

Reading: Acts 12:14-17

¹⁴ She recognized Peter's voice, and because of her joy, she did not open the gate but ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the outer gate.

¹⁵ "You're out of your mind!" they told her. But she kept insisting that it was true, and they said, "It's his angel." ¹⁶ Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were amazed.

¹⁷ Motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. "Tell these things to James and the brothers," he said, and he left and went to another place.

Good morning church!

Last week Jeff set up today's narrative favorably, and to ensure we are all up to speed on the event of Acts chapter 12, let me remind you of what's taking place. First, the gospel's relentless advance has found favorable and fertile soil in the Gentile world. That is any group or culture that is not cultural and religiously Jewish. While Gentiles were getting saved, the Lord's work within Israel continued as well. However, instead of reading about triumphs, we read tragedies. The persecution is no longer merely religious but compounded by political adversaries as well.

King Herod Agrippa 1 executed James, one of the three closest disciples to Jesus, and has now arrested Peter destined to meet the same fate. Why has this king opposed the gospel? Liking his position so much, he fights against King Jesus's anti-imperial message to ingratiate himself to his Jewish peers and his friend Claudius, Emperor of Rome. From every other metric, he was a good king despite the fatal flaw opposing Jesus. Politically and religiously, he would stand out among Israel's Rulers if he is in the line of Kings from the Old Testament. He observed Torah, kept the festivals, expanded Jewish influence in the area. But he opposed King Jesus and his kingdom.

Like our brothers and sisters from the first century, is our fight and struggle against flesh and blood, against rulers and authorities in power and prominence? No, our enemy is the Devil who seeks to destroy anyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ. Our short time together today in God's word aims to equip this body with the

Acts: The Relentless Gospel

Kingdom Triumph Acts 12:5-25 // Patrick Murphy // May 30, 2021

hope and knowledge of Kingdom Triumph. If the world opposes God's message and messengers, how does God ensure we survive?

God binds the church together in tragedy.

Expect for God to move on our behalf.

God's kingdom has no rivals.

1. God binds the church together in tragedy.

Acts 12:1-3 About that time King Herod violently attacked some who belonged to the church, ² and he executed James, John's brother, with the sword. ³ When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter too, during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

Last week, Jeff encouraged us to expect opposition, and adding to his encouragement, we expect it because God uses it for his glory and our good. The violent persecution of believers in Jerusalem is pinpointed in James' execution and Peter's arrest. A great tragedy has fallen on the church, but will there be a triumph? Tragedy and triumph are two sides of the same coin in God's economy, yet we, for whatever reason, experience them as oil and vinegar. An unmixable substance, incomprehensible to one another.

I will concede the initial experience of tragedy is perplexing to the human mind. We ask how good comes from pain, discomfort, or from a change so sudden we dare even to stop and contemplate how it happened. *Yet as time passes, the faithful in Christ patiently await God's interpretation of his will, making plain what we cannot yet conceive. We are sure to err if we scan God's work in vain worldly wisdom.* A wisdom that has us perceive who God is through the lens of our circumstances. Instead, God directs us to view our circumstances through the lens of his character. Who he is, interprets what he is doing.

God is one, the three persons of the Trinity existing in perfect harmony and relationship. Since we are made in his image and his church is the body of Christ, God binds us together as a church family in unity. He often uses trials and tragedies to do it.

⁴ After the arrest, he put him in prison and assigned four squads of four soldiers each to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him.

The events in these verses might be God's answer to Jesus' fervent prayer in the garden. Read with me **John 17:11** "Holy Father, protect them by your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one."

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When Peter is arrested the church unites in praying fervently for his deliverance. Yet their tragedy is probably answer to a prayer prayed long before this trial. Their united prayer certainly began with James' arrest and execution and continues for Peter, pleading for God to move on their behalf.

Do we expect God to move?

2. God moves on our behalf.

⁶ When Herod was about to bring him out for trial, that very night Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while the sentries in front of the door guarded the prison. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. Striking Peter on the side, he woke him up and said, “Quick, get up!” And the chains fell off his wrists.

For a moment, compare this Peter with the younger Peter in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Remember, he was a fisherman who lived on the sea, but one night during a terrible storm raging around him and the other disciples, he frantically wakes up Jesus to calm a stormy sea. That was the old Peter, and the mature Peter on the night before his trial and probable execution was sound asleep. He was so sleepy that light from Heaven could not wake him, so the angel has to slap him awake. Peter had matured to be like his master. He trusts God, period.

a. Peter's trust is God.

Peter doesn't know what God will do. He might free him or call home; either way, Peter rest securely knowing God is God.

The prophet Jeremiah writes of trusting in God, he says:

Jeremiah 17:5,7-8 “Cursed is the person who trusts in mankind. He makes human flesh his strength, and his heart turns from the Lord..., The person who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence indeed is the Lord, is blessed. ⁸ He will be like a tree planted by water: it sends its roots out toward a stream, it doesn't fear when heat comes, and its foliage remains green. It will not worry in a year of drought or cease producing fruit.

Look at the comparison made. A person can either trust in themselves(mankind/flesh) or trust in God. Both face drought and hardship, but one is blessed and the other cursed. **Ex. Ourselves or God, Holy Trinity or the Unholy trinity.** Experiencing blessing or a curse is not predicated upon external circumstances but upon what our hearts trust.

Jeremiah emphasizes our confidence *in* the Lord; he repeats the statement but altering it slightly. Dwell deeply upon this statement for a moment. **Our confidence is the Lord.** His character and nature form the

foundation for trust. Whatever is trustworthy or dependable finds its origin in God, who creates and sustains all things. Peter's trust is the Lord, the unshakable, immutable God. As a result, he sleeps without needing to know what God will do because he already knows who God is.

So Peter gets up, wipes the drool off his face, and listens to the angel,

⁸ “Get dressed,” the angel told him, “and put on your sandals.” And he did. “Wrap your cloak around you,” he told him, “and follow me.” ⁹ So he went out and followed, and he did not know that what the angel did was really happening, but he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ After they passed the first and second guards, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened to them by itself. They went outside and passed one street, and suddenly the angel left him.

God isn't performing one miracle. He's performing many, the chains fall off, the guards remain asleep, and the iron gates open. One after another, and what does Peter think about the miracle? Peter thinks he's sleepwalking. He was so out of it the angel had reminded him how to get dressed, "put your shoes on, put your pants on and let's go."

b. Peter follows God's direction in faith.

Despite not believing the event is actual or remembering God already freed him from prison back in chapter 5, Peter follows the angel's lead. Don't underestimate simple obedience to God in times of tragedy or perplexity. We may not have an angel telling us exactly what to do, but we have God's word with us. In it are commands for life and godliness.

The Praying Church.

Peter wasn't the only person surprised at his release. The gathered church could not believe it either:

Acts 12:13-16

13 He knocked at the door of the outer gate, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer. **14** She recognized Peter's voice, and because of her joy, she did not open the gate but ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the outer gate.

15 "You're out of your mind!" they told her. But she kept insisting that it was true, and they said, "It's his angel."

16 Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were amazed.

c. The church's faith was uncertain but not lacking.

Although they were fervently praying for deliverance, they doubted Peter was truly at the front door. It is pretty ironic as the city is preparing to celebrate Passover, the Jewish feast commemorating deliverance of the nation from oppression and certain destruction in Egypt; God again delivers his servant from the hands of his captor. God surprised faithful people, and he continues to surprise us. Their expression "it must be an angel" signifies they thought Peter was dead and not at their door. When a person died, they believed their "guardian angel" could appear in their likeness to communicate on the individual's behalf one last time. They were faithful but uncertain that God would deliver Peter.

I have heard well-meaning people say that God didn't heal someone, or the desired outcome didn't happen because we didn't have enough faith. **This passage provides sufficient evidence that God does not act on our behalf based on the intensity or sincerity of our faith. Instead, he works according to his will.** The church prayed for James and Peter with equal fervor. James died while Peter survived; why? The Lord still required Peter on earth while James could go home. God delivered both men in different ways. We can be faithful to God while uncertain about what will happen tomorrow.

Does God move our behalf? Yes he does.

God moves on our behalf for our good. For the church gathered in Mary's home, Peter may have been delivered from certain death, but life won't return to the way it was. Peter goes into hiding and recedes as an active leader in the Jerusalem church. He hands off the torch to James, Jesus' half-brother, in a way when he says in verse 17, **"Tell these things to James and the brothers," he said, and he left and went to another place."**

God moves on our behalf to move us into greater Christlike maturity. This James, who Peter passes leadership off too, writes to all the saints in James 1:2-4, "² Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing." Ah yes, I knew you could not wait for me to get here. Verse two's command to consider trials a great joy is only possible because verse four is the goal. That God is moving on our behalf to make us "mature and complete, lacking nothing." This is undoubtedly a good God working in a powerful way to reveal how our tragedies become *his* triumph.

But the Devil continues to oppose God's work in your lives through earthly and spiritual means, but we would do well to remember, God's kingdom has no rivals.

God's kingdom has no rivals.

King Herod learned this well. After he was humiliated by Peter's escape, he had the guards killed and went to Caesarea to lick his wounds. As a good, yet possibly shrewd king, he secured favorable trading rights with surrounding peoples and planned a day to celebrate the deed. Luke records in Acts 12:21-23 the event.

²¹ On an appointed day, dressed in royal robes and seated on the throne, Herod delivered a speech to them.

²² The assembled people began to shout, "It's the voice of a god and not of a man!" ²³ At once an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give the glory to God, and he was eaten by worms and died.

Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, also records these events in his historical accounts, affirming everything Luke records. He describes Herod addressing the crowds in a robe completely covered in silver and glistening in the sun. As the people cried out to him as a god, he notes Herod ought to defer glory to Caesar, which differs from Luke's account of where Herod needed to humbly direct praise to God. Then both affirm he became sick that day and died shortly after.

Another irony is Herod was a man who looked glorious on the outside but was rotting of worms on the inside. Why? He opposed and rivaled King Jesus. He is not guilty of this charge alone. The rest of the nation and Jewish leaders are entrenched in their stubbornness and pride to repent and believe in Jesus as Lord and Messiah. Back in verse three, we learned Peter was arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was the prelude to Passover, and it symbolized the nation's rejection of unrighteousness and godlessness. The people would bring out their old yeast from the previous year and symbolically burn it to represent ridding themselves of sin. Yet, the gesture is meaningless. Instead of glorifying God, they celebrate the death of his servant, James, and praise their earthly king as God's equal. What is God to do?

In 26 years from this event, Rome, with all its might, will crush the apostate nation. Destroying the temple and scattering the people across the empire. It happens because God's kingdom has no rivals.

Application

Discover a passion for God and his Gospel

Passion results in action. What I am passionate about becomes what I involve myself in. We are passionate people with varied interests and pursuits, but nothing ever replaces God and his Gospel. We can discover this passion through reading and prayer, mentoring, or reading Christian biographies. There is no shortage of recourses available to us today on this subject.

Because of the churches' passion for God and his Gospel, they were moved to action to prayer for Peter.

Pray with passion for faith and deliverance.

Fervent prayer is the first step to experiencing a tragedy become a triumph. Fervent prayer is an intensity of Spirit and passion being poured out by us to God. Look with me at other passages where this same word is used.

Jonah 3:8 - ⁸but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them *call out mightily* to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

Luke 22:44 - ⁴⁴Being in anguish, he prayed more *fervently*, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Both verses describe the desperation conveyed to God. Do we permit ourselves to pray fervently? When the request requires it. I would advise the content of our prayer should begin with a request for faith then deliverance.

Tami and Charlie... Faith in God for the deliverance he deems best and assumes it's yes until it's not. We must be prepared to...

Suffer for the gospel's advance.

The word of God will not suffer or be hindered, however, its servants may be bound and bruised for it's advance. It may be external like John Bunyan who was Jailed for his belief and preaching of Jesus in England. Despite being in Jail, the Lord led him to write Pilgrims Progress. A masterpiece of solid Christian theology and spiritual growth in a compelling narrative. Or our suffering might be like Paul's thorn in the flesh or like

William Cowper who suffered from crippling depression. Both men have given us power words and testimonies of God's goodness in spite of suffering. Paul gave us Romans 8 "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." William Cowper gave us many hymns, the most famous is "God Moves"

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform; he plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines, of never-failing skill; he fashions up his bright designs, and works his sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take, the clouds that you much dread, are big with mercy and will break in blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain; God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.

Communion
Pray

1 Cor. 11:23-26 “On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said,^[f] “This is my body, which is^[g] for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Pray