

DON'T KNOCK A KNOCKING CHURCH

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October 4, 2009

Mt. 7:7; Acts 12:1-19

Here in Mark's Book of Acts we are shown the 3rd persecution of the church, the Herodian Persecution under Herod Agrippa I. The first persecution was by the Sadducees, and the second was by the Pharisees. This is the third persecution under arrogant King Agrippa, the son of Aristobulus and the grandson of Herod the Great. His father, Aristobulus, was murdered by his grandfather, Herod the Great.

Agrippa had been brought up in Rome for his safety, and helped Caligula become the emperor after the death of Tiberius, and was rewarded by being made king of the tetrarchy of Philip, and later Caligula added to that Galilee and Perea. Then when Caligula was killed, Herod Agrippa worked with the Roman senate and helped Claudius become emperor. Consequently, Claudius added to Agrippa's dominion Judea and Samaria.

Agrippa was of both Edomite and Jewish ancestry through his grandfather and father, but he wanted to please the Jews by martyring the apostle James, brother of John, and by arresting Peter to make him the second apostle martyred. Agrippa was trying to please the Jews also by putting Peter in prison during the Passover season, so as not to mar that holy observance, and then to bring him forth to the people for execution after Passover. His plans were thwarted, however, by a Knocking Church.

A Knocking Church Is, First of All, A CHURCH THAT BASES ITS FAITH UPON THE PROMISES OF GOD. One of the first of Jesus' teachings was that of Matthew 7:7, "Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you." Prayer is simply, according to Jesus, a knock at Heaven's Door by children of the Heavenly Father. He will give when we ask; He will help us to find what we seek; and when we knock on Heaven's Door, Heaven's King will open the door *personally* so that we may come in and sup with Him and He with us.

Not only will He give us whatever we ask in faith, He will give us more abundantly than we have room to receive. There was abundance at the Wedding of Cana! There was abundance at the Feeding of the Five Thousand! And there was abundance and superabundance on the Day of Pentecost! Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 18:18-20: ¹⁸ "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." ¹⁹ "Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." ²⁰ "For where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst of them."

Clearly, then, Jesus is teaching His disciples that He will answer their prayers, that when they knock at Heaven's Door, Heaven's King will answer that knock and open

the door. Now, notice how these words are again taught in the hours before His crucifixion in John 14: ¹¹ “Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works’ sake.” ¹² “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.” ¹³ “And whatsoever ye shall ask in my Name, that will I do that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” ¹⁴ “If ye shall ask any thing in my Name, I will do it.” ¹⁵ “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”

Now let us reason for just a moment why Peter was released from his bonds and escaped martyrdom at the hands of Agrippa. The answer to that is in that early church, meeting in the house of Mary the mother of John Mark, in the very Upper Room where the Holy Spirit made His initial descent on human flesh. Joel’s promise that the Spirit would come upon all flesh was first of all fulfilled with the Jews in this very Upper Room where the Christians were praying.

Praying? Yes! What were they praying for? Listen: Acts 12:1-5 ¹ “Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the church.” ² “And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” ³ “And because that he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) ⁴ “And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quarters of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.” ⁵ Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

It did not occur to the early church that God could not do all things! They believed that God could indeed do all things! Perhaps the martyrdom of James caused some to doubt; but overall the Church believed, and therefore prayed. They no doubt prayed for James. But God had a greater ministry for him, and they accepted that. He was the first Apostle martyred, and the second disciple after Stephen martyred for the Name of Jesus. The church filled with the Pentecost fire did believe. They also believed that God was in control, and that He would answer their prayers according to His will. They believed that somehow God would free Simon Peter. They believed in the Miraculous Power of God.

I am afraid that some Christians have lost that faith. A Supernatural God, an Almighty God, is *able* to do whatever He chooses, because along with His Power is His Knowledge, He knows all things, as well. When the Church prays, it prays to a God who can indeed do all things, but will do only what is Best. The Church was a Knocking Church—they *prayed* in surrender to His will!

Notice that when Peter was miraculously freed from the chains of prison and the doors of the prison were open—you can’t knock a knocking church!—the church was still knocking. Their knocking opened Heaven; their knocking opened the doors of the prison; and they were still knocking. Listen to verse 12: “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.

While Peter was in prison, in verse 5, the church made continual prayer, unceasing prayer unto God for Peter. When Peter knocked at the door of Mary, the church was in prayer for him, knocking at heaven's door for him. Not all the church, for with the thousands that had been saved, the Upper Room could not hold them all. "Many were gathered together praying." I remind you anew of Jesus' statement that if two agreed it would be done, and that where two or three were gathered together in His Name, He would be there in the midst of them. It should be, but the church doesn't have to be all the members, but the most faithful must continue to pray unceasingly, for that is the will of God.

The Bible tells us that GIVING opens the windows of heaven; and Jesus tells us that PRAYER opens the doors of heaven; but Luke shows us that PRAYER, BASED UPON THE PROMISES OF GOD, ALSO OPENS THE DOORS OF PRISON. Look at Simon Peter's situation. He was in a high security prison, locked in a cell, bound with two chains to two soldiers. Could anyone be in a more hopeless situation? But with a praying church, knocking at the doors of Heaven, no situation is hopeless. I might add that for a praying man or woman with faith in the Living God, and with the Name and Authority of Jesus Christ behind them, no situation is hopeless. They may need patience, but they never need lose hope!

I am reminded of my Professor of Missions, Hugo Culpepper, in whose class Martha and I met. Dr. Culpepper and his beautiful bride were commissioned by Southern Baptists to go as missionaries to China. As they were going to China, the Japanese invasion of China had taken place, and they were, as I recall, rerouted to the Philippines. There they were captured and imprisoned by the Japanese, and spent some three years in captivity. Their strong faith and their prayer life and the continual prayers of Christians sustained them. Dr. Culpepper said that the only Bible he had in prison was a Greek New Testament, so he learned Greek well there in that prison. He and the other missionaries interred there also learned to trust in Almighty God. And they learned patience as well. In God's time the prison doors were opened. God used American soldiers as His angels to open those doors, but it was faith and prayer—that continual knocking—that opened the prison doors.

Prayer also helped the prisoner Peter to be sustained in that prison. The Baptist New Testament scholar, Frank Stagg, writes in his commentary, "This is one of the happiest pictures we have of Peter; here some of his best qualities are in evidence. On the very night before his scheduled execution, Peter slept soundly. His physical courage was always equal to the test. Instead of nervously pacing the floor (with chains and all) through a sleepless night, Peter prepared for a night's sleep and was well on his way toward it when the deliverance came. He had removed his sandals and mantle and had gone soundly to sleep; the angel had to prod him in the side to awaken him."

We might well ask the question, Why was Peter so courageous? In the face of a horrendous and impending death, how could he show such courage? He reminds us of Jesus asleep in the storm aboard Peter's fishing boat. Peter's courage came from his

own knocking at heaven's door. No doubt he asked God for courage to die bravely. Doubtless also, he thought of His young comrade and leader Jesus, who died with such courage while he played the coward in the courtyard outside Herod's Palace. And he thought of his fishing buddy James, with whom he had had such a beautiful fellowship over the years, of his partnership with he and John; and then the three exciting years with Jesus that included the healings and the miracles and the promises and the Transfiguration and the Death and Resurrection and the Ascension. If James could die with such courage, Peter prayed that he might have such courage also. He went to sleep believing!

But Peter was not alone on knocking at Heaven's Door. The Church prayed for him. I often have people tell me, "I felt your prayers." I know what they are saying. They are simply affirming the strength that the prayers of other Christians give them. We need to pray for people in need of prayer. We need to pray for the people in the prison of loneliness, in the prison of illness, in the prison of addiction, in the prison of unforgiven sin. As we knock at Heaven's Door, God's angels will visit them in their prisons and knock down the doors of isolation, and free them from the sense of loneliness that they feel.

As someone wrote, "Stone walls do not a prison make Nor iron bars a cage." Many things imprison us. We are imprisoned by our own lusts. We are imprisoned by our pride. We are imprisoned by our fear of what others will think of us. We are imprisoned by our weak and sinful bodies. We are imprisoned by our shame. And when we continually knock on Heaven's Door, God is able to break down all these things that imprison us and make us slaves when we should be 'more than conquerors.'

What gave Peter the strength and the courage to sleep in the storm? Prayer! Prayer and the Presence of a Caring God! The two most powerful allies of prisoners is a Caring Church and a Caring Heavenly Father.

You can't knock a knocking church that cares enough about you and your family and your world to pray unceasingly for them, and a church that tries to answer those prayers by doing something about them with the help of Almighty God Who still performs miracles when we have the faith to expect them.

The most interesting part of our story about Peter's release is, I think, the behavior of a young maid named Rhoda. She heard Peter knocking, came to the door and recognizing Peter's voice, she ran back to the Prayer Group and told them that Peter was outside standing at the door. She was simply too excited to open the door. Would you look with me at this as the Knocking Church opening the door to the knock of opportunity? I think that is precisely what it was. Whenever we Knock at Heaven's Door, we will often find the corresponding Knock of God Knocking at Our Door. That is another way of saying that Prayer must be done with the expectation that God will answer the prayer.

There is something for us to do too. We must open the door to the opportunities that God sends to us. In a word, we must open the door whenever God knocks! Let me remind you again of the promise of Jesus in John 14: ¹⁴ “If ye shall ask any thing in my Name, I will do it.” ¹⁵ “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” The answer to prayer is conditioned by our doing something, as well. Is not Jesus saying just this: “I will answer your prayers, but you must prove your love for me by keeping my commandments.”

WHEN WE KNOCK AT HEAVEN’S DOOR, GOD ALSO KNOCKS AT OUR DOOR WITH THE ANSWER TO OUR PRAYERS.

In the case before us the answer was in the form of a man called Peter. But someone has to open the door to receive the answer. Jesus says that the answer is keeping His commandments. We keep His commandments by Loving Him. That commandment is the greatest commandment of all: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength;” That means following Jesus and doing what He said do. That means keeping the Ten Commandments; that means keeping the Sermon on the Mount; that means Keeping the Great Commission; that means doing our very best to keep all the commandments of God in the Bible. Of course we will fail, for we will not be made perfect in Love until we get to Heaven. But we must earnestly try!

The second commandment is this—Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. You see, when God knocks at our door He speaks with the voice of Peter, He comes as a man or a woman, as a boy or a girl. We were created in God’s Image, and God visits us in man’s image. That is His way. That is just another way of saying that the Church exists to serve God and to serve human kind. Was that not the case God would not have come to earth as a man called Jesus! The church must always ask the question, Who is knocking at our door? What are the needs outside our door? Are we willing to open the door to the opportunities around us?

The gathered body of Jesus Christ must continue to knock at heaven’s door, and listen for God’s answer when He knocks at our door. We must expect that from God for which we ask. “Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you.” In this particular case the church knocked and knocked and continued to knock. But when Peter knocked, they could not readily accept it! They believed, but they were shocked at the suddenness of the answer! Rhoda just represents what they all felt! What a shock it is! We pray to God and suddenly He answers our prayers and we are shocked from unbelief to incredulity. But God does answer and the answer is outside the door knocking and we must open that door.

There is the knock of human need, as I said. That includes any need that we can meet. There are lonely people outside the door that we can visit; there are sick people outside the door that we can see; there are myriad discouraged people outside the door that we can encourage; and there are hurting people outside the door knocking at the door that we can soothe with the word of God.

Listen to the words of our Lord before he warns the people who refuse to help people: ^{Mt. 25:31} When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: ³² And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: ³³ And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ For I was an hungred and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: ³⁶ Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison and ye came unto me. ... ⁴⁰ And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then there are those knocking at our door that are lost. They have not been saved. They have not been born again by the Spirit of God. They have not met our blessed Savior. They have not repented of sin and believed. They have not been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. They have not been sanctified by His Spirit, justified by His sacrifice, and so, unless they are ministered to by us, they will not be glorified when the Son of God returns. They are lost! Lost! Lost! And they have stumbled blindly to our door knocking upon it, hoping that someone will let them in. Then we let them in and explain to them that the church door is the wrong door, that Jesus is the Door, the only Door to salvation. We have the message! We have the Savior! We must respond to a broken, hurting, lost world and open to them the door at which they have blindly been knocking.

Knock and it shall be opened! That is what the church did for imprisoned Simon Peter! That is what we must do for all the imprisoned in sin! We must keep knocking at heaven's door! And when they knock at our door we must open it to them and show them the Door to Everlasting Life. Amen.