

**Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!**

**Produced by Rev Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church**

**The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>**

**It will also be available to listen to for one week from Sunday 5th July 2020 via telephone. The number to dial is 01875 444 495.**

**Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020 – Prayer (5) – “The unbelievable answer to prayer”**

**Introduction**

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

We've now reached 5<sup>th</sup> of 6 Podcasts on the subject of prayer or, more particularly our brief journey into stories in the Bible where we find God's people at prayer.

We're trying to learn how they pray. Where did they pray and what did they pray about? And, as importantly, how did their prayers change the reality of their situations?

Now, we know that prayer is no magic wand which can wave away all the difficulties of our lives. That would be wholly unrealistic. But, if recent reports of how so many have turned to prayer during these recent months of uncertainty are to be believed, then there must also be a reason why those same prayers have become so important.

Why has prayer, for so many, become so important?

I wonder if the American writer and preacher Max Lucado might help us answer that question. Here's what he says.

*"Our prayers (he writes) may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the one who hears it and not in the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference."*

In other words, prayer is deeply connected to our trust in God which is something the Apostle Peter – who is at the centre of our thoughts today – had surely come to rely upon, as we discover at Acts chapter 12, when he was bound to some prison guards in a jail.

We'll come to that story in a moment. First of all, though, shall we pray?

**Let us pray...**

**Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Almighty and everlasting God, with awe and wonder we come before you this day. You are higher than our highest thoughts, but always close to our sides; greater than we can ever think or imagine, yet made known to us in Jesus Christ; more powerful than anything or anyone, but nurturing as a mother tends her child; constantly at work in the lives of nations and empires, yet having a special concern for each one of us.

Father, we marvel at such love as you give to us and to your world each day.

We confess that we barely begin to understand the nature of your being. Thinking about it stretches our imaginations to their very limit and beyond. And, as we think about the many blessings of our lives, we confess too that we cannot even count the many moments when your presence has touched our lives.

And yet, hidden and seen God... God of great and God of small... God surrounded by glory but exemplified in the simplicity and compassion of the life of Jesus, we come to you this day seeking to be made new, pointed in a new direction and made open to the promptings of your Holy Spirit which enabled the first believers and enables the believers of today to reach out with your gospel to a world in a need.

Bless our worship we pray this day and when this time is over lead us out into a world which needs to experience the transforming of your presence.

And hear us as we bring our prayers to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say and to pray saying,

*Our Father*

*who art in heaven*

*Hallowed be thy name*

*Thy kingdom come*

*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread*

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power*

*and the glory, for ever, Amen.*

### **Bible Reading – Acts chapter 12 verses 6 to 19**

**Our Bible reading this week is taken from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Acts reading verses 6 to 19. This week it will be read to us by Anne Sutherland who is an elder at Chalmers Memorial Church**

*The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. 7 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.*

*8 Then the angel said to him, 'Put on your clothes and sandals.' And Peter did so. 'Wrap your cloak round you and follow me,' the angel told him. 9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.*

*11 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.'*

*12 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. 13 Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14 When she recognised Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, 'Peter is at the door!'*

*15 'You're out of your mind,' they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, 'It must be his angel.'*

*16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. 'Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,' he said, and then he left for another place.*

*18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 19 After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed*

**Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.**

### Reflection

**Thank you to Anne for sharing that reading with us and, by the way, Happy Ruby Anniversary to you and Colin today!**

Our story today, from Acts chapter 12, where the Apostle Peter is arrested and put in jail, is not the first time that we read of Peter being imprisoned. In fact, almost as soon as Peter, and the other apostles began their ministry following the events of Pentecost, imprisonment - or the threat of it - was to become a regular reality in their lives.

Prior to this particular imprisonment, Peter has already, we discover been jailed twice – once in Acts chapter 4 and a second time in Acts chapter 5.

In Acts chapter 4 the arrest is made by the religious authorities who had Peter and John placed in jail for the night because of their propensity to share the gospel message wherever they went. The religious authorities, in that chapter, try to ensure that Peter will stop preaching in return for his freedom.

It's an age old tactic. Keep quiet and life will be bearable. Keep talking and life will soon become unbearable. The more you make my life difficult – or my organisation's life... or a government or even a dictator – the more you rock the proverbial boat will lead to an increase in reprisals.

The only trouble for the religious authorities in Jerusalem, when it came to Peter, was that he had made it perfectly clear that nothing would stop him from talking about Jesus. In fact, as he tells them that he was not for changing his ways, he even manages to sneak in a sermon for good measure!

Peter's persistence and stalwart stance leaves them in a bit of a quandary and so, at Acts chapter 4 and verse 21, we are told that, since they couldn't decide how to punish Peter, that they simply let him go.

By the time we get to chapter 5 they have locked Peter up again, this time along with his fellow apostles. They are flung into the Temple jail to await trial but, when someone goes to check on them, they discover the jail is empty. The jail is locked. There are even guards on duty outside the prison, but there are no prisoners on the inside.

Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that an angel had released them during the night leading Peter to go straight into the heart of the Temple courtyard where he promptly begins his defiance with another round of open air evangelism.

They retain their freedom but only after a severe flogging and, yet, we are told the apostles seemed to rejoice. Something in what happened to them reminded them of what they had seen, not that long before, happening to their Lord and Saviour before he headed towards Golgotha.

This time around, as we arrive at Acts chapter 12, the situation has become even more serious than on the two previous occasions for the arrest of Peter comes at the hands of the King, Herod – Herod Agrippa, grandson to Herod the Great... a King who, it seems, was keen to foster good relations with the religious authorities at the Temple.

At one level, we might think he could have done that by making a generous donation – perhaps to the Temple fabric fund... or to some act of benevolence towards those who served as the Temple priests.

If he'd done that then he certainly wouldn't have been the first and he wouldn't have been the last. How many times has the one who wants to gain influence done so at the price of a well publicised act of benevolence?

However, this is not how Herod Agrippa chooses to act. If his influence was to continue then surely it must be in ways which openly support the temple authorities struggle against those who had become their so called "*thorns in the flesh*" and, who better to start with, than the followers of Jesus.

Agrippa must have known about them. After all it was it his uncle, Herod Antipas, who had been one of those to have conducted a trial on Jesus himself. He knew only too well how the temple authorities felt about these apostles and the way in which they would not be silenced.

Each time attempts are made to suppress them we are told that the Holy Spirit gives them the power to withstand the pressure, as well as the words to say.

And, more to the point, to get back to our story – if Peter had already managed to escape prison before then there was no way Herod was going to risk the same thing happening again.

Agrippa has already had James, the brother of John, put to death. Peter, however, would await trial after Passover and, whilst he waited, he would be double handcuffed to guards on either side of him, with even more guards at the entrance to the prison in which he was being held.

There was no way, earthly speaking, that Peter could have gone anywhere. 24 hours a day he was being watched. He couldn't move his arms freely... he couldn't stand up... nor even attempt to open a door. Peter was going nowhere.

As Peter languished in jail, he allows himself to fall asleep. Perhaps he was tired. And, anyway, what else was there to do?

Or, we might ask, was his sleep a sign of his confidence in God?

The late preacher and writer, John Stott, in his commentary on this passage recalls a comment made about this story by John Chrysostom, the 5<sup>th</sup> Century Archbishop of Constantinople who remarks, "*It is beautiful that Paul sings hymns, whilst Peter here sleeps*"

At Acts chapter 16 Paul is in jail facing the prospect of death but decides to spend the night singing songs of worship. Peter, on the other hand, points out Chrysostom, chooses to sleep – as confident as Paul was that God was surely with him.

Confident, too, that outside of the jail, as we discover at Acts 12 and verse 5 that there were those gathered together who were praying for him.

Let me pause for a moment... pause to ask a question...

Have you ever known a time in your life when you KNEW that folk were praying for you?

And if you did, how did it make you feel?

*Somebody prayed for me, had me on their mind, (goes the song made famous by American gospel singer, Dorothy Norwood) ... took the time and prayed for me (continues the song) ... I'm so glad they prayed, I'm so glad they prayed, I'm so glad they prayed for me"*

The following verses go on to be thankful that *"the preacher prayed for me... that my mother prayed for me"* but most of all *"that Jesus prayed for me... I'm so glad he prayed for me" ...*

Have you ever been glad that someone prayed for you? Sometimes at the lowest ebbs in our life... at those moments when we thought the tide was getting a tad too high in the river of our lives hearing that someone is praying for us can be just enough to pull us to a new place... to provide a warm ember glowing in the seeming darkness of reality...

Took the time to pray because we were special enough to them at a time when we thought that we weren't all that special... special at a time when we thought no one had noticed that look in our face or that strain in our voice...

Prayed for me... placed me at the feet of our heavenly Father with nothing more – or nothing less – than the words, *"Lord – I pray for them..."*

I'm glad they prayed for me... I am glad I was special enough to them that they prayed for me and I did not even know what they were doing and yet, somehow, not even not knowing they were thinking of me helped to turn me around...

Did Peter know that they were praying for him? Almost certainly... How could he not have known? After all Jesus had taught them to pray and he'd shown them how to pray...

And he'd shown them – in a garden called Gethsemane – that there is no situation, even when things look to be at their most pathetic or uncontrollable – that is beyond the moment of prayer.

Peter, of course, thinks that his miraculous release from prison is all a bit of an illusion...

He's half asleep... hardly awake... and here he is hurtling towards the door of the jail with an angel on his arm!

No wonder he thinks it's all a dream... We are in total sympathy with him...

It's not until he's standing outside the jail that he knows that God has been there. Again, that's often true for when it comes to understanding answered prayer... It's often only later that we come to realise that God has been there...

So, Peter shakes himself down and he goes to the one place – to the house of Mary, the mother of John where he must have been fairly certain that he would find his fellow apostles together.

They are praying... Well, we knew they would be...!

Except that, even with Peter standing outside of the house, they don't quite twig that on this occasion that God might just have answered their prayers in a pretty spectacular way.

Goodness me – Rhoda, the servant girl mentioned in the story - is so shocked and excited that she even forgets to let Peter through the door. He's still standing outside whilst they – inside – are still praying for Peter's release.

OK – so none of us are perfect. Their response is quite reassuring.

God is busy doing big things... huge things and it doesn't even rate on our spiritual Richter scale until, that is, the answer to prayer is staring us in the face – just as Peter has to be seen, just like, interestingly enough, Jesus himself had to be seen and touched.

Glad...! Peter must have been so glad that day that these friends of his decided to pray for him...

**Let us pray.**

### Closing Prayer

Father God, we thank you that do indeed answer prayer. Sometimes the answer comes in a moment of stark realisation. Sometimes it is in a still small voice. Sometimes the answer is yes... or no... or not yet. However, we acknowledge that you do listen to us and, as we have been pondering today, we thank you for the privilege of not only praying for ourselves but also for others.

So, as we draw these moments to a close, we do indeed pray for others.

We pray for those who are waiting for their own answer to prayer in the midst of their complex lives and who wonder what the future holds for them. May the steadiness of your presence allow them, as it did for Peter, that opportunity for peace in the midst of uncertain days.

We pray for leaders in our world at this time, especially within our own country and community. Lord we are taught to pray for those in authority and so we ask that you would give to them wisdom to make informed choices, especially at moments such as these when lockdown restrictions are gently easing.

And be with those for whom that same easing of lockdown brings an accompanying anxiety, for those – for each of us – who have lived very different days in recent months and harboured surging emotions and concerns for our loved ones and ourselves.

Grant us peace and the wisdom to make the right choices for ourselves at the moment which is right for us.

Bless your church in these days that she may bring that word of peace to a struggling world, holding high the message of divine compassion.

And may that same message and blessing be given this day, and every day, to those who are ill or lonely or who walk uncertain paths in their lives.

Lord, you answer our prayers - not always in ways we expect or in the ways we want - but hear us, we pray, as we bring these our prayers to you in the knowledge that you hear not just the words of our mouths but the very prayers of our hearts.

In Jesus name we ask it, Amen.

### Benediction

*Let us go now not to serve ourselves but to serve others, not to seek our own glory but the Glory of God, and so may all we are and all we do make known the name of Jesus Christ.*

*And may the blessing of Almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you and all whom you love this day and forevermore, Amen.*