



Sermon Title: Praying with Expectation (Acts 12:1-19)

IN Opportunities to connect and pray as a group

1. What is your earliest memory of 'prayer'?
2. Why does God ask us to pray? What do we expect from God when we pray? What does it mean to pray 'with expectation'?

UP Time that is devoted to the Word of God

1. Jesus appoints His disciples (Mark 3:13-18). Note the names He gave Peter, James and John who were His 'inner circle.' Who was with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-11)?

2. Read Jesus' words to Peter in John 21:18-19. What do you think that Peter expected would happen in his current situation as a prisoner?

3. King Herod was the grandson of the Herod who killed all the male infants in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18) Describe his character (Acts 12:19-23). Why did his choice to arrest Peter please the Jewish leaders? Why did Herod, as a Roman official, now join in the Jewish opposition to the church? What does this tell us about the kind of crisis Peter faced?

4. Describe the kind of prayer that the church conducted on behalf of Peter? (Acts 12:5) What words do you think they may have used? Pastor Ashwin mentioned their 'imperfect faith.' How did they show this?

5. Dr Luke, the writer of both the Gospel and of Acts, inserts two phrases in this narrative: 'King Herod had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword' (Acts 12: 2) and '...the church was earnestly praying to God for Peter' (Acts 12:5) Would the church have prayed differently for the two men? Do you think the manner of prayer would have made a difference? Why? Why not?

6. 'The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. Our enemy fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray. Prayer turns ordinary mortals into people of power. It brings fire. It brings rain. It brings life. It brings God. There is no power like that of prevailing prayer.' -- Samuel Chadwick

Read Psalm 127:1. How does the quotation mirror the verse?

OUT Seek to be the Community of God's people in your community

1. Regarding answers to prayer, what impedes the level of your expectancy? Discuss the balance between 'expectation' and 'surrender.' How can the Group pray for you?

2. Pastor Ashwin said, 'The challenge I want to bring to us today is to pray with expectation all week as a church family. Let's raise our level of anticipation of what God can and will do, allow our faith to arise to a new level so that we can trust God to stay true to His promises.' www.cschurch.ca/weekofprayer

UP – IN – OUT reflect a balanced life including a focus on our personal relationship with the Father (UP), staying connected to the Body (IN), and reaching our world (OUT).

THE WORD (NIV)

Acts 12:1-23

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, 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. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. ¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen." ¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" ¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." ¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place. ¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

Psalm 127:1

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain.

Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.

This week's writers:

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Last week we heard from Pastor Ken Shigematsu on the *Survival Habits of the Soul*, habits to help us reorder our lives so that we do not fall into the cultural pressures of success and achievement. This week, Pastor Ashwin continues the emphasis on spiritual formation by focusing on the topic of prayer. At the start of a New Year, we as a church enter a week of prayer, setting the week apart for fasting and prayer; to declare our community's dependence on God and prepare us to engage actively in these prayer-focused events.

Unfortunately many of us fall into a trap of uninspiring prayer instead of living the adventure that prayer is meant to be. It is easy to turn prayer into a ritual and thereby lose sight of the power of prayer. This area of our Christian life comes under the greatest spiritual attack: if there is one thing the enemy wants to strip from you, it is your dependence on prayer. The one activity that causes the enemy to tremble is prayer. The forces of darkness know that apart from prayer our accomplishments are minimal; but when we pray we partner with the One who gives us strength to do all things. We receive supernatural help when we pray; God does great things in response to bold prayers. To help us raise our level of anticipation and expectation of what God can and will do this week of prayer, and beyond, we will look at the passage from Acts 12:1-19.

To segue into the lesson, Pastor Ashwin told a short humorous story to show a common mindset among us regarding the power of prayer. A man got a permit to open a tavern in a small town. Members of the local church were strongly opposed and prayed God would intervene. Lightning hit the tavern, burning it to the ground. The church members rejoiced, until they received notice that the tavern owner was suing them, claiming compensation because they were responsible for the loss. At court, the perplexed judge heard both sides and said, "We have a problem: there is a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer, and a church congregation that does not." Humorous; but how often do we pray with little or no expectation that our prayers would be answered? Even as we pray for intervention, our minds start reasoning how absurd it is to expect an answer. If we actually receive what we asked for, our jaws drop! Why we are more surprised when our prayers are answered than the other way around?

This is not just a contemporary problem. The early church had much the same problem. A bit of context for Acts 12: these were gloomy times. After a respite from persecution after the conversion of Saul, Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great (who ruled at Jesus' birth), succeeded his uncle Herod Antipas (exiled by the Romans) in 39 AD and opposed the work of God just as his grandfather had done. He ordered James (the brother of John) put to death by the sword, the first Apostle to be martyred (v.2). Jesus had twelve disciples, of which three were in the inner circle: Peter, James and John. The approval of the Jews at James' death encouraged Agrippa to do the same with Peter, the outspoken leader of the heretical sect. However, during the Passover week no trials could be held, so Peter was imprisoned and heavily guarded (v.4). Peter was at the verge of death; and the church's only recourse was earnestly praying (v.5). The word translated "earnestly" means 'stretch' or 'strain'; praying to God in fervent supplication, agonizingly interceding in passionate intensity. Herod and the kingdom of darkness use physical weapons; the early church countered with prayer as their act of defiance against opposition. Prayer is not a casual or passive activity, a last ditch effort when all our options have been exhausted. When we pray we call on the One who has no limitations to meet us at our point of need.

The church prays the night before his trial; Peter is asleep, chained between two guards (v.6). Peter has released all his burdens to God (Phil 4:6-7). He is sleeping so soundly and peacefully that he does not awaken with the bright light, and the angel has to (literally) kick him in the side to wake him up. The rescue is miraculous – the guards do not awaken, the chains break, the iron doors open by themselves (Greek 'automate'). Even Peter thought it was all a vision. Not until the angel left him, did he realize that God had done this. We too often look to strategies, techniques and self-help books as ultimate solutions. Important as these may be, our success does not hinge on them. (Psalm 127:1)

Now comes some comedy (vv.12-14). The Christians are praying for Peter's release, and hear a knocking at the door. A servant girl is sent to check, and in her excitement at hearing and recognizing Peter's voice, she rushes back to the prayer room – entirely forgetting to unlock the door to let Peter in - and tells them Peter is here, your prayers have been answered. Instead, they tell her that she is out of her mind, or that Peter must be dead - his angel (spirit) is here to comfort them (v.15). Meanwhile, Peter is still banging at the door (v.16); he is a wanted man and most likely in danger of being recaptured. While the prison gate opened automatically, Peter can't get through the gate to safety with his Christian friends! When they finally do open the door and see him, they are astonished! This is not an indictment of the early church – it simply shows the church had ordinary men and women, just like us, with the same imperfect faith. Ordinary men and women who were shocked that God would use their imperfect faith to do something spectacular!

And the story does not end with Peter's rescue. Herod Agrippa I, the tyrant adamant in hindering God's work, makes the guards pay for Peter's escape with their lives (v.19). At the end of Acts 12:20-23 we read Herod's obituary: another opposition to God's kingdom wiped out. No one can oppose God and win; His mission is unstoppable (Acts 12:24). Herod did not realize that when he took on God's people, he was taking on God Himself.

As we approach this week of prayer, for what are you believing God: for your life, for your family, for our church, for this world? Ask, and it will be given; Seek, and you will find; Knock, and the door will be opened (Matt 7:7). Where do you need God's divine intervention in your life?