

*THE SECRET OF PREVAILING PRAYER.*

**I** DESIRE, beloved Christian friends, to bring before you, for encouragement in prayer, a precious instance in which an answer to united supplication is given, as we have it recorded by the Holy Ghost, in Acts xii.

“Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” This was the first apostle who became a martyr for Christ. Stephen had previously been stoned, but he was not an apostle. This one was an apostle.

SATAN’S POWER, LIMITED.

“And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also.” Now Peter, indeed, seems to be at death’s gate; but the Lord said, “Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther.” This we have to keep before us, that Satan, though he hates us, can go no farther than the Lord gives him liberty.

The most striking instance of this, we find in the case of Job. Satan had tried to get at him, but was unable to do so; and at last he has to make confession before Jehovah, “Hast thou not made a hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side?” Satan had tried to get at him, but by reason of the hedge he was unable to get at the person or substance of Job. It was only by the permission of Jehovah, and when this hedge was removed, that he was able to get at the substance of Job. And even still, the hedge was around the person of Job, and not until this hedge had been removed, was he able to touch the person of Job. Though we must never lose sight of the fact that on the one hand Satan may be, and often is, powerful to hurt us, yet on the other hand, He that is with us is more powerful still, and Satan can do nothing without the permission of Jehovah.

“And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him.” He was delivered to sixteen soldiers—four little companies of four soldiers each, who were to be responsible for him; so that there might be two inside, and two outside, and so always some to take care of him. Thus it seemed to be utterly impossible that he could escape. “Intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.” It is called Easter here, but there was no such thing as Easter then. It was the feast of unleavened bread.

“Peter, therefore, was kept in prison; but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” See we have prayer in church capacity. The

saints at Jerusalem meeting together, and giving themselves to prayer, and from what we see afterwards, it was

“PRAYER WITHOUT CEASING.”

There was always some little band at prayer—“prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

They did not say, Now we will send a petition to Herod to let him go. They might have sent in such a petition, for by this time there were thousands in Jerusalem who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. They were a formidable company by that time; and if they had all written down their names to this petition they might have succeeded. And if thus they did not succeed, they might have raised a large sum of money. They were very willing to give their substance, to sell their houses and lands for the poor of the church; and most certainly they would have willingly done so for the deliverance of Peter. They did not do this, though a most probable way of getting Peter delivered would have been to have bribed some of Herod’s courtiers. Even in this very chapter we find that when disunion had arisen in regard to the men of Tyre and Sidon, some individuals bribed a courtier, the king’s chamberlain, and thus made peace. Therefore it might possibly have succeeded if they had done so. But none of these things did they use; they gave themselves to prayer. And that, my beloved friends, is the best weapon they could have used. There is not a more blessed and powerful weapon for the children of God, than that they should give themselves to prayer. For thus they can have the power of God on their side—the almighty power of God. And by making use of this power, through the instrumentality of prayer in all things we need, we can have the infinite wisdom of God brought to work for us, and have God Himself at our side, as children of God. Therefore we should seek to make a far better use than ever we have done of prayer. And you, my beloved Christian friends, who are in the habit of meeting often at the noonday prayer meeting, expect great things at the hands of God; look out for wondrous blessings, and you will find, how ready He is to give those things which we ask for. This, then, these saints at Jerusalem did—they gave themselves to prayer without ceasing. That is, they believed that though Herod had apprehended him for the purpose of slaying him, and though this Herod was a notoriously wicked man, as we all know, yet God was able to deliver him from this bloodthirsty Herod. They believed that nothing was too hard for God to accomplish, and therefore they prayed without ceasing.

WAITING FOR THE ANSWER.

Now, notice, we do not know how long Peter was in prison, but it is an obvious and natural inference that he had been apprehended before those days of unleavened bread; as after these days his execution was to take place, and, therefore, at least he was in prison seven days. Now, it was not on the first day that the prayer was answered. They met together and prayed,—prayed earnestly; but the first day, hour by hour, passed away, and yet Peter was in prison. The second day, and again they are found waiting on God in prayer. Still, hour by hour, the second day passed, and yet he was not delivered. And so the third, and fourth, and fifth days, passed away. They are still waiting on God; prayer is made without ceasing; yet this holy man remained in prison; and there seemed to be no prospect of God answering their prayers.

And thus, beloved friends, you and I shall find again and again that the answer is delayed; and the question is, shall we give up praying, or shall we continue? The temptation is to cease praying, as though we had given up hope, and to say, “It is useless; we have already prayed so long that it is useless to continue.” This is just what Satan would have us say; but let us persevere and go on steadily praying, and be assured that God is both able and willing to do it for us; and that it is the very joy and delight of His heart, for Christ’s sake, to give to us all things which are for the glory of His name, and our good and profit. If we do so, He will give us our desire. As assuredly as we are the children of God, if we pray perseveringly, and in faith, the prayer will be answered. Thus let us learn from this precious instance regarding prayer, which the Holy Ghost has given for our encouragement.

“And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and the keepers before the door.” Mark, that the last night before his execution is now come, and yet Peter is asleep. Not carelessly and indifferently was he lying there, but calmly, quietly resting in the arms of Jesus, and leaning on the bosom of his Lord. He is bound with two chains, as the custom was, between two soldiers, one on the one side and one on the other side, that he might not escape.

GOD’S MANNER OF ANSWERING THE PRAYER.

And now about the deliverance; we will see in what way God works.

“And behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison.” We should have said, this must be done in the dark, and as quietly as possible. But see, the light came into the prison. Humanly speaking, this would

have wakened the soldiers; but not thus with Jehovah; when He works, He can do His will, notwithstanding all these things.

The angel “smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly,” without any fear that in addressing Peter the soldiers should be wakened.

“And as he rose, the chains fell from off his hands.” Still there was no fear of arousing the soldiers.

“Gird thyself.” There is no need to hurry; he is to be taken out, but is to dress himself properly.

And now comes the strangest thing of all, “Bind on thy sandals.” These wooden shoes must be bound on the feet. We should have said, let him walk out without them, that no noise be made to awaken the sleeping soldiers. Not thus; it was God who wrought the deliverance, and when He works there is no need to fear, for who can withstand?

And so he did. And the angel saith unto him, “Cast thy garment about thee.” His outer garment is to be put on. Everything, therefore, is to be done in an orderly manner. It is as if Herod had sent a messenger to deliver him; he is to go quietly forth.

“When they were past the first and second ward.” The eyes of the keepers were miraculously shut.

But now they come to “the iron gate.” Many, many times do we come to some such iron gate. He was now out of the prison, and past the soldiers who were watching, but now he comes to this great iron gate. How shall he get out of prison after all? And so it is with you and me at times. Everything seems prepared, and difficulties have been removed; and yet, after all, there seems to be one great obstacle which is insurmountable. Can we escape? Yes; God is able to open the iron gate for you and for me, even as He caused the great iron gate of the prison to open of its own accord. Let us expect everything from God, and He will do it, if it is for His glory, and our good and profit.

#### THE UNCHANGEABLE POWER OF GOD.

But can He do miraculous things in the latter part of the nineteenth century? Yes, as well as He could in the middle of the first century. Let us never say this was in the days of the Apostles, and we cannot expect such things now. Quite true, that God does not commonly work miracles; but He can if He will, and let us give glory to His name, that if He does not work miracles it is because He can and does do His will by ordinary means. He can accomplish His ends in many ways. Let us never lose heart in such circumstances; He has the same

power as ever He had. Many think if they were living in the days of Elijah, or in the days of Elisha, or in the days of the Apostles, they would expect these things; but because they do not live in those days, but in the latter part of the nineteenth century, therefore they cannot expect to have such answers to prayer. This is wrong; remember, that God has the same power as in the days of the prophets of old, or of the Apostles of old; therefore let us only look for great blessings, and great blessings will be bestowed on us, my beloved friends in Christ.

“They passed through one street, and forthwith the angel departed from him.” This contains an important spiritual truth—it is this, that God does not work miracles when they are not needed. The angel was sent to deliver Peter from prison; but Peter was now in the streets, and he knew very well the streets of Jerusalem. He had been living there, and he knew all about them; and it was not, therefore, necessary that the angel should lead him through the streets, and bring him to the house where he was going. Therefore as soon as he was outside the prison, and no more supernatural help was required, the angel departed from him.

THE DELIVERANCE EFFECTED.

“And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath sent His angel, and hath delivered me out of the hands of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.” He wist not that it was true at first, and thought that it must be a vision, but now that he finds himself in the streets, he knows that God has indeed delivered him.

“And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.” Notice this, “many were gathered praying.” For what purpose? For Peter’s deliverance unquestionably; because prayer was made by the church on his behalf without ceasing. Though it was the night before his execution, they did not lose heart. It is to be next day; to the eye of man the case seems hopeless, but they still come together to pray. Therefore they had not only begun well, but they had also gone on well; they had continued in prayer.

“And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.” Her name is given. Why so? When this was written down, inquiry might be made as to the truth of the account. The damsel, probably, was then living, and thus opportunity for this inquiry was afforded. “And when she knew Peter’s voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in and told how Peter stood before the gate.”

Here we find a description to the very life. What shall we say? The damsel heard his voice and knew it; she knew they were praying for Peter's deliverance; her heart was so glad that first of all she runs to tell that Peter stood at the door. She could not open the door. Now what do we expect to hear out of the mouths of those beloved brethren in Christ, those holy men who have been waiting upon God day after day? Surely it will be praise. "They said unto her, Thou art mad."

FAILING FAITH.

Ah! there it is which shows what we are. "Thou art mad." I specially seek in bringing this before you this morning, that we may learn what we are naturally. They had begun well, and had gone on well, yet failed completely in the end. They had faith at the first, and exercised faith, but had no faith in the end. Let us be warned, beloved friends; that is just what we must seek to avoid. It is comparatively easy for us to begin well and to go on well, day after day, week after week, month after month; but it is difficult to remain faithful to the end. Even thus it was, beloved Christian friends, regarding those of whom we are quite ready to say, "we are not worthy to unloose their shoes;" and if they failed, what of us? What say they? "Thou art mad." They are praying for the thing, and it comes; yet this is what they say. Those men had begun in faith, had gone on in faith, and yet it is gone. They had continued outwardly to wait upon God, but at last without expectation. If they had continued in faith, they would have said when they heard the tidings, "Blessed be God; let His holy name be praised!" It could not have been otherwise, if they had been waiting to the end for the blessing; and since it was not so, it is a plain proof that faith was gone. I am as certain of this as though an audible voice had told me from heaven. It would have been impossible for them to say to that dear, godly young woman, "Thou art mad," when she brought the news of Peter's deliverance, unless faith had been gone. This, however, is what we say naturally, "Thou art mad."

IF WE ASK LET US BE LOOKING FOR THE ANSWER.

"But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished." Another proof that they were wanting in faith at that time, "they were astonished." True faith is thus known, that when we begin in faith, and continue in faith, we are not astonished when the answer comes. For instance, suppose any of you, my Christian friends, have beloved

sons or daughters who are unconverted in America, or in Australia, or in New Zealand, for whom you have been praying long. At last you get a letter, stating that at such-and-such a time they have been brought to the Lord. The test, whether you have been praying in faith or not, is, if say when the letter comes, "The Lord be praised for it," and you receive the tidings gladly; then you have been exercising faith. But if not, if you begin to question whether it is real, can it be the case? Then by this you know you have not been exercising faith; you have not been expecting your request to be granted. If I may use a phrase in the right sense, although one of the world's phrases, the world says of certain things, "We take it as a matter of course." So, in a spiritual sense, we should be so confident that God will bless, and that He will do for us in answer to prayer what we ask, that when it comes, we should still be so confident as to say, like the world, "we take it as a matter of course; it could not be otherwise; the thing must come, because God has pledged Himself, for Christ's sake, to give the blessing."

"But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of prison. And he said, Go show these things unto James and to the brethren; and he departed, and went into another place."