

# Acts 12: (Part 1): 1-19 • When believers gather to pray

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And we are in the Book of Acts, so open your Bible there if you would, please. Acts chapter 12. We're beginning the 12th chapter of Acts this morning as we make our way through the Bible. Sunday morning through the New Testament, Wednesday evening through the Old.

Here we are in the Book of Acts and in the 12th chapter. We're going to read together through the first 5 verses and then we're going to pray. I will get farther than that today, but that's as much as I want to read here to start off and set the stage for us if I could.

Follow along with me as I read Acts 12, beginning at verse 1, it says, *“About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. <sup>2</sup> He killed James the brother of John with the sword, <sup>3</sup> and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, (here's the part I want you to focus on this morning) but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” (ESV)*

Let's stop there and let's pray.

Father, as we dig into the Scriptures this morning, as we open our hearts to the message of this passage, we pray for Your Holy spirit to lead us. We ask you to speak to us as Brian prayed, Lord, we're in agreement.

You be the teacher here today, we are the students and we want to learn, and we want to grow, and we want to be nourished and equipped. And we believe those things come through Your Word as the Holy Spirit brings that Word to life.

And so we ask Lord that You would do just that and we ask it in the name of our Savior Jesus, amen. Amen. Amen.

Here's what's going on. You notice that it tells us in this passage that king Herod arrested James, put him to death, and then arrested Peter once he realized that the Jews were fairly thrilled with that. By the way, this is Herod Agrippa, the first.

You read a lot of people named Herod in the Bible. Frankly, they're not all the same person, not by a long shot, but they are related. This man is a grandson to Herod, the great. That's what he's known as. I don't think he was all that great actually. He was the one that demanded the murder of all the baby boys near Bethlehem at the time of Jesus's birth, or at least within the first few years of it. And so that's what he had to deal with before God.

Anyway, he was king of Judea, kind of. And the reason I say, kind of, is because he was put into that position by the Roman emperor who was Claudius Caesar at the time. And so he was a puppet king, but at the same time, he had enough authority to cause trouble, and he did.

He was fairly popular among the Jews because even though he was Idumean, which is a Greek form of saying he was an Edomite. His background was really of Edom, not of Jacob, but he did keep the law. At least he tried to keep the rigors of the law. He kept the festivals, the Jewish festivals.

And because of that, and really that alone, he was a popular king with the people, and he enjoyed that popularity, and he wanted to maintain that popularity. And that's one of the reasons why we read that he was doing what he was doing here.

You'll notice in verse 1, it says, *"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church."* We don't know who these people are. They were unnamed, but they were obviously living in or around Jerusalem at the time. And it says that Herod began to become violent with these people.

And then it says in verse 2 that, *"He killed James the brother of John with the sword."* Now this is James, one of the 12. This is one of the 12 men who was chosen by Jesus to follow Him during His earthly ministry.

He was not only considered one of the 12, James was considered one of the 3. Because you had the 12 disciples, and then you had the 3: Peter, James, and John, who were taken into places where the other disciples were not allowed to go.

They were taken to the Mount of Transfiguration when the other disciples were not allowed to do that, and to see that, and to hear what those 3 men saw and heard. And so he was a man who got to be on the inside track of a lot of pretty amazing things, and yet he's the one that Herod put to death.

And then we're told in verse 3 that, “...*when he* (and that means Herod) *saw that it pleased the Jews*, (he was a man who loved being liked by the Jews) *he proceeded to arrest Peter also*. (and then we're told that) *This* (happened) *was during the days of Unleavened Bread*.” And of course we know that's the 7 days following Passover so that's all part of the Passover celebration.

And it says in verse 4 that, “*when he had seized him, he put him in prison, ...* (and he guarded him with) *four squads of soldiers...*” And a squad of soldiers was 4 so this is four squads of four soldiers. You can tell that he doesn't want to let him go.

He doesn't want to see this guy escape or anything happen, so 16 soldiers are guarding this one man, right? And it says in the latter part of verse 4, that he intended to bring him out after Passover.

And the reason for that is because during Passover, it was decided that no trial could go on or no execution could take place during the entire Passover week, which of course included Passover, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and so forth. And so he intended to bring him out afterwards.

But then we were told at the end of verse 5, that “...*earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church*.” So the body of Christ came together and began to pour out their hearts before the Lord concerning Peter. And that's where we're going to pick it up here.

Look at verse 6, as we move on. It says, “*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*.” He's got a lot of people involved in this guarding of Peter.

And it says, “<sup>7</sup> *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.* <sup>8</sup> *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.”* <sup>9</sup> *And he went out and followed him.* (it tells us here that) *He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.*” Peter had already been a part of a few

visions and I imagine they seem very real at the time. And this seemed like it was just a vision, even though it seemed real.

But in verse 10 it says, *“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.”*<sup>11</sup> 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.”*

<sup>12</sup> *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.”*

Pause there with me please for just a moment. This is the home of John Mark, where this prayer service is going on. John Mark is the nephew of Barnabas, and he is also the author of the Gospel of Mark. And he was a man who later on became a very close attendant and assistant to Peter, interestingly enough. Which is why we believe that the Gospel according to Mark is essentially the memories of Peter concerning the life and ministry of Jesus.

And this is the home where this prayer meeting is going on. And we knew this, of course, because we took note of the fact that in verse 5, it said earnest prayer for Peter was being lifted up by the church at that time. And we assume that because Peter was asleep when the angel came into the cell, that this prayer meeting was probably going on all night.

I don't know how many of you have ever been part of an all-night prayer meeting. I have done it one time, just one time, and it was a long time ago. I was in my twenties and I actually arranged it. I was an assistant pastor on staff at a church in Montana and just decided it would be really cool if we did an all-night prayer time.

And we finally gave up, I think around 4 o'clock in the morning. I sent everybody home after, because it's really hard. It's hard being in prayer for a long time, and it was even a little weird because I'm sitting there praying and there's all these people and we are in our sanctuary at the time.

And we were praying and all of a sudden I'm praying in my head or in my brain and all of a sudden I realized I'm praying in my head weird words. I mean, I don't even know what I'm saying. And I realized I was like half falling asleep while I was praying so I went, okay, that's it, we're done. And I just sent

everybody home. But so you know, I learned my lesson through that circumstance. It was, it's a very difficult thing to do.

But the next portion of this passage is almost a little humorous because it says in verse 13 that when Peter *“knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda (who obviously wasn't the brightest bulb in the pack) came to answer. (she) <sup>14</sup> 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.”* She was so excited, she just ran back into the house and started telling everybody, Peter's out there.

And I want you to notice verse 15, would you? *“They said to her, “You are out of your mind.””* That's the response of people who were praying for Peter's deliverance. Does that..., get it?

They're praying for Peter to be delivered. And when they hear that he's at the gate, they say to Rhoda, you're crazy, you're crazy, which is really interesting.

I think if I were Rhoda, I would have probably said, well, then what exactly have you been praying for? But anyway, it raises the question here about prayer that I think needs to be raised.

And that is just simply this, when you're praying, do you pray with expectation? And that's an important question, I think. When you pray, do you pray with expectation? Do you pray expecting? I've always loved a statement that David made in the Psalms, and I like it particularly how it appears in the NIV. Let me put it on the screen. From Psalm 5, it says,

**Psalm 5:3 (NIV)**

*In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my request before you and wait expectantly.*

*In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my request before you and wait expectantly.*

It's always struck me when I read that passage, when David says that. *“I lay my request before you”* because, I don't think most of us, when, especially when we're going through trouble, we don't really have a hard time laying our requests before God. We're fairly motivated at times to do that, but waiting expectantly, maybe sometimes I think that's where we stop. I don't think we get there sometimes. And the reason, well, there's probably lots of reasons.

Maybe I'll just share a little time of true confessions here, because I remember there was a time in my own life where I knew that I stopped waiting expectantly. And the reason I stopped waiting expectantly when I prayed was because I'd gotten so turned off by the Hyper Faith movement the Word Faith movement.

Some of you know it by different names, but there's all these guys on the internet. It used to be on TV, maybe they're probably still on TV. But they would preach about faith to such a degree or in such a way that you just know in your spirit, something's wrong.

And I was actually exposed to the Hyper Faith camp back when I was fairly young in the Lord, and the church that Sue and I were attending at the time came from a little bit of that background, and we didn't really know about it.

All I knew is that there were, I felt like there were excesses that people were holding as it relates to the Word of God and what the Bible has to say on faith. And my reaction to the Word of Faith movement was to numb myself a little bit concerning the topic of faith altogether.

And I started discounting a lot of what the Bible had to say on the topic of faith again, because I was having a knee jerk reaction toward these abuses and these excesses that I saw. And I wasn't really strong enough in my understanding of scripture at the time to have anything really more than just a knee jerk reaction. I couldn't find the balance from God's Word. All I knew is that this doesn't sound right, that's all I knew.

And so my response was, just to just back off on the whole sort of a thing. But the problem is every time I started reading through the gospel accounts again, Jesus kept popping up with these statements about faith that really made me uncomfortable.

And I remember reading my Bible and reading some of the things Jesus said about faith and thinking to myself, why did you say that? That was not a really... Don't you realize that some of these yahoos on TV grabbed a hold of this statement and they ran with it to unbiblical ends? And I actually took issue with some of the things Jesus said. Things like Mark 11, let me show you this on the screen, Mark chapter 11.

**Mark 11:24 (ESV)**

*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

*Therefore (this is Jesus talking here, Therefore He says) I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

And I'm like, Jesus, why did you say that? That was dumb. Don't you know that people are exploiting this idea and they're just running off halfcocked and getting people in all kinds of a mess. And then Matthew 17 was another one, Jesus saying,

**Matthew 17:20 (ESV)**

*"...truly, I say to you, if you have faith, like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible to you."*

*"...truly, I say to you, if you have faith, like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible to you."*

I thought, boy, You obviously didn't think through that one. You see, that was the problem. I kept running into these passages that the Hyper Faith guys were quoting, and it created a crisis of faith for me personally that went on for years.

Really, it went on for years because I knew that the Hyper Faith conclusions were wrong, but I didn't know how to apply what Jesus said. You see, I couldn't find the balance. I couldn't find the balance between what Jesus said and what these yahoos were saying.

Anyway. Over a period of time, I eventually made some important discoveries in the Word of God, and it came slowly, little by little. And mostly as I started teaching through the Bible. I've been teaching chapter by chapter and verse by verse through the Bible for the better part of 40 years, and I started running across other scriptures that started tipping me in the area of balance, and one of them was in a very unlikely place. It was in the Old Testament Book of Lamentations of all places.

You know what Lamentations is? I mean, it was, it comes right after the Book of Jeremiah and it's basically Jeremiah's cry of mourning and grief when he saw Jerusalem destroyed and the people of Judea taken captive into exile into Babylon. What a strange place. But as I'm going through Lamentations, let me show you what I found. Lamentations 3:37,

**Lamentations 3:37 (NIV84)**

*Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?*

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See that's the opposite of what the word faith guys were teaching. The word faith teachers were telling people that if you speak, you can make it happen. You have the ability, you have the creative ability. In other words, God has given you and me creative ability through our word, just as He creates through His Word.

They like to do that. They like to like, and your word and God's Word, and yes, God did create by speaking, let there be light, boom, there was light, so on and so on. And they refer to that and they say, God's given you the same ability. You can speak in it. You can speak it into reality.

And then I come across Lamentations and it says, who can do that if God has not decreed it. In other words, if it's not God's will, if it's not God's Word, right, to speak. Then I also discovered something else along the way. I discovered that when you're praying, and when you're believing, and when you're putting your faith in God, I discovered that you can't erase the sovereignty of God from the equation.

That one took a while to come for me to hit the old gray matter there, but it happened when I read about that time of suffering that Jesus was enduring in the garden of Gethsemane for those, however many hours before His arrest. And something that he said there that just impacted me powerfully up on the screen, it's from Matthew 26, and it says,

**Matthew 26:39 (ESV)**

*...going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."*

*...going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."*

And when I read that verse, when I read that passage, I thought to myself, there it is. That's it. That's the balance I've been looking for. That's what I needed to know.



I could see that God wanted me to pray with faith, but I could also see that He had given me an example of humility, humbling myself before God in prayer in such a way as to submit myself ultimately to His will. Regardless of what I'm praying for to submit to his will. And the reminder to be humble was only even punctuated and underscored when I got around to Isaiah chapter 55 and I read this, on the screen. God speaking here saying,

**Isaiah 55:8-9 (ESV)**

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

And I thought, wow, so God's thoughts are so much farther above my own. But if Jesus, the Son of God gave me an example of submitting my will and my prayers to the ultimate sovereign will of my Father in heaven, then I could do no less.

I realized He wanted me to trust Him and have faith, but He wanted me to trust Him, even if I didn't know what He was going to do. And He taught me that's where real faith actually lies. It's not in having a goal and saying, I want this and I believe I'm going to get it.

It's having a..., sure you can have your goals and have your prayer requests, but it's laying those requests before God and saying, you know what, Lord, I trust You. I trust You. I'm going to hope in You. No matter what I found out that's real faith. I found out that real faith is trusting God when you don't know.

We're in the middle of verse 15, if you want to keep reading with me there, it says, *"But she kept insisting that it was so, (this is Rhoda) and they kept saying, "It is his angel!"* I don't know where they got that conclusion.

Anyway, again, if I was Rhoda, I'd have said angels don't need to knock. All right. They just come in, right? Yeah. Anyway. All right.

*"<sup>16</sup> But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. <sup>17</sup> 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.""*

Okay. Now, wait a minute. I thought we just saw that James was killed. Well, yeah. That's true. This is a different James already. This is James, the half-brother of Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary whom Jesus appeared to personally after His resurrection and who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. This is that James.

And so it says here at the end of verse 17, *“Then he departed and went to another place.”*<sup>18</sup> *Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.”*

Can you imagine the guys who were chained next to him? Can you imagine those guys? He was chained to some guys and can you imagine when, they all kind of wake up from this obvious God inspired stupor that He put them in. And they all and they shake the dust out of their eyes and they look and Peter's gone and the chains are just lying there and the door is still locked.

And the other sentries are still posted outside that door, and there are 16 of them, and Peter is nowhere to be found. Can you imagine what that was like for these guys? I mean, talk about a moment of panic. It's just incredible. And so to say there was no little disturbance is a bit of an understatement.

*“And after (verse 19) Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death.”* Because you see under Roman law, that was the rule. When you're guarding a prisoner who is condemned to die and you lose him, you have to pay his price. That was just the way it was. Boom.

And then it says simply that, *“...he (and that refers to Herod) went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.”* And I love, this is a great story, isn't it? I mean, this is one of those stories we don't mind reading. It's fun to read. It's fun to go through. And you love hearing about God's miraculous deliverance of Peter.

But then we remember that Peter was delivered and James wasn't, and that takes a little bit of the fun out of it. We look through the text to see if there's some sort of an answer to this, and the only thing that we can find in the text is that in the case of Peter, the church was earnestly praying. That's really the only difference. There isn't any mention after James's arrest of whether or not the church was praying.

And we're left to wonder if that was the key element to Peter being delivered in this particular way. And I'm willing to bet that some of you would probably

answer that question by saying, well, yeah, I think so. I think that is the key difference. No question about it. And then I'm also willing to bet that some of you aren't as sure about that conclusion necessarily.

There are some people who think very deeply about prayer. And I know that because sometimes they'll write to me or talk to me about their questions related to prayer. And I realized as soon as they asked their question, wow, you're a deep thinker. You haven't just taken this thing at face value. You really pondered this issue.

And some of them, some of the questions that I've gotten over the years have really challenged me to think through prayer. In fact, in my book and in my on my blog, there are a couple of questions that appear there related to prayer. Let me show you the first one. This one came a number of years ago and it said,

In light of God's sovereignty, does it really make a difference for us to spend time in prayer?
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In light of God's sovereignty, does it really make a difference for us to spend time in prayer?

And, when I read that, I remember the first time I thought to myself that's a good, that's a good question. It comes from a deep reflection on the sovereignty of God. And if you've ever really just sat and pondered the sovereignty of God, sovereignty means there's no one above Him.

Nobody can tell Him what to do. He is completely and ultimately and utterly in charge. And so when you ponder that sovereignty in a way that begins to really enlarge its meaning in your heart and understanding, you start thinking about things like prayer and natural questions come up like, well, does prayer even matter when you're dealing with a sovereign God, does prayer even matter?

And then somewhat related to that question is another one that came up and that is,

In light of God's sovereignty, does it really make a difference for us to spend time in prayer?
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How is it possible that our prayers can influence God?
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How is it possible that our prayers can influence God?

And this question arises from someone who has most likely received a revelation of the grandeur and the majesty of God. In other words, His bigness. This is really very similar to David's statement when he said, Lord, when I consider the heavens, the work of your hands, what is man that you're even mindful of him, the son of man, that you even care about him? (Psalm 8:3-4)

And what David was doing is that he thought just a little bit about how God is almighty, and powerful, and immense, and infinite. And he came to this idea. How is it possible that You're even pondering my life in any way? Why do You even care? And how in the world could my prayers make any difference in the grand scheme of things. That's where that question comes from.

Yeah. Aren't you glad you don't think that deeply? I don't know. Maybe you do, those might keep you up at night though, sort of a thing. Well, that I tell people from time to time that if you ponder some of those questions too long, you'll get a brain cramp. And you will, I'll guarantee it.

But at the end of the day, all we know is really 3 things about prayer: We know that God's Word exhorts us to pray. We know that God promises to hear us, and we know that prayer makes a difference

Because we see in the Word, that it makes a difference. And so we have to be careful not to let our deep ponderings about these questions remove the basic essence of what we know to be true.

That's one thing Pastor Chuck Smith used to say to us at pastors conferences and things like that. He would say, you're going to run into things in the Bible for which you don't have an answer. And when you do, when you come up upon something that you don't know, fall back on what you do know.

And so, what we do know is God says, pray. I will hear you.

Prayer makes a difference, amen.