

# CROSSWALK

## **PRAY**

**July 15, 2018**

**Acts 12:1-19**

**Dr. Jody Cross**

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Acts 12:19, that's on page 920 in your pew Bible. This is our 3<sup>rd</sup> message in our new summer series, CROSSWALK.

As we previously journeyed through the Gospel of Mark, we learned Jesus IS the Son of God, and that He HAS purchased our redemption.

You've been tracking and say, "I'm there...I believe in Jesus and I know He loves me and has forgiven me". In this series we are asking, since we believe, NOW WHAT should we DO in RESPONSE?

In first message we spoke about God's people bowing before Him in awe and joyful **WORSHIP**. This morning we have sung about our wandering hearts and the redeeming grace of our Saviour. We have sung of our conquering King, our Living Hope whose name is lifted high in our worship.

Last week's message, **GO**, called us to respond by telling others about Jesus – this is our second response, **TELL**. This morning we have heard of telling hundreds of others about Jesus at our Family Carnival and we have been praying for that to be a powerful tool in God's hands. This morning we heard about Elya's exciting ministry in Brazil. She ended her email like this,

We would appreciate your prayers as we travel and reach these people, building relationships and growing in the Lord. Prayer is so vital - what can we do without His presence, guidance, and empowerment?

I love it! She gets it. We can't do ministry in Brazil or VBS in Orillia or Family Carnival without God's presence, guidance and power. People who get this know they need power and they need boldness. You can't do God's work in your own strength.

This brings us to our subject today. **PRAY**. How should we understand the importance of prayer? Listen to David Mathis' description,

Prayer is at the very heart of the Christian life. Not only is it obedience to God's command, but it is a vital means of our receiving his ongoing grace for our spiritual survival and thriving. And the joy of prayer — communing with God — is essential to what it means to be Christian. Without prayer, there is no true relationship with him, and no deep delight in who he is, but only glimpses from afar.<sup>1</sup>

Prayer is at the CENTER of what it means to be in relationship with God. It is our vital supply line of grace.

What does God's Word tell us about the PRIORITY AND PRACTICE of prayer in the life of the early church? Hear now God's Holy Word beginning at verse 1 of Acts 12.

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.<sup>2</sup> He killed James the brother of John with the sword,<sup>3</sup> and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.<sup>4</sup> And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.<sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

<sup>6</sup>Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.<sup>7</sup> And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands.<sup>8</sup> And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."<sup>9</sup> And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.<sup>10</sup> When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.<sup>11</sup> When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

<sup>12</sup>When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.<sup>13</sup> And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.<sup>14</sup> Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.<sup>15</sup> They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!"<sup>16</sup> But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.<sup>17</sup> But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

<sup>18</sup>Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.<sup>19</sup> And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

The story is pretty amazing! It is one of three prison escape stories in Acts. It was a very difficult time for the believers. Luke tells us that King Herod, also known as Agrippa I, grandson of Herod

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<sup>1</sup> David Mathis, *Desiring God, When Prayer Comes Out of the Closet*, accessed July 11, 2018.

the Great, with the desire to curry favour with the Jews and protect his own political position, began to violently target believers in Jesus. He begins to arrest some of the church leaders. He has James, the brother of John, killed. Seeing how persecuting the church pleased the Jews, he sought to arrest Peter as well. Herod used extreme security measures on Peter. He was kept in prison, with 16 imposing soldiers assigned to watch him, 4 at a time, 2 next to him and 2 to stand guard. They were taking no chances with him as he'd mysteriously and miraculously "escaped" once before (Acts 5:12).

For the church, this was a grave crisis with little hope; only 10 years after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, two of the Apostles, leaders of the church in Jerusalem had been taken out - James was dead, and Peter was as good as dead, for the next morning was execution day.

What did the believers do, petition the King, protest the injustice, bribe the guards, attempt a breakout? **THEY PRAYED.** It would have looked foolish and fanatical to Herod, but he soon learned the mighty power of the state was no match for the power of almighty God.

So where did the disciple learn to pray? **FROM JESUS'** example and Jesus' teaching. In the Gospel of Mark, we see how prayer marked the life of the Lord Jesus. He arose early to pray, spending time communing with His Heavenly Father (1:35). He went up on the mountain to pray (6:46). He taught that prayer and fasting is the church's spiritual weapon in a spiritual war that aids us in a spiritual task of seeing lost people saved and set free (9:29). Jesus taught that His house was to be a house of prayer for all nations (11:17). He taught his disciples to pray in faith and ask for what they needed (11:24). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed in earnest, bowed before the will of His Father (14:32). He taught the disciples to be on guard, to watch and pray (14:38).

Having understood the context of this passage, we are going to zero in on verse 5 of chapter 12 and discover the heartbeat of the early church in prayer. This morning, I want to give you 4 principles of prayer from the early church that we need to learn as God's praying people.

The first thing I want us to see is this:

Those who know Jesus,

## 1. Pray Expectantly

So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made **to God** by the church. (Acts 12:5 ESV)

In a humanly impossible situation, the church prayed **to God**.

They were not going through the motions of mindless words, or empty ritual. They weren't praying to a distant deity, the man upstairs, but to the God who hears and faithfully answers prayer. They were conscious of being in the very presence of the eternal, omnipotent God, pleading with Him for their brother in Christ.

I need to stop for a moment, because when you found out that this message was going to be on prayer, likely there were a number of reactions...

**guilt**...I am failing at my prayer life

**disinterest**...some people pray, I am more of a doer

**boredom** ...prayer is not where it's at, I've been to some pretty uninspiring prayer meetings, it's so passive, so seemingly disconnected from real life

**complacency**...I've heard this all before.

Some of you are actually **excited** to hear about prayer because you realize its importance.

Prayer is a divine summons and a royal invitation. Donald Whitney<sup>2</sup>

Sound routine? Boring? An audience with the God of the Universe? Wow.

Richard Longenecker writes,

Luke presents prayer as "the natural atmosphere of God's people and the normal context for divine activity".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, p. 68, Navpress, © 1991

Prayer is God's invitation for you to come before Him to have audience with Him, to praise Him and present your requests to Him, knowing He loves you and hears and answers prayer.

We can come to God through Jesus, the Son of God, the Lord of All, who has made a way for us to approach God. Jesus has shed His blood for us and through him we can come boldly in prayer.

Before the throne of God above, as the song says, we have a strong and perfect plea, the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, whose name is love and ever lives and pleads for us.

Prayer is the principal occupation of Jesus now. Jesus the risen, ascended, seated Lord and Saviour is ALWAYS PRAYING at the throne of grace for His people. Right now for you and me, in this gathering Jesus is praying for us.

... Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (Romans 8:34 ESV)

So God's people, come, in prayer, by the Spirit, through the Son to the Father, to His throne of grace and find God's help.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16 ESV)

Here we have this wonderful picture of heaven and of earth; see this with me, on earth the church gathered in this home prayer meeting, in the power of the Holy Spirit pleading before God while Peter in the prison cell, sleeping in the deep peace of God and in heaven, (Psalm 4:8)<sup>4</sup> and in heaven the Lord Jesus interceding for Peter on behalf of the church.

When you pray, are you conscious of being in God's very presence, before His face, through Jesus, or do envision your prayers bouncing off the ceiling or vanishing into thin air?

Church of God, pray, and pray expectantly TO GOD Your Father, by the Holy Spirit and through the Son who is praying for you! Here's His promise,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Longenecker, In Acts: IVP NT Commentary Series, William J. Larkin Jr., p. 183, © 1995

<sup>4</sup> In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. (Psalm 4:8 ESV)

...call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. (Psalm 50:15 ESV)

Here's the second thing; those who know Jesus,

## 2. Pray Earnestly

So Peter was kept in prison, but **earnest prayer** for him was made to God by the church. (Acts 12:5 ESV)

What kind of prayer was being offered up by the church? EARNEST.

To get an idea of the intensity of this word, picture a runner, straining with every ounce of energy, nerve and muscle focused on crossing that finish line first to break the tape. Except this is not exertion for a race but for the work and will of God.

A soul stretched out in the intensity of its earnestness toward God. R.A. Torrey<sup>5</sup>

**Illustration:** When I was 22, I spent the summer with power to Change (CCFC) doing evangelism and discipleship for 7 weeks in Guyana, South America. Besides the need to raise my financial support for this mission trip (which the Lord faithfully did), I needed to raise up a prayer team (like Elya has asked for). I asked a lady in my church in Ottawa, Mary Moffatt, to pray for me daily while I was away. Mary was a woman you'd want to pray for you. She was a wee woman in her early 80's but had the faith of a GIANT. You wanted HER on YOUR prayer team! And she faithfully prayed for me...and though I don't have time to go into details, the Lord heard her prayers and protected my life in a couple of pretty dangerous situations while I was in Guyana. He heard Mary's prayers. Well, I had a conversation with Mary some time later, 2 years later, and she said to me, "*You know I still pray for you every day*". I was stunned, humbled, honoured, so grateful that this praying saint would come alongside this young pastor and intercede for me on a daily basis. She was earnest in her prayers on my behalf.

Alfred Lord Tennyson penned these words,

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<sup>5</sup> R.A. Torrey, *The Power of Prayer and The Prayer of Power*, p. 78, Zondervan, © 1924.

More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice rise like a fountain for me night and day.

I am reminded of God's grace in my life that has kept and led me through the faithful prayers of God's fervent prayer warriors who have stood beside me their voices rising like fountains before the throne of grace on my behalf.

Wouldn't you want this kind of people praying for you in your mission trip, or in your time of need, or in face of a crisis? I am deeply grateful that there are earnest prayer warriors in this church who faithfully carry the torch of prayer, and I pray God raises up MANY MORE to join their ranks, those who are unceasing, fervent, at "full-stretch".

This by the way is the same word used of Jesus, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22:44,

And being in agony he prayed more **earnestly**; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44 ESV)

The early church is praying like Jesus, agonizing in prayer, at full intensity, crying out to God, wrestling in prayer for Peter. John MacArthur writes,

The church poured the maximum effort they were capable of into their prayers for Peter.<sup>6</sup>

Peter was RESTING in God, while the church on his behalf was WRESTLING in prayer with God. They were fighting against the enemy, taking up the weapon of prayer, fighting against spiritual forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:12), and prevailing!

What do WE know of this kind of earnest prayer, this intensity of pleading with God? Saints of old seemed to have it. May God give us this heart and burden to pray like this for others, for God's purposes in the world. This is not something we work up in our own strength, yell a lot, raise our voices and try to summon God - this is work of the Holy Spirit.

If we ask, He will give us this burden and intensity. The praying church is empowered by the Holy

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<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, MacArthur NT Commentary: Acts. Accordance Software, Acts 12.

Spirit to be EARNEST IN PRAYER.

The third thing is those who know Jesus,

### 3. Pray in Unity

So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God **by the church**. (Acts 12:5 ESV)

Prayer is to be a part of our personal walk with God, you in your prayer time, in the “prayer closet”, you alone before God or when you are on the go and praying throughout the day as you praise Him, and seek Him for your needs. Amen! Good! Keep growing that! But there’s more. We take that sense of dependence with us BEYOND the prayer closet and bring it into the community of believers.

A quick survey of prayer in the book of Acts shows the church in community, praying together. Together they were devoted to prayer and the Word (1:14, 6:4), praying for guidance (1:21), praying together daily (2:42), praying for boldness in persecution (4:31), praying for miracles, sending out missionaries with prayer and fasting (13:3, 14:23), praying in their suffering (16:25), praying in their grief (21:5).

They prayed together regularly, and they prayed in unity for Peter. Prayer is an expression of our unity and it also strengthens our unity.

Is corporate prayer a regular part of your life? Are you part of a prayer group in this church? There is power in personal prayer, but there is great power in united, concerted prayer.

Here’s what faith-filled believers know about prayer,

Prayer is the key that unlocks all the storehouses of God's infinite grace and power.<sup>7</sup>

As a church body, what do we believe about prayer? First, prayer is one of our Core Values,

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<sup>7 7</sup> R.A. Torrey, *The Power of Prayer and The Prayer of Power*, p. 17, Zondervan, © 1924.

We deeply believe that prayer connects us to God's purpose, peace and power for life and ministry.

Together we want to be connected to God's purposes, peace and power. Amen?

Second, it reminds us, as we pray, elders, prayer groups, men's groups, women's groups, worship team, VBS leaders, youth leaders, that we're entirely dependent on our God. By prioritizing prayer TOGETHER, we admit our human failing and find our unfailing help in God.

In corporate prayer, we are reminded we need every member of the body and we are on level ground; male and female, young and old, rich and poor, new believer and seasoned saint. There are no celebrities, just humble faith-filled people, claiming the promises of God together and trusting God to hear and act in wisdom, love and power.

This diverse group of God's faith-filled, praying believers, possessed more power than Herod's fortified prison and 16 guards.

A church's life and ministry doesn't exist merely at the visible level of events, and meetings. Its greatest business, takes place in unseen places, in the prayer groups, in the prayer gathering in Pastor Paul's before the Sunday service, in the Upper Room where the M30 prayer team gathers to pray during the service.

The prayer that gets results is EXPECTANT, EARNEST AND UNITED. Prayer get results because God loves His children and He is a prayer answering God.

Here's the final thing; Those who know Jesus,

#### **4. Pray Boldly**

So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer **for him** was made to God by the church. (Acts 12:5 ESV)

The gathered church was praying specifically for Peter. We don't know exactly what they were praying for; maybe for God's peace to flood his heart on the eve of his execution, maybe for Herod's change of mind or his salvation, or maybe they were praying big, audacious, jumbo faith

filled prayers of deliverance. They believed in the God of the Exodus who rescued his oppressed people. They believed in God who delivered Daniel's 3 friends from the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:28). They believed in the Son of God who was raised from the dead and did miracles before their eyes including sending angels to open prison doors.

This chapter opens with the apparent inability of God's people to do anything to rescue Peter but then shows an amazing faith among seemingly helpless Christians revealing the source of their strength and confidence, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, be bold in your prayers and expectant, for is not God 'ABLE TO DO IMMEASURABLY MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE'? (Eph. 3:20). Church, we need to be reminded that we HAVE GREAT POWER IN PRAYER. Don't let the devil try to convince you otherwise.

No matter how difficult or dark life might appear, God and his angels are present and ministering, and he can deliver us anytime he sees fit! So, keep praying big, bold prayers, and look for God's answer to come.

### **What Was The Result?**

What was the result of their bold prayers? They experienced the power of God. As if to test the church's faith to the limit and emphasize his power over his enemies, the Lord waited to act until the night before Peter's execution to rescue him. And what a rescue it was! Herod's plan was destroyed by the direct intervention of God in response to the prayers of the church and Peter was rescued (cheer here!).

We've read the story, Peter is sleeping...God sends an angel to wake Peter up, releases his chains, gives him step by steps instructions, keep his guards asleep, lead him out of the prison, through the gate into the city, into street and to the door of the house where the middle of the night prayer meeting was still going on. Peter's escape was a miracle at every point. They were amazed as Peter told them the entire story of God's deliverance and God was praised for the answer to their prayers!

The same powerful God who delivered Israel from Egypt and Daniel's three friends from the mouth of the lion, rescued Peter from Herod's plans.

I need to stop for a moment and ask the obvious question ... WHY WAS JAMES KILLED BUT PETER SPARED? Was God sleeping when James' life was in jeopardy? Did God love Peter more than James. NO AND NO.

I think two things need to be mentioned here. First, we need to understand this account of prayer in light of the context. Look with me at verse 24,

But the word of God increased and multiplied. (Acts 12:24 ESV)

Any rescue is a sign of the triumphant advance of God's mission and evidence that nothing can stop God's wise and gracious purposes. In other words, there is a bigger picture. God cares deeply about individuals, but there's an even greater work going on. It's about the spread of the Gospel to the whole world for God's glory. When the church prays, the cause of God will go forward. God's work goes on according to His plan, regardless of the difficulties.

Here's the 2<sup>nd</sup> thing. God's sovereign purposes prevail both in life and in death. His sovereignty is seen in deliverance AND in death.

David Peterson writes,

Without explanation, one apostle is executed, but another is rescued, teaching the church to live with the mystery of God's providence and to rely afresh in each situation on the mercy and continuing care of God.<sup>8</sup>

We need to hear this. We are a needy people. We live with the mystery of God's providence and rely afresh on God and His care in each situation we face. We pray earnestly, like the early church, and trust our faithful God and His will.

Christianity is a supernatural faith, and we are called to live it with God's supernatural power through Jesus Christ. Prayer has AS MUCH power TODAY as it did in Acts 12. God doesn't

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<sup>8</sup> © 2009 David G. Peterson, Acts of the Apostles, Pillar Commentary Series, p. 362. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids,

change. He wants his people to rest in the assurance of his unchanging, constant power. God's work will be done in His way with His power and we seek Him.

So, we pray personally, and we pray corporately. We pray for our walk, our marriages, and children and ministry fruitfulness, for the sick and sorrowful, for eternal impact in Orillia, and for the lost to be saved.

## How Shall We Respond?

If we are honest we'd have to admit that we don't live in a praying age. We live in a self-sufficient, self-reliant age and we are often spiritual impoverished. R.A Torrey said back in 1924. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Matthew Henry said it as well, "We live in a cold, prayerless generation." The same can be said today in 2018. Where is the burden for prayer in the North American church?

There is a real sense of spiritual powerlessness in the lives of many believers. Why is there so little fruit and passion for the things of God? Isn't it the neglect of prayer?

You do not have, because you do not ask. (James 4:2 ESV)

*Pray – Lord, I repent of my prayerlessness. Make me a person of prayer!*

Become that person. Make time and make a place for it. Make it part of your life – your waking, your sleeping, your working, your public worship.

*Pray – Lord, help me to intercede for others and the work of the Gospel.*

Join together with others in the spiritual battle and pray for the work of the Gospel around the world, for the persecuted church, for the ministry of FBC, for its leaders and people, for salvation of the lost in Orillia and in our nation.

Let's not just be a church that prays, let's be a PRAYING CHURCH. We will see the power of God in our midst and He will be glorified. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

