

Acts Series Part 33

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Please turn with me to the book of Acts and chapter 12 on page 1106 of our Bibles.

Now, as I was commenting earlier this morning, we were considering this chapter in its entirety and describing the battle scene that is presented and considering different aspects of this battle that was raging and is described for us in the chapter.

And as we did so, we were considering different aspects of the battle, the opposing camps and the power that they wielded, the weapons that they employed. And in reference particularly to the weapons that were employed, we noticed that as far as the church was concerned, they were, as presented here in this chapter, seemingly a one-trick pony.

They had one weapon, and that weapon was prayer. This was the one thing that they could employ as they sought to battle with their enemies, as they thought, to defend themselves against the attacks of Herod, who we described not really as the main man in the opposing or enemy camp, but a pawn of the prince, of the prince of this world.

And I noticed or commented this morning that we would leave to one side any further discussion on that matter of prayer in order to do so this evening. And that is what we will do now.

[1 : 48] One weapon, but what a weapon that they had at their disposal. What I want to do is, together, consider what we can learn from the prayer meeting at Mary's house.

There in Acts chapter 12, we're told in verse 5 that Peter was imprisoned. He was kept in prison. And then we're told, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

And then subsequently in the chapter, when Peter is miraculously released from captivity, he makes his way to Mary's house.

And there in verse 12, we read, So we're told that on his arrest, the church earnestly prayed to God for Peter.

And that reference in verse 5, no doubt, refers not just to those gathered in the home of Mary, no doubt across Jerusalem. In many homes, Christian people, disciples of Jesus Christ, were equally at prayer on behalf of and interceding for Peter.

[3 : 10] But we are given particular insight into this one home, the home of Mary. And it is this prayer meeting at Mary's house. It's a very homely scene.

This home of this disciple called Mary, the mother of John Mark, in her home, in her house, Christians gathered to pray.

And Peter, on his release, interrupts, as it were, this prayer meeting at her home. And we want to consider this prayer meeting, and certain aspects of it that it would instruct us in this matter of prayer.

The first thing I want to just notice and highlight are the circumstances of the prayer meeting at Mary's house. What were the circumstances? Now again, if you were here this morning, you have an advantage in that we were discussing in some detail the circumstances, what was going on. But just to very, very briefly comment, the circumstances were very grave and desperate circumstances. James, we are told, had been put to death with the sword.

[4 : 20] Peter was on death row, imprisoned, awaiting the show trial and subsequent execution. Other Christians had been imprisoned and mistreated and tortured.

And what could they do in the face of this attack? What could they do very specifically for Peter, who finds himself in chains, surrounded by Roman soldiers?

What could they do to secure his release? What were their options? What could the Christians have done? Peter's in prison, and they gather around, and they say, Well, what do we do? Could they have hired some fancy lawyer who maybe would have been able to secure his release?

Could they have organized a petition and got all the Christians to sign this petition and bring it solemnly to the palace? Could they have organized a protest march and head through the main seats of Jerusalem?

Could they maybe somewhat more adventurously organize some SAS-style rescue mission to secure Peter's release?

[5 : 26] Well, I'm sure you'll agree that as you've heard every possible option described, none of them were reasonable. None of them would have secured their objective.

None of these things were possible, and even if they had been foolish enough to attempt them, they would have served no purpose. They would have been wasting their time. There was nothing they could do to secure the release of Peter except praying.

Now, I'm not suggesting that that is always the case. There may be occasions when Christians find themselves opposed and persecuted, and there are things that can be done.

But certainly on this occasion, it seems reasonable to conclude that the only option they had, the circumstances were so desperate, all they could do was pray.

And this is what they do. Of course, they don't do this only because it was the only option open to them. They do so because they were persuaded that this was the God-appointed means for them to make known to God their concerns and their desires and their pleas.

[6 : 39] And so they do so not as a last resort. They do so willingly and gladly because that is what Christians do. In desperate circumstances, they pray to their God.

And as we think of our own circumstances, no doubt very different to the circumstances of the believers there in Jerusalem, but as we think of our own difficulties and troubles and trials, and I don't know what you're going through in your life.

I don't know what trials you are facing, what troubles you have, what difficulty and pain and suffering that is maybe your portion and your lot, and maybe matters that you really don't know what to do.

Maybe you've attempted to do many things, and nothing seems to work. Nothing seems to bring an answer to your circumstances and to your difficulty. Well, the simple and yet important lesson that we have from this prayer meeting at Mary's house is that in desperate circumstances, in times of trouble and trial and temptation and difficulty, we are to turn to God in prayer.

We are to seek His face. We are to seek His help. We are to cry out to Him that He would help us and answer us. Indeed, might it not be the case that God in His grace places us, yes, even places us in difficult and painful places, that it would spur us to recognize that we are entirely dependent upon Him.

[8 : 21] When all goes well, when seemingly we can, in our own strength and making use of our own resources, we can solve our own problems, is that not a time when we are so prone to fall away from God, to place our trust in our own strength and resources?

And yet, when the going gets very tough, when the circumstances are very desperate, God graciously permits that, that it would be a spur to us and a help to us, that we would turn to Him, as He is the only one who can possibly help us.

Others may wish to help us. Others may be very well-meaning, our Christian family and friends, and have a real desire and a genuine desire to help, but are unable to do so.

And so we turn to the one who is able. We turn with the believers. They are gathered at the prayer meeting at Mary's house. We turn to God.

But the church was earnestly praying to God for Him, for Peter. So whatever your particular crisis, maybe it's a family crisis, maybe a loved one who is seriously ill, maybe a loved one who is far, far away from God and is reaping the very painful harvest of being so far away from God, and you are particularly burdened for such.

[9 : 55] Maybe there's problems at work, maybe personal problems that you have, maybe sometimes problems of your own making, but that seem to be without solution.

Well, you need to pray. Anyway, this morning, as we were considering the power of the respective camps in the battle, and we commented how Herod had friends in high places, how the emperor Claudius was a childhood friend.

And we said, what of Peter and James? What friends in high places did they have? Seemingly, they were without such friends. But then we remember that far from not having such a friend, they could sing in the dark gall in which they were.

Indeed, James, as he awaited his execution, they could sing, what a friend we have in Jesus. And as I was reminded of that praise song, of that hymn, I'm reminded of the words that follow, particularly appropriate to this matter of bringing to God our needs and our concerns and our troubles.

What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. Oh, what peace we often forfeit.

[11 : 09] Oh, what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer. Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness.

Take it to the Lord in prayer. Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?

Precious Savior, still our refuge. Take it to the Lord in prayer. To thy friends, despise, forsake thee.

Take it to the Lord in prayer. In his arms he'll take and shield thee. Thou wilt find a solace there. So the circumstances of this prayer meeting at Mary's house, they were desperate circumstances.

And in such circumstances, God's people turned to God in prayer. But also let's notice who is present at this prayer meeting at Mary's house.

[12 : 08] Who is gathered there? Well, there in verse 12, we're told of who are present. When this had dawned on him, that is on Peter, that he had been released, he had been, as it were, in a daze, and he's able to recognize that this is the real world.

He really is free. He went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Many believers, many disciples, ordinary Christians, were gathered at Mary's house.

And it would seem, though we can't state this categorically, it would seem that the leadership of the church was actually absent from that gathering. I was commenting on that in the morning.

We notice in verse 17 that Peter, when he is motioning to the gathered assembly to be quiet, they're celebrating his release from captivity.

And before he leaves the gathering, seemingly to go into hiding, he says this to those gathered in Mary's house. At the end of verse 17, tell James and the brothers about this.

[13 : 14] Now, the James that is referred to here is James the brother of Jesus, who became very much the leader of the church in Jerusalem. So he was, as it were, the main man in terms of the leadership there in Jerusalem.

And the brothers that are referred to, very possibly, though it could refer to Christians generally, it's very possible a reference to the other leaders, James and the leadership group, as it were.

They're not present at this prayer meeting. It is the ordinary Christians. Mary's there, Rhoda's there, and no doubt many others. Ordinary Christians, gathering in the home of an ordinary Christian, praying to their God.

Prayer is for everybody. Prayer is for every Christian. The leader, the elder, the minister, the apostle, don't have some special privilege or some special access to God.

We are all priests of the Most High, and we can all, as Christians, pray in the name of our great high priest. The prayer of the servant girl, Rhoda, mentioned here in the account.

[14 : 23] Her prayer reaches the throne of grace as quickly as the prayer of James, the brother of Jesus. James can't, as it were, claim special privileges.

Jesus is my brother. No, Rhoda, the servant girl, she too can pray. She too can cry out to God and is heard as quickly and with equal concern as any of the leaders of the church.

Who are present at this prayer meeting? Ordinary Christians, the likes of you and me. On this occasion, it was the house of Mary. Could have been the house of Peter or John or Martha or Timothy or you name it.

Put any name there that you wish. Ordinary Christians gather praying to their God. Mary's house, a house of prayer.

What about your house? Is your house a house of prayer? Could it become a house of prayer if today it is not a house of prayer? Could your house be like Mary's house, a house where Christians gather and pray to their God?

[15 : 35] What more can we say concerning this prayer meeting at Mary's house? Well, we can notice the plea that was being made, the prayer that was being made to God there by the Christians at Mary's house.

We're told in verse 5, very specifically, that the church was praying for Peter. It's very explicit. Peter was in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him, for Peter.

It's very clear. Now, that's not to say that that is all they were praying for, but it's certainly clear that this was at the heart of their concerns, and this was the matter that was gathering them to pray.

They were praying for Peter. But I wonder, and here there is a measure of speculation, but I think reasonable speculation. I wonder when James and the others were arrested there at the beginning of the chapter, some who belonged to the church were arrested.

Among them was James. When they were arrested, and before James was executed, we don't know how long there was between his arrest and his execution, but even allowing for Herod being able to manipulate the judicial process, presumably some time had to pass between the arrest and the execution.

[16:48] And during that time, were the Christians praying for James? Surely they were. Surely they had gathered as they did for Peter. Surely they were praying for James and for the other believers.

And so they pray for James, and they pray for the ones who are unnamed. They pray for Peter. What were they asking for? Again, we maybe think, well, that's obvious.

They would have been praying for their release, and I'm sure they were praying for their release. But I wonder if they went beyond simply praying for the release of James, the release of Peter, the release of the others.

Might they have been praying also that God would grant to James and to Peter and to the others grace to endure this trial? That if it be not the Lord's will to free them, that they would be granted that grace to endure and to remain faithful to God even in the midst of violence and persecution. Who are they praying for? They're praying for their friends. They're praying for James. They're praying for Peter. They're praying for the others. They're praying for the immediate needs that these men and women were facing. And that, too, is something that we must do as believers as part of this fellowship, that we would pray for one another, that we would gather and that we would discover what the various needs we have are and that we would pray for one another.

[18:11] And certainly I would hope that as the neighborhood fellowships develop over these weeks and months, that they would be occasions and opportunities for Christians to discover what the needs of others are, that we would pray one for another as these believers prayed for their friends in their troubles and trials.

And these Christians praying at Mary's house, how do they respond to what we might call unanswered prayer? And maybe that's not the best way to describe it, but for the purposes of this evening, let's call it unanswered prayer.

And what I mean by that is, what do we make of James? You see, we read this chapter and there's this heroic rescue of Peter and it's all very exciting and we can be, as it were, taken along in a wave of triumphalism.

How wonderful it is that Peter is rescued from this jail. But what about poor James? James is dead. James has been beheaded. What about James? And what did the Christians think when they discovered that James is dead?

These Christians, they've been praying for his release and now they discover he's dead. How do they respond to that? When they discover that he's dead, I am sure they were distraught.

[19:31] They were heartbroken. They were, I am sure, confused. Why has God allowed this? Maybe some, maybe many, were angry with God. How could God allow this faithful, this good man to die such a horrible death?

Many emotions and maybe all of these emotions, a cocktail of all of these emotions was their experience. But how do they respond to this strange providence?

How do they respond to this tragic death? How do they respond to God saying no to this particular plea for the deliverance and liberty of James?

How do they respond? Well, they carry on praying. They carry on praying. You see, James is dead, but they carry on praying for Peter. The death of James doesn't bring them to the point of saying, well, there's no point in praying.

It's a waste of time. God's not interested. No, they're confused. They don't understand. They don't have all the answers, but they carry on praying. They carry on praying. They don't give up.

[20:39] Neither do they piously leave the fate of Peter in God's hands and do nothing. You know, that could have been a pious way of doing it. Well, it's all in God's hands. God is sovereign.

God will decide. And if Peter is to be released, well, he'll be released. And if he's to die, well, he'll die. There's nothing we can do. No, they pray. They pray earnestly. They pray fervently that Peter would be released.

It's true. We're not told explicitly that this is what they're asking for, but it seems entirely reasonable that this is at the heart of their prayers, that Peter would be released. They carry on praying, even though they are, of course, conscious and recognized that ultimately God will determine if that is indeed what He determines to do.

So with us, we can be disappointed in prayer. We can be confused by the silence of God or by God saying no to what to us seem entirely reasonable requests.

And we can be confused, and we can be angry, and we can be discouraged. But let's learn from those Christians who gathered in Mary's house and let us carry on praying.

[21 : 58] But we notice also, as we draw things to a conclusion, just note a couple of final things about this prayer meeting at Mary's house. Notice the manner in which they prayed at Mary's house.

We're told in verse 5, and of course this refers not only to those who gathered at Mary's house, it refers to all the Christians, maybe gathered in many homes, but we're told there that the church was earnestly praying to God for Peter.

So there's an adjective there. There's one particular word to describe the manner in which they prayed. They were praying earnestly to God. Now what can we say of this?

What does this suggest? What does this mean? To say that they were praying earnestly. Perhaps without great commentary, it's worth just noticing, and I think it is instructive, to notice that this same word is spoken of to describe Jesus as He prayed on a very particular occasion.

In Luke chapter 22 and in verse 44, we find Jesus on the Mount of Olives as He is facing imminent death.

[23 : 09] And there we read, and being in anguish, Jesus being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

This is the same word that describes how Jesus prayed to His Father in such desperate circumstances. This same word is used of the Christians in Jerusalem. They prayed earnestly. And the word would seem to suggest at least two complementary ideas. First of all, the idea of fervency. They were praying with passion.

They were praying with intensity. Yet even as we say that, we take a step back and simply pose the question, is it the case that God pays more attention to fervent prayer?

Is it the case that passionate prayer that is visible even in the manner in which we pray, is that somehow more effective? Is God more moved by that? Is it the case that we whip up a fervency in order to make our prayers more spiritual and so twist God's arm?

[24 : 16] What do we make of this fervency? that is described here? I think as one has, I think, wisely explained it, this fervency is expressive of the church's concern for Peter rather than a feeling that if God is to answer prayer, He must be pressed and persuaded by spectacular feats of devotion.

See, the question isn't here that the more fervent, the more passionate, more God will listen. Why is it fervent? It's fervent because they love Peter. It's fervent because they want to see him again. It's fervent because they don't want him to be beheaded.

They love him so. They want him back in their midst. That's why it's fervent. Not because somehow the more fervent, well, God will pay attention and the less fervency, and the less fervency, well, he's not going to show much interest.

They pray fervently because they love Peter fervently. Indeed, just in the passing, and a very important thing to say in the passing, a good measure of the love that you have for somebody is how often you pray for them.

We know that the Christians in Jerusalem love Peter for this simple reason that they prayed earnestly for him. And you say that you love your family.

[25 : 38] You say that you love your children. You say that you love your wife and your husband, and I don't for a moment question the sincerity of that claim. But the measure of your love, a very helpful measure of your love, if you're a Christian, will be if you pray for them.

If you pray earnestly for them, then you can be sure that yours is a fervent, earnest love. But this word that they prayed earnestly for Peter, it speaks of fervency, it speaks of the love that they have

for Peter, but it also carries the idea of unremitting, persevering prayer, of prayer that doesn't give up easily.

And this is very much a feature of the prayer that is being offered or that is being made. at Mary's house. We don't know definitively how long Peter was in jail before his miraculous release.

We're told that he was released on the eve of the end of the festival that would have allowed for him to be tried and executed. We're told that there in the passage.

And if he had been arrested at the beginning of the festival, which is possible, then he had possibly been in prison for several days. Anything from three or four days to a week seems a reasonable suggestion as to how long he had been in prison.

[27 : 02] And certainly, everything suggests that throughout this time, the believers had been gathered praying for Peter. They prayed in an unremitting and in a persevering way.

And so, the question that comes to us and the challenge that comes to us is, how do we pray? Do we pray in this way? Do we make earnest prayer on behalf of those whom we love?

Do we pray unremittingly until we hear the answer that God would give to us? Do we persevere in prayer? Maybe if you are honest with yourself this evening, you can recognize that there are matters, there are people that you used to pray for and you have given up.

You've stopped praying for them. And might this be the opportunity for you to recognize that and to take as your determined intention that you will once again, earnestly, unremittingly, pray for that friend who as yet does not know Jesus, for that loved one who has drifted far away from the things of God.

Pray once again for them. And if you are praying, continue to pray. Pray earnestly, pray unremittingly for such. But then finally, let's notice the answer that they receive to their prayers.

[28 : 27] These believers praying in Mary's house, what answer do they receive? Well, at one level, the answer they receive or how we would deal with that question is a function of what we think they had actually asked for.

If they had asked that God would give grace to Peter, if this was part of what they prayed, that while he was in prison and indeed if he were to ultimately face death, that God would grant him grace to face this trial, if indeed that is what they were praying for him or part of what they were praying and it seems reasonable, well, might it not be that we have an answer to that?

There in verse 6, the night before Herod was to bring him to trial. Peter was sleeping between two soldiers. Here he is. In the dawn of a new day, he was to be executed and he's sleeping soundly even as the executioner's sword is being sharpened.

Peter is sleeping soundly, sleeping like a baby. Why was that possible? Was it not, or is it not reasonable to answer that it was possible because God's people were praying for him, that he would be given grace to confront this trial?

One of the early church fathers, Chrysostom, who was the Archbishop of Constantinople in the third century, he comments interestingly on how Paul and Peter spend their time on death row.

[29 : 56] And I quote what he says, It is beautiful that Paul sang hymns whilst here Peter sleeps. Death is just around the corner and one is singing hymns and the other is sleeping like a baby because their trust is in God and God's people are praying for them.

And is it not the case that often the most powerful answers to prayer are not the miraculous deliverances, not the spectacular healings that God in His grace can of course grant us, but is it not often the case that the most powerful answer to prayer is when that grace is given to endure and carry on trusting in the midst of pain and in the midst of suffering that is not removed, that is not relieved.

Of course, on this occasion, they prayed for Peter's release, I am sure, and God did choose to grant them their plea, and Peter was, of course, released.

And one final encouraging aspect of this answer that the Christians receive to their plea is this, that what we have before us is an example, or we have described for us very ordinary Christians, very ordinary, infallible Christians like ourselves.

And why do I say that? Because though they are praying for His release, they didn't really expect their prayer to be answered. The whole report that we have there concerning Rhoda and how Peter arrives at the house, and Rhoda goes and hears his voice and runs back without opening the door and tells them it's Peter, and she's told that she's lost her mind, that she's crazy, and she insists that it is Peter, and they say, oh, it must be his angel, and we don't have time to go into all the ins and outs of this.

[31 : 57] But what is abundantly clear is that the Christians gathered there don't expect Peter to be released. They're praying for him to be released, but they don't actually think he will be released. James has met the executioner's sword, and no doubt Peter will also.

Yes, they're praying for him. Yes, they're praying he would be released, but they don't really expect it to happen. You see, they're ordinary. They're like you and me. And isn't this encouraging? These Christians in Jerusalem and this nascent church, and we think, well, there's the model.

We would like to be like them, but they were like us. They also lacked faith. They didn't have a great expectation. They also doubted, as you doubt and as I doubt.

They're ordinary people, just like you and me. And is that not encouraging? God is good, just as he doesn't measure the fervency of your prayer before deciding if he will answer your prayer.

So he doesn't weigh your faith before responding. He delights to hear and to answer the tentative and timorous prayers of his people, of the likes of you and me, of the likes of those gathered at Mary's house, praying for Peter, and yet not expecting him to appear.

[33 : 13] Well, when we are instructed, when we are challenged with regard to prayer, I think as Christians, we all nod approvingly.

Many of you were here a few weeks ago when David Campbell was preaching for us, and he challenged us particularly concerning private prayer. And I'm sure we all would say, yes, that was a very timely challenge.

And of course, now we are challenged concerning corporate prayer, gathering with other Christians to pray. And again, I'm sure we would all nod approvingly and say, yes, that's important. But of course, the important thing isn't to nod approvingly here.

The important thing is to do that which we are challenged to do. What about the challenge you received that I received several weeks ago concerning private prayer? How have you responded? And I leave you to answer that for yourself.

Maybe how you responded to that challenge will give you a good idea as to how you are likely to respond to this challenge, that we, with the believers in Jerusalem, would be of those who gather in our homes, in the home of Mary, in the home of ordinary believers, that we would pray for those whom we love, and that we would pray earnestly, that we would pray fervently, that we would pray perseveringly.

[34 : 34] And even though our prayers lack a great deal, we do so in the confidence that our God delights to hear and to answer us. Well, let us close in prayer.

Amen.