

# The “Upside” for People Who Pray

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## I) Acts 12:1-19

## II) Introduction

### A) Prayer postures

- 1) Jesus’ disciples asked, “Lord, teach us to pray.” At the heart of their request they were asking,
  - (a) *“Jesus, teach us to pray so that God hears us and we hear from God.*
  - (b) *Teach us to pray powerfully and effectively.*
  - (c) *Teach us to pray like you!”*
- 2) Jesus teaches us that prayer is **alining our will with God’s will, setting our hearts to seek God’s heart, putting our lives completely into God’s hands.**
- 3) Before we get into our scripture text this morning, it is important for us to get a little Biblical background on various postures in prayer.
- 4) The Bible says quite a bit about **prayer postures** but does not teach us that there is a right or wrong position for our body when we pray. What we learn is that certain postures of prayer were used for specific kinds of prayers.
  - (a) *I have good news for you. Today is “**Doodle Sunday.**” On any “Doodle Sunday” those of you who doodle during the sermon are celebrated for your creativity and artistic prowess. To help you envision your doodles I have asked my friend Jerrod to be a model. For those of you who still have trouble drawing people, you can copy my fantastic stick figures on the screen.*

## III) Doodles in Prayer

### A) 1. Standing

- 1) Standing for prayer is the most common posture for prayer in the Bible. The people stood for prayer in the Temple. When Judah was facing immanent attack from their enemies, King Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of the house of the Lord and prayed for deliverance while the people “**stood before the Lord.**” (2 Chron. 20:13)
- 2) Standing with hands lifted up and open, eyes open and head up is perhaps the oldest posture of prayer described in the Bible. It is called, “orans.”
- 3) This is the posture of praise, thanksgiving, blessing and general prayers. In John 17, it says that Jesus looked to heaven and prayed for his friends, the disciples. His posture was the orans.

### B) 2. Hands Folded

- 1) Standing with hands folded in front and the head down is a posture of submission.
  - (a) The hands are crossed as if they are bound like that of a slave. The head position reflects humility toward God.

### C) 3. Kneeling

- 1) Kneeling is a common Biblical posture for prayer.
  - (a) It is a sign of submission of a subject to the King. Kneeling expresses reverence and worship. It is a defenseless position as well as an offenseless posture. In other words, it is not a position of attack.

(b) Throughout the Bible people knelt in prayer. Possibly the most famous was Daniel who was said to have camel knees from kneeling in prayer so much.

**D) 4. Sitting**

- 1) Sitting and praying is a very rare Biblical posture for prayer.
- 2) At best it denotes a preparedness to receive teaching. But almost every reference to someone sitting and praying in the Bible is a negative one. For example, Elijah sat and prayed that he would die.
- 3) Sitting is comfortable and convenient. It is no wonder that in our culture, the vast majority of our prayers are done sitting.

**E) 5. Laying Down**

- 1) Laying on a bed and praying is part of God's instruction for meditating on his Word day and night.
- 2) This is another reminder that prayer is not limited to a certain place or time of the day. We are to pray with the frequency and rhythms in our life as if we were breathing.

**F) 6. Prostrate**

- 1) The final posture is that of prostration. Lying flat on your face with your arms stretched out in front of you or to the sides.
- 2) This is the posture of complete submission and homage. The reaching resembles the reaching of a child longing for the parent. The body is as low as it can go without being covered by the earth which is death.
- 3) There is a fervency, intensity and urgency associated with praying in the prostrate position.
- 4) Like I said, the Bible does not tell us that any one posture is the right one. They are all appropriate postures but the most important thing in prayer is the posture of your heart.

**G) Thank you Jarrod.**

**H) Postures in church**

- 1) It is probably no big surprise that this congregation is rather, how should I put it..., reserved in our emotive expression. Nobody wants to stand out, or make a scene. I understand that.  
*(a) If you raise your hands, it is kinda like this... My personality leans toward a pretty flat affect on the outside even if there is a big celebration in my heart as I worship. I believe that when we are in worship there should always be freedom to express on the outside what we are feeling on the inside.*
- 2) So, listen carefully. If God prompts you to raise your hands, bow, kneel, dance or lay prostrate before him then do it. This is to be a house of prayer. God forbid that we would show vane cultural restraint before God.  
*(a) I encourage you - I implore you to be obedient to the Spirit of God and express yourself in worship and don't worry about what anybody else around you is thinking.*
- 3) The Bible instructs us that worship should be orderly but it should also be free. Believe me, we are a long way away from losing order. But we certainly could use some expressions of freedom and fresh movements of the Spirit of God around here.
- 4) Do I hear an "Amen?"

- 5) Turn in your Bibles with me to Acts 12. Acts is the story of the beginning of the church. It was written by Luke, the same guy who wrote the gospel that bares his name.

IV) **Acts 12:1-19** (read)

- 1) <sup>1</sup>It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup>He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. <sup>3</sup>When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup>After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.
- 2) <sup>5</sup>So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. <sup>6</sup>The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. <sup>7</sup>Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.
- 3) <sup>8</sup>Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. <sup>9</sup>Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup>They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.
- 4) <sup>11</sup>Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." <sup>12</sup>When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. <sup>13</sup>Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup>When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"
- 5) <sup>15</sup>"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." <sup>16</sup>But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup>Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.
- 6) <sup>18</sup>In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup>After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

B) **Herod, James and Peter**

- 1) There is a lot going on in this chapter.
- 2) King Herod was not a great man. In fact, he was not even a good man. His grandfather was known as Herod the Great. The same Herod that killed all the boys under the age of 2 in Bethlehem after Jesus was born so Grandpa Herod was not so great either.

- 3) This Herod, also known as Agrippa, was a pompous, self absorbed, godless wimp who didn't care about his people or the nation. He just wanted the people to tell him how great he was and worship him.
- 4) At the beginning of chapter 12 we find that Herod Agrippa had recently arrested and killed James. This was James, the brother of John. Together they were called the Sons of Thunder which probably had been tagged on them because they were loud, explosive and bold. Everybody knew when Zebedee's boys were around because they were like, Thunder.
- 5) James was part of Jesus' inner circle along with his brother John and Peter. His death was a real blow to the church. Other followers of Jesus had been killed because of their faith in Christ in the 14 years since Jesus' death and resurrection but James was the first of the 12 Apostles to be martyred. He was a strong leader and would have played an important role in the future of the church.
- 6) Herod gloried in the positive reaction of the Jews to James' execution. The followers of Jesus had become a substantial force in Jerusalem and the Jewish religious leaders didn't like it. And so when James was executed the Jews gushed all over Herod and told him that he was a great king and boy, he liked it.
- 7) So, to keep the accolades coming, Herod had Peter arrested. Unfortunately, for Herod the Passover feast came right on the heels of the arrest. Knowing that it could create a riot for a public figure like Peter to be executed at the time when all of the Jewish pilgrims were in the city, Herod had to wait.  
*(a) The story in chapter 12 takes place the night before Peter was going to be beheaded.*

### c) The Church

- 1) The leaders of the church rightfully saw this turn of events as extremely dangerous not only for Peter but for the whole church. If Peter was executed a groundswell of support from the Jews in the city was sure to follow. It didn't take a prophet to see that there would be a bloodbath for all of Jesus' followers.
- 2) And in verse 5 it says, **"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him."**  
*(a) This is the key verse for the whole chapter. The key word in this sentence is the word, "earnestly." It is also translated, "fervently." The Greek word that earnestly and fervently are translated from is "ektenos." Say that with me, "Ektenos."*
- 3) Ektenos literally means to be "stretched out continuously." In other words the church was "stretched out in prayer over a long period of time." The followers of Jesus were on their faces with their arms reaching for God the Father. They were laying prostrate together praying earnestly, fervently for God to intervene.
- 4) Luke also used the word, "Ektenos" to describe Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as he was "stretched out" in prayer to his Heavenly Father to take the bitter cup of suffering and death that was ahead for him. But Jesus also prayed that the Father's will be done. And Luke says that Jesus in his earnest "ektenos" prayer, Jesus sweated drops of blood.

- 5) The church was stretched out in earnest, “ektenos” prayer meanwhile, Peter sat in prison waiting for his certain execution.

## v) The “Up” side of Freedom

### A) Bondage

- 1) Most of us don’t know what it is like to be physically in prison. It does not take much imagination though to recognize the loneliness, shame and despair of being behind bars.
- 2) But most of us know first hand the loneliness, shame and despair of being in bondage to an addiction like alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling or anything else. My guess is that everyone in here is effected in some way by an imprisonment of your own or the bondage of a friend or loved one.
  - (a) *You may know first hand the weight of the chains of unrepentant sin or the darkness of spiritual oppression. These shackles and bars are every bit as confining and dangerous to you, your loved one and your family as Peter’s imprisonment was to him and the church.*
- 3) I would like to share with you nine observations from the story of Peter’s miraculous release from prison with what I call, “The Upside of freedom for People in Bondage.”

## vi) Upside of freedom for people in bondage

### A) 1. God Shows Up! (verse 7) “Suddenly, the angel of the Lord appeared...”

- 1) Like Peter, we might not even be aware of the Lord’s presence in our prison but he is there. He comes to us where we are, and as we are. There is no place too dark, too scary or too foreboding that God will not show up. After all he is “Emmanuel, God with us!”

### B) 2. Light up! (verse 7) ...a light shown in the cell.”

- 1) When the Lord shows up, any place or space in our life, the darkness will “light up.” John tells us that “**God is Light and in him there is no darkness at all.**” (1 John 1:5)
- 2) The only way we will ever find our way out of our prisons is in the full light of truth and not in the stealth of darkness. The light of God is miraculous. It reveals the ugliness of all the dark corners of our prison and shows us the way out of our sin. Peter did not sneak out in the dark of his prison and neither can we.

### C) 3. Wake up! (verse 7) “He struck Peter on the side and woke him up.

- 1) Don’t you find it strange that on the night before Peter was to be executed that he was sleeping? I know that I wouldn’t be able to sleep at a time like that.
  - (a) *So if we are talking about the prison of an addiction or any other pattern of sin, what is it going to take for God to spiritually wake you or your loved one up? Sometimes all you need to wake up is to hear your name and you’re up. Other times it is necessary for God to give you a strong whack on the side.*
- 2) Wake up! If you want to get out of your prison you cannot be spiritually asleep any longer.

### D) 4. Stand up! - (verse 7) The angel said, “Quick, get up!”

- 1) The command of the Lord to the shackled prisoner to take immediate obedient action and stand is not unlike Jesus’ command to the lame person to get up and walk or the blind person to go and wash their eyes.

- 2) If you are to ever walk out of your prison you will need to take a step of faith. If the Lord says to you, "Quick, get up!" don't sit there any longer, stand up.
- E) **5. Hands up! (verse 7) and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.**
  - 1) Peter did not have to put his wrists out of joint; he did not overpower the guards to whom he was chained to get a key.
  - 2) The removing of the chains of sin is God's healing and redemptive work in our lives. Let your posture before the Lord be that of thanksgiving and praise as the chains fall off. Hands up!
- F) **6. Dress up! (verse 8) Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals" And Peter did so. Wrap your cloak around you..."**
  - 1) Even though Peter is still in the heart of the prison he was instructed to get prepared for a life of freedom on the outside. It is like Paul's instructions to the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God.
  - 2) Dress up! Because you are outta here.
- G) **7. Keep up! - (verse 8) "Follow me!" the angel told him. And Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.**
  - 1) Fourteen years earlier, at the end of John's gospel, Jesus told Peter the kind of death that he would eventually face. Jesus didn't talk about any narrow escapes from prison or anything like that but he simply said to Peter, "Follow me."
  - 2) Jesus says to you and me, "Follow me." To choose to not follow the Lord out of prison is to re-enter the darkness and bondage of your prison.
  - 3) It is a natural desire when seeking healing from the imprisonment of an addiction or any sinful pattern to want immediate release. Occasionally, God heals with miraculous immediacy. Most often however, freedom is a journey, one step at a time exiting through memories of the same dark corridors that initially got you there. When Jesus tells you to follow him, your only concern should be whether or not you can keep up.
- H) **8. Look up! (verse 10) "They passed the first and second guards..."**
  - 1) There was a total of 16 guards assigned to watch Peter. They were stationed at various places throughout the prison to create a perimeter. Peter had the presence of mind to look up and see the 2 groups of guards stationed along the way as he and the angel walked by. Somehow, somehow God had immobilized the guards so that they could not touch him.
  - 2) I have talked to people who God has released from the prison of a terrible addiction or spiritual bondage and how, after they are released from their chains, the old desires for a drink or their drug of choice no longer has power over their life.
  - 3) In other words, they look up and see the prison guards of oppression that the devil had used to keep them in sin had been completely immobilized. Don't forget to look up.
- I) **9. Wait up! (verse 10) They came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.**

- 1) After all the jokes of St. Peter at the entrance to the Gates of heaven, isn't it good to know that those who follow the Lord when they come to the gates of the City of God the gate will open on its own, welcoming the released prisoner home?
- 2) The simple observation is this. Wait up. We do not have to storm the Gates of Heaven. God is the perfect host and heaven's gates will open on their own.

**J) Prison release**

- 1) Just as God miraculously freed Peter from the Jerusalem prison, God still releases people from their prisons of sin and spiritual oppression.

**VII) Prayer**

**A) James / Peter**

- 1) It is easy to read this story about Peter's rescue and forget that only a few days earlier James had been executed. So, we have to ask, what is the difference between James being killed and Peter being saved? Couldn't God have saved James too?
- 2) The text doesn't give us very many clues other than the key verse that we talked about earlier. Verse 5.
  - (a) *"...but the church was earnestly praying to God for him."*
- 3) "Ektenos." The church was "stretched out" in continuous, earnest and fervent prayer to God to save Peter's life.
- 4) What difference did it make for the church to pray? If God had already determined that James would die and Peter would live what difference would prayer make, even ektenos prayer?
- 5) There is a very important teaching that we need to take away from this text.
  - (a) *God changes the world and sets prisoners free when people pray.*
  - (b) *Prayer influences God as we become aligned with his will and purpose.*
  - (c) *God calls on his people to participate with him in kingdom matters in the world. He impresses on our hearts the dangers and threats to his work and people.*
- 6) If you believe God needs to change something, or free someone, pray about it.
  - (a) *Pray fervently to God about the wrong in the world that you see.*
  - (b) *Pray earnestly for the people that need a miracle.*
  - (c) *Pray ektenos prayers as the church of Jesus stretching and reaching for God's sovereign will to be done.*
- 7) It is still hard for us to understand, like it was hard for the church in Peter's day that in God's sovereign will is done both in the execution of James and the rescue of Peter. The truth is that we keep praying.
- 8) God may choose to intervene as he did with Peter or not intervene like he did not do for James. Still, we are to stretch ourselves out continuously in prayer.

## **IX) Conclusion**

### **A) Ektenos prayer**

- 1) We don't have enough room in here for everyone to stretch themselves out in a posture of "ektenos" prayer but we don't want to leave today without praying for you or someone you care about if you need prayer.
- 2) I'm going to ask you to do a very bold thing, if you would like the church to pray for you, with every head up and every eye open I am going ask that you simply raise your hand. We don't need to know right now what your need is or the need of the person you are concerned about. God knows and we want to lift you up to him. Just seeing your hand will help us visualize you as we pray for you.  
*(a) Do you need prayer? Please raise your hand.*
- 3) As we come before God in prayer, I want to ask you to take on a very simple posture for prayer. Simply, put your hands on your knees and turn your palms upward demonstrating openness to hearing from God.

### **x) Prayer**

- 1) Heavenly Father, holy is your name. We come to as your church and humbly ask for your will to be done. As we have seen these hands raised requesting prayer, you intimately know the situations and people concerned. Where there is a need for healing bring wholeness of body, mind and spirit. Where there is need for release from some kind of prison, enter the darkness and lead the person to freedom. Whatever the need or fear or concern we pray for you to bring about your solution. As we pray, increase our faith. Help us to hear from you and not lose heart for we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **XI) Hymn – And Can it Be (verse 3)**

### **XII) Benediction**

- 1) Pray well in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.