

# We Pray, God Answers

Acts 12:1-24

Last week we ended with Acts 11:29 where we read that the disciples, in particular the *Gentile Disciples* in Antioch had –

Acts 11

<sup>29</sup> “...determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. <sup>30</sup> This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

So we leave chapter 11 with the understanding that Barnabus and Saul have left Antioch and were headed back to Jerusalem with a financial gift for the Churches in Judea. We don't know how long it took them to travel the 300 miles from Antioch to Jerusalem. If they went directly to Jerusalem, it's a steady walk of about 15 days. If they took their time and stopped at other Churches along the way, it could have taken them much longer.

One thing we do know, according to Luke, changes were beginning to happen in Jerusalem “*about that time...*”

And this takes us to where we will begin today, chapter 12 of the book of Acts –

Acts 12

<sup>1</sup> Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. <sup>2</sup> Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. <sup>3</sup> And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

By now, the growing hatred for the Christians and the continued separation of the Christians from the Jews was very apparent. Even as we read how after the stoning of Steven the persecution grew.

As you remember from the previous study the whole reason Barnabus and Saul had been in Antioch was because the persecution had driven some of the Believers out of Jerusalem and they went to Antioch, and as they went into Antioch, **instead of being quiet about their faith** in fear of persecution, they began *preaching the Word, preaching the Lord Jesus*. And Luke tells us that (11:21) “*...the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*”

So, Barnabus and Saul were in Antioch to encourage these new converts. They are now headed back to Jerusalem and it would appear as though the persecution has now made a major turn for the worse.

Acts 12

*<sup>1</sup> Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. <sup>2</sup> Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.*

The Herod of Acts 12 was a part of the Herodian Dynasty. This dynasty ruled over the land of Israel for a number of years, from before the birth of Jesus and through the time of Paul. From both the Gospel accounts and the book of Acts, the four “Herods” that we are most familiar with are –

- **Herod the Great** – who ruled the area from 37– 1BC. He is the one who built the Second Temple (in Jerusalem), and he is the one who was ruling at the time of Jesus’ birth. He is also the one who ordered all the male children from two years old and younger to be murdered in his attempt to kill the baby Jesus. He died shortly after.
- His son, **Herod Antipas** ruled the area from his father’s death until about AD 39. He was the one who ordered John the Baptist’s execution and was still ruling during the time of Jesus’ crucifixion.
- A grandson of Herod the Great through another son, Aristobulus was the next in line, he is known as **Herod Agrippa** and he ruled AD 37–44. **He’s the "Herod" here in Acts 12.**
- Agrippa’s son, **Agrippa II** is the one Paul stood before in Acts 25 and 26, before going to Rome for his appeal to Caesar.

The interesting thing to note is the fact that the **family of Herod had Jewish blood** – descendants of the Hasmonean family. It was the Hasmonean family which led the revolt against the Greeks some 200 years earlier. So, through the years the Herod dynasty primarily just played the game: seeming to appease Rome, but also keeping peace by doing all they could to appease the Jews.

Since neither Rome nor the Jews cared for the Christians, arresting some of them and even putting some to death was a way of garnering favor with both parties – the Romans and the Jews, but at the expense of the Christians. **All of the Herods were players. And this one, Herod Agrippa, was simply playing his part.**

So as he *stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.* <sup>2</sup> *Then ...killed James the brother of John with the sword*

*<sup>3</sup> And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.*

Peter had been arrested sometime during the seven day festival called the *Days of Unleavened Bread*. Yet Herod wanted to wait for the end of Passover to put Peter to death. Passover is single 24 hour period during the feast of Unleavened Bread and actually come before the Days of Unleavened Bread, but the general term for the whole celebration and feast is called Passover. So, Herod was waiting until the end of the entire feast and celebration.

James had already been put to death, now it was apparent that Herod **had no problem putting Peter to death**. For him, to put Peter to death would have been the death nail to Christianity. Peter was undoubtedly the major leader of the Christians in Jerusalem at that time. Therefore, his death would remove the leader and end the Church... **Apparently they had learned nothing at the death of Jesus.**

But here is Peter in prison with four squads of soldiers to watch over him, making certain he didn't escape. It would have been four squads of four soldiers each: two chained to Peter and two standing outside the door of his cell. This squad would rotate shifts with the other three squads, giving twenty-four hour guard over this very special prisoner.

Acts 12

<sup>5</sup> *Peter was therefore kept in prison, **but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.*** <sup>6</sup> *And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.*

<sup>7</sup> *Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands.* <sup>8</sup> *Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me."* <sup>9</sup> *So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.*

There is so much going on here, I don't want you to miss any of it.

**First** of all, while he was in prison, *constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.*

**Never under estimate the power of prayer.** Particularly *believing prayer or prayers of faith.* If you are familiar with this event, you will know the added significance of those statements: **believing prayer or prayers of faith.** I'll explain it to the rest of you in a moment.

**Secondly**, we see *Peter was sleeping.* This was the night before Herod was going to kill him, but it sure appears as though Peter **wasn't stressing out about it.** He had to know that James had been murdered, there was no reason for him to believe that he wouldn't suffer the same fate. So, rather it

was his faith that the Lord would deliver him or that the Lord would soon receive him, it would seem as though **Peter was at peace, even in the worst case scenario.**

**Thirdly**, while he's in prison, chained to these two guards with two more just outside the door, there is no way on earth that he is going to be freed... no way on earth.

No way on **EARTH**, so God sent an angel **from heaven** – gotta love it!

*...behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!"*

Did you catch that? The angel was in the room... a bright light shone in the room... and the angel **still had to smack Peter on the side** to wake him up. Truly the Psalmist declares, "*He gives His beloved sleep* (Psalm 127:2)."

*"Come on Peter, get up and let's go!"* and as he did, the chains binding him to the guard *fell off his hands* and apparently didn't wake the guard up – the guard who should have been awake anyway, since he was on guard, by the way.

*"Get dressed and get your sandals on and follow me!"*

If you are Peter, **things are getting really weird now**. This is about the **coolest dream you have ever had**, and you hope it continues. He had no idea *"that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision."*

And they kept walking out of the cell, then down the hall, and past the guards, heading for **the big red-lettered EXIT sign at the iron gate.**

*<sup>10</sup> When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. <sup>11</sup> And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people."*

As they walked down the hall, Peter **believed it was just a vision.**

As they walked past not one, but two guard posts, Peter **knew it was a vision.**

As that big iron gate (normally bolted and locked), opened on its own, Peter **knew for absolute certain that it was a vision.**

As they walked out into the night air of the City of Jerusalem and began walking down one of the streets, Peter was **still trying to figure out this dream.**

Then just as suddenly as he had appeared in the prison cell, “...*immediately the angel departed from him.*”<sup>11</sup> **And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.”**

This is actually the second time Peter had been freed from prison. Back in chapter 5, the High Priest had arrested Peter and some of the other Apostles.

Acts 5

<sup>19</sup> *But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said,*<sup>20</sup> *“Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.”*

But **even with previous experience**, Peter is **still amazed** at the work, power, and provision of God.

Oh my, how soon we forget the provisions of God from yesterday

As Peter came to himself, he also realized he had to **go and tell the Church.**

He was pretty sure where they would have been meeting that night. They were probably meeting at the same place when James was arrested...

<sup>12</sup> *So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.*<sup>13</sup> *And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer.*<sup>14</sup> *When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.*<sup>15</sup> *But they said to her, “You are beside yourself!” Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, “It is his angel.”*

Now let's stop right there. Before we get into an amazing scene and dialogue, we're first introduced to John Mark. This is the Mark who wrote the second Gospel account. This is the same Mark that goes on Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, the same Mark that causes for the great separation of Barnabas and Paul, and the same Mark that Paul wrote to Timothy about, asking him to be certain to, **“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry (2 Tim. 4:11).”**

Apparently Mark's mother, Mary is a widow. There's no mention of her husband's name, but she must have had a large enough house to accommodate a very important Church prayer meeting.

Now, as far as what's taking place here in these few verses, I don't want to lessen the seriousness and importance of the events, but you just have to see that ***what's happening in the middle of this serious prayer meeting is absolutely hilarious!***

Peter, after being miraculously freed from the prison is sneaking through the streets in the middle of the night, wondering when the guards will discover he's missing and send out the troops to look for him. He finally makes it to Mary's house (the mother of John Mark), and begins knocking at the gate.

Everyone inside is praying for Peter's safe release. While they were busy praying, a young girl named Rhoda (very possibly a servant girl) gets up and goes out to see who could be knocking this time of night.

*"Who is it?" she asks in a loud whisper.*

*"It's me Peter, let me in!"*

*"Who?           **Who** are you really?"*

*"It's me Simon Peter." He tries to explain, "I was just freed from the prison by an angel of the Lord!"*

Suddenly, Rhoda recognizes the voice. She's so excited, she can't contain her joy... and she's not thinking very well either. She forgets to open the gate for Peter, leaves him out standing in the street and runs back to the group who are praying for Peter's release.

*"Oh Lord, hear our prayer. We have the faith to believe that You are more than able to release our Brother from prison?"*

*"Father, we know that You are able to move heaven and earth, simply by the words of Your mouth or the wave of Your hand. Father, we believe and ask that you would do it even now."*

***"Guys, you're not going to believe this, but Peter's at the gate."***

*"Oh dear little Rhoda, the stress has gotten to you. Be quiet now while we keep praying."*

*"Father, keep our Brother Peter safe. Watch over him, Lord. Please, in Jesus name we ask that You would set our Brother free."*

***"People!! Peter is here. Our prayers have been answered!!"***

*"Oh bless your heart, Honey. That's what we're praying about. You must of simply heard his angel."*

Hmmm, no. Probably not.

There's no doubt that they were praying sincerely in faith and earnestly believing for Peter's release, they just didn't expect an answer so soon!

And no doubt they had also prayed for James, but Herod murdered him.

<sup>16</sup> Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, **they were astonished**. <sup>17</sup> But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

Let's face it. Sometimes we are astonished when the Lord answers our "**prayers of faith**"!

*I **believed** He could do it, I just didn't think He **really would** do it!*

**Charles Spurgeon says:**

*If God wishes to surprise his people he has only to answer their prayers, such is their unbelief.*

We are strange creatures are we not? We say we believe and that we have faith, but when it actually happens the way we are praying, **we are astonished**. But aren't you glad that God isn't bound to our ability to believe?

Does He want us to believe, and pray in faith? Absolutely. We are told to pray believing. But how many of us, if we were absolutely honest would have to agree with the poor father of the young man possessed of an evil spirit. When the father was asked by Jesus, "*Do you believe?*" The man in his direct honesty to the Savior declared, "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*"

Sometimes, **it's in spite of our prayers** that the Lord still works His perfect will.

Yes, pray in faith, but understand that our God is always bigger than our greatest faith.

Peter tells them to "*...tell these things to James and to the brethren.*" And he departed and went to another place."

Let's move on...

Acts 12

<sup>18</sup> Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there.

The soldiers had no answer for Herod. Whatever happened, apparently the angel had caused them to go into a deep trance or sleep, they were unaware of what had happened until the morning. Out of frustration or out of the command that any Roman soldier who loses a prisoner under his care is liable unto death, Herod had these sixteen soldiers (four squads of four) put to death. Then he left and went to his summer home in Caesarea by the Sea. The home of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion who had recently come to faith in Christ, as well as the home of Philip, the Evangelist.

But Herod wasn't interested in hearing anything of the Gospel or recent conversions – even of one of his soldiers. He went there, probably hoping to get a time of rest after the embarrassment of losing the Apostle Peter while under his arrest.

Tyre and Sidon were in the area of what we now know to be Lebanon, the area known as Phoenicia during this time and era. For some reason, the people of those two cities had raised Herod's anger against them – perhaps for not paying enough tribute money.

Acts 12

<sup>20</sup> *Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country.*

<sup>21</sup> *So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.* <sup>22</sup> *And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"* <sup>23</sup> *Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.*

*24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.*

I love how Luke ties that in. Wickedness meets its end, but *the word of God grew and multiplied.*

Herod had allowed and undoubtedly desired the worship and praise of the people. He had set the day up for himself, to show his might and power. To show his “majesty” before the people. Oh yes, he wanted their praise and so *arrayed in royal apparel, he sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.*

And as the people began to declare his sovereignty and deity, *immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.* <sup>24</sup> *But the word of God grew and multiplied.*

Herod had judged James, the brother of John and put him to death. Herod had judged the Apostle Peter and tried to put him to death. Herod had judged his own prison guards and put 16 of them to death. Herod then received the praise and worship of man – So, God judged Herod, and put him to death.

Josephus, the Jewish historian of the First Century tells us this happened in AD 44 In his writings called Antiquities he wrote:

*Now, when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Cesarea, ...and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a*

*certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety... On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another..., that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery.<sup>1</sup>*

Sometime after these things, Luke shares with us –

<sup>25</sup> *And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.*

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<sup>1</sup> Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, [The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged](#) (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 523.