

Dependence for Food

1st Kings 17:7-16; Acts 12:12-23



On what do we depend? On what foundation do we build our lives? Do we trust God to meet our needs, or are we perhaps afraid that God does not want the same things for us that we desire or esteem to need? If we live according to God's will, can we trust God to be faithful, even in the face of grave uncertainties?

It was just one more night of duty. Guards were not normally chained to their prisoners, but there was some special concern with keeping this one from escaping. Perhaps there was not a whole lot of sense in two of them being chained to this prisoner, for he was not violent. Then again, Herod was rather superstitious and anxious about religious matters. Since the days of John the Baptist, he had viewed prophets and religious characters with a degree of anxiety. The guards settled in for what they assumed should be an uneventful night.

There was no hope for Peter. He was doomed. Herod had begun persecuting leaders among the disciples, having gone as far as killing James. Peter was among those he had ordered arrested, and now he was in prison awaiting trial. In the meantime, he was chained between two guards to ensure that he could not escape. A guard would pay with his life if a prisoner got away, but being chained to two guards meant extra security. The events of that night before the scheduled trial took everyone by surprise, Peter included.

The believers were gathered at Mary's house to pray for Peter. They were keeping watch through the night, praying earnestly for God to intervene on Peter's behalf, somehow rescuing him from prison and death before Herod. They prayed earnestly and fervently, but it would seem they did not hold out much hope. Perhaps their prayers had more to do with expressing their fear over their own future and struggling with their anxiety. Whatever the case, they appeared unprepared for God's intervention.

Peter thought he was having a vision. He had no thought that the events occurring before his eyes could be real. He was awakened by a messenger who poked him in the ribs, ordered him to get up and dress, then follow him out of the prison. The prison's iron gate to the city opened of its own accord, and Peter was escorted into the street. A block from the prison, Peter found himself alone and recognized that he was seeing no vision, but that he had been freed by God!

Peter made his way to Mary's house, where the believers were gathered in prayer, and knocked at the entrance. Rhoda was overcome with excitement, forgetting to open the door to allow Peter to enter. They had been praying for Peter's release, somehow not quite believing that it could happen. When Rhoda announced that Peter was at the gate, the disciples did not believe her. As he continued to knock, they went back and let Peter in, astounded by Peter's presence among them.

They believed in God. They had committed their lives to God. They had accepted that Jesus was indeed the Christ and had risen from the dead, working numerous miraculous signs throughout his ministry. They had seen miracles performed through Peter and others of the disciples. God had even used Peter to raise Dorcas from the dead! Even so, it was still hard for them to grasp that God would

indeed intervene in their lives in unexpected ways. It was so much easier to believe in God's provision through the more common patterns of life.

If this was the struggle of the believers, it was also the struggle of the Sidonians. They went further than the believers in Jerusalem, but they were depending on the wrong things to provide for their needs. When they acclaimed Herod as divine, they were simply lavishing praise and seeking to curry favor with the king. They did not really believe that Herod was divine, but they disregarding dependence upon God in favor of dependence upon visible means of provision. At heart this was little different from the stance of the believers.

Oh, they did not acclaim men as gods. They did not disbelieve that God could provide for them. They did not question God's love, care, and provision. And yet, they struggled to trust God fully. Fear and anxiety still held sway as they lived in uncertainty over provision. They did not actively distrust God, but neither did they live in victorious confidence.

They had not signed on for an adventure—a life of being surprised by God. They wanted faith to give them comfort, security, and protection from the unexpected. It was more comfortable in fact to be resigned to Peter's impending death than to have Peter miraculously rescued from certain execution. His release from prison was obviously a joy for them, but it was hard to accept as true.

Life was supposed to follow certain rules. It was not expected for Peter to be freed in the middle of the night. God was supposed to have Herod release Peter after the trial! That was what they were most likely praying about! Peter should have stood before Herod and presented a defense of the Gospel that would confound Herod such that he would be released to freedom! It was ludicrous to think that God would orchestrate a prison escape instead!

Yet faith is trusting God's provision, God's timing, God's plan, God's means of deliverance. The same Peter had held plans for Jesus' ascension to power that Jesus himself had brushed aside. Peter had tried to force Jesus to conform to Peter's plan. Only on the other side of the resurrection had Peter been able to understand why God had chosen the cross instead of the sword. So now, the disciples had to give up their own ideas of how God could, would, or should provide and allow God to make those decisions without their interference.

While the Sidonians felt compelled to depend upon the favor of Herod for food and survival, the disciples were learning to depend upon God alone. They were learning to trust God's will and plan rather than their own wisdom. They were learning that it was alright to be surprised by God's means of provision, since God is dependable. They were learning that God is not limited to the boundaries of human understanding and imagination. They knew these things, but it is much harder to learn to live by the truths than merely to quote them.

As we plant, water, and weed our gardens, God makes them grow. As we labor to deposit a check in the bank, God meets needs beyond the limits of our resources. As we worry and fret over plans for our futures and our children' and grandchildren's opportunities, God creates new opportunities and futures we could not have imagined or prepared for ourselves. Can we depend upon God for more than food? Can we trust God to surprise us as needed? God might just have more than we would hope for. Will we trust God to carry us through?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*