

Prevailing, Prayer, Persecuted Church

by John McGregor

John McGregor's sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer and faith in the face of persecution, illustrating the power of a united church through the story of Peter's imprisonment and deliverance in Acts 12.

Duration: 44:22

Scripture: Acts 12:1

Topics: "Persecuted Church"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the power and strength of Jesus in the church. He highlights the persecution faced by the early church and how they remained faithful to God despite the challenges. The preacher shares a powerful story of a pastor who was arrested and imprisoned for his faith, but continued to trust in Jesus and lead others to salvation. The sermon also discusses the miraculous deliverance of Peter from prison by an angel, illustrating the victory that believers have in Christ over any obstacles they may face.

Transcript

A message this morning, let's turn to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 12, and we're still thinking about a people of action, and we want to read the first 19 verses here of Acts chapter 12, and just think on them for a few moments together. And really they give us three pictures of a church in action, and so we'll look at that. Acts chapter 12 and verse 1 says, Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.

Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword, and because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the days of unleavened bread, so when he had arrested him, he put him in prison and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

And when Herod was about to bring him out that night, Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers, and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. Nigh behold, an angel from the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison, and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, Arise quickly, and his chains fell off his hands. Then the angel said to him, Gird yourself and tie on your sandals, and he did so.

And he said to him, Put on your garment and follow me. So he went out and followed him and did not know what was done by the angel was real, but thought he's seeing a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard post, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord.

And they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. When Peter had come to himself, he said, Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent his angel and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people. So when he had considered this, 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 girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness, she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. But they said to her, You're beside yourself.

Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, It is his angel. And now Peter continued knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go tell these things to James and to the brethren. And he departed and went to another place.

Then as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. He went down from Jerusalem to Caesarea and stayed there.

Father, this is your word, and we ask that you would just encourage our hearts through it this morning in these few moments together. Lord, may we know your touch upon us. In Jesus' name, amen.

I just dropped my CD, so put it back where it belongs. This morning, as I say, there are three pictures in these verses of people of action. God's people are always a people of action, and the Herod who is mentioned here is Herod Agrippa.

He's one of those people that history teaches us was a politician. And you say, John, what do you mean by that? He was a king. Well, he was a politician in that when he was with the Romans, he did as the Romans did, and when he was with the Jews, he did as the Jews did, and he would enjoy pleasing people and gaining advantage through things like that.

And so he had a plan, and his plan is to move against the church, the people of God. And you know, it's not so surprising as he takes the leadership and starts to move against them. Jesus, in fact, himself told us that there are some things we can expect.

We don't need to be defeated by them, but we can certainly expect them. In John 16 and verse 33, the Lord Jesus himself, as he spoke to his disciples, said this. He said, in the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

And you know, those things that come against us can sure knock us down in a hurry, can't they? But it's important for us this morning just to remember that Jesus is the victor. He has victory over all the things that can come and touch us and defeat us or discourage us and so on. And so as we think about three

pictures of the church this morning, here's the first one.

You notice, first of all, they are a persecuted people as this chapter opens. And I find it interesting, the words that are used, it says they were harassed. Do you ever feel harassed? Some of those guys that Brad just read about, I think, remind me of this word, harassed, and especially the one moving the sign on the deer.

There are all kinds of things that can come against the people of God, aren't there? You see, we might ask, why persecute the church? Good question, isn't it? Why? I mean, God's people are loving and compassionate and gracious, and we looked last week at how we need the grace of God. But as you think about it, you know, the church is a people called out, and they have one king and leader whose name is Jesus. And there's something about that that disturbs the world that we live in, because the Christian is someone who knows what it is to be changed from the inside out.

The Christian is one who knows what it is to be committed to walking on with Jesus no matter what. And that sense of being called out to follow after him sometimes can bring us surprising things. I remember so well when the Lord Jesus saved me in that little bedroom in Ireland so long ago, and I remember going to work the next day and thinking, this is great! But you know, it was shocking.

When coffee break or tea time came, and I said to my co-workers, guess what happened to me last night? They weren't excited at all. In fact, the question came back, what? I said, I got saved! And remember Ken Moffitt saying, the only time you'll get saved is if somebody pulls you out of the river lagging because you fell in there drunk. And you know, I thought, those are not the kind of comments that I expected.

You see, there's a difference, isn't there, between those who are called out, who belong to God. Their perspective has changed, their allegiance has changed, and they're no longer walking in the way of the world. So they are here in our text, they are harassed, and it's Passover week, and they would have been thinking about the Passover previous when the Lord Jesus took the bread and the wine, and then went to the garden to pray, and then went to the cross for you and for me.

And it's in that season that Herod moves against them in persecution. And maybe you've noticed that things can be going so good spiritually, and that is often the time that something comes along to try to kick the legs out from under you. Someone who should understand doesn't.

Those who ought to be full of encouragement and strength aren't. Those kind of times come along for all of us, don't they? Why persecute the church? Because, you see, the truth always brings conviction. And when the truth is preached as it has been through the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, there's a sense of that which is right and that which is wrong.

I was down in Indianapolis week before last, and one of the things that I spoke about was the fact that troubles me most in our media and so on is I hear all kinds of things, but I never hear the words right and wrong. You notice that? Because the world would have us believe that everything's okay. But you see, the church are the called out of God, and they are those who know the truth.

And there's great freedom in the truth. It comes to build on the inside and to strengthen us in all kinds of ways. Now you say, now John, why would you say it's because they were preaching the truth that this persecution comes? Well, you know, in the early chapters of the Acts, we see what happens when the truth is preached and conviction comes upon hearts and lives.

For instance, in Acts chapter 7, Stephen goes through a whole list of the history of Israel. And you would think that everybody would have agreed with him and said, oh yeah, but you know when he says, this is how we know that Jesus is true and that you took him and crucified him, there is such conviction and it is rejected. That is to say the leaders did not accept the conviction of God, and when conviction is rejected, it brings forth anger.

You see, there's something with the pride of the human heart that resists that truth and that comes back out as anger. And then in Acts chapter 9, we see an instance where there is conviction in the life of one man whose name is Saul. And as he is cast to the ground and hears the Lord speaking to him and calling to him, he accepts the conviction that he needs a turnaround in his life and trusts in Christ fully and goes on with the Savior.

And you see, when conviction is accepted and dealt with, it brings about that depth of truth that says I can no longer live the way I used to. I must follow him all the way. And there's another instance I'll just quickly mention of conviction in the early chapters.

It's in Acts chapter 5, and it's what happens when conviction is extreme. Ananias and Sapphira tried to lie to the church and to lie to God, and when conviction comes, their lives end. They just die and are carried out.

Wow. You see, this thing of the truth is such a vitality, and when it is resisted and when we try to manipulate it, we always are the losers. Scripture here says that the church was harassed.

James, the brother of John, had been killed. He would have been executed with a sword. And you know, he and his brother were dubbed the sons of thunder.

They were somewhat loved for Jesus. Maybe that might explain why he is the one who is taken. And the other James that is mentioned, in case you wondered when Peter said in verse 17, go and tell James, he wasn't talking about the James who had gone to heaven to be with Jesus.

He was talking about James, the half-brother of Jesus, who wrote the Epistle of James and who had become the leader of the Jerusalem Church. Peter is arrested and imprisoned. He's under guard, and I wonder what it would have felt like to be chained to Peter.

I have this Irish imagination, as you know, and I sometimes think about these things. Here they are, chained to him. That Scripture doesn't tell us how long, but it must be a significant time because it says, after the Passover, although he was arrested before it, but after the Passover they were going to bring him out for execution and so on.

So he must have been chained to them for a while, and I wonder what things they might have discovered of God, chained to that man. It's kind of like a little man I know whose name is Bill McLeod. He'll be speaking at that conference next weekend.

He's 91 years old, and I had the joy of flying down to Indianapolis with him from Winnipeg, and we didn't have seats together. He was in the seat behind me, and flying from Chicago to Indianapolis, I could hear Bill saying, you know, I'm 91 years old, and God has been so good to me. Could I ask you, sir, do you know anything of the goodness of God? And the man said, no, not really.

And the conversation, I was carrying on a conversation with the person beside me, but I was listening, you know, at the same time, and as we were moving toward that decline into the Indianapolis airport, I could hear Bill saying, so would you like to trust Jesus as your Savior? Would you like to get to know him? And you know, I could hear the man saying, I really need to do that. Yeah, just thinking about those who take a position and a stand, it still works. It still works.

I need to move us along. Secondly, we see a picture of a praying church. In verse 5 and 6, it says that although he was arrested and taken and chained to those men, and they must have discovered something of Jesus in that, what was the church doing, the action of the church? Well, I'll tell you, in our terms, we would have gotten together a petition.

No amen? Or maybe we know a politician who could get something done with this. Or perhaps there's someone who has the ear of the king, and we could find a way to get the word to him and smuggle Peter out of time. But you know, I love the acts of the apostles because the early church did none of these things.

They just prayed. And as we look, it was constant prayer and fervent prayer and earnest prayer and persistent prayer because they kept at it and at it and at it all the way through the text. Indeed, it was united prayer, corporate prayer.

And there is, you know, these days something that says we don't actually need the church to come together to pray. And dear friends, I think this is why we have such weakness and such discouragement. Because, you know, when you look at the early church, when they came together and prayed and sought the Lord, oh my, that was how they dealt with every contingency that comes upon them.

When they were doing well, they prayed. When they were challenged, they prayed. When they were persecuted, they prayed.

I think there's something in this that we somehow are missing in these days and times. There's a little book about the Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards that speaks about prayer before that great revival, and part of the title of the book is that it is an appeal to the people of God for united explicit prayer in agreement seeking Him for revival. That's just part of the title.

It's not the whole first chapter. You see, there's something about that togetherness in it that really touches and brings forth the right response. And notice the timing.

The timing goes right to the wall. They did not quit. It's the night before he is to be executed, and they are still praying.

You gotta love it. They are still there petitioning God. And I think that it was not the kind of prayer meeting where there's a quietness to it.

Indeed, I think it might have been like some of the Vietnamese prayer meetings that I've been in, where you might have a couple of hundred people in the room, and they all pray at the same time, out loud and with great gusto. And there's a sense of, wow, God, you can hear every single word from every single person. I cannot comprehend it, but he does.

This is the people of God in action, facing an impossible situation, and yet God specializes in them. So, Glen Cairn, let me grow personal for a moment. How long have we had the land at Prince of Wales? I see

lips going, but I don't hear any words.

About 20 years, 23, 23. Okay. Where will God give us an answer for this thing? It is at this place of prayer, and this is exactly what I want to get across to you this morning.

And if you don't hear one other word that the preacher says today, hear this. It's not even my words. I learned it years ago from that same little man, Bill McLeod, when I was graping about money one day.

You ever do that? No, it's okay. You don't have to put your hand up. This is what he said.

Just quietly, he said to me, John, if God knows your need, who else needs to know? What is that desperate need that's in your heart this morning? Isn't this a great place to bring it to him? Have you been hurt and rejected, struggling with pain? If God knows the need, he can act on it. It's a great longing in your heart to see a move of God like there is in mine. Let me talk about my other life for a minute.

You know why I do those things in the revival, things that I do? Because I believe that one day in the midst of it all, God is going to come and every human voice will just be stilled, and when he moves, every human need will be met, because he can do more in five minutes than I can do in 50 years. That's why the early church prayed. They knew they didn't have the strength, they knew they didn't have the ability, they knew they didn't have the education, they knew they didn't have the funds, but they knew who did, and they laid hold of him in such a way.

My friends, if great preaching could bring revival, it would have happened years ago, but it's great praying that brings God into the midst. He specializes in these impossible situations. There's a young pastor in 1964 in Zaire in a village.

His name is Zebedeo Edu. He has a wife, two little children. The Simba communist rebels come and take over that part of the country, and they arrest hundreds of people, and they set aside a day when they're going to execute these people.

The pastor was one of those arrested, and as he is taken out to a big truck where they're loading all these prisoners to bring them to the town square for execution, the trucks won't start, so they make the prisoners push them until they start. When they get there, the authorities are furious because this execution is running late, so they just line them all up in the square and say, number off, one, two, one, two, one, two, one, two, one, two. Then for some reason, the man in charge of it all says, all you number twos, get back in the truck and go back to jail, and as they're driving out of the square, they can hear the machine guns start up, and all those who had number one are gone into eternity.

Back in the jail, the pastor says, my hope is in Christ, and I don't know what's going to happen to us now, but those of you who can hear my voice, you need to trust in Jesus. Eight people came to the Lord that day, and the next day, the authorities came and said to the pastor, we arrested you by mistake. You can go home now, and when he got home to his village some walking distance, guess what the church was doing? Yeah, he walked into a prayer meeting where they were saying, God, would you protect our pastor? God, would you somehow set him free? What do you think that felt like? Isn't it the same picture that we have here? Exactly, exactly.

Third picture, very quickly. There is not only a persecuted church and a praying church, but there's a prevailing church in verses 6 through 19. Why would you say prevailing, John? Prevailing means overcoming.

How can you see that in the text here? Here's how I see it. Peter is the recognized leader of the church. He is prevailing, but he's in jail, John.

He sure is, but he's prevailing. How could even an Irishman come up with that? Look at the text. Look at verse 5 and 6. What does it say Peter was doing the night before he is to be brought out and executed? He is sleeping.

I can tell he's not Irish. I'd have worried all night. He's prevailing because, you see, he knew that when he fell asleep that night, that probably before the sunset the next day, he would be asleep in Jesus forever, and he has no concern whatsoever.

This world and the things of this world have no pull on him, not at all. Neither the world, nor the flesh, nor the devil has any victory over him. He just goes to sleep.

Brad so rightly said, it's God who does it all, and Peter knew that and trusted him anyway. And there comes in this supernatural intervention when an angel walks in to that room, and scripture says this, a light shone in the prison, just like John 1 5 says, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. And as he stands there, he touches Peter on the side.

I think, why not the head? Or why didn't you just kick him in the foot? But he touches him on the side, because that's closest to his heart. And my friends, God hears the cry of your heart and comes to touch your heart and says, it isn't mine. Here's a couple of thoughts just on this text.

That angel would not do for Peter the things that Peter could do. He said to him, get up, put your sandals on, get dressed. Now don't you think if you can come from heaven straight into a prison cell, that with one stroke or request, he could have had Peter up, dressed, and ready to go? I think the chances are strong.

But he would not do for Peter what Peter could do. But he did do for Peter the things that Peter could not do. Forgive me for a minute, because I love this.

Are you facing some things that you cannot do? Then you're a candidate for some supernatural intervention. Peter couldn't get rid of the chains. But when he obeyed that angel and stood, they fell off.

And I might be speaking to someone this morning, and there are some chains around your heart. There are some things in your life that you wish were not there. If you will trust the Lord at his word and obey him and come to him, those chains will fall.

Might be a habit, might be a hidden sin, might be a besetting sin, something that you wish you could get rid of. But whatever it is, he has the strength and the power to do it. He opened the doors.

Are you facing some locked doors? I've only been a part of the church for about the last seven years, and I want to say this. I think there have been some locked doors, and sometimes it seems like, where do we find the way forward? Friends will find it in corporate prayer. We'll find it at the throne of God.

We'll find it in the ministry of his Spirit, and he can open what we cannot. I had the privilege one year working with the Graham people to have two Crusades in very opposite places. One was in Newport News, Virginia on the Atlantic coast, and the other was in Anchorage, Alaska up in the far Pacific coast.

And Anchorage is on the same time zone as Honolulu. That's about as far apart as you can get. I was asked to go start the Crusade in Anchorage in November, and I was told the meetings are the first week of

March.

That's usually 18 months to set up for a Billy Graham Crusade, so I don't know how many months that is. My math has never been good, but you can count it out. Could be five, I think.

And when we met with that group, this is the first thing they said to me. Probably if we soak the place with advertising, we can get maybe a thousand or fifteen hundred people to come, and Sullivan Arena holds 8,500. So they said, what do you think, John? You know, being Irish, you can stick your neck out once in a while.

It has nothing to do with being Irish, actually. I said, I wonder where are you gonna put the overflow? Where are you gonna put the thousands who can't get in? Because you see, that's our God. And Lincoln, where are we gonna put them? We need him.

And we need to be a people at the throne of God. About 200,000, I think, in this city or close to it. If you took all the evangelical churches in town and put them all together, I think you'd have a very hard time finding 10,000 in that crowd.

In fact, you might have a hard time finding 10,000 in all the churches in the city. We need to lay hold of him and to move in his strength and power. I promised to preach short this morning, and I've been long, so let me give my apologies and just conclude.

By the time you get to verse 19, all the plans of man have fallen apart. Peter's out, and there's not a thing that the world can do about it. The church is moving on, and there's nothing that can stop it, because Jesus is the Lord of the church, and his power and strength and spirit are rolling, and all the glory goes to God.

You notice in verse 17 what Peter says, the Lord has delivered me. There's no credit to anybody but him. Oh, may we be a praying people, and may the glory go to him.

Let me close with this little thought. There's a school in Itasca, Texas. Before World War II, it had a fire.

263 children perished in the fire, so when after the war they rebuilt the school there in Itasca, they installed the most modern, the best, the greatest sprinkler system that you have ever seen. In fact, they took tours through the plants to show people all the sprinklers and all of the safety and so on, and after the war, as the economy expanded, so did the population of Itasca, and they needed to add on to the school seven years after it had been built. And you know when they started to put on the addition? They discovered that that sprinkler system had never been hooked up to the source.

Now why would I finish a message with a story like that? Because sometimes that's the problem for us. In our busyness and all the rest, we can be so removed from the source and just go on through the motions. Let's change position for a minute and stand together as we come to the Lord in prayer.

There's a persecuted church in this passage and a praying church and a prevailing church. Jesus said the devil comes to kill and steal and destroy, but I have come so that you might have life and have it more abundantly. As I close this morning, I just want to ask you, are you living in the abundance of Jesus? Better is one day in his courts than thousands elsewhere.

Are you in that place, that sweet spot, close to the Lord Jesus this morning? Or might it be that as we close this morning, you could say, I wish to be closer to him. Now, you know I don't do this every Sunday and I don't do this lately either, but I wonder this morning if we might not just respond to the Lord to say, Father, I do want to be nearer. Lord, I don't want there to be any change.

I want to see you open those locked doors and lead me as I'm committed to you. My friends, even as in Acts 12, it all started at the place of prayer, so it is the same today. So just before I pray, I ask you, has the Lord been to your heart this morning? If so, step out from where you are and come.

Let's just come before him here at the altar at the front. Take a few moments just quietly to seek him, to draw near to him, to know his touch and his salvation in every way. So I'll wait for a moment or two as the Lord has been speaking to your heart.

Let's simply gather for a moment or two of prayer as the people of God, the corporate, united people of God. I want to ask you this morning just to do three things. The first is simply this, just to say to the Lord, Lord, would you put your finger on any sin in my heart, things that hold me back? And as the Lord may bring something to your mind and heart, confess it to him and forsake it.

He'll cause those chains to fall away. The second thing I'd ask you to do this morning is just to say to him, and in this sense, I think we're just like as Brad said, all idiots. Lord, so often I try it in my strength and my way and my power.

And just to acknowledge that to the Savior this morning and to ask him just to refresh that trust and that relationship of complete dependence upon him. The third thing, my dear friends, brothers and sisters, is just to say to him, Lord, I need the fullness of your Holy Spirit. Father, here we are as your people around the altar.

And indeed, as you bring things to our mind, we confess them to you. Sometimes, Lord, there's pride. Sometimes, Lord, there's unforgiveness.

Sometimes, Lord, there's just a sense of knowing that I can do it and I so often fail. Lord, we acknowledge we can't do it in our strength. We need you to cause the chains to fall off and the doors to open before us.

And so, as your people, we come to your throne this morning, united together in fervent, explicit prayer. Father, let your Spirit fall fresh on us and fill each one who's in this room with a sense of your love, your grace, your forgiveness, your power. Lord, we worship you.

We thank you for your Word, for that still little voice speaking to us in our hearts this morning. Lord, we want to ask, would you take us and build your church? Not our church, Lord, but yours. And we plead with you for the souls of this city, for the darkness that's all around us.

Let the light shine. Father, we can't do it, but lead us to be the people who are trusting you and watching you build your church. I ask, Father, that as you minister to us in the power of your Spirit in these moments, would you heal those hearts that are broken and hurting? Would you lift those who are discouraged and despondent? Would you come alongside those who are lonely? And may your strength and your ministry just flow into hearts.

In Jesus' name we ask.

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