TITLE: Belief

TEXT: Acts 12:1-17; James 5:16; 2 Cor. 12:7-10;

Mt. 26:39; Luke 17:5-6

INTRODUCTION: This morning I want to talk about belief.

 First what is it? What does it mean to believe?

Dictionary defines belief as:

1 : a state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing

 The New Testament Greek word we usually translate as belief is the word **pisteuō *pist-yoo'-o***

**to *have* *faith* (in, upon, or with respect to, a person or thing), by implication to *entrust* (especially one’s spiritual well being to Christ):— put in trust with.**

 So, whenever we identify ourselves as a “believer” in Christ Jesus what we are saying is that our confidence has been placed in Him, we have faith in Him and entrust all to Him.

 Does this describe our belief?

 I want to look at an account that involved some early believers this morning because I think they are reflective of us today in many ways.

**Acts 12:1-17(NIV)**  **1It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.**  **2He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.**  **3When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.**

**4After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.**  **5So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.**

**6The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.**  **7Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.**  **8Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him.**  **9Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.**  **10They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.**  **11Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.”**  **12When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.**  **13Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door.**  **14When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”**  **15“You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”**  **16But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.**  **17Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the brothers about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.**

I find something very interesting here when it comes to Peter and this group of believers in regards to their belief.

 How would you describe their belief? As great, mediocre or poor?

 James the brother of John is arrested by Herod and put to death.

 This really pleases the Jews so Herod arrest Peter also and holds him over until after the Passover where he probably has the same thing in mind for Peter.

 The Church knows the seriousness of the situation so they fall on their knees before the Lord and start to pray for Peter.

**5So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.**

The Greek word used is:

***ek-ten-ace'*; *intent:*—without ceasing, fervent.**

 Although it is not specifically mentioned we can safely assume that Peter himself was earnestly praying for his situation as well.

Notice how Herod has Peter held;

**4After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. 6The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.**

Seems like overkill to me for the arrest of a non-violent criminal?

**James 5:16(NIV)**
**16Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.**

The Church was earnestly praying for Peter and I imagine that Peter was earnestly praying for himself!

What happens?

God answered those prayers in a mighty way!

**7Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.
9Peter followed him out of the prison---They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.**

God miraculously delivers Peter….

What I want to focus on this morning is not so much the miracle itself but the reaction of Peter and the Church to that miracle.

 So how did they initially respond to this mighty act of God that came in response to their prayers?

 First let’s look at Peter.

**9Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.**

After the angel disappears…

**11Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.”
12When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.**

Now let’s look at the response of the Church that was praying for Peter…

**13Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door.
14When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”
15“You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”
16But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.**

 My question to both Peter’s and the Church’s response to this mighty miracle of deliverance is Why?

 Why didn’t they instantly believe and recognize this as the miracle that it was?

 Why did Peter think he was just seeing a vision and why did the Church think they were seeing his ghost?

 I mean isn’t this exactly what they had been praying for? For Peter to be delivered?

 Why so astonished when it actually happened?

And, why were they earnestly praying if they really didn’t think God would answer their prayers anyway?

 Before we get too hard on them though, don’t we often do the very same thing?

 We pray for God to intervene on our behalf and then when He does it actually surprises us?

How many times has God answered a prayer in a mighty way and we get so excited that He did that we want to jump up and down?

 It is good to get excited about anything God but why should it surprise us when He actually answers our prayers?

 The answer, of course, is that our prayers are rarely answered in such a dramatic fashion as they were in Peter’s case here…Or, are they more often than we realize?

 I have earnestly prayed for people who were terminally ill. Prayed for their complete healing and yet they died.

 Did those prayers go unanswered?

 I don’t believe so…. Sometimes our desires can interfere and confuse the issue.

 If we pray that a Christian who is terminally ill is completely healed and God takes them to be with Him then isn’t that really the ultimate healing?

 To pass from the pain and suffering of this life into the very presence of God where Scripture says there is no more sickness, sorrow, pain or death!

 Isn’t that the ultimate healing for any Christian? To be with Jesus?

 EXAMPLE

Joni Eareckson’s story is now well known to us both through her books and the movie about her paralysis as a teenager and her amazing fight back to a useful and productive life of ministry through her art.

 From the preface of her book “*Joni” she shares this insight :*

*“Isolated, by itself, what is a minute? Merely a measurement of time. There are sixty in an hour, 1,440 in a day.*

 *At seventeen, I had already ticked off more than 9 million of them in my life.*

*Yet, in some cosmic plan, this single minute was isolated. Into these particular sixty seconds was compressed more significance than all the millions of minutes marking my life prior to this instant.*

*“So many actions, sensations, thoughts, and feelings were crowded into that fragment of time. How can I describe them? How can I begin to catalog them?*

*“I recall so clearly the details of those few dozen seconds—seconds destined to change my life forever. And there was no warning or premonition.*

*“What happened on July 30, 1967, was the beginning of an incredible* *adventure which I feel compelled to share because of what I have learned.*

*“Oscar Wilde wrote: ‘In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.’ To rephrase his thought, I suggest there are likewise only two joys. One is having God answer all your prayers; the other is not receiving the answer to all your prayers. I believe this because I have found that God knows my needs infinitely better than I know them. And He is utterly dependable, no matter which direction our circumstances take us.”*

 *“In the Psalms we’re told that God does not deal with us according to our sins and iniquities. My accident was not a punishment for my* wrongdoing—*whether or not I deserved it. Only God knows why I was paralyzed. Maybe He knew I’d be ultimately happier serving Him. If I were still on my feet, it’s hard to say how things might have gone. I probably would have drifted through life—marriage, maybe even divorce—dissatisfied and disillusioned. When I was in high school, I reacted to life selfishly and never built on any long lasting values.*

 *I lived simply for each day and the pleasure I wanted—and almost always at the expense of others.”*

 Perspective is what this life is really all about. What is the perspective that we have in life?

The perspective that we have will ultimately come down to one of two perspectives in which we will live our lives---Is it all about me or is it all about God?

 For most of us our perspective in life is that it is all about me.

 We often even take this perspective of its “all about me” into our prayer life….

 God, I want you to do this and I want you to do that and if you don’t do it as I ask then you haven’t answered my prayer.

 This “it’s all about me” perspective is so ingrained within all of us that apart from a miraculous work of Gods grace in our life we will never break free of it. And most of the time the word “break” is exactly what it takes for us to be free of this destructive perspective.

 We see this illustrated time and time again in the pages of Scripture.

 King David struggled with “it’s an all about me” perspective when at a time when Kings go out to war David stayed in Jerusalem.

 David took the year off to sit back and satisfy self

and ended up committing adultery and murder to cover it up, and in so doing invited turmoil into his household for the rest of his life. God told David because you have killed Uriah and taken his wife to be your own the sword will never depart from your house.

 Yet through this tragedy David gained a broken and contrite heart and God changed the perspective of his life from it is all about me to it’s all about God.

 Evidentially even the Apostle Paul struggled with an;
“it’s all about me” perspective of life at times.

**2 Corinthians 12:7-10(NIV)**
**7To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.
8Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.
9But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.
10That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

 I believe this thorn in the flesh experience broke Paul of any “it’s all about me” perspective and changed it into an “it’s all about God” perspective.

 The most important and the most powerful experience we can have in this life is when we come to the realization that it is not all about me but it is all about God!

 It will especially change the dynamic of our prayer life…

This “it’s not about me” but “it’s all about God” perspective is exemplified to us in no greater place in Scripture than the night Jesus was praying in the garden of Gethsemane the night he was betrayed…

**Matthew 26:39(NIV)**  **39Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”**

What a model for our prayers! What an example of perspective!

 God, in my limited perspective this is what I want to see happen but Holy Father never allow my wants to interfere or be a determent to your will…For Your will is so much greater than anything I could ever ask or want.

Jesus displayed an “it’s all about God” perspective in this prayer…**“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”**

 What it all really boils down to is this: Do we really believe?

When we pray do we really believe that God hears and answers our prayers? Many times He may answer in a way we do not expect but He answers…

 It will be the perspective that we have in life that will largely determine to what degree we will believe.

 Is life all about us or is it all about God? Is it all about our wants and desires or is it all about what God wants and what God desires and the fulfillment of His will for our life?

 The perspective that we have will determine the degree of our belief….Especially when it comes to our prayer life….

 The disciples once came to Jesus with a request.

**Luke 17:5-6(NIV)
5The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”
6He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.**

The word used here for faith can also be translated as belief…

**pistis *pis'-tis***

***persuasion*, that is, *credence*; moral *conviction* (of *religious* truth, or the truthfulness of God or a religious teacher), especially *reliance* upon Christ for salvation; abstractly *constancy* in such profession; by extension the system of religious (Gospel) *truth* itself:—assurance, belief, believe, faith, fidelity.**

The prayerful question is: Do I pray with such confidence in God’s power that I would never be surprised if He answered even the most challenging prayers.

 Or when God answers my prayers in a mighty way am I always set back and surprised by it?

To what degree do you and I believe in God?

Does our belief match the definition of the word?

 **A state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in “God”.**

Or would we benefit with asking Jesus for what his disciples asked him for—to increase our faith, give us a believing heart that is never surprised by His wonderful acts of grace….Lord increase my faith!

This morning, what is the perspective that is guiding your life? Is it all about you or is it all about God?

The perspective we have will determine the degree of our belief…