



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 12:1-25

“The God who Smites, or Release and Retribution”

TRANSCRIPT

There are some interesting things that have been said regarding prayer, which is one of the major lessons of the passage that we will be looking at today. In our society of today and in the past, not long ago, one of the well-known periodicals contained within it this comment in an article on “What’s happening to prayer” a reference to a book written by one of the leading evangelical theologians of today, in which he said, “An informed Protestant commentator says that, ‘Many Christians today, including theologians, openly acknowledge that their prayer life is virtually non-existent.’” What a confession on the part of well-known Christians, including theologians, to say that their prayer life as virtually non-existent.

That really is a confession of the lack of the possession of spiritual life. As one of the Puritans put it, a couple of hundred years ago, they seem to have had more contact with the doctrine and the practice of praying, “Praying is the same to the new creature as crying is to the natural. The child is not learned by art or example to cry, but instructed by nature. It comes into the world crying. Prayer is not a lesson got by forms and rules of art; but flowing from principles of new life, itself.” So when we have Christians who are not praying, we have Christians who may be only professing Christians after all because the natural response of the believing heart, like crying is the natural result of the possession of physical life.

We’re turning to Acts chapter 12, for our Scripture reading and as we shall see, this miraculous deliverance that Peter experienced from prison is related to the practice of prayer by the early Christians. chapter 12 of the book of Acts in verse 1 through verse 25, is our Scripture reading for today.

“Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.”

Now, I think, it’s important to just make this comment because we have two “James” in this chapter. This is James the Apostle; the brother of John the Apostle; the two of them being the sons of Zebedee the fisherman. And they had a little fishing business and these two son, brothers were in that fishing business, also. In a moment, we will have reference to James, the brother of our Lord, who was not a believer during our Lord’s days, but became a believer and became a leader in the church in Jerusalem. Now, verse 3:

“And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. Then were the days of unleavened bread.”

That, I think, is a bit important, because “the days of unleavened bread” is a reference to the feast that followed the feast of the Passover. Immediately after the Passover was slain, for one week the feast of unleavened bread took place. And so the time is the time of the Passover. In a moment, we’ll have reference to Easter, which in the original text is Passover not Easter. Verse 4:

“And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter [that is, after the Passover] to bring him forth to the people. Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto

God for him. And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison, and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, ‘Arise up quickly.’ And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, ‘Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals.’ And so he did. And he saith unto him, ‘Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.’ And he went out, and followed him; and wist not [that is ‘knew not’] that it was true, which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second ward, [or guard] they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. And when Peter was come to himself he said, ‘Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.’ And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.”

Now, this Mary who is mentioned here is the mother of John Mark, who was the first cousin of Barnabas. And so this Mary is related to Barnabas was his sister. You can see in the early church, there were quite a few family relationships that, obviously, arose out of the conversion of the individuals.

“And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.”

Perhaps a young slave girl, brought from the island of Cypress by Barnabas and Mary and their family.

“And when she knew Peter’s voice, she opened not the gate for gladness but ran in and told how Peter stood before the gate. And they said unto her, ‘Thou art mad.’ But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, ‘It is his angel.’ But Peter continued knocking and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished. And he beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Go shew these things unto James [now, that is James the brother of the Lord] and to the brethren.’ And he departed, and went into another place. Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode. And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and having made Blastus the king’s chamberlain their friend. [Now, that’s nice language but what the really means is they paid him a bribe.] They made him their friend and then they sued for peace desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king’s country. And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration [or a speech] unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, ‘It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.’ And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.”

I love those descriptions. [Laughter] There is a touch of reality to things in the Scriptures. It’s impossible in an audience like this to talk about the disease that this individual had. Some Christian physicians have commented upon the language of this Christian physician who wrote this book. But this was not a nice way to die.

“But the Word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.”

Now, in verse 25, it states, “And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem.” In most of the more recently edited Greek manuscripts, it is not “from” but “to Jerusalem,” “Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem,” and the reference is to their coming with money to help the poor saints in Jerusalem. If, on the other hand, and there are good manuscripts that have this reading that is found in the Authorized Version and I think the New American Standard Bible, as well, if we are to read, “Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem,” well then, the reference is to what is stated at the end of chapter 11, “And they finished their task and they went back to Antioch.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Our Heavenly Father, we approach Thee through the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and how encouraged we are to read of the answer to the prayers of the church in Jerusalem that were so marvelously answered because we know, Lord, that Thou dost answer our prayers just as certainly as theirs were answered. And we thank Thee that the answer was ‘yes’ in their case and we hope, Lord, if it should be Thy will, that the answer shall be ‘yes’ to our petitions, too. We bring before Thee the whole church of Jesus Christ and today, Lord, we ask Thy blessing upon the whole body, those who have by Thy grace come to rest and rely upon the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. May Thy blessing, Lord, rest upon each one of them. We know there are many stages of spiritual knowledge and spiritual growth and development and maturity in the church of Christ, but we pray that by Thy grace Thou wilt today and in the days of this week cause the saints of God to grow and develop and to be useful and fruitful.

We pray for our country. We ask, Lord, Thy blessing upon our president and as we enter this new year and this new administration, we pray, Lord, that Thy hand may be upon the United States of America for its safety and for its good and, especially, for the preaching of the Word of God and the freedom of giving testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Thee, Lord, for Believers Chapel and its ministry; for our elders and for our deacons and for our members and friends. We pray, Lord, Thy blessing upon each one of them. We give Thee thanks for the ministries that Thou hast given to

this assembly of believers. And, O God, if it should please Thee, may Thy hand be upon that ministry continually, for good.

We thank Thee for the past; we pray, Lord, that we may be useful to Thee in the days that lie ahead. We thank Thee for those whose names are listed in our Calendar of Concern, and we would particularly pray for them. Encourage them, sustain them, give healing where healing is desired and needed, guide and direct, Lord, in the lives of all of those who have those specific problems mentioned there. And for those whose names may not be on the Calendar of Concern, but who also have great needs, Lord, we bring them to Thee, too. We are grateful that we have such a sovereign God, such an all-knowing God and all-caring God. We are grateful and thankful. And, Father, if there should be someone in this audience who if, by Thy grace, has been brought to the conviction of sin, may today be the day that they flee to Him who offered the atoning sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ, and receive forgiveness of sins. We pray Thy blessing upon us as we sing and then as we hear the Word. And we ask Thy blessing upon the meeting this evening.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Perhaps you noticed in the reading of the Scripture this morning, in Acts chapter 12, the two-fold mention of that verb “smite” for we read in verse 7, “And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shone in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side.” And then, near the end of the chapter, when Herod is making his speech and the crowd is shouting, “It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.” We read, “And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him.” Now, those two words are the same word, of course, in the original text, but they express the subject of the message this morning, it's “The God who Smites, or Release and Retribution.” For he smites both in release and in retribution; in one case, in the release of the Apostle Peter; in the other, in divine retribution upon King Herod Agrippa the First.

This chapter provides us with some interesting puzzles. Perhaps, in the reading of the Scripture or thinking about it, you may have wondered about some of these puzzles as well. We have

here a reference to the first Apostolic Martyr. Now, I know that when we read through the book of Acts we realize that Stephen was martyred. We can say of him that in the book of Acts, he appears to be the first Christian martyr. But Stephen was not an apostle. He was not an official of the whole church. James, the brother of John, was an apostle of Jesus Christ. A couple of chapters are devoted to Stephen, but only a sentence to James, the apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ. The simple words are, “And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” One would naturally ask the question, why is so much space devoted to Stephen, and why so little devoted to James, the brother of John? You can think of all kinds of reasons.

One might suggest reasons like, well, Peter was going to be much more fruitful and so, therefore, it’s important to lay stress upon Peter. And that’s the reason that the Lord kept Peter and brought James home. One might also say we don’t understand the level of life of these two men. Perhaps James, the brother of our Lord, was a remarkably mature Christian and ready for heaven, and so the Lord took him. But Peter needs a great deal of growing to do and so, consequently, he was left. We sometimes think that if a person is taken quickly, and there are all kinds of illustrations of this, you might tend to think that those who were taken quickly as Christians and who do not get to live out their lives, are those that have manifested great maturity; and, therefore, they’re ready for heaven.

Now, there have been some remarkable cases in which it does seem as if that’s probably the case, but on the other hand, I know you have seen cases that seem just the opposite. Some very immature people have also been taken to heaven quickly and some mature ones have been left here for a long time. Think of John the Apostle, who outlived all of his contemporaries. You wouldn’t expect that. He, certainly, was a remarkably mature Christian. The facts are that we really do not appreciate what death is and that to which death introduces us. Listen to the Psalmist who says, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” And so, consequently, when James the Apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ is taken, and Peter is left, we shouldn’t assume thereby that Peter has the best of this. As a matter of fact, it may be James who has much the best of it. In fact, I think,

if you'd asked James, after this had taken place, he'd say, “Well, I'm sorry for Peter. He's got to live out his life down there but I'm in the presence of the Lord and what a wonderful thing this is.”

You can learn from this, also, how little the Bible cares for its heroes. James was a true hero. He was an apostle of Jesus Christ, a faithful apostle, one who gave his life for the Lord's testimony. And so, he's a genuine hero; the first of the apostles to give his life for his testimony to Jesus Christ. But the Bible has the simple words, “And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” So the Bible does not propagandize its heroes and that impresses us with the truthfulness of the Scriptural record.

About the time of the visit of the prophets, mentioned in chapter 11 in verse 27, to Antioch, there arose in Jerusalem a third persecution of the young church, related perhaps to the conversion of the Gentiles described in chapters 10 and 11, by Peter and that as he spoke about that which happened in Cornelius' house. Its instigator was a vain politician by the name of Herod Agrippa the First, a very evil man; a man who had been brought up in Rome, a friend of some of the Roman emperors, a friend of Caligula, before he became the Roman emperor; then, also, instrumental in the helping of Claudius, a later Roman emperor. And as a result of his experiences in Rome, he was given certain political responsibilities and certain political positions in the land of Palestine and, finally, came to the place of authority where he can be called, Herod the King. Herod Agrippa the First, a very vile and vain politician. He's the character that lies in the background of this account in Acts chapter 12. Of course, the primary story of Acts chapter 12, is the deliverance of the Apostle Peter from prison. This is one of the last views, incidentally, of Peter in the book of Acts and one of the last views of the city of Jerusalem because the Christian movement moves on toward the west. Antioch in Syria becomes the headquarters of the Christian movement, rather than Jerusalem and the Gospel goes out from there to the Gentiles.

Now, Luke, as he tells the story, mentions that James, the brother of the Lord was killed with the sword. Our dreams are often disappointed. One might think that James' dreams were disappointed here because if you look back in the gospel record and you'll find a rather interesting

occurrence. I know you're familiar with it, but perhaps you've never associated it with this particular chapter. But in the course of the description of our Lord's earthly ministry, you'll remember that the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, came to our Lord; perhaps they had their mother speak for them because in one of the accounts it's the mother who speaks and, in the other account it's the two men who speak. And so we assume that probably the mother spoke for them. They had caused her to go to our Lord thinking that perhaps if she went to the Lord, she would have more affect upon the Lord than they. But they went to the Lord and they said to him, “Master, we would that Thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire.” Can you imagine someone asking the Lord that? You've never done that? Have you? And he said unto them, “What would ye that I should do for you?” They said unto Him, “Grant unto us that we may sit, one on Thy right hand and the other on Thy left hand, in Thy glory.” So they had it all worked out. The Kingdom, what better place to be than one on the right hand and one on the left, the brothers of our Lord.

Now, the Lord said unto them, “You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink of the cup that I drink of and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Now, that's a reference to his death, and he's talking about the horror of the death that he will face, for no one ever faced the death that Jesus Christ faced. Other men die physically, as James does in this chapter; our Lord died physically and spiritually, bearing the eternal judgment of a Holy God, upon sin. Now, notice the confident reply that James and John give. They said unto him, “We can.” We can do it. We can share the death that you are to die. And Jesus said, “You shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of and with the baptism that I am baptized with all shall ye be baptized. But to sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared.”

Well, that was a dream that was shattered, in one sense, for James and John; but yet, now, James is called by Herod Agrippa the First, and he is ushered into the presence of our Lord, no doubt triumphantly as an individual who has given his testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ. So, really, if you were to ask James, was your dream realized? Well, he would have said, “No, not quite in the way that I anticipated. I'm glad, now, that it never was answered in that way. I'm glad that I got a 'no'

answer to that, but I am overjoyed to be in the presence of our Lord.” We have such different views and such wrong views about what death really is for believers in Jesus Christ.

Now, Herod was very pleased with the fact that he had been able to take James, the apostle of Jesus Christ, one of the Twelve, and put him to death; and the Jews rejoiced over that. And Herod was anxious to have a little more favor with the Jews and so he thought, “I’ll take another one of those apostles,” and so he put his hand upon Peter when he saw that it was pleasing to the Jewish leaders. And he put him in prison and he put to guard him “four quaternions of soldiers.” Elaborate precautions were made and that is quite a compliment on Herod’s part. And when one thinks about the little flock of believers that our Lord speaks about, to put four quaternions of soldiers to guard him is certainly remarkable. One on either side of him and two doors guarded by soldiers; and this, all the hours of the day. It’s amazing. But, of course, if we think about what the little flock had; why, they had the privilege of prayer. And in having the privilege of prayer, they were able to lay hold upon the Lord God.

Now, it was a tribute to the power of Peter and the early church to put four quaternions of soldiers guarding him; but what are four quaternions of soldiers when the power of the Lord God is involved. As Tennyson’s Galahad says, “My strength is as the strength of ten, because my heart is pure.” Well that is a bit priggish, but the Old Testament does say that “One shall put a thousand to flight, and when that one is one with the power of God, one thousand is a small number to be put to flight.” In this case, we have prayer, made by the church without ceasing. That’s the statement of verse 5. Peter was kept in prison, “but prayer,” marvelous two words, “but prayer,” put him under guard, put soldiers all around him, keep the soldiers there all the time, “But prayer was made without ceasing by the church unto God for him.” That “without ceasing,” may be the meaning; or it may be simply, earnestly. But the earnest prayer of the early church involves the constant praying on the part of the church.

Now, we read in verse 6, “When Herod would have brought him forth,” that is, he wanted to bring him forth and perhaps torture him a bit and then put him to death, “the same night Peter

was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.” Would you have been sleeping on an occasion like that? I don’t think I would. I think this is one night I would have found it difficult to sleep. Wonder what Peter was thinking? Well, perhaps, he’d been reflecting on John 21:18, where the Lord had said to him, a few weeks before this, “Now, Peter, the day is coming when you’re going to be taken where you don’t want to go.” And perhaps Peter was thinking, “Now is the time for my death.” The Lord Jesus alluded to that, after his resurrection. “So, my time has now come.” But having something of the faith of a true believers, he was sleeping even though he may have been reflecting while awake on the fact that his death was near at hand. He knew the Psalms. He knew the statements that the angel of the Lord encamps around about them that fear him. And so he had, evidently, committed himself into the hand of the Lord and was resting in what was God going to do for him. The latter part of that statement of Psalm 34, by the way, says that the angel of the Lord encamps around them that fear him and delivereth them. And, in this case, Peter will experience both of these. So he is sleeping between the soldiers. I wonder what the soldiers were doing? But we don’t know about that.

There’s a beautiful little story about a man who had three little girls. And he asked one of his three little girls, who had just gone to bed, if she had said her prayers. And she said to him, “No, Father, I haven’t said my prayers.” He asked her if she were not afraid to go to sleep without having prayed. And she said, “Not tonight, Father, for it’s my turn to sleep in the middle.” [Laughter]

Well, John Robertson, who was later on the head of the great ecclesiastical presbytery of the Church of Scotland, in the city of Edinburgh, told that story. And he told it after he had been the head of the presbytery there. And he said, later, he said, “You know when I was the head of the presbytery and very important in the Church of Scotland, I didn’t feel the need that I feel now, of turning to the Lord. But,” he said, “I feel the need now to cry to God. I’m no longer in the middle. I need to wait upon him; and I can’t do that without the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Of course, it’s much better to do that, when you are beginning your Christian life and to continue it all along, than wait until some difficult times come for you. But, Peter is sleeping, very

contented, like our Lord in the boat on the Sea of Galilee, in the midst of the storm and they are disturbed, but he's sleeping. His spirit is right with the Lord. “And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shone in the prison,” nobody was awakened by the light. “And Peter was smitten on his side by the angel.” Peter was sleeping soundly. You know, some of you? If I were to go in the room where you were sleeping and turn on a little light, you'd jump up, because you don't sleep that well, do you? Some of you, I see, are smiling because that's characteristic of you. But Peter, with the light of the angel shining in the prison is still sleeping. The rest are sleeping by the determination of God. So the angel smites him on the side and raises him up. And he doesn't say, “Now, Peter, get out of here as fast as you can. And when you cut out of here, turn right.” Doesn't say, “Take it on the lamb,” or anything like that. Omnipotence is never in any hurry. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is staid on Thee.” And the angel is perfectly content and Peter is told to get up, he's told to put on his clothes, that's really the meaning of “gird thyself” but on your girdle, put on your clothes, and don't take your shoes and run out with your shoes in your hands, Peter. That's not nice for people who are the object of God's supernatural deliverance. Put on your shoes. And so, Peter has to put on his sandals. He's ready to grab his coat and run, I'm sure, and the angel said, “Don't do that Peter. Throw your coat around you. Go out like an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

And so he goes out and the angel when he got outside, Peter had followed him and, you know, as Peter was going out, he wondered if this thing was really true. He felt maybe I'm seeing another vision like I did on the rooftop of Simon the tanner's house. But when he got out, he saw after he had passed the first and the second ward and the iron gate opened of its own accord and they went out into the street. And when the angel left, he realized the whole thing was really a supernatural deliverance from the Lord.

Now, isn't it interesting, by the way, how the angel didn't take Peter to Mary's house and knock on the door for him, or open the door for him, so he could go in the midst of that prayer

meeting. There would have been utter confusion in the prayer meeting because half of them would have raced out of the house to get away from that ghost, which they thought they would have seen.

One of the old Puritans, one of those great old Calvinistic Puritans, one of those great old Calvinists, one of those great old Christians, one of those people you know about, the man who is all of this, his name was John Bunyan. Mr. Bunyan said, “You can do more than pray after you have prayed; but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.” So when the angel got him out, it’s now up to Peter to find the house. And Peter found the house and he arrives at the house and he’s knocking on the door. And when Rhoda came to see who was at the door and Peter said, “Open the door,” she recognized his voice. She was so overjoyed by the fact that it was Peter; she forgot to open the door. And so she ran back into the meeting and she said, “Peter’s out there.” And how do you think these Christians, full of faith, praying to the Lord, knowing that God answers prayer, how do you think they responded? Well, you’ve already read it. They said she’s crazy. She’s mad. The last thing they expected was the answer to their prayers. And so they first of all offer a little bit of rationalism. She’s mad. Unbelief alloys even golden faith. Now, when she kept constantly affirming, “Peter’s out there,” then they try a little superstition. They say, “It’s his angel who’s out there.” So the last thing they thought of was to say, “God has answered our prayers.” But, fortunately, God’s answer kept knocking. That’s the way it often is with us. He keeps knocking until finally, it dawns upon his faithless Christians, who have the faith to pray to the Lord God. Well, there’s a time to pray and a time to act. And the time to act had come, to go open the door and let the apostle in. There is a time to pray and there’s a time to act.

I like that old story about the little girl who was disturbed by her brother. He kept catching little animals in his traps and that seemed very bad to her. She thought that was a horrible practice. He’d catch these animals and then he would taunt them and usually kill them. She went to her mother and she said, “Mommy, what can we do about brother, he keeps catching all these little innocent animals.” And Mother said, “Go pray about it.” So she prayed about it and she came back and she said, “Now, he won’t be catching anymore of those animals.” This is just a little bit later.

Mother said, “You prayed about it?” She said, “Yes, I prayed about it.” She said, “Well, how do you know he’s not going to be catching anymore?” She said, “I smashed all his traps.” [Laughter] So there is a time to pray and there is a time to act and the church had prayed and now was the time to act; go open the door.

And so they opened the door, finally, and Peter then told them the whole story. I like the way Peter put this. He told “how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.” Now, actually, the text says it was the angel that brought him out of the prison; but Peter recognizes that lying back of the activities of the angel is the Lord God and so he traces it to the Lord. He “declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.” That’s so beautiful because, remember, as we’ve been saying over and over, going through Acts, Luke tells us right in the first couple of verses, that this book is a story of the continued ministry of our Lord in doing and teaching. And this is some of our Lord’s continued doing, though he’s not here in the flesh. So Peter told the whole story and they were astonished at what had happened. Think of that! Astonished! Astonished at answered prayer! Have you ever been astonished at answered prayer? Well, probably you have, if you’re a Christian and you’ve been praying. You probably have been astonished. And in this case, they were astonished because they got such a nice affirmative answer so quickly.

Now, of course, we need as Christians to remember that the answers of God are not always “yes.” And the fact that he answers us in a particular way, sometimes by a negative, sometimes he seems to be absolutely silent, these are just as much answers as those quick affirmatives. And it’s helpful for us to remember that and to wait on the Lord because he has the best interests of his saints at heart.

So they were astonished. Someone finally realized that spirits find it to hammer on doors and they went there. They didn’t reason it out that way. I know that there probably was somebody there who was going to be a philosopher, a Christian philosopher later on. He probably thought now, there’s a noise out there and spirits don’t make noises like that. They don’t stand before doors and hit ‘em like this. So there must be a man out there. So anyway, they went out and they got him and

Peter told the story. And now, after it's over, he said in verse 17, “Go show these things unto James,” that is, the leader of the church there or one of the leaders of the church, the brother of the Lord, and to the brethren. And then, Peter, wise man that he was, he departed and went into another place. Like John Knox, the leader, Reformer, who always found it a work of faith to retreat every now and then. And so when he got into difficulty that was one reason Knox lived for a little bit longer than some other Reformers, he was sensible enough to realize that when he got in a place where he was almost sure to lose his neck, he decided the best thing was to retreat a little bit and he could come back and fight again. And that's exactly what Knox did. And, that's what Peter did because he knew if he was going to hang around Jerusalem with Herod Agrippa the King, the chances are he would find his way back into that prison. So we read, “And he departed and went in to another place.”

Now, “As soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers.” You can imagine. What had become of Peter? And the two soldiers can you not hear the conversation between them. “We had him last night. He was tied to both of us with a chain. We've got a man at one door and a man at another door, and we have the iron gate outside and that fellow is not here.” You can just imagine that there was a state of confusion, “no small stir among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter,” because they knew that that meant their life. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers and he commanded that they should be put to death, then he went down from Judaea to Caesarea and there he was living.

Now, Luke tells another story here. The time reference is not given. It probably was somewhere near that time because he wants you to understand what happens to people like Herod Agrippa, ultimately. So the death of Herod is described here. And you remember the text in the Psalms that says, “Surely the wrath of men shall praise thee.” And so the story is a simple one. Herod was displeased with some people with Tyre and Sidon with the people there, and they came because they were dependent upon Herod and they bribed Blastus, the chamberlain of the king. He was the person who had control of the king's bedroom and all of the personal affairs of the king. And so they

put some money in his palm, like they do south of the border and like they do north of the border, too, for that matter. And like they do in so much of our society today, they put bribes in the hand of Blastus, and then they sued for peace because their country was nourished by the king's country. And so on a certain day, Herod arrayed in his royal apparel, maybe he was going to make some kind of proclamation of his reference to Tyre and Sidon, we don't know exactly what it was but he made an oration to the crowd. And the people gave a shout saying, “It's the voice of god, and not of a man!” Oh, the hollowness of human flattery.

We have, you know, we live in a day of sports, everybody loves sports. There's nothing wrong with loving sports. But, you know, we can love things like sports so that we really provide all kinds of temptations for human beings who are unable to stand the test. And so we have an instance recently of one of the sports figures of the Dallas community engaging in an act that certainly is not a very nice kind of act. And so his story is put on the paper on the pages of the paper. In fact, we've had several, recently. And, today, in the *Dallas Morning News*, there's an article by one of the sports editors, who comments upon this. But, nevertheless, the thing that impressed me yesterday was that here is an individual who, really, has engaged in an act that's a kind of a personal disgrace. And I admire the man because he's confessed his sin. He came back to this city and made his confession. I certainly admire the courage of this man.

But, nevertheless, what does this sports writer say? “He's a good fellow.” Over and over again, “He's a good fellow.” We don't have to do things like that. We don't have to say, “He's a good fellow.” As a matter of fact, the Bible says, “There is none good, no, not one.” We don't have to say things like that. We can be compassionate and we can be sympathetic because we know we are liable for the same kinds and degrees of sin. But we don't have to say, “He's a good fellow.” We don't have to say of Herod Agrippa the First when he makes a speech, “This is the voice of a god, and not of a man.” We can say, “It's a nice speech.” Why do we have to say, “It's the voice of a god and not a man.” And, in this case, the crowd shouted, “It's the voice of a god and not of a man!” Oh the hollowness of human flattery. “And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him because he gave

not God the glory, and he was eaten of worms and he gave up the ghost.” That’s fitting; I like that. He was not a good man. He was an evil man. A very evil man, all of us are evil men. Here’s one who excelled in evil, and he died the kind of death that he should have died. So, the Lord smote him. He didn’t give God the glory. Eaten of worms. The kind of cancer of which he probably died is the most unpleasant of all. “But,” Luke says, “The Word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem.”

Let me conclude with just a couple of comments. One notices, of course, the efficacy of prayer. In fact, the omnipotence of prayer. One of the striking things about theological seminaries is you rarely ever see any course on proseuchology. In fact, you probably have not heard the term. *proseuchomai* is the Greek word that means “to pray.” The most common word in the New Testament. Proseuchology is discourse on prayer. In almost all systematic theologies, there is no section on proseuchology. Soteriology, theology proper, pneumatology, ecclesiology, eschatology, no proseuchology. Sometimes it is said, “Well, that’s the application of Christian truth,” and there is some truth in that. And I’m not blaming all theologians for not having an area of their theology devoted to proseuchology. Many of them have written other books about prayer; but I only comment upon this because there is so little stress upon the importance of human prayer.

The angel fetched Peter out of the prison, one of the Puritans said, “But it was prayer that fetched the angel.” How many things could be accomplished if we truly prayed? How many meetings? We’ve had a lot of them in Believers Chapel. We have about as few as any church. We’re not like the person who was converted and a friend went to her afterwards and asked her what church she wanted to join. She just said, “I’d like to join the Baptist church, but I’m not so sure my health could stand it,” referring to the many meetings that they had in the Baptist church. Somebody was there every night. Well, we have many meetings, too. We have meetings on Sunday. We have three or four meetings on Sunday. And so we go to our meetings, feverishly, nervously, powerlessly, rush to and fro unprepared, unanointed, unfulfilled and unsuccessful. God does not reveal himself to man on the jump. And Ruth Paxson, who wrote that statement also has another very vivid statement

in connection with it. She said, “He doesn’t manifest his glory to the spiritual tourist; but to the one who comes up to him on the mount. The reflected glory of Moses’ face as he came from his forty days communion with God was not produced by a snapshot, but by a timed exposure.” That’s what we need a timed exposure in prayer and devotion to the Lord God.

There is another thing that one notices here, and that is the adequacy of the presence of the Lord. Peter was so sure, it seems, of the presence of the Lord with him in this trial, that he could sleep. He could sleep because he knew that the Lord God, who was the God of Israel, neither slumbered nor slept. And, therefore, he could trust in him. I wonder if through this experience Peter learned the truth of that great text that he writes in his first letter, “Casting all our care upon Him, for He careth for you.” James Russell Lowell said, “God is always I am, never I was.” And Peter had come to know the truth of that.

Now, one final thing, notice the certainty of sovereign retribution. Herod the king slew James the Apostle of Jesus Christ. But it’s Herod the king who is smitten at the end. The angel smote Peter to give him deliverance. The angel smote Herod Agrippa in divine retribution. “The voice of a god and the voice not the voice of a man?” No. The voice of a vile and vain buffoon and God smote him.

Not too many years ago, Edmund Leach, the provost of King’s College, Cambridge, declared that, quote, “Men have become like gods and should behave as such.” How blasphemous. But we live in a society in which that is really the attitude of many. It would be good for us over and over again, to read Psalm 73. It’s a magnificent Psalm and it describes, of course, the problem that Christians and others have with the fact that it looks as if society doesn’t have any judgment, whatsoever.

Listen to the Psalmist. He says:

“For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued

like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily.”

It almost seems as if evil does win in the end. You know, I love the comic page. I can hardly get through a day without that. I have to go up to Chicago two or three days a week and I don't have any access to the comic page then. It's terrible to be without your comic page. It's like the cup of coffee that some people have.

But yesterday, I came back on Friday, I came back at night and asked for the comic page and Martha showed it to me. And I read Croc is one of my favorite ones. I like Croc. He's so bad. So bad. And I love that swashbuckling enemy of his, who has that long sword hanging off of his side and he's standing out and he's yelling at Croc, in his little fort, and he's saying, “Give up, Croc. You know that evil always wins over good in the end.” And Croc's assistant, a simple guy standing by, that said, “He considers you to be good, Sir.” And then Croc says, “I wonder where I've gone wrong?” [Laughter]

Well, we know that evil does lose in the end. And so in this case evil loses in the end and the Psalmist, he's talking about how marvelous everybody seems to have it, but then in the 17th verse, he said, “When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me.” I look and I see all of these people riding around in Mercedes and I'm riding around in a Pinto and they've got a Mercedes or Lincoln or whatever. And then he said, “It was so painful for me; until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.” And he goes on to talk, not only about their end, but about the glorious end of those whose faith, by the grace of God, is in the Lord God.

Did you notice the time? It's the Passover time. That was the time when Israel was delivered and Pharaoh died in the waters of the Red Sea. God smote Israel for deliverance and God smote Pharaoh with his death. The fact that this occurred at the Passover time is almost intended as an

illustration of the great fact that by virtue of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the saints of God have deliverance and those who refuse must suffer, finally, divine retribution.

And this morning, I'd like to remind all of us of the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ has become, by the grace of God, the Lamb of God. And those who put the blood on the doorposts and the upper post of the door have deliverance when the destroying angel comes through. And those who have not turned to him have no hope of deliverance.

May, by God's marvelous grace, he move in your heart. And may, as a result of the working of the Holy Spirit in effectual grace, from the divine elective love of God, may you come to the Lord Jesus Christ and cast yourself upon him, with all of your sin and uncleanness and receive, by virtue of the blood that was shed, forgiveness of sins. Don't leave this auditorium without the assurance of everlasting life. May God help you to come to Christ. You can do that so simply in your heart, by simply saying, “Lord, I know I'm a sinner. I know that I have offended a holy God. The Scriptures say Christ has died for sin, and salvation is offered to sinners. Lord, by Thy grace, I receive the gift of eternal life and the forgiveness of sins.”

May God help you in your heart, personally, to make that decision. Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Heavenly Father, we thank Thee that the same God who opened those prison doors, opens the prison doors of human sin and gives deliverance and life today. O God, we worship Thy name. We praise Thee. We acknowledge we are lost sinners, evil and undone. We thank Thee for the grace that has received us, through Christ. Lord, may no one leave this auditorium without the assurance of eternal life.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.