

Rhoda

The Woman Who Was Called Mad

Scripture Reference - Acts 12:1-19

Name Meaning - Foreign born, this domestic servant of Mary the mother of Mark had a Greek name meaning "rose." Wilkinson remarks that as "Barnabas, Mary's brother, was of the country of Cyprus, it is a very reasonable supposition that the family had been resident there, and brought thence this maiden, who, like so many of her nation born in foreign parts, had received a Greek name."* Although she carried one of the most beautiful names she was called by another not so pleasant. The saints in Mary's home called her *Manias meaning, "a mad woman."

In the human episode in which Rhoda is the prominent character, nothing is said of pedigree. As a slave-maid she did not merit any genealogy. As a servant, she had no hours. The fact that it was long past midnight when Peter reached Mary's house, and that Rhoda the portress answered the door, indicates that she was willing to serve long and late. Mary, her mistress, also found in Rhoda a spiritual help. Doubtless she, too, was on her knees with the others praying for Peter, and hearing his knock went to the door. Perhaps we can break up the narrative in this threefold way. Peter knocked - Rhoda was shocked - The saints mocked.

Peter Knocked

The background of the record which Rhoda shares can be briefly cited. Mary of Jerusalem, a rich widow and mother of Mark the evangelist, owned a large and conspicuous house in the city which she placed at the service of the Lord. During the days of terrible persecution the saints in Jerusalem gathered regularly in her lovely home not only for the reading and exposition of the Word, but also to pray for afflicted saints. On the night in question the saints concentrated on the deliverance of a precious life, namely, Peter their leader. Herod's sword of persecution had fallen heavily upon the church in Jerusalem. James the Greater had already drunk the cup of martyrdom prophesied for him by his Lord, and the gathered intercessors had learned that Peter, imprisoned by Herod, was the next to be led forth to die. If their shepherd was smitten what could the sheep do. Such a crisis brought Peter's fellow believers to their knees in night-long intercession.

As the church in the house earnestly petitioned the Lord, their prayers were heard. In the prison the Lord, by means of an angel, miraculously freed Peter. Peter sped past guards and through opened doors, and came to the closed door of a house where he knew the saints were gathered together praying. Peter knocked at the door, but because of Rhoda's excitement, she failed to open the door. Peter continued knocking until the door was opened, not by angelic hands, as at the prison he had left, but by unbelieving human hands. Such a delay might have been dangerous, if the guards, discovering their prisoner had escaped, had tracked him down and found him standing at the closed gate of Mary's ancient house.

Rhoda Was Shocked

Peter not only knocked but also spoke, for we read that she knew his voice - the dear voice she had listened to so often expounding the sacred truths of the Word. But she was so stunned and overwhelmed at the answer to those midnight prayers standing there, that she failed to draw the bolts and admit Peter. "She opened not the gate for gladness." Such gladness would have been changed to sadness had Herod's soldiers appeared at that moment and taken Peter back to prison. We can understand Rhoda not opening the gate as soon as she heard the knock. "Never open a door in the dark until you know who is behind it." In those days when the saints were not sure who would be the next to join the noble army of martyrs, great caution was necessary. That knock might have been the summons of cruel Herod, making a fresh inroad on the little flock. But when Rhoda asked, "Who is knocking?" and received the muffled reply, "It is Peter, open quickly," she should have opened the gate before opening her mouth to others in the house about Peter standing outside. Knowing that for certain it was Peter, it was her duty as the maid to open the door. But stunned by the glad tidings she was momentarily thoughtless.

There are some characteristics of this maidservant who only has this one notice in Scripture, which are attractive.

First, unbounded joy was hers. Luke, the beloved physician, who wrote the Acts, analyzes Rhoda's state of consciousness when the good news of answered prayer on Peter's behalf overpowered her presence of mind. She forgot herself - and her duty - and *ran in to tell the intercessors to pray no more for Peter* was at the gate. We can imagine how excitedly she shouted, "Peter is free! Peter is knocking at the door!" A spontaneous child of nature, she manifested her exuberance. Had hers been a calmer, less passionate nature, she would have opened the door when she knew it was Peter, and then gone in to tell the praying band that Peter was safe and free. Further, when her good, glad information was scorned by the saints whose prayers for Peter had been interrupted by Rhoda's joyous outburst, "she constantly affirmed that it was even so." Her young heart believed in God and in the power of prayer, and knowing definitely that prayer had been answered, she would not suffer the praying band in the house of her mistress to browbeat her into silence. Although only the maid, she was not to be subdued by the sarcastic criticism of the large congregation present. She knew it was Peter, and nothing could move her from that belief. Rhoda wore the red rose of courage so beautifully as she persisted against opposition to constantly affirm the truth.

The Saints Mocked

How revealing was the reaction of those gathered together to Rhoda's excited announcement. First of all, they told the glad maid that she was *mad*. *They accused her of insanity! But* Rhoda was in good company because it had been said of the Saviour whom she had come to know and love, "He is beside Himself." Then, when Paul's eye kindled with the glory of his message, just as the face of Rhoda glowed as she told of answered prayer, Festus said of the Apostle, "Thou art beside thyself, much learning doth make thee mad." The prophet speaks about the spiritual man being mad (Hosea 9:7). Have we ever been thought mad for Christ, or fools for His sake? We are in the best of company if others sneer at us as we declare and live the message of God's power through Christ. But being told she had lost her senses did not deter Rhoda from the repetition of what she knew to be true.

Departing from their accusation, the band said, "It is his angel." Failing to move Rhoda from her persistent testimony, the saints treated her message as coming from the dead. It was a common Jewish belief that every true Israelite had a guardian angel especially assigned to him, who, when he appeared in human form, assumed the likeness of the man whom he protected. The continued knocking of Peter, however, stifled that interpretation of Rhoda's testimony because guardian angels are not prevented from carrying out their mission by closed doors. So, feeling that there was something insistently human about that constant knocking "they opened the door, saw Peter, and were astonished."

Astonished! How this description of their feelings revealed their unbelief! They had been praying for hours for Peter, yet when Peter stood at the door they did not believe it. Lack of faith was mingled with their intercessions, and so they were surprised at the miracle God had performed in Peter's escape from prison. Our Lord instructed His disciples to pray believingly. "When ye ask, believe that ye receive." Spurgeon once said, "If the Lord wants to surprise His people, He has only at once to give them an answer. No sooner do they receive an answer than they say, 'Who would have thought it?'" Mary of Jerusalem came to value her godly maid, Rhoda, more than ever because of the great assistance she had rendered that memorable day. And once in the house, Peter must have commended her for her persistence.