

Lurgan Baptist 11:10:2011

Reading: Acts 12:1-25

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

22. THE THREE GREATEST POWERS IN THE UNIVERSE

Amid the churning waters of San Francisco Bay, an island of solid rock stands fast against its tumultuous surroundings. This island is Alcatraz, once the site of the most secure prison in the United States of America. *“ After it became a maximum security federal prison in 1934, no convict was known to have lived to tell of a successful escape from the prison of Alcatraz Island. A total of 23 men attempted it but 12 were recaptured, five shot dead, one drowned and 5 presumed drowned.”* The prisoners sentenced to Alcatraz knew there was no hope of escape. Peter must have felt like one of those inmates when Herod threw him behind bars. Locked up in the dark recesses of a Roman prison, Peter was shackled to two soldiers and watched by two more guards at the door. It would take a miracle to escape this prison. And that's exactly what happened.

Now if you knew that you were scheduled to be executed the next morning, would you sleep the night before. Peter did. My can you imagine sleeping while down the hall, the executioner is sharpening the blade meant for you ? Yet, Peter slept soundly even though he was well guarded and had been sentenced to

be executed. What made the difference ? Prayer. Prayer can open doors. Prayer can overcome great problems. Prayer can set people free. Are you locked up in an impossible situation ? Your prison might be a difficult relationship, a frustrating job: an inner spiritual struggle, or anything that has you chained to a feeling of hopelessness. My whatever the situation you've written off as impossible, don't look at it outwardly. With the powerful weapon of prayer, turn your attitude, your habit, your circumstance over to Him. The Lord will take charge.

It's interesting to notice here the **timing** of this remarkable incident. Look if you will at (12:4) That is after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, that took up the week immediately following the day of Passover. In other words this was the time of the Passover. Some years before Peter had been sent with John to prepare the Passover feast for the Lord Jesus, and as the disciples were gathered around the table Peter had declared his willingness to go with the Saviour to prison and death. (Lk 22:33) Here in (Acts Ch 12) Peter was fulfilling that vow. At that previous Passover Peter slept (Matt 26:40) but it was the sleep of unwatchfulness, he failed to watch even for one hour with the Saviour. Here again, Peter sleeps but this time it was the sleep of absolute confidence in the word of Christ. Peter had peace in the midst of life's storm because he knew that Herod could not kill him. You see the Risen Lord had promised Peter that he would live to be an old man and end his life crucified on a Roman cross. (Jn 21:18-19)

Peter simply laid hold of the promise of Christ and committed the entire situation to the Lord and God gave him peace and rest. Now at the previous Passover Peter had slept while the Lord Jesus had prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, but now as Peter slept not only did the Great High Priest pray that Peter's "*faith might not fail,*" (Heb 7:25) but many were gathered in the home of Mary praying. (12:5-12) But Peter was not to die. On that first Easter morning "*the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door.*" (Matt 28:2) and now again "*the angel of the Lord,*" would open prison doors on this Easter morning and set Peter gloriously free. I wonder did you notice that there is an intriguing triangle in this chapter ? **There is a hostile world attacking, there is a beleaguered church praying and a prayer answering God intervening.** Or to put it another way in this chapter we see a number of different powers at work. Indeed here there is brought before us "**The Three Greatest Powers in the Universe.**"

(1) THE POWER OF SATAN

Look at the opening statement. "*Now about that time Herod the king*" (12:1) The word " vex," means "*to persecute.*" You see, Satan exercises his power,

(a) AT DEFINITE TIMES:

" *Now about that time,*" (12:1) What time ? Well,

1. It was a Troublesome Time:

You see, whenever you see the Herods in the Bible it always spells trouble. In the New Testament era this family of rulers stands out in the battle against God. To understand the trouble cited in this text, we need to understand what King Herod was like. His father, Aristobulus, had been murdered by his own father, Herod the Great, the ruler who had ordered the slaughter of innocent babies at the birth of Christ. After the death of Aristobulus, this Herod, Herod Agrippa the First, was sent to Rome to be educated, and there he grew up as a close friend of the imperial family. He was something of a playboy, and in AD 23 he fled to Palestine to escape his creditors. *In Palestine he lived in humility and poverty under his uncle, Herod Antipas. Upon his return to Rome, he was imprisoned by the Emperor Tiberius for some critical remarks he had made.* His life had hit rock bottom. But then Tiberius died, and Herod's childhood friend, Caligula came to power, not only freeing him from prison, but giving him a gold chain weighing as much as his iron fetters in prison.

Soon Herod was named ruler of some Palestinian provinces, and when another childhood friend, Claudius, succeeded Caligula, Herod became ruler of Judea and Samaria. Murder and intrigue had been the currency of his entire life. My ... Herod was pre-eminently a politician. When he was with the Romans, he did as the Romans did, and when he was with the Jews he acted like a Jew. Like most of the Herods he ruled with one foot in Rome and the other in Jerusalem. Look if will at (12:3) Herod would do

anything to ingratiate himself with the people. James, the brother of John was dead, and Peter was in prison, destined for the same end. Luke is very specific about the **timing** of this persecution. “*Now about that time*,” (12:1) What time ? Well,

2. It was a Triumphant Time:

It was a time of great progress with the gospel. I mean the gospel was jumping over the walls of Judaism. Gentile people like Cornelius were being saved. (10:1) Gentile places like Antioch were being reached (11:21) Satan knew that the church of the Lord Jesus was on the move so he attacked it. My the Devil always fights the church when the church is on the move. Charles Spurgeon used to say that Satan never kicks a dead horse. Has not been his policy right down through history ? Those of you know who know a little about church history will realise that this is exactly what happened after the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. The Roman Catholic system began to tighten up on things and hit back with what was known as the Counter Reformation. In 1545 Pope Paul the 3rd and called,

(1) The Council of Trent: (1545-1563)

At that council the position of the Roman Catholic church was reaffirmed. Papal authority, the place of tradition and all other Romish doctrines were emphasised. Then there was,

(2) The Jesuits: founded by Ignatius Loyola (1534)

and this was another instrument to fight against a

return to the Bible. The Jesuits were permitted to do evil that good might come. Their schemes included assassination of their opponents. Then there was,

(3) The Inquisition:

This was the “*bloody engine*,” of the Roman Catholic church that bathed so many lands in blood. My in one way or another Rome won back much territory that it had lost. For when God moves and blesses expect a counter-attack. Have you grasped this lesson ? Do you realise that Satan will never suffer any attack on his kingdom without resenting it ? Do you recognise that the Satan will fight this church, when we start to move for God ? “*Now about that time*,” What time ? Well,

3. It was a Testing Time:

(a) It was a Time of Famine:

The prediction of a drought had just been given by Agabus in (Ch 11) and a special offering was taken to help the victims. Do you know when Satan likes to attack us ? When we are down and struggling. When troubles weigh heavily upon us, Satan knows that then we can be very vulnerable to attack. (a)

(b) It was a Time of Fear:

Look at (12:2) James was the first martyr of the twelve disciples and John was the last of the apostles to die. My in between their deaths were the deaths of some of the finest saints ever to live on this earth. Now why was Peter delivered while James was killed ? My is this not one of the mysteries of God’s

providence ? Here we are face to face with some of the mysteries of God. Now, there are many things about God and God's ways which we do not understand. There are times when I do not understand why God does the way He does. There are mysteries in the providence of God. Our finite minds are not able to comprehend or understand an infinite God. *Do you remember what the Lord says in Isaiah ? (Is 55:8 -9)* One of these days maybe God will unfold the mysteries of His providence. I mean this chapter begins with the death of James and with the deliverance of Simon Peter. One of them dies and the other one lives. *Now I don't have any question in my mind that the church prayed for James just like it prayed for Simon Peter and yet somehow God was pleased to answer the prayer concerning Simon Peter and yet, in the providence of God, James died.* You see, God's plan and his providence are personal. He deals on an individual basis with His children. In other words God has a personalized plan for every believer's life.

Now is that not encouraging ? I rejoice in the fact that God is dealing separately and individually with the lives of His people. God's will for Simon Peter was that he live for a little bit longer. But James' life was shorter. Now the point is not how long your life is nor how short your life is. It is what you put into your life in doing the will of God and in serving the Lord. So here is Satan and he exercises his power (a)

(b) IN DIFFERENT WAYS:

In (Ch 2) we read that 3000 people were converted to Christ. Later on that number grew to 5000 (4:4) Then what happened ? Well, according to (Ch 4) Satan came like a **Lion** and had the apostles threatened. In (Ch 5) Satan came like a **Serpent** influencing Ananias and Sapphira to infect the church with their lying and hypocrisy. My ... if Satan cannot win by persecution from without he will try pollution from within. Then Satan came as the **Accuser** in (Ch 6). One group of widows accused the other group of widows of taking over. “ *We are being neglected,*” they said. Satan likes to get the saints to accuse one another. Now according to this passage, Satan came as a **Murderer**. James was killed, and Peter was put into prison to be kept for execution. Why ? Why did Satan attack James and Peter ?

Because, they were getting in his way. They were winning souls. They were Spirit-filled men who were serving God. They were leaders who had influence. My ... do you pray for your Christian leaders ? Do you pray for those who have influence ? You may not always agree with them, but do you pray for them ? For surely Satan is ought to destroy those who are in places of spiritual leadership. Now are you beginning to see the picture ? In (Ch 4) we see the *Ferocity of the Lion.* Do you recall Peter's words. “ *The devil as a roaring lion walketh about seeking whom he may devour.*” (1 Pet 5:8) In (Ch 5) we see the *Subtlety of the Serpent.*

Do you recall Paul's words, “ *But I fear lest by any means as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety*

so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." (2 Cor 11:4) In (Ch 6) we see the Activity of the Accuser: Do you recall John's words, "*The accuser of our brethren is cast down.*" (Rev 12:10) And now in (Ch 12) we see the Policy of the Murderer. Do you recall Christ's words, "*He was a murderer from the beginning.*" (Jn 8:44) (1) My never underestimate the power of Satan. For Satan used Herod and today Satan uses all kinds of people to attack the work of the Lord. But if you fight people you are wasting your time for, "*we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*" (Eph 6:12) (1)

(2) THE POWER OF PRAYER

You see, something stronger than Herod's army was at work. "*But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.*" (12:5) The church had no other options. I think the Lord allows us to get into impossible situations at times in order to force us to pray and turn to Him. Otherwise, we wouldn't, at least like we should. I mean, can you picture this situation ? Prison, chains, four bands of soldiers consisting of four soldiers each, execution in the morning. My things appeared desperate. If Herod had succeeded against Peter what could the rank and file expect, but whole -sale massacre ? If the under-shepherd cannot stand against the lion, what must the sheep expect ? But, bless God there is always one weapon available to the children of God and it's the weapon of prayer. I

mean we don't use physical weapons to fight spiritual battles. (2 Cor 10:3-5) This church was not arming itself for battle, they were not trying to influence the Sanhedrin, they were not trying to bribe Herod (12:20) they were not holding demonstrations or protest rallies. My they were on their knees praying, for "***prayer moves the arm that moves the world.***" The "**but**," of the Bible are remarkable and well worth noting. They usually denote a change. Indeed the phrase "*but prayer*," is the turning point in this story. Oh, can you picture this scene ? As the iron gates of Herod's prison clanged shut, the gates of heaven swung wide open. The church sank to its knees, and a ceaseless volume of prayer ascended to the throne of grace. (2) Now what kind of praying has power ? Note:

(a) THE CHURCH PRAYED SPECIFICALLY:

Look if will at (12:5) "*For him.*" Peter was being kept in the maximum security ward, after all he had escaped before. (5:19-20) He was probably in the fortress of Antonia on the northwest corner of the Temple area. And Herod's plan was to execute Peter " after Easter," that is after the Passover. "*But prayer for him.*" My the object nor the subject was in doubt. They were carrying Peter the acknowledged leader of the apostles and their brother in his need to God in prayer. Do we claim to be a successor to this early church ? Do we carry each other in our needs to God in prayer ? Oh, their praying was specific. "*For him.*" This was not some vague, confused, general petition, this was specific and direct. "*For him,*" Is this not how the Lord Jesus taught his disciples to pray

? Look if will at (Luke 11:1-5) My is this how we pray corporately ? Is this how we seek God's face in our own personal devotions ? Is it the salvation of a loved one that concerns you ? Then pray specifically for their salvation. Is it the future that burdens you ? Then pray definitely for guidance ? Is it circumstances at home that worry you ? Then pray precisely for wisdom. (a)

(b) THE CHURCH PRAYED UNITEDLY

In (12:5) we are told that prayer was taking place but (12:12) gives us a clearer image. There is power when " *many,*" gather together in united prayer, prayer that is offered to the Lord in agreement by all the saints.

(c) THE CHURCH PRAYED EARNESTLY:

Do you see that phrase " *without ceasing,*"? Well, this word (*ektenes*) its a medical term describing the stretching of a muscle to its limits. It means " *strenuously, with agony.*" It's the same word translated " *earnestly,*" in (Lk Ch 22) where it speaks of the Lord Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. " *And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly and His sweat was it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*" (Lk 22:44) These believers were not just sitting around a coffee table have a chat. They were praying earnestly. And remember that it's " *the earnest, heartfelt, continued prayer of righteous man, makes tremendous power available, dynamic in its working.*" (James 5:16) My so often our praying is cold,

lifeless, dead, mechanical: half-hearted and such praying will never meet with any response. These believers were praying earnestly. Does that describe your praying ? Is there intensity, fervency about it ? They were united, they were gathered together. They were fervently, earnestly praying. They were praying without ceasing. They were praying specifically for Peter. God in His sovereign will had permitted James to be slain, but now they were interceding for Peter. Prayer must be always connected with the sovereignty of God. Prayer is not telling God what to do. Prayer is finding out what God wants to do and asking Him to do it.

(d) THIS CHURCH PRAYED PERSISTENTLY:

I get the impression that they had been praying all night and all week. Remember it was the Passover, the feast of unleavened bread and the seven days of that feast (Lev 23:5) were nearly expired and still there was no answer. (12:6) The night before Herod was to bring him to trial Peter was sleeping. Think of it, the date was set. Peter was to die tomorrow yet Peter was sleeping. Can you picture the scene ? The prison, the chains, the soldiers, the iron gate securely fastened. The population of Jerusalem expecting with morning light to be gratified with the blood of Peter (12:6) Peter himself sleeping calmly under the shadow of God's wings and a little way off the church pouring forth its intense prayers through the silence and darkness of the night.

(3) THE POWER OF GOD

I mean they prayed about the matter over and over again. It may have seemed at first that prayer was not going to be answered. They prayed and nothing happened. They prayed another day and nothing happened. Do you know the experience ? My they came to the night before the execution of Simon Peter was due and still nothing had happened.

James is dead, “ *but prayer was made him,*” Simon Peter is in jail, “ *but prayer was made him,*” that infidel Herod is on the throne “ *but prayer was made him,*” that prison is as secure as Alcatraz “ *but prayer was made him.*” My they never gave up, and they never let go and importunity won the day, for before morning light the angel had come and the prisoner had gone. My do you want to put power into your praying ? Then you’ll need to pray persistently. To say with Jacob, “ *I will not let thee go except thou bless me,*” (Gen 32:26) To be like Elijah, when he said to his servant, “ *Go again seven times,*” (1 Kings 18:43) Are you preserving in prayer ? Are you holding on ? Do you refuse to give up and give in ?

The answer may be nearer than you think. Mother, hold on to God for your wayward boy, father, hold on for your unsaved children. Wife, hold on to the Lord for your unsaved husband for we have a God who hears and answers prayer.

My I stand before you this evening as the result of my father’s persistence in prayer. This church prayed persistently, and their faith in God was rewarded, for notice the third great power in this chapter. (1) (2)

You see, God’s power is released when God’s people pray. Now the power of Satan was released through Herod’s hands, but when you pray God’s hands go to work. Do you recall how the believers prayed in (Acts Ch 4) Look if will at (4:28-30) In (Ch 4) we read about the “ *hand of God,*” but in (Ch 12) we read about, “ *the hands of Herod.*” But when does God’s hand work ? When does God’s hand move ? When God’s church prays. My the hand of God does not work apart from prayer. Prayer is what moves the hand of God. Sometimes we wonder why folks are not being saved, why the church is not growing, why the bills are not being paid, but God’s hand works when God’s people pray. My are we tying God’s hands by our prayerlessness ? Did you notice that in (Acts Ch 12) God’s people prayed and God’s hand moved and brought,

(a) ***DELIVERANCE TO GOD’S SERVANT:***

Imagine waking up to a miracle and having an angel for your alarm clock. Incidentally, Peter was a real sleepy head wasn’t he ? Almost every time he sat down he went to sleep. Do you recall that’s what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration ? Peter was asleep. (Lk 9:32) Then do you recall the night the Lord Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane praying ? What was Peter doing ? Sleeping. (Matt 26:40) He was a sleepy head, but this sleep was different. Peter had peace in the midst of the storm, do you know why ? Because of,

1. God's Promise:

The Lord Jesus had told him that when he got to be an old man he would be crucified. (Jn 21:18-19) We sing,

“ *Standing on the promises of Christ my king,*” do you know what Peter was doing ? He was “ *Sleeping on the promises of Christ his king.*”

2. God's Power:

You see, each time he had been in jail before he had been released. God had a perfect track record. No wonder he was able to write later, “ *Casting all your care upon Him for he careth for you.*” (1 Pet 5:7) Do you want to sleep soundly ? Then you need to rest on God's promise and rely on God's power. The psalmist says, “ *Great peace have they who love thy law and nothing shall offend them.*” (Ps 119:165)

3. God's People:

I mean they were praying for him. My God did not have to blow up the prison to deliver Peter. He simply sent an Angel down. Not an **Army**, but an **Angel**. “ *The angel fetched Peter out of prison,*” said Puritan Thomas Watson but, “ *it was prayer that fetched the angel.*” God still has his angels, messengers and though some of them are very human (Matt 25:35) others are not human at all but they can meet us wherever we are and help in times of need. (Heb 1:14) I don't know what particular “ *prison problems,*” you may have this!

Could it be that you are enmeshed in circumstances that are very trying ? Do you belong to a praying church where you can be surrounded and prayed for ? Maybe some of your loved ones are spiritually imprisoned in the prison house of sin ? Perhaps some of you have friends on the mission field who are going through times of difficulty.

My you can be sure of this. God answers prayer. No matter what the situation may be, no matter how high the walls, no matter how locked the doors, no matter how strong the guards, God is able to deliver. For,

(1) He is LORD in the SUPERNATURAL Realm:

“ *A light shined in the prison.*” (Ex 10:22-23)

(2) He is LORD in the PHYSICAL Realm:

For by his angel He enters the prison, breaks chains and opens doors.

(3) He is LORD in the HUMAN Realm:

For the soldiers eyes are closed to the light, and their ears are deafened to the sound of voices.

(4) He is LORD in the SPIRITUAL Realm:

Hostile forces were at work in Herod, but there is no spiritual conflict in which the Lord is helpless. He hears and answers the prayers of His people. Yes, the power of God brought (a)

(b) DELIGHT TO GOD'S PEOPLE:

Isn't it amazing that God could get Peter out of a

prison but Peter can't get himself into a prayer meeting.

" *Peter is here,*" said Rhoda to the others, not thinking that poor Peter would have liked to come in. " *He's right at the gate and*" " *That's impossible.*" the believers replied, perturbed that their prayers had been disturbed. " *But I heard him. I heard him !*" " *Then you're hearing things. Now, where were we ?*" " *Oh, yes, Mighty God, please deliver Peter from the hands*" " *But I heard him*" " *And they said unto her*" (12:15) If Rhoda did hear a voice, maybe their fears had come true. " *Could it be that they've killed Peter,*" wondered someone in the group, " *and his angel has come to tell us ?*" Everyone shivered at the thought, everyone except Rhoda. " *It is Peter, not some angel. Come to the door and and Oh, my. I left him outside,*" " *And when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.*" (12:16) My has this been your experience ? We pray fervently for the conversion of a relative, and when it happens we say, " *Amazing.*" My what is amazing is our slowness to believe Gods ability and willingness to answer our prayers. In late 1964 Communist Simba rebels took over the town of Bunia in Zaire and began arresting and executing anyone they considered " ***enemies of the revolution.***" One of their victims was a pastor, Zebedayo Idu. The day following his arrest was to be a great political holiday, and as part of the celebration great crowds were gathered in front of the monument to Patrice Lumumba, the spiritual leader of the revolution.

There were to be speeches by dignitaries, and a number

of prisoners were to be executed there. When the prisoners finally arrived there, the official lined them up and ordered them to count off , " ***one, two, one two.***"

The number twos were marched back to prison. The commissioner then ordered for all the number ones to be shot. In their cells the number twos could hear the sound of gunfire. They wondered why they had been spared and what the future held for them. Pastor Zebedayo shared with them his hope of heaven, and eight souls found the Lord that day. Hardly had the pastor finished when an excited messenger came to the door with an order. The pastor had been arrested by mistake. They were to release him at once. He said goodbye to the remaining prisoners and returned to his home next to the church, where he discovered that a crowd of believers had gathered in the church and were on their knees praying earnestly for his safety and release. Great was their rejoicing when the answer to their prayers walked into the building. That prayer service became a praise service for God's faithfulness. My the God of Peter still lives. Gods people prayed and Gods hand moved and (a) (b)

(c) ***DESTRUCTION TO GOD'S ENEMY:***

What a horrible death Herod had. (12:22-23) As he discovered the folly of fighting God. The world today looks like the first part of (Acts Ch 12) but when world history is over it will be like the last part of (Acts Ch 12) My do you know who Herod is a picture of ? The future " man of sin," for he also will rule the world and persecute Gods people. (2 Thes 2:4

Rev 13:1) He also will command the worship of the whole world, but he will be destroyed “ *with the brightness of Christ’s coming.*” (2 Thes 2:8) Did you notice that other “ **But,**” in the chapter ? Look if you will at (12:25) In spite of the death of James, in spite of the imprisonment of Peter, in spite of the arrogance of King Herod. “ *But the word of God grew and multiplied.*” Why ? Because you cannot frustrate God’s Purpose and you cannot hinder God’s Word. You see, you really don’t have to defend the Bible. Charles Haddon Spurgeon said one time, “ ***Defend the Bible ? I would just as soon defend a roaring lion. Let it loose and it will defend itself.***” The Bible defends itself. The Scripture says, “ *but the word of God is not bound.*”

(2 Tim 2:9) You cannot hinder the Word of God. God will get His Word out. God will get His Will done. God will get His Purpose accomplished. For “ **God is still on the throne.**” The Lord is sovereign and can do whatever He wills. But often His will is tied to prayer. My can you understand how God works in response to prayer ? I can’t but I believe He does. For when God’s people pray, God’s hand moves.