

ACTS 12

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# BEHIND THE SCENES

## MEANWHILE, BACK AT JERUSALEM . . .

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Under the oversight of Barnabas, 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—

- ▶ James, the brother of John and one of Jesus' inner circle, is 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—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."

## WHEN SUDDENLY AND UNBELIEVABLY—

*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; this Peter has come to understand that God is in control.
- ▶ A supernatural being materialized in the prison cell and suddenly, Peter found himself walking out of the fortress and down the street! He didn’t realize that it was actually happening; he thought he was having a dream.

*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 hoping would happen.”*

## WHEN PETER REALIZED HE WASN'T DREAMING—

*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.*

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Are we really better at believing than those who were praying for Peter?
  - ▶ Do we pray bold and absolutely impossible prayers, or 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 a ridiculous “anything” in His name?



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

*—Acts 12.5, 12*

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

## **WHAT WE 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.

# PRAYER AND THE WORLD UNSEEN—

- ▶ 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.

▶ Resistance within ourselves—

- ▶ An inability to see the issues at stake the way the spiritual world sees them.
- ▶ 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



*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*



*“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.*

*—H. C. Leopold, Exposition of Daniel*



*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—

- ▶ Unseen spiritual forces determine what we see and what happens in the visible world. What we see in the physical has already occurred in the spiritual.
- ▶ 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—the destiny of nations (Daniel), the destiny of the church (Acts), and individuals like you and me.

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



*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*

*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*