to somebody here who needs to hear this. In Acts 12, it was about this time that King Herod, that's the grandson of the Herod who was the king when Jesus was born. King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church intending to persecute them, and he had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

That's, remember, James and John and Peter were the three closest to Jesus of the disciples where James was slain as a martyr. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also, and this happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was just celebrated in the month of April here by the Jewish people. After arresting him, Peter, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each.

Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. And here's the key verse. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

One translation has a steady stream of prayer kept going up from the church for Peter because Peter's in prison, and it looks like he's gonna be executed himself. They had no money. They had no political clout.

They had no public buildings. James had already been killed. Now another leader's been taken.

So they just shut down everything, and a steady stream of prayer intercession was going up to God. That was typical for the early church because they remembered all the verses. In the day of trouble, call upon me.

And I will answer you. Jesus said, ask, and you'll receive. Seek, and you'll find.

Knock, and it shall be opened. When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on the earth and the kind of faith that still is praying? So they were praying. 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.

And suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell, and he struck Peter on the side and woke him up. Quick, get up, he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. 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 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.

They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. And when they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

And then Peter came to himself and said, 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. So Peter was arrested, and it looked like it was all over. Hey, qu'est-ce sera sera, what will be will be.

You know? But something stirred up the church, and they began to pray. And think of what they were praying for. They believed in a supernatural God who could do supernatural things, because why pray for someone who's locked up in prison, guarded by four different groups of soldiers, four in each group, who are on rotation every six hours? He's chained, he's in a filthy dungeon.

Why even bother praying? Because nothing is too hard for God. One of the great battles in prayer is giving up, because some people and some situations seem so far gone that you don't even pray. Or you start to pray, and when nothing happens, you've given up, you give up.

I've had that happen to me. How many have ever dealt with that battle, is to believe God, lift your hand up, to believe God when it seems like, well, it's not working, it's impossible. So something was stirring them, and they were just praying.

It seems like they shut everything down, and just gave themselves to prayer. We've had that, those times in our church, when we've shut down, I can remember a few occasions, we shut down the Sunday services, and just had one service that began at nine, and I remember one day when I stayed in the auditorium until about 7.30 or eight o'clock at night. We never left, one meeting went merged into the other, why? Because there's a time for everything.

There's a time to sing, there's a time to hear a chorale, there's a time to study a Bible, there's a time to go on missions trips, there's a time for everything. And part of spiritual wisdom is to know what to be doing at the right time. And when Peter's in prison and about to be executed, the right thing to do is shut down everything, and flat out pray.

And in our own personal lives, sometimes it's not time to read the Bible, it's not time to listen to gospel music, it's not time to talk to your friend, it's time to get alone with God, and say, God, I'm not gonna let you go until you rearrange my life and bless me. Come on, let's put our hands together. Say amen to that.

And maybe the spirit of God is prompting someone, and he brought you here tonight, you're at a crossroads, what you need to do is shut down everything, you won't die, your life won't fall apart. It's falling apart now. Shut down everything and say, God, I'm not moving until you speak to me.

So, they prayed for the impossible, because they knew there's a time for everything, but this was not a time for the apostles' doctrine, or to sing hymns and spiritual songs, or they'd probably mingle those in. And a church that gets off is a church that doesn't know how to hit all those notes on the chord. Did you notice some of those are very rich chords that they were singing? Those are not just straight chords, those are very difficult chords that they're hitting, and they're hitting four or five notes, six notes probably.

And to lead a church is to ask God for the wisdom to know what note to hit, to hit all the notes, but to know which one to hit. Because when you need to pray, if you study the Bible, you're missing it. And when you need to study the Bible, if you're singing all the time, then you're missing it.

And then there's a time to shut everything down and just praise the Lord and sing. And there's a time for everything under the sun. But I want to ask you before we get to just review what happened when they prayed.

What would have caused them to pray like that in an impossible situation? The Bible says this. So Peter was kept in prison, but a steady stream, or an earnest prayer, was continually offered up. And I have the Bible in 26 translations up in my office, and it's not all 26 translations, but it borrows on each important text from 26 different translations of the New Testament.

And it's interesting how that passage is translated, because it's different. Sometimes it's earnest prayer was continually given, but strong petitions kept going up to God by the church while Peter was in prison. And the word there to describe the verb, the adverb, to describe the prayer, is a Greek word that basically

has three meanings to it.

It has the connotation of stretching, stretching for something with all of your heart. It has the meaning also of earnestness and deep heartfeltness. And then it also has the connotation of not stopping, keep at it, not quitting.

Stretching, earnestness, reaching out with all your heart, and not quitting after two minutes. That's what they were doing for Peter. Now, how do you pray like that? I thought when I was growing up, you just try your hardest to pray like that.

But then it can get very mechanical, just like certain traditions have quiet prayers and candles and kind of mystical feeling. Other kinds of churches have loud noise to be their tradition, and both are worthless. Quietness is worthless, noise is worthless, unless the spirit is giving birth to it.

The Bible says at one point, be still and know that I am what? But then the same Bible says, make a joyful noise unto the Lord. Well, which one should we do? Some people are quietest, and they never see the value of making a joyful noise unto the Lord. They want everything quiet.

Other people, it's not even a church unless you're screaming all the time. But those are very imperfect understandings of what God wants to do. The Holy Spirit is the one who teaches us when to be quiet and just wait.

I was in a meeting last night in Long Island preaching in a church, and a holy hush came on us as we were praying. You could have just sat there forever. But then there are other times when it's make a joyful noise unto the Lord.

The point is that the Holy Spirit is the one who helps people to pray like that. Have you ever felt the Holy Spirit calling you to prayer? Look at me, everyone. Have you ever felt the Holy Spirit drawing you away or bringing someone to your mind or causing a cry to start somewhere deep inside of you? And many times we squelch it, or we don't obey the leading and get alone so that we can express it.

But the Bible says that the Holy Spirit is the one who not only teaches us the Word, teaches us how to worship, helps us to preach, only one who can give us understanding of the Bible. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of prayer, for we know not how we ought to pray, but the Spirit helps us. And I'm praying right now in Jesus' name that the Holy Spirit is settling upon us now, right now, that the Holy Spirit is bringing subjects to our heart that He wants to stir us up to pray about.

So this church, which was led by the Holy Spirit, this early church was spirit-filled, spirit-controlled. Spirit-filled means spirit-controlled, controlled by the Spirit. They were moved to pray like this for Peter.

We don't know why they didn't pray like that for James. There's a mystery to all of this. But they were stirred to pray.

And I wanna tell you something that I've learned over and over again. When God stirs you to pray about anything, and you know it's beyond you, then that is a strong indication that it's His will to answer your prayer. Why would God stir you up to pray, or stir me up to pray for something, and then say, sorry, no answer? No, that's impossible.

How many know our God is an awesome God, a good God, a loving God? Let's put our hands together and say amen. So, how to pray about something, when to pray about something, and asking God for the fervency to pray for something. My late father-in-law, he was so funny.

I remember him preaching and saying when he first got saved, he thought you had to cry when you prayed, that if you weren't crying, you weren't really praying. So, he would pray, and then he would feel no tears, and he'd say, oh, I can't pray. So, he would always think of his dog that he grew up with, and how that day that dog died, and he would start to feel sad, and he would say, thank you, Jesus, help me, Lord.

But those are just human emotions. The fervency and the ability to endure in prayer only can come from the Holy Spirit. In fact, I'll tell you something deeper.

Everything comes from the Holy Spirit, because the only God on Earth is God the Holy Spirit, and he's the author of every righteous act, every fruit of the Spirit, every work of power, every prayer, you can't even sing hallelujah properly unless the Holy Spirit is inspiring your heart to do it. Oh, you can get your mouth to do it, your mind, and you can hit the right note, but that doesn't mean you're pleasing God. It has to be born of the Spirit.

So, they were stirred up by the Spirit, and they were praying, and they wouldn't let go. And now, what happened? Don't get into the specifics, but just remember this. Suddenly, an angel from heaven appeared.

The greatest answer to prayer is something from heaven. You know what most of us need here today? The way the blessing of God works is the people of God say, God, we can't go on, send something from heaven. Well, what from heaven, an angel like came to Peter? No, let God decide what you need from heaven.

He might send an angel, he might see in the revival, he might send a deliverance, he might perform a healing, but God, send something that we can't do. Send something from heaven. Can we say amen to that? How many want something from heaven? Something from heaven.

Something from heaven for transitions. Something from heaven for our youth. Something from heaven for our seniors.

Something from heaven in our services. Something from heaven on the choir. What good is our choir singing? Is music gonna change anyone? Where is that in the Bible, that music is gonna change somebody? It can become a form of entertainment.

It's only the anointing that breaks the yoke. And when you pray, as they prayed, God answered, something came from heaven. In this case, it was an angel, but don't be specific.

Just, God, send something from heaven. You know, some of you that are battling with some besetting sin, here's what you need, something from heaven to break the power of that thing. Something from heaven.

I bet there's some people here, you wouldn't even recognize yourself if you just cried out to God and said, God, I'm waiting for something from heaven to come. But notice, they were praying for someone else. They were interceding.

You know what intercession is? You touch God with one hand, and with the other hand, you touch that person you're praying for. You never move out of the building, but your heart touches God and touches that person. I was with a man yesterday that people came and asked me to call him.

I said, I can't call him. He'll have to call me if he wants. He doesn't come to this church.

He's a member of another church. I don't feel impressed to call him. If he wants to talk to me, I've known him since he was a child.

He'll have to call me. He didn't call me. He's getting worse.

So in the meeting last night, who does God send in but this man who I got a burden for a few weeks ago and just began to cry out to God for him? And now he's in the building where I'm speaking. The end of the service, I was able to put my arms around him. I hugged him like I would my own son or daughter.

I just rocked with his head in my arms. You know what God can do? Here's what happened to Peter. Peter was sleeping.

Do you have someone you love tonight who's sleeping? Not physically sleeping, spiritually sleeping. They're sleeping. They're not praying.

They're not reading their Bible. They think eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. They have no idea that Jesus is coming again.

They have no idea the value of their soul. What would it profit a man or a woman if he gained the whole world and lost his soul? They're sleeping. Come on, how many have a loved one who's sleeping or somebody? I got some nephews who are sleeping, sleeping.

And the angel struck Peter on the side and wake up. Did you know when you intercede and pray for someone, God can wake them up? That's what happened to Chrissy. We prayed on a Tuesday night at the culmination of a lot of prayers.

And when God delivered her and brought her back to him, she looked up at me with her tears. I hadn't seen her in five months. And she said, Daddy, who prayed for me on Tuesday night? Because God woke her up, sent her a dream.

Did you know that God can send that loved one a dream, that mother, that father? How many believe God could send someone a dream, could wake them up, could give them a vision, could send somebody to them? Listen, God, nobody's out of God's reach if we'll pray. And then the Bible says, the chains fell off his hands. This man who I'm praying for, there's strong chains that are being broken right now.

He called me today. Strong chains are being broken. It's gonna be here, God willing, on Sunday.

Strong chains. I don't care what the, heroin, crack, methadone, adultery, fornication, pornography, cigarettes, alcohol, you name it. Racial prejudice, I don't care what the chain is, God can break that chain.

He can break it in an instant. Come on, say amen with me. God can break that chain.

Those are the chains that hold people. The people in prison, that guy sending the tithe, he's not in prison, he's free. He's serving Jesus.

It's the people walking around this city that are in prison. They're in chains. But they prayed, he woke up, and the chains were broken.

And for someone here who's struggling with something, and you can't, you've been trying and trying, and you can't get through, you can't get that door open, listen what happened. As they prayed, Peter got woken, the guards were knocked out somehow, and now the angels leading them out, they passed the first two, three centuries, and they come now to the door that leads, the big iron gate that leads to the city. And listen what Luke adds in as he gives us this account, and I close, he says, Peter, as Peter and the angel approached, that door was total freedom.

It opened by itself. Didn't have to push, get some poles, we're gonna knock this thing down, no. When God opens a door, nobody can shut it.

Come on, can we say amen to that? Oh God, I praise you for opening doors. Come on, let's really praise him, God opens doors. You just seek the Lord, stay surrendered to him, the door he wants you to go through, you won't have to elbow anybody, and fight and worry and lay awake at night, the door will open by itself.

One more time, let's say amen. He's gonna open doors for us. Open doors for ministry, open doors of opportunity.

Open doors for jobs. So they prayed, and he was awakened. They prayed, and the chains fell off.

They prayed earnestly, sincerely, stretched out, wouldn't quit, and doors were being opened. Amazing. So that's why the devil hates a prayer meeting.

That's why there's hardly any prayer meetings across the land. He don't like preaching, but he'll let you preach. He don't like Bible teaching, but you can teach a Bible, I mean, all right.

He don't like music, praising God, but that's, but, oh, prayer. Because prayer drives him back. Prayer frees up other people.

Come on, do you believe that? Can we put our hands together one more time? Yes, it does.

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