

I love to read. Always have and always will. Our house is littered with books; read, half read and still to be read. My family know well my love of reading and so a couple of years ago bought me a magazine rack for the smallest room in the house where I do some of my best reading. I grew up with a deep love of books and the ideas they contain. But I am a promiscuous reader in that I will read mostly anything. As a child books were banned from the breakfast table because if I got caught up reading a book I would never get ready for school. So in desperation while wolfing down my wheat-bix I would read the back of the cereal packet. Curiosity did not kill this cat, but it did make it late for school.

Christianity is a faith built around the witness of a Book. Actually, 66 different books contained in a portable library we know as the Bible. This library of ancient books informs and regulates the church's life and witness. When we read the Bible we peer through a window into the very heart of God.

I love the fact that so many more of us at Newlife are reading and wrestling with the Bible, through small groups, Winter College, journaling and daily reading notes like Everyday with Jesus. Fantastic! But reading the Bible is not an end in itself. There are plenty of people who read the Bible regularly, experts in the Bible even, who are not changed by the experience. Dwight Moody put it like this:

God did not give us the bible to increase our knowledge but to change our lives. (DL Moody)

We are not spending 26 weeks reading through the Acts of the Apostles because we are interested in church history; although it is fascinating.

We are not wading our way through Luke's history because we have to, or because we should or because it is a nice idea.

We are spending this six month period reading Acts because just as through the power of the Holy Spirit God transformed the Jesus' followers into a revolutionary movement that changed their world, God wants to transform us. In the story of Acts we find the story that God wants to write with our lives. Acts has 28 chapters; we are the 29th. We are an Acts 29 church.

So let's jump in! Last week Melissa reflected on the establishment of the church at Antioch, as the church continued to spread and grow like a virus across the Roman landscape. In Acts 12 Luke returns to Jerusalem, back to the mother church.

It was about this time that King Herod (Herod Agrippa) arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. (Acts 12:1-2)

King Herod, or Herod Agrippa, was the grandson of Herod the Great, the man responsible for some of the great architecture of first century Israel like the massive temple expansion, the city Caesarea by the Sea and the desert fortress Masada. Agrippa was also the son of Herod Antipas, the man who had tried Jesus.

Herod was a close confidante and friend to two successive Roman Emperors, Caligula and Claudius. Under their patronage he had greatly extended the territories under his command so that included all of Judea and Samaria.

The events Luke recounts here are dated around 43AD, 13 or so years after Jesus' resurrection. The church has existed for more than a decade and is experiencing increasing opposition and persecution.

Herod executes James, and in doing so fulfills Jesus' prediction that James would drink the same cup of suffering that Jesus himself drank. James is the second recorded martyr after Stephen, and the first of the apostles to be killed.

In killing James, Herod was attempting to kill the Jesus' movement and ingratiate himself with the Jewish authorities. Herod, seeing how pleased the religious authorities are about James' death, decides to press the political advantage by arresting Peter. Like dictators before and since, Herod's intention seems to be a show trial followed by a public execution.

There was a small speed bump in the plan. You see Peter was arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the time around Passover. Under Jewish law no trials or sentencing was allowed during this festival. So Herod held Peter in prison under the continual watch of four jailers until the sham of a trial could be held.

The timing of Peter's imprisonment and the events that follow seem to be no accident. There is deep symbolism and parallels here. Passover was the festival that celebrated the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. And it was Passover when Jesus was crucified but then escaped the bondage of death through his resurrection. It is probable that Herod had Peter imprisoned in the Tower of Antonia, only meters from where Herod's father had tried Jesus. Would Peter encounter the same miraculous deliverance that Israel and then Jesus experienced?

Let's read on.

**So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.
(Acts 12:5)**

Peter was the undisputed leader of the church. Jesus himself had prophesied that Jesus was the rock on which he would build his church, against which the gates of hell would not prevail. Having just lost James, the early church was about to lose Peter. Things were going from very bad to even worse. It was a crisis like which the early Christian believers had never faced. It seemed like their very survival was at stake.

And so they prayed. And they prayed fervently.

The word translated as earnestly is the Greek word 'extenos', which means earnestly or fervently or unremittingly.

Extenos is the same word Luke uses of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember what he says:

**Being in anguish, (Jesus) prayed more earnestly (extenos), and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.
(Luke 22:44)**

This was no polite prayer. This was no perfunctory prayer performed out of a sense of duty or obligation. This was a desperate, passionate storming of heaven. Luke does not tell us the content of the prayer, but he does offer us the emotion and feeling with which it was offered.

Herod had the power of the state on his side. The only power the church had was the power of God they accessed through prayer. John Stott puts it this way:

Prayer...is the only power which the powerless possess. (John Stott)

While the church prays, astonishingly Peter, the man facing certain death, sleeps. Later in Acts we will read the story of Paul who is imprisoned like Peter. In jail Paul sings hymns all night long. Peter does not sing; he sleeps. Both Paul and Peter shake their fist at death. Don't you love it!

But Peter's slumber is interrupted by a blinding light and an accompanying angel. The angel wakes Peter up from his deep sleep and tells him to get up. As soon as Peter does, the chains that bound him fall off his wrists. The angel instructs Peter to get dressed and to follow him. Peter is still wiping the sleep from his eyes and actually wonders if he is having a dream. They pass two lots of guards and get to the outer gate of the prison which miraculously opens for them. As

soon as they walk though into the nighttime streets of Jerusalem the angel disappears and Peter finally realizes that he has lived through an uncontested miracle of deliverance. Once he works this out he rushes to the house where he knows the church will be gathered. What happens next is wonderful:

Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" (Acts 12:13-14)

While everyone is pouring their heart out to God in prayer, Rhoda comes to the door to answer a knock. It's the dead of the night so it can only mean bad news. Perhaps Herod has sent soldiers to arrest more believers?

But to her astonishment it is Peter's unmistakable voice she recognizes. Here is where it gets just a little comical. Rhoda leaves Peter at the door knocking and knocking as she rushes back to the others to announce his arrival.

'Peter is at the door! Peter is at the door! , she repeats over and over again, through tears of laughter and joy. I have this picture of her hyperventilating as she splutters out the news no one dare believe.

Again, the parallels are stark. It is a woman who is the first witness to a miracle of deliverance, just as it was women who first announced Jesus' resurrection from the dead. And like then, the other disciples struggled to believe Rhoda:

"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. (Acts 12:15-16)

There is massive irony here; Peter walks freely through the doors that imprisoned him but can't get into the door of the church! And so he keeps on knocking, and knocking and knocking. Knocking until his knuckles ache, dogs begin to bark into the stillness of the night and the neighbors call out for his to shut up. He keeps on knocking until eventually the door is opened and the prayer meeting breaks up in astonishment at what God has done.

What a cracker of a story! But what possible relevance does it have for us? To answer this question I want to back to an earlier verse:

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (Acts 12:5)

While Peter languished in prison the church he lead engaged in passionate, fervent, round the clock prayer for him. Now there is a lot of ambiguity about the prayer they offered. Most importantly, what was it they prayed for Peter? Luke does not tell us, but he does inform us that the church was locked in prayer. While the content of their prayer is uncertain, Luke's message is not; the prayer of the early church was, at the very least, a catalyst for Peter's miraculous deliverance.

Today's theme is the Power to Intercede. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the early church interceded for Peter – they pleaded Peter's case with God. This same Power to Intercede is also our privilege and responsibility.

Prayer is conversation with God. Broadly speaking there are four types of prayer conversations. There is adoration where we honor God simply for who God is – God's majesty and character. Then there is confession, where we confess our sin to God, at the same time seeking and finding his mercy and grace. Then there is thanksgiving, where we thank God for gifts large and small, recognizing that everything we have ultimately is a gift from God. And finally there is supplication, or intercession, where we present to God our needs, the needs of others and the needs of the world. Intercession is the form the prayers offered by the Jerusalem church took.

As we read scripture, including the story we have just read, we discover Intercessory prayer offered in the power of the Holy Spirit has three distinct marks:

Intercessory Prayer is Passionate

Intercessory prayer is marked by the passionate belief that God is active in our world, that God hears and responds to our prayers, that offering such prayer is not an exercise in futility, that praying for others is both a privilege and a responsibility, that such prayer is an expression of the inseparable commandment to love God and each other.

Intercessory prayer is marked by a passionate belief. It is also marked by a passionate commitment.

Paul says in Ephesians:

**And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.
(Ephesians 6:18)**

Paul tells the Thessalonian church to pray without ceasing.

This is exactly the sort of unceasing prayer Peter's friends were engaged in as they poured out their heart to God all through the night. To not pray was unthinkable.

To be passionate in prayer is a gift of the Holy Spirit we must hunger for.

A couple of years ago I had the privilege of teaching for a week at the YWAM base in Hawaii. I stayed in a room that was adjacent to a meeting room where around 100 or so Korean students would gather everyday for classes, which ran from 9am to 5pm each day. Every day I would wake around 6am to the sound of those 100 students pouring out their heart to God in prayer and praise. Every night I would go to bed with the same noise ringing in my ears as they prayed passionately together again. Every morning, every night and every day. One day I had the privilege of teaching them. During the worship time, none of which I understood, the worship leader lead the meeting in prayer. She started and then everyone else joined in. 100 voices at around 100 decibels all out loud all at once. At first I was uncomfortable, but then I joined in. It was powerful.

God doesn't care if our words are clumsy, he just wants our heart. Prayers that are neat and tidy can often be symptomatic of faith that is dead and lifeless. Prayer is not a performance – prayer is a conversation – a heart to heart conversation with the Creator of the universe.

Intercessory prayer is passionate and it is also a partnership.

Intercessory Prayer is a Partnership

If the situation weren't so serious, Peter's return to the house where his friends were praying would be classic comedy. Peter is left knocking and knocking and knocking and can't get in. Meanwhile those who are praying are annoyed with the answer that interrupts their prayers.

Remember, Luke does not tell us what they were praying.

They may well have been praying for exactly what occurs; Peter's miraculous deliverance from certain death.

Or they may have been praying that Peter might face death with courage and faith.

If it was Peter's deliverance they prayed for, their response to his arrival showed they did not actually believe God could or would do it.

If it was just Peter's courage they prayed for, God provided another answer altogether!

On the evidence Luke presents us, their prayers lacked faith or focus or both!

This is why I love the bible, because it tells it like it is.

Too often my prayers lack faith. Do I really believe God will answer, even if he smacks me over the head with his response?

Too often my prayers lack focus. Do I really know what to pray for? How do I know?

Thank God that even though when it comes to prayer I don't have a clue, God knows what I should pray for and offers me the faith to believe for answers. Such faith and focus is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In some of the most profound teaching on prayer in the scriptures, Paul says this:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

(Romans 8:26-27)

These two verses deserve a sermon series in themselves. But let me make a brief comment now. When we pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, God begins to align our will with the will of God. We do not know what to pray, or even how to pray, but in the power of the Spirit God teaches us. In prayer we enter into a partnership with God to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven.

Does God need our prayers? Of course not! God is God and acts in our world without limits or boundaries, except the ones he sets.

God does not need our prayers, but he longs for them. He created us to be in relationship with him, to partner with him in the stewarding of his magnificent creation. That creation is now marred by sin and so God longs to partner with us in its ultimate restoration.

God does not need us, but by his amazing grace he chooses us as partners! And this partnership is sealed in the prayer realm. I do not know how this partnership works, I just know that it does and that its ultimate end is the restoration of all things.

Intercessory prayer is passionate, it is a partnership and finally intercessory prayer is powerful.

Intercessory Prayer is Powerful

Luke seems to be making the point that the prayers of the church are in some way a catalyst for Peter's escape. God works beyond their expectation and surprises them with his answer. Prayer makes things happen. James says it this way:

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16b)

Another translation put it like this:

The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. (NLT)

One of the marks of the early church was its passion for prayer. And there seemed to be a direct correlation between the prayer life of the church and the movement of God in their midst. It was while the disciples were gathered in prayer that the Holy Spirit fell on them with Pentecost fire and power. Luke tells us that the early church was devoted to prayer, and that as they prayed and served and worshipped, God added daily to their number those who were being saved.

Intercessory Prayer is powerfully effective.

A couple of weeks ago I was given an article written almost twenty years ago by Rev Dr Stuart Robinson, who was for many years the Senior Pastor of Crossways Baptist Church in Melbourne. The article is titled 'Are we prepared to pay the price to see God move in our nation?'

I read the article and was convicted like I have not been for a long time. Stuart Robinson traces the undisputable link between prayer and revivals; powerful movements of God and intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer has launched social revolutions, mission movements and periods of extraordinary evangelism.

Just one story illustrates Robinson's point brilliantly:

In the late 18th century a man called John Erskine orchestrated what became a Concert of Prayer through a letter writing campaign around the world. He persisted for forty years. On Christmas day 1781, at St. Just Church in Cornwall, at 3.00 am, intercessors met to sing and pray. The heavens opened at last and they knew it. They prayed through until 9.00 am and regathered on Christmas evening. Throughout January and February, the movement continued. By March 1782 they were praying until midnight. No significant preachers were involved just people praying and the Holy Spirit responding.

Two years later in 1784, when 83year old John Wesley visited that area, he wrote, 'This country is all on fire and the flame is spreading from village to village.' And spread it did. Baptist churches set aside regular nights devoted to prayer for revival. Methodists and Anglicans joined in.

Across the country prayer meetings were networking for revival. A passion for evangelism arose. Converts were being won not through the regular services of the churches, but at the prayer meetings! Some were held at 5.00 am, some at midnight. Some preChristians were drawn by dreams and visions. Some came to scoff but were thrown to the ground under the power of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes there was noise and confusion; sometimes stillness and solemnity. But always there was that ceaseless outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Whole denominations doubled, tripled and quadrupled in the next few years. It swept out from England to Wales, Scotland, United States, Canada and to some Third World countries.

The social impact of reformed lives was incredible. William Wilberforce was touched by this movement and worked ceaselessly for the abolition of the slave trade. John and Elizabeth Fry gave their lives to radically reform the prison system. Florence Nightingale founded modern nursing. Ashley Cooper, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, came to the rescue of the working poor to end their sixteen hour, seven day a week work grind. He worked to stop exploitation of women and children in coal mines, the suffocation of boys as sweeps in chimneys. He established public parks and gymnasia, gardens, public libraries, night schools and choral societies.

The Christian Socialist Movement, which became the British Trade Union movement, was birthed. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was formed to protect animals. There was amazing growth in churches, and an

astounding change in society came about because for forty years a man prayed and worked, seeing the establishment of thousands of similar prayer meetings, all united in calling on God for revival.

Intercessory Prayer is powerfully effective.

Lives are changed and the world is transformed when people pray.

Do you want to change the world? Pray!

Do you long for renewal in the church? Pray!

Do you long to see people far from God discover faith in Jesus? Pray!

Do you long to see social injustice overturned? Pray!

We live in a church where we could very easily get by without praying. We have talented people, a great property, extensive programs, a great strategy and big dreams. The future is exciting.

But if the dreams we have are not birthed in prayer and the programs we labour over are not bathed in prayer - then we dream and labour in vain.

King Solomon, who built the first temple in Jerusalem, wrote a Psalm that was recited as people ascended the steep steps to enter the temple courts. The psalm begins:

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

Newlife will not grow because of great plans or because its lead by smart people.

Newlife will not impact this city and world with the gospel just because we extend the building, add another service or plant another campus.

Newlife will only grow as God brings the growth.

We do not build this church; God does!

Jesus promised that He alone would build his church, against which the gates of hell would not prevail.

Our privilege is to work with God in the establishment of his church on earth and we will only participate in this as we humble ourselves and pray.

Intercessory Prayer is Passionate.

Intercessory Prayer is a Partnership.

Intercessory Prayer is Powerful.