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August 25, 2024

## PRAYING: ACTS 12:6-18

Believers can thankfully trust God in all circumstances.

### Focus Attention

**Introduction Option 1:** Sometimes in life, we need a little comic relief. We see this in action movies sometimes. During the harrowing fight with the bad guys, the hero will make a quip or say something funny that makes the moviegoer laugh despite the serious events taking place on screen. We experience this in real life as well. Maybe a family is gathered in a hospital room facing a serious medical situation and one of the children says or does something that causes everyone to break out laughing. Or maybe a family is gathered together after a funeral, and someone starts telling funny stories about the person for whom everyone is mourning. The comic relief does not lessen the seriousness of the situation or the sadness or loss, but sometimes it is good to smile and laugh as a family amid hard times. In today's lesson, Luke is going to offer some comic relief during a very serious situation. He will also remind us that prayer is essential and God's plan is inevitable.

**Introduction Option 2:** Ask group members to relay a time when a child or someone provided comic relief during a serious or somber moment. (You might need to provide an example to help the group grasp the idea.) After the group shares a story or two share the paragraph in Introduction Option 1.

**Introduce the Passage and Transition:** Sometimes bad times seem to come out of the blue. Acts chapter 11 recounts the way Christianity was growing among the Gentiles and in places like Antioch. Luke then tells that that famine is coming. He goes on to tell the reader that persecution of the church is appearing once again. Acts 12:1 records, "About that time King Herod violently attacked some who belonged to the church, <sup>2</sup>and he executed James, John's brother, with the sword." James is the only Apostles whose martyrdom is recorded in Scripture. His death was probably an emotional blow to the Christian community in Jerusalem. Luke, however, does not spend much time discussing the event. It's almost like he wants to quickly get to the events that happened afterward. Following James' death, Herod receives positive feedback from the Jews, so he arrests Peter. The arrest comes during the Holy Days surrounding Passover, so Herod waits until the end of the holiday to put Peter on trial and surely kill him as well. That is where our lesson picks up. Let's look at Acts 12:6-10

### 1. LED TO FREEDOM (ACTS 12:6-10)

**Read or have someone read Acts 12:6-10**

#### Notes:

This is the Aim of the lesson. It drives our discussion and should be the point we drive home throughout the lesson.

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *New American Commentary: Acts* (NAC)
- *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts* (HNTC)
- *Preaching the Word: Acts* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Christ in Acts* (Exalting)
- *Unstoppable Gospel*, Gregg Matte

"Considering the history of Herod Agrippa I, the Herod of this story, the time most likely would have been the spring of a.d. 42 or 43." (NAC, 277)

"Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great." (NAC, 277)

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**Explain:** The first thing we can note about this passage is Peter's demeanor on the night before his trial and presumptive execution.

**Ask:** What was Peter doing? (He was sleeping.)

**Discuss:** What would you have been doing on the night before you were probably going to be executed? (Allow time for discussion)

**Explain:** Dr. Kent Hughes sums up Peter's composure well. "He isn't biting his nails, pacing the floor, or trying to negotiate a deal. He is sleeping!" (Exalting, 173) We might ask ourselves how this is possible. Even a person who trusts in the Lord would probably be unable to sleep and nervous about the events to come. I think we can find that answer not just in Peter but in the Christians who supported him.

**Read or have someone read** Acts 12:5 (<sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him.)

**Explain:** Before Luke describes Peter's peace while in prison, he tells us about the church's persistence in prayer. We do not know if Herod had undercover agents watching the Christians in Jerusalem or if non-believers were watching the Christians to observe their response to the revived persecution. But imagine if someone was watching them. They might expect this group of radicals to be planning an *Ocean's 11*-style breakout. Or maybe they would be planning a protest rally at the scene of the trial. That is not what they were doing. The men, women, and young people who cared for Peter and worshipped Jesus were praying. For the unbeliever or the spiritually immature this response to difficult times might appear ludicrous. "Does anything look more ridiculous to oppressors than a ragtag, harried group of believers praying for God's help in the midst of oppressive darkness?... What good would this effeminate praying do?" (Preaching, 165)

**Discuss:** Has anyone ever questioned or ridiculed your commitment to prayer in or about a distressing situation?

**Explain:** While some might question the power of prayer, this passage highlights the Christian practice of prayer and the power of prayer.

- **The Practice of Prayer:** In verse 5 Luke tells us the church was "praying fervently to God for him." The word "fervently" has been described in two ways. Gregg Matte says, "The original Greek word Luke uses means that the church was praying 'at full stride.'" (Unstoppable, 187) The imagery is one of walking or running. Their prayers were not equivalent to a lazy stroll in the park. Instead, their prayers were akin to a runner opening up on the home stretch and lengthening his stride. Kent Hughes helps us understand the word in a different way. He writes that the word "comes originally from a word that means 'to stretch' or 'to strain.' they were straining in prayers!—praying 'with agony,' as G. Campbell Morgan says." (Preaching, 165) If we think back to our prison break or protest

Notes:

"It was the last minute before the sealing of the apostle's doom."  
(NAC, 280)

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scenario, we might say that instead of straining, planning, and organizing the Christians put the same amount or more effort into their prayers. “This was no last resort for the church but rather a priority. They knew they were talking to the One who created the universe, and that is no small thing.” (Unstoppable, 187) The early church provides a model for us when praying in dire times. “God invites us to pray—to take part in His movements on this planet... God’s power always wins, and prayer gives us the chance to get in on the ground floor of that victory.” (Unstoppable, 188)

- **The Power of Prayer:** We see the power of their prayers through the response. Luke does not tell us that Peter is aware of the church’s intercession for him. He probably does have hope or assurance that his friends are praying. Moreover, Luke does not tell us that the Apostle is praying but we can reasonably assume he has been praying during his prison stay. Regardless of his knowledge of outside events, we can see in Peter’s slumber that he is the recipient of the powerful peace that comes from prayer. The Apostle Paul will help us understand this peace in his letter to the Philippians.

**Read or have someone read:** Philippians 4:6-7 (<sup>6</sup> Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.)

“Peter was guarded by soldiers, but his heart was guarded by God.” (Exalting, 174) We also see the power of their prayer in the response of the Lord. Our passage describes the events in the prison. Unless we are uptight and rigid, we can see the humor in the story that was probably a popular one among the early church. Peter is sleeping and bright light fills the room. Yet, Peter does not wake. We can imagine Peter telling the story, “I was so dead asleep that the angel had to literally kick me in the ribs to wake me up. Then, I was so out of it he had to tell him the plan step by step. ‘Quick, get up!’ ‘Get dressed.’ ‘Put on your sandals.’ ‘Wrap your cloak around you.’ ‘Follow me.’ I was so out of it that I thought it was a vision. I mean, the huge iron gate just swung open *by itself*.” This was no jailbreak. It was a rescue of a man who was not fully awake and needed his morning coffee.

**Discuss:** While this might be humorous to imagine we should stop and consider the power of God in the midst of our weakness. Ask the group to relay a time in their life when God acted and did something they were powerless to accomplish on their own. (If you get no response you can ask, “What about a story from the Bible where God acted when His people were powerless.”)

**Summarize and Transition:** In Peter’s experience, we can be reminded of an episode from the Old Testament. Genesis chapter 28 relays the events surrounding Jacob’s flee from Canaan. While resting his head on a rock, he received a vision from the Lord. The vision was one of angels coming and going on a ladder between heaven and earth. Regardless of our situation, the Lord is at work all around us. On this night in prison, the

Notes:

“Obviously, this was not Peter’s escape. It was rather his deliverance. Peter was totally passive throughout the entire incident.” (NAC, 280–281)

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spiritual was made visible to Peter. One of those usually invisible angels who are “sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation” (Hebrews 1:14) made an appearance as an agent sent to answer the prayers church. (c.f. Preaching, 167-168) But what happens after the angel leaves Peter on the dark streets of Jerusalem?

## 2. KNOCKING AT THE DOOR (ACTS 12:11-14)

**Read (or have someone read)** Acts 12:11-14

**Explain:** Again, we note the humor in Peter’s dire situation. He is one block away from the prison gate. He thinks he is having a pleasant vision and then suddenly the angel is gone, and he is standing alone on a dark city street. He is ‘on the lam’ and suddenly realizes it. His actions at this point show us his Respectable Acknowledgment and his Rational Actions.

**Peter’s Respectable Acknowledgment:** We can imagine that upon realizing the reality of the situation Peter might have smiled and offered a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord. He realized that God had sent an angel to rescue him from a tyrant and to dash the expectation of what everything thought would happen (“from all that the Jewish people expected.”)

**Discuss:** Ask the group to consider how people sometimes respond after God answers their prayer. What positive ways do they respond and what not-so positive might a person respond?

**Explain:** Sometimes people pray for healing. Sometimes people pray about a financial situation. Sometimes people pray about an employment issue. Believers pray with an expectation that God will act. Yet, sometimes when God acts, we are tempted to give the glory to the doctors for healing, the stock market for financial success, or our personal skills for employment advancement. Instead of responding in such a way, believers should respond like Peter and respectfully acknowledge the actions of a faithful, caring, and loving God. But Peter doesn’t just pray, thank God, and saunter down the street. He acts rationally.

**Peter’s Rational Actions:** As we said before, Peter is on the lam. He is about to be the most wanted man on Herod’s list. We can imagine him hurrying through the night to get to a place of safety. It would be foolish and frankly disrespectful of the Lord to flaunt his new independence. Years earlier after a similar deliverance from jail, God had told the Apostles to go out in public and begin preaching (Acts 4:17-21). He does not do that in this situation. Peter received no divine instruction after getting out of jail.

**Apply:** When there is no divine instruction, rational action should be taken. After God acts in the believer’s life through healing, proper medical follow-up is rational. After God acts in our finances, proper budgeting and wise spending are rational. After God acts in our employment situation, hard work and diligence are rational. We should not just sit back and say, “Do it again God.” Peter does not presume upon God. Instead, he acts. He goes the home of John Mark’s mother.

Notes:

“Notice that supernatural deliverance does not preclude common sense. From the minute he walked out that iron gate, Peter was ‘on the lam.’ Hiding became as important as announcing his deliverance to the church.” (HNHC, 196)

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**Explain:** This is one of those situations in which Luke drops in the name of a person who will become important later. John Mark will accompany Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. But right now, his mother's home seems to be the location in which one of the Jerusalem congregations gathers for worship. On this night, the home is the site of an all-night prayer vigil during which Rhoda is tasked with manning the door. Peter's arrival at the outer gate leading to the courtyard yet again provides a little comic relief in a very serious situation. When Rhoda hears his voice on the other side of the gate, she is so overcome with joy that she runs inside to tell the others. We can almost see Peter roll his eyes and look over his shoulder for guards. We can imagine him knocking again and stage whispering, "Rhoda, come back. Rhoda, open the door. Rhoda!"

**Transition:** Luke again gives us a humorous tableau, but these events remind us that we should respectfully acknowledge God's work, respond rationally to God's work, and like Rhoda rejoice when God acts. Just don't forget to open the door when God sends the answer. Let's see how the prayer meeting responds to Rhoda while Peter waits in the street.

### 3. TELLING HIS STORY (ACTS 12:15-18)

**Read (or have someone read)** Acts 12:15-18

**Explain:** The initial reaction to Rhoda's interruption of the prayer meeting is disbelief. The attendees at the prayer meeting provide a Human Response to a Heavenly Action. They tell young Rhoda that she is crazy, but she keeps insisting that Peter is here (still out on the street). Then they insist that it must be his angel. Now, beyond a discussion on their faith that God can answer prayers, this is an odd comment. It should be noted that Luke and the Bible are not saying that humans have a specific guardian angel or that we become angels when we die. Luke is simply reporting the response of those in the home. (See the attached note from the *Holman New Testament Commentary* for an explanation.) In effect, the people who had been praying for Peter could not believe that he was standing at the door. "God's grace here was so astonishing that even a praying church had a difficult time believing it!" (Exalting, 174)

**Apply:** How often do we refuse to acknowledge God's answer to prayer? When He gives guidance in a situation, we want to argue or dismiss Him.

When He provides deliverance, we refuse to see it. Sometimes, like this group, we stand around and argue about theology while the answer to our prayer is standing at the door knocking.

**Explain:** All the while, Peter is standing on the street knocking. When they finally do go and check the gate, they let Peter in the home. The reaction of the people was so exuberant and raucous that Peter had to settle them down using his hands. He then provides them with an Honorable Retelling of the Heavenly Action.

**Apply:** Peter provides us with an example to follow when God acts in our lives. We should tell the wonderful story. In situations like Peter's and the awestruck prayer group, telling the story of answered prayer helps believers grow in their faith. Recounting God's work reminds those who pray that God *does* answer prayer. When we know someone is praying for us or about a situation, we should report to them the actions of God.

Notes:

"Here's a picture of a people who are praying but are struggling with believing that God actually works miracles! I don't think Luke included this insight as an indictment on the church. These men and women were ordinary humans..." (Exalting, 175)

"They found it easier to believe that Peter had died and gone to heaven than that their prayers had been answered." (NAC, 282)

"In other words, they stand around discussing theology while the answer to their prayer is waiting outside!" (Exalting, 175)

"God 'is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think' (Eph 3:20), yet the church here is surprised by God's ability." (Exalting, 175)

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This will be an encouragement to them in their personal prayer ministry. Telling others about God's answer to prayer can also serve as an evangelistic tool. When God heals, delivers, or provides, telling unbelievers will help them see the power of the God we serve.

Peter also tells the group to report back to James. James is the half-brother of Jesus and will at a later date be viewed as the leader of the Jerusalem church. There is a very practical reason for Peter to have to report to James and the elders. They are the day-to-day leaders of the church that is facing persecution. They need to know that the Apostle has been delivered from Herod's grasp. This will also need to plan accordingly and glorify the Lord for His actions. Moreover, Peter has others deliver the message because he going to act rationally and go to "another place." Luke does not tell us where he went, but he probably left town. Again, Peter acting rationally. He is not running away because he fears the authorities. He is honoring the work of God in his life. God saved him so he is going to do his part and stay alive. He does not stay out of Jerusalem forever; we see in Acts 15 that he is back in the city. He just heads out of town to let the storm die down. And there will be a storm.

The next morning, the Apostle cannot be found in the prison. As a result, we see a Hellish Reaction to God's Actions. Verse 18 tells us "there was a great commotion among the soldiers." Verse 19 tells us that Herod interrogated the men and had them killed. This hellish response was actually the law. If a prisoner escaped a Roman guard, the guard would be punished in the way the prisoner would have been punished. This proves that Herod had plans to kill Peter. It also shows us that the world will not always respond joyously to the works of God. When the works of those who seek to harm the Kingdom of God are disrupted, they will respond in negative ways. Peter and the Lord were not responsible for the death of the soldiers. Herod was responsible. We should be ready for negative reactions when God works to advance His Kingdom and disrupt the works of Satan.

**Summarize and Transition:** When Peter arrives at the home of John Mark's mother, the people are faithless in their response to Rhoda's report. Their faith is then bolstered by Peter's retelling of his deliverance. This account is not just one of God's miraculous work it is a story of prayer and spiritual growth. Let us remember to respond faithfully when God responds to our faithful prayers.

## CONCLUDE

Let us return for a moment to the instruction given by Peter to go and tell James about the event. Later James would write a letter that we have in our Bibles. In chapter 4 of that letter, James deals with prayer and the motives behind prayer. He makes an interesting statement. In 4:2c-3 he writes, "You do not have because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup>You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." We do not know how God would have acted in Peter's situation if the prayer group had not met. We do know that they asked, and they received. Dr. Hughes asks the probing question, "If we are not seeing similar power working among us, why not?" (Preaching, 170)

**Conclude** by asking the group to consider the things in their life that seem most dire and "unfixable." Encourage them to take those things to the Lord Jesus. In John 1:51 "Jesus said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of man'... He meant, 'I am the ladder. I control the highway between Heaven and earth.'" (Preaching, 170) Like Jacob and like Peter we should be aware that the Lord cares for our troubles and wants to act and desires for us to ask.

### Notes:

"The James who was to be informed of Peter's deliverance was James the oldest of Jesus' brothers, who from this point on assumed the leadership of the church in Jerusalem (cf. 15:13-21; 21:18)." (NAC 283)

"Luke evidently did not consider the place all that important and did not specify where it was. The point is simply that he had to go elsewhere to find safety from Agrippa. Later, after Herod's death, he was back in Jerusalem (15:7)." (NAC, 283)

**A Note on verse 15 “You’re out of your mind!” they told her. But she kept insisting that it was true, and they said, “It’s his angel.”**

“What a fascinating idea. Ancient Jews and many modern Christians believe that each person has a guardian angel, though that idea is hardly supported with the great weight in the pages of the New Testament. Some years after the New Testament was written, this concept developed into the view that these guardian angels also bore the image of the persons they protected and often appeared immediately after that person’s death. Although we certainly do not want to read postbiblical literature back into our interpretation of Acts, it is not difficult to see that notion among these early believers. Did they believe Peter had been delivered and now waited outside in the street? No. They *could* believe, however, he had died and gone to heaven and his look-alike angel stood there!” (HNTC, 196)

**A Story about a Peter-like Deliverance in our times**

In late 1964 Communist Simba rebels took over the town of Bunia in Zaire and began arresting and executing anyone they considered "enemies of the revolution." One of their victims was a pastor, Zebedayo Idu. The day following his arrest was to be a great political holiday, and as part of the celebration great crowds were gathered in front of the monument to Patrice Lumumba, the spiritual leader of the revolution. There were to be speeches by dignitaries from the provincial capital, Stanleyville, and a large number of prisoners were to be executed in front of the monument.

The prisoners were taken from their cells and herded onto a truck to be taken to the plaza, but for some mysterious reason, the engine refused to start. The prisoners were finally unloaded and compelled to push the truck to get it started. When they finally arrived in front of the angry police commissioner's office, the furious official wanted no further delay, so he lined the prisoners up and ordered them to count off—"one, two, one, two." The number twos were taken back to prison. The commissioner then ordered all of the number ones to march double-time to the monument, where they died a few minutes later. In their cells the twos could hear the sound of gunfire. They wondered why they had been spared and what the future held for them. Pastor Zebedayo shared with them his hope of Heaven and eternal life, and eight people found the Lord that day. Hardly had the pastor finished ministering the Word to them when a very excited messenger came panting to the door with an order. The pastor had been arrested by mistake. They were to release him at once.

Pastor Zebedayo bade farewell to the remaining prisoners and returned to his home next to the chapel, where he discovered that a crowd of believers had gathered in the house of God and were on their knees praying earnestly for his safety and release. Great was their rejoicing when the answer to their prayers walked into the building. The prayer service became a praise service for God's faithfulness. The God of Peter still lives! (Preaching, 169-170)