

I. Introduction

Good morning! We started on Acts 12 last week, but let's read from the beginning of the chapter so that we can remember the context for today's Scripture. **Acts 12:1-2, "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword."** James was killed as a martyr and we can be sure that he was welcomed into heaven by Jesus. After this King Herod will also die, but he will die under judgment for his sins.



Acts 12:3-4, "When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover." The text says that Herod's actions, "pleased the Jews. This is a reference to the Jewish leadership, the Sanhedrin, which was an assembly of 70 Jewish leaders. Last week we talked about the Passover and we saw that James and Peter were passed over from judgment because of their faith in Jesus. One died and the other lived, but both continued in loving relationship with Jesus.



King Herod assigned sixteen soldiers to guard Peter. That seems like a lot for guarding one fisherman, but this was apparently the normal practice in the Roman Empire. Many Bible scholars believe that the tomb of Jesus was also guarded by sixteen soldiers, although the number is not directly stated. Another common practice in the Roman Empire was to execute guards who failed in their duty. Sadly, that is what will happen to Peter's guards, even though what happened was not their fault. This was brutal, but in those days it was probably considered necessary as a way to make sure that guards could not be bribed. Even a large bribe will be refused if the soldier knows that accepting it will cost his life. Of course, if the bribe is from the authorities, that is a special case.

When Jesus rose from the grave, the Jewish leaders were determined to oppose the truth of the resurrection with a lie, so they bribed the guards. **Matthew 28:12, "When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day."**

This makes no sense at all because a guard who was asleep at his post would be in danger of execution and he would certainly be executed if the thing he was guarding was stolen while he slept. Despite this obvious contradiction, this lie is still believed by some people even today. But the fact that the guards were allowed to live proves that it is a lie since only the influence of powerful political forces would be able to save the guards after they had failed in their assignment to guard the tomb.

Acts 12:5, "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." This is where we stopped last week. Peter is in prison, guarded by sixteen soldiers, but the church is praying. What do you think the church was praying for? Well, they were praying for Peter, and so it seems certain that they were praying for Peter to be rescued from prison. Peter was beloved and the church had already lost James. They were surely praying for Peter's life. With that context in mind, let's read **Acts 12:6-25** and see what happens next.



II. Scripture Reading Acts 12:6-25, (NIV, 1984)

6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. 8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him.

9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. 11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. 13 Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" 15 "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." 16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 19 After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while.

20 He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. 21 On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. 22 They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man."

23 Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. 24 But the word of God continued to increase and spread. 25 When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

III. Teaching

The last verses of this chapter remind us that the Good News of Jesus was being preached more and more widely even as the church was being persecuted. Barnabas and Saul had taken an offering to Jerusalem from the church in Antioch and now they are returning to the work in Antioch, taking a young man named John Mark along. When we study Acts 13, we will return to this spot.



As we saw last week, King Herod, more specifically, King Herod Agrippa I, was judged severely for his sins, in particular for his sin of accepting praise due only to god. However, as we noted last week, the historian Josephus records that it took five days before King Herod died from his sudden illness, so Herod did have time and opportunity to reflect on his sins and, we hope, repent.

Let's go back and take a closer look at what happened with Peter. **Acts 12:6, "The night before**

Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.” Peter is bound with chains, but he is getting some restful sleep, while the guards have to remain alert. This is a good illustration of how we can relax and be filled with the peace of Jesus regardless of our circumstances. The Christian life is not free from trouble, but as we trust in Jesus more and more, we can have more and more peace and joy even in times of trouble.



Acts 12:7, “Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.” An angel came and wacked Peter in the side to wake him up, and then told him to get ready to go. The chains fell off and they left the jail together. The guards, apparently, had been immobilized by the angel, perhaps put into a deep sleep right where they stood. I hope that Peter had preached the Good News of Jesus to these guards since King Herod will soon execute them for their failure to guard Peter.

Peter had been sleeping so soundly that he still wasn't really awake, and at first Peter thought it was all a dream or a vision. It was only after the angel had led Peter past all of the guards and out the city gate that Peter realized that what was happening was real. **Acts 12:12-14, “When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!””**

We can imagine Rhoda's joy and excitement when she realized that it was Peter at the door, the very man they had all been praying for so earnestly. Audrey Lopata gives us a picture of the moment, with doves indicating the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is one of those places where we can enjoy the fact that the Bible records things just as they really happened. Sometimes the events are joyful, sometimes tragic, and sometimes they are even humorous. Here is a moment which is both joyful and humorous. In her excitement that Peter has come, Rhoda completely forgets to open the door and let Peter in.



In **Mark 11:24**, Jesus had told His disciples, **“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”** In the full context and counsel of Scripture, we understand that this promise applies only when we pray with right motives for things that are in God's will. At the time that Jesus told the disciples this, they would have understood this. But even with that caveat, it is an amazing and wonderful promise. With this promise, we might expect that the disciples would have been able to pray for Peter with confidence and in expectation of God's answer.

And the Scripture does tell us that the disciples had been praying earnestly. So, how did the disciples respond when Rhoda told them Peter was at the door? **Acts 12:15-16 ““You're out of your mind,’ they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, ‘It must be his angel.’ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.”** When I read this, I don't know whether to laugh or to cry. The disciples had been praying for Peter, but they were at first disbelieving and then astonished when God answered their prayers by returning Peter to them safely.

How about us? Do we pray with an expectation that our prayers will be answered? Or are we disbelieving and astonished when God answers our prayers? I don't know about you, but this question challenges me to examine my own attitude toward prayer. Even though I have read the record of God's great works and amazing answers to prayer in the Bible, and even though I have experienced God's miracles in my own life, I have to confess that all too often I pray with little expectation of God answering. I have faith and confidence in God's love and I know God will do the right thing, the very best thing. But when I pray for some specific thing, I often fail to watch and wait expecting God's answer. Do you ever have that problem? Perhaps a lot of us do.

The problem is that we have very short memories. We open our Bibles and read of the amazing things God has done in the past, and then we close our Bibles and forget. We fervently pray for some need and we rejoice when God answers our prayers, then we get a good night's sleep and forget. But if we want to pray with faith and expectation of God's answer, then we need to remember. We need to remember the great miracles God has done in answer to prayer in the Bible, in our own lives, and in the testimonies of our brothers and sisters in the church here at OIC and around the world.

In order to help them remember the things that God had done for them, the ancient Israelites were told to set up memorial stones. Let's take a look at Joshua 4:1-7.

Joshua 4:4-7, "So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.""



Like the ancient Israelites, we also need help to remember what God has done, for our own faith and also so that we can pass our faith on to others. Of course, "memorial stones," don't have to be literal stones. A notebook, an online blog, notecards, or even Facebook will work. The point is to find a way to remember your prayers and God's answers so that your faith can be strengthened.

I found the blog of a kindergarten teacher at a Christian school who prays with her students every day. The students write their prayer requests on a piece of paper and she uses this jar as a place to keep all of the old prayer requests after they have been answered.



God answers prayer. There are three answers that God often uses when we pray. The first answer is, "yes." This answer immediately strengthens our faith. The second answer is, "not yet." In this case God is going to give us what we asked for, but the timing is not right, so we have to wait. This answer helps us to learn patience and trust. The third answer is, "no, because I have something better in mind." In this case God gives us something even better than what we asked for, although we may not understand that immediately. But God is far wiser than us and only He knows the full situation. For this reason, it is good to leave room for this answer by praying for His will to be done.



IV. Conclusion

Today we have seen that the disciples were very surprised when God quickly said, "yes," to their prayers with an amazing miracle that freed Peter from prison. I would like to encourage all of us, including myself, to be more diligent in keeping a record of the many times when God has answered our prayers so that our faith can be strengthened and so that we can testify to God's goodness and love more effectively when we speak to our families, friends, loved ones, coworkers, and neighbors.



Let's close for today with **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."** Let's pray.

V. Prayer

