

The Hidden hand of God

The example of the early church I think continually challenge us on as to what our priorities should be. The sacrificial nature of their lives at time shows up our lives in sharp contrast. Their commitment in the face of persecution is a vivid example to us.

What we have seen in Acts is a real rollercoaster isn't it? Tremendous blessing and horrendous difficulties. New frontiers for the gospel and internal squabbles. Does the growing church always live within the tension of these boundaries because of fallen human nature and temperaments? I guess so. Only in heaven will all the creases be ironed out.

I wonder if it was thoughts of heaven that were going through Peter's mind in those days in jail. Joining his Lord, Stephen, James and meeting Moses and Elijah and the other big names from the old Testament.

Let's just step back though and let Luke once again tell the story. In the time frame we are approx 12 years into the growth of the church. The hated Herodian dynasty, non-Jewish and puppet to the Roman Empire are up to their old tricks. Looking for politically expedient ways to get onside with the Jewish people. The Jewish authorities have obviously been a flea in his ear about the church and so he arrests some

Vs 1 "It was about this time that king Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them."

James was the brother of John – known as the sons of thunder. A fisherman. He had been part of the inner circle who had seen the transfiguration and been present at the raising of Jairus's daughter.

Vs 2 "He had James the brother of John, put to death by the sword" (most likely beheading). The charges no doubt trumped up to warrant the death sentence.

Imagine how John must have felt. I think knowledge of this puts a new edge on his gospel and letters doesn't it?

Vs 3 "When he saw this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also."

This is what he wants. Popularity. And only at the cost of the lives of a few of their own kind. Only Jewish law prohibits him. No such work done over the festivals – feast of unleavened bread took place just before the Passover."

Luke hovers here over some of the details. Vs 4 prison with 4 squads of four soldiers taking turns on a 24 hour vigil. Normally folks are jut flung in prison but he is chained to two of them and two are standing guard outside the cell. He is political gold and is

getting maximum security treatment. I wonder if he was aware that they had been released from jail before (5:19). He has the top man and this will be a show trial and Herod had several days to plan it.

It was a dark hour for the church. It was the day before the anniversary of Jesus death. Peter's thoughts must have been on what was awaiting him.

Here is the point I think Luke has been leading us to vs 5

“So Peter was kept in prison, BUT the church was earnestly praying for him”

But had they not prayed for James.

“We are safe and secure till our work on the earth for the gospel is complete”.

The Lord still had work for Peter to do but James' work was over and he was taken home.

This is a real poke in the eye of the modern health and wealth gospel that is heavily influencing the evangelical church. God wants you to prosper and be healthy? Does he? I think he would rather you were humble and generous and be prepared to be taken home at any moment.

The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 116:15

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of the saints”

On these things Spurgeon commented

“they shall not die prematurely, they shall be immortal till the work is done; and when their time comes to die then their deaths shall be precious. The lord watches over their dying beds, smooths their pillows, sustains their heart, receives their soul.”

My Aunt is in hospital dying. She is a believer and these words gave me great solace.

“So Peter was kept in prison, BUT the church was earnestly praying for him”

Some praying for his release, some praying for him in his final hours? But the point is the are earnestly praying.

Answering earnest prayer

Luke emphasises prayer a great deal in Acts doesn't he

1:14 they were constantly praying

2:42 the early church was recorded as being devoted to prayer amongst other things.

6:4 the apostles were wanting freed up from waiting on tables to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

7:60 Stephen's last words were a prayer

9:11 Saul is praying and has a vision

10:2 Cornelius prayed regularly

10:9 Peter was on the roof praying

Here is the first great contrast. The political might of Herod and his armies contrasted with this huddled group of praying Christians.

But here is the strength of the weak. Here is the armour of the unarmed. Here is the defence of the defenceless. Above the power of politics and clamouring for approval a higher force is at work; a higher person.

It is interesting that the Lord leaves Peter in prison till the night before the trial. They have been earnestly praying for days. Why has he waited? I am speculating but was to help them to continue to learn patience and trust? Would they not look back and remember the times when they had to wait and keep praying for the answers?

vs 6 Peter is asleep. Did he have peace. Were prayers being answered in this regard also? But whilst Peter is asleep the Lord is awake. Again Luke hovers over details just to put is right in the picture. Chained to two soldiers, sentries.

Vs 7 "Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared.."

In my warped imagination I wondered if as the angel was on his way he was humming the tune to the A team.... "light shone in the cell"

He struck Peter (interesting word I think see later why Luke uses it)

The instructions come "Quick, get up", "Put on your clothes and sandals" (Did peter object – can I not just carry them?)

"Wrap you cloak around you" What – have you been talking to my mother?

The reason I make light of this is that I think we might miss something here. Notice the level of detail and the unhurried nature. Omnipotence is never in a hurry. God works slowly and majestically. I need to hear that because I am always in a hurry! You too?

In our hopes for the fellowship and folks who do not yet know the Lord maybe we need to taper them according to God's timings. There is an urgency do not get me wrong but our sense of urgency must subject itself to the divine timetable!

Luke is not afraid to paint the imperfections of the church. These are not plaster cast saints! He is also

not afraid to show the humorous side of what has happened.

You've got Peter coming too in the middle of the street. Fully clothed and ready to leg it. It is interesting that the Angel leaves him and does not take him to the house? Is it that the lord does not do for us that which we can do for ourselves?

He heads for the house of John Mark's mother. A relative of Barnabus. It look like it is a big place (there is an outer door entrance to a courtyard?) and they have servants. Here she comes vs 13

"Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. (Who is it? It's me Peter) When she recognised Peter's voice (there's that Galilean accent again), she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

"You're out of you mind," , they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be an angel"

"Peter kept on knocking (somewhat more frantically you might imagine), and when they opened the door and saw him they were astonished"

Rhoda means rose (as in Rhododendron), she is probably an non Jew. It is a beautiful little story isn't

it? But there is a greater beauty here and it is the continuing power of the gospel to turn over the tables of the social norms of bigotry and prejudice. This slave girl had been praying with her masters. In Christ there is not slave nor free, neither Jew nor Greek.

Acting Sovereignly