

ACTS | A Church that Prays | Story 17

Acts 12

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Introduction

Last week Pastor Dave described the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles in the conversion of Cornelius the Centurion.

It's speculation but possible that Cornelius was the same centurion written about in Luke 7 who pleaded with Jesus to heal a servant who was sick and near death.

- Both were of the same rank in the military, they were both God-fearers (Acts 10:1).
- Both would have been aware of Jewish traditions of uncleanness associated with contact with non-Jews or Gentiles (Acts 10:28).
- Both were generous with the wealth they had.
- The centurion seeking Jesus loved the Jews and built a synagogue for them (Luke 7:5), while the centurion who sent for Peter was noted for his love for the Jews and his generosity toward the Jewish people (Acts 10:2, 4, 22)

As a result of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem, the believers scatter into Judea and Samaria and begin to take the gospel to both the Jews and Gentiles. The church is growing, it's multiplying, it's spreading like wildfire—the Holy Spirit is moving powerfully among them.

*It just seems like it's all going great... and then, **Today** we pick up in Acts 12.*

Acts 12:1-24

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ 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. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but **earnest prayer** for him was made to God by the church.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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."

¹² 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**. ¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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!" ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him

and were amazed. ¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” ²³ 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.

²⁴ But the word of God **increased** and **multiplied**.

THE PEACE OF CHRIST THE POWER OF PRAYER THE PROSPERING CHURCH

The Peace of Christ

There are so many “Herods” during and after the time of Christ, that’s it’s sometimes hard to track. The members of the Herodian family were political rulers during the lifetime of Christ and the beginning of the early church.

Herod the Great was ruling when Christ was born.

Herod Antipas — *Herod the Great’s son*, was the ruler of Galilee and Perea, the territories in which Jesus and John the Baptist carried out most of their ministries. It was Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptist and tried Christ just before his death.

Herod Agrippa I is persecutor of the church written about in **today’s** passage, in Acts 12.

Herod Agrippa II hears Paul’s testimony in Acts 26 just before Paul is sent to Rome to be tried by the Caesar.

The first Christian martyr was **Stephen**. *But this is the first martyrdom of an Apostle*—someone who was a direct follower and disciple of Christ. This is James the brother of John—one of the original 12. His death is a landmark. He is one of those Jesus referred to as “Sons of Thunder.” One who wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans that rejected Jesus.

It was the mother of James and John who asked that her sons sit at Jesus right and left hand in a position of power.

Matthew 20:22-23

Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup...”

This is that moment in James’ life, when he drank from the cup of suffering that Jesus promised.

The death of James so pleased the Jews, that Herod then arrests Peter with the full intention of another public execution. He wants to be absolutely certain that Peter doesn’t escape, so Herod assigns four squads

of soldiers to him—four guards over each watch—two guards were at the cell door—and two guards were chained to him!

What does Peter do in the midst of this? **He takes a nap!**

1 Peter 2:20-23

But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. ²²“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth.” ²³When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.

Peter is pointing to the fact that Jesus Christ is the perfect example of patient submission to unjust suffering. Christ had every reason to retaliate during His arrest, His trial, His crucifixion—yet He suffered in silence. He could have destroyed His enemies with a word, but instead, He endured utter and total humiliation and pain.

Peter in this passage is living out the implications of the gospel. If Christ walked that road—and entrusted His own life to Him who judges justly—then that’s the calling of Peter and of every single one of us.

Matthew 5:11-12

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

This is why Paul writes in Philippians 4...

Philippians 4:6-7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the **peace of God**, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**It’s understanding the road Christ walked before you,
and the promises that He’s made to you,
that allows you to patiently endure suffering.
Even though there are severe injustices on the earth,
we have a just judge in heaven who will sort it all out one day.**

This is what enables David, when Absalom, his own son, is coming after him to kill him...

Psalms 4:8

In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

What Peter understands is that while He is sleeping, the Lord is working.

The Power of Prayer

One of the things I love about this story is that Peter is sleeping so soundly that the angel has to kick him to wake him up!

Acts 12:5

So Peter was kept in prison, but **earnest prayer** for him was made to God by the church.

This sentence is the turning point of the whole story.

The church is devastated by the news of James being martyred... their first response is to go to God in **bold and specific** prayer for Peter!

STORY:

Martin Luther was the Father of the Protestant Reformation. Frederick Michonius, was his assistant who helped Luther as he was undergoing the enormous task of reforming the church in the 1500's. In 1540, Michonius was on his deathbed and wrote a farewell letter to Luther saying the end is near, I love you... thank you for your friendship.

Luther wouldn't stand for it. And instead of praying a safe "may the Lord be with you and comfort you"... He prayed a massive, specific, faith-filled prayer, and wrote this in a letter back to his friend Michonius.

*"I command you in the name of God to live, because I still have need of you in the work of reforming the church. The Lord will never let me hear that you're dead but will permit you to survive me. For this I am praying... because I seek only to glorify the name of God."
~ Martin Luther¹*

That is a BIG and SPECIFIC prayer.

Michonius had already lost the ability to speak and was evidently hours away from death. But when he heard this letter, it engaged his faith and he was supernaturally healed. He lived six more years and died two months after Luther died.

One of the things that makes our prayers so impotent is that we pray for things that are so general, or even things that God has already answered...

"God give me a good day today..."

"God be with me today"

- He's already promised He would be with you even to the end of the age.

Our prayers are often so general and so small that we undermine the power of God in our lives... I just wonder if He isn't looking at the Church today saying... *"I want to do SO MUCH MORE in you, through you, and around you, and if you would just believe me for BIG, BOLD, SPECIFIC, things—you would be blown away! You wouldn't be able to believe what I'm able to do on your behalf!"*

Not... *"help me get through the day..."*

HOLY AND MIGHTY GOD.

- Raise up my children to be bold spiritual leaders in their school.
- Make my marriage so strong and so healthy and so powerful that it becomes a testimony of your goodness and mercy to those around us.

Not, "God, my husband is a jerk... I pray that you would make my husband less of a jerk."

- NO! "God, touch the heart of my husband, I pray that he would bow his knees in full surrender to your son Jesus. A man after God's own heart and that he would even begin to reveal to me how good

¹ Hyatt, Eddie L. *The Charismatic Luther* (Hyatt Press, October 20 2017)

and gracious and generous You truly are—and may our family be forever changed as he begins to lead us to Jesus and the things God has in store for us—that generations would be different because of the work you’ve done in him.”

Not, “God help me survive the work day today and avoid conflict with the one person that I’m hoping took a sick day ...”

- NO! “God, give me YOUR heart for this person that I can’t stand—change me! Change my heart toward them and in the midst of conflict would you help me to show them your grace and display incredible humility in the workplace that people might take notice of You and what You’ve done in my life!”

Big prayers, specific prayers—and all of a sudden as you see God answer in ENOURMOUS and SPECIFIC ways—your faith grows bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger—and your relationship with God grows deeper and deeper and deeper.

We see it when Rhoda comes to the gate after hearing Peter’s voice—she’s so excited that she leaves him outside, just knocking on the door—and the people who’d been praying, they don’t believe her!

Acts 12:15-16

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!”¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.

Here they are praying for God to move on Peter’s behalf, and God has done it! And they can hardly believe it!

*“The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel.”
~ Thomas Watson, Puritan preacher²*

The Prospering Church

The story takes a very interesting turn here... because God begins to deal with His enemies.

Acts 12:18-19

Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.¹⁹ 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.

Acts 12:21-23

On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them.²² And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!”

The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that this scene took place during a festival honoring Claudius Caesar, and that the king wore a beautiful silver garment in honor of the occasion. We do not know what Herod said in his oration, but we do know why he said it: he wanted to impress the people. And he did! They played on his ego and told him he was a god, and he loved it.

But the problem is...

² Harrison, Nick. *Magnificent Prayer* (Zondervan, May 29, 2010)

Isaiah 42:8

"I am the Lord; that is My name! I will not yield My glory to another or My praise to idols."

Look what happens to Herod...

Acts 12:23

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.

The point of this is to make clear to everyone who has ears to hear—that God and not Herod is to be worshiped and glorified. If any man lifts himself up against God, you will become more feeble than a worm. You cannot win.

Daniel gave the same message about kings....

Daniel 2:21

He changes times and seasons; He removes kings and sets up kings.

And when Nebuchadnezzar boasted...

Daniel 4:30, 32

"Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"

..."You will eat grass like an ox . . . until you have learned that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He wills"

- God doesn't always judge His enemies in the way or as quickly as He did Herod.
- But He always watches over His people and brings purpose out of their suffering.
- The early church had no "positional power" or friends in high places to "pull strings" for them.
- Instead, they went around the thrones of men, directly to the throne of grace.
- The believers didn't need to manipulate circumstance or bribe any human court.
- They simply took their case to the courts of Heaven and left it in the hands of God.

What was the result?

Acts 12:24

...the word of God **increased** and **multiplied**.

At the beginning of Acts 12... Herod *seemed to be in control*, and the church was losing the battle. But at the end of the chapter, Herod is dead, and the church is very much alive and well. The church is continuing to grow and is multiplying rapidly—the word of God is spreading! Lives are being changed and transformed! Believers are being empowered and sent out!

The historical reality of the church is simply this:

The church is strengthened in adversity.

***Let me tell you something Grace Chapel.
God has been and is continuing to strengthen us.
The strength of a church is not measured by nickels and noses,
it's measured by our allegiance and alignment to Christ,
love for one another,
and outward missional focus of the church.***

Conclusion

And in moments where it feels like you're taking another punch to the gut, or blindsided by another disappointment, or like the church in acts 12, where you feel like you're in a losing battle—God wants you to know—**HE IS AT WORK. HE'S NOT FINISHED WITH YOU! *He's got you covered!***

We're not shrinking back. We're not backing down.

This church is going to continue to be a spiritual force to be reckoned with in the days ahead—because our highest allegiance is not to any one man, but to Christ and Christ alone.

**God works when churches pray,
and Satan trembles “when the weakest of saints hit their knees.”**

I want to close by reading Paul's prayer for God to strengthen the church at Ephesus...

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from Whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be **strengthened with power** through His Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have **strength to comprehend** with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Do you see the FAITH in this prayer? GOD IS ABLE TO DO IMMEASURABLY MORE than we could ever ask or imagine—to Him be the glory forever and ever and ever AMEN!

Big BOLD specific, faith-filled, passionate, powerful PRAYER—right in line with the very heart of God...

- ***What if we all began to pray like this?***
- What might God do on our behalf?
- What miraculous works might God do in our midst?
- What testimonies of His goodness might we be able to share with one another?
- How might His Kingdom be seen and experienced and expanded through this family?

**If we will be a praying church...
He will do more than all we can ask or imagine!**

Discussion Questions

1. What gave Peter the ability to peacefully sleep in the middle of being chained between two soldiers?
2. What difference does it make to God when we pray a general prayer or a bold, specific prayer?
3. What is the danger of taking God's glory to yourself or of giving His praise to idols?
4. Why is the church strengthened in adversity?
5. What does that say to Grace Chapel in our church life today?

NOTES