

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Acts 12.16.

I want you to imagine the scene here in Acts 12. King Herod Agrippa has begun his vicious campaign against the Christians. He has already had James put to death, and now he's got Peter, the really big fish, in prison. His friends are horrified, but their first reaction to call a prayer meeting is spot-on. A praying church is an alive church. We don't need money, guns, and political clout. All we have is the power of prayer, but, it is the slender muscle which connects us to omnipotence. Take it to the Lord in prayer. St Mark, who wrote the 2nd gospel, crops up here, for the prayer meeting is held in John Mark's mother's house, p1106, v12 ... But suddenly there's a loud knock at the door. 'Who on earth that can *that* be? Rhoda! Go and answer the door.' So off she trips and they get back to their prayers. Poor Rhoda didn't dare open the door. Who knows? It could have been Roman soldiers after *them*. 'Who is it?' she asks. 'It's me, Peter. Quickly. Open up before they see me' You would think she would open the door but Rhoda is so stunned, that she leaves him standing and goes running back to the prayer meeting inside. 'You'll never believe it but who do you think is at the door?' 'Who?' 'Peter, of course'. Now, if they had been Ulstermen they would have said, 'Will you have a titter of wit, sit down and settle yourself. Get back to your prayers. Silly girl!' But she won't be silenced. 'No, no, it really *is* Peter. Come and see. Hurry!' And of course, they do, and to their amazement they realise that Rhoda is telling the truth.

It's a great story, *partly* because yet again it shews

women in a good light, and the men as dolts. It was women who discovered the empty tomb of Jesus, and they also were dismissed by the men as hysterics. But the women were right. The real Bible is much more feminist than you realise.

But even more importantly, nearly all of us can see ourselves in this story. The men prayed for Peter's release from prison. As we discovered, he was released, but when he stood outside their very door, they didn't believe it. Isn't that you? You're in a jam, you say your prayers, but deep down you know it's hopeless. You don't really believe that God can solve your problem. Well, those Christians 2,000 years ago in Mark's mother's house were no different from you. Surely even God Almighty couldn't get a man out of gaol when he was guarded by four squads of four soldiers, and chained at night to a warder on either side. Come on, now. Let's get real!

You know, there's no point in saying your prayers if you don't believe that God can deliver. Peter's friends didn't really believe. That's why they thought Rhoda was bonkers

So, what am I saying? Does that mean that everything I pray for, I will get, so long as I've got enough faith? The answer, of course, is No! Because prayer is not magic. God is not our little genie in the bottle who gives us whatever we ask for so long as we cast the right spell. We exist for God's sake. He does not exist for our sake.

May I be very personal? No-one prayed harder for a baby than Laura and me. You have all be so supportive and loving to us in our loss, but, after a while we realised that God *did* in fact answer our prayer. Against all the odds, he actually gave

us a miracle baby. I know he lived only two hours, but little Edgar did what God planned for him on earth, and now he has called him home. We don't own our children. They are God's gift to us, on loan for a while. We look after them for God.

We read earlier from Christ's Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew* 7. You might care to turn to p971, to v7. 'Ask and it shall be given unto you'. That sounds pretty clear to me: Jesus promises that whatever we ask for, God will give it to us. But I'm not sure it *does* say that. It doesn't say, 'You will receive whatever you ask for'. It says, 'Ask, and *it, something,* will be given you'. Look at v8 'For everyone who asks receives'. It doesn't say that you will receive what you asked for, only that you will *receive*'. Go on ahead to v9... No good father will give bad things to his son. Some children ask for stupid, harmful things. God is our Father. He sees further than we do. He sees the big picture, and he will never give us something that will harm us or bring him dishonour, vv9-11...

'Everyone who asks *receives*' is Christ's promise. We will receive, because God wants to *give*. He wants to give to us *abundantly*, because he is our *Father*. He *loves* us and wants the very best for us. *Psalm* 65.2 describes God as a 'hearer of prayer'. It doesn't say he is a 'Giver-of-everything-you-ask-for', but a 'hearer of prayer'. He will always answer your prayer, but it might just be a No, or a Not Yet.

What has sustained Laura and me is the knowledge that God loves us, and, as our Father, wants to *bless* us. He wants to bless us in a way that we haven't imagined yet. Yes, he has

closed one door, and that is very hard to bear, but we know he will open another door, and richly bless us. He loves us.

But the Bible *also* reveals God as a God who is *able*. Nothing is impossible with him. He did the impossible when he raised his beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead at Easter. There is no situation he can't transform if you let him. Whatever you are facing at the moment, however impossible you may think it is, ask God into your life and situation. You will see miraculous things start to happen, believe me.

God did the impossible when he released Peter from prison. He did the impossible when he gave Laura and me a child. But he isn't finished with us yet. He so much wants to shower blessings on us all, if only we would hold out our hands to receive. Prayer isn't magic. It's about stopping being in control; it's about letting go and letting God! Prayer is about just holding out your hands to receive. Open your heart to him and let him work

Ask, and you will receive. Ask and you will receive far more than your limited little earth-bound requests. Those Christians were *astonished* to see Peter standing there. Why? Wasn't that the very thing they had been praying for? Say your prayers. Let God into your life. Amazing things will happen, but don't be astonished, because he is a God who is able.

Scripture tells us of a God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. So whatever you're facing now, just trust in God. 'Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths'.