

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 7, 2010**

COMMENCE PRAYER

Acts 12:1-17

In several of his books, radio speaker, Bible teacher and pastor Chuck Swindoll tells the same story. It happened in 1968 on a flight bound for New York. As the plane began its descent, the pilot realized that the landing gear was not engaging. The pilot tried everything he could think of to get the gear to lock in place, with no success. He asked ground control for instructions. As the plane approached and circled the landing field, an emergency crew coated the runway with foam, and fire trucks and other emergency vehicles moved into place in anticipation of being needed.

The pilot alerted the passengers and kept them informed of each maneuver. In spite of their own fears, the flight attendants continued to project an air of calm, confident reserve. The passengers were instructed to place their heads between their knees, and to grab their ankles just before impact. As you can imagine, lots of them were visibly shaken. Fear was written on their faces. It was obvious in their voices. It was one of those “Oh no, not this!” experiences in life that we hope will never happen to any of us, or to anyone we love.

With the landing only moments away, the pilot came on the intercom again, and said: “We are beginning our final descent. At this moment, in accordance with the International Aviation Codes established at Geneva (Switzerland), it is my obligation to inform you that if you believe in God, you should commence prayer.”

That is a true story. The good news is that the plane’s belly landing went off about as well as it could. There was lots of damage to the airplane, but no one sustained any serious injuries. There were no deaths. Everybody made it out OK.

There is a message for us in this story amid the ever-fluctuating circumstances of life in this world. The message is not just for the crisis moments we all experience. It is not just for times of trouble, or hurt, or fear, or pain, or suffering. Not just when your back is up against some kind of wall, or something happens to turn your whole world upside-down, or you find yourself trapped in a situation you never thought would (or could) happen to you. It is a message for each of us and all of us in every season, and in all the circumstances, of this life.

The message? You heard what the pilot said: “If you believe in God, it is time to commence prayer.” There is never a time when it is not time to pray. There is never a time when we do not stand in need of prayer. There is never a time when you and I do not need the help and strength that come from God. There is never a time when it is not time to commence prayer.

Look at what was going on in Acts 12. Herod decided to score some points with the leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem, so he had James, one of the apostles, arrested and put to death. The strategy worked and his approval ratings shot up, so Herod had Peter arrested and thrown in jail, with the intention of giving him a sentence of death, too.

Do you know what Peter's fellow believers in Jerusalem did when they heard about it? Verse 5 gives us the answer: "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." They commenced prayer for Peter. And they prayed earnestly. They prayed with passion. They prayed with fervor.

WHO'S WHO

We'll come back to that shortly. Right now, I want to give you a brief rundown of "Who's Who" in this passage, because you can't always tell the players, or the actors, without a program. I don't want any of you to be confused about who's who.

First, there is Herod (12:1). He wasn't really a king, even though that is what they called him. He was the Roman governor in Jerusalem, responsible for Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. He had succeeded Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor at the time of Jesus' death. He is not the same Herod as Herod the Great, who, after learning of the birth of Jesus, ordered the slaughter of all the baby boys in Bethlehem (Matthew 2). This Herod was the grandson of that Herod (Herod the Great). Nor is he the Herod who put John the Baptist in prison and eventually agreed to John's execution when the daughter of his wife Herodias asked for the head of John on a platter (Mark 6). That Herod – Herod Antipas – was the uncle of the Herod here in Acts 12. You can see the family resemblance between them all, can't you?

Second, there is James, who was put to death in a political move by Herod to gain favor with an important constituency. He was the brother of the apostle John. They were the sons of Zebedee and, along with Peter, were part of Jesus' inner circle among the twelve disciples.

This James is not the James to whom Peter refers in verse 17. The James in verse 17 is not the brother of John, but the brother of Jesus. He was the son of Joseph and Mary, so he was actually a half-brother of Jesus. After becoming a follower of Christ, he became an important leader in the church at Jerusalem, and the New Testament Letter of James was written by him.

In addition to Peter, there is also the unnamed angel (12:7-10) sent by God to rescue Peter from prison and a likely death.

We also meet two women named Mary and Rhoda (not characters from the old Mary Tyler Moore TV show). This Mary was not Jesus' mother. This was a different Mary. She was the mother of John Mark, who would later go with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13), and would also write the Gospel of Mark. Mary was a Christian believer who opened her home as a regular meeting place for the church in Jerusalem. Some New Testament scholars think the upper room where Jesus and the disciples ate the last supper was in Mary's house.

All we know about Rhoda is that she was a young servant in Mary's home who got so excited when she heard Peter's voice at the door that she forgot to open the door and let him in.

PRAYERS AND EXPECTATIONS

Now, back to verse 5, where Peter is in prison, and the whole church is praying for him. What do you think they were praying? The passage doesn't give us any specifics. My guess is that they were praying for God's grace to sustain and strengthen Peter in the trial he was undergoing. I think they were praying that Peter's faith would remain strong, that he would not grieve the Lord by denying Him or renouncing his faith in Christ. I'm sure they were praying for his safety, for his protection in prison. I'm sure they were praying that God would protect him from fear, from doubt and despair. I'm sure they were praying, too, that Peter would not suffer the same fate as James, but that God would intervene in some way to deliver Peter from what seemed like certain death.

They prayed their hearts out for Peter. They are a great example to us in that. But do you think they really expected God to answer their prayers? Do you think they really thought God would do something God-like in response to their prayers, and rescue Peter from the clutches of Herod?

A thousand years earlier, in Psalm 5:3, David had prayed: "In the morning, O LORD ... I lay my requests before You and wait in expectation."

Do you hear that? After David presented his requests to God, what did he do? He waited in expectation. In expectation of what? It had to be in expectation of what he believed God would do. In confident expectation of the answers he believed God would give.

Do you think the people praying for Peter had any real expectation that God would answer their prayers for his deliverance? They probably thought to themselves: "We prayed for James, and look what happened to him. Why should we think it will be any different for Peter?" You can understand that kind of thinking.

We really don't have to wonder if they expected God to rescue Peter. It is obvious that they didn't, because when Rhoda excitedly told everyone at the prayer meeting that Peter himself was at the door, they all thought she was hallucinating (12:15). Nobody believed her. They had prayed. God heard and answered their prayers. But nobody expected it. None of them really believed God would do it. They all thought Peter was a goner. Everybody was surprised when they saw it was really him. Not just surprised, astonished (12:16). But there he was, flesh-and-blood proof that God does things that are humanly impossible, things that only God can do, in answer to prayer.

THEN AND NOW

That was then, this is now. That was them, this is us. (Sorry if that was not grammatically correct.) What about now? What about us? Are we any different from the believers in Jerusalem who prayed for Peter? When we pray, do we wait in expectation for what God will do? Do we really expect God to do anything when we pray? Do you?

In my life, I tend to think about prayer a lot, partly because prayer is an important part of my job description as a pastor. Part of what I love about being a pastor is that I get to talk to people about God and His Word (like I'm doing right now), and I get to talk to God about people (in prayer). I get to pray with and for you. The problem is, too often I spend more time *thinking* about praying than actually *doing* it. And sometimes, when I pray, I'm a lot like the Christians in Jerusalem. I don't really expect God to do anything big or amazing or truly God-like. I have low expectations, so I won't feel disappointed or embarrassed if (or when) God doesn't do something dramatic. Sometimes I may ask God to do something really out-of-the-ordinary or miraculous, but I don't really expect Him to do it. I would be more surprised if He did it than if He didn't. This says a whole lot more about me than it does about God. And it is wrong. *I'm* wrong.

I need to learn to wait in honest-to-goodness expectation when I pray, like David did. How about you? I need to have my vision of God, my understanding of the purposes and power of God, and my awareness of the amazing things God does enlarged. Radically. How about you?

I don't need to be convinced of what God *can* do, or *could* do, or *might* do. I believe with all my heart that God is able, as we sing every Sunday, more than able to do much more than I could ever dream, according to His power, the power of God the Holy Spirit, at work in the world today. Do you believe it, too?

What I need is a larger vision of what God actually *does* in response to His children's prayers. Like delivering Peter from certain death. Like healing someone with a terminal illness. Like rescuing a marriage from ruin. Like providing for a family in a financial crisis. Like transforming a hardened sinner into a living example of faith, hope, love, and forgiveness. Like using "prayer patrols" to rid an inner city neighborhood of gang activities. Like turning the heart of a Muslim to the Lord Jesus. Things that only God can do.

How about you?

I praise God for prayer warriors who devote themselves to prayer (Colossians 4:2) and understand the spiritual power that is unleashed through prayer. Whether or not you think of yourself as a prayer warrior, it is time for all of us to commence prayer. No matter what you're going through, it is time to commence prayer, and to keep on praying without losing heart (Luke 18:1-8). As Corrie ten Boom once said, let prayer be your steering wheel, not your spare tire, to be used only in case of an emergency.

The elders and deacons met together to pray last Thursday evening. We had a rich time of prayer with one another. Tonight at 6:30 PM, there is an opportunity for whosoever will to commence prayer, as we gather for our monthly "Sunday Evening Prayers" to pray with and for one another. Coming to a prayer meeting is not some kind of spiritual litmus test. It is a blessed opportunity, though. If you are able, I encourage you to come.

But whether it is in private or together with others, commencing prayer is just the first step. I believe God wants us to wait in expectation when we pray, just like David. God wants us to

pray expectantly, believing not only that He hears us when we pray, but that He will do God-like things, things that only God can do, things that will show His glory and grace and power to us and to the world around us in amazing ways, in response to our prayers.

Like the believers in Jerusalem who prayed for Peter in prison, let's pray earnestly. Fervently. Passionately. But unlike those who prayed for Peter, let's also pray expectantly. Like David, let's pray and then wait in expectation for what God will do. When God answers your prayer, as He answered the church's prayers for Peter, don't be shocked. Don't be surprised. Be thankful.

John Newton got it. He understood how God wants us to approach Him in prayer. He wrote:

You are coming to a King,
Large petitions with you bring.
For His grace and power are such
You can never ask too much.

If you believe in God, commence prayer. Keep on praying. And wait in expectation for God to do God-like things, for our good and His glory. Lord, let it be so. Amen.