

Four Amazing Answers to Prayer

Acts 12:1-24

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We love the answers to prayer that make sense. But tragedies sometimes happen in answer to prayer. Martyrdom's sometimes happen in answer to prayer. We are reading another missionary biography to our children called *Lords of the Earth*. And it is a remarkable testimony to the strange but marvelous ways in which God opens regions to the Gospel. Stan Dale and a fellow missionary had made some progress in reaching natives to Christ. There was much prayer that was being offered up. But the events that took place may have seemed like a mockery to their prayers, because their entire work was stopped short when cannibals shot them to death with arrows, dismembered, and ate them. The government did not allow any more missionaries to be sent into the region, and it looked like their deaths were senseless. Only a subsequent tragedy re-opened the area as a plane crashed and everyone aboard the plane except for a small child were killed. An old man befriended the child and protected him, and he was later picked up. And this re-established some ties. Only later did anyone discover the incredible impact that the missionaries had upon the cannibals as the missionaries pulled arrows out of their bodies, broke them, threw them to the ground and continued to preach the Gospel of peace to the people who were killing them. The warriors finally began to wonder if they were gods and began crying, "Please die, please die." It took 100 arrows apiece before the missionaries fell. But as a result of that martyrdom and the deaths on that plane, hundreds of thousands of Yali became believers. And the intricate twistings of providence make for a story as interesting as the book of Esther. I highly recommend that you read it.

But in this chapter we have four amazing answers to prayer, some of which may have been puzzling to those who offered up their prayers. There was the glorious martyrdom of James. Then there was the freeing of Peter from prison. Then the violent death of Herod. And finally the growth of God's Word and the advancement of Christ's cause. When we are undergoing persecution, we might wish that our prayers were always answered by the death of the persecutor just as happened in verses 20-23. And there is a place for imprecatory prayers that result in such judgments.

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But it is just as important to believe that God is in control in verses 1-3 as it is to believe that God is in control in the rest of the chapter.

I. **A Glorious Martyrdom (vv. 1-3)**

Verse 1 begins, **Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some of the church.** Things had gotten bad in politics. This was Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great. Agrippa's father, Aristobolus, had been murdered by Herod the Great. It didn't bother him to kill his own family. Well, this made his mother nervous and she sent Herod Agrippa to Rome to keep out of his murderous grandfather's way. In Rome, Agrippa became intimate friends with the wicked emperor apparent, Caligula. When Caligula came to the throne, he gave his friend Herod tetrarchies in Syria, Galilee and Perea and named him king. In AD 41, Caligula was murdered, and the emperor Claudius added Judea to Agrippa's territory. So he had obviously been doing some good networking in Rome. And he sought to do the same in Israel. Herod Agrippa was looking for ways to curry favor with the Jewish leaders and to solidify his control. Persecuting the church was one easy way to do so. And to this day we see Satan manipulating leader's ambitions to lead them to persecute the church or to oppose Biblical issues. According to Paul Marshall, author of *Their Blood Cries Out*, there is persecution of Christians in more than 60 countries worldwide. 200 million Christians face threats of harassment, abuse, torture and death because of their faith. And in this story we aren't told what the harassment is, but eventually Herod becomes more bold.

Verse 2 says, **Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.** This may have come as a shocker to some. It was now quite clear that no one was exempt from the possibility of martyrdom. Some might have thought that the apostles were invincible. Other people had been killed, but they came through unscathed even though they stayed in the most dangerous area to be – Jerusalem. But church history tells us that all the apostles except for John were martyred. Why? Why does God allow this? We know that He is capable of stopping such senseless killings. And yet God allows one of Christ's closest friends (from that inner circle of Peter, James and John) to die.

I can think of three reasons why this was not a tragedy, but a marvelous answer to prayer. The first reason is that anyone who dies prematurely gets to go to heaven sooner rather than later. That is not a curse, but a blessing. Precious in the eyes of the Lord are the death of His saints, says the Psalmist. When people died in Ethiopia, many people became believers when they would see the hope and comfort that Christians had in

heaven. We are trading the weariness of this life for the comforts and glories of heaven. Even when a baby dies, though it is our loss and our weeping, it is the baby's gain. The baby may have missed out on living, but has certainly not missed out on life more abundant.

The second reason this is not a tragedy is that martyrdom is an honor. We all have to die sometime, but to be able to die as a martyr is a great privilege. The early church considered martyrdom to be such an honor, that they often volunteered for death – something that I do not recommend. But it does show you that they realized something about martyrdom that we tend to ignore. Martyrs share a special place in God's heart and in His kingdom, have special rewards and are considered blessed.

But the third reason this was not a tragedy is that God has a purpose for every event He plans under heaven, and no Christian can die before it is his time to go. Last year I shared how my niece's premature death in a car accident resulted in the salvation of her friends that she had been praying for, the airing of the funeral over TV and the salvation of numerous others. God always brings good out of such events. We may not always know what the good may be, but God always brings forth good. An early Christian leader in the 100's AD by the name of Clemens Alexandrinus tells us that the man who had seized and accused James (perhaps a guard) was so overwhelmed with the powerful testimony of James before his accusers, that this guard fell on his knees in front of James and asked his forgiveness for having arrested him and accused him. He then made a clear public profession of faith and was beheaded along with James. Eusebius treats that story as true. And it may have been one of many purposes for James' death.

God has turned so many other tragedies into tools of growth that the early church coined the phrase that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. But even when it is simply a tragic early death, we can have confidence that God is in control. His silences are not silences of lack of care.

Some of you have heard my mother tell a story along these lines. My parents lost two babies in Ethiopia because there was no medical care that could save their lives. They lived too far away from civilization to get help for premature births. Well, those deaths had a profound impact upon one old lady. My mother would witness to the women and would visit them in their homes, and they would come to visit her. Well, my mom developed a burden for this one lady who was 101 years old. She had been taken as a child to be a bride in this strange new area, and from that point on never saw her mother again. She had outlived all twelve of her children. And when my mother would share the Gospel with her, she would always respond, "I was born a

Muslim and I will die a Muslim.” Well, this lady came to the wake of my mother’s second son who had died to bring my mother comfort. It was kind of a social custom that all the neighbors had to take turns sitting with you. And even though it was quite wearing to have so many people when you are grieving, it was also a great time to share the Gospel’s hope and comfort. And this lady said, “Your baby may not have died if you had stayed at home. At any rate, you would have had your mother with you.” Coming to a strange province without a mother had been a hardship for her, and she was obviously moved by the love my parents had to voluntarily come. She went on, “You’ve been telling me for a long time the story of why Jesus died and I now accept Him as my lord and savior.” Some time later, she was in the home again with some other guests and my mother served them bread and jam. When all the other guests had left, she was still squatting by the doorway. My mother took hold of both of her hands and went over the Gospel story again. The woman said, “You didn’t believe me when I said that I was accepting the Lord as Savior. Is this not the Muslim fast of Ramadan and did I not eat and drink in your house in front of all of these guests?” It dawned on my mother that this was as bold a testimony as this woman could possibly have made. It made it clear that she was renouncing Islam and embracing Christ. From that time on no one doubted her conversion. And it brought her persecution. Her own relatives eventually put her to death. When she died at the age of 105, the Muslims wouldn’t allow her to be buried in their cemetery, so she was buried on the station. But here was a story of God not allowing her to die for more than 100 years so that she could hear the story, and hear it from the lips of someone who trusted God with a death of a loved one but a few days old. God controlled the days of each life. I would say that my brother’s death was a marvelous death. It was not meaningless.

II. A Glorious Release from Prison (vv. 3-19)

But the story continues with a totally different answer to prayer. It starts off similar. Verse 3 says, **And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also.** Let me comment on that phrase, “he saw that it pleased the Jews.” Tyrants rarely ignore the feelings of the people. They are paranoid about the reactions of the people. But those feelings can be changed over time. Earlier it was only the leaders who hated Christianity. In Acts 2:47 it says that the Christians had **favor with all the people.** That’s a remarkable contrast. It’s now 44 AD, only 14 years later, and the same people are *pleased* with this public execution. What’s going on

here? What it shows to me is that the attitudes of the public can be rather easily and quickly manipulated. It's astonishing how quickly the public can adapt to any form of tyranny. Think of how quickly most Germans adapted to the increasing tyranny under Hitler. Think of *America*. If politicians 30 years ago were to have suddenly done the things that they are doing now, they could very well have been run out of office. In my lifetime I have seen the same people who were offended at abortion and homosexuality now think nothing at all about it. These same people are now somewhat embarrassed when I oppose those things. It's the frog in the kettle syndrome. If you put a frog into boiling water, it will hop out. If you put it into cool water and gradually raise the temperature, you can cook it alive. And even Christians often only seem to react when it is too late. In any case, it is not just tyrants who are evil. It is the people who allow the tyrants to exist.

Verse 3 goes on: **Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread.** That's a cool little side note. James had been executed just before the Passover feast, but it would have offended the Jews to do an execution during the feast. Since it was God's time for James to die, he was captured before the feast and executed. Since it was not God's time for Peter to die, He was captured during a time when he couldn't be executed. Now Peter could have been rescued earlier, but God kept in prison for a time to glorify His name.

Verse 4: **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.** Four squads means that Peter is being guarded by 16 soldiers who no doubt guarded him in six hour shifts around the clock. Verse 6 adds the detail that two of the guards are chained to Peter and other guards are outside. Herod wanted to make sure that this guy did not escape. It was maximum security. Why would Herod take such precautions? The answer is that Peter had gotten out of prison two times already. The first time was in chapter 4. The second time was in chapter 5. With two soldiers chained to Peter and guards outside, there is no way that anyone is going to get him free. Or so Herod thinks.

Yet verse 5 says, **Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.** The church must have set up teams of people so that every hour of the day would be covered with prayer. And that's not a bad idea when difficult times come. If I ever end up in jail, I hope you guys organize round the clock prayer for me. Luke's lesson is obvious – prayer is important. It can save lives. There is a cause and effect relationship between the prayers of the church and Peter's release.

But there is a special word for the prayers being offered here. The word “constant” is *hektanôs*, and it refers to intensity. The only other time it is used by Luke is in Luke 22:44 where it says, **And being in agony, He [that’s Jesus] prayed more earnestly [there’s the word]. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.** *Hectanôs* prayer is a prayer that has the kind of intensity that Christ’s prayer had in the garden, or at least it approaches to that. Any Christian can on occasion experience this kind prayer. But it’s rare. It’s only happened to me twice. The first time it happened to me, I was startled. The only thing I could liken it to is my guess at what giving birth is like. It was an almost uncontrollable, deep intercession that continued for a long time. And when I finally got release, I knew my prayer had been answered. But while any Christian can occasionally experience this, there are some people who are specially gifted in *hektanôs* prayer. . It is a very intense, Spirit-driven intercession. Wagner’s research has brought him to the conclusion that about 5% of the church has this gift. He defines it as “The special ability that God gives to certain members of the Body of Christ to pray for extended periods of time on a regular basis and see frequent and specific answers to their prayers, to a degree much greater than that which is expected of the average Christian.” These are people whom the Spirit seems to drive to prayer 2-5 hours a day. Some people call it travailing in prayer. But if there are any in the congregation who has experienced this, I would love to talk to you. That is a special gift that we would like to be aware of.

But any kind of prayer is important. Though God has given us other weapons of warfare, prayer is by far the most important one.

In verses 7-9 we get to another marvelous truth of Christianity, and that is, that angels are real. I love this story.

Acts 12:7 Now behold, an angel of 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.

Acts 12:8 Then the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and tie on your sandals”; and so he did. And he said to him, “Put on your garment and follow me.”

Acts 12:9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

Acts 12:10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, 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.

I love that phrase, “and did not know that what was done by the angel was real.” He probably thought that he was dreaming. It was just too strange. An angel has gotten me out of *that* prison!? And I think that this phrase gives a healthy corrective to two extremes on the subject of angels. The one extreme doubts that any angelic appearances today are real. Luke says, “It was real.” The other extreme says that we should expect miracles and angelic appearances every day. But if miracles were common place, they would cease being thought of as miracles. If talking with angels was commonplace, then Peter would not have had doubts about whether this was real. It obviously had not occurred frequently for Peter. When I say that the presence of angels is real, I don’t mean that they will commonly manifest themselves to you. They are always around. But angels aren’t always permitted to talk to people, to manifest themselves to people or to do miracles for people. I believe in miracles. I believe angels are real. But I think this passage gives balance.

Several of you have had at least one time in your lives when an angel has helped you. In fact, yesterday Tom Collen told me a story that happened to him when he was fifteen years old. He was part of a swim team that used to swim in the Missouri river for fun. Usually they would swim out half way, catch a log and ride it for a ways, and when rested, swim back to the same side of the shore. But one day they decided to swim all the way across the river. When they got to the center, the stream became fast and very cold and Tom was losing his strength and beginning to be concerned that he would not make it. The others made it to the other side more easily, but Tom was exhausted, felt like weak and limp, and secretly was thankful that he had even made it. Then everyone decided to swim back to the other side. Well, Tom was too weak by this time, and he knew that he couldn’t do it. He wanted to walk a mile to the bridge and go back over that way. But they pressured him and pressured him until he felt forced by peer pressure to swim back. And as he got into the water he knew he was going to his death. Isn’t it funny how the fear of peer approval can make us do the most foolish things? Well anyway, he felt he was going to his death. Out of nowhere, a boat appeared and a man asked them if they would like a ride to the other side. They said, “Sure.” And as soon as Tom’s feet got off the boat and onto the shore on the other side, he turned around, and the boat was gone. It was a straight wide open stretch of the river, and no one saw where it had disappeared to. He’s convinced that it had to have been an angel to protect him in his foolishness.

My wife experienced that in a car accident. A girl had quickly darted out into the street without looking, and my wife hit her with the car before

she could stop. It just happened like that. Before she could get out of the car and run to the girl that she had hit (the girl had darted out in front of her a paramedic was there taking care of the situation. But as soon as help was on the way, he disappeared into thin air. And we could tell other stories. But the church of America needs to rid itself of its false rationalism that does not believe in angels and wake up to the reality of spiritual beings. There are demons at work in your life to oppose you and there are angels at work in your life to help you. Hebrews 1:14 says of the good angels, that they are **ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation**. If that's their job description – if they have been sent to minister to you, you know that they are on their job. There are angels all around us this morning. We know it's true because 1 Corinthians 11 says that it is true.

And this angel appeared to be able to do things that we humans cannot. We aren't told that the angel put the guards to sleep, but they obviously were (or at least their eyes were blinded). We aren't told how the angels got the chains off his wrists, or how he got the doors to open. The likelihood is that Peter was being jailed in the Tower of Antonia which had a massive gate. Verse 10 says that it opened of its own accord. It may be that God just did a miracle, or that there were other invisible angels at work. But this angel or these angels were no doubt at work because of the prayers of the saints. Many passages of Scripture link our prayers to the ability of angels to work. The angels in Daniel 9 and 10 were at warfare because of Daniel's prayer. In Daniel 9:22-23 the angel says that he was sent because of the prayer. The angels in Revelation 8 are made to wait silently until the incense goes up with the prayers of the saints. It is only after prayer that they sound their trumpets and regiment after regiment of angels goes forth. That passage indicates that it is the prayers of the saints that cause judgments to flow and angels to serve. Somehow, prayer is connected to angelic ministry. Let's keep reading.

Acts 12:11 ¶ And 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.”

That word “expectation” means “eager expectation.” Just as people love to watch the news as voyeurs of crime, these people were eager to hear the next bit of news about what Herod was doing. Newspapers pander to this eager expectation as does gossip. This is what makes people come out to watch a dare devil try to do something stupid and impossible and are somewhat disappointed if he makes it and doesn't break any bones.

Verse 12.

Acts 12:12 ¶ 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. Apparently prayer meetings were well attended when apostles were in jail.

Acts 12:13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer.

Acts 12:14 When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of *her* gladness she did not open the gate [isn’t that an interesting phrase. Sometimes we are irrational in grief and irrational in joy. Instead of letting him in, she runs to tell the others the news. And it is so true to human nature. “... she did not open the gate”], but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.

Acts 12:15 But they said to her, “You are beside yourself!” Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, “It is his angel.”

There is another interesting reference to angels. “*His* angel” implies that they believed that angels were assigned to different people. The Reformation Study Bible says, “they thought it was his personal angelic guardian (Matt 18:10; Heb. 1:14). The popular conception was that such a guardian could assume the appearance of the human person protected.” Now we could chalk it up to ignorance, or we could assume that the author sees this as a perfectly normal supposition. In favor of the latter is the fact that this appears to have been a formal church prayer meeting, and that some leadership was probably there. Second, that this was the house of John Mark’s mother. John Mark was an apostle who was trained by Christ. But apart from the issue of whether angels can look like those they are guarding (which may or may not be true), let’s just take a rabbit trail and give you some Scriptures which appear to support the idea that there are guardian angels who watch over us.

Matthew 18:10 Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven *their angels* always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. Notice the possessive: “their angels.” Apparently there are angels assigned to our children. I find that encouraging.

Psalms 91:11-12 For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. [Nowadays, it’s lest you get killed in a car accident. I think William’s accident had to have had a guardian angel protecting him. The Psalm goes on...] You shall tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot.” Those were symbols of demons. The implication is that this triumph over the demonic is also by these angels. In fact, the whole Psalm is a Psalm

showing how the Lord delivers from all kinds of things – the arrow that flies by day and the pestilence that stalks at night. He mentions war, evil, plague, destruction. It is a tribute to guardian angels. This is not a superstition.

Luke 4:10 “For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you,’ [Is that not a function of guarding? Angels who have charge over you to keep you. That was Luke 4:10]

Hebrews 1:14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?

Psalms 34:7 The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, And delivers them.

Daniel 4:13 I saw in the visions of my head while on my bed, and there was a *watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven.* Some versions translate that as “a guard, a holy one.” And there is one other verse that speaks of a watcher.

But the question might come, “If there are angels who guard one individual, do the higher up angels who are in authority over them, guard larger groups of people?” And I believe the answer is, “Yes.”

Daniel 12:1 “At that time Michael shall stand up, *The great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people;* And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. The people needed a guardian because of the trouble.

Matthew 4:11 Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

1Timothy 5:21 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels. He’s charging Timothy in the presence of these angels who were witnesses.

1Corinthians 11:10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

And so, there are angels who are constantly involved in the activities of believers. They are ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those who are heirs of salvation. And I think that 1 Corinthians 11 is saying, “Don’t offend them.”

Back to Acts 12, let’s look at verse 16. **Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.** That’s an encouragement to me. Here are people who are praying for his release who can’t believe that their prayers have actually been answered. We sometimes turn first century saints into superheroes. But they had doubts just like we do.

Verse 17 is a great description of the underground church in China. **But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent,** [There are some

underground believers who are so careless with security that you would think they have a death wish. But usually, they are very cautious and quiet when they meet in a room. We can't sing or talk loudly. That is not fear. Peter was bold. That is wisdom. Going on.] **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."** God's army needs intelligence. They also need wisdom. Just in case the excited commotion of these Christians had been heard, the last phrase says, **And he departed and went to another place.** That is simply using wisdom and prudence. He may have worried that they had gotten reported.

The next two verses show that it's not just Christians who can get killed. When tyranny triumphs, anyone who cooperates with them or fails to bring in a quota can sometimes be punished. And my friends in other countries have seen this happen.

Acts 12:18 Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter.

Acts 12:19 But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that *they* should be put to death.

So this was the second marvelous answer to prayer. God gave Peter a miraculous escape from prison. There have been times when God has delivered one saint from the jaws of a Chinese prison while another one has had to serve for 18 years. We don't always know God's reasons for that. But what we can be sure of, is that God is on His throne, and He is the same yesterday, today and forever. There is no reason we cannot pray for God to bust people out of jails in Saudi Arabia, Eritrea or North Korea. It is a prayer worth praying.

III. A Glorious Destruction of the Enemy (vv. 19b-23)

The third prayer worth praying is that God's enemies would be destroyed. In verses 20-23 we see the glorious destruction of Herod. But this answer too is puzzling. Why did God not immediately answer the imprecatory prayer in Acts 2, but he does answer prayers in this chapter in a marvelous way? We don't know. But one thing we can be sure of, it's not just the Old Testament that speaks of God bringing historical judgments. God judged this king and he has judged many since that time. Let's begin reading at the last phrase of verse 19.

Acts 12:19b And he [that is, Herod] went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed *there*.

Acts 12:20 Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend [perhaps this was through bribery – aht frequently happens in non-Christian countries], they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's *country*. [It's amazing what compromises and ridiculous lies these people are able to make to get their country once again on a favored nation trading status. We could say a lot about that in terms of our modern politics, but I won't. Verse 21...]

Acts 12:21 So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.

Acts 12:22 And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"

Acts 12:23 Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.

This was a disgusting death. The historian, Josephus, who lived at that time, described this event as well. But anyway, the people addressed him as a god. God's judgment fell immediately and he began to have worms eating through his body. For five days he cried out in pain, his body smelling like a rotting carcass. What a just death for this egomaniacal tyrant. He may have had a gorgeous funeral as tyrants usually do, but his stinking death was simply a prelude to an eternity in hell.

And by the way, some people wonder how this could happen. But there are medical reports, both ancient and modern, of worms eating people while they are alive. Kathy Krutz sent me an article of a worm in Africa that they are trying to eradicate that eats its way through your muscles. And there are other kinds of worms. A similar death happened to Antiochus Epiphanes who tried to destroy the believers before the time of Christ. And a historian at that time says, "And so the ungodly man's body swarmed with worms, and while he was still living in anguish and pain, his flesh rotted away, and because of his stench the whole army felt revulsion at his decay." (2 Macc. 9:9 RSV). Now, is that not a marvelous, a glorious destruction of the enemy?

On his blog, Cavin Cawthon tells the story of

"...a nightclub opening on Main Street in a small town. Upon hearing the news, the only church in that town organized an all-night prayer meeting. The members asked God to burn down the club. Within a few minutes, lightning struck the club, and it burned to the ground. The club owner sued the church, which denied responsibility for the destruction of the club. □ □ After hearing both sides, the judge said, "It

seems that wherever the guilt may lie, the nightclub owner believes in prayer, while the church doesn't."

And that pastor's question was:

"Do we believe in prayer? If the same thing were to happen to this church, would we take responsibility for the answer received to a prayer like that? □"

There should be no shame in asking for judgment against tyrants. I know it is not popular in evangelical circles, but it is Biblical. Luke 18 tells us to never stop asking for such avenging in the parable of the importunate widow. Most people apply that parable only to ordinary prayer. But Christ was quite clear that she was asking for avenging. And Christ's conclusion is, "**... now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily.**

Of course, He won't bring such judgments unless we ask for them. There have been countries where the church has passively suffered under persecution for decades before they finally figured out that they had the right to pray the imprecatory psalms. If the church could pray the imprecatory psalms in Acts 2, why can't we? And as I have been instructing church leaders in other countries, the lights have been coming on.

Agestino Neto was the first dictator of Angola. This psychotic tyrant persecuted the church with a vengeance. One time he boasted, "Within 20 years there won't be a Bible or a church left in Angola. I will have eradicated Christianity." Now when you have someone who is as bold as that, he needs to be taken down just like Herod. When the church finally pulled out the imprecatory psalms and began taking on this tyrant before the court room of heaven, God took him out. Neto died on an operating table in Moscow under extremely suspicious circumstances and Christianity survived. Let me quote from Peter Hammond about some similar incidents that took place in Romania

* A communist official ordered a certain pastor to be arrested. The next day the official died of a heart attack. □

* Another communist party official ordered that all the Bibles in his district were to be collected and pulped, to be turned into toilet paper. This blasphemous project was in fact carried out. But the next day when the official was medically examined, he was informed that he had terminal cancer. He died shortly afterwards. □

* On another occasion, a communist official who had ordered a Baptist church to be demolished by bulldozers died in a car crash the

very next day. □ [Our God is a God who continues to answer prayers for judgment. Going on.]

* When an order was given to dismantle a place of worship on the mountainside in a forest, the workmen flatly refused to carry out the order. At gunpoint a group of conscripted gypsies also refused to touch the church. In desperation, the communist police forced prisoners at bayonet-point to dismantle the structure. Yet the officer in charge pleaded with the local Christians to pray for him, that God would not judge him. He emphasised that he had nothing against Christians and was only obeying strict orders. The building was in fact reconstructed later, and again used for worship.

Nicolae Ceaucescu the dictator who ordered much of the persecution in Romania was overthrown by his own army and executed on Christmas day, 1989, to joyous shouts of "the antiChrist is dead" in the streets. Many testified that this was in answer to the fervent prayers on the long suffering people of Romania.

Samora Machel was the first communist dictator of Mozambique. He was a cannibal who ate human flesh in demonic ceremonies. He closed churches, placed tens of thousands of Christians into concentration camps, and publically cursed God and challenged God to prove His existence of killing him. The church finally took up the challenge of praying imprecatory psalms, and his plane crashed in a violent thunderstorm after being struck by lightning. On the plane were found his plans for overthrowing Malawi. Our God continues to be a God who can bring judgments. We can praise God when He brings such judgments and we can praise Him when He withholds them.

IV. A Glorious Advancement of the Word (v. 24)

The fourth marvelous answer to prayer was the glorious advancement of the Word. Verse 24 ends this section with the simple words: **But the word of God grew and multiplied.** And of course, that should be our goal in all our prayers: to see God lifted up, the church expanded, and His Word triumphing. Many enemies of God have pronounced the end of the Bible, only to find themselves proven wrong. Voltaire vowed to destroy Christianity within 50 years. But following his death, the Geneva Bible Society purchased his house for printing Bibles. Voice of the Martyrs gave a similar story for Romania.

On Thursday I ran across an old poem that likens the Bible to a blacksmith's anvil. An anvil is a large piece of metal that they would beat out hot metal on with large hammers. The poem says,

The Anvil - God's Word.

Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith's door□
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime:
□ Then looking in, I saw upon the floor□
Old hammers, worn with beating years of time.

"How many anvils have you had," said I,
□ "To wear and batter all these hammers so?"□
"Just one," said he, and then, with twinkling eye,□
"The anvil wears the hammers out, you know."

And so, thought I, the anvil of God's word,□
For ages skeptic blows have beat upon;□
Yet though the noise of falling blows was heard,
□ The anvil is unharmed . . . the hammer's gone.

□ *Author unknown*

Is that not true? There have been many hammers like Herod Agrippa who have sought to stomp out Christianity and to destroy the Word. Yet Verse 24 will always continue to the result. **But the Word of God grew and multiplied.** That “but” contrasts the worms with the Word. All else will perish and stink except that which conforms to God’s Word. Let’s pray.