

In the mid to late 1800's, John G. Paton and his wife were Scottish missionaries to the New Hebrides in the South Pacific. One night, hostile tribesmen surrounded their mission headquarters, with the intention of burning it and killing both Paton and his wife.

The two of them prayed all through the night, asking God for deliverance, and when daylight came, they were surprised to see the attackers leave.

A year later, the chief of that tribe, was converted to Christianity, and Paton asked him why they didn't attack them that night. And the chief replied, "Who were all those men there with you?" And Paton said, "There were no men there; only my wife and I." But the chief said that they had seen hundreds of big men, in shining cloths, with drawn swords in their hands, circling the mission station, and so they were afraid to attack. Paton realised that God had sent His angels to protect them.ⁱ

*But John Paton didn't **always** experience God's provision in that sort of miraculous way. His first wife died because of complications during child-birth, and 17 days later his child also died. He even had to dig the graves himself. But even so, he knew the Lord was with Him. He wrote "I was never altogether forsaken. The ever merciful God sustained me to lay the precious dust of my loved ones in the same quiet grave. But for Jesus, and the fellowship he [there, gave to me out of His grace, I would ⁱⁱ] have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave!"ⁱⁱⁱ*

So at different times, Paton experienced the grace of God, saving him and his family from certain death, and he also had

the experience, of the sustaining presence of God, as he suffered the tragic loss of those he loved most ...

But the overall experience – whether it be a tale of loss, or of triumphant, miraculous deliverance – the overall experience, was one of the advance and the growth of the Kingdom of God...

Today's topic, is "Passionate prayer, and the relentless advance of God's Kingdom" ...

Today, we had the story of the tragic death of James; of the triumphant deliverance of Peter; and of the righteous judgment of God on the narcissistic King Herod... But the overall message, is summed up in verse ²⁴ **But the word of God increased and multiplied.**

Herod had the apostle James killed. Now, it's important to not get them confused – This is James (the apostle) – James (the son of Zebedee)... But about this same time, James (the brother of Jesus) comes into the leadership of the Early Church – two different James' – let's not get them confused..

And when Herod saw that it had pleased the Jews very much (that he had killed James), he thought "Right, we're onto a good thing here", and so he locked up Peter, and was just waiting for the Passover to be finished, before he has Peter executed as well...

And I just love V5. It begins: **So peter was kept in prison....** Alright, so he's about to be executed – he's on death row – he's being kept in prison, but that's not the last

word on the matter... because V5 continues: **but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church...**

The last word **always** belongs to God. And we need to remember that – whatever situation you're in – no matter how hopeless it looks – God always has the last word ...

Peter's situation looked **absolutely** hopeless. He had 4 teams of guards, 4 in each team – 16 men, tasked to keep a 24 hour watch, on just him... An absolutely hopeless predicament – except for V5: **but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church...**

And how often, have seemingly hopeless situations been overturned, when the church have earnestly prayed to God???... That word “earnestly”, it's talking about “fervent prayer” “passionate prayer”... What our churches need today, are disciples of Jesus who pray **passionately** for God's Kingdom...

One commentary I read, while I was preparing for today, the author was lamenting how modern-day church practices very often bring about a *coldness, boredom* or even *cynicism*, within the church... He says:

Contemporary society is also the era of entertainment, which has replaced passion as a means of attracting people in church and society.

And he goes on to say:

*“many Christians have **not had** a vibrant experience of God.... People do not want to be passionate about anything. They play it safe spiritually.^{iv}”*

And his conclusion was that all these sorts of *attitudes hinder earnestness in prayer.*

And I think he's got a point... As disciples of Jesus, we're called to be **passionate** in our faith – to be **passionate** in our love for God – to be **passionate** in our love for others – to be **passionate** in God's mission – to be **passionate** about the Kingdom of God – and to be **passionate** about grace and mercy and justice and sanctification and holiness.....

A church filled with passionate disciples of Jesus, attracts people **to** Jesus.

But when there's a shortage of passion, it's OK, we've got a substitute... And so his point was, churches attract with entertainment, because there's a lack of passion in our ranks...

Now, I don't know about you – I love good worship; good songs; good singers; good bands; captivating speakers – I love em as much as the next person.... But never, if it's the substitute for passion in the people...

And a passionate church, prays fervently for God's Kingdom...

When a church is passionate, the word of God increases and multiplies. And you understand don't you, when I talk about a church, I'm not limiting it to Sunday morning worship – Because U R the church. And when you are passionate about Jesus, in the work place, in the school ground, on your days off, in your family and in your home – when U R passionate about Jesus in your social life and in your relationships with others.... – the word of God increases and multiplies.

James was passionate about Jesus Christ, and he was executed. Peter was passionate about Jesus Christ, and he was put on death row. The church in Jerusalem were passionate about Jesus, and prayed passionately for Peter's release... And he was released...

King Herod did all he could to stop the word of God from getting out.... But King Herod doesn't get the last word – King Jesus gets the last word. And when Herod dressed himself up in a shimmering silver robe, and delivered his speech, he received accolades from his dependant subjects “**The voice of a god, and not of a man!**”... and he kept that accolade for himself, instead of giving glory to God. And he was struck down. And he died.

A Jewish historian, Josephus, actually records the event. He was immediately struck down with severe tummy cramps, and he died a few days later...

Herod thought he was going to stop the word of God, but **God** had the last word...

Herod died, ²⁴ **But the word of God increased and multiplied.** – it wasn't stopped – not at all..

If ever it **appears**, that God didn't get the last word, or that the kingdom of darkness seems to have overcome God's kingdom.... Well, that's just because God hasn't finished yet.

When James was killed, the kingdom of darkness hadn't won. God just hadn't finished yet. And I know we gain a great deal of encouragement when we see God intervene into our circumstances, in miraculous ways... But don't get down,

when He seems to be absent – don't get discouraged. When we remain faithful to God, and when we're passionate about Jesus, and that passion comes through in our prayers.... Don't get discouraged... Remember, God will have the last word... And the word of God **will** increase and **will** multiply... And the Kingdom of God **will** grow. ... We can count on it.

Even death isn't the last word.... At the sound of a trumpet and the voice of God, the dead in Christ will rise...

No wonder we can afford to be passionate in our faith... Even if we get knocked down now, God **will** have the last word. And what a word that will be.

ⁱ Fernando, Ajith. The NIV Application Commentary – Acts. Zondervan. Grand Rapids. 1998. (p.370/371) (Sited in Billy Graham, Angels: God's Secret Agents (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1986)

ⁱⁱ [*vouchsafed me there, I must*]

ⁱⁱⁱ Fernando, Ajith. The NIV Application Commentary – Acts. Zondervan. Grand Rapids. 1998. (p.370/371) (Sited in Daily Readings from FW Boreham, Selected and arranged by Frank Cumbers (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1976))

^{iv} Fernando, Ajith. The NIV Application Commentary – Acts. Zondervan. Grand Rapids. 1998. (p.369)