



Unit .32

Session .01

The Church Is Sent to Trust God

Scripture



Acts 12:1-17

1 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.

Intro Options



Main Point:
God responds to prayer even
when we have difficulty
seeing Him at work.

Option 1

You have probably seen some funny videos of trust fall fails. If you haven't, I highly recommend it for a good, clean laugh. If you can, it may be a good idea to show a video to your group. Then have them try to do a trust fall. Choose one small and willing participant to fall into the groups' arms.

▪ How does prayer demonstrate trust in God?

In Acts 12, the church demonstrates their trust in God through fervent prayer. Prayer is one way we show that we know our lives are ultimately in God's hands, and that we trust Him with our future.

Option 2

Your students should pretend they work for a Christian mental/emotional health agency. They've been hired to help people know how to deal with fear. They should make posters (alone or in pairs) or radio commercials that give two or three bad ways and two or three good ways to deal with fear. Depending on your group, you may want to try to keep things light. They could make their bad ways to deal with fear humorous: for example, if you're afraid of the dark, a way to deal with that fear is to start a firefly collection. Coming up with specific examples of fear and how to respond to them may be helpful in catalyzing their ideas.

Let the students prepare their posters and ads and then share them. How many suggested prayer? We'll see in today's lesson that fervent prayer is one way the church responds to fearful circumstances.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 12:1-5.



Both Jewish and Roman leaders failed to stop an ever-increasing number of people from turning to Jesus. Like Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, the Jewish and Roman leaders saw the multiplication of the people of God as a threat. The Jews took advantage of their political influence—an influence the apostles did not have—in an attempt to defeat the apostles by force. Ironically, it seems they learned nothing from the crucifixion and resurrection events.

Imagine the fear the early Christians must have been feeling. One of their most prominent leaders was executed, and another is in prison awaiting the same fate. With no political power, they throw themselves upon the mercy and power of God. Like the children of Israel at the Red Sea, their only hope is that God would make a way where there was no way.

▪ What are some unhealthy ways we respond to crisis and difficulty?

Our natural response to crisis is always carnal. We typically freak out, get angry and bitter, doubt God, sulk in self-pity, or go into problem-solving mode. When things are out of our control, there is a tendency to turn to unhealthy habits for a sense of control and comfort. We might use food, social media, binge watching a TV series, or immersion into a gaming world as an escape from reality to seek comfort. We may retract from others, or we may turn to relationships as a kind of savior they were never meant to be.

▪ What can we learn about responding to crisis from the believers in this story?

The church in Jerusalem shows us how to respond to crisis by turning to the God who reigns. When our lives are out of control, God is still in control. When the scales of justice are unbalanced, God reigns in righteousness. God is not bound by human limitations, governments, or even the laws of nature. Though, at times, it seems that we can do nothing, God can do anything. Fervent prayer is an action that shows that we truly believe in such a God.



99 Essential Doctrines (p. 48, DDG)

Prayer and Providence

If God is in control and already knows the future, why pray? The Bible teaches that although God has a plan for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the means God uses to accomplish His divine purpose. Even though God knows the end result, the means that lead to that end result will be accomplished through prayer. In this sense, it is true that “prayer changes things,” and it is also true that God uses prayer to change our hearts so that our will comes into conformity with His.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
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Acts 12


12:1-5. “Having won points with the Jews by the execution of James, Agrippa then moved against the chief of the apostles, Peter, arresting him and putting him in prison...It would have been after the holy days had ended that Agrippa would have brought Peter forth for public trial and surely also for execution (v.4)...While Peter waited in prison, the Christians used their most effective means of assistance. They prayed continually for him (v.5).”¹

“Fervent prayer is motivated by love and deep concern and is offered with enthusiasm, feeling, and faith. This is not a casual listing of requests, but prayer that flows from the heart over a pressing need.”²

“Thou art coming to a King, Large petitions with thee bring; For his grace and power are such, None can ever ask too much.”³

1. John B. Polhill, *Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary)*, vol. 26 (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub Group, 2011).
2. Charles Stanley, “Prayer That Moves God,” *intouch.org*, 2017, <https://www.intouch.org/-/media/sermon-notes/prayer-that-moves-god.ashx>.
3. Downing, Frank U. *Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare*. Chicago Music Co., Chicago, monographic, 1885. Notated Music. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sm1885.03117/>.

In Defense (p. 50, DDG)



One apostle is martyred while the other receives a miracle, but surely the early Christians prayed for James, just as they prayed for Peter. So, are we to conclude that they lacked faith when James was in prison? That God wasn't hearing their prayers before? Our response to both of those options should be a resounding, “No.” This is a story where we find that God is not like a genie, and prayer is not us attempting to twist God's arm to do what He has not willed. Rather, prayer brings our will before God, with earnest plea, and then surrenders to His rule and wisdom.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 12:6-11.



Have you ever had a dream that was so vivid it felt real? Peter had an experience that felt like a dream, but it was real. Perhaps he thought it was a vision because of how unlikely (and humanly impossible) his escape would have been. Regardless of why, Peter was initially unaware of just how real this miracle was. And yet, the miracle does not merely happen to him, but with him. There were five things Peter was instructed to do in verses 7-8: to get up, to get dressed, to put his sandals on, to put a cloak on, and to follow the angel.

There are some things that only God can do, but He still gives us a role to play in His miraculous work. God almost always works through people to accomplish His will, whether through prayer like in verse 5 or through simple obedience in verses 7-8.

- **What are some simple ways you can obey God that could make a big difference in your life and the lives of others?**

Hudson Taylor once wrote, “A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in little things is a great thing.”⁴ The angel didn’t command Peter to do extraordinary things; Peter simply had to stand and walk. It was God who did the chain-breaking, prison opening miracle. God doesn’t need you to perform a miracle—He can do it Himself, for He is God—but He does want you to obey when He calls you to do something.

Jesus has performed the miracle of setting us free from the binding power of sin, but are we walking in His freedom? Jesus has given us access to Heaven’s throne, but are we going to God in prayer? Jesus has done what only He could do, but we have a responsibility to do what He gives us the power to do.



Read Acts 12:12-17.



When something great happens in your life, who do you tell? Who do you immediately call or text or go see? Typically, we want to tell our family and closest friends. Where do you go when you’re in need or in danger? Typically, it’s the same people. For Peter, those people were his church family. He had just experienced a miraculous release, but in a very real sense, he wasn’t completely out of harm’s way just yet. So, he turned to his church to share what God has done.

- **What can we do as a group/church to be a safe place and refuge for each other when someone is in need?**

For both the good times and the bad times, our goal should be to create a church culture where our church family is the go-to people in our lives. We must create a culture of love, dependability, loyalty, and care that makes our church a place of refuge spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

- **What can we learn from Rhoda’s example as a young person in the church?**

Rhoda was a young servant who was not in a position of authority. She may have thought her job wasn’t all that important, but God used her to accomplish His purposes. Regardless of your age or position, God can use you. She wasn’t powerful, but she was persistent with the truth. As you commit yourself to the truth and commit to use whatever voice you have to speak up for what is true, God will use your life regardless of your age or position.

COMMENTARY

Acts 12

Main Point:
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12:6-11. Neither Herod nor the guards had reckoned on divine intervention, and presumably it would take nothing less than that to extricate Peter from this situation.”⁵

“Obviously, this was not Peter’s escape. It was rather his deliverance.”⁶

12:12-17. Darrell Bock notes, “The community is praying, not knowing that God has already answered their prayers.” As we pray, God is at work behind the scenes. Even when we haven’t yet realized what God is doing, we can rest in knowing that God is already working to produce His will in our lives.⁷

12:17. “The James mentioned here is the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3), who later figured as the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; 21:18); Paul regarded him, along with Peter and John, as one of the three ‘pillars’ of the church (Gal. 2:9). He had been a witness of a resurrection appearance of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7), and hence Paul recognized him as an apostle (Gal. 1:19). It seems probable that, from an early stage, he was one of the leaders in the church, and at some point he took Peter’s place as the recognized leader.”⁸

4. Gavin Ortlund, Twitter post, April 9, 2020, 10:43 p.m., <https://twitter.com/gavinortlund/status/1248456497421406208>

5. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

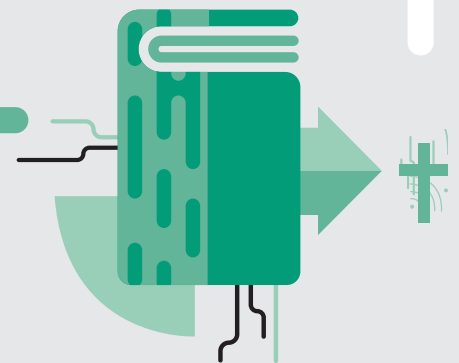
6. John B. Polhill, *Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary)*, vol. 26 (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub Group, 2011)

7. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids (Mich.), MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

8. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (IVP Numbered))* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

(p., DDG) Christ Connection

When Peter was arrested and put in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for his release. God delivered Peter miraculously, but the church failed to believe he had been rescued at first. In a similar way, Jesus taught His disciples that He would die and come back to life, but they, too, failed to believe at first. When they saw and experienced the resurrected Savior, their faith increased.



Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

Head



How can trusting in God's providence motivate you to pray more?

How might your prayer life change if you remembered God's ear is open to you?

Heart



What are some reasons we can trust God even when He does not answer a prayer like we hoped He would?

What are some areas of life where our hearts are tempted to please others instead of pleasing God?

Hands



What are some practical steps you can take to develop a deeper lifestyle of prayer?

What are some areas of life you need to move from prayer to action?

Main Point: God responds to prayer even when we have difficulty seeing Him at work.



Head

If you believe God is powerful, sovereign, and good, it will encourage you to pray more. Why pray to a God who is weak? Why pray to a God who isn't in control? What a waste of time! So, when you believe God is in control, you are motivated to pray more. A God who is great, powerful, sovereign, and good is a God worth praying to.

Now, imagine the thought of a God like that whose ear is open to you. Tim Keller wrote, "The only person who dares wake up a king at 3:00 AM for a glass of water is a child. We have that kind of access."⁹ My children come to me when they are in need, whether it is midday or the middle of the night. My help is just one cry or call away. Through the cross of Jesus Christ, we have become the children of God. We can go to God with anything and everything, for no problem is too small for His care or too big for His power.



Heart

We will all face situations where our trust in God will be tested. That was certainly the case for the early church in Acts 12. Persecution was on the rise, James had been killed, and Peter had been imprisoned (Acts 12:1-4), yet we find the church expressing its trust in God through prayer (Acts 12:5). They knew the stories of Abraham, Joseph, David, Daniel, and many other Old Testament saints whose lives demonstrated God's faithfulness, but most of all, they had seen God's love and faithfulness in Jesus Christ. The gospel is a constant reminder that God can be trusted, even when our situation tempts us to question His love and power.

When we trust God, knowing that He is faithful and will prevail in the end, it frees us from the pressure to please people. People are fickle, and the ones we try so hard to please today may turn on us tomorrow. Seeking their approval is short-sighted, but God's approval lasts forever.



Hands

We make time for the priorities in our lives. If sports are a priority, you will go to practices and work on your skills in your free time. If school is a priority, you will get to class on time and study at home. So, if prayer is a priority, you will set aside time to pray. You can pray when you read your Bible, when you shower, when you are getting ready, or when you are riding down the road. You can pray anytime and anywhere.

However, once we've prayed, we need to take action. Tommy Nelson said, "Don't lean on a shovel and pray for a hole."¹⁰ Prayer is not a substitute for action; rather, it is an act of faith that is meant to be coupled with action. When our prayers are coupled with obedience, we are demonstrating that we believe God is working and that we desire to work with Him.

9. Timothy Keller, *Twitter post*, February 23, 2015, 10:05 a.m., <https://twitter.com/timkellernyc/status/569890726349307904>

10. Garrett Kell, *Twitter post*, March 12, 2018, 4:37 p.m., <https://twitter.com/pastorjgkell/status/973311945033035778>