

“A CRUMB FROM THE MASTER’S TABLE”

Acts 12:1-9, NIV

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There are so many promises in the Bible that we as Christians can ask for and will receive miracles in our lives. Jesus says “anything you ask in my name I will do” (John 14:14) or “if two of you agree on anything on earth God the Father will grant it” (Matthew 18:19). In John 14:21 it states that if you wrote down every miracle Jesus Christ ever did then the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:24). Then in John 14:12 Jesus tells us we will do greater miracles that Jesus ever did! The point is that we have empowered to perform miracles in the name of Jesus Christ. That being said, why don’t we see more miracles today? We have all received bad news that a loved one was dying from and incurable disease. In response, we got on our hands and knees and prayed fervently for a miracle. When one did not happen we were left wondering why. From examining the story of Peter’s miraculous release from prison we are going to find that four things must be present for a miracle to happen:

First, like the Pharisees we need to clean the inside of the cup (Matthew 23:26) so that our Master might hear our prayer requests. Living with one foot in God’s kingdom with the other firmly grounded in the desires of human nature, will not lead to righteousness. Jesus commands all of our allegiance (Romans 10:9).

Second, pray to God to reveal His will. We cannot view God as a genie in the bottle. Like the Pharisees we simply cannot play the pipe or shed the tear and demand (Luke 7:28) the potter to mold the clay to our desires! It is not that faith or fervor is not important but simply that it cannot be used as a “stick” to force God into our mold. When Jesus says “anything you ask in my name I will do” (John 14:14) or “if two of you agree on anything on earth God the Father will grant it” (Matthew 18:19); this does not make Jesus a genie in the bottle! God is sovereign!

Third, remember have faith that even the DOGS get crumbs from God’s table! God loves you and sees you as infinitely valuable to Him.

Fourth, when God gives you a miracle be like the servant in this story and rejoice fervently for God is good!

Ambivalence or Two-Faced

Matthew 6:22 describes the eye as a “lamp unto the body.” If the eyes are healthy the whole body will be filled with light. The eye’s beauty radiates from its incredibly complicated dimensions. Look at someone’s eyes and you will see one layer upon another woven together to form a sophisticated collection of colors, contours and light reflections. As is the eye

complicated so is the soul in which it is a lamp. Since every person has been given free will from God, contained within our soul is the innate ability to either do good or evil. Our desire to do evil comes from our human nature that is pleasure seeking. Our desire to do good comes from the influence of the Holy Spirit who wants us to do the will of God the Father in heaven. Since the desires of the human nature are contrary to the desires of the Holy Spirit, there is a war going on inside of each and everyone of us (Galatians 5:17). Our souls are often complicated because we hold onto conflicting beliefs at the exact same time. For example, hopefully you believe it is wrong to commit adultery but at the same time might be ok with flirting. Or, you might believe it is wrong to lie but at the same time are ok with “stretching the truth” if it means not hurting someone else’s feelings.

Peter’s miraculous escape from prison is filled with this kind of ambivalence. Ambivalence is a word that means either “two-faced” or “hypocrite.” The characters in the story are complicated to show that at anytime we can give different responses to God when He breaks into our world and performs miracles. I will begin the sermon by describing how King Herod and the Jewish people chose to persecute those who believed in Jesus Christ. Faced with an impossible situation, Peter’s imprisonment and scheduled execution, the church responds by prayer. God answers their prayers by sending an angel who frees Peter. I will finish the sermon by outlining how complicated we truly are by stating three different responses to Peter’s miracle: acceptance after proof, blind faith and outright disbelief. **It is precisely this war of both good and evil, holding onto conflicting beliefs, that keeps us Christians from seeing how gracious to us.**

Ambivalence of Herod Agrippa I

In this passage we read that King Herod arrested James the brother of John (one of the “Son’s of Thunder” – Mark 3:17) and had him executed. To appease the Jewish people Herod had James beheaded with a sword. When Herod saw this action was met with approval of the Jewish people he decided to seize Peter as well. At this point in Scripture one should stop and ask the question: why was Herod so interested in showing favour to the Jewish people? Did he love the Jews? Was he a Proselyte and part of their faith? Was he scared of them raising up and killing him?

To understand why Herod was so interested in appeasing the Jewish people one must first understand his rise to power. In his youth Herod was considered a playboy and in 23 AD he was so heavily in debt that he had to flee to Idumea to escape his creditors. He eventually received an asylum by Emperor Tiberius and a pension from his uncle Herod Antipas who he eventually quarrelled with. In 36 AD he returns to Rome and offends the Emperor and is imprisoned. Once Tiberius dies he is released from prison in 37 AD. The new Emperor Caligula grants Herod rule over northern Palestine. When Herod Antipas is banished in 39 AD he gets his territory as well. When Emperor Caligula dies and Emperor Claudius succeeds him as Emperor, Herod receives rule over Judea and Samaria.

Herod did not execute James and imprison Peter because of a love for the Jewish people, their beliefs or due to fear of them. Herod sought their favor because the masses in Rome hated his family and would use any excuse to have him dethroned and executed. It was

Herod's policy to ruthlessly crush minorities when they became disruptive. The ambivalence is clear: Herod seeks to look like a good person doing the will of the Jewish people. He who spent a year in prison dreaming of being released is the very one who freely imprisons others with little regret. King Herod is a complicated king in some ways but very transparent when it comes to his desire to let his human nature do evil.

Ambivalence of the Jewish People

Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, wants the reader to know that Peter was imprisoned and held for trial which would take place after the Festival of the Unleavened Bread. Why are these details so important that Luke feels strongly compelled to share them? He could have shared these details to allow us to trace the date of the historical event. Or, more likely Luke as a physician was more interested in the ambivalence of the Jewish people. The Festival of Unleavened Bread, or Passover, is a celebration of the Jewish people of their deliverance of slavery from Egypt. After having felt the power of God in the form of ten plagues, Pharaoh freed the children of Israel from their bondage. Many Jewish people would travel to Jerusalem to be ceremonially cleansed at the temple before the Passover began. Luke correctly accentuates the contradiction of a Jewish people who believed they were called to be a light unto the nations could at the same time believe it is ok to persecute God's chosen ambassador. They felt justified in hanging God's Son Jesus Christ on a cross for not being the Messiah of their expectations and now felt equally justified in executing James and imprisoning Peter. The Jews celebrated the Passover so that they would never forget their unjust imprisonment by Pharaoh and God's subsequent wrath and judgement upon him but somehow had no problem in doing the same injustice to Peter, one of God's Son's Ambassadors.

Like the Jewish people we are full of conflicting points of view. Our human nature that likes to sin holds beliefs that are contrary to the Holy Spirit at the same exact moment. The Jewish people did not see either the execution of James or the imprisonment of Peter as being evil. They felt justified by foolishly stating that Jesus Christ was not the Messiah. Luke wants the reader to catch the ambivalence of the Jewish people not to demean them but to illustrate how easy it is for Christian people to convince themselves they are doing right when in reality they are only gratifying their own desires. Given two-faced or ambivalence in mind, now let's look at the miracle of Peter to answer the question why we don't see more miracles today.

Impossible Situation

Herod had planned to try Peter as the leader of a divisive minority in Palestine called "The Way" that had aligned themselves with Jesus Christ. In view of the magnitude of the offering to the Jewish people, another great leader's death, Herod decided to take no chances in Peter escaping prison so he doubled the guard duty. One guard on each side was chained to Peter to ensure he could not run away. Two other guards were placed outside the doors guarding to make sure no one got in or out of the prison. Herod also had a practice of rotating the guards every three hours so that they would always be alert.

The Fortress of Antonia is the probable location of Peter's imprisonment. Using words such as prison, soldiers, chains and sentries in verses 4 and 6; Luke is painting the portrait that Peter has been placed inside an impenetrable fortress that no level of human intervention could be used to secure his release. After having executed James, Herod intended would have been very clear: yes there will be a mock trial but Peter was about to die as soon as Passover ended! Peter needed a miracle!

The Church Prays for a Miracle

When faced with an impossible situation Christians met in a house and prayed earnestly for Peter's release. The word "earnestly" used in this passage is similar to the word used in the prayer of Jesus in the garden where His sweat was like drops of blood. Luke uses similar wording I think to emphasise how desperate the people were to have God break in to their world and save their leader.

The first thing we learn from this passage is that successfully getting God to perform a miracle for Luke is not based on faith or fervor alone but was also based on the request being congruent with the will of God. There is no doubt that the same group of Christians had just prayed for James days ago but the answer to their prayer – God please free James from Herod – was a resounding "NO." It is not that they lacked faith or forgot to pray but simply that God had other plans for James – i.e. to go home. We learn from Luke that God is in providentially in control of everything. Like the Pharisees we simply cannot play the pipe or shed the tear and demand (Luke 7:28) the potter to mold the clay to our desires! It is not that faith or fervor is not important but simply that it cannot be used as a "stick" to force God into our mold. When Jesus says "anything you ask in my name I will do" (John 14:14) or "if two of you agree on anything on earth God the Father will grant it" (Matthew 18:19); this does not make Jesus a genie in the bottle! Jesus will do good to those who love Him, YES, but for James that was to take him home. Luke is reminding us that He who is the breath of life (John 12:10) is Sovereign (2 Chronicles 20:6). **There are limits to our requests for miracles – God's will must be done! This is why Jesus when He asked God to remove the cup also said "not my will be done but yours" (Luke 22:42). Jesus was not challenging God but merely showing us the importance of praying in the will of God the Father.**

The second thing we learn in this passage is that we as Christians tend to let our human nature that loves to do evil make most of our decisions. It is not until we exhaust all other possible solutions that we are willing to bow our knee to God and ask for help. When one is faced with debts that cannot be physically paid, incurable diseases or shattered hearts God is the first one we look to for help. When things are going well in our lives God is the last person we consult. We look to our friends, spouses, teachers, parents and especially ourselves for advice to help us make our decisions easier while God becomes an after thought! This of course is crazy because human wisdom, no matter how good we think it is, is only foolishness in God's sight (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Peter being freed from the fortress that he was in is truly a miracle. Luke who painted a picture of doom for Peter with the prison, chains and extra guards, is now telling how he miraculously got free. An angel appears and "kicks Peter in the ribs" as some commentators

suggest to get him awake. Peter obviously was not in fear of his life. I don't know about you but if I was about to be executed I would not be sleeping like a baby! The angel says "quick get up" and Peter's chains fall off. The reader is left with no doubt that the chains that fell off of Peter's wrists was a miracle. The reader is left with no doubt that passing by the first and second guards without being noticed was also a miracle! After all, it is most likely the guards chained to Peter and those outside his cell were awake! If Herod caught any guard sleeping on any watch, he would be executed on the spot which exactly what happens at the end of the story in verse 19! I highly doubt they would have taken that chance that Peter might escape while they were sleeping! The reader is also with no doubt that the large iron gate of this fortress opening was by the hand of God! Peter's release from prison was a miracle!

Luke uses similar language in this passage that was used in Exodus when God brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt. When Peter comes to realize these events he just went through were not a vision he states the following: "now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen." Peter acknowledges God has broken into this world and miraculously thwarted their evil plans. Still the God of rescue and exodus for His oppressed people is active during Peter's time period. God is still active in performing miracles today as well! In John 14:21 it states that if you wrote down every miracle Jesus Christ ever did then the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:24). Then in John 14:12 Jesus tells us we will do greater miracles than Jesus ever did! The point is that we have empowered to perform miracles in the name of Jesus Christ. Miracles did not die with the last Biblical writer but continue to happen each and every day of our lives. So the question becomes: why don't we see miracles today similar to this one performed for Peter?

Attitude Affects Both Receiving and Seeing a Miracle

Let's summarize what we have learned thus far. Since every person has been given free will from God, contained within our soul is the innate ability to either do good or evil. Our desire to do evil comes from our human nature that is pleasure seeking. Our desire to do good comes from the influence of the Holy Spirit who wants us to do the will of God the Father in heaven. Since the desires of the human nature are contrary to the desires of the Holy Spirit, there is a war going on inside of each and everyone of us (Galatians 5:17). Our souls are often complicated because we hold onto conflicting beliefs at the exact same time. On the one hand Luke paints the Jewish people on the good side with his reference to the Passover. In desperation from being under the iron fist of Pharaoh, the people cried out to God for deliverance and God performed 10 miracles in the form of plagues to have Israel freed from bondage. On the other hand, Luke paints the Jewish people as evil with his reference to their approval of the death of James and the imprisonment of Peter.

Their ambivalence or two-faced attitude is clear: at one moment they are faithful thirsting for God and at the next moment persecuting God's chosen leaders. Lest we think too poorly of the Jewish people and too highly of ourselves, let's look at the end of this passage in Luke. Having allegiance either to our human nature that loves to do evil or to the Holy Spirit that wants to do the will of God the Father matters as to whether or not the church saw Peter's

miracle. Let's see how Luke uses two distinct people and their reactions to the miracle as proof that our attitude really does matter.

The Servant's Response

Peter has just been released from prison by an angel. The first thing he does is to go to the very church that was earnestly praying for his release to tell them the good news! He knocks at the door where the people were praying. A servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she heard Peter's voice she was overwhelmed with joy. She was so excited that Peter had been granted a miracle that instead of opening the door she went back to tell the members of the church of the good news and left Peter standing outside waiting looking at a closed door!

For Luke this imagery at its very best! The fact that Rhoda was a servant is very important to Luke. She personified what Israel used to be like when they were in bondage in Egypt. Having nothing they had to rely on God for their very existence. They listened to God and sought His council and as a result saw the 10 plagues of Egypt. God broke into their world and performed miracles that are still being talked about today. In a similar manner, God broke into the world of Rhoda. As a servant Rhoda had very little in life and was ruled by her master. She relied God for everything and as a result when Peter spoke she automatically assumed a miracle had been performed. She needed no other proof than simply his voice on the other side of the door. She had the faith that moves mighty mountains (Mark 11:23).

Rhoda's faith reminds me of the passage in Matthew 15:21-28 that describes a Canaanite woman whose daughter was demon possessed. She asked Jesus to cast the demons out of her daughter and Jesus responded by saying "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel" (verse 24). He goes on to tell her "it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs" (verse 26). The woman at this point could have went away sad. Was Jesus really saying that He only came to save Israel or was there a provision for the Gentiles as well? The woman decides the Gentiles must be included in the kingdom so in faith she responds by saying "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table" (verse 27). Jesus sees her faith and casts the demons out of her daughter. He tells her that "her faith is great" (verse 28). The point is that miracles happen when dogs ask for crumbs for God's table. Like this Canaanite woman, Rhoda believed that a crumb from God's table had fallen on Peter and he was saved! She needed only a crumb of proof to shout in joy and proclaim the miracle. The prayer meeting for this servant woman was powerful and she had the full expectation that praying in God's would lead to miracles! In other words, for Luke she was letting the Spirit of God guide her and as a result she saw the finger of God make the impossible happen! Also, don't miss the fact that Rhoda praised God as fervently as she had prayed for the miracle!

Our Traditional Response

The initial response of the church people was unbelief. Unlike the servant girl they were free people and had received many blessings from God. They had seen the church grow from a hand full of people to over 20,000 in a two-year time span. Some of the leaders present may personally witnessed the apostles and Jesus perform many miracles. You would think belief

would come easy to them but in a time of great blessings inside the church Luke wants us to know that the leaders had lost their faith. They told the servant “you are out of your mind!” They did not believe that a crumb could fall from the master’s table and a miracle happen! They had fervently prayed for James release and yet he was still executed. Would their prayer have any effect this time? I can understand why they were so sceptical. We have all lost loved ones to incurable diseases. When we first found out that they were ill we prayed fervently that God would let a crumb fall from His table and heal them. When God said NO to us we assumed either that we lacked faith, were too sinful or were too much a DOG to have the master’s attention. The truth is God does say NO when we ask outside of His will. The really sad part is that when we cherish sin by letting our human nature reign, God does not even hear our prayers (Psalms 66:18).

Summary

What do we as Christians need to do to see miracles?

First, like the Pharisees we need to clean the inside of the cup (Matthew 23:26) so that our Master might hear our prayer requests. Living with one foot in God’s kingdom with the other firmly grounded in the desires of human nature, will not lead to righteousness. Jesus commands all of our allegiance (Romans 10:9).

Second, pray to God to reveal His will. We cannot view God as a genie in the bottle. Like the Pharisees we simply cannot play the pipe or shed the tear and demand (Luke 7:28) the potter to mold the clay to our desires! It is not that faith or fervor is not important but simply that it cannot be used as a “stick” to force God into our mold. When Jesus says “anything you ask in my name I will do” (John 14:14) or “if two of you agree on anything on earth God the Father will grant it” (Matthew 18:19); this does not make Jesus a genie in the bottle! God is sovereign!

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Fourth, when God gives you a miracle be like the servant in this story and rejoice fervently for God is good!