

Miracles Happen When We Pray

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Today, the General of The Salvation Army has called us all to pray for our world; to pray specifically against the severe impacts of COVID-19. On our church Facebook page (The Salvation Army Southmount Citadel), I've posted his call to prayer and a separate list of prayer points that can guide you in this. I know we have all been praying. Today, we pray as one world-wide Army, with fervency and conviction that God is able and will act in response to our prayers.

Given this call, it is no surprise to me that our return to the life of the Apostle Peter takes us to a day in his life when the prayers of God's people were vital! I invite you to take time now to read Acts 12. As you do reflect on the important role that prayer played in this miraculous vignette in Peter's life. It will be familiar to most of us; going back to our Sunday School days!

As we've journeyed with Peter over many months, we saw the Church move from a period of severe persecution to a time of relative peace. In both periods, the faithful proclamation of the Gospel met with great success and the Church grew and grew as a result. Today's story starts with an indication that persecution has returned. Herod Agrippa I had assumed power throughout Palestine, Judea and Samaria. According to historical accounts of his reign, he

was a Roman ruler who needed to be liked and pandered greatly to the whims of the Jewish religious leaders. He personally feigned an allegiance to Judaism and chose to see Christianity as subversive to Jewish law and Roman rule. He quickly realized that coming out against this new 'sect' bought him great favour with the Jewish leaders, and so he began arresting its leaders. He had James (brother of John) beheaded, and as our story begins he has Peter arrested with the same intention. Fortunately, the arrest took place during the Feast of Unleavened Bread/Passover and, out of respect for this Jewish festival, a trial could not take place immediately.

So on this day, Peter is kept in prison pending trial. He is guarded heavily, as Herod did not want to risk an escape. And while he is in prison, verse 5 tells us "the church was earnestly praying to God for him". The Feast/Passover ran for a stretch of 14 days. We don't know exactly when Peter was arrested, but Luke's account gives the sense that the Church was praying the entire time, without ceasing, round the clock, day and night! And when the Church prays, miracles happen! This story provides solid proof!

As I reflected on it, I was in absolute awe of the number of little miracles that made the bigger miracle of Peter's escape possible. Just consider the following:

1. The Church was gathered for prayer during a period of persecution; gathered at great risk to themselves. That is a miracle! In the past, when persecution came, they scattered. But not now! Now they were trusting God for protection for themselves, even as they prayed for Him to protect Peter. And it's important to note that this isn't the apostles gathered (see verse 17). It is ordinary saints exhibiting extraordinary faith in these days! What an inspiration!!!! Also note that the answer didn't come until the night before Peter's trial (verse 6). Sometimes God keeps us waiting, to increase our faith. We have to persevere in prayer, just as these ordinary saints did!
2. Peter was sleeping soundly (the angel had to strike him on the side to wake him up! – verse 7). That's a miracle given the circumstances. Though he was facing a trial that would likely lead to his execution, he wasn't kept awake by worry or anxiety. He slept. Though he didn't have a soft bed to lie on (more likely a cold, hard stone floor), he slept. Though he was naked and chained to two guards, he slept deeply. He was in the Lord's hands and he trusted in God's care. I'm not sure, given a similar set of circumstances that I could do likewise. What about you? Anxiety and worry can flee when we are willing to put our trust fully in our Heavenly Father.

3. An angel of the LORD showed up (verse 7). (The last time that happened was Resurrection Sunday!) The Church prayed and God sent a deliverer! In sharing the story, Peter actually indicated that he had acted like he was in a dream, the angel only a “vision” (verse 9), which highlights the reality that angelic appearances were rare and unexpected. The angel’s appearance that night was a miracle! I believe in guardian angels because I’ve witnessed their work in my life many times. As a church, are we praying that God’s angels would protect His children world-wide? Are we trusting that they are fighting in the spiritual realms for our benefit?
4. Well-trained Roman guards slept through everything. Two of them were chained to Peter, yet they weren’t disturbed by the angel’s appearing or the bright light that filled the jail cell, or Peter’s getting up and getting dressed and walking out. The punishment for letting a prisoner escape was death (verse 19), yet both the guards at Peter’s side and the sentries at the jail gate slept. It was like they were put in a coma. That’s a miracle! God is able to do more than we can think or imagine. He is sovereign and the battle belongs to Him. Whatever the adversary, God is greater and stronger!

5. Peter's chains fell off (verse 7). Neither he nor the angel did a thing to release them. They simply fell away from his wrists. Another miracle! Do we believe that chains of bondage can fall off when we pray? Here's proof!
6. As Peter and the angel headed out of the jail, the gate opened for them all by itself (verse 10). They didn't have to hunt down a key or say magic words. The solid, iron gate separating them from the city flung open as they approached it and they walked right through. Miracle? I'd say so! What doors has God miraculously opened for you? What doors is He waiting to open as He waits for you to pray?
7. Peter knows just where to go after his release. After the angel departs he immediately heads to the house of Mary (mother of John Mark). He somehow knows that he will find a group of believers there praying for him. It's the middle of the night! They should have been in their individual homes, in bed, sleeping. But because of God's work that night in delivering him, Peter knew the Church was praying and he knew just where! That's a miracle. Jerusalem is a big city. The Church in Jerusalem was large. Many homes would have become places of worship by this time in its history. Still, of all the homes he could have identified, he correctly chooses Mary's.

God led him there to the believers who were actively praying for him! A miracle! Are we leaning on the miracle of God's Spirit who leads and guides us on our journey of faith as Peter did that night?

8. A servant girl named Rhoda greets him at the door. It's interesting that in simply hearing his voice, she's so overwhelmed with joy that she forgets to open the door! We chuckle at that, and at the praying believer's reaction ... "you're out of your mind", "it's his angel". As a woman, as a servant, she had no authority in the home and her testimony bore no weight, so to some degree it is not surprising that the people gathered didn't believe her. But what struck me as miraculous is the fact that a servant girl met Peter. It was a servant girl who had prompted Peter's first denial of Jesus, and so it seemed to me that there was a further thread of redemption offered here for Peter. Another miracle in this night of miracles! God's gift of redemption and His continual reminders of His love and forgiveness are available to us daily. Do we give thanks as we see those threads of redemption in our lives?

9. Though Peter remained outside Mary's house for quite some time pounding on the door, he was not re-captured by his guards. The soldiers would have awakened at some point and discovered that their prisoner was

gone. Luke's account tells us this happened "in the morning". Upon waking, there was no small commotion amongst the soldiers (read, *they were in a panic!*) and a thorough search did take place for Peter (verse 18), but it didn't take place until the morning. Did God keep the soldiers asleep all that time? We don't know, but what is clear is that Peter was protected. Another miracle! And, after being granted entrance to Mary's home and sharing all that had happened that night -- "how the Lord sent His angel and rescued me [Peter] from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating" (verse 11) -- he was able to escape to another place and avoid re-capture altogether (verses 17,19). The miracle of God's protection is with us each and every day. Are we cognizant of His hand upon us? He is with us always and moment by moment, day by day, He offers us the loving protection of His righteous hand.

Miracles happen when the Church prays! Big miracles! Little miracles! Are you convinced? Do you believe? They happened in abundance on this day (this night) in the life of the Apostle Peter! They happen each and every day, though I think we often miss them because we aren't looking for them. What miracle/s do you need today? What miracle/s does our world need? Do we need His healing

power? Do we need His miraculous intervention in these days? God is a miracle-working God, but He is waiting for us to ask for those miracles! His promise remains,

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

So let's pray! Let's pray for miracles! And let's pray believing that God will bring them!