

Victory through prayer (Apologies for the sound quality)

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[0 : 00] We're going to Acts 12 now. It's a great story of Peter Graham Jail in a very remarkable way.

Peter gets out of the prison there. There's some journalism that's taken place. Acts 12 verse 12. When he had considered a thing, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John, his surname is Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

Where many were gathered together praying. As I've said, we're speaking about victory tonight, God's victory in the world.

And what we're going to see tonight, I hope, is that a great part of that victory takes place in response to, and with the instrumentality of prayer, Christian's prayer.

In this chapter, we're very clear that there are two opposing forces, two kingdoms, if you like, during battle. We tend to think of it as, on the one hand, Herod.

[1 : 37] Now this Herod is Herod Adritha I. He's the grandson of the Herod who killed the babies in Jerusalem. In Bethlehem, he's the grandson of the Herod who wanted to kill the infant Jesus.

This Herod Adritha very much like his grandfather is a master piece of work. And here he has mustered his forces against the church.

And so on the one hand, we've got Herod Adritha, and the forces available to him. And on the other hand, we've got Christians.

They are the unarmed, and they've been taught by the officer in charge to turn the other cheek. And we might think to ourselves, well, there's no contrast, isn't it?

You've got Herod and his army. And on the one hand, armed with weapons, trained to fight.

[2 : 47] And on the other hand, you have the church. Christians unarmed who've been taught to turn the other cheek.

There's no contrast. The outcome is surely just the matter of course. But possible hope in the church, you know, of any kind of victory in circumstances like this.

But what Luke wants us to recognise, and Luke has written this Luke to be the past, is that really the true context is not between Herod and Christians, but between Herod and Jesus Christ.

And it's to ask the Christians to take up the weapons of their warfare, which especially includes prayer, as you can see, Christ fights through them and under their heart.

They fight among other ways through prayer. Not by swords, and Herod's day, or by guns and iron, or whatever.

[4 : 05] And, but, in prayer, verse 5, Peter was kept in prison. That's what Herod did. But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.

That's what the church is. The church is fighting Herod with prayer. And I know myself, and I'm sure you all know, the feeling that when someone is in difficulty, and you say to them, I'll pray for you, there's a little voice that says, oh, what do you have to?

And, you may well have said to someone, I see you're a difficulty, I want to remember your prayer. And they may well have said to you, well, look at it, and so they say, that will not do any good.

Nothing could really be far off of your feet, that could it? But the devil always is trying to discourage us, I think more than anything, to pray.

Because there is nothing he himself fears more than Christians who pray in the name of Jesus. So we don't need to be surprised if we find in all kinds of ways that we're in a world which tries to critique prayer.

[5 : 30] We don't need to be surprised if we find that people in the church make light of prayer. Because the devil is in every possible way available to him, trying to stop you from praying.

But prayer is, or because prayer is, perhaps the greatest weapon we wield against him.

That is why in the book of Acts, when you have a lively, powerful, vibrant, militant church, you have prayer written large all over the book of Acts.

There are perhaps 50 occurrences of prayer, one sort or another. You see in chapter 1 verse 14 for example, how the Christians after Jesus ascended to heaven, meet together with one accord, and continued, all continued in prayer, in supplication.

They prayed. And so the day of Pentecost came, and the Holy Spirit was poured out, and what the Holy Spirit did was to make them pray even more. Verse 42 of Acts 2, they continued in the church, continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and fellowship, and the breaking of bread, and then prayers.

[7 : 05] They were praying in church. They prayed all the time. They prayed about everything. They prayed for their deacons in Acts chapter 6 verse 6.

They set them apart, their own hands. They prayed for their elders in Acts 14 verse 13. You saw in Barnabas, and in church they laid hands on those they pointed to the elders.

They prayed for them. Because they saw that the praying for those that had any capacity in the church, or any function in the church, enlightened them and equipped them in the heavenly realms, equipped them with spiritual weakness to think.

The church prayed for the Holy Spirit to pray people. Acts 8 verse 15, an example. They laid hands, apostles laid hands on the people's name, and they were filled with a spirit.

The church prayed for those that they set apart their special mission. Acts 13 verse 3, for example. It's all a virus. They prayed for the very church, Antioch, and sent out in their first mission.

[8 : 12] It's a pattern in the book of Acts, that a problem is encountered. People prayed. The answer to that poem is received.

For example, chapter 4 verse 31. They face the opposition of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. And it says they prayed, and the place where they prayed was shaken, and they were all filled with the spirit, and they spoke the word of God with bones.

They said they prayed for the prayer problem. Prayer answer. Acts 9 verse 40, another example. Tabitha, Dorcas, was dead. Peter sends everyone out of the room, they stand on his knees, and he prays.

And she's brought back to life. Another example we read this morning, Acts 16 verse 25. Paul and Silas in the stocks, in the heart of a prison in Philippi.

And they pray. And again, there's an earthquake. And they're set free. And it's really a place breakthrough for the church of Philippi.

[9 : 25] Another example in Acts 28. They're on Malta. And the man called Gubilis, his father is sick. Paul prays for him. He's got fever and dysentery.

Paul prays for him. And he's healed. Problem, prayer, answer. We could go on and on. The church was used to. That was the way we thought.

If there was a problem, they prayed, and they expected an answer. If there was a mission, they prayed for the people to be equipped. If there was a job to be done, they prayed for those who wouldn't do the job, to be empowered.

If there was spiritual warfare to be done, they prayed for the people to be equipped for it, and you would equip. And thus the church, which you must say had very little likelihood of success in human terms, when it was a trembling van of people in the upper room, or when indeed it was a larger but still uncertain group of people up for resurrection.

The church at the end of Acts has penetrated the very part of the Roman Empire, and we see Paul just freely evangelizing Rome, and building by the Spirit a church here.

[10 : 44] And then, immense and superlots were stacked against the church, that the church prayed, and won through, and obtained victory in the name of Jesus.

And so it went on and on throughout history. But the church lost its map of this, when, strange to say, the church conquered the Roman Empire, the Roman Empire constantly became a Christian, and then the church kind of started to trust in parents' weapons.

It lost its urgency in prayer, and so entered into a thousand years before, or known in history as the dark ages.

And although there were certain areas of still great missionary vigor, the Celtic church was one example. By and large, that which was under the Roman church, was in a very sad and decadent state, because it needed trust, not in the weapons of prayer, but in the weapons of the Word.

And we need to recapture what was the great heart of the Celtic church, the great heart of the Apostolic church, the great heart of the Roman church, the great heart of the Historic church in the Highlands, in the last couple of centuries, praying in the victory of God through Jesus Christ in prayer.

[12 : 16] So what we're seeing here in chapter 12 is really the church at its best, and it was most invincible. Here we have in verse 12, obviously a wealthy home, because we read, many were gathered.

Now, you had to have a fairly big means to have a big house in those days. But it's shown that Mary then, this is the only mention of this Mary, this Mary, mother of John Mark, was quite a wealthy woman.

She had quite a large house. And yet, although there was money about, and there was a great number of people about, they didn't trust in their money, and they didn't trust in their numbers.

They trusted in Jesus Christ. And they prayed, and laid hold of the power of a compassionate and all-powerful Savior. And the church kept on moving forward, despite the persecution.

Now some people have questioned, why is chapter 12 in the book of Acts at all? Because it is true, that if chapter 12 had been left out, no one would notice the initial, because in a sense it doesn't really fit with the storyline, because verse 30 of chapter 11, could easily run straight into verse 25 of chapter 12, and no one would notice that all that bit of a thing would be like that.

[13 : 43] So why is Luke included it? Well, I think Luke has included it, just to show, that when the church prays, first of all, God answers, God answers directly, and secondly, when the church prays, God may well happen in any direction against those who are oppressing the church.

That's the encouragement of chapter 12, and in the Roman Empire, when there was a great deal of persecution, and indeed through the Jewish leadership against the church, this chapter was a great encouragement, because it showed that when there was such heavy hand persecution, such as Herod's was, where he just out of hand killed, verse 2, James, one of the twins, one of the brother-father, the brothers known as Blanerge, the sons of thunder, just killed him out of hand, and then was going to do the same with Peter, that the church overcame.

God answered directly, sent an angel to the free teacher, but also answered in a very solemn way, in that Herod, when he went on to Caesarea, made this great pompous speech, dropped dead.

And that was the enemy of him, the enemy of the church. I think Luke is showing us here, that it is not a good idea to get in the way of a praying church, or a praying Christian.

It is not a good idea to be in the way of a church that really believes in praying down the opposition. It is not a good idea to stand against a Christian who really believes that Jesus Christ hears his and her prayers, because, well, while you may be led to repentance, you may, on the other hand, be relieved.

[15 : 47] As I said it was. But one thing for sure God will ask against you. It is not a good idea to stand in the way of praying people.

And history is absolutely full of examples of this. And Adritha's sticky end is but one example. But Luke is saying, the church that prays earnestly in the face of opposition will advance.

That believes in getting hold of God in prayer, and that that's really the only requirement, that that church, those Christians, will advance. And I think verse 24 is the summary of this whole incident.

But, despite heaven, the word of God grew, and multiplied. The church advanced, and multiplied.

So often the question is asked, isn't it? What can the church do today? Look at us in Britain here. There are so many discouragements, there are so many difficulties, there is such a secular society we live in, and there is so much unbelief, and there are so many things against the church, and our society.

[17 : 00] And what can we do in this day and age? And people make all kinds of suggestions, and all kinds of schemes are dreamt up, all kinds of methods are employed, and many of them are good, and important, and profitable, and fruitful.

But often, you don't hear, given its prominence, the most radical and effective solution, that the church has at her disposal.

And that is, prayer. Because prayer is often not seen as practical. The devils performed a strange trick with the word practical.

Practical is something that you actually do, perhaps with your hands, or your tongue, or whatever. An activity that produces what you might call concrete results.

It produces pieces of paper, or it produces books, or it produces a format of a service, or something like that. And prayer is not seen as practical. But we need to think of prayer as the most practical thing we can do.

[18 : 13] Before all the other practical things that are good, before all the other things that we put on to bring non-criticals to Christ, let's think of prayer as the most practical thing.

It's the thing we must think of first. Well, what can we do in this discouraging and difficult day in age? Well, the most practical thing we can do, the thing that will get the most results, the most concrete results, is prayer.

Let's not think of prayer as a kind of last result. When all else has failed, we'll pray. We must be continually praying.

Just like here, the church is in the business of prayer. And if we are in the business of prayer, then we will also be continually refreshed by God answering prayer.

But we may even be surprised by God answering prayer. Because there's one thing for sure, the church that prayed for Peter was actually surprised at the way God answered so clearly and directly.

[19 : 22] When Rhoda went to the door, and Peter was there and she recognized his voice, and she ran in and said, It's Peter. In verse 15, they said, You're mad.

They couldn't believe it. And then they said, It's his angel. Whatever that means. Luke isn't saying that every person has an angel or something like that. He's just saying, Well, that's what they thought. They just had to come up with some idea.

What was this? But in verse 16, they were astonished when it really was Peter. You may say, you may be sure rather, that if you pray continually, you'll get some wonderful surprises.

And that's what the church experienced. But then you say, Well, that's okay, but I'm not the kind of person, these prayers God hears.

Or we're not in a church that really God will answer prayer for, or on our behalf of. But, when Jesus said, that all you need is a mustard seed of faith, what do you think he was trying to encourage?

[20 : 32] Well, he was trying to encourage prayer. He was trying to encourage Christians who are down on themselves, and would think, oh, so-and-so has such great faith, and I've got such small faith.

He was trying to say, well, it doesn't really matter. Because when you pray, remember, you're praying to me. I'm the one who said, small mustard seed faith is fine.

And when you offer your prayers, well, I'm at the receiving end of those very prayers. I mean, you might say, young, we've got great faith, but remember, I said, small faith was okay.

I said, great faith may come, but mustard seed faith is fine to get on with. And when you pray, you're actually praying to the one who said that.

You're praying to Jesus the Lord. So that encourages us in prayer. Though we are the very kind of people who Jesus delights to answer when we pray to Jesus.

[21 : 36] We've seen in a couple of occasions recently, Elijah, that's another example of that, isn't it? James says, Elijah's a man like us. And, ah, people just can't accept that.

Can't accept Elijah was just an ordinary man. The word bloke came to mind and it's appropriate. He was an ordinary bloke. That's what James is saying. He's saying a man like us.

But he prayed. And he prayed, eventually, permanently. Not because he had great faith, not because he was something special in himself, but just because he knew that, well, God answers prayer.

His prayer, anyone's prayer, our prayer. So you pray. You can well imagine what the church prayed like after this incident.

I can just hear them praying maybe the next time they've met some difficult opposition and saying to the Lord, Jesus, last time they prayed in a sticky situation, you sent an angel and orchestrated a jailbreak for Peter.

[22 : 47] Well, we want you to do that again. They expected things. Well, when you begin to see surprising answers to prayer, you begin to get stronger. And that muscle, and that muscle, which has been flabby and weak, begins to become well exercised, and lean and vital.

And so the church must have been all the more encouraged to pray after this incident. Mickey Gumbel, in his book, Questions of Life, speaks about prayer.

And he says how he himself, it's often met by people who say, well, prayer, if you pray and you get an answer, it's just a coincidence. And he says, well, if I, fair enough, once, it may be a coincidence.

Twice, it may be a coincidence. But as you go on and on praying, and seeing answers, you know it's not a coincidence. You know God is answering your prayer, because those coincidences just get too many.

And they should be read as God incidents, because it's what God is doing. And you know, as time goes on, my God is really answering my prayers.

[24 : 07] He recommends keeping a prayer diary. I recommend that as well. If you're doing business with God about something in prayer, then pray, write down what you're praying about.

And keep on praying about it. If God leads you to do that, keep on praying about it. And, when you go back later, and see how God's answered, you may be just tremendously encouraging, and filled with wonder, surprised.

Because our God is a prayer answering God. It's such an exciting thing, to be in prayer to God. It's such a wonderful thing, to know that your God is a prayer answering God.

And it's thrilling to see, when you pray for something, and God has answered it so clearly, and so specifically, time and again. The alternative for Christians, is to live in a defeated life.

In a life which is no contest. Where Satan has written over your life, no contest here. I know I don't need to worry about this man or woman, because when they pray, they don't believe God's going to do anything.

[25 : 14] I don't need to have any worry. I've got much more concern with that man over there. I've got much more concern with that woman there. Because they believe, that Jesus answers prayer.

And they really do believe, that it's worth praying fervently about things. We don't want to be in a no contest life. Goliath may mock, but we want to be the praying David, who wins.

You'll always find people who mock your prayers. You'll always hear a voice in your own mind, saying that prayer was the most paltry, pathetic, and small thing that I have ever heard.

Because you've got someone against you, who doesn't like that you prayed. But Goliath, who mocks, lies dead, lies slain, in the face of an apparently ill-equipped little boy, David.

Pray as a David. Believe your God. Come out in the name of the living God, against the Goliaths, and they'll lie slain at your feet. It's exciting to pray.

[26 : 30] That's what Luke is saying. Pray, church. He's saying, pray. He's saying, let me just put this little incident into my catalog of the development of the church in the early days.

Because I want you to recognize that when this Herod came against the church, with all his forces, and it looked like the church was finished because he was picking on the apostles, the leaders, that the church prayed because it couldn't do anything else.

It prayed. But it prayed that he made me that God would do things. And at the end of the episode, when Herod lies dead, the word of God increased and spread.

And the church just kept on growing and growing. And I don't know. I've learned about this area. There's an immense richness of history, isn't it?

And if you look on an ordinary survey map, you'll find marks here and there all over the area. Forts and blocks and castles. They're in clinical supply in this part of the world.

[27 : 32] They all were steamed by their occupants in centuries going by as impregnable forces, as places of safety against enemies.

But none of them is up by now, for long purpose. The strong walls that there were, lie in ruins.

And history has moved on. But in this area, there remain many forts, many strongholds of darkness.

And many, many, many, many, many institutions, many groups, that are strongholds of darkness.

And they're still up to find. And we want them to be like those ruined castles and fortresses that are sprinkled all over the area.

[28 : 42] But these strongholds of darkness, they look to us to be invincible. But the reality is that their fate will be like the ancient forts.

The church will grow and grow. But the strongholds that there are in this area of darkness, they will fall one by one. But they won't fall in our day, unless we pray.

Only prayer. Only prayer. And the accompanying measures that meet people and their need, will bring these strongholds down.

They will come there, that you and I must pray. The odds may seem stacked against us, so that we might even not consider praying against some of these strongholds.

Because an answer to the prayer may seem so unlikely, so impossible. But think again. What do you suppose, for example, that angel is doing today, who released Peter from prison?

[30 : 03] He's not being pensioned off. He's not in retirement now. He's still in the business of carrying out executive duties on behalf of God.

And the Holy Spirit to breathe, to light the hurricane through the church. What's he doing? He's fully at work in this world.

The forces that brought down Herod, the forces that brought the Father of Acts of the church in this chapter, they're still about. So we pray.

We pray when the odds are stacked against us. We pray even with mustardy faith, and the voice in our ears saying our prayers are a waste of time.

Because we know our God will answer prayer. Well, as you know, I've been reading Jackie Pullinger's book, Chasing the Dragon.

[31 : 03] And I came across a really tremendous incident in it. We're in the walled city in Hong Kong, which was just such a lawless place, held by various gangs known as the Triads.

Jackie Pullinger was at work bringing the gospel against incredible odds. And it seems that very few had succeeded in making any kind of impact on that lady before she came along.

Again, a woman who you might say, well, what is she against the men? But God used her. She used to take the boys of the walled city, many of them gangsters, on youth camps.

One occasion she held a youth camp for the boys. And one of the gangsters went to youth camp with the idea that when he was there, he would get a bit of time to think about the next gang fight, and to plan the weapons they would use and how they would organize themselves to fight the rival gang.

So he went away on the youth camp to do that. But when he was there, he became a Christian. And he went back after the camp to his old haunts.

[32 : 23] And of course the rival gang knew nothing about him becoming a Christian. And the day for the fight came. And the rival gang lustered.

And they came to the appointed place with their horrendous weapons. And Ah Ming, that's the name of this gang leader who had become a Christian.

Ah Ming saw him coming. And instinctively launched into the battle. He picked up two iron bars that came to hand. And he sort of launches into the battle.

And then, before he actually engages with them, he realizes what he's doing. He drops his weapons.

And before the rival gang, with all their whatever they've got, bottles and chains and stuff that we're thinking about, he kneels down in front of them all. And he starts to pray.

[33 : 26] And he prays, and he prays, and he prays with God. A few minutes later he looked up to see his enemies surrounding him.

They were all looking down at him, curiously. And he said, what are you doing? Their leader asked. I'm praying. I'm a Christian now. Would you like to hear about it?

They nodded. Done found it. So Ah Ming told them what had happened to him. They were so impressed, says Jack the conjurer, that several came to see me later, and began to attend the meetings. The odds were stacked against that man. He prayed. And more strongholds of darkness came down, and the church advanced.

That's how we do it. It's really as simple as that. That's how we do it here. Though we tend to not see the strongholds quite so clear, but we don't see the strongholds quite so clear. The man came to see me later. The man came to see me later, and began to attend the meetings. The odds were stacked against that man. He prayed. And more strongholds of darkness came down, and the church advanced.

That's how we do it. It's really as simple as that. That's how we do it here. Though we tend to not see the strongholds quite so clear, they're not gangsters in a gang, but they're still there very, very really in individuals' lives.

[34 : 38] Strongholds of darkness. And the weapons of our warfare are not. They're not carnal. They're not worldly weapons. But they're real weapons, mighty through God, to the pulling down of those strongholds.

That's how we advance. That's Luke's message in chapter 12 here. This is how your church goes. Yes, by all means, there are many, many other activities that will reap their benefits, but do nothing without prayer.

And do nothing without hearing, believing prayer, to God who loves to hear, to answer, mustard seed faith in prayer.

And your church will grow. And your Christian life will grow. And the strongholds in your life will come tumbling down.

And the things that stop you from becoming a Christian, if you're not a Christian, will come tumbling down. And the things that stop you from growing as a Christian, will come tumbling down.

[35 : 46] God hears prayer. So, Herod good in my words. Verse 24. The word of God grew and multiplied.

So let's pray together. Thank you. We thank you for this chapter.

We thank you that Luke gave us this, Lord. We thank you that you preserved it for us. To encourage us, Lord, when things seem very discouraging, or when the darkness seems to surround us, and hold the grip on us, that seems to be life-like and unbreakable.

We thank you, Lord, that the praying church is a growing church. And so may we pray, Lord. May we pray individually. May we pray with our neighbor. May we pray with our Christian friend.

May we pray in our families. May we pray, Father, in our congregations. May we pray, Lord, in special prayer meetings. May we pray in instances of great need.

[36 : 56] May we pray just as a matter of course. May we pray continually. May we pray with faith, Lord. May we be confident in you. Give us that kind of approach. Give us that kind of moving forward, Lord.

Give us that kind of expectation. We may be surprised at times of how fully and how wonderfully you are, sir. But we do know this, Lord. Your word will continue to grow and to multiply.

The church will progress. Strongholds will come tumbling down. And the name of Jesus Christ will be held by us here, where we live, to the glory of his name.

Amen.