

From Simon to Peter #33 - the Spirit in the Heart With Death at the Door

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon highlights the power of the Spirit in the face of death and the role of the praying church in releasing God's servants from difficult circumstances.

Duration: 40:49

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 3:16, Acts 12:1-19, Romans 3:23, Hebrews 9:7

Topics: "Simon to Peter"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the story of Simon Peter in the book of Acts. Peter finds himself imprisoned and facing certain death, with no human means of escape. However, the preacher emphasizes that the spirit of God reigns in Peter's heart, providing him with all sufficiency and power. The preacher highlights the importance of a praying church and the use of angels as means through which God releases Peter from his imprisonment. The sermon concludes by emphasizing that angels are simply messengers of God, and that God can use both human and supernatural means to accomplish His purposes.

Transcript

Now shall we turn for our meditation to the Book of the Acts in Chapter 12 and to the passage that was read for us by Mr. Lowe earlier in the service. I have given it the title, The Spirit in the Heart with Death at the Door. This is the last but one of the series we began some time ago now and called it From Simon to Peter.

I was tempted to pass over this, but on second thoughts I found it irresistible and have had to turn to it for some of the precious things that it has to tell us. So I bid you turn with me this morning to the passage, though I'm not going to read any one, any particular verse from verses 1 to 19. We shall be looking at the passage and its message as a whole.

Now that the Holy Spirit dwelt in Peter's heart hardly needs proving. Readers of the Book of the Acts and those of you who have been with us here over the last number of months will need no proving at this point that the mighty Spirit of God came into the heart of this man to dwell. We remember something of the initial glory of his entrance in power and with great grace on the day of Pentecost.

We have seen something of the abiding glow and grace of that Spirit. Circumstances have changed, but the sufficiency that Simon Peter experienced on every plane is such as to prove that this once fallible and always feeble man, naturally speaking, is now in touch with God. He is indeed more than sufficient in and through him who is his Lord and his Savior.

With each new exigency or demand, the mighty indweller seems to cast the mantle of his sufficiency around God's servant, to raise him up above what he would normally be. To make him wiser than the wisest of his foes and stronger than the strongest. And it's a remarkable sight.

It's a remarkable spectacle. To see this, let me repeat, this once very feeble, foolish man now reigning in grace. You see him moving from one circumstance into another on the pages of the Book of the Acts, but always having all sufficiency in all things.

And the reason? The Spirit of God reigns and rules in his heart. And the Spirit makes present to the believer the unchanging grace and sufficient power of God in glory. Now, in the incident before us, Simon Peter is found looking straight into the eyeball of death.

Death stands astride his pathway in all its gaunt arrogance. And humanly speaking, there is no getting death away from the door. Peter's in prison.

Four squads of soldiers, making sixteen in all, have been deputed to keep an eye and a hand upon him until the morrow, when the execution is to take place. There's no getting out of it. There's no wriggling out of the situation.

He's with us back to the wall. He's looking death in the face. What does the Spirit of God do for a man in a circumstance such as this? Well, let us look.

Let us see what the passage is to tell us. But before we come there, I want to say one other thing. Will you please mark this well? The saints and the servants of God have to die and to suffer.

Now that may sound quite unnecessary to be told, but it is. There is no such thing as the utter and eventual avoidance of death or of suffering. The saints of God have to suffer in one way or another.

And the leader of the Christian church, Simon Peter, has here to suffer. Don't you believe in any doctrine of healing which suggests that anybody can ultimately escape pain, persecution, which is suffering, and death? There are times when God breaks in healing power upon the body and upon the mind as upon the spirit. That is true.

But there is no such thing in the New Testament as absolute deliverance from suffering and pain until the day when the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible and we shall receive a body which will know no pain and in which we shall know no sorrow. In the meantime, the saints of God suffer. In fact, the case could well be made out that the saints of God have more sorrows and more sufferings and more trials than those who are outside of Jesus Christ.

If you're a Christian this morning and if you're witnessing to your Lord, you will have problems, you will have burdens, you will have sorrows that the man of the world doesn't know anything about. You will have a dimension that gives you pain and distress that the man who knows not Christ has never, never known and never will. For in the midst of all these things, says Paul, we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

That's what we have here. Peter is in prison. Peter is threatened with death.

I don't know whether he thought it. Expositors of the passage looking back upon it have concluded, erroneously of course, but have concluded that it must have appeared to Peter that his Lord's prophecy was about to come true. You remember Jesus said to Peter, it's recorded in John 21, 18, Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would.

But when you're old, you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you would not wish to go. John explains. He said this to him referring to the kind of death that he would ultimately die.

Is this the end then? Simon might well have asked the question. It was destined not to be the end. But as Simon Peter looked at it in prospect, he may not have been sure.

And so that as far as he was concerned, he's looking death in the face. His hands are bound. There is no escape.

Let's see what did the Spirit do for him. Now the first thing I would like us to notice, one can speak of in these terms. Let us look first at the powers that were arraigned against this Spirit-filled man.

And then we shall see of the power that is for him. You remember Paul's great appeal of praise at the end of Acts chapter 8. If God be for us, then who can be against us? Now we have that enacted here in the experience of one man. There are those that are against him, but God is for him.

And because God is for him, he is more than conqueror. It's an illustration really of that Pauline teaching in Romans 8. Briefly then let's look at the powers arraigned against this Spirit-filled man, Simon Peter. There are many.

Though we shall now have to confine ourselves to the more obvious. First of all we think of Peter's human foes at this point. The first and the most obvious of course is Herod the King.

May I read to you again the first few verses? About that time Herod the King laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with a sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.

And when he had seized him, he put him in a prison and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. Now that unscrupulous tyrant was Herod Agrippa I. Those of you who are acquainted with the history of the times will know that he was the son of Aristobulus and the grandson of Herod the Great, an Edomite brought up upon the best that Greek culture could provide. But he was a pagan and a miserable pagan.

He was a man who was given to lust. He was a man who was dissolute. He was a man without principle.

He was a man who cared not for the things of God nor for the things of men. He was a man who was virtually his own God. About the only consistent rule in this man's life at this time was the way in which he was determined, whatever it cost, to hold on to his throne and his power.

Now that is the only thing that you find consistently emerging in his life and in his history. He will do anything. He will go anywhere.

He will pay any price if only he can remain in power. Now, of course, he's not the only one that's walked that path, but he did. And it is for these political reasons that he went out of his way to please the Jews.

It's almost uncanny, if you didn't know the whole story. This man, pagan though he was, would begin his day just as a Jew did, with a sacrifice. Not that he believed, but he wanted to please the Jews.

He wanted to be on good terms with the Jews, lest they should make an insurrection and somehow or other his power would be less secure and his authority and his reign. He not only did that, he observed all the customs of the Jews. He coveted their good.

When, for example, the Roman Gaius arrived in Palestine and wanted to have a statue of himself in the temple, this pagan, this profligate, this immoral character championed the cause of the Jews. Not because the temple was a place that he honored or respected at all, but he wanted peace, you see. And if there was any trouble in the country, well now, he might conceivably lose control and lose his power.

His motivation was miserably selfish. He would do anything to please the Jews to avoid any slightest discord. And it was because he thought that it would please the Jews that he murdered James with a sword.

Now at that point he didn't quite realize what a pleasure that gave to the Jews. But then, after the event, he saw it and he recognized it. And he said to himself, My, if I can please these people by bringing one life to an end, let me see, I must get one of the chiefest of the people that they dishonor and dislike.

And so he decided that he'd get Peter into prison and straight after, you notice, after the days of unleavened bread, after the Passover, he's just as scrupulous in these things as a Jew. When the festive season is over, he'll do exactly the same with Simon Peter as he did with James, just because he wanted to please the Jews and secure peace at any price. And with peace, the continuance of his own power.

So you see, behind the power of Herod, you see the power and the authority and the influence of the same generation of Jews who sent Jesus to his cross and crucified him. So then there is Herod and the Jews. Secondly, I want you to notice Peter's psychologically harassing circumstances.

James was already slain. James is already dead. Now, the link between Peter and James was a very long one.

They were both brought up in the same town. They became fishermen and later on in life they became partners in fishing. Luke tells us that in chapter 5. So you see, James and Peter, along with John, were very intimately friendly.

Moreover, they'd not only begun to follow the Savior together, but these three, Peter, James and John, had been given privileges denied to the other nine disciples. I don't need to go over the details of that. But James and Peter were always together.

James and Peter and John. Peter, James and John. James has already been killed.

One doesn't need to say more. You can imagine how Peter felt. Herod has raised his mighty hand and has murdered his friend.

He is already in prison and he is guarded well. There is no conceivable way of escape, humanly speaking. Not only that, Peter is, as we've noticed, there in prison and he is there at a particular time.

Will you notice the calendar? They tell me that when you're in prison, if you have your sanity, you think more than you do on the outside. Whether that is true or not, I'm not sure. But if Peter was thinking at all, he would remember the time of the year and he would think about this because he was a good Christian man and he respected the Jewish calendar as well as the Christian.

It was the time of unleavened bread leading up to the Passover. In other words, this is the very time of the year when Jesus Christ was crucified. Peter could never forget that.

This was the time of the year when Peter denied his Lord. He wasn't in prison then. He was in the high priest's courtyard.

He had his freedom, he had his liberty. But one taunt, one jibe from a young damsel's lips and Peter denied his Lord with oaths three times over. Can you see what a psychologically significant moment this is? And then behind all these things, can I just make a passing reference to the fact that we have the archenemy of mankind and of the saints and of the church and of the Christ especially.

We have Satan at work. Satan must have been infuriated at his lack of success in relation to the disciples of Jesus Christ and to the church. In the first place, he had failed to hinder Peter becoming a disciple.

He had failed and failed miserably. For whatever he made Peter do, however he tempted him, the Lord Jesus Christ lifted him up again, forgave his sin, gave him fresh grace and sent him on his way rejoicing. And Satan's ploys and designs were all in vain.

Then he had miserably failed in the death of our Lord. Oh yes, he managed. He managed to get a disciple who would sell him for thirty pieces of silver and he had other human agents involved in the whole plot and Jesus was nailed to the cross but he was raised from the dead.

The lamb that was slain upon the tree became the triumphant Lord. He is risen. How disappointed he would be.

Then you remember he tried very early in the history of the Christian church, this side of Pentecost, to see poison into the minds of the community and he introduced hypocrites into the midst of the saints. Ananias and Sapphira, for example, in order to pollute the spirit. But he failed.

The church is going on. The church is marching forward. You hear the trumpet of the gospel sounding forth unequivocally that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Satan is infuriated. Now he will try another tactic. And this is what it is.

He whips up the fury of Herod. Peter's in prison. Now then, that is the first part.

That's the background. Now let's come to the other side. These are the powers, the main powers, against the apostle of the Lord.

Now how does a spirit-filled man approach this? What does the grace of God do in times like these? I can only give you a little picture this morning but it's a precious one. The parties who were active on Peter's behalf Blessed are they who with Elisha of old in the Old Testament days when surrounded by enemy hordes could say to his servant Don't be afraid For they that are for us are greater than those that are against us And I'm sure his servant must have thought that he was pulling a fast one Pulling wool over his eyes Where are they?

The young servant might have asked I don't see anybody for us I only see the enemy all around us and there's no way of escape But the eye of faith could see beyond the human And the man of faith could see that God was on the field And he was And here Simon Peter was unafraid And Simon Peter was kept And Simon Peter was released Not forever, Simon had to die eventually But not before his work for God was done In other words, Herod and his hordes can never ultimately frustrate the work of God At this stage let us not indulge in a comparison of these powers For and against Let's just simply look at the way God dealt with his servant And the first thing I want you to notice is this God ministers his grace to this spirit-filled man via a praying church I read in verse 5 So Peter was kept in

prison But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church This is very important, far more important than you might at first think A spirit-filled man cannot do without the fellowship of the church If he tries to, he will be the loser And I am tremendously impressed by the fact that the Lord in glory Did not deal simply on a personal plane with Simon Peter here He made his own church the vehicle of blessing He made the church pray and in answer to the prayers of the church in part He communicated the benefits that are recorded here and the victory But let me come to the praying of the church Again this may strike us as something very normal But you know it wasn't normal to this church It wasn't normal to the early church Praying has become a new thing to them since Pentecost The

whole genius of the Old Testament I'm oversimplifying, I'm aware Nevertheless let me put it like this The whole genius of the Old Testament is to show that The way into the presence of God is not yet opened There is a veil that separates God And it only opens up once a year and that for the high priest But as for the commonality of men They're told to keep out and keep up day because we are all sinners And when the high priest went in on the day of atonement He had to go with blood for himself and for the people he represented In other words the word is keep away, keep your distance God is holy, you are sinful And therefore prayers were very formal in Israel Those that we have in the book of Psalms and elsewhere are exceptions They are men and women of faith that have seen the coming

Messiah And on the basis of what God is going to do They leap with faith and with hope but they're exceptions In other words the ordinary Jew kept away He kept his distance and the better the man he was The more the distance he kept, the further away The good man in the Old Testament was a man who was aware of his degradation Aware of his need, aware of his sin And had the fear of God and the designation fear of God Is related to this sense of lostness But now you see Jesus has come He's taught, he's lived, he's died upon the cross He's made atonement He's offered his own blood once in the fullness of the time And the veil of the temple has been rent in the midst And the spirit of sonship has come and he's come to dwell in the hearts of men And so you see with the rent veil in front of

them And the spirit of the sonship of Jesus within them They must pray It's the natural thing to draw near to God now To come to God With the advent of the Messiah and all this They must pray May I say it by way just as a passing remark You see this is why it is still true as in the book of the Acts of the Apostles One of the proofs that a man is a Christian is Behold he prayeth That was a signal that was given to that saint Who was the first man to deal with Saul of Tarsus You go says the angel to him You go says the Lord to him via his servant You go, you can trust yourself He's praying The veil of the temple has been rent He's drawing near to God And the spirit of sonship is in his heart He's a changed man You see a Christian is a man who draws near to God So then, just think of it

This church finds it almost spontaneously right and proper and natural To carry Simon, Peter and his needs Into the Shekinah, into the glory Into the Holy of Holies A praying church Oh blessed is that man

Who belongs to a praying church Time was when the whole church prayed Now I may be chiding now Will you take it kindly But it's only in lands like Korea today That we have a whole church meeting for prayer In one or two places in Europe We don't have it In the early days the whole church met for prayer Nowadays it may be a representative of the family Not even that from time to time Just a few Time was when the church prayed And I say to you blessed is that man Who belongs to a church that can pray for him when he's in prison And bring the grace of God to bear upon his situation in a

cell I'd like to see a church like that I tell you if I were in secular employment And I were moving from one place to another The first characteristic of a church I would look for would be this A church that can pray for me A church that can put her arms under me when I'm going down and sinking And lift me up A church like that will always be orthodox The church whose prayers God accepts Will always be an orthodox church But you can be orthodox without praying And Peter belonged to a church like that And when they knew that Peter was in prison The first thing they do is this They gather around They put their arms together And they lift their voices to God And they carry the needs of Peter to the Lord And pray for him Though Peter was spirit filled God used means to release him One means

a praying church The body of Christ at prayer Another means that God used is an angel Verses 6 and 7 The very night when Herod was about to bring him out Peter was sleeping between two soldiers Bound with two chains And sentries before the door were guarding the prison And behold the angel of the Lord appeared Now let's put this in its simplest terms and briefly An angel is simply a messenger An angel of God is a messenger of God Sometimes God's messengers are very human Very human As human as you are As human as I am You read Matthew 25 and 26 And you will see what stress our Lord puts upon this How we are meant to visit those in prison And the sick Go to James How we are meant to visit the fatherless and the afflicted The widows In other words Some of God's angels are human Some of

God's messengers are human And an angel is a messenger You know Let's be careful here In the book of the Revelation The minister of the church is called an angel Now I don't want you to call me an angel But it's true It's true to fact, you see An angel is but a messenger A messenger A messenger of God An angel of God is a messenger of God But you know there are times when God's human angels Physical messengers Can't do His will For example They can't always get into prison They can't unlock prison doors And they can't get into the windows And they can't get in any other way But you see God has His messengers His angels Who can get in where human angels Human messengers can't He has His special His refined angels And He has only to command them And they're there Where?

Anywhere At His bidding Anywhere Now don't let's get into the details of the doctrine of angelology Let's just take the simple and the glorious truth of this God has at His command Every kind of servant necessary To fulfill His will And to save His people Whatever their circumstances Now that's the point It doesn't matter whether it's human or angelic It doesn't matter at all The point that the passage is making is this We can fail to see the wood for the trees here What the passage is saying is this When no other man can get into that prison and do anything about it God sends one of His servants that can And that was an angel He's the Lord of hosts I like this Old Testament appellation Some people say that refers to the stars Well that's true He's the Lord of the stars He's the Lord of the sun It's setting and it's rising He's the Lord of the elements He's the Lord of all He's the Lord of hosts And within the hosts of the Lord There are angelic beings And this angel goes into prison And he tells Peter Look on Peter Wake up man Peter was sleeping Wake up man He says get up Dress, put on your sandals And then your mantle And then follow me And he leads him out So then we have first of all a praying church Then a ministering angel But now Most important Finally We have the sovereign God Himself This is where I want to end this morning Over

against the combined might of Herod and the Jews The psychologically unnerving situation And Satan's maneuvers We have a praying church An angel of God And God Himself And God Himself The point I want to make is this God's church And God's angel Contribute nothing originally To the situation Please notice that Neither the church nor the angel can do anything originally That is in and of themselves The only thing that the church and the angel are able to do is this It's to bring the word, the message of God And the grace of God And the provisions of God To Peter where Peter is It's God must act And it is God who does the acting It is God who snaps the chains His chains fell off Who snapped the chains?

I tell you who snapped the chains It is God who does that And when they came to the outer gate We're told it opened to them of its own accord Who opened the prison gate? I tell you it was God who opened the prison gate So that on the scene here We have the church praying in the background We have an angel that's come right in But with the angel Alongside of Him And near to Peter And in Peter's heart giving him peace And sleep on a night like this Is God Himself By His Spirit in a prison Now in the knowledge of all this Simon Peter was unmoved at the prospect of death Let me repeat He was sleeping soundly until the angel woke him up Twice before God has delivered him from prison And if it is His will God will do it again I suppose he argued like that Oh blessed faith Oh wondrous peace Though death has arrived on the doorstep The Spirit in Peter's heart Ministers the comfort of knowing that God can again deliver him If that is God's will And His will Is God's will Can you not see what's happening here?

It's a long time ago When Jesus said to Simon Ha ha So you are Simon the son of Jonah I'll make you a new man A man of rock A man of stone A man of character A man of stability We've waited a long time to see the rock in Peter Here he is Sleeping between two soldiers The night before his execution Unwilling to recant or to withdraw To do anything at all to come to terms with his enemies Willing for whatever God wills And going on With God My good friend, I don't know what your need is this morning But you and I are not imprisoned anyway Here we are And yet we may be imprisoned within a set of circumstances That are terribly trying Do you belong to a praying church?

Where you can be loved and surrounded And prayed for Do you yourself as a Christian do that for others? Can you do anything to make our church here at Knox More of a praying, pleading church That nurses every member from the crib to the grave And carries the need of all its people Every week throughout the year To the throne of grace And pleads the merits of the name of Jesus In relation to every circumstance May I remind you that God still has his angels Though some of them are very human Others of them are not human at all They can meet you where you are But more and still more important Is the fact that whether he sends his servants from the church Or his angels from his immediate presence Neither of them can do anything unless God comes in To break the chain And open the door And lead you out And take you on And this he will do If like Peter Your will this morning Is God's will Oh may the Lord bring us there That we have no will but his And then We shall know no grace Less than his

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