

Acts 12

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to be looking at this passage that is part of the Acts of the Apostles, which, as you know, is the story of the church. After Jesus had ascended to heaven, he left his disciples here in this world, but he did not leave them by themselves.

He left them with a great commission to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations, and that he promised he was going to be with them, present with them.

He was not going to leave them alone. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down and filled the disciples where they were and energized and empowered them to go out with the gospel. That did not mean that life was going to be easy. And the book of the Acts of the Apostles, in a very realistic manner, tells the story of the highs and the lows, the times of pleasantness, the times when things were easier and the times when things were desperately difficult, like the one that we're, the era that we're thinking about, reading about in Acts chapter 12.

The disciples, of course, they were all Jewish, and they had to contend with all kinds of different challenges. One of them was, how do you relate to Gentile believers?

[1 : 22] The Acts tells us how that happened, but it also tells us how they related to the world around them. There were other Jewish people who were not Christians and who were hostile to these new Jewish followers of Jesus.

And they were amongst the fiercest opponents of the Christian faith. And then there was the Roman. There were the Romans who were the occupiers of Judea at that time.

They tended to be largely tolerant as long as you pledged your allegiance to Caesar. And sometimes you were required to declare that Caesar was Lord.

Christians couldn't do that because for them, only Jesus was Lord. And so, as a result of their refusal to declare that Caesar was Lord, there were times of persecution at various points throughout the history of the church in Roman times.

But even during these times, persecution was not universal. It depended on where you lived. It depended on who the local government was, who was in charge.

[2 : 41] Some people were more tolerant than others. And so, some had a relatively trouble-free life, and others were put to death because of their faith in the Lord Jesus.

It also depended on the politics at the time. And if ever there's an example of such a situation, it's Acts chapter 12, where Herod comes into the picture.

This Herod was a nephew of the Herod that put John the Baptist to death. And he was also a grandson of Herod the Great, i.e. the Herod of the birth of Jesus, the Herod who put the babies to death in Judea at that time.

Now, this is his grandson. And if you know anything about the Herods, there's a very complicated political history, but the Herods were the most insecure dynasty.

They were paranoid. They were also psychopaths. They were desperate for attention and desperate for, I don't know what had happened in their family, but if you look at the history of Herod the Great, for example, he was a man you could not trust.

[3 : 56] He would stab you to death as soon as you thought you could trust him. And it was pretty much the same for this. And they were always trying to please everybody. They were trying to keep in with the Romans because they knew that they didn't have any real power.

The Romans were the ones who held the power. And Herod was like a kind of a puppet. He was always being controlled by the Romans. But nonetheless, they gave him some devolved power, as you can see here in this chapter.

And that power extended to being able to execute people. And so in his desperation for affection and respect and for power, he decided to use his authority.

So all of a sudden, from nowhere, you get this persecution. And it's like overnight. It's here today and it's gone tomorrow. At the beginning of this chapter, it looks as if Herod is on the throne and it looks as if the church is on the run.

And yet at the end of the chapter, Herod is dead. The threat has gone. It's over almost as quickly as it emerged. And that's the way, isn't it?

[5 : 20] You have a threat one day that disappears the next. That doesn't mean that it's not a real threat. It was a real threat. And that's why when in the book of Revelation, there's a lot of reference to the sea.

And when heaven comes, when heaven is revealed, we're told that there was no more sea. The sea represented the uncertainty of life for Christians.

It could be calm one day and there could be a storm the next. And the thing is, not to be surprised when the world turns against the church and the gospel.

We should not be surprised. But all of it is in God's control. And that is the message of this chapter. God's people are under his control. Politics, the politicians, the empire is under God's control. And the one thing that is absolutely certain is that Jesus is building his church.

[6 : 38] First thing, I want us to look tonight at the main players in this chapter. We'll just go through it very simply. The main players, we've already talked about Herod and we'll come back to him later on, particularly as we look at his rather nasty death.

But the first person that we come across is James. We read that he had James, verse 2, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

Now, anybody who knows the gospels knows who James is. He was the brother of John. They were fishermen. They were sons of Zebedee. And there are all kinds of accounts given to them in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John about particularly Peter, James and John who were, of all the disciples, the closest to Jesus.

Well, this is the James of Peter, James and John. He had argued with others as to which of them would be the greatest. These were the three that went with Jesus into the house of Jairus.

These were the three disciples who had gone with Jesus to them up in the top of the Mount of Transfiguration. And they had seen Jesus transfigured. They had seen something, a glimpse of his glory.

[8 : 02] James had been with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to his arrest. And along with his brother, James had earned the name Boanerges.

I hope I'm pronouncing that correct. The Sons of Thunder. Remember when he suggested that Jesus call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans who had rejected Jesus.

That's the kind of person that James was. He was one of the best known of the 12 disciples. Here's the interesting bit. Remember Matthew 12, how his mother had come to Jesus with a request.

And her request was that she would allow appoint her sons to sit one at his right hand and one at his left in his kingdom. And Jesus, now listen to this, Jesus asked her a question.

He said, are you able to drink? He didn't ask her the question. He asked James and John. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink of?

[9 : 15] And they said, yes. And Jesus said, yes, you will drink the cup that I drink of. Now, I believe that what he was talking about there was persecution.

That James was going to be persecuted and he was going to give his life. He was going to suffer because he was a follower of Jesus.

And yet, this account is so mysterious, isn't it? Acts 12, where all, this is the famous James, Peter, James and John, the closest of the disciples to Jesus.

And yet, his death is a one-liner. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. End of story. Nothing more is said about James.

Isn't that mysterious? And doesn't it raise some perplexing questions? Here's a young disciple. He's full of passion and zeal and usefulness.

[10 : 26] Think about his years with Jesus, all that preparation. And within a short period of time, he's dead. He's killed. It all seems so pointless.

It doesn't seem to make sense. Jesus had said to all of his disciples to go into all the world and to make disciples of all. You would think that he would give them some opportunity to do that.

After all, James was still a young man. He could have spent the next 40 years in the service of the gospel. And yet, he's destroyed as a young man.

And you think, well, what a waste. what's the sense in that man being put to death? God could have, the rest of the chapter proves God's miraculous intervention in the case of Peter.

Why did he not do the same for James? And why could he not even have raised him from the dead? You have people being raised from the dead in Acts of the Apostles.

[11 : 29] Eutychus in Acts chapter 16 is raised from the dead. It's quite clear that God is on the throne in this chapter. He puts Herod to death.

Why could he not have done that before he put James to death? And besides, there are even more mysterious features of James' death.

It just, it just seems to be so matter-of-fact, doesn't it? When Stephen was stoned to death in Acts chapter 8 or 7, we read that godly men, devout men, buried Stephen and made great lamentation for him.

Here, arguably, a more famous disciple is put to death and nothing more is said. No word of tribute or eulogy or lamentation or burial even, nothing is said.

Besides, there's no apparent growth of the church as a result directly of James' death. That's one thing you might expect. If the church, if there was a massive revival immediately after James' death, you would think, well, we now know why.

[12 : 57] But there's none of that. the disciples were simply left to wonder about the significance of all of this.

There are no answers to these questions. There is so much that we don't understand. So much that God doesn't tell us.

He doesn't owe us an explanation. And just because nothing is said in the aftermath of James' death does not mean that James' life was wasted or that his death was wasted.

We don't know what the result or the significance of James' death was. God hasn't told us.

Maybe one day will find out. But God has a plan. What did happen as a direct result of all this was that the disciples were driven to prayer, to the place of prayer.

[14 : 12] And when I say prayer, I mean prayer together in solidarity with one another.

The church, verse 5, when Peter was kept in prayer after Herod put James to death with the sword, Peter was kept in prison with Herod, fully intending to bring him out to trial and execute him in front of the people in order to gain popularity for himself, in order for his own purposes.

So Peter was kept in prison. But listen, the church was earnestly praying to God for him. That was the result of the death of James.

And somehow in the providence of God, as a result of God's people praying for Peter in an extraordinary way, God answered that prayer.

Now we'll come on to the question of why did he answer the prayer for Peter and not for James?

We'll ask that question in a few moments, Tim, because that's an intriguing question as well, isn't it? Why Peter and not James?

[15 : 29] Obviously God has it in his power to save one. He had in his power to save them both.

We'll come on to that question. What I want to concentrate on is what is happening about this, about the church.

They're driven to prayer. Now there are two types of prayer. We all know this by the way. The kind of prayer that we talked about this morning where Jesus says to go into your closet, to go into your room where things are quiet and where you can be with God alone and where you can pour your heart out to him.

That's what we call private prayer. But in this chapter we're reading about what we call collective prayer. When the church comes together and when they put their minds and their hearts together and when we pray collectively or corporately is a word that some people use for it.

What we're talking about is what they used to call a prayer meeting. It doesn't matter what you call a time of prayer. prayer. It happens in small groups. It can happen on Zoom as we have discovered over the past year.

It can happen at any time. People come together to have a time of prayer. It can happen formally. I think many of us older ones were brought up in a more formal idea of a prayer meeting or it can happen less formally where it's a time of prayer where anybody can pray audibly and we all pray along with that person.

[17 : 05] I don't believe it matters how it happens. And neither does it matter the kind of words or length.

In fact, Jesus warned his disciples about using too many big words and praying for too long. prayer. But what we have here in this passage is a description of how the church prayed.

Did you notice it? The church prayed earnestly for Peter. That's the key to what prayer is. fervently, urgently, passionately. It doesn't matter how good your grammar is. I hear a lot of people, I've been in the ministry now for many, many years and I get so alarmed when people say to me, I can't take part in a prayer meeting because I don't have the big words that I hear other people using.

It makes me despair almost when I hear that because it doesn't matter about big words. Neither does it matter how long you pray for.

[18 : 29] What matters here in Acts 12 is that the church came together and they were crying out to God for Peter because they were in desperate straits and it's amazing what happens when you're in desperate straits, isn't it?

It's amazing how your prayer changes when your circumstances change. and I wonder if what we're touching on here right now is one of the reasons why our prayer meetings or our times of prayer are so unpopular and it's not just one church but this problem extends in every church.

It doesn't matter where you go, you'll always find people saying, well, I wish more people would come when we have a time of prayer, when we have a time of fellowship and it seems that there's this reluctance, there's this fear in some people to take part in corporate prayer because they feel they're not good enough, they feel they're not educated enough.

please don't let that happen. The prayer meeting, whatever you want to call it, is the centre of any congregation and I would love for this to be an opportunity for you to ask yourself what is my part in the prayer meeting in Bonacord or my house group or whatever?

Do I go? Do I take part? Do I see the necessity how essential it is for my own spiritual well-being and for the fact that other people are dependent?

[20 : 11] I remember this is a little anecdote for those of you who have been going to Bonacord for many years. You remember when I was minister in Bonacord, it was one of these recurring nagging features of my ministry.

I would every so often on a Sunday I would remind the congregation of how important it was to come on a Wednesday night to gather together to pray.

I tried to do it firmly and yet gently at the same time. And sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't and sometimes you would have more people coming and sometimes you would have less people coming.

Do you know what I remember? Do you know what I'm going to say? Do you remember when 9-11 happened? It happened on a Tuesday as far as I remember, which meant that on a Wednesday night there was a prayer meeting the day after 9-11.

Do you remember what that prayer meeting was like? We had to take chairs in from other rooms because the hall wasn't big enough for everybody who came.

[21 : 20] Do you remember that? Well, I do. I'll never forget it. It's amazing what happens when you're in dire straits. And that was what happened here.

The church came together and they prayed earnestly for Peter. Please don't wait until God brings us into that place of danger and desperation before you come together and pray earnestly.

And what was the effect? Well, let me tell you what the first result of their prayer was. Peter slept in prison.

Isn't that incredible? The night before, Herod was to bring him to trial. I find this almost, it is quite amusing in a way, if it wasn't so serious.

Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains. Well, I'm trying to put myself into Peter's position here and I'm in a jail, I'm in a prison and tomorrow I'm going to be wakened up, I'm going to be taken to trial and I'm going to be sentenced to death and I'm going to be executed.

[22 : 45] Would I be sleeping? I don't think so. And yet Peter was.

God had given Peter the gift of peace, the peace that passes all understanding. He had somehow given to Peter that presence of mind that knew that he wasn't Herod's prisoner, he was God's prisoner and somehow God had the control to be able to do whatever he wanted to fulfil his purpose, whatever that and if it meant his death, so be it.

If it meant his life, so be it. And I wonder tonight, well I know that none of us are awaiting execution, but I wonder if there are issues that really bother you and that keep you from sleep and that swirl

around in your mind.

You can't escape them. The Bible says, do not be anxious about anything.

Now that's hugely difficult, isn't it? You might say to me, well you don't know what I'm going through. It's all very well for you to say, do not be, well it's actually not me that's saying it, it's God that says it, do not be anxious.

[24 : 33] But in everything, by prayer and supplication, make your requests known to God. Now, here's the challenge, are you going to take God at his word?

I want you to have a night's sleep and if the reason you cannot rest is because something is revolving around and around in your head, ask the Lord to bring his truth home to you.

leave it with him. The Bible tells us to cast all our cares upon him for he cares for us.

I can't think of any better way to finish a Sunday night because you're maybe dreading going into work or working from home, I don't know what your arrangements are but you're maybe dreading something about the future.

Cast your cares upon him because he cares for you. On the eve of his execution, Peter was sleeping.

[25 : 53] God's plan that Peter be miraculously delivered.

If God can do it unmiraculously then so be it but if God has to move heaven and earth to do his will then heaven and earth are at his disposal. Locks of doors are not a problem, walls are not a problem, gates are not a problem and neither are guards.

God is God over them all. And yet we have this strange phenomenon in this chapter don't we? The ministry of angels because it was an angel that came to Peter and Peter was so sound asleep he had to be, the angel had to hit him to get him to waking up.

That's quite astounding isn't it? And when he'd woken up he kind of didn't know what was happening, he was kind of dazed I suppose. He's still half asleep, he doesn't know what's going on, maybe he thinks he's dreaming and so he just does what he's told, he puts on his clothes and the doors open by themselves and he's led past the guards out into the street, he's not quite sure of what's happening to him, he might be dreaming and it's only when the angel leaves him that he's left alone, he wakens up completely and thinks, I'm free.

What's just happened? Well what's happened is that an angel has been sent to rescue Peter, an angel. Now, if you would like me and if you expect me to spend the next five, ten minutes talking about angels, then I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed because I'm not.

[27 : 46] for one thing, I don't quite understand angels because there's not enough information given to me in the Bible, but there is enough for me to know that they are real, created beings, rational, reasonable beings, not human beings, and yet they are rational, worshipping, serving beings who are, the Bible tells us that they are ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.

And I'm going to leave it there, do you know why I'm going to leave it there? Because if you could, if we could interview an angel tonight, he would tell us very quickly into the conversation, I do not want this conversation to go any further, because I don't want any glory, I don't want any attention, I am here to unobtrusively serve the king.

And that's the place that we have in the Bible, they're always in the background, and I believe that they still are in the background.

And the reason I'm saying that is because there is a current trendy obsession among some churches to kind of dwell on angels and to speculate a lot about what they do and who they are and what they're doing right now, I don't want to get into that, not because I'm denying that angels exist, but because they don't want the attention and God does not want them to have the attention.

They're here to do God's will, and we just leave it at that. And that's what, that's a clear message of this chapter.

[29 : 40] There's no such thing as a guardian angel, by the way. There's no evidence in the Bible whatsoever that God has assigned a particular angel to you or to me.

Nonetheless, they are ministering spirits sent to serve. I'm just going to read one thing, okay? I'm just going to read one thing. This is a chapter, a passage I came across some years ago about the missionary John Paton.

He was a Scots missionary, and he ended up in a very, very dangerous situation on one occasion. And here's what it says.

Hostile natives surrounded his missions, his missions headquarters one night, intent on burning the Patons out and killing them. John Paton and his wife prayed all during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them.

When daylight came, they were amazed to see that unaccountably the attackers had left. A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Jesus, and Mr Paton, remembering what had happened, asked the chief what had kept him and his men from burning down the house and killing them.

[30 : 52] The chief replied in surprise, who were all those men you had with you there? The missionary answered, there were no men there, just my wife and I. The chief argued, that they had seen many men standing guard, hundreds of men in shining garments, with drawn swords in their hands.

They seemed to circle the mission station so that the natives were afraid to attack. Only then did Mr Paton realise that God has sent his angels to protect them.

The chief agreed that there was no other explanation. Isn't that fascinating? There aren't many stories like that, but I believe that one.

I'm a bit of a sceptic when it comes to this kind of story, by the way, but I believe that one because there is no other explanation. I could go into the reaction of the church when Peter eventually showed up at the door of the house of John Mark and his mother knocked at the door.

They couldn't believe they were so filled with unbelief that they just didn't have the presence of mind to even open the door for Peter. It just shows how foolish the church can be sometimes.

[32 : 07] And we're no better. sometimes I think that our prayers are just not big enough and if they were and when God answers them we just wouldn't believe what he's done. The problem is because we're so afraid of God not answering our prayer that we don't ask for big things so we're never challenged as to whether or not we accept when he answers.

Let's be a bit more bold in prayer can we? Let's be a bit more daring. Let's take risks in prayer ask for things and expect them to happen.

I'm just going to finish off now. I'm going to finish off by looking at we talked about the main players we talked about Herod we talked about James we talked about the church we talked about Peter and how he was miraculously set free.

That's not there are other people in this chapter aren't there? The guards I feel so sorry for the guards do you not feel sorry for them?

They were only doing their job prison guards who were Romans they tended to be retired Roman soldiers hard and Roman they had seen they had been in many battles in the army and now this was a way of having an easy retirement while still being employed and here were these men and they were just doing a normal day's work I mean what's difficult about locking the door of a prison and just sitting outside there's nothing really difficult about that at all I'm not saying that it's easy to be a prison officer I'm not saying that at all but for them after all they had come through as soldiers this was an easy retirement and then this happens out of the blue something they can't understand something they can't make head or tails off and when they try and explain it to Herod he simply doesn't believe it and he orders their execution it just shows of course how totally irrational

[34 : 32] Herod was see unbelief is irrational these men would have told Herod here is what happened and Herod refused to believe and it cost the guards their life you can't blame God for that don't blame God for that we live in a dangerous world where our lives could be taken from us in a moment you could be walking down the road a drunk driver is driving his car on the road he goes off the road and kills you that is his irrational behaviour or her irrational behaviour you can't blame God for that it shows you can't know the day or the hour when our life will be taken from us but you know I love to think I would love to think that these men had got to know

Peter they got to speak to him and if they had it wouldn't have taken long before Peter would be sharing with them what Jesus had been like I can just imagine him telling them what it had been like to be with Jesus the miracles the teaching of Jesus and his death on the cross and his resurrection and how he had come to realise that his death was the payment of our sin and that life God was offering them everlasting life if they repented and believed who knows maybe I don't know this but maybe they came to believe in the hours before they were put to death what I do know is this that that was the last opportunity that they had this may be the last opportunity that you have if you're not a Christian I'm not trying to manipulate

I'm just being real this may be the last opportunity that you have and I'm pleading with you tonight to put your trust in the only way of salvation that there is and that's Jesus Christ and what he did on the cross and of course the story finishes with Herod himself of course there's the question that we asked before why James and not Peter when you compare why did one why was one set free and the other one had to die simply because James' time had come and Peter still had a work to do and God was going to have Peter he was going to allow him to live for that bit longer so that he would complete the work that God had given him to do but lastly you have this intriguing character Herod who has all the opportunity in the world and yet because he did not give glory to God God judged him and condemned him it strikes me that any any number of reasons Herod was a ruthless violent cruel man and any number of reasons could have been cited as to why God judged him on this occasion and yet the reason why God struck him down was that he refused to give glory to God and that's the choice that lies in front of every single one of us tonight we either live to the glory of God or we refuse and I hope tonight that you will discover in the gospel of Jesus Christ the newness of life in which you will give glory to God our father in heaven hear us now we pray and transform us and make us like the disciples who were willing to live and die for the Lord Jesus Christ and use us and convince us afresh that our labour is not in vain in the Lord we pray that our lives will be glorifying to you in Jesus name Amen