

BEHIND THE SCENES

Prayer, spiritual attacks, and the spiritual warfare behind our experiences

Acts 12

MEANWHILE, BACK AT JERUSALEM . . .

When we come to Acts chapter 12, we are taken back to Jerusalem. Last week when we studied chapter 11 we saw that—

- ▶ While Peter and the Jewish believers back at Jerusalem were finally realizing that their ethnic bias was at odds with God's purposes, Spirit-enlightened believers were seeing many non-Jews in Antioch coming to faith in Jesus.
- ▶ When the apostles back in Jerusalem heard what was happening in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to encourage the work there. Under his oversight, and then the combined teaching of Barnabas and Saul, the church in Antioch was on a course to become the ministry center to the Gentile world of the Roman Empire.
- ▶ Meanwhile, back at Jerusalem, the persecution that drove believers north toward Antioch was now targeting the apostolic leadership in a spiritual attack that was intended to decimate the future of the church.

THE ATTACK ON THE CHURCH—

How did this spiritual attack unfold? Luke records that—

- ▶ James, the brother of John and one of Jesus' inner circle, was arrested and beheaded by Herod Agrippa I (nephew of Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptizer).
- ▶ When Herod saw how much this pleased the anti-Christian population, he arrested Peter, intending to put him on public trial when Passover ended.
- ▶ Peter was being held in the Antonia Fortress, in an inner cell, guarded by sixteen soldiers (4 squads of 4)—chained between two soldiers in the cell, with two sentries outside guarding the locked door.
- ▶ On the night before his trial, Peter was asleep between his guards and the church was "earnestly praying to God for him."

At that point, Luke tells us in verse 7 that—

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

- ▶ Amazingly, Peter was sound asleep! This was not the same Peter that we saw at a previous Passover when Peter felt threatened and in danger and vehemently denied any association with Jesus. This Peter has come to understand that God is in control.
- ▶ A supernatural being, “an angel of the Lord,” materialized in the prison cell and suddenly, Peter found himself walking out of the fortress and down the street! His shackles had fallen off, doors had opened automatically, and Peter had walked out with the guards completely unaware. Peter himself didn’t realize that it was actually happening; he thought he was having a dream.

WHEN PETER REALIZED HE WASN’T DREAMING—

Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.” (verse 11)

Now that he was wide awake, Peter could fully appreciate the enormity of what had happened: God supernaturally rescued him from a life-threatening spiritual attack, one that was intentional and deliberate and anticipated by those opposing the church. In verse 12, we read—

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.

- ▶ Why did Peter go specifically to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark? Peter had been in custody for a week and would have been unaware of specific prayer gatherings on his behalf. The fact is that Peter went where he knew he would find people in prayer. This was a gathering place for a church whose consistent practice was daily prayer.

- ▶ Peter had been surprised by his deliverance from prison and now the church was astonished by the appearance of the answer to their prayer. This incident has provoked much humor, or really, belittling, of the people who had been praying for Peter but who refused to believe that he was really delivered and knocking on the door.

Before we express the same attitude, let's ask ourselves—

- ▶ Are we really better at believing than those who were praying for Peter?
- ▶ Do we pray bold and absolutely impossible prayers, or do we pray more “likely-to-happen” prayers?
- ▶ Do we “hedge our bets” by praying “if it's Your will” because of a lack of faith to ask for some ridiculously impossible “anything” in His name?

This is a powerful story of supernatural intervention in a vicious spiritual attack intended to eliminate the apostolic leadership of the church. The apostle Paul would experience many such attacks on his life and would ask believers to pray that he would be delivered and able to continue his mission.

PRAYER AND THE WORLD UNSEEN—

Let's look behind the scenes to understand all that is happening here. The most important words that we read in this account are in verses 5 and 12—

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying for him. . . . many people had gathered and were praying.

The word for “earnestly” is *ektenes*; to stretch out, extend. *Ektenes* has two dimensions: time (as in stretched out, continuous) and intensity (as in agonizing effort)

This is what you and I must understand—

Prevailing prayer requires more than just believing or praying about an issue. Because of the spiritual factors involved, including those in the unseen realm, continuous, intense, and unified prayer is necessary for spiritual breakthrough.

When we talk about prayer, it's not really a matter of what we don't know; it's that we do not fully practice what we do know.

- ▶ Someone who is listening to our prayers might get the impression that we need to inform God about the issues and persuade Him to do something. Prayer is not an effort to convince God to act; it is a partnership with God that enables Him to exercise His power on our behalf and for His purposes on earth.
- ▶ However, we often make it a very unequal partnership, expecting maximum returns with minimal investment.
- ▶ Prayer, faith, and unity are fundamental principles of the unseen realm—the basis by which we can partner with God and He can work in our visible world. The adversary understands the strategic and fundamental significance of these principles and so the forces of darkness resist, undermine, and minimize prayer and unity.
- ▶ The more that is spiritually at stake, the greater the resistance by the adversary, in both the unseen and the visible realms.

No other spiritual activity faces greater resistance than prayer. The resistance comes from both within us and from the adversary.

▶ **Resistance within ourselves—**

- ▶ An inability to spiritually see and understand the issues at stake.
- ▶ Spiritual weakness so that we cannot overcome our human inclination not to pray or to pray little, while indulging in things appealing to self.
- ▶ An inability to see through the agenda of distractions and interruptions.
- ▶ Selfishness that resists the surrender and submission necessary for unity.

▶ **Resistance in the spiritual realm—**

- ▶ The adversary manipulates our attitudes, emotions, perspectives, and the details of our visible world to minimize prayer, faith and unity.
- ▶ Demonic forces and principalities exert control and influence in the world, resisting every effort of God and His people.
- ▶ Demonic forces resist the answers to our prayers so that God's purposes will not be accomplished in the visible world and in the lives of people.

In numerous places, the Bible give us a clear and unambiguous picture of prayer and the unseen world. One of those pictures is from the perspective of the unseen world itself—from one involved who describes in detail to Daniel what has been happening as he has been praying for clarity to understand the purposes of God among nations on earth. In Daniel 10 we read—

Then [the supernatural being] said to me, “Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia . . . But now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come. But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince. And as for me, in the first year of Darius the Mede, I stood up to confirm and strengthen him.”

—Daniel 10.12-13, 21; 11.1

In his commentary *Exposition of Daniel*, H. C. Leopold wrote:

“Bad angels, called demons in the New Testament, are, without a doubt, referred to here. In the course of time, these demonic powers gained a very strong influence over certain nations and the government of these nations. They used whatever resources they could muster to hamper God’s work and to thwart His purposes. . . . We get a rare glimpse behind the scene of world history. There are spiritual forces at work that are far in excess of what men who disregard revelation would suppose. They struggle behind the struggles that are written on the pages of history.

SEEING BEHIND THE SCENE—

Take note of the details of this account given to Daniel by the supernatural being who came in answer to Daniel’s prayer—

- ▶ There is a prince of the kingdom of Persia—obviously not a human prince.
- ▶ There is Michael, “your prince” —meaning the angel-prince of Israel.
- ▶ There is the prince of Greece, like that of Persia.
- ▶ This supernatural spiritual being who came to Daniel was in a 21 day battle with the prince of Persia who tried to prevent the answer being delivered to Daniel.

- ▶ This angel-messenger needed assistance from Michael, the archangel and prince of Israel, to break through and get to Daniel.
- ▶ Daniel's angel-messenger tells Daniel that, when he leaves, he will return to the fight against the prince of Persia and against the prince of the next world empire, the Greeks.
- ▶ Notice that these angels have their assigned position and Daniel's angel-messenger has a lonely battle: there is no one to support him except Michael.
- ▶ Daniel's prayer was for understanding to know the purposes of God in human history and the coming world kingdoms.
- ▶ Daniel is told that demonic beings and angelic powers were engaged in a battle over those kingdoms.
- ▶ Notice that Daniel didn't pray just once; he kept on praying—earnest, agonizing prayer on earth even as the spiritual beings were fighting in the unseen realm.
- ▶ One more detail: Daniel's messenger told him that in the first year of Darius the Mede, he stood up to confirm and strengthen Michael, the angel prince of Israel. What battle was Michael engaged in? With the defeat of Babylon, world power had passed from the Babylonians to the Medo-Persian alliance. In the first year of Darius the Mede, we read in Daniel, chapter 6, of the efforts that were made to make King Darius hostile toward Daniel and ultimately, Israel. After Daniel continued his prayer and intercession, and was thrown to the lions, God sent His angel on that occasion and shut the lion's mouths so that Daniel was safe from that demonically inspired attack. That miraculous deliverance caused Darius to reverse his edict and issue a decree "to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land" that they "must reverence and fear the God of Daniel" (6.25-26). As a result of this spiritual attack being defeated and Daniel being delivered, he subsequently received revelation included the timing of the birth and crucifixion of the Anointed One, prepared the way through intercession for Israel's restoration according to Jeremiah's prophecy, and received revelation about the end of time—all of which would have been lost had the spiritual attack succeeded. The spiritual victory also prepared the way for the next king, Cyrus the Persian to be favorable toward Israel and issue the decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

There would be more kingdoms and more battles fought in the spiritual realms and more satanic attacks to thwart the purposes of God and to prevent prophecy from being fulfilled that would ultimately lead to the coming of the Savior of the world.

Battles in the unseen realm are going on at this very hour over Baltimore, Chicago, Portland; over the United States. Demonically inspired attacks are taking place against the church. As you sit in the comfort of your home this morning, war is being fought in the spiritual realms over the purposes of God in your life.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus—

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. . . . And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

—Ephesians 6.11-13, 18

THE UNDERSTANDING WE NEED—

Let's sum this up with three points that we need to understand and a question for us to consider—

- ▶ Unseen spiritual forces determine what we see and what happens in the visible world. What we see in the physical is the outcome of what has occurred in the spirit world.
- ▶ Prayer, faith, and unity influence what happens in the spiritual realm, and therefore, the outcome that we see in the visible world. Prayer assists the forces and work of righteousness and obtains God's will on earth; prayerlessness enables the forces of darkness in their agenda to thwart the purposes of God.
- ▶ All spiritual warfare is ultimately about destiny—in Daniel, it's about the destiny of nations; in Acts, it's about the destiny of the church; and in Ephesians, it's about individuals like you and me.

In light of God's Word, honestly ask yourself this question today—

*If I really understood these truths, as both angels and demons understand them,
would I pray more, and pray together more
with other believers?*

Many years later and perhaps remembering this experience, the Apostle Peter would write to the churches in Asia: "The Lord knows how to rescue."

A FINAL ENCOURAGEMENT—

Sundar Singh was an Indian Christian missionary in the early 20th century. He was born into a Sikh family in northern India in 1889. His mother took him to learn from a *sadhu*, an ascetic holy man, who lived in the jungle, while also sending him to a Christian high school to learn English. When he was fourteen, his mother died, and in anger, he burned a Bible, page by page, while his friends watched.

Feeling that his religious pursuits and the questioning of Christian priests left him without fulfillment and future, the teenaged Sundar resolved to commit suicide by throwing himself in front of a train, unless whosoever is the 'True God' would reveal himself. That very night he had a vision of Jesus. Sundar announced to his father that he was going to be converted into missionary work for Christ. On his sixteenth birthday, he was baptized as a Christian. His father rejected him, his brother attempted to poison him, and villagers threw snakes in his house. (*Wikipedia*)

In his commentary, *The Book of The Acts* (NICNT, page 236), F. F. Bruce recounts this Peter-like deliverance experienced by Sundar Singh—

"Once in his missionary travels in Tibet, by order of the chief lama of a Tibetan community he was thrown into a dry well, the cover of which was securely locked. Here he was left to die, like many others before him, whose bones and rotting flesh lay at the bottom of the well. On the third night, when he had been calling to God in prayer, he heard someone unlocking the cover of the well and removing it. Then a voice spoke, telling him to take hold of the rope that was being lowered. He did so, and was glad to find a loop at the bottom of the rope in which he could place his foot, for his arm had been injured before he was thrown down. He was then drawn up, the cover was replaced and locked, but when he looked around to thank his rescuer, he could find no trace of him. The

fresh air revived him, and his injured arm felt whole again. When morning came, he returned to the place where he had been arrested and resumed preaching. News was brought to the chief lama that the man who had been thrown into the execution well had been liberated and was preaching again. Sundar Singh was brought before him and questioned, and told the story of his release. The lama declared that someone must have got hold of the key and let him out, but when search was made for the key, it was found attached to the lama's own girdle."

The Apostle Paul was being escorted to Rome by a detachment of Roman soldiers when the ship they were on was caught in a violent storm. Luke records that all efforts to save the ship and themselves were futile and everyone gave up all hope of being saved. But the apostle had been in prayer and he had a message from the Lord—

Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as He told me.

—Acts 27.23-25

From the beginning of his ministry, the Apostle Paul experienced spiritual attacks designed to take his life. Had he lost his life in this shipwreck, his calling and mission would have been ended unfinished and significant portions of the New Testament would not have been written. But God once again delivered Paul; and not only had he received personal assurance of deliverance, but his intercession also resulted in God ensuring the deliverance of all who were traveling with Paul.

Years later, at the end of his life with his mission fully completed, the Apostle Paul would write to encourage his protegee, Timothy—words that you and I can also declare today with faith and confidence—

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

—2 Timothy 4.18

Amen.