

# Ministry of Grace Church

## The Acts of The Apostles Chapter 12

### Preface:

Last week we learned about the church at Antioch. It was formed by the scattering of the church from Jerusalem that resulted from the execution of Stephen and the following persecution. Initially, the fleeing church members were witnessing only to Jews. However, some of them, people from Cyrene and Cyprus, were witnessing to the Greek speaking Gentiles and God richly blessed their efforts.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard about the conversion of Gentiles in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to verify the reports they had been hearing. Upon seeing the large number of new believers, he went to Tarsus and brought Saul to Antioch to teach the new church. About this time, prophets told them that there was a famine coming that would affect the church in Jerusalem, so the church unanimously agreed to send money to the church in Jerusalem.

### James Killed and Peter Imprisoned

#### **Acts 12:1-5**

**<sup>1</sup>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, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.**

### Notes:

Herod the king. This was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great who had ordered that all boys in Bethlehem 2 years old and younger were to be murdered so that the prophesied King of the Jews could not be born. Herod Agrippa I was also the nephew of Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist beheaded. This family was descended from Esau (the Edomites), so the Jews resented having them rule over God's chosen people.

This Herod, however, wanted to please the Jews so that there would be no uprising in Judea. And, because he knew that the Church was a thorn in the side to the Jews, he was willing to join in with the persecution of Christians. He had the apostle James killed with a sword. He and his brother John had been referred to as "the Sons of Thunder" by Jesus. Herod's execution of the Apostle James pleased the Jews so much that he decided to do the same to Peter.

Unfortunately, Herod did not consider the timing of Peter's arrest. He arrested Peter during the Days of Unleavened Bread, which are the seven days after the Passover Lamb was slain. Executing anyone during this festival would have been a great affront to the Jews. So, instead of

executing Peter right away, Herod imprisoned him until after the festival was over. However, Herod was aware that Peter had previously been imprisoned and was able to escape without any visible evidence of how he had done it.

Wanting to avoid the embarrassment that the Sanhedrin had endured when Peter and the other apostles escaped the first time ([Acts 5:17-21](#)), Herod had Peter securely guarded 24 hours a day. He was handcuffed to two separate soldiers, one on his right and one on his left, with two other soldiers standing guard to ensure that Peter couldn't escape. After 6 hours, when the next squad of soldiers arrived, Peter was then handcuffed to two of them while the other two stood guard. Thus, for each of the four watches, Peter was securely guarded.

Unfortunately for Herod, and for the four soldiers who guarded Peter at night, our God did not want Peter to remain imprisoned. There is no such thing as "securely guarded" when the prisoner is one of God's children. Because, what Herod didn't know was that the church was praying for Peter. In fact, the text tells us, "[earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.](#)" The word translated "[earnest](#)" also has the meaning of "continually." It appears that Herod's attempt to securely bind Peter was met with continual fervent effective prayer from the church. As James tells us:

[Confess your faults to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous one avails much. \(James 5:16\) \[MKJV\]](#)

How much more so, the fervent prayers of an entire church of people who have the righteousness of Christ.

## **Peter Is Rescued**

### **Acts 12:6-11**

**<sup>6</sup>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. <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. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup>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."**

### **Notes:**

Don't you just love how God works sometimes? He could have had an angel release Peter at any point during the time he was incarcerated, but he waited until the night before Herod was going to make a spectacle out of him. This makes for a dramatic disappointment for Herod, but what about Peter? I'm sure he would rather have had the angel release him on the first night. Instead, Peter had to endure a number of sleepless nights before being released. Wait, what?! Apparently, Peter did not have any sleepless nights. Let's look at the facts.

We don't know for sure how many nights Peter slept with both his wrists shackled to the guards on either side of him, but one night of that would be more than enough to cause lack-of-sleep syndrome for almost anyone. And consider this, Herod intentionally waited until the Days of Unleavened Bread were over before bringing him out. Certainly, everyone knew that Herod would make a spectacle out of Peter as soon as he could. So, even if Peter had slept fairly well during the early part of his imprisonment, he surely knew that the following day Herod was going to bring him out and have him executed. That would make for a sleepless night for almost anyone – but not Peter.

Have you ever been sound asleep when someone suddenly turned on the light in the room? What happens? You wake up, right? And, you probably have a few choice words to say to the person who switched on the lights. Notice what happened when the angel came into the prison.

**And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell**

I doubt that there was a night-light in the cell where Peter was shackled to the two guards. No – it was pitch black in there. There was no moonlight or even starlight - Just darkness! It was inside a prison! Then – suddenly! There was the light of the glory of one of God's angels! Remember how startled the shepherds were when the angle appeared to them on the night that Jesus was born?

Now, why do I say that Peter didn't have a sleepless night that night? Notice what happened next,

**He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly."**

Peter was still asleep even after the light had been turned on, and the angel had to hit him to wake him up! He was probably in the middle of a dream where he was in the Paradise of God, eating from the tree of life, enjoying the fellowship of his Lord when – all of a sudden, he was being awakened and there was bright light all around him. It may have taken a few seconds for Peter to get his bearing, but hearing the voice of the angel, he suddenly realized that both of his hands were free and he was able to get up.

Getting dressed, Peter followed the angel, not knowing yet if this was reality, or just a dream. Remember that he had been shackled to two soldiers and the other two were standing guard? Well, as Peter and the angel passed these two sentries, who had apparently fallen asleep, he came face to face with the iron gate of the prison. As they approached it, the gate opened by itself. The Greek word is, *automatos*, meaning "automatically," just like your garage door when you press the button on the remote.

Then, as they were walking down the street – the angel just disappeared! And what happened next?

**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.**

Does anyone have a guess as to how fast Peter's heart was beating just then?

Very quickly, let me give you another reason why Peter was not afraid that Herod would have him killed. Do you remember after the resurrection, Peter announced to the other disciples that he was going fishing? While they were fishing, Jesus appeared on the land and they went and

had breakfast with him. It was there that Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved the Lord more than the fish. Peter's response was,

“Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:17)

Right after that, Jesus told this to Peter:

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (John 21:18)

Did you catch that? Jesus just told Peter that he was going to die as an old man. Peter knew, in spite of the fact that he was in Herod's prison and Herod had planned on killing him the next day, that it wasn't his time to go yet. Peter knew that God would rescue him! Not only that – Peter knew that the Jerusalem church was a praying church and he knew they were praying for him.

## **Peter Presents Himself to the Church**

### **Acts 12:12-19**

<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. <sup>13</sup>And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. <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. <sup>15</sup>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!” <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.” 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. <sup>19</sup>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.

### **Notes:**

Peter knew the church in Jerusalem. He knew they would be praying for him. Apparently, his first thought was to reveal himself to them so that they would know their prayers had been answered. Notice here that we have a praying church, not just a church with a few prayer warriors in it. This all occurred either very late at night or very early in the morning, but the church was still praying for Peter.

He also knew where the prayer meeting was being held. Of course, it would be at Mary's house, where else would it be? Apparently, this was one of the regular meeting places for the church, so Peter went there. Many houses at that time were built around a central courtyard with a wall and a gate at the far end. A servant girl named Rhoda came to the gate when she heard Peter knocking. The Greek name Rhoda means “Rose,” a rose by any other name would smell as sweet (at least Shakespeare thought so.)

She immediately recognized Peter's voice and ran inside to tell the others that Peter was at the gate. The response from the prayer meeting attendees surprised me a little. They said, "You're out of your mind!" Hadn't they just been praying for Peter. Surely, they prayed that God would release him from the prison. So, why didn't they believe it? And, when Rhoda kept insisting, no, it really is Peter, they said that it must be his angel. Does that sound as strange to you as it did to me the first time I read it? His angel?

The Jews believed in the idea of guardian angels, and it seems that some among them may have believed that one's guardian angel bore some kind of resemblance to the human it was assigned to. Some people believe that is what Jesus was teaching in Matthew 18 when He said,

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 18:10)

However, because of Peter's incessant knocking, they finally opened the door for him. When they saw him, they were "amazed!" Does that sound like Christians who had been praying all night?

Apparently, their amazement showed in their reaction. And - apparently everyone was speaking to Peter, probably asking him numerous questions all at once. Motioning to them to calm down, Peter then explained to them what had happened and told them to relay the information to James and the others. Then he left! That's the last we hear about Peter in the book of Acts.

Meanwhile, back at the prison ... When Herod couldn't find Peter anywhere, he ordered that the soldiers should be put to death. There was a law in Rome at that time that if a prisoner escaped, the one or ones guarding him should receive his punishment.

## **The Death of Herod**

### **Acts 12:20-25**

<sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. <sup>22</sup>And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>But the word of God increased and multiplied. <sup>25</sup>And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

### **Notes:**

Historical evidence suggests that Herod Agrippa I was frequently angry. Apparently, the port cities of Tyre and Sidon had offended Herod somehow and he became angry with them. The word translated "angry" in verse 20 is *thumomacheō*, which means, "to be greatly offended" or "to be enraged against someone." He apparently wasn't just slightly irked, he was furious. We don't know what it was that made him angry at these two cities, but the fact that the Apostle Peter had just escaped from his prison while under intense security, certainly didn't sooth his savage anger.

However, the two cities of Tyre and Sidon knew how important Herod was for their own livelihood, so they went through the diplomatic channels and arranged for a conclave with the king. Historians tell us that he appeared before them wearing a coat made with silver which glistened in the morning sun and put his audience in awe. We are never told what his speech was about, although it was probably about himself, his greatness, his mercy, and his power. Whatever it was about didn't really matter, though. The people of Tyre and Sidon were only interested in making him feel good and they did so by shouting that he spoke like a god. But, because he freely received the accolades of the crowd, an angel of the Lord struck him with such a supreme pain in his gut that he was carried out and lay in his castle for five days before succumbing to death.

As a result, we see an example of how God feels about anyone or anything receiving worship as a god. There are numerous places in the Old Testament where God told the Israelites that He is a jealous God. For instance, here's what it says in Exodus,

for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God (Exodus 34:14)

And, here's what the Prophet Nahum said:

The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. (Nahum 1:2)

It's not good to make God angry, and He became angry at Herod for receiving worship as a god. Luke then gives us another status update of the church,

But the word of God increased and multiplied.

And, Luke tells us that as soon as Barnabas and Saul completed their service (bringing the money donated by the Antioch church for famine relief of the Jerusalem church) they headed back to Antioch and took John Mark (Barnabas' cousin) with them.

## **So What?**

One thing that we learn from this chapter is that the Jerusalem Church was a praying church. Apparently, they started praying for Peter as soon as they heard that he had been taken captive by Herod, the same Herod who had just killed James, the son of Zebedee. We don't know exactly how long Peter was imprisoned, but the text makes it sound like it was close to a week. And – the church was still praying for Peter the night before he was to be brought forth to be killed. I envy that kind of dedication to prayer. In fact, the text tells us that “**continual prayer for him was made to God by the church.**”

The church was so focused on praying for Peter that they didn't just pray once and then forget it. Likewise, we are told in **1 Thessalonians 5:17** to “**pray without ceasing.**” The word translated “**without ceasing**” does not mean “without interruption.” It means “to pray in an unceasing manner” It means “to be constantly aware of and in fellowship with God.”

Prayer is evidence of our awareness of who and what God is. It is conscious communication with the Creator, our Savior, our Master, our Heavenly Father. In our men's fellowship group, we have been going through a little book entitled, “The Practice of the Presence of God.” The

author, a monk from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, shares how he developed the habit of being aware of God's presence 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. That's praying without ceasing.

However, we need to be constantly on the alert that our prayers don't become a mechanical ritual that we go through simply because we're supposed to. Mechanical prayers become non-prayers because God doesn't listen to our words, He listens to our thoughts, the thoughts that come from our heart. The Psalmist said,

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! (Psalms 139:23)

And – shortly before his death, King David gave instruction to his son Solomon on building the temple. He started off his instructions with:

And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, **for the LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought.** If you seek him, he will be found by you ... (1 Chronicles 28:9)

Prayer is the life blood of our Christian existence. Without prayer, we're isolated and alone. Even though we know that God is still in control of our lives, without prayer and continual reading and studying of God's Word we're just "winging it." Our earthly life is supposed to be a Journey with God. He doesn't want us just winging it. He wants to lead us through life. That means we have to follow, which is one reason why Christians are called "followers of Christ."

Do you remember the story of Mary and Martha?

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

Martha was serving the Lord with all her heart, but Mary was more interested in being in the presence of the Lord. A number of years ago as I was studying the life of Abraham, I came across **Genesis 17:1** which says,

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless,

The word translated "before" is the Hebrew word for "face." So, we could translate the end of this verse as, "walk with respect to my face, and be blameless," or even, "walk facing me, and be blameless." There are a number of reasons why I like this last translation better. If we are walking through life facing God, we will be focused on Him and not on ourselves. If we are walking through life facing God, we will never stray because we will always be moving toward Him. If we are walking through life facing God, it is easy to talk to Him and we will always know where He wants us to go. If we are walking through life facing God, we will be praying without ceasing.

Meanwhile, back to the praying church in Jerusalem. The church was praying for Peter. They knew that God could release him. I'm fairly certain that they were praying that God *would* release him. And yet – they didn't believe it when Rhoda told them that Peter was at the gate. The Jerusalem

church was a praying church. They believed that God could, and they *hoped* that He would do as they petitioned him.

## **Now What?**

Where is your prayer life? Do you believe that God is Almighty, that He is able to do absolutely anything? Do you remember what James said?

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous one avails much. (James 5:16b) [MKJV]

“Yes,” you may say, “I believe that God is Almighty and I believe that the prayer of a righteous person is effective. But I’m far from righteous.” Oh, but you’re wrong, my friend. In God’s record book every true Christian has the righteousness of Christ.

So – let’s quit winging it. Let’s commit to living our lives facing God, knowing that we are always in His presence. Let’s spend more time in prayer and give Him praise every time He answers.

**Let’s pray.**

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