

The Book of Acts: The Spirit Moving

Paul's Journey to Jerusalem / Acts 11:27-12:25 / October 5, 2025

Introduction:

Good morning, church. Today's passage in Acts 11:27-12:25 marks a significant transition in the Book. Up until this point, the narrative has largely followed the ministry of the disciples and, most prominently, the Apostle Peter, which was happening in Judea and the surrounding countryside. After today, Luke will continue his story of the early church through the eyes of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles as the Gospel of Jesus Christ explodes into the ancient world. If you've read through Scripture, you know what kind of man the Apostle Paul is. He is a man who, though he has earthly reason to boast about himself, would rather humbly call himself the chief of sinners. He is a man who fearlessly spread the Gospel, building churches and making numerous disciples. He is a man who believed deeply in the unshakeable authority and sovereignty of God. But, we mustn't forget that he, too, was "just a man." Last week, we read that Paul was brought from Tarsus to the city of Antioch by the disciple Barnabus, and for an entire year Paul would teach along side him. It was a time of growing, teaching, and service to a local body of believers. But now, something is about to happen that will set things into motion for Paul.

Acts 11:27-30

27 Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). 29 So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. 30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Our narrative begins with prophets from Jerusalem warning about a coming famine sometime during the reign of Claudius. According to scholars, famines that happened in Judea during his reign would place our time period at 45-47AD, well over a decade since Christ's resurrection. And that's plenty of time for Christian communities like the one in Antioch to mature. Notice how the Gentile believers in Antioch respond—they send help, whatever they are able. No doubt Paul would be thinking of this moment when he began another collection of aid for the Church in Jerusalem later on. This is a significant moment for the Church because this is more than charity; it's unity. It's the church beginning to act as one body across ethnic and geographic lines. Then, take a look at this: the church sends Paul and Barnabus, the guys who had been teaching them for a year! These believers have grown so much in that time that they feel like they can get along just fine without them. They know that these two can do more good elsewhere, and so they are sent with the offering. But then, suddenly, the scene shifts. As I was meditating on today's passage, something caught my eye that puzzled me. Paul and Barnabus go down to Jerusalem with the offering, then we follow Peter around (who is in Jerusalem), and then we don't hear about Paul again until the end of chapter 12.

Acts 12:25

25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

So why doesn't Luke talk about anything that was going on with what Paul was doing? Why talk about Paul's first mission, just to not talk about Paul's first mission? Who's the main character in this story? At first glance, it looks like the spotlight is squarely on Peter. But if we zoom out a little, we see that what happens here actually casts a long shadow over the rest of Acts—especially on the ministry of Paul. Why? Because he was there in Jerusalem watching all of this unfold. In fact, he likely had a front row seat. Luke tells us he returned with John-Mark, that same John-Mark whose mother's house plays a prominent role in the narrative. I believe that Luke's point in all this serves 2 purposes: 1st, Peter's imprisonment and miraculous release prepared the ground for Paul's ministry by showing that God's mission cannot be stopped by kings, chains, or persecution. And 2nd, it reminds us that the unstoppable God we serve wants us to fearlessly share the good news.

Acts 12:1-5

James Killed and Peter Imprisoned

1 About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. 2 He killed James the brother of John with the sword, 3 and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. 5 So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

Herod, trying to curry favor with the Jewish leaders, kills James, the brother of John, with the sword. One of the three closest disciples to Jesus—gone. And then Peter, the leader of the apostles, is arrested, chained between soldiers, waiting for trial and likely execution. Now let's pause here. What does this mean for the early church? It means suffering isn't an accident—it's part of the story. And if Peter, the great apostle, isn't spared from chains, then Paul later knows not to expect an easy road either. Question for us: How do we respond when suffering touches our lives? Do we see it as a sign that God has abandoned us, or as a stage where His power can be displayed?

Acts 12:6-9

Peter Is Rescued

6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

The night before Peter is to stand trial, an angel appears, the chains fall off, the guards stay asleep, and Peter walks out into the street a free man. I love how the Angel wakes him up like an old friend, smacking him on his side. This familiarity enhances how easy it is for Peter to make his escape. Despite being locked away under guard and key, Peter's chains miraculously fall off of him, then the door of his cell

must've opened miraculously, and then even more miraculous events occur concerning the guards and the front gate:

Acts 12:10-11

10 When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

Peter, in a state of being half awake and shocked, thought that the Angel leading him to safety through a miraculous series of events was only a vision. Could you imagine being woken up like that in the middle of the night and finally realizing what had taken place? I would be absolutely bewildered. But look at how Peter reacts to the whole situation when he finally snaps out of it: he glorifies God as his rescuer. All the persecution and death that Herod wanted were rendered impossible and all at the command of the Lord. This serves as a powerful testimony of the deliverance that our powerful God can provide for His people.

Acts 12:12-17

12 When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. 13 And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" 16 But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

The humor in this story adds to the credibility of Luke's account. Rhoda's failure to open the gate for Peter, followed by her misunderstanding that it was literally Peter standing outside. It all adds to the suspense of the situation until our resolution happens: Peter shares what happened to him, recalling the supernatural working of God. Luke's emphasis on how the believers gathered, even in the middle of the night, in order to earnestly pray with one another, highlights how the early believers relied on God's power, and reminds us how we should too if we are going to see God working in our lives. Peter then tells them to inform James, the brother of Jesus, and the other disciples that he is unharmed and free, and goes on his way.

Acts 12:18-19

18 Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 19 And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

What's the lesson here? Kings can plot, guards can chain, doors can lock—but God's mission cannot be chained. Paul will later write from prison, "The word of God is not bound" (2 Timothy 2:9). Where do you

think he learned that? He learned it from being an eyewitness to the power of God, where, like Peter, meant being rescued by none other than God's hand. Paul carried this memory into his own chains in Philippi, in Caesarea, and in Rome. He knew that when the church prays and God moves, no prison is strong enough to hold back the gospel. But why didn't God rescue James? Do you think Paul asked that question? God's rescue of Peter and the death of James is a reminder to us that God can call us home at any moment, so do not be unready to meet your Creator. I'm certain that Paul would have taken that lesson with him into ministry as well. Before we move on, I can't skip over the Gospel connection here. And church, if you've come here today not sure of what your destiny would be in eternity, I know where salvation is found. Maybe you aren't sure if Christ can wash the guilt of your sin away, or you feel weighed down by something that you think is holding you back from trusting in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Remember that God broke Peter's chains; He can break ours, too. He can free us from our unrighteousness and rescue us from His just and holy wrath because that's who He is. God loves us so much that in order to save us from the wrath we deserve, He sent His Son, the exact imprint of His nature, to live the life of a mortal man, but perfect in every regard. Sin's curse was broken when Jesus Christ came, lived the perfect life we couldn't, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again to conquer death. The cross is where our chains are broken. That means forgiveness, it means freedom, and it means a new life in Christ, an eternity with Christ. So if you're here today and you've never trusted in Jesus, stop putting it off and turn to Christ today. Yes, it's humbling to ask for forgiveness, but that's the point: humility is essential to the Christian life because we bow to our King. To reject God as King over all is to put ourselves in His place and, we are warned, that doing so is treason and worthy of His wrath.

Acts 12:20-23

The Death of Herod

20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. 21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" 23 Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

The story takes a sharp turn. Herod, who thought he could silence the church, gives a speech after brokering a peace deal with multiple adversaries. The crowd shouts at Herod that he has "The voice of a god, not of a man," pumping up his ego. He must've agreed with them because he doesn't correct them at all, and what happens? He's struck down by an angel and eaten by worms. It's almost ironic—Herod thought he was in control, but God's the one writing the story. The proud ruler falls, the so-called weak church rises. Paul will stand before rulers too—Sergius Paulus, Gallio, Felix, Festus, Agrippa, even Caesar himself. And every time, Paul knows: Kings will rise and kings will fall, but God's kingdom always and relentlessly advances.

Acts 12:24-25

24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.

25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

Luke closes this section with a summary: “But the word of God increased and multiplied.” That’s the heartbeat of Acts. James is martyred, Peter is imprisoned, Herod dies in his pride—and yet the word of God multiplies. Through working in and through the lives of often times ordinary people like you and me, God’s mission was and is unstoppable. Despite opposition and intense persecution throughout the past 2,000 years, despite the Church fracturing and splitting, despite corruption, despite the evil in the world around us, the Gospel of Jesus Christ will go exactly where God wants it to go, and He invites all disciples to participate in the unstoppable mission of making disciples. That’s exactly the atmosphere Paul steps into in Acts 13, when he and Barnabas are sent out on the first missionary journey. Do you see the connection? Paul doesn’t go out in fear, wondering if he’s intentionally putting himself in danger. He doesn’t wonder if whether or not God will advance His Church. No, Paul goes out in confidence, knowing that if God can deliver Peter from chains and strike down kings, then no power on earth can stop the Kingdom of God. So what do we do with this today? We could probably take away a lot from this. We’re reminded that. Like the church in Antioch, we give generously because God’s mission is bigger than just our little circle. Like James, our time on earth is limited and fleeting so we must persevere in living our lives for the glory of God. Like Peter, we give thanks to God when He delivers us out of the hands of those who would do us harm. Like the believers praying in Mary’s house, one of the best things we can do is call on God when things look impossible. Like Paul, we go forward with humble confidence, knowing that no earthly authority can stop the word of God. Let me leave you with this thought: Peter’s release wasn’t just a miracle for Peter—it was a message for Paul. And by extension, it’s a message for us. What’s stopping you from living boldly for the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Yes, we live in a very scary and messed-up world right now, which is why we have to remember that God is greater still. With a God that great, what is there left to fear?