

The Surprising Power of Prayer—Acts 12:3-19—9/27/26

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Turn to Acts 12 & let's read the chapter to get the context of this story of God's supremacy—Acts 12:1-25. [READ]

Although it was in my notes last week, I somehow skimmed over a reminder to encourage you to vote "NO" on the amendments to the Virginia constitution on this year's ballot.

Because God gave children to parents as gifts, we must not kill them in the womb & we must not allow government to steal parental authority.

Those are moral issues grounded in creation design & clear in Scripture that beckon us to vote no against Amendments 1&2.

It's tragic that our state has been run into greater depths of rebellion against God under the current governor in just the 1st of a 4 year term.

What kind of opposition to Christians might be coming in our state or even nationally if political winds blow the wrong way?

How can we respond to such burdens with hope & not despair?

Where do we turn if we feel powerless to uncover the deceit & fraud & entrenched structures of corruption?

And further, how do we help Christians elsewhere under Islamic sharia law or communist rule facing violent oppression with no freedoms?

How can we encourage Christians under greater persecution?

Or listen—if all that sounds far away from where you live—then what situation are you tempted to feel hopeless about?

Do you feel unfairly treated or wonder if change is possible?

Whether our thoughts are right or wrong, today's passage can help us.

Our look at the responses of Peter & the church in Acts can equip us to respond to the situations that overwhelm us.

God's display of supremacy in Acts 12 can remind us to trust Him & seek Him no matter how bleak the outlook or how useless we feel.

Acts 12:3-19 shows 4 demonstrations of the surprising power of God that can motivate us to pray fervently in all we face.

I doubt any of us are facing the potential for feeling helpless that the church did after the Apostle James was martyred & Peter was next.

But Luke recorded a hopeful reminder of God's supremacy for Christians throughout history to lift our gaze to our great God.

Luke has documented what God did to demonstrate who God is & what God can do whenever He chooses to prove He is still in charge.

When you think of why the nations rage against God & why scoffers dare to mock & why fools defy & deny God.

It often is because God is exercising His patience, because God is reigning in the comprehensive details of His providence.

And it's only a matter of time before God flips the narrative & makes His glory undeniable for the good of His people.

We can know that God will right all wrongs & vindicate righteousness.

Knowing that can move us to fervent, faithful prayer.

Knowing what God can do & eventually will do should motivate us to be people who deeply trust in the power of God through prayer.

If we grasp how God glorifies Himself when our helplessness drives us to rely fully on Him, then we will eagerly pray.

So let's unpack 4 demonstrations of God's power through prayer.

The 1st of those is that God can overcome any opposition through prayer as we see 1st in the contrast in verses 3-5.

As we face opposition to biblical morality & basic reality, we need to recall (#1) that God can overcome any opposition through prayer.

As we think of more overt attacks on Christians elsewhere, we must know God can overcome any opposition through prayer.

Recall from Acts 12:1-2 that the corrupt politician, King Herod, had come to power over that region & was trying to pad his support base.

So he began doing to Jesus' followers what the Jewish leaders of the region did with Jesus, seizing them to mistreat them.

As they did with Jesus, he unjustly executed the Apostle James & that raised his poll numbers with the Jewish community & its leaders.

When that maneuver was popular, he calculated that another similar act could advance his self-elevating self-protection.

So Peter was next on his list while the crowds were gathered for the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread & Passover.

He was crafting a plan for a public trial just after the festival as he had Peter arrested & imprisoned & ready to execute.

Read Acts 12:1-5 to recall that & see the contrast Luke set up. [READ]

Do you see the contrast?

On the one side, all the circumstances seemed aligned against Peter.

King Herod was an evil despot who had no real interest in justice or the rule of law or doing what was right.

Herod was in charge & had seized Peter with the plan to parade him before the Jewish people to raise his approval ratings among them.

James's death with a sword was a religious judgment & Herod had planned similar charges against Peter to rally more support.

But Herod was aware of the embarrassment of the Jewish leaders described in Acts 5 when the Apostles had escaped prison before.

So he added extra layers of maximum security—4 squads of 4 soldiers each were assigned all to Peter to watch him.

Peter was double guarded, with 2 soldiers chained to him in the prison cell & two others guarding the entrance.

That foursome squad would serve for a period & then the next squad would take its turn as they rotated to stay alert.

Herod assigned 4 of those squads completely to Peter so that none would lose focus as Peter was kept in confinement.

So the opposition to Peter seemed impenetrable & invincible.

But there was another far more unassailable power being advanced.

Note the contrast—the first word in the second half of verse 5 is the word for **prayer** with no article to emphasize its quality.

In contrast to all that was arrayed against Peter was **prayer**.

It was ongoing prayer being made continually by the church.

The church was praying—those who had repented & trusted Jesus as Lord & Christ & those whose chief spokesman was in danger.

They were praying literally to the God, to the one true God, the One who is supreme over all earthly rulers like King Herod.

This is what they had done as part of regular gatherings & it was particularly what they had done in Acts in response to persecution.

They were praying specifically for Peter & praying fervently.

Fervently was a word for a muscle being stretched to its limits with the idea of intensity & constancy yet with perseverance.

They were praying eagerly like Jesus had in the Garden of Gethsemane as **Luke 22:44** described with this same word.

So see the battle lines drawn & what is on each side in this war.

On one side is King Herod & the Jewish leaders & four squads of 16 soldiers total & chains & prison bars & locked gates.

All the power structures had Peter prepared for prosecution & death.

But on the other side in the war was grieving believers who had lost James praying to God that they would not lose Peter also.

If Peter was killed, then only the Apostle John would be left from Jesus' inner circle of the three & Peter was the most vocal of them.

The church did not search for political ties in government to pull strings or call for favors or pressure for protective status.

The church did not take up arms or rush the streets to march in protest.

Such responses may be permissible & prudent at times—don't misunderstand me—but we must see what the church did first.

We must see what the church did eagerly & continually.

The first response to enter the battle against all this opposition was to pray to the Almighty God, to seek help from the Savior.

Is that your default reaction to opposition?

Is that where you automatically turn when the odds are stacked against you & you sense that the flood of insurmountable foes?

Or do you text someone to complain or to recruit their help or do you start to formulate fresh arguments or plans of action?

Do you let panic rise or anger rage or excuses run wild?

What do you trust & where do you seek help in the battle?

Do you believe God can win the battle through prayer?

Do you believe **James 5:16**, which says “*the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.*”

Luke set up this contrast to **demonstrate that prayer** is the weapon the church wielded to fight overwhelming opposition.

And that weapon did not prove powerless or untrustworthy & it was not simplistic or passivist for the church to be devoted to prayer.

Despite what Herod & the Jewish leaders & even the church expected, God overcame all that opposition to save Peter.

We see not only that God can overcome any opposition by prayer, but also that God can overturn any expectations through prayer.

Point #2—God can overturn any expectations through prayer.

Read verses 6-11 as God orchestrated what no one expected. [READ]

This was the last minute, after Herod's plan was in motion.

That night, Luke emphasized—but then he noted that Peter was asleep.

Peter was not worried about dying because his eternity was in God's hands & he could rest.

Since Peter had been released before, perhaps he was awaiting release.

It's possible that Peter knew he would not die until later in life because John 21 says Jesus told him he would grow old.

In John 21:18, Jesus told him, “*when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.*”

Then John 21:19 explained, “*Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God.*”

We don't know if Peter thought that he had grown old 10-11 years after Jesus had said that, but either way, Peter was able to sleep.

Luke adds that Peter was between two soldiers, chained to both, with more guards before the doors keeping watch.

Then came the unexpected interruption that changed the landscape.

Behold—the stunning stand of an angel that lit up the room but apparently did not awaken any soldiers.

The angel had to poke Peter's side to wake him up to urge him to rise with speed that would counter his grogginess.

The quickness was not because the angel feared the guards, but because God had a timetable he was guiding to answer prayer.

As Peter obeyed, his hands were freed from his chains to the soldiers & the angel's next commands were preparation to leave.

The angel said to get dressed & put on his sandals & Peter did.

Then Peter was told to wrap himself with his outer garment & follow the angel & Peter followed as he went out of the prison cell.

The middle of verse 9 then reveals a first potentially humorous detail that points to how unexpected this rescue was.

Peter did not know this was real as it was happening— isn't that funny?

It was like a dream—he supposed it was a vision to see.

But it did not stop there—Peter & the angel went undetected by the two other soldiers & through the doors or gates they watched.

So they arrived at the large iron gate—possibly down some stairs out of the old Antonia fortress to enter the city.

They hit the button on the wall by the door that made it swing open— **no I'm joking**—but the gate did open automatically on its own.

Think of the details that Peter must have told to Luke later as he wrote this **amazing story of God's intervention**.

The escape was not complete until the angel led Peter out of sight of the prison, out of it & down one street as verse 10 says.

At that instant, Peter was on his own as the angel went away.

But that's when Peter fully woke up & spoke what he now truly knew.

God had changed the outcomes expected by the Jewish people.

All the Jewish people—particularly the leaders—were **expecting** Herod to execute Peter, but God had other plans.

Peter pointed to the Lord—likely referring to Jesus with the OT name of God, Yahweh, that was translated as Lord in the NT.

The Lord had sent out his angel for this rescue operation, to free Peter from the power that everyone thought was held in Herod's hand.

The Lord had **answered prayer** & altered the schemes of men.

He had overturned their plans & provided deliverance to His servant.

This was in answer to prayer as we read in verse 12. [READ]

Comprehending what the Lord had done, Peter knew he needed to get away from the prison & flee from Herod's eventual search.

Yet he knew where the church would be gathering for prayer as had been their pattern since Jesus had ascended.

This house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, may have been where the disciples had gathered with Jesus & with each other before.

We cannot be certain, but it must have been a frequent place that was large enough to host a gathering.

It was securely enclosed around with gated entrance with doors.

Several ladies in the Gospels were named Mary & so this was clarified as the house of Mary the mother of John Mark.

In Acts 13:5, 13, this man is called John, but then he is clarified also as John Mark in Acts 15:37, 39, as the companion of Barnabas whom Paul did not want to take on the second missionary journey.

Colossians 4:10 describes this John Mark as a cousin of Barnabas & he was a known as a son to Peter in Peter 5:13.

A 2nd century church father [Papias] notes this John Mark as the author of the Gospel of Mark with the oversight of Peter.

This was not a house-church, but persecution had likely driven church gatherings out of the Temple area & into courtyards within larger extended family household compounds.

This is described as a large number gathered—not a small group—and they were together for the purpose of praying.

The verb form is used of the noun used for prayer in verse 5.

Luke **contrasted** prayer by the church with expectations by the Jews.

So see **the emphasis again on prayer**, first in contrast to the opposition against Peter, but here in contrast to the expectations of what seemed certain to come next for Peter.

And just think of how that can apply to **our expectations**—like when you know the right thing to do but you **expect it to go poorly**.

Do you ever know you need to have hard conversations but you **expect people to respond wrongly** or react against truth?

We doubt the power of God in those times, don't we?

Of course, we know we don't deserve for God to use our attempts to evangelize or counsel or teach or minister to others.

And we know that God must change hearts by His Spirit & we have no power in ourselves to effect spiritual transformation.

But sometimes we let such realities make us **doubt** that God will work through us & for us & in answer to us as we pray.

So may Acts 12 help us pray in faith, not because we deserve answers, but because God can overcome opposition & overturn expectations.

Since God loves to rightly show that He alone is God, we should love to pray for Him to prove that for His glory.

On that fearful last night before Peter's likely execution, a large gathering of the church was acting in that kind of faith by praying.

Their faith was strong enough to seek God in this time of need, but their faith was also small enough to need strengthening.

So we see another ironic & possibly humorous scene that shows us a 3rd point for today—that God can strengthen any faith through prayer.

We've said God can overcome any opposition through prayer & God can overturn any expectations through prayer.

Now note 3^{rdly} that God can strengthen any faith through prayer.

We see the surprising power of prayer even for those praying.

We see the **shock** of such good news that it **seemed impossible** even to those who had enough faith to be seeking God's help for Peter.

That's what I mean that **any faith** can be strengthened through prayer—I mean those with faith **strong enough** to be fervently & continually praying could have their faith strengthened.

Yet God could also strengthen those whose **faith was too weak** to accept God's amazing answer to their prayers.

So **whether you think your faith is strong or weak**, God can work to strengthen your faith through prayer.

Read verses 13-17 to see the joy, amazement & **even doubt**. [READ]

Possibly the gate door was shut because they did not want any persecutors to enter their prayer gathering.

It would have been customary to ask who was outside the door, especially if someone was knocking at night like Peter was.

This young servant-girl Rhoda went to the door to answer.

She must have been a believer as part of the household because she knew Peter's voice & she was thrilled when she heard it.

Yet she was so glad that her first reaction was to report the joy rather than open the gate to let Peter in.

Out of her joy, she ran in to share that Peter was standing at the gate.

Again, this is another humorous scene where God's supremacy is so shocking that people's responses seem funny.

But we know the story & are not trapped in the sequence of surprises.

And the irony is deeper in verse 15 when the praying saints argue against Rhoda's report of God's answer to their prayers.

Rather than instantly believing God had provided, they accused Rhoda of being raving mad or insane.

But she held her ground, firmly maintaining it was so.

So they reached for another wrong answer, the Jewish tradition of an angel taking the form of the person being protected or served.

That was possible, but this mention of Peter's angel is not a proof-text for the Jewish tradition of specific guardian angels.

Hebrews 1:14 says angels are "*ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who inherit salvation.*"

We're told in Scripture of angels acting in ways like these, but we don't know when they are acting now.

We just know they act & we know we're not to seek or worship them.

So the point here is not to extrapolate an idea of angels or fascination with angels beyond what the Scripture warrants.

The point is that praying Christians were grasping at crazy explanations for what Rhoda was surely saying.

They were **surprised by the power of God to answer prayer**.

God was proving His power so greatly that even the fervent faith of these persevering prayer warriors was stretched.

It was too amazing to accept—yet Peter kept knocking & so after they opened the door, the evidence was undeniable.

They saw Peter & their confusion exploded in astonishment.

They were astounded, awestruck, out of their minds as their faith was strengthened beyond what they asked or expected.

Have you ever felt that?—have you been overwhelmed at God’s grace to answer some desperate longing that you were pleading for?

Perhaps you jumped for joy & immediately had to tell others or maybe you wept tears of joy & could hardly speak.

Their response was loud excitement & so Peter gestured with his hand for silence partly to protect them from detection by soldiers.

Their silence would also allow Peter to extol the wondrous work of the Lord that led him out of the prison.

Peter wanted this report spread so that God’s supremacy was known.

Isn’t that a glad & right response to faith being strengthened?

We must tell about it, right?—when God moves to answer prayer, we must tell about it, we must share our praise of Him with others.

We must celebrate His grace & share the growth of faith that can belong to us & to others as we see God answer prayers.

He is worthy of such worship & we are helped by expressing it.

We praise God & encourage one another when we join in prayer & also join in praise as we see God answer.

We can rejoice & grow in faith that God can overcome any opposition, overturn any expectations, & strengthen any faith through prayer.

Whether we note the faith of the church as strong enough to be praying for Peter or we see their faith as weak enough to doubt God’s answers, we surely know God could grow their faith.

And we know that that lesson of faith was to be shared as he said to report it to James & these brethren.

Possibly the baton of leadership for the Jerusalem church was being passed here from the Apostles to James & other leaders.

The brethren could also refer to the whole church, but clearly James was coming into view as a leading elder of the Jerusalem church.

Of course, this was not the Apostle James, the brother of John, who had been martyred earlier as verse 2 said.

This was James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, who was a leader in the Jerusalem church later in Acts 15:13 & 21:18 & as mentioned by Paul in 1st Corinthians 15:7 & Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12. [cf. Mark 6:3]

Peter knew these things needed to be known & yet he knew that he did not need to stay in Jerusalem to be captured again.

So he departed from there to go elsewhere.

After this chapter, Luke’s narrative shifts to Paul as the main character in Gospel ministry & Peter shows up again in Jerusalem in Acts 15.

But Peter left for now & would not be found by Herod again.

God overruled Herod’s murderous plan to exalt himself as Peter was free & Herod was disturbed & dejected.

Read verses 18-19 to see Herod’s reaction. [READ]

We've said to note how God can overcome any opposition, overturn any expectation, & strengthen any faith through prayer.

Now note #4, that God can overrule any leader through prayer.

Point #4—God can overrule any leader through prayer.

And this point is already obvious, but it's emphasized as we see Herod's exasperated defeat & ashamed departure.

Since the prison escape was at night, daybreak brought not a little commotion among the soldiers what then had happened with Peter.

Their concern was warranted because their job was to guard him with their lives—or their lives would be taken.

And that's what happened to them after Herod did not find Peter.

Herod searched for Peter & interrogated the soldiers to see if one of them was secretly involved in the escape plan.

But with no answers & no lead on finding Peter, Herod did what evil leaders do—they took out their wrath on someone else.

Herod's plan for coalition-building toward his self-exaltation had failed miserably & left him with shame rather than fame.

So he scooted out of the region Judea so he could try to shake off his losses at Caesarea by the Mediterranean Sea.

He went on a beach vacation to try to drown out his sense of insufficiency & insecurity in knowing God had overruled him.

That's what God does—He humbles the proud.

That is the power of God through prayer—just as God did with Herod, God can overrule any leader through prayer.

God had overcome impossible opposition, overturned anchored expectations, strengthened all manner of faith, & overruled Herod.

And He may not show us the miracles in doing so today, but He still moves in His providence in amazing ways to show His glory & respond to the prayers of His people.

So we can pray knowing that God can overcome any opposition, overturn any expectations, strengthen any faith, & overrule any leader.

He can do so & He welcomes His people to ask Him for such overwhelming actions in our helpless situations.

We can humbly admit our dependence & desperation & as 1st Peter 5:7 says, we can cast our anxiety on Him because He cares for us.

Of course, that only applies to you if you know Him as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

His promises to answer prayer are for those who confess their sins & turn from hope in self & surrender in faith to Jesus as Lord.

So if you know you are a sinner who cannot get to God, admit your spiritual bankruptcy & trust Christ as all you need.

Jesus lived perfectly, died sacrificially & rose in victory to provide righteousness, pay sin's penalty & secure hope for all who trust Him.

So trust Him today & begin to experience the blessings of answered prayer from this gracious & sovereign God over all.

Let's all be grateful for all we have in Christ & let today's passage renew our zeal to be people of prayer.

Pray with me as we close.