**THE SILVER LINING - MESSAGES OF HOPE AND CHEER BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**18. THE UNEXPECTED ANSWER by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"Many were gathered together praying."*

*Acts 12:12*

"Many were gathered together praying." What had prompted the prayer-meeting? "James the brother of John" had been killed "with the sword." "And because Herod saw it pleased the Jews" ! Ah, that is one of the dangerous crises in a man's life! When a man finds that a certain course of conduct is receiving popular applause he is led on to further excesses. He is often doubly betrayed by the seductions of the shouting crowd. A public speaker descends to a coarse and vulgar jest, and because it pleases the baser sort in the audience, and the speaker is awarded a round of applause, he is prone to descend to still further depths of degradation. "He proceeded further to take Peter also"! The apostle was arrested, shut up in prison, and guarded by four quaternions of soldiers. And now what can the little company do with whom he has been wont to associate in the evangelical ministry? They have no influence with the king. Not one of the little band has any connections with the imperial house. "Not many noble are called." No material force belongs to them. What, then, is their resource? They can pray. "Prayer was made without ceasing unto God for him."

But in such an emergency as this does not a prayer-meeting appear absurd? Here is a man in prison, surrounded by a tenfold defence. The material obstacles are overwhelming. What is the use of a prayer-meeting? Can we pray a man out of his chains, and through the prison gate, and through the assembled soldiery? The world regards it as a grotesque expedient. And perhaps there are many Christians who would regard it as legitimate and reasonable to pray for the quietness of Peter's spirit, that he might be kept in boldness of faith and in open communication with his Lord, but who would regard a prayer for his release as trespassing upon forbidden ground. Does not this timidity very frequently spoil the range of our petitions, and rob us of the promised inheritance? If the dominion of prayer is to be limited by the prison gates, we are reduced to a pitiful impoverishment. If the ministry of prayer is absolutely ineffective in the material world, then I, for one, am stupefied. I am told I may pray for mental enlightenment, or for moral strength, or for spiritual perception and gift, but I am warned off the material ground as a domain in which prayer exercises no influence. But I have an initial difficulty. I do not know where the boundary line between the body and the mind is found. In many instances the mental seems to pervade the material, and to control and determine its conditions. If I pray for a brighter mind and obtain it, I gain in addition a healthier body. If I grow in hope I also increase my material resources. If my love is inflamed I am established in the power of endurance. My morals and my digestion are very intimate! And if in this little world, which I call my body, mind and flesh are so intimate, is it not possible that a larger Mind may be intimate with the larger body we call the universe? If my mind can in any way influence and change the ministries of my body, why should not God's mind pervade and control and change the larger ministries of the universe?

And if prayer is the communion of the human mind with the Divine mind, is it altogether incredible that by my fellowship with the Lord I can indirectly exercise the mighty prerogative of influencing the movements even of the material world? And, therefore, I see nothing incredible and illegitimate in praying for favourable weather. It may be that the prayer is sometimes unwise, but the unwisdom of a prayer does not imply the impossibility of the intercourse. I see no need to give our supplications the severe restrictions which many Christians impose. I would rather exercise a glorious liberty, and if Peter is in prison I would pray for the opening of the prison doors, and for the apostle's bodily release.

"And behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him." That was a great moving mission begotten by the ministry of prayer. I will not at the bidding of unbelief reduce the narrative to mere poetry and regard the incident as a commonplace event, for which, if we knew everything, we could find a commonplace explanation. It is one of the profoundest beliefs in my own life that there was a vital connection between the prayer-meeting and the prison. Do not let us throw away our dignities and prerogatives at the cry of the timid, or at the sneer of a flippant unbelief. Do not let us limit our communion. Let us believe that the little prayer-meeting can set in motion ministries which will take the chains from a man's limbs, and lead him out of the iron gates and bring him into healthy freedom.

A little while ago Sir Oliver Lodge met a company of evangelical ministers, and I felt greatly humiliated that we had to receive the warning from his lips not to relinquish the boldness of our rights in the ministry of prayer! This little apostolic prayer-meeting moved about in splendid freedom in their supplication to the Almighty. They prayed for their companion's release, and release was given. "And behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And he went out, and followed him: and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him."

Now let us look at these praying people. It is the dead of night. The doors are locked. It is something after the fashion of those prayer-meetings which used to be held in the cellar at Scrooby by the men who founded the commonwealth across the seas. And while one of the little company is praying, a knocking is heard at the door. A damsel named Rhoda goes to the door, and listens to the voice; she had often heard it, and knew it to be the voice of Peter. Just before she had left the little company, one of the brethren was praying ardently for the apostle's release. Now here he is at the door! "She opened not the door for gladness." How strange that is! She was so glad that she became thoughtless! But can gladness confuse the judgment? I know that fear can; fear can throw the powers into panic, and take away the faculty of a calm discretion. And I know that sorrow can lead to mental confusion, and we know not what we do. But here the ministry of bewilderment is joy itself! The incident is simple, and I think most illuminative. Shall we not say that it suggests that we must watch our moments of exultation, our delights, our season of ecstasy? In our joy we may forget many needful things. Is not this true of the joy of a revival? Is it not true that very frequently we open not the gate for gladness? I have known converts who, in the delight of revival meetings, have forgotten common courtesies. They have rapturous eagerness to get away to the foreign field, and they forget to send a letter to their aged mother at home. They ignore the humdrum ministry, in the glad contemplation of the field afar off. There are some people who are so glad in the Lord that they go about writing Scripture-texts on other people's property! Surely that is a forgetfulness which a little vigilance would avoid. I think this is not impertinent teaching. Our joy becomes perilous when it makes us forget the immediate duty. That door! Open it! That little duty! Discharge it! "She opened not the door for gladness."

Now let us go into the meeting itself. Rhoda, I said, had just heard one of the brethren praying, "Lord, restore him unto us!" The damsel eagerly returns with the announcement that Peter is at the gate. Now what? The petition had scarcely fallen from the brother's lips; she had interrupted him in the middle of his petition; and it was probably the suppliant himself who replied to Rhoda, "Thou art mad!" How can Rhoda's announcement be true? Think of the prison, the chains, the soldiers, gate after gate, and especially that notorious iron gate at the last! "Thou art mad!" Again I say, how suggestive the incident! They were praying for an answer; the answer comes to the door; and it strikes them as incredible. I know the condition of the little troubled company. There were two empty places in their ranks, and they knew not how soon the vacancies might be multiplied. James was dead and Peter was in prison, and they were bewildered in their distresses. Then they would pray! They prayed for his release, and when his release was given, they received the intimation as the speech of the mad. "She constantly affirmed that it was so." And so they went on debating the matter, while all the time the answer was waiting at the door! If it were not too sorrowful the situation would be half-humorous. Surely the best thing would be to open the door at once, which after a while they did. "When they had opened the door they saw him and were astonished."

Now, God's answers to our prayers ought not to surprise us into incredulity. These momentous occurrences ought to be daily commonplaces in our lives. The responses of the Almighty should be grand familiarities. Why should we suppose the herald of the answer to be mad? God is good! God is faithful! It is the most natural of all things that the prison gates should open and the apostle be free. The answer often comes knocking at the door but we don't let it in, and we never know that the answer has been given. We are in an unexpectant mood, and we have never suspected the wealth which the Lord would have left at our gate.

Now let us listen to the word of the apostle. "Go show these things to the brethren." He urges them to be evangelists of the story. Tell these dealings to other people! Go about among the absentees, telling them the wonderful dealings of the Lord. How grand would be the ministry if this were our usual track! Did some gracious answer knock at your door yesterday? Tell it to others. Had you some heartening visitor of grace before the day began? Share it with others. "Come unto me, all ye that fear the Lord, and I will tell you what things He hath done for my soul."