
ACTS OF THE APOSTLES



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“Parting Prayers”

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COMMUNITY BIBLE CHURCH
3645 Cashiers Rd, Highlands, NC 28741

CBC Weekly Resource

Acts: Praying with Expectancy

Sermon Text: Acts 12:5–19

Pastor Gary Community Bible Church

SERMON RECAP

In Acts 12, the early church is living in a moment of both explosive spiritual growth and intense opposition. James has been killed, Peter has been imprisoned, and Herod is preparing to execute him after Passover. Yet in the middle of that crisis, Scripture says, “constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church” (Acts 12:5). Pastor Gary emphasized that this was not casual, distracted, religious prayer. It was striving, stretching, urgent prayer—like reaching through prison bars for the keys.

The pastoral heart of the message was a call for the church to recover urgency and expectancy in prayer. We are often surrounded by discouraging news, cultural confusion, moral failure, sickness, division, and relational pain. Over time, those realities can dull our compassion and drain our faith. But the church must not become cynical or prayerless. If we do not pray for the hurting, the lost, the imprisoned, the prodigal, and the spiritually far from Christ—who will?

Pastor Gary also reminded us that expectancy is not the same as presumption. Peter was miraculously delivered; James had been martyred. We do not control the outcome. But our responsibility is to pray with faith, love, urgency, and expectation—leaving the results in God’s hands. The church must be a praying church, not merely one that performs prayer, but one that believes God still hears, moves, saves, heals, delivers, and opens gates.

STUDY GUIDE

Key Points

- **The early church prayed with urgency.** Peter was facing execution, and the church responded with constant, fervent prayer.
- **Cultural cynicism can dull spiritual compassion.** Constant exposure to brokenness, outrage, and bad news can make believers less sensitive to the needs of others.
- **Prayer must include expectancy.** The church prayed for Peter's release, yet they were astonished when he appeared at the gate. Pastor Gary challenged us to examine whether we pray while expecting nothing.
- **God can work even when we are unaware.** Peter was asleep when the angel came. God was moving on his behalf even when Peter was not fully awake to what was happening.
- **Sometimes God opens gates automatically; sometimes He calls us to press through.** The iron gate opened "of its own accord," but not every obstacle is removed that way. Maturity requires discernment, trust, and obedience.
- **We must pray strategically for the lost and those we love.** Pastor Gary especially challenged the church to pray with urgency for loved ones who are far from Christ.

Key Scripture

Primary Sermon Text

- **Acts 12:5–19** — Peter is imprisoned, the church prays constantly, an angel delivers him, and he appears at Mary's house where believers are gathered in prayer.

Verses and Passages Mentioned by Pastor Gary

- **Acts 12:5** — "Constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church."
- **Acts 12:6** — Peter sleeps in prison while chained between two soldiers.
- **James 5:16** — "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."
- **John 17** — Jesus' high priestly prayer before the cross.
- **Psalms 127:2** — "He gives His beloved sleep."
- **1 Peter 5:7** — "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."
- **Genesis 15** — God cuts covenant with Abram while Abram is in a deep sleep.
- **Psalms 46:10** — "Be still, and know that I am God."
- **Luke 22:44** — Jesus prays in Gethsemane with such agony that His sweat becomes like drops of blood.
- **Matthew 18:20** — "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."
- **2 Thessalonians 3:10** — "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat."
- **Acts 10; Acts 11:1–18** — Peter, Cornelius, and the controversy over Gentiles receiving the gospel.
- **Acts 4:13** — The leaders recognize Peter and John as ordinary men who had "been with Jesus."
- **Revelation 5:8** — The prayers of the saints pictured as golden bowls before God.

Other Relevant Verses

- **Philippians 4:6–7** — General thematic tie. This passage reinforces the call to bring anxiety and need to God in prayer, trusting Him for peace.
- **Colossians 4:2** — General thematic tie. Paul commands believers to “continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving,” which closely parallels the church’s constancy in Acts 12.
- **Luke 18:1–8** — General thematic tie. Jesus teaches that His people “always ought to pray and not lose heart,” connecting directly to expectancy and perseverance in prayer.

DEVOTIONAL MATERIAL

Day 1: Constant Prayer in a Crisis

Reflection Question

When life becomes urgent, do you instinctively turn to prayer—or do you first turn to anxiety, control, or distraction?

Reading

Acts 12:5

“Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.”

Thought

Acts 12 takes place in a dangerous season for the early church. Herod had already killed James, the brother of John, and now Peter was imprisoned with the intention of executing him after Passover. This was not a minor inconvenience. This was a life and death crisis.

The church’s response was not political maneuvering, panic, or resignation. They prayed. The word translated “constant” carries the sense of earnest, stretched out, strenuous prayer. Pastor Gary described it like reaching through prison bars, straining for the keys just out of reach. This was prayer marked by love, burden, and urgency.

In our day, we can become emotionally numb. We hear of suffering, sickness, violence, spiritual drift, family breakdown, and cultural confusion so often that our hearts can grow dull. But the church is called to stay tender. We are called to pray for people in trouble because we know the God who hears.

Constant prayer does not mean we live in a state of emotional panic. It means we refuse to become passive. We refuse to let cynicism replace compassion. We refuse to stop bringing people before the throne of grace.

Challenge

Make a short prayer list today of 3 to 5 people who urgently need God’s intervention. Set aside intentional time this week to pray for them with focus and expectancy.

Day 2: The Peace of a Beloved Child

Reflection Question

What situation in your life is stealing your rest, and what would it look like to cast that care on the Lord?

Reading

Acts 12:6; Psalm 127:2; 1 Peter 5:7

Thought

The night before Peter was to be brought out for trial and likely execution, he was sleeping. Humanly speaking, this is shocking. He was chained between two soldiers, guarded by multiple squads, and facing death. Yet Peter slept.

This was not ignorance. Peter knew the danger. He had already seen James killed. He understood Herod's intentions. But he also knew the Lord. Psalm 127:2 says, "He gives His beloved sleep." That does not mean believers never experience fear or insomnia. It means there is a kind of rest that comes from knowing our lives are held by God.

Later, Peter would write, "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Those words carry weight because Peter had lived them. He had been in the prison cell. He had faced death. He had learned that God's care was not theoretical.

Many of us want peace, but we also want full control. We want rest, but we keep rehearsing every detail. Peter's sleep reminds us that trust is not passivity—it is surrender. It is the soul saying, "God knows where I am. God knows what I face. God knows what comes next."

Challenge

Before bed tonight, identify one burden you have been carrying. Name it before the Lord and intentionally entrust it to Him. Ask Him for the grace to rest as His beloved.

Day 3: God Works While We Are Still Waking Up

Reflection Question

Where might God be working in your life even though you do not yet fully understand what He is doing?

Reading

Acts 12:7–9

Thought

An angel appears in Peter's cell, strikes him on the side, wakes him, tells him to get dressed, and leads him out. But Acts tells us Peter did not fully understand what was happening. He thought he was seeing a vision.

That detail is deeply comforting. God did not wait for Peter to have perfect awareness before He acted. Peter was groggy, confused, and only partially aware, yet God was already delivering him.

Pastor Gary reminded us that there are seasons when we are not spiritually “on top of our game.” Maybe we feel distant, weary, distracted, or confused. Yet God is gracious. He can guide us even when we are not fully alert. He can protect us even when we do not see the danger. He can lead us step by step before we understand the whole story.

This does not excuse spiritual laziness. But it does magnify God’s mercy. The Lord is not limited by our inability to grasp every detail. Sometimes obedience comes before understanding. Peter simply followed the angel’s instructions: get up, get dressed, follow me.

Challenge

Ask the Lord where He is calling you to simple obedience right now. Take one concrete step, even if you do not yet understand the full picture.

Day 4: When God Opens the Gate

Reflection Question

Can you discern the difference between a gate God is opening and an obstacle He is calling you to press through?

Reading

Acts 12:10

Thought

As Peter and the angel came to the iron gate leading into the city, it opened “of its own accord.” Pastor Gary highlighted the Greek word behind that phrase, connected to our word “automatic.” The gate opened without Peter forcing it.

There are moments when God removes obstacles in ways we cannot explain. A door opens. A diagnosis changes. A relationship is restored. Provision comes. Protection happens. We may never know all the dangers God has spared us from or all the gates He has opened before we even reached them.

But Pastor Gary also gave an important caution: the Christian life is not always “automatic gates.” Sometimes God opens the way miraculously. Other times He strengthens us to endure, obey, work, grow, persevere, and mature. Peter experienced miraculous deliverance here, but later church tradition tells us he would die by crucifixion. James was not delivered from the sword. We do not always understand why.

Faith does not demand that every gate open. Faith trusts God whether the gate opens, stays shut, or requires us to keep walking in obedience.

Challenge

Think of one “closed gate” in your life. Pray with expectancy, but also ask the Lord for discernment: “Are You opening this, redirecting me, or strengthening me to endure?”

Day 5: Praying with Expectancy

Reflection Question

Do your prayers sound like you believe God may actually answer them?

Reading

Acts 12:12–16; James 5:16

Thought

After Peter is delivered, he goes to the house of Mary, where believers are gathered praying. A servant girl named Rhoda recognizes Peter’s voice at the gate. In her joy, she forgets to open the door and runs to tell the others. Their response is astonishing: they do not believe her.

This is one of the most human moments in Acts. The church was praying fervently, but when the answer arrived, they were shocked. Pastor Gary pressed into this tension: were they praying with passion but without expectancy?

That question is worth sitting with. It is possible to pray as a religious exercise while expecting nothing to change. It is possible to say the right words, gather in the right room, and still be surprised when God answers.

Expectancy does not mean we dictate outcomes to God. Peter was delivered; James was martyred. We cannot explain every mystery of suffering and sovereignty. But we can refuse to pray empty prayers. We can bring real needs to a real Father, believing He is able, good, near, and active.

The church today does not need less prayer. It needs prayer filled with faith, surrender, and expectancy.

Challenge

Choose one prayer you have prayed casually or hopelessly. Begin praying it this week with renewed expectancy, while surrendering the outcome to God.

IV.

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES

Opening

Welcome everyone warmly. Invite the group to settle in and briefly share how they are doing.

Then open with a prayer prompt rather than a scripted prayer:

- Ask the Lord to make the group attentive to His Word.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to expose cynicism, prayerlessness, or unbelief.
- Ask God to renew expectancy and compassion in the group's prayer life.

Thematic Recap

Acts 12 shows the church under pressure and Peter facing death. Yet the believers respond with constant prayer. God miraculously delivers Peter, but the praying church is surprised when he appears at the gate.

Core Highlights

- The church is called to pray urgently for people in trouble.
- Prayer can be fervent and still lack expectancy.
- God is able to work even when we are confused, tired, or unaware.
- Sometimes God opens gates miraculously; sometimes He calls us to endure faithfully.
- We must pray strategically for loved ones who are far from Christ.
- The church's first line of offense is prayer.

Icebreaker

Question:

Can you remember a time when you were surprised by an answered prayer? What made it surprising?

Allow 5 to 15 minutes for discussion. Encourage brief, honest stories.

Scripture Exploration

Passage 1: Acts 12:5–11

Discussion Prompts

- 1 What details in this passage show the seriousness of Peter's situation?
- 2 What stands out to you about the phrase "constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church"?
- 3 Why do you think Peter was able to sleep the night before his likely execution?
- 4 What does this passage teach us about God's ability to act beyond human limitations?

5 How do you personally respond when you feel trapped, guarded, or powerless?

Passage 2: Acts 12:12–17

Discussion Prompts

- 1 Why is it significant that the believers were gathered together praying?
- 2 What do you notice about Rhoda's reaction compared to the group's reaction?
- 3 How can believers pray passionately but still lack expectancy?
- 4 What are some signs that our prayers have become more routine than faith filled?
- 5 How can a small group cultivate greater expectancy without becoming presumptuous?

Passage 3: James 5:16 and 1 Peter 5:7

Discussion Prompts

- 1 What does "effective, fervent prayer" look like in everyday life?
- 2 How does casting our cares on God connect to praying with urgency?
- 3 What is the difference between carrying a burden in anxiety and carrying it in prayer?
- 4 Why is it important that Peter, who once slept in prison, later wrote about casting cares on God?
- 5 How can confession, righteousness, and prayer strengthen the life of a group?

Grand Synthesis Prompt

Acts 12 shows the church praying for Peter, James 5 calls believers to fervent prayer, and 1 Peter 5 calls us to cast our cares on God. Taken together, what kind of prayer life is God forming in His people?

Application: Growing in Personal and Communal Prayer

As a group, discuss practical ways to respond this week.

Personal Prayer Steps

- Make a list of 3 to 5 people who need salvation, healing, deliverance, or renewed faith.
- Set aside a specific daily time to pray for them.
- Pray with expectancy, but surrender the outcome to God.
- Limit distractions that fuel cynicism or anxiety.
- Keep a simple record of prayer requests and answers.

Group Prayer Steps

- Spend more time actually praying together, not only talking about prayer.
- Create space for urgent needs without rushing past them.
- Follow up on requests from previous weeks.
- Celebrate answered prayers, even small ones.
- Pray for prodigals, unbelieving family members, and spiritually weary believers by name.
- Ask God to make CBC a church marked by faith filled, compassionate prayer.

Closing

Before ending, invite group members to share prayer needs.

Prayer Prompt Themes

Encourage several people to pray as they feel led, focusing on:

- Loved ones who are far from Christ.
- People in crisis or under pressure.
- Renewed expectancy in prayer.
- Freedom from cynicism and spiritual numbness.
- Trust in God's sovereignty when outcomes differ.
- A deeper prayer culture at CBC.

Leader Notes

- **Create safety.** Some people may feel discouraged because prayers have not been answered the way they hoped. Make room for grief and mystery.
- **Avoid simplistic answers.** Remember Pastor Gary's point: Peter was delivered, but James was killed. We pray with expectancy, not control.
- **Draw out quieter members.** Ask gentle follow up questions without putting anyone on the spot.
- **Keep the discussion Scripture centered.** Let Acts 12 shape the conversation more than personal opinions about prayer.
- **Move from discussion to practice.** Be sure the group actually spends time praying together.
- **Celebrate faith, not performance.** The goal is not eloquent prayer. The goal is honest, expectant dependence on God.
- **Encourage follow up.** Ask group members next week how they prayed and what they sensed the Lord doing.

Prayer Protocol Reminder

Do not read or assign a scripted prayer. Instead, invite Spirit led prayer using themes, prompts, Scripture phrases, and specific needs from the group.