

AM Acts 12:1-24

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Date: 20 September 2026

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[0:00] You read this morning from the Holy Bible, from the book of Acts, chapter 12. Narrates the events that took place after the Lord Jesus rose from the dead and was taken up into heaven.

And after the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples. And it deals with the events beginning in Jerusalem and then from there to Judea and Samaria.

And then towards the ends of the earth as the word of God, the gospel, goes out. So we're going to read chapter 12, verses 1 to 24.

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James, the brother of John, with the sword.

And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of unleavened bread. 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.

[1:41] So Peter was kept in prison. But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and centuries before the door were guarding the prison.

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. 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. 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.

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.

[2:58] And they went out and went along one street. And immediately the angel left him. 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.

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. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.

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. 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. But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.

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.

[4:18] Then he departed and went to another place. Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.

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.

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.

On an appointed day, Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, the voice of a God and not of a man.

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.

[5 : 33] But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

May God bless that reading of his word to us. Chapter. Many people ask the question, is there any purpose to human history?

And maybe that is something that you have asked. Maybe in your own life and experience, you've experienced things maybe going well for a while and then some random disaster strikes, maybe illness or the death of a loved one or you lose your job or something happens that is a disaster in your family.

And then on a world scale, sometimes things may seem to go well for a while. There are improvements, you know, in terms of world peace and advancement.

There may be reforms, things go for the better and then suddenly things get worse. Maybe there's a pandemic or there's bad leadership or terrorism or wars or economic or environmental crisis and just general uncertainty.

[6 : 58] And you wonder, what's going on? Is there any purpose to it? Is there any direction to world history? Well, this chapter gives us some pointers, some answers.

It gives us a window into God's purpose and how that works itself out in the lives of individuals and of peoples, of nations.

And also in the mix of that, there is the importance and the role of the prayers of God's people. So at the beginning of the passage, there's a new wave of persecution hits the church.

And this time it's instigated by King Herod. This is King Herod Agrippa I. He was like a puppet king under the Roman Empire.

And he reigned from 41 to 44 AD. So we can sort of roughly date the events of this chapter. So this Herod, Herod Agrippa I, he was the, you might think, remember the Herod who was around at the time of the birth of Jesus who had all the boys in Bethlehem killed.

[8 : 14] So that was this Herod's grandfather. And then you might also think of that there's another Herod who was responsible for the death of John the Baptist and was also there at the time of Jesus' crucifixion.

He was the uncle of this particular Herod in this story. So Herod's plan is to silence the leaders and to stop this movement, this Jesus movement, from going any further.

And also, he's concerned about his own popularity. He sees that it's, when he has James executed, he sees that pleases many of the Judeans, as it's probably better translated.

And seeking their approval, further approval, he has Peter seized. And no doubt his plans are the same for Peter. So Peter's arrested.

He's put in prison. And after the feast, that's the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which immediately followed the Passover, he's to be brought out for trial.

[9 : 21] And no doubt the plan is to execute him as James. And the James there is James, the brother of John. That's one of the Twelve Apostles. The first of the Twelve Apostles to be martyred for their faith.

So Peter's in this high-security jail. He's got four squads of four soldiers each. They would probably have a three-hour shift.

So two would be chained to Peter and then two guarding the prison doors. And possibly some remembered back in chapter 5, it talks about a rather remarkable getting out of jail on the part of Peter and the other apostles.

In fact, at that time it was an angel who let them out. And so people aren't taking any chances this time. They want to make sure that Peter is secure. So things are looking pretty bleak for Peter.

He's due for trial the next day. The fate of his fellow apostle James was his death, his execution, and it looks like that's going to happen for Peter as well.

[10 : 38] But in verse 5 we're told that the church was earnestly praying to God for Peter. And in the verses that follow we read of how God answers their prayers.

So the night before Peter is brought out for trial, he's bound by two chains between two soldiers, two guards, further guards are standing at the door keeping watch.

And Peter's fast asleep and the angel of the Lord comes into the cell and a light shines around and the angel wakes Peter up.

And it's just interesting to note that Peter on the night before he's brought out for trial and probable execution, he's sleeping soundly. The word actually it says the angel struck Peter and it is quite a violent act.

I mean it's not to do him harm but it's not just a tap, he has to really hit him to wake him up because he's soundly asleep and that's remarkable and we'll come back to that in a few minutes.

[11 : 52] Remarkable in the situation that Peter is in. So the chains fall off Peter, the angel tells him to get dressed, to put his cloak round him and he, to follow the angel and so they walk past the first and second guards who have been put to sleep.

The gate to the jail opens by itself and they walk up the street and Peter's still half asleep, he thinks it's some kind of a dream or a vision and then the angel leaves him and Peter sort of comes to and becomes awake, fully awake.

And all of this is a direct answer to the prayers of the church. God sends his angel to rescue Peter from prison and from death by this great miracle and we see from this as so often in the scriptures that there is no limit to God's power.

He hears and answers the prayers of his people and it's an encouragement to us that if we are in trouble, in danger, in a difficult situation, we should pray to God in that situation and if possible get others to pray for you and with you as well.

Peter's escape is an answer to prayer and God is able to answer our prayers beyond our expectations. But maybe you're sitting here listening to this and you're thinking well that's very nice for people who have their prayers answered.

[13 : 30] It's nice for Peter and for the church who are praying for him just to have that remarkable answer to those prayers but maybe you're thinking to yourself well you know I've prayed for something and there just seems to be no answer whatsoever.

Maybe you prayed and for somebody in your family or a friend who's been sick and you've prayed that they'll be healed and they haven't been healed. Maybe they've even got worse.

Maybe they've even died. And you've prayed maybe for something else to happen. Maybe for marriage or for a child or for just whatever it is you've prayed and you've prayed hard and earnestly! And it just doesn't happen! And maybe what you don't want to happen does happen! And you just think well what's going on? Why doesn't God answer my prayers?

Well this passage speaks to that very situation and if that's what you're feeling it speaks to you in that situation because we've read how Peter on the night before his trial and execution was in this miraculous remarkable way rescued by the angel.

[14 : 45] But in verse 2 we read of the apostle James the brother of John and that Herod has James put to death with the sword. James was an apostle the same as Peter he was a servant of God no less than Peter was and no less loved and cared for by God our heavenly father and I've no doubt absolutely no doubt that the church prayed for James just as earnestly as it prayed for Peter and yet James was executed James was killed why was that?

What can we learn from this? We learn that God is sovereign that God rules and that prayer is not like putting money into a slot machine you put your money in and then you get out the answer that you want prayer isn't like that God's will for James was that he be killed by Herod now of course we all must die and for James this was the manner this was the time for James according to God's will but God's will for Peter was that he be rescued from this situation now later on Peter would die and he would also die a martyr's death we know that but on this occasion Peter is rescued in this remarkable way and God is glorified in both he's glorified in the death of

James this violent death of James and in the escape of Peter we see something like that in Hebrews chapter 11 that chapter in the book of Hebrews that speaks about faith and different exploits different achievements that people did by faith and in verse 34 of Hebrews 11 it says some through faith escaped the edge of the sword but then a bit further on in verse 37 it says others by faith were killed by the sword and we see that worked out here in the case of James and Peter so you might pray for something maybe you pray for healing or for a marriage partner or for a child a job or just to get out of financial difficulties or to get out of some difficult situation maybe you pray for revival for your church for the town for whatever for your family your relatives and nothing seems to happen you pray and you pray and nothing happens and maybe you know others in a similar situation to you and you know they have prayed and they've got what they asked for and maybe

worse even worse the thing that you pray won't happen does happen maybe a death of a loved one or whatever it is does it mean that

God loves you less than that other person who does have their prayer seemingly answered does it mean that God has forgotten you does it mean that God loves you less or is ignoring your prayers the answer to all of those is no God does not love you less God has not forgotten you God is not ignoring you God's answer to your prayer may be yes it may be no or it may be to wait but the important thing is to trust God to trust his care for you there's also a perspective in this chapter hinted at which looks beyond this life there's an eternal perspective here in Luke chapter 21 Jesus speaks about persecution which of course is what's going on in this chapter and there Jesus says that they will put some of you to death everyone will hate you because of me but not a hair of your head will perish stand firm and you will win life how can

Jesus say that not a hair of your head will perish when he has just said they will put some of you to death well the answer is in what he says when he says if you stand firm you will win life and the life that you will win is eternal life it is everlasting resurrection life in the age to come those who believe in Jesus as saviour and lord even if they are killed for that belief will rise to everlasting life at the last day that's what Jesus says in John 11 I am the resurrection and the life whoever believes in me though he die yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die I mean we noted earlier how Peter sleeps soundly on the night before his trial and execution you think he might be all churned up worried what am I going to say how am I going to defend myself but no he's fast asleep so fast asleep that the angel has to strike him to wake him up because

[20 : 35] Peter is facing death with peace I wonder how you feel about death about your death death is a horrible thing it's feared everywhere and yet Peter faces his own death with peace and that is something that only the gospel of Jesus Christ can give something that only Jesus himself gives and if you don't have this hope this certainty even in the face of death then it can be yours if you come to Jesus Christ and put your faith your trust in him well then we go back to Peter so the angel has brought him out of the jail and down a street or two and then leaves him Peter is now fully awake he realizes it's not a vision it's for real that the

Lord has sent his angel to rescue him and so he goes to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark and many believers are gathered there and they're praying and we know what they're praying for because we're told in verse 5 that the church was earnestly praying to God for Peter so Peter goes and he knocks on the door and what happens next is it's kind of like a piece of comedy the servant girl Rhoda comes to answer and she recognizes Peter's voice and in her joy and excitement she goes to announce that Peter's there and she forgets to let him in and they say the people in the prayer meeting don't believe it they say no Rhoda you're out of your mind you're imagining it there's no way that can have happened and then Rhoda insists and they say well it must be his angel and that reflects a Jewish belief that's not in the Bible the Bible doesn't teach this but many

Jews believe that a person's angel or spirit hung around after death for about three or four days and then they departed and I think that's what they're referring to here but what we see here is that here they are praying for Peter praying for his deliverance but when it happens they just don't believe it they look for any other explanation that Rhoda's lost her mind that it's Peter's angel or spirit any explanation other than that God has actually answered their prayers and yet that's perhaps like many of us and I think I find some comfort in this passage because here are these people they're praying praying hard praying earnestly but they're not really expecting God to answer their prayers and yet God does answer their prayers in a way that's much greater than what they could even imagine and we see the grace of

God in this our prayers are answered not because of how strong our faith is how faith filled our prayers are God answers our prayers often in spite of how weak our faith is but it's by his grace that he answers those prayers sometimes people sometimes Christians will say things like the reason you're not healed or the reason your prayer isn't answered is because you haven't prayed with enough faith and you need to sort of summon up more faith to ask God for this thing and that is wrong it is utterly wrong because the answers to our prayers are not because of how faith filled our prayers are it is by the grace of God and we see that so clearly in this passage and it reminds us of just the prayers of God's people is a powerful thing because God is a powerful

God he is an almighty God and it also reminds us of the privilege that we have in prayer that we can pray to God and that he is the God who is able to do to answer our prayers in a way that exceeds

anything we can ask or imagine salvation but finally we come to just the last section of the passage from verse 20 which deals with the death of Herod so it's kind of moved away from the church the disciples even the preaching of the gospel here to kind of political events in that part of the world at that time and we're told of how Herod goes from Jerusalem to Caesarea there's been a quarrel with the people of Tyre and Sidon and they want to make peace with Herod because they rely on his country for food supply and so they secure the mediation of this servant

[25:54] Blastus and the appointed day comes for Herod to be there and to make this speech according to the first century historian Josephus Jewish historian he also has an account of this which kind of confirms the account in Acts he tells us it was Caesar's birthday and that Herod was there in great pomp with robes Josephus tells us that the robes were woven with silver and they glittered with the rays of the sun so this is kind of power dressing Herod is dressed to impress and the people want to please him want to gain his approval and so they flatter him that this is the voice of a god and not of a man and Herod is delighted with this he accepts it he's happy with this flattery and then we're told that the angel of the lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms a sudden dramatic and disgraceful death because this is the judgment of

God we're told it's because he did not give God the glory because so Herod's just refusal to give God the glory receiving this glory for himself it kind of reveals his own conceit and arrogance and egotism he's happy to receive worship from others because essentially he worshipped himself he was self-centered self-focused egotistical now this might seem extreme and yet in a way it's all too common we're all prone to that kind of idolatry to what fills our minds our horizon what we crave is that others approve of us that we gain recognition that we gain the applause of other people we saw at the beginning in verse 3 how

Herod has Peter arrested because he sees that it pleases the Judeans it gains their approval and that's what he's all about and yet we see the failure of idols here whether that idol is ourselves or another person or a thing we see that death brings that idol to an end it doesn't well Herod's idol was himself and Herod is brought to an end by this sudden and violent death but however we die and we all will die it brings our idol to an end for us how much better to do what Herod didn't do which was to give glory to God the immortal God the God who is everlasting and eternal as the catechism puts it our chief end our chief purpose is to glorify

God and to enjoy him forever well finally in verse 24 we see that God has the last word powerful people like Herod may try to stop God's word they may try to silence God and that's what Herod was doing by arresting the leadership those who were preachers of the word and yet we see the failure of that and in contrast in verse 24 and this is really the end of the passage 25 really belongs to the next chapter in verse 24 it says but the word of God increased and multiplied and the word of God of course is the message of Jesus Christ the gospel it's the rule of the real king the real king who is Jesus Christ and that is the theme of acts of the spread and the growth of the word of God John Stott in his commentary sums up it well he says that the chapter opens with James dead Peter in prison and Herod triumphant it closes with Herod dead Peter free and the word of God triumphing in our own society as in every society there are powerful forces reigned against the gospel against the word of God people think they have silenced God people think that they have just ridiculed and put to death the gospel and the proclamation of that gospel the proclamation of God's word and even the idea of God and yet God has the last word we see that in history we think of I remember hearing about missionaries in China in the late 40s after the communists had taken control and all the missionaries were expelled the church was quite frail quite weak and missionaries the missionaries in China or who'd been expelled from China were very fearful about what would happen to this youngish church well after three quarters of a century of communist rule the church in China is thriving there are thousands millions of Christians in that land there's different estimates but the word of God is thriving in China and so we see that there as we see here in this chapter that God has the last word

[31:59] God will not be silenced and that is a great comfort for us may God bless his word to us we're going to sing and may God