So, Peter’s lying in a cell, sound asleep, the night before the execution. That alone tells us something about Peter. He wasn’t tossing and turning. He had probably resolved in his own heart that this was the end of the story and he was fine with that. Like James, he would die for his faith. He’s sound asleep. The angel shows up and it’s interesting that the text says, “…struck him in his side”. I don’t know why the angel didn’t just kind of shake him or call his name, but it sounds like he kicked him one in the side. Peter is sleeping and he wakes him up and then he walks him through this process: “Okay, Peter, put on your shoes. Okay, Peter, put on your pants. Okay, Peter, put on your shirt; put on your coat; follow me; we’re heading out.” Now why does the text give us that level of detail? I think it’s to tell us that Peter didn’t expect “The Great Escape”. He hadn’t planned this out. This wasn’t the great escape from Alcatraz. He was sound asleep; he had resigned himself he’s going to die. And so, he’s awakened in the middle of the night and he’s confused, and so the angel has to say, “Put on your shoes; put on your pants; put on your shirt. Okay, follow me; we’re walking out.” And so, they walk past the guards. One of the interesting things in the story is there simply is no mention of the guards in any significant way. They just seem to be non-factors. The chains fall off; they walk out of the jail cell; they walk past the guards; they finally get to the gate that leads to the city and it opened by itself. The Greek word that is translated by itself is the word from which we get the word automatically. The gate just opened. Gates in the cities didn’t just open in the middle of the night, but it did, and Peter and the angel walked through and then suddenly the angel disappears. And the text basically says Peter finally gets it—that God has set him free.

This story is basically the story of a battle between two powers—between the king of Judea and the King of the Universe—and Peter gets it! The King of the Universe has said, “Not this time, fella,” and has walked him out and he’s free.

Verse 12:
And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.
(*NASB Acts 12:12)

Now one little side note here: this would be the house of John Mark, owned by his mother, Mary. There’s quite a bit of evidence that the upper room that Jesus and the disciples were in the night that Jesus was arrested was this same room. It was the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. We don’t know that for sure, but the evidence seems to lean that way, so it adds a little dimension to the story. They’re back in the very place where they had met with Jesus in the upper room.

When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, “You are out
of your mind!” But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, “It is his angel.” (Vs.13-15)

So, Peter realizes he’s out, so he makes his way to where he knows the church will be gathered and he’s knocking on the gate and, I’m sure, looking over his shoulder. It’s only a matter of time before the soldiers come down the street looking for him. He’s a wanted man, so he’s knocking on the gate and he’s trying to get their attention, and the servant girl, Rhoda, comes and she hears Peter. She realizes it’s Peter but, instead of letting him in, in her excitement she runs back to the prayer meeting, and she says, “You are not going to believe this; Peter is standing at the gate!” And their faith-filled response is, “You are crazy!” (Laughter) I find myself wanting to know, “What were they praying for?” (Laughter) Were they even asking for release or had they resigned themselves to the fact that he would die and, “Give us strength and protect us”? Whatever they were praying for, they definitely did not expect Peter to be standing at the gate. They say, “Girl, you’re crazy.” So, she insists, and they say, “It can’t be Peter; it’s got to be a ghost.” So just to make sure we understand they’re completely convinced it couldn’t be Peter, but they’re plenty willing to believe it’s a ghost. That’s the frame of mind that they are in.

I love Verse 16:

But Peter continued knocking; (I’ll bet he did (Laughter), looking over his shoulder like, “Would you people let me in?”) But Peter continued knocking and when they had opened the door, they saw him, and they were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, “Report these things to James and the brethren.” Then he left and went to another place. (Vs. 16-17)

This would not be James of the Big Three because that James is dead. This would be the James, the half-brother of Jesus who wrote the little New Testament book of James. By this time, he was a main player in the New Testament Jerusalem church. So, Peter tells them the story, “This is what happened; make sure you tell James; I’m out of here.” Interestingly enough, this is really the end of what we know about Peter, other than how he died. He disappears off the scene—probably goes into hiding—he would have had a bounty on his head. And Paul really takes up the story in this part of the book of Acts and it’s about Paul and his missionary journeys from this point on in Acts.

Verse 18, (kind of, meanwhile, back at the ranch):

Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.

Can you imagine? They go down to find him, to bring him out to execute him and he’s nowhere to be found. “Did you check under the cot? Did you look under the mattress? Where is this guy?” Obviously, they know there’s trouble.

When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there. (Vs. 19)
So, Herod sends the guards in order to get Peter, in order to execute Peter, in order to be a hero to the Jewish leaders—but Peter is nowhere to be found. He’s gone; he’s escaped. So, he brings forth the guards; he has them executed and he gets out of town—total embarrassment!

The rest of the Herod story finishes the chapter. It says:

Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king’s chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king’s country. On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. The people kept crying out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. (Vs. 20-24)

Verse 24 is key, because that’s what the whole story is primarily about. It’s a power encounter between the king of Judea and the King of the Universe, and the story finishes by saying, “God took out Herod and the church kept growing.” It is indeed unstoppable. But in the midst of this story, there is this emphasis on the praying church and the deliverance of Peter. The story is basically that if you gather together and fervently pray with great faith, Peter will be released. Amen. Have a nice day.

Wait a minute! That’s not really the way the story goes. First of all, they didn’t seem to have great faith. I’m not exactly sure what they were asking for. But, clearly, they did not expect God to release Peter. The text is clear. It was shocking; it was amazing; it caught them totally off guard. No one could make the case that these prayers moved the hand of a sovereign God because these people had great faith. They didn’t. They were people who were fearful; they didn’t know where to turn; they were confused, and they were fervently gathered in the presence of God. It is a great story of God doing the impossible and releasing Peter from prison.

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I would love to be able to tell you that, if you pray fervently and if you believe, God will release Peter, and everything will be okay. If you just conjure up enough faith, you can actually manipulate the hand of God and get whatever you want. That’s the way it works; but that’s only part of the story. It’s a great story. Peter was miraculously released, but James is dead. I’m sure they were praying for James. I’m sure they loved James; I’m sure they wanted James released, but James is dead, and Peter is released.

This is the challenge of prayer. We don’t know, at the end of the day, whether we get a James story or whether we get a Peter story. And if you get enough James stories, you start to believe it doesn’t work. It doesn’t do anything; it doesn’t change anything. I mean I can only hope and believe so many times. If I keep being disappointed, I just can’t go there anymore. And so, I stop believing that prayer really moves the hand of God. Maybe it’s just a therapy session and nothing more.

I have to tell you; I so resonate with that feeling. Of all of the spiritual disciplines, the one I struggle with by far the most, is the discipline of prayer. Some of you are thinking, “Oh no, the pastor doesn’t pray! (Laughter) We need a new guy.” I’m just being honest with you. This is really a struggle for me. You say, “Why is that?” I’ll tell you why it is. It’s twenty years—
twenty years of a child watching his father suffer unimaginable pain, day after day, week after week, year after year—as a boy crying out to God, praying to God, pleading with God, “Please do something; make it stop!” Not only did we not experience healing, it just got progressively worse. You can only believe; you can only have hope; you can only cry out so many times and feel like God is nowhere to be found—where you just can’t do it one more time. I can’t set myself up to be hurt again; I don’t have it in me. That’s twenty years of my life. To this day, it makes prayer hard for me. It’s a discipline where I must choose to believe, but there’s a pain in my heart that will never fully go away. And the more painful life is, the more difficult the circumstances are, the greater the risk of believing it’s possible that God could give me a Peter story. But dealing with the reality, it may be a James story—and I don’t know that I can do that one more time.

Some people swing the pendulum so far to the Peter story that they convince themselves, “If I just have enough faith, if I believe hard enough, I can actually manipulate the hand of God and get what I want every time. Every story will be a Peter story.” I’m telling you, “If you believe that, you’re setting yourself up for some deep, deep disappointment.” There’s nowhere the Bible promises that. But we can’t let the pendulum swing to the other side. Where, because we have had James stories, because we’ve prayed and it was painful, and we desperately wanted God to do something, and God didn’t respond the way we wanted Him to respond, we just finally conclude, “This doesn’t work. God’s sovereign; He does His thing; I can’t change that; I just need to suck it up and accept that.” That’s just not true. We can’t go to that swing of the pendulum. I still must choose to believe that prayer moves the hand of God.

I find myself asking of the text, “What if the church hadn’t been praying?” Even with the littleness of their faith, is it possible Peter would not have been released? I don’t know. There’s no way to answer that question. I only know that, within the story, there’s great emphasis on the fact that the church was praying fervently and that was part of the story that led to the release of Peter.

I do believe with all of my heart that prayer does move the hand of God. I believe that! I’m just telling you that it’s hard and it’s painful and, when the hand of God doesn’t move, it’s painful in a deep part of me—and some of you, probably many of you, would resonate with that. You’ve been down that same path, where you cry out to God and it seems like God doesn’t care. It seems like God doesn’t listen, and you finally concluded, “It just doesn’t work. What’s the use of doing it anymore? I can’t think that way one more time; I can’t hope one more time because I just can’t endure the pain of being disappointed one more time.” We have to discipline ourselves, with all that we have, to believe that prayer can move the hand of a sovereign God. It is possible that, through my prayers, God might do the impossible. I might get a Peter story, or I might get a James story. That’s what makes prayer so hard.

So, here’s what I would invite you to do. What this week was heavy on your heart...What kept you awake at night...What are you struggling with? And what I want to ask you to do is to fervently pray for God’s hand to move in whatever situation that is: not a casual request, not maybe if I have time, but I’m going to get at it in the presence of God and I’m going to ask God fervently to do the impossible. I’m not promising you will get a Peter story—I can’t make that promise. I don’t know if it will be a Peter story or a James story. I am saying it’s possible, that when the people of God fervently pray, you may get a Peter story and bring dramatic change to whatever it is that’s so heavy on your heart. Then, as we talk about prayer, you can run it through the grid of this thing in your life, and your fervent prayer, and what you’re asking God to do. And let’s just see if, at least among some of us, there’s a Peter story.
Our Father, we’re thankful that You’re the God of all power. Lord, Herod was no match for You. That’s obvious! Lord, I don’t doubt for a minute that You love me, but, Lord, you know this prayer thing can be very hard. In the most painful moments of life, sometimes it seems like we pray, and we pray, and we cry out; we ask for something. It feels like a James story. It just doesn’t end the way we had hoped it would end. Lord, that makes it hard, as You know, to believe the next time and the next time. Lord, I know there are people here that’s like me, have experienced that. It’s just really hard to believe that. Lord, give us the faith to believe it is possible we could have a Peter story. Lord, prayer does reach Your ears and it does move Your hand. Lord, we have to believe that. And when we get a James story, we just have to trust You. Lord, this is hard. Give us what we need. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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Arnie: Thanks Bryan. So, if you're disappointed in how your prayer life is playing out, what do we need to remember?

Bryan: I think we need to know the truth. I think it's common that Christians are wanting to claim things that are things God didn't promise, and then they're disappointed because God doesn't come through. And maybe they were led astray, or some sort of false teaching, or just, I call it the “Let's make a deal” theology. [Oh right.] We just want to believe, if I'm a good boy, I'm a good girl, then it's all going to work out. And you can just imagine God in Heaven, saying, “Wait a minute, I didn't promise that.” As a matter of fact, the Scripture seems pretty clear. So, I think trying to sort out, what I'm asking for, what I'm claiming. I think remembering, as we've talked about, this isn't Heaven and we're told again and again we should expect difficult times to come. And then I think just checking motives. Sometimes I just want God to clean up the mess, so I can go on with my life. And maybe God's saying no, actually I'd like you to learn something, so I'm going to leave the mess for a while. So, it's trying to sort out all those things, I think.

Cara: One thing I noticed, you made the case that while the people were praying for Peter and they were fervent about it, but they also were fearful. Does this tell me then that when I'm praying and there’s some fear there or confusion, maybe you're not really sure what to pray for, that God will still hear me?

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. So, you think about these people, why wouldn't they be afraid? James has been executed. As far as they know, Peter is going to be next, and the impact on them would be severe. It'd be odd for them not to be fearful, but still in the midst of that, they knew they only had one hope. And they turned to God and they fervently pray, and God answers their prayer miraculously. I think it's a myth, this idea that if you have this great faith with no doubt, that somehow then that's the key to moving the hand of God. So, we're saying if we do it, then God responds. And it's like that's not what we're saying. We're helpless, and in need, and fearful, and confused, and everything else, but it's God that has the power. And God's going to do what only God can do.

Cara: So, if I'm praying, and I'm not feeling a hundred percent confident then about what I'm praying for, or a certain situation, how to pray for that, is that where I can count on the Holy Spirit to help me out?
Bryan: Yeah, for sure. So, I would say I'm often confused about exactly what I'm supposed to be asking when I pray, because I don't know what's needed, whether it's in my own life or somebody else's life. I'm not real sure what's needed most, and it does get confusing, and all I can do is do my best to ask God, trust the Holy Spirit to lead me. And the rest is up to God.

Cara: Stand firm on what I know about God and maybe just release what I don't know about that circumstance then.

Bryan: Yeah. So, does someone need to be healed, or is there something they need to learn that will make them more like Christ? I don't know that. All I can do is ask for God to do what's needed most, (and that it feels better when I'm talking about someone else). [Yeah.] But it may be equally true in my own life. [Sure.]

Arnie: You said that Peter’s situation was a battle between the king of Judah and the King of the Universe. When we pray, we're also in the battlefield, aren't we?

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. It's spiritual warfare. The Bible even talks about prayers being a weapon. We're asking God to display His power and demonstrate He is indeed God. And thinking of the enemy: Them's is fighting words. It is a form of warfare.

Arnie: But Bryan, you have to admit, it's hard to imagine that my begging God to actually make a difference in this spiritual battle really makes a difference. Can you give me some perspective here?

Bryan: You know, the best I could say is you have to believe God tells the truth. You know, those are the verses that help me as it relates to prayer is, there's so much of this I don't understand, and it's confusing, and all I can do is believe God tells the truth. There's plenty of Biblical examples. I do think it does make a difference. I think it is just too easy to talk ourselves out of believing that prayer works. We kind of roll over and give up and we just can't do that.

Cara: So the angel gets Peter out of prison, but then Peter is on his own. He had to go into hiding. He still had a job to do, so he still needed to deal with worldly issues. That seems to say that even when God answers our prayers, we still have a job to do. So, in other words, there's God's part. And then would you say that there is our part?

Bryan: Yeah, there's certainly both. I mean, that God answers prayer, that's not “end of story”. I like to think of it as you just keep going. You know, whatever it is we're praying about, God steps in and resolves it; it's not the end of the story. So, we don't know what exactly happened to Peter, where he went. I don't think he was somewhere hiding in a cave. I think he was fulfilling his calling, but the wisdom to hide and get out of town makes sense. But until God called him home, he had a job to do. And that's true of us as well.

Arnie: But Bryan, you know as well as I do that there are plenty of people listening who've been praying for weeks, months, some of them even for years, the same thing, and they haven't seen any answer. Why should they keep praying?

Bryan: Yeah. So that's a message that's pretty deep in my own heart, because it is hard. Year after year after year, you pray, and you hope, and you plead, and sometimes it doesn't go the way you want it to go, and it's easy at some point to give up. [Or to get angry.] Yeah. And part of its
emotionally, I just can't hope again and be disappointed again. It’s a big part of my own story, so I identify with it. But I think continuing to ask is continuing to be dependent, to stay focused. The only chance I have, the only hope - and I say this to people all the time - if you become angry and bitter and walk away, you've turned away from the only chance you have. [Wow.] [That’s pretty powerful.] [Yeah.] So, even though God isn’t answering, it's like I don't have plan B. You know, I remember talking to my mom once, and I was asking her about these things, and my mom said she prayed every day for my dad's healing, and she believed with all her heart one day my dad was going to come walking into the kitchen. And I asked her why she did that. And she said it was the only way to get through it: every day had hope. And without that, she couldn't go forward. So, I think even if we're not getting the answer we want, it still is the message of hope. What's the option? What's the alternative?