

CALM IN THE MIDST OF A CRISIS

Today's Text: Acts 12: 1- 24

Extracts:

Now about that time *Herod the king* stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed *James the brother of John with the sword*. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered for him by the church. And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison [Acts 12: 1-6]

On Monday, December 8, 2008, a US Navy fighter plane crashed into two homes as it approached a Marine Corps air station in San Diego, California.¹ The pilot ejected safely and was taken to a naval hospital in stable condition. But one of the two homes totally burnt up in the crash belonged to Dong Yun Yoon, 37, a Korean immigrant, who had moved into that neighbourhood just three months earlier. His wife, 36, two daughters (aged 15 months and 2 months) and mother-in-law, 60, all perished in the fire. As he was surrounded by his siblings, pastor and members of the Korean United Methodist Church in San Diego, Dong Yun Yoon said, "Please, tell me how to do it. I don't know what to do [but] I don't have any hard feelings. I know [the pilot] did everything he could. Please, pray for him not to suffer from this accident."

Yoon came to America as a teenager in 1989 and had since become a US citizen. Now, at the time he was beginning to live up the American dream, everything went up in smoke. Yet, he remained remarkably calm in the midst of such a major tragedy. How many of us can do that? How many of us can pray for those causing our discomfort? How many of us can hold our peace and let God take control? In this week's Bible story, King Herod killed James, one of the twelve apostles, and put the head of them, Peter, in jail, hoping to kill him too after the Passover. In spite of being heavily chained and surrounded by heavily armed soldiers, Peter fell sound asleep! There is something there for us to learn, to assist us to cope with our own crises. Read on!

¹ Based on "Immigrant doesn't blame pilot for crash," *The Associated Press*, Wed., Dec. 10, 2008; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28156838/?GT1=43001>
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1. Background: Peter in chains falls into a deep sleep!

In African folklore, there is an explanation for the fact that predatory birds, especially eagles and hawks, prey on chicks and hardly on ducklings. The story goes that when a young hawk once brought home a baby duck, the mother hawk asked him for the mother duck's reaction. He reported that she did not say a word. The mother hawk asked the baby hawk to quickly return his victim because his mother could be up to something. She advised him to catch a chick instead. When he returned, his mother asked the baby hawk how the hen reacted. He said that she screamed and howled and cursed. The mother hawk replied, "That's all she can do! From now on, leave the duck alone and hunt for chicks." The lesson from that story, as the African story teller would get the listening children to conclude by themselves, is never to panick when you face a crisis. Instead, remain calm so that your head can better think of solutions.

Life without a storm can be quite boring because you will have little or no experience to share or build on. There are times that you will feel good. There are times that everything may look gloomy all around you. The Preacher says that there is a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance [Eccl. 3: 4]. God has not promised you a life without storms. Instead, He says that when you pass through deep waters, you will not be drowned and through fire, you will not be burnt [Is. 43: 2]. Therefore, *bad things do happen to good people. The issue then is how you should react to a crisis to show people around you that you are a true child of God. That is the matter that we shall examine in this week's study.*

Our Bible story is taken from the persecution that the apostles faced when King Herod determined to stamp out Christianity that he saw as a threat to his power and vanity. The situation that Peter and his colleagues faced can be summarized as follows:

a) *The crisis*

King Herod "stretched out his hand to harass some from the church." He killed James, the brother of John, with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter and locked him up, hoping to bring him out before the people [presumably to get him condemned to death] after the Passover [Acts 12: 1-4]. Peter was the head of the apostles and, indeed, of the early church. Herod's thinking could have been to kill the head so as to kill the body.

The Herods (more popularly called the Herodian family) were Jewish kings that were extremely hostile to the new faith. You will recall that Herod the Great was the one that killed innocent children two years and under in his attempt to eliminate Infant Jesus [Matt. 2: 16]. It was one of his sons, Herod the tetrarch who killed John the Baptist for challenging his marriage to his brother Philip's wife [Matt. 14: 1-10]. The Herod [historically known as Herod Agrippa I] that killed James and put Peter in detention was another

descendant of this wicked family that saw killing the innocent as an honourable thing.

Examine how Peter was treated in detention. Four squads of soldiers guarded him [Acts 12: 4]. A squad was made up of four men. So, sixteen men were placed to guard an unarmed man! As if that was not enough, they bound him with two chains between two soldiers [v. 6]. Can you imagine the agony he had to bear that night?

b) *Peter's response*

Many things could have been passing through Peter's mind that night. James had just been killed. His own death was bound to follow after the Passover. The rest of the church might have been scattered and in hiding. His panic-button should have sounded a loud alarm. Therefore, fear and anxiety ought to have gripped him. But that was not Peter's reaction to his situation. He fell fast asleep [v. 6]! In fact, the sleep was so deep that when an angel of the Lord came later to rescue him, "he struck Peter on the side and raised him up" [v. 7]!

Peter did not send for the influential members of his congregation, such as Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea that were able to obtain Pilate's permission to bury Jesus [Jn 19: 38-42], or the Roman officer, Cornelius, that he recently led to Christ who was respected by the Jews [Acts 10:22, 44-48]. He could have used their connections to set himself free. The man that had denied Jesus thrice during His trial [Jn 18: 15-27]; the man that had feared that he was going to drown when Jesus once told him to walk on water to meet Him [Matt. 14: 28-32]; that was the same man that now slept soundly when he faced instant death! The difference, however, was that *this Peter had become a new creation in Christ, having received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday* [Acts 2: 1-21; 2 Cor. 5: 17].

c) *The outcome*

Peter was asleep but not the church for "constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church" [Acts 12: 5]. The effective and fervent prayers of righteous people avail much [Jam. 5: 16]. So, just the night before Herod was to bring Peter out, God sent an angel into that prison. A bright light shone—that suggests that the testimony of Peter's release was loud! The angel roused Peter up by striking him on the side, saying, "Arise quickly!" The chains fell off his hands. As if to tell Peter to take his time, the angel said, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals... Put on your garments and follow me" [Acts 12: 6-8]. Wow!

The angel took Peter past the first and second guard posts and nobody stopped them. Then they came to the iron gate leading to the city and it opened "of its

own accord.” As soon as they entered the street, the angel disappeared and Peter knew that it was real, that he was not seeing a vision! Then Peter said, “Now I know the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectations of the Jewish people” [vv. 9-11].

There are important lessons that we can learn from that story.

2. Coping with your own crises

Right now, you may be passing through trying times. Death or illness in the family, unemployment, failure in exams or business or relationships, barrenness and more. The more you worry, the worse you feel and yet there does not seem to be any respite. *No matter for how long you cry, your tears cannot fill a little glass.* So, why don't you find another (and better) way out? Writing on the need for patience in the face of hardship, the disciple James (the brother of Jesus) wrote [Jam. 5: 10-11]:

My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord- that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

If Job and Peter could cope, you too can. Here are some guidelines to enable you to cope with your own crises:

a) *What is the possible final outcome to expect?*

The helplessness that first strikes when crisis hits can be quite numbing. Nevertheless, it is not a helpful solution at all to remain there. It means that if you had been in Peter's place, you would have been restless and sleepless. How could that have helped the situation? As somebody has said, *worry does not improve your future but it certainly ruins your present.*² Therefore, the first thing for you to do is to determine what to expect as a possible final outcome of the crisis that you are facing.

Doon Yun Yoon's whole family had died in the fire. The reality is that he was now alone. They could never come back but he was still alive to pick up the pieces. For example, when Job was told that he had lost all his seven sons and three daughters in one day, he tore his robe and shaved his head (signs of mourning). Then he fell to the ground and worshipped God, saying, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” [Job 1: 20-21]. When David's son (by Bathsheba) died, he got up from his seven-day

² M. R. De Haan, MD, “Are you a worrywart?” *Our Daily Bread*, RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA; 2012 Annual Gift Edition, Thurs., Apr. 26, 2012

fast (while the child was sick), washed and anointed himself and ate food. When his servants questioned his conduct, he told them, “Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me” [2 **Sam. 12: 15-23**].

Your crisis may be life-threatening but you have the opportunity to reconcile with God and make His kingdom should death come. You may have lost your job (and masculine pride) but it gives you an opportunity to appreciate what your full-time housewife has taken from you over the years! ***Hope is for the living!***

b) *What can you do for yourself?*

There are certain things that you can do for yourself that will help you to cope. In Peter’s case, he fell asleep. ***Sometimes, you can cry first so as to let off steam.*** For example, when David and his troops returned to find their camp in Ziklag razed by the Amalekites, and their family members carried away captive, “David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep” [1 **Sam. 30: 1-4**]. When King Jehoshaphat was told that his kingdom (Judah) had been surrounded by enemy troops, “Jehoshaphat feared” [2 **Chron. 20: 1-3**].

Expressing your emotional feelings should not be all that you can do. Instead, you should anchor them on your faith. The word of God says, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of his church” [1 **Jam. 5: 13-14**]. After weeping, David “strengthened himself in the Lord His God” [1 **Sam. 30: 6**]. Jehoshaphat feared “and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah” [2 **Chron. 20: 3**]. While Peter was in detention, “constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church” [1 **Acts 12: 5**]. Even after his miraculous release, the church was still assembled in the house of Mary the mother of John Mark “where many were gathered together praying” [v. 12]. God will never do for you what you can do for yourself.

c) *Can you then let go and let God for matters beyond your control?*

However, what you cannot do for yourself, you should be ready to leave to God. For example, Peter could not be bailed out of jail or set free by his human army (which he did not have!). So, while he slept, God sent an angel to deliver him out of Herod’s hands. Meshach, Shadrach and Abed-Nego could not deliver themselves out of Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace but God sent a fourth man who was “like the Son of God” and the fire had no power over their bodies or their clothes [1 **Dan. 3: 19-27**]!

You may not lack family, friends or well-wishers who may bombard you with the need for you to abandon your faith and look for human solutions. You should be able to remind them that the woman with the issue of blood for twelve years had wasted all she had on physicians; yet, they could not heal her until she came to Jesus [**Lk 8: 43-44**]! Why should you buy a lottery ticket from a person in rags? Does s(he) not want the millions that s(he) is offering you? Get wise!

d) Then your victory becomes another's testimony!

When Peter came to Mary's house where they were praying for him, the little girl, Rhoda that opened for him rushed back to tell those praying that Peter was at the door. They did not believe her. Instead, they said that she was beside herself (mad!) and that what she saw was Peter's angel. But as Peter continued knocking, they opened the door and when they saw him, "they were astonished" [**Acts 12: 12-16**]. Herod that threatened the Christians was struck by an angel of the Lord and "he was eaten by worms and died." In the end, "the word of God grew and multiplied" [**vv. 19-24**]. Your calm response during the crisis and ultimate victory over it will soon become the testimony on which others will anchor their struggles. They will say that if you could bear it and win ultimate victory, there is hope for them.

3. Conclusion: Always keep your eye on the ball!

The bottom line is to always keep your eye on the ball. The dribbler's trick is to hide the ball from you. You cannot kick what you cannot see! Satan is the thief who wants to kill, steal or destroy [**Jn 10: 10**]. He is the adversary coming at you as a roaring lion looking for whom to devour [**1 Pet. 5: 8**]. For example, Job did not know until later that his ordeal was a duel between God and Satan. When he came to know, he said to God, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know...Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" [**Job 42: 1-6**]. So, always keep your eye on the ball.

Those who desire to live godly in Christ will suffer persecution [**2 Tim. 3: 12**]. Therefore, you will face crises- physical, material, emotional or spiritual. You can fear but do not worry. Let the fear drive you closer to God and His Christ. Jesus has promised to be with you always, even till the end of the age [**Matt. 28: 20**]. So, fear not. Let the rivers rage. Let the fires burn. Let the noise be deafening. But, by your God, you can both lie down in peace and sleep. He alone can make you dwell in safety [**Ps. 4: 8**].

Remain calm. All shall be well. All is well!