

LISTENING TO RHODA
Acts 12

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“We are three, you are three, have mercy on us! We are three, you are three, have mercy on us!” This simple prayer prayed by three hermits on an island was unacceptable to the more learned church officials who went to check on them. So they instructed them in the fine art of prayer over a period of days and then left the island on a ship.

Within a few moments, they saw the amazing sight of three spots of fire coming across the water toward them. As the fire drew closer, they discovered it was the three hermits running across the top of the water. “We already forgot how you taught us to pray! Could you remind us.” The officials with this new knowledge sent them back to the island with this advice, “Keep on praying the way you have been.” Obviously for them prayer was more than a form or a formality. It was a force.

In Jerusalem, the apostles became a target. They were on the king’s hit list in his effort to suppress the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ. James had his head chopped off by Herod, and Peter was put in prison, awaiting the blade himself. When Herod killed James, the Jews were elated. Herod wanted to score some more points, so he proceeded with plans against Peter. This Herod, Herod Agrippa, is the grandson of Herod the Great, the horrible Herod who was on the throne when Jesus was born.

Peter was placed under the heaviest of security – guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. The guards were rotated every three hours throughout the twelve night hours, to assure maximum alertness. Peter was a prize prisoner.

It was the night before Peter was going to go to trial. I don’t know how he slept, but he did – between two guards, bound with two chains, with sentries standing at the entrance. 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. At once, the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

The term Luke uses for the angel’s blow to Peter is a harsh one (v. 7, “struck”). And an angel only strikes two times in the New Testament, ironically both in Acts 12. In 12:7, the angel strikes Peter to save him; but in 12:23, the angel strikes Herod to kill him.

I think Peter is groggy. I think Peter is sleepy. The angel has to tell him everything to do – like a parent who awakes an eight-year-old child. “Put on your clothes. Okay, now Peter, put on your sandals.” Now, look, verse 8, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.”

Peter stumbled, shuffling his feet, out of the prison. But he had no idea that the angel was real. Peter thought he was dreaming. As they passed the first and second guards and came to the iron

gate leading to the city, the gate mysteriously opened. That made it all the more dreamlike to Peter. They simply walked through it. After they had walked the length of one street, the angel vanished.

Peter woke up – verse 11 – coming to himself. “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent His angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything those Jews were wanting to happen to me.”

The scene shifts in verse 12. Here, the Christian community is gathered at the home of John Mark’s mother. They are praying for Peter – praying that God will release him.

Her name meant “rose” – Rhoda. Peter is trying to be quiet. He is trying to hide. He knows the soldiers will find him gone. He knows that their lives will be on the line for his. So he needs to get out of the moonlight and into the shadows of cover.

Rhoda, like the girl who keeps the gate at the trial of Jesus, is a servant girl who is in charge of the gate. She responds to Peter’s knocking. She hurries out to the gate and discovers who it is. She is overjoyed. She is so joyful she leaves Peter standing outside, runs back into the house and announces the good news – forgetting altogether that Peter really needed to come in.

“Peter’s at the door,” Rhoda announces excitedly, interrupting the prayers of Christians who had gathered there to pray for the release of Peter. Did you hear that? When she exclaimed that Peter was at the door, Rhoda interrupted Christians who were praying for Peter’s release.

They stopped praying for Peter’s protection and said, “No, it can’t be. It must be Peter’s angel.” It was a reflection of the Jewish belief that each person has a guardian angel as his or her spiritual counterpart. It was believed that after someone’s death the angel might appear for a while. You’ve seen his ghost, we might say. You see congregation, they found it easier to believe that Peter had already been beheaded in a hasty fashion and had gone to heaven than that the very prayers that were being uttered from their lips had been answered.

In any event, you can’t trust a hysterical servant girl. “You’re crazy. You are out of your mind,” they said. “You’ve got to be kidding,” another one chimed in. Some things are just too good to be true.

But it was true, and Peter kept nervously knocking. Finally, he got another response. Can’t you see Peter out there? “Hurry up, hurry up. They’re going to come and get me. My goodness, open the door! What are you thinking?”

But look at verse 16. Peter kept on knocking. And when they opened the door and saw him – this is what I want you to see – they were astonished, amazed.

Stop right there. What does Luke mean when he writes they were astonished? How could they be astonished? They were right there, praying for Peter’s protection, for Peter’s delivery. I know James had already been beheaded, and God seemingly hadn’t answered those prayers. But they

were praying for Peter – specifically for his protection, for God to intervene. And when they get what they petition the throne of God for, they are astonished.

They really hadn't been listening to Rhoda. Listening to Rhoda means that we are willing to be a people of expectancy. That when we pray, we expect God to do, in return, great things.

Listening to Rhoda – realizing that God does answer prayers, realizing that God works in mysterious ways through the Spirit, even in the details of life – sending people our way, putting us in the right place at the right time to be the bearers of His kingdom.

You see, the church has been trying to silence Rhoda from the earliest days. Here, even in the shadow of Peter the Apostle, the one who brings the message that God has acted and prayers have been answered – well, somehow it just seems too good to be true. And even with those gathered Christians, bent upon knees to pray in the home of John Mark's mother – even as they doubted that their prayers would really do anything or that God would really answer – even so, we find ourselves in the story, praying but not expecting.

Fred Craddock tells a story of walking down the halls of a hospital on his usual pastoral rounds. And a lady in a bed – it's happened to me before, it's not unusual – called for him to come in.

“Me?” he asked, knowing she wasn't on his list.

“Well, if you're a preacher, I want you.”

“Well what would you like for me to do?” Craddock asked nervously. People really do make the strangest requests of preachers.

“Why, pray for me to be healed, of course,” said the woman, as if she was almost disgusted with his inquiry. Why did he have to ask? If you are sick and in the hospital and you call for a preacher, you're calling for someone to pray.

He prayed. She stretched and jumped up and yelled, “I'm healed. I'm healed.” Unquestionably, she really was healed.

Craddock, a traditional minister, says that he went to his car in the parking garage – his heart pounding, his pulse racing – leaned his head against the steering wheel and said, “Lord, don't you ever do that to me again.”

It's funny. It's funny because Craddock prayed and really didn't think God would answer his prayer. What was true of that group of Christians huddled in fear in Jerusalem in the home of John Mark's mother was true of Professor Craddock. They prayed. They asked. But they didn't really expect an answer.

And there's Rhoda, seemingly more naive than the rest of the community of faith, and she's calling upon those of us who are theologically hardened to listen – Peter really is at the gate. God really has heard, and God really has answered the prayers of His people.

Elva McAllaster has written a poem.

**Whenever Deacon Jones kneels down to pray
Tall angels gather round him with alert faces
And flexing wingtips.
They know that urgent errands
Will soon be sending them
In rapid haste, like leaves on autumn winds.
While he was kneeling today,
Three of them saluted and left for the local hospitals;
Six or eight, in strong swift pirouette,
Went toward as many mission fields;
One disappeared to do his stint
Within the office of a harried senator;
Four more were hovering
(While Jones yet spoke)
Beside four other mortals surnamed Jones.
Some of us may consider Jones
A humble, ordinary man.
No matter.
He's far too busy with his opportunities
To give much attention to our appraisals,
And he's dispatching angels.
(“Dispatching the Angels,” reprinted from *Perspectives*, October 1991)**

Quite confessionally I want to say to you that I'm a little bit hardened. Like those early Christians and like Fred Craddock, sometimes I'm so weary of people who even seem to minimize God by looking for Him under every blade of grass and attributing to Him every minute detail of life. I become weary of the Rhodas of this world. Some of it is because of the real deep sense of awe and respect I have for God and His name, and don't feel like every time a parking space becomes available on the front row at WalMart I ought to exclaim, “God, you have answered my prayer!” (Robby prayed to God, asking for a sign. If God wanted him to have a donut, he prayed there would be an open parking spot right in front of the Donut Stop. And sure enough, 23rd time around the block, there it was!) In the process, there is a little crust and a little callousness that sometimes keeps theological veterans from lending their ear to Rhoda.

There she is at the door, and she's right – Peter is there. Their prayers have been answered. And all the people who have been praying for Peter can simply say is, “You've probably just seen a ghost. Leave us alone. Let us keep praying for Peter.”

It does us good to listen to Rhoda.

The late Milton Cunningham told a story – he told about a Rhoda in his life and in the life of Barbara, his wife. Dr. Cunningham was pastor of Westbury Baptist Church in Houston. He was the chaplain of Baylor University and a dear friend of mine.

A letter came to Dr. Cunningham’s home. It had the wrong name on the letter. It had the wrong street address on the letter. And it had the wrong town on the letter. There was really nothing on the letter that had anything to do with Dr. Cunningham or his street or, even, his town. He lived in Waco, and the letter should have been going to Arlington.

Dr. Cunningham said to Barbara, “This is strange for us to receive this lady’s mail. I mean, sometimes you get your next door neighbor’s mail, and sometimes you get the mail of the person who lived in your home 20 years ago, but just a piece that’s completely unrelated?” Milton shrugged his shoulders and tossed the piece in the trash can, unopened. But Barbara went back sometime later and retrieved the letter from the trash, bothered by its presence.

“I’m going to try to find the person to whom this letter is addressed, Milton. It’s not a piece of junk mail. It’s nice stationery.” She called the town and they didn’t have the lady’s name listed. She asked the operator to try to cross reference, based upon the address, and finally – bingo. There was the name and phone number of the lady to whom the mail had been addressed.

Barbara made the long distance phone call and identified herself. “You see, ma’am, I know you don’t know me, but I received this piece of mail addressed to you. I’m in Waco and you’re in Arlington and well, I want to send it to you.”

“Oh, just throw it away. It’s probably some junk mail.”

“No, it’s not,” said Barbara. “It’s on nice stationery. It’s from North Carolina.”

The lady began to weep on the other end of the phone. “I’ll bet it’s a letter from my son. My husband and I divorced years ago. My husband was a man of means, and he took my boys and told them that if they ever wanted to inherit any of the money they would have to abandon me, have nothing to do with me. They were little boys then. I have not heard from my son since. Please send me the letter.”

Barbara readdressed the envelope and sent it to the dear lady. Three months passed and Barbara decides, “You know, I think I need to call that lady. I’ve just got her on my mind.”

“Oh, thank you for calling back. I wanted to thank you for sending me the letter. It was from my son. He just graduated from Texas A&M, and he had been admitted to medical school. If the letter had been trashed he would have thought I had not been receptive to his single effort to reach out, and I probably never would have heard from my son again. We have a renewed relationship, and everything is going fine.”

Barbara then met the dear lady, a new friend in Christ, in Hillsboro once a month, and they had Bible study together.

What about it, Bible Study teacher? What about it, deacon? What about it, staff member? What about it, pastor? Are you so hardened, are you so fixed – running back and forth on the same theological trail, like a dog in a fenced yard – that you can't look into the darkness? That you can't listen to Rhoda? That you can't pray and expect God to answer?

You see, when I look at Acts 12, there is something very disturbing to me. When I look at myself, I ask which character am I? I'm not Rhoda – I'm not. I'm that group that is inside, praying and saying, "Don't bother me. God can't be answering our prayers."

And I'm not the only one in that group. There are a lot of you who join me, because long ago you stopped listening to Rhoda.

I'm happy to say I'm learning again to listen to her. I'm happy to say I'm learning again that when I pray and ask God to heal, I really think that He might do it. I've seen Him do it. I know He can do it. Oh, I'm not trying to make God into some type of god with a little "g" that has to respond to my magic incantation. No, not at all. But I am going to let God be God, going to ask for Peter to be released for prison, and I'm going to expect that since He's done it so many times before there is a good chance He is going to do it again. My prayers, of late, have been formed with a whole new measure of hope, a whole new way of listening to Rhoda.

I appreciate so much those of you who gather on Wednesday night to join your pastor in prayer for those who are in the hospital – those of you who come on Wednesday faithfully and we see those names and we pray. You know God has been doing some wondrous, healing things among this, his body of people called First Baptist. We've seen people like Peter, counted down and out, go up and out. And don't think for a minute that I don't attribute it to God listening to the prayers of His people.

Howard Hendricks tells a story about a man who came to know the Lord on a Thursday evening. On Sunday he showed up at church. The pastor announced that there was going to have an evening service, and, of course, the guy didn't know enough to stay home. He was a new believer – so he showed up again. That's when he learned that the church had Bible study and prayer meeting on Wednesday night. So the new believer came again.

Howard Hendricks said he sat next to him at the prayer meeting, and just before it got started the new believer turned to him and asked, "Do you think they'd mind if I prayed?"

"Of course not," Professor Hendricks, theologian, reassured him. "That's what we're here for."

"Yeah, I know," he said, "but I've got a problem. I can't pray the way you people do."

Hendricks told him, "That's no problem, friend. You should thank God for that!"

Well, we started praying, and I could tell he was too nervous to take part. Finally, I put my hand on him to encourage him. I'll never forget his prayer: "Lord, this is Jim," he began.

“I’m the one who met you last Thursday night. I’m sorry, Lord, because I can’t say it the way the rest of these people do, but I want to tell you the best I know how. I love you, Lord. I really do. Thanks a lot. I’ll see you later.”

That prayer ignited the whole prayer meeting. “Some of us,” writes Dr. Hendricks, “had been doing a good job of talking about theology in prayer – you know, exploring the universe of doctrine, scraping the Milky Way with our big words. But this guy prayed – earnestly!” This guy prayed expectantly. (“Learning ‘bout Prayer” *Stories for the Heart*, ed. Alice Gray)

Listening to Rhoda. Listening to the guy who meets the Lord on Thursday and is already teaching you things on Wednesday. Really expecting that God is listening to your prayers and that He answers.

Some of us huddle in our little circles of prayer and declare that she must have seen a ghost, because God isn’t really answering our prayers. And Peter stands at the gate, yelling in a whisper, “Let me in.”

The God you call upon will finally come, promises Frederick Buechner, “and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers, that is what we are really praying for.” (*Prayer, Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC*, p. 87)