

"Acts of the Apostles: Acts 12: Lesson 20" by Faber McMullen, Union Grove Baptist Church ©2018

"Does Prayer Work: Understanding the Sovereignty of God"



You will remember that last week we were looking at the positive effects that came in the wake of the stoning of Stephen. We looked at how the ordinary Christ-Followers scattered and they did extraordinary things in the spreading of the gospel as far as Antioch (Turkey), where they established a great and mighty church. It was there that they were first called Christians. God indeed uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things in the Kingdom.

The time line of what we read today isn't exactly clear, but historians put it around 43 AD. Let me read Chapter 12 and I'll comment after I've read the chapter on the portions that I have put in bold faced type. Please open your Bibles and start with me at Acts Chapter 12 verse 1. As we read this passage try to figure out why God put it in the Bible and what you can learn from it; applying it to your life.

**12** Now about that time **Herod the king** stretched out his hand to **harass** some from the church. <sup>2</sup> Then he **killed James the brother of John** with the sword. <sup>3</sup> And because he saw that it **pleased the Jews**, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the **Days of Unleavened Bread**. <sup>4</sup> So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to **bring him before the people after Passover**. <sup>5</sup> Peter was therefore kept in prison, **but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church**. <sup>6</sup> And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. <sup>7</sup> Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and **he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!"** And his chains fell off his hands. <sup>8</sup> Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." <sup>9</sup> So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup> When they were past the

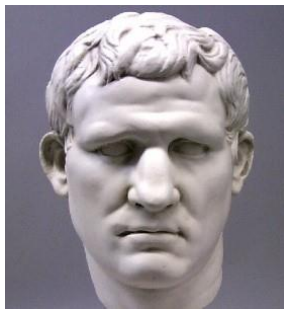
first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, **which opened to them of its own accord**; and they went out and went down one street, and **immediately the angel departed from him**.

<sup>11</sup> And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “**Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.**”

<sup>12</sup> So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. <sup>13</sup> And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named **Rhoda came to answer**. <sup>14</sup> When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. <sup>15</sup> **But they said to her, “You are beside yourself!”** Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, “It is his angel.”

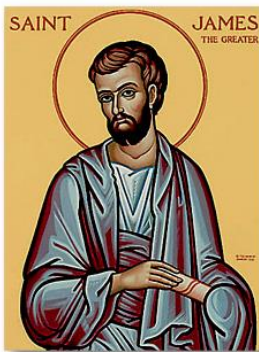
<sup>16</sup> Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, **they were astonished**. <sup>17</sup> But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, **he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison**. And he said, “**Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.**” And he departed and went to another place.

(Acts 12:1-17, NKJV).



**Verses 1-4:** These verses are an introduction to the characters in the account. After Saul had Stephen killed, persecution of the church sort of disappeared for a while. The "Herod" introduced here is Herod Agrippa I. Herod was a family name. This family were not really Jewish in their origins, but they were nominally Jewish in their religion. In the Bible we first heard the name Herod as the King who heard about a king being born in Israel and he ordered all of the Jewish male babies two and younger to be killed. That Herod was Herod the Great.

Herod the Great had a son named Antipas and he is the Herod before whom Salome danced and pleased him. As a reward he offered her up to half of his kingdom, and she maliciously asked for the head of John the Baptist, whom he had killed. Antipas had a son who is the Herod



Agrippa I in this story. He is the one who is having James killed in this story and he had Peter arrested. He had been raised in Rome with the Emperor Claudius and his political career had always ridden on the back of Claudius.

He was trying to figure out how to do something that would make him popular with his people so he arranged for the death of James. For clarification, there are three men named James who are named in the New Testament. This is the one that was the brother of the Disciple John who wrote the gospel as well as the Book of Revelation. Jesus called these two brothers James and John the Sons of Zebedee (meaning Thunder). The other two Jameses mentioned in the New Testament are James Son of Alphaeus and James the actual brother of Jesus who later would become the pastor of the church in Jerusalem.



Jesus called on this Disciple James to be with him on special occasions. You see him along with two others, Peter and John. These three were with Jesus when He healed the daughter of Jairus. These same three were with Jesus on the Mount of transfiguration where they got to see Elijah and all the other things they saw. It was these same three that were with Jesus in Gethsemane the night before the crucifixion. And here in Acts 12

we see James the Disciple, arrested and decapitated.

James was the first apostle to die a martyr's death. As the first, it's sort of a shock. It makes us wonder why Jesus would allow this to happen. This was the same James and John who had put their mother up to putting them to be first in the kingdom. She said she wanted Jesus to have them sit on his right and His left when He would come into glory. Jesus granted it, but they didn't realize He was talking about the cup of suffering that they would share with Him.

James drank from that cup as he lost his earthly life. Herod cut off his head. This business about suffering is bothersome. It makes us wonder why Jesus allows this to happen. We are quick to claim the promises of God, but we have a way of skirting the ones that have to do with unpleasant things. Jesus told us. *"<sup>33</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33, NKJV).



This promise of tribulation should remind us of what many of the believers of Jesus in the world will experience. We all remember the pictures we saw a few years ago of Christians being marched out onto the beach by ISIS, only to have their heads cut off. But, Jesus tells us that even when we go through such persecution, we can be of good cheer. If you don't want to be persecuted, just blend in with the world.

Paul told Timothy, *"<sup>12</sup> Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."* (2 Timothy 3:12, NKJV).

When you live a godly life in Christ Jesus you'll look different from the world. Well Peter looked different, so Herod had him arrested as well during the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These were the seven days that followed Passover.



**Verse 5:** But look at the response of the church. Did they protest? Did they draw swords? No. They fought the best way they knew how. They prayed **EARNESTLY** and **CONSTANTLY**. The text tells us that earnest prayer was made for him by the church. I've been thinking a lot about prayer lately. In fact, I've been praying a lot lately. I wake up praying for people in this congregation for all

sorts of things. I'm amazed at the things that God puts into my mind for each of you. I think it's important to realize that we don't pray because it is ALL we can do. We pray because it is the BEST thing that we can do. Prayer is the first and most effective line of attack in spiritual warfare.

So, why don't we pray? I think that if we had any idea of the true power that's available to us in prayer we would pray continually. I'm actually sort of embarrassed by some of my prayers. I've learned to get very real with God. I even tell God when I'm thinking about sinning. I share my weaknesses with Him. I think there is great power in being honest before God. Sometimes, I've even told God that it's his reputation at stake and not mine about certain things that I'm praying about. I say, "God, you see this injustice going on; and, why aren't you doing anything about it?"

I think that in the end of our prayers, we need to admit that God is sovereign. When I read this passage I can't help but wonder why He saved Peter but allowed James to be killed. As I've often told you all, start with the presumption that God is good. Scripture tells us that God delights to show mercy. He longs for us to come to Him and pour out our hearts. <sup>18</sup> *Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy. (Micah 7:18, NKJV).*

**Verse 6-10:** This next event that we're reading about happened during the 7 days following the Passover. Peter was in prison with 4 squads of 4 soldiers. So there were 16 soldiers guarding him. Peter was chained between two soldiers. So the account takes up on the eve of his trial before Herod and the church got together and began praying DESPERATELY. This means they had a prayer vigil. They were praying around the clock. This means they were praying with such fervor that it never stopped. So let's take a minute, and let me ask you today. How is your praying? Do you pray fervently? Do you pray unceasingly? Sometimes God will lay on your heart to pray about something, and I will tell you "DO IT!" You never know what is going on in the spiritual realm.

So here we see the church praying, and what is Peter doing? The text tells us that Peter was fast asleep. I've notice that in scripture Peter slept a lot. Peter had reached the point where he had absolutely committed his life to the Lord. He was abandoned to the will of God. He lay there realizing that there was nothing he could do about it, and he was committed to do or to undergo whatever God had for him. He had absolutely surrendered to the will of God in his life.

The angel woke Peter up and it told him to get dressed and tie his shoes. So Peter saw his shackles released and he began to follow the angel outside. Peter thought that it was all a vision. We've seen Peter have several visions so this isn't that unusual to him. Remember Peter's vision on the housetop of Simon the Tanner. The text tells us that they passed several guards and then an iron gate opened by itself and Peter found himself out on the street alone. I think it reminds us that God goes with us just as far as is necessary and then we are sent on our way on our own.

**Verses 11-18:** We have the humorous account of Peter going to John Mark's mother's house where a servant girl named Rhoda showed up at the door. When she heard Peter she was so

shocked that she just left him at the door and ran to tell the folks inside praying that Peter was outside. Their reaction is very interesting.

Instead of immediately praising the Lord that prayers had been answered, they disparaged Rhoda and told her that she was just overcome with emotion. Why are we so reluctant to recognize the hand of God and praise Him when we see prayers answered? I think it's because we must believe that He really doesn't hear us. I want to say a couple of things about prayer.

The people did not believe Rhoda at first--however, they did not just leave Peter standing in the street, but went to investigate. Sometimes when our prayer is answered, we do not recognize it at first. But when we examine it with faith, we see the truth of the matter.

**1 Pray without ceasing.** *"<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NKJV).*

**2 Pray expectantly.** *"<sup>14</sup> Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." (1 John 5:14, NKJV).*

**3 Pray acceptingly.** *"<sup>13</sup> Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; <sup>14</sup> whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. <sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." (James 4:13-15, NKJV).*

Couldn't the Lord have delivered James? Why did God let James die, but he brought Peter out of prison? I think the only answer is that God is sovereign. We are placed here to accomplish certain things for his glory. Learn to enter into a precious conversation with Him. Pray without ceasing and learn to pray expectantly. God always gives an answer even if the answer is to wait. Then pray, knowing that He is good, He is merciful, and most of all, He is sovereign in your life.

This only happens if you are in a right relationship with Him. That is accomplished by receiving the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life from Him. You can say today, "Yes Lord, I receive you. Yes Lord, I need you. Yes Lord, I dedicate my life to you and ask you to do a marvelous work in me." He will answer that prayer.

Let us pray.

Union Grove is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at uniongrove362@gmail.com or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Fryday - Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.