

Faith in Adversity

by C. Bruce White

“And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and roused him, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, ‘Gird yourself and put on your sandals.’ And he did so. And he said to him, ‘Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’ And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. And when they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street; and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter came to himself, he said, ‘Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting’” (Acts 12:7-11).

THESE first eleven verses of Acts 12 give us an excellent example of one in dire distress recognizing and yielding to the tremendous power of God. Let us improve our understanding of God’s power by looking at the four p’s of this passage.

PERSECUTION (12:1-4)

The first P is persecution. To study New Testament Christianity in its original milieu is to study persecution. The first-century church was constantly overcoming or withstanding persecution. Paul in 2 Timothy 3:12 said, “And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Persecution, in one form or another, will be the lot of one who lives for the Lord.

In the first century persecution often took the form of physical torment. The apostles were

attacked and beaten. On this occasion, James, the brother of John, was killed. Peter was arrested and put in prison, and would have been killed had the Lord not intervened. According to tradition all the apostles, except one, died a martyr’s death. The book *Martyrs* claims that even into the fifth and sixth centuries Christians were still giving their lives for the cause of Jesus Christ.

Later, under the rule of Constantine, the state religion became an adulterated form of Christianity. From that time forward Christianity has been more or less accepted, and we have watched dedication and commitment to Jesus Christ wane in almost direct proportion. Thus, we do not know much of the persecution the New Testament church knew except for what we read.

However, while we speak little of persecution, we do talk much about *alienation*. We speak of being ostracized from certain groups, but how many of us even suffer this ostracism? When it appears a certain group is not going to accept us, we often compromise. We sometimes justify our actions so that we can be a part of the herd rather than take a stand for Jesus Christ. Not only are we not physically persecuted for the name of Christ in our day but we will not even accept social alienation. We avoid it by simply rationalizing the action of the world.

Many ridicule Christianity openly but secretly admire individuals who take a stand. If we have the courage to stand against the tide and say, “I am going to be a Christian and stand for that which is right regardless of what others might say or do,” time will show that respect will be given.

Several years ago our baseball team was on a road trip when the team manager wanted to talk with me privately. He said, "I wish you would talk with me a minute." We talked for an hour or two that night. He was caught up in all that was going on in society at that time. He engaged in almost everything that might make him popular because he wanted everybody to like him, but that night he said, "I wish I wouldn't do the things I do." He continued, "I put my head on my pillow at night sometimes and say, 'Tomorrow, I'm not going to be that kind of person anymore'; but he added, "You know, though, I find now people expect me to be a certain way." He had set the cast. He had revealed to the world that he would yield, be weak, and compromise. He had already shown he would do what it took to be accepted with the crowd.

After all the discussion that night I found him the next day engaging in the same type of things. Apparently, the talk did not do much good. He was living a sinful life but he really did not want to. He just did not have the courage to take a stand, even for one day.

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Herod was probably that way. He killed James to please the people. The text implies that he arrested Peter thinking, "I don't want to bother this man, but these people are looking for me to do something. I've got to do something to please them." The lesson for us is that the manner of our life and the mode of our decision-making should not be based on pleasing the people around us. Persecution will never come our way until we take a personal stand for Jesus Christ. Then, the Bible says, we will receive it. However, the Bible also says that if we stand in faith, God will help us.

PRAYER (12:5)

When Peter was arrested and put in prison, the brethren did not fall apart, saying, "What are we going to do? What can we do to rescue our brother?" They did not get into a council meet-

ing. The Bible says, "So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God." When the brethren heard Peter was being persecuted they said, "We need to pray."

What do we do when we find ourselves against insurmountable odds? Do we search for the right council? The right means and method? The right financier? How many times do we say, "We need to pray"? Maybe we are not what we could be because we do not believe in the power of prayer. Maybe we are not accomplishing what we could in the kingdom of God because we do not take advantage of the power in prayer.

In Matthew 21:22, Jesus says, "And everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive." We are tempted to take exception with the "all" or begin giving the Lord reasons why we do not actually expect Him to do certain deeds though we may pray.

We do not accomplish much in prayer because we do not believe in it. While we believed anything we asked in prayer will be given us, many of us seem to pray in doubt. We often have heard people saying, "I prayed about it, but I knew it wouldn't do any good." That was correct. If our attitude going into prayer is that it is not going to do any good, it will not. James urged praying without wavering. God's ears are open to words of faith, not thoughts of doubt. James wrote, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3). Selfishness voids prayer. We need to pray in faith and without selfish desires.

PATIENCE (12:6)

Under persecution the brethren in the first century went to God in prayer, thinking not of themselves but of Peter who was in prison. We next read of the patience of Peter. He waited on the Lord. He was not overly anxious in those chains. In fact, the Bible says he was sleeping. Does that not tell us something about Peter's faith? Many have problems which cause them to lose sleep. Hotlines are known to be at their heaviest during night hours. People call up and say, "I've got a problem and I can't sleep. I'm so torn up. You've got to talk with me." When we think of Peter's problem, what kind of problem can we have? We have not been for Christ's sake chained between two guards in a prison cell

under the threat of death. Peter was, and he was sleeping! He was waiting on the Lord, prepared to do the Lord's will, whatever it meant.

Peter probably spent much time in prayer before he went to sleep. His prayer may have been, "Lord, give me strength, patience, and faith to accept Your will." We need to learn that type of patience with the will of God. Too often we pray, as one lady did, "Lord, give me patience and give it to me right now." God allows circumstances to create patience in us.

A study of the Old Testament pictures God developing patience in His people. This principle is especially obvious in Exodus 14. The children of Israel, under the leadership of Moses, came to the shores of the Red Sea. Before them lay the Red Sea and behind them came the Egyptian army, the clouds of whose chariots could be seen on the horizon. To the left was wilderness. To the right was more wilderness. The people of God began to complain: "Moses, Moses, why did you bring us out here to die? We would have been better off in Egypt. At least we would have had a decent burial. What are we going to do?"

Moses went away for a meeting with God. When he returned the people were murmuring and complaining. As he walked past thousands of people, he heard a swell of griping. Finally Moses held his hand up and said, "Quiet. Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord." We do not always give God that opportunity. We get busy solving our problems ourselves, but the next day we notice that we have dug three feet deeper into difficulty. Let God work out your problems. He has more power than you do. Peter was patiently waiting in prison as the brethren prayed.

PAYOFF (12:7-12)

Next comes what we could describe as the payoff. God does not always work in ways we think He ought to, and that troubles us. In our minds we question Him. We have thought it all out. We have a five-step formula in mind as to how God can solve all our problems. When it does not happen as we planned we say God does not care. When we suddenly wake up one day with the problem solved, we wonder how it happened, only to find that God has done it some other way.

As the brethren prayed for Peter and as Peter slept in the prison, they probably thought the only way out for Peter would be the overthrow-

ing of the guards by force. Strength against strength is how we generally figure things out. Who would have thought an angel would come in the night? Have you ever had an angel punch you in the side? Imagine Peter's reaction when he was awakened by an angel in the middle of the night!

Of course, Peter was not sure about the situation either. It was not until he was outside the prison and free that he came to himself and said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me. . . ." Obviously, no snow-white, fluffy-winged being came down to the prison, punched Peter, and said, "Come on." If that had been the case, Peter would have said, "Oh my, an angel!" Rather, it must have been someone who looked like another man who awakened Peter and said, "Follow me." Peter may have looked down and said, "Well, I can't. These chains . . . what chains? But we can't get through the gate . . . hey, that thing's open!" The Lord probably did not do it as Peter thought it would be done.

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God works in His own way to accomplish His will for His people. What we need to do is yield, be patient, and accept God's will. We just cannot tell Him what to do. We should pray, "Lord, we want Your will to rule our lives"; but we must leave ourselves open, for often in mysterious ways God accomplishes His will in our lives.

God's payoff always comes when there is patient faith. Nothing exemplifies this more than the Book of Job. Job was rich and increased with goods. All of a sudden the devil is allowed to strip him of everything. He cast him on a pile of ashes so that Job suffered boils from head to toe. His wife saw what happened and urged Job, "Curse God and die." His friends said to him, "You must have sinned and God is now punishing you."

Finally, the ever-patient Job cried out to God and said an umpire judging between him and God would argue that Job had done no wrong. Job's problem surfaced at that point. He had patiently accepted God's will for a long time, but

now he wanted to defend his own righteousness. God appeared to him in a whirlwind and said, "Listen to this, Job. Stand and consider the wonders of God." God revealed to Job the marvelous works of His, such as hanging the earth in empty space. He asked Job, "Can you close the mouth of a python? Can you create?"

Job realized who he was and who was in control.

Then Job answered the Lord, and said "I know that Thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore, I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask Thee, and do Thou instruct me. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee. Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:1-6).

Job had learned his lesson of patience. He learned that God would be present even when His people suffer. Job also learned that when he maintained his humble, penitent attitude, God would restore twofold. He did not have the wealth he had before; he had twice as much. God rewards patient faith. We may say, "Things pile up. Things just don't seem to go right. Everything is going against me. Poor me!" Who are we to complain about our station in life. It may be that the reason God is not changing the circumstances of our life is that we are not displaying a patient faith. We need to wait on the Lord, pray to Him in faith, and yield our life to Him. The payoff will come.

CONCLUSION

Two subjects in the Bible are said to always receive payment. One is *sin* and the other is *righteousness*. Paul wrote, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). We can continue to live our own lives, direct our own steps, and do our own thing, and we will receive our reward, which will probably be difficulty in this life along with death eternal. Or, we can yield our lives to God, submit ourselves to the will of God, become a Christian and attempt every day to live as the Lord wants us to live. Every day may not be peaches and cream; but if we live our lives the best we can each day for the Lord, the end result will be a joyous life here and life eternal in eternity.

QUOTATIONS

"Temporary is the flexible and fickle sign erected over millions of marriages today."

"We Must Tell the World What the Bible Teaches,"
Your Marriage Can Be Great,
Robert R. Taylor, Jr.

"Poor communication is the main problem in 86 percent of all troubled marriages."

David Mace

"Children may not know that 2 + 2 = 4, but somehow they have a clever way of adding up our words—our lives—even our thoughts."

This Will Kill You,
Jack Exum

"A sin may appear to be safely buried (like a murdered corpse), and grass may grow on the grave; but a resurrection awaits it."

Aspects of Sin,
Hoyt Bailey

"Of all the disintegrating factors the chief is the loss of the sense of meaning of what a family ought to be. Our basic failure is not the failure to live up to a standard that is accepted, but rather the failure to keep the standard clear!"

The Recovery of Family Life,
Elton and Pauline Trueblood

"Thou art coming to a King;
Large petitions with thee bring;
For his grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much."

John Newton

"No iron curtain, colour bar, class distinction or national frontier of today is more absolute than the cleavage between Jew and Gentile was in antiquity."

The Epistle to the Ephesians,
F. F. Bruce