

## The Power of a Praying Church

Acts 12:1-30

Let me start by asking you a question:

*“Have you ever experienced a ‘wall’ in life?”*

Have you ever been faced with a problem that you just knew was impossible to solve? It made you feel completely overwhelmed - like this was it - there is no way out?

For example

- has a doctor ever shared the results of medical tests that confirmed the presence of cancer or some other grave illness - and the prognosis he gave was guarded at best? As you walked out of his office you felt a wave of despair asking yourself, is this the end.”
- Or, perhaps you have felt your marriage has reached a dead end. The intimacy is gone and the fights and tension is so bad you just know it will not last.
- Maybe your “dead end experience” concerns your finances. The bills keep growing and growing and you think there’s no way out.
- Or, maybe it’s parenting that has made you feel this way. You used to have a great relationship with your son or daughter, but when they hit adolescence, things changed. Now, all you do is fight and from your perspective, your relationship has gone down the toilet.
- Perhaps you feel this way about work - your boss and/or co-workers make your days miserable. It’s so bad it even affects your life outside of work. And you just don’t see how it could ever get better. It’s a dead end that you can’t avoid.

Well if any of the above situations describe your life now, or in the past - if you have faced or are now facing a hopeless, impossible situation, then be sure to listen this morning. Because this next section of Acts records a time in the life of the church when Christians in Jerusalem faced a seemingly impossible situation - a state of affairs that looked hopeless. And the way they dealt with this seemingly unstoppable nightmare highlights a truth we need to hear – a truth that will help us face the inevitable “dead ends” of life.

We are up to chapter 12 as we go through our series called Acts - the church on a mission. Take your Bibles and turn with me now to Acts 12. We’ll be reading verses 1-19.

**12** *It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup>He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. <sup>3</sup>When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup>After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.*

*<sup>5</sup>So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

*<sup>6</sup>The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. <sup>7</sup>Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.*

*<sup>8</sup>Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. <sup>9</sup>Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup>They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.*

*<sup>11</sup>Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.”*

*<sup>12</sup>When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. <sup>13</sup>Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup>When she*

*recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"*

*<sup>15</sup>"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."*

*<sup>16</sup>But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup>Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.*

*<sup>18</sup>In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup>After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.*

### **Background**

This chapter of the history of the early church begins with King Herod initiating the persecution of the church. And if you're thinking that HEROD seems to be around forever, wasn't he there at Jesus birth, well no. Herod was a popular name in the New Testament days! In fact, there are at least four Herods mentioned in the Bible.

- Herod #1 was known as "Herod the Great." This was the "Herod" who slaughtered the babies of Bethlehem in an attempt to kill baby Jesus. He also murdered many of his own family.
- Herod #2 was known as "Herod Antipas." He was the "Herod" who beheaded John the Baptist. He was around when Jesus was crucified.
- Herod #3 was known as "Herod Philip the Second." He was the half brother of Herod #2 and was murdered by his father Herod #1 because he feared his son was after his throne, but before Herod Philip died he had a son who became...
- Herod #4, known as "Herod Agrippa" who was the King Herod that we read about here in Acts 12.

Now this "Herod #4" was a typical politician in that he worked very hard at cultivating the favour of the Jewish people. He did this by keeping the Mosaic Law and all the Jewish observances, and it worked. He became very popular with the Jewish people, especially the religious leaders.

However, he didn't do this because he loved the Jewish people. No - he was appointed to this position by Rome, so his ultimate aim was to please his Roman boss. He knew that one thing they wanted was a peaceful Palestine - Rome wanted happy campers, non-rebellious subjects, so their "lap-dog" Herod Agrippa worked very hard to keep the Jews happy. And, as I said he did a good job at this.

In his efforts to gain even greater popularity Herod decided to attack the rivals of the Jewish rulers, the Christian Church and its leaders. So he arrested some Christians and he discovered that among them was James, the brother of John. Together they were called "The Sons of Thunder."

We don't know exactly what happened but perhaps James was leading a gathering of Christians when soldiers sent by Herod Agrippa broke into the room and arrested them all.

Then Herod ordered James executed by the sword. And it had the effect he wanted. His approval rating with the Jews soared. He thought I am on a roll, and tried to raise it even higher by arresting Peter, but Herod didn't have Peter killed immediately.

This temporary stay of execution wasn't due to some hidden streak of kindness in Herod's nature but another example of Herod's desire to be popular with the Jewish religious leaders. Peter was arrested during the Passover, and according to Jewish Law no trial or execution could be carried out during this week so Herod could not kill Peter until the week had passed - or he would risk losing the popularity he had gained by arresting him in the first place.

So Peter was placed in a holding cell, but not your simple holding cell. Normally a prisoner was chained by his right hand to his guard's left hand - but scripture says that Peter was chained by both hands to a guard on each side. Each of the remaining two guards in the squad kept watch at one of the two gates leading to his cell.

Now why would Herod go to such lengths to guard this unemployed fisherman? Well, perhaps it was because of something that happened seven chapters earlier. Acts 5 records an incident in which the apostles, including Peter, had been preaching and healing in the temple courts. Remember? This upset the high priest and so with the help of the jealous Sadducees they arrested Peter and the other disciples and put them in the public jail. However during the night an angel opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.

So perhaps the high priest said, "Listen Herod, let me give you a little advice. Prison didn't work too well last time. So guard him well."

Okay look at Acts 12 verse 5 again. This verse is the climax of this entire chapter so pay attention to its words. Verse 5 says that Peter was in prison the night before his trial - at which time Peter was sure to have been sentenced to death - and then notice that next word, "BUT..."

'Buts' are great! Time and time again, history turns on this little word: "BUT"

This little word teaches us that life is not always determined by the reality of what we see, feel, or hear. The happenings of life are not always determined by those massive physical forces of evil that move about in this fallen world. Take your mind back to the beginning when I mentioned life's 'walls' that we hit.

There is more to be factored into any impossible situation! In fact whenever we view a problem as being impossible, we are actually falling into a subtle trap - the trap of focusing on externals. Paul told the Corinthian believers, "*You are looking at things as they are outwardly.*" (2 Cor. 10:7a) and we do the same thing when we see only the impossible situation and not our God, Who is absolute Lord of every situation!

Okay - let's get back to the text. The situation is grim. It looks bad for Peter - "BUT!" - BUT what?... The church was in prayer! Look at verse 5. "*So Peter was kept in prison BUT the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*"

One thing I have noticed as I read through the New Testament and through our study of the book of Acts...is that it is impossible to imagine the members of the early church NOT gathering to pray with each other. I mean, praying was "what they met to do."

Meeting together with other Christians in the days of the early church and NOT praying was unthinkable. And Prayerlessness should be just as unthinkable for us today. Prayer gets us on the same wavelength. It unites us as one. It gets us all plugged into God's way of thinking. When Christians pray together they experience a unique bond - through which God can and will do great things.

Now I am not talking about a limited understanding of prayer, when we gather and 'assume the position' - prayer is communication with God, individually and corporately, that is done, yes in formal prayer, but also in our thinking and dreaming with God, in our conversation with each other and God, and yes

even in our serving others with God, in going and doing and taking action with God. Prayer is so much more than 'assuming the position' and speaking endless words.

So, from the earliest days, the church has always been at its best when its people have come together to pray. And we should look at prayer as they did - as an indispensable source of unbelievable power. Acts 2 says the early disciples "gave themselves continually to prayer." We must give ourselves to it as well - on Sunday nights or in our small groups or on Sunday morning, in our family times, with prayer partners, ministry groups, while we are driving, walking, running. The fact is, if we are to be an effective, healthy, Godly church we must be a prayerful church.

Why? Because....

1. Prayer changes THINGS.

Remember that! In life when it looks like everything is against us - when it looks like there is no hope - when it looks like it is the end and we are about to be overwhelmed; it is then that we need to remember that prayer changes things, because prayer releases God's power. Now please don't ask me how it works, I don't know, but my experience is that it makes a difference.

That power may not always come in the way that we want... it may come in the form of wisdom - an idea you desperately need and until that time hadn't come up with yourself. It may come in the form of courage, greater courage than you could ever muster. It may come in the form of confidence or perseverance, or a changed attitude toward a spouse or a child or a parent, a changed circumstance, or maybe even, sometimes, but not very often, an outright miracle. But, however it comes, God's power is released in the lives of people who pray. Prayer changes things.

It certainly did in Peter's situation. God again sent an angel to free him. This angel led the sleepy-eyed apostle through the prison and past guards. It was so amazing Peter thought it was all a dream and didn't wake up and come to his senses until he was a couple blocks away from the prison.

And what happened next is funny. He knocked on a door and a servant girl named Rhoda answered. She recognized Peter's voice but was so excited she left him standing there exposed to re-capture and ran upstairs to tell everyone. When she entered the room she said something like, "Peter's here! He's out of

prison!” and they replied, “That’s impossible! Don’t interrupt us, we are praying! Now, let’s see where were we?” “Oh yes, ‘God, we know You are able to free our leader Peter. Do it now Lord.” But Rhoda insisted, “Listen, it is Peter. Oops! I left him standing outside!” And she rushed back down to the door to let Peter in.

This shows that God answers our prayers even when we don’t fully believe He can and this is in line with the Scripture, because Jesus said that we don’t need a great deal of faith when we pray. Faith the size of a mustard seed.

Our prayers make a difference - God acts in response to them! Prayer changes things!

## 2. ...prayer changes PEOPLE.

This is a comforting truth because if people don’t change, what good would it do to change things? And in my experience prayer changes people more than it changes things. Look at verse 24 of chapter 12 and the following few verses and you will see a great example of this in the lives of these early believers.

<sup>24</sup>But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

<sup>25</sup>When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

Remember that before this answer to prayer the followers were huddled in a room fearing for their lives. But after this they were so bold in their witness that the Word of God spread - they changed because of the power of prayer. In fact, the answer to their prayers - the miracle of Peter’s release - became a defining moment, forcing the unbelievers toward greater despair, and the believers toward greater faith.

Here’s some more Biblical examples of this principle.

- Prayer made shy Moses into a leader.
- It softened the cruel heart of Pharaoh.
- It kept discouraged Elijah from quitting.
- It turned the fanatical persecutor Saul into a globe-trotting apostle.
- And-it changed Peter. Remember? While imprisoned, Peter was so full of faith and peace that he could sleep deeply, even though he thought he would be killed the next day. Ten or fifteen years earlier, Peter had been a different man. He had lied to avoid imprisonment. He had fled

because of his fear. But not anymore. In fact, after this experience he was even more fearless because he headed to Rome, the very seat of Roman power to boldly share the love of Jesus Christ. All this because prayer changes people!

Again I am not talking about prayer where we assume the position and list off our wish list. I’m talking about prayer in which we open our hearts to God and listen for His response which in turn makes us more like Him. As someone has said prayer enables us to “think His thoughts after Him.” Plus, prayer opens our eyes to our sin and shows us how we need to change to be more conformed to His image.

I guess the greatest example that prayer changes people is seen in conversion - becoming a Christian, which only happens in response to prayer.

This morning if you are here and you are not a Christian then I urge you allow the power of prayer change you...right here...right now. The Bible says that

*anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! 2 Corinthians 5:17*

And let face it, this conversion process is a lifelong process of change, we are all in the process of conversion, of being made new.

All you have to do is pray! You may be here with us this morning and are facing some horrible thing in your life. Something that seems hopeless. If that is true then as we enter a time of worship I encourage you to pray - to talk to God about it. He wants nothing more than to answer your prayer - to show you that things aren’t always as they seem. And, remember you can pray about anything....Philippians 4:6 says,

<sup>6</sup>Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. <sup>7</sup>Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

‘The peace of God’ – doesn’t that sound great? It’s not magic in that the sense that you pray and the peace instantly comes upon you, again it is a process, not worrying, praying, being thankful about life and I can guarantee you will sense God’s peace.

Let’s choose to be a praying church