

## **Conversation: Protection**

A Sermon based on Acts 12:5-17

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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When I was growing up we lived on a farm. My mother began raising dogs to sell for extra money. She had various breeds all the way from Toy Manchester Terriers to Skye Terriers and then Great Danes. While she was a woman of great prayer, she also used her pet Great Dane for protection. Our farm house was about 100 yards off the road and about a quarter mile from the next farm house. Occasionally, someone would come to the door asking to use the phone because their car had broken down.

She would greet them at the door with the Great Dane at her side and then leave the dog there and go make the call for them. After my brother and I had both moved out and my father passed away, the Great Dane slept on the landing at the bottom of the stairs – so she felt pretty safe when she was asleep upstairs. But trusting your Great Dane (or whatever kind of dog you might have) is not always the best protection. One cloudy afternoon, shortly after a loud clap of thunder, my mother answered the door when the dog was outside.

Knowing that the dog came running when a visitor would come to the door, she wasn't worried about answering to see what the man wanted. The man at the door asked if she had a big dog, to which she replied yes. He then said he had stopped at the side of the road to put the top up on his convertible when, at that loud clap of thunder, the dog jumped into the back seat. He said, "Could you please come get your dog out of my car?"

I want to ask a question this morning: How do you protect yourself? There are a lot of bad people out there today.

What precautions do you take to make sure you don't get snared by one of them? If you have internet access, you've probably seen the e-mail from the "Nigerian Banker" who wants to give millions of dollars to a Christian organization. You have probably also seen various e-mails about scams and tricks used to get you out of your car at the mall or along a highway.

In our Scripture today, we see some interesting things about the early church, its prayer habits and its leaders in times when protection is needed.

The first thing we see is that Herod has James, the brother of John, put to death. This pleased the Jews, so Herod grabs Peter and puts him in jail. Now, this was nothing new for Peter. Remember last week, Jim spoke about Peter and John being held by the Jewish leaders for preaching about Jesus. Now, this time it's not the religious leaders, it's the government! Not only did Herod put Peter in jail, he made sure there was no way Peter could escape. Herod, we are told, set up four squads of four soldiers each guarding Peter. There was no way he was going to get out of that prison! That's like having 16 great Danes or maybe pit bulls guarding him.

But wait! Then we are told that "the church was earnestly praying to God for him." What could be more powerful than that?

The interesting thing about this is that the text is not specific. In other places, where Luke records prayers, he gave the details. Here, he just says they were "earnestly praying for" Peter. Nothing about praying for his release, or for his safety, or that Herod might suddenly have a change of heart. Just earnest prayer. Now, let's face it, they had to have known what happened to James.

They had to be worried about Peter, and perhaps, even scared for themselves. But they gathered together and earnestly prayed for Peter. Don't you know, if they had been praying specifically for Peter's release, Luke would have tied this miracle more directly to how God answered their bold prayers?

When we pray, so often it is prayers like "God, help him," "God, heal her," "God, protect my friend." Kind of general prayers. That is apparently what the early Christians were praying for Peter. But their prayers were different. The Greek word translated "earnestly" is only used in a couple of other places in the Bible. In each of these three places it means they had deep love and commitment.

But, they were probably thinking what we all too often think: "We prayed for James, and look what happened to him!" But they went ahead and prayed earnestly, with deep love and commitment. We just don't know if their prayers were for Peter's release, or for God to take him to Heaven away from Herod or for Herod to drop dead. We just don't know.

One thing we can learn from those early Christians is that praying earnestly means much more than shooting off those little "arrow prayers," as someone has called them. You know, the kind I mentioned a moment ago: heal him, help her, comfort him, bless her, show me the way. When you pray with deep love

and commitment, you are not just praying out of love and commitment to the person for whom you are praying, you are showing your love and commitment for God. And that means, not only talking to God, it also means listening to Him.

Lloyd Ogilvie, Presbyterian pastor and former Chaplain of the United States Senate, tells of a lady who came to talk with him. She came to see him “about her inability to pray for her sick husband. They had been married for a few brief years. She had lost a previous husband through cancer. She prayed for him and he died. She felt panicked not only by the danger of further loss, but by the “failure” of her prayers for her first husband. What she could not trust was God’s sovereignty—that He is all-powerful to deal with each situation according to a greater plan that we can’t fathom. The significant difference between the two men was that her first husband was a Christian; her ailing second was not.” Ogilvie “asked her what she would pray if she did not limit God by what she accused Him of not doing when she asked before.

Her reply was very revealing. ‘I’ve thought a lot about that,’ she said. ‘I’d ask that the Lord bring him to a relationship with Him, and I’d ask that nothing happen to him until he was sure of that.’” Lloyd “told her that all that thinking about what to pray had been prayer in itself. The Lord was getting her ready to ask. Her prayer was answered. He became a Christian,” and was still alive when Ogilvie wrote the commentary on Acts.

So, one thing we must do in our prayers is try to seek the mind of God. Think about what do I really want? Do I want God to do my will? Or, do I want to listen to Him and seek His will? Then, we will know how to pray boldly and earnestly. We will know how to pray earnestly in deep love and commitment.

Ogilvie puts it this way. The formula for creative intercessory prayer is: listen carefully, ask boldly, trust completely, and know that the answer is part of the tapestry of God’s greater plan. He uses everything for His glory and our growth, if we allow Him.”

When we begin to seek God’s will and pray earnestly for that, we never know what’s going to happen – for sure. God often has some surprises! Luke makes an interesting note in verse 7.

He shifts from the folks praying to the prison cell and tells us that “Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up.” Now, if you knew that one of your best friends had been killed and the guy who did it was holding you captive for the same reason, do you think you would be so asleep that a bright light in your room would not wake you? That’s some kind of real faith! I’m not sure I’d be sleeping so soundly.

But, Peter was apparently so asleep that the angel had to not only wake him up, but tell how to get dressed!

Remember? The angel woke him up then told him to get up and then told him “Put on your clothes and sandals.” Then the angel said, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” I mean he was really asleep! The guy had to have step by step instructions on how to get dressed!

Peter thought he was having a dream. The text says, “he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.” But the angel led him right past all those guards, those Pit Bull Great Danes, led him out of the prison and down the street.

So, here’s Peter, walking down the street a free man and, finally, fully awake. What does he do? First, he praises God! He says, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches....” We don’t know if he prayed for protection or release before he went to sleep. Luke doesn’t tell us anything about that. But, he was no doubt thankful and praising God once he realized what had happened, or, as the text says, once he “came to himself.”

Now, I know some of you may be saying, “Yeah, but what do I do when God doesn’t answer my prayers? God didn’t provide or protect, as I asked.” Well, I know sometimes it’s difficult, but praise God for whatever He is doing. As I quoted Lloyd Ogilvie earlier, we don’t know God’s overall plan. Remember the Apostle Paul? He at one point was chained between guards, much like Peter was. I’m pretty sure Paul and many of the other Christians were praying for his safety, his release, or just “earnestly praying for him.” What did Paul do? He witnessed to the guards. The custom was to change the guards frequently, so he had many opportunities for sharing his faith. Can you imagine, sharing the Good News, even when in prison for the very reason of sharing the Good News! Some people believe that they changed the guards frequently because he was converting them to Christianity.

So, I believe we are to listen to God, hold onto our faith, and serve Jesus in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. When you are praying for others, whether it be for protection, deliverance, help, healing or whatever, keep praying boldly and earnestly. But spend a lot of time listening for God’s direction in the matter. It may be that what you or that friend or relative need is a deeper relationship with Jesus rather than immediate healing or protection.

Let's pause for a moment and think about what happened. God pulled off a miracle. His angel came and led Peter out of the prison – even with all those guards watching him. Sometimes God does those miracles. He works in the life of someone we know or maybe someone we have read about, and what He does for them is truly a miracle. But, because God chooses to work a miracle in one person's life, does not mean we can expect, or demand, a miracle for ourselves or whomever we are praying for. I believe, more often than not, God works in small mysterious ways that we may not even be aware of. He is there. He is sovereign, but He doesn't jump to our command. If He did, everyone would be a believer. But they would be a believer just so they could get whatever they want.

The second thing Peter did was go to where he knew his Christian friends would be meeting and praying for him. Luke tells us they were at the home of John Mark's mother. Peter wanted those faithful prayer warriors to know that their prayers had been answered. It is here that we find one of the more humorous events in the Bible. Peter goes to the outer door of the courtyard and knocks. Now, don't you know that knock may have caused fear to rise up in the minds of some of those Christians? It might have been Herod's guards coming for them! So a servant girl named Rhoda is sent to answer the door. When she hears Peter's voice, she is so excited she doesn't open the door, she runs back and tells the others it's Peter.

There was probably a lot of running back and forth. The Christians are not sure what to think. They may have been "praying earnestly," but when there appears to be an answer to their prayers, they at first, try to dismiss it. "You're out of your mind," they told Rhoda. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

When they finally let him in, he had to silence them so they didn't make too much noise celebrating. After all, that might attract the attention of Herod's men. Let's face it, when those sixteen guards discovered what had happened, they were in full panic mode. If they didn't find Peter before Herod learned that he had escaped, they were in big trouble!

Then Peter told them how the angel had rescued him and led him out to freedom. The story ends with Peter going "to another place." It doesn't tell us where he went. No doubt he went into hiding. After all, if Herod did find him he would be killed on the spot. Luke doesn't tell us any more about Peter's release or how Peter himself might have prayed following his release. But I think I can say with confidence that Peter prayed earnestly for God to lead him to safety. He, no doubt, sought God's guidance and protection. We know that he was safe, for he shows up in Jerusalem a couple of years later.

Protection is something we all need, all the time. There are many perils and mean people out there wanting to do harm. Author and teacher, John Stott put it this way: “Many of the happenings of civilized society would not exist if it were not for human sin.

A promise is not enough; we need a contract. Doors are not enough; we have to lock and bolt them. The payment of fares is not enough; we have to be issued tickets, which are punched, inspected, and collected. Law and order are not enough; we need the police to enforce them.

We cannot trust each other. We need protection from one another. It is a sorry state of affairs.”

All too true and all the more reason we need to be in earnest prayer for ourselves and our loved ones and friends, that God will protect them and carry them safely through whatever it is they might face. So how do we do that? First of all, think about what it is that God wants you to pray for. Talk to God about the need, the concern and consider what thoughts come to your mind. Spend time listening for God to guide your prayers.

Next pray earnestly and boldly. In other words, let God know how much you love Him and show that love and commitment in your prayers. Say it over and over. Then, “pray without ceasing,” as the Bible says. Keep praying until you, or that other person, is safely carried through the trial, the concern for which you are praying. Then thank God for whatever the outcome, knowing that He was with you – or them – through it all. As Ogilvie says, we don’t always understand, but we can be confident that God is working through His plan and some day we will understand.

This morning I want to ask some special prayers from you. In the 9:45 service we baptized three children. Would you commit today to pray for their protection and pray that their parents will do all within their power to see that those children are raised, as Paul told the Ephesians, “With the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord?”

We also awarded Bibles to a whole bunch of third-graders. Would you pray for them that they not just treasure that Bible as a nice gift from the church, but that they will read it, study it, and learn to live by it throughout their life?