

“A Surprising Answer to Prayer”

Acts 12:1-25

8-9-20

Have you ever prayed fervently for something and then were completely surprised when God answered your prayer?

Erwin – WWII Survival

In Acts 12 we see another surprising answer to prayer. And through it we are going to discover that ***God has the power to work through the prayers of His people to deliver them from the evil plots of men and establish His own plans in their place.***

[Acts 12:1-24]

1. **God is present in the dark** (Acts 12:1-5).

Acts 12 most certainly represents extraordinary times in the early church—perhaps the darkest hour that the church had ever faced up to this point.

- Herod is launching another round of persecution by arresting Christians for the purpose of injuring them (vs. 1)
- James has been put to death with the sword--probably beheaded. (vs. 2)
- Peter, their most prominent leader, is in prison waiting to be executed (vs. 3).
- And Herod is bringing all this harm to the church for his own political gain with the Jews.

Imagine the emotions that the believers must have been experiencing.

- Pain of grieving the death of James
- Anger at the injustice of persecution and being used as political props for Herod.
- Fear for the safety of Peter and even fearing the possibility

of losing their own lives.

What would become of the church?

Where was God in vs. 2 when James faced martyrdom at the hands of his persecutors?

There is a certain mystery in God’s providence, isn’t there? James was executed, Peter was delivered, and John was exiled. The outcome was very different for each of these men, yet we know that God was not taken by surprise nor was He failing to work out His sovereign plan in each circumstance.

Jesus has warned both James and John that they would drink His cup and share in the baptism of His sufferings.

Tertullian, the great defender of the faith in the second century said, “the blood of Christians is [the] seed [of the church].” (*Apologeticus* 50). Perhaps that was what God was doing through the death of James.

Beloved, it’s easy for us to become disillusioned in the dark when we can’t make sense of the mystery of God’s providence—why He delivers some but not others. Yet the reality for every believer walking through dark times is that God is present there with them in the dark.

Certainly, God was present with James in his death (whose life did not end in tragedy but in the glorious, heavenly presence of Jesus). Certainly, we see evidence of God’s presence as the church gathers to pray through the night—God is among them, sustaining their faith (vs. 5)! Certainly we see the peace of God’s presence in vs. 6. It’s the eve of Peter’s execution and what is Peter doing? He’s sleeping—chained to two Roman guards!

Before we jump too quickly to God’s intervention to deliver Peter, it’s important to be reminded that God is present in the dark. God has not left you or abandoned you when life takes a downward turn. He is

still with you; He is working and He is worthy of your trust. God's power is so great, His wisdom so infinite, that He doesn't need good circumstances to shape good character and faith in you. He can work with anything. He can turn ashes into beauty.

It's important to remember that God is present in the dark. But it is essential to believe that God is powerful to deliver.

2. **God is powerful to deliver** (Acts 12:6-17).

In vs. 6-11 we see the miraculous fingerprint of God on Peter's deliverance.

-Who sent the angel to awaken Peter and lead him out?

-Who caused the chains to fall off his hands?

-Who blinded the eyes and deafened the ears of the guards in the cell and the guard at the 1st gate and the guard at the 2nd gate as Peter escaped?

-Who caused the iron city gate to open by itself?

God did!

But God was not the only one working the night shift. He was working through the church as they gathered for an all-night prayer meeting. [vs. 5]

I want you to imagine a massive steel door. On one side is extreme darkness—that's vs. 1-4. On the other side is the intense life-giving light of God's deliverance—that's vs. 6 and following (Peter will be delivered; Herod will be dethroned; James will be vindicated).

Vs. 5 is the hinge upon which the door swings so that the church can pass from darkness to deliverance. That hinge is the fervent prayers of God's people. Keep in mind that God is on both sides of the door. He is present in the dark and He powerful to deliver. But He has ordained that His deliverance most often comes through the prayers of the saints.

The late reverend John Thomas said, "*We serve a God who won't do everything, but He can do anything.*" In other words, we have a part

to play, we have a responsibility to fulfill and it begins with prayer, believing God can do anything. It's never legitimate for us to say, "there's nothing we can do." We can pray and trust God to do the impossible.

Never view your past or present circumstances as the final word on your future. Always factor in the sovereign power and wisdom of God. Beloved, we must think and believe what is true (about God's ability to intervene) and we must pray, which is the first step of acting in faith.

It's almost humorous the way the story unfolds. Peter is so in shock (and half asleep) that the angel has to give him step by step instructions. The church is so amazed by the answer to their prayer that Rhoda leaves Peter at the door and they find it more plausible to believe that Peter's angel is at the door than Peter himself. The point of all this is to highlight that God had truly done the impossible. By God's hand alone, Peter had walked out of a maximum-security prison!

Yet this is not the end of the story. The church had yet to learn that...

3. **God is preeminent over all dominions** [powers and authorities] (18-24).

Vs. 18 is the understatement of the 1st century: "*Now when day came, there was **no small disturbance** among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.*"

That's because they knew their lives were in jeopardy for losing a prisoner. And indeed Herod has them executed in vs. 19.

Other than Peter's escape, it seems as though Herod is getting his way—people live or die at this command. He seems to be the triumphant one up to this point in chapter 12. Yet chapter 12 ends with God settling accounts with Herod and revealing that Herod's

pride does not make him strong, but rather makes him weaker than worms.

Vs. 20 goes on to tell us that the people of Tyre and Sidon, wanted to regain favor with Herod because they depended on him for essential resources. So when Herod gave a speech, they flattered him by saying, “the voice of a god and not a man.” [vs. 23] These were likely intestinal worms that could create an acute obstruction which is very painful and deadly .¹

*So who triumphs in the end? Notice the contrast between vs. 23 & 24: “And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. **But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.**”*

I believe the message of Acts 12 is found in the big picture. The chapter begins with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing. It ends with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing.²

Acts 12 is much more than a fascinating story of answered prayer and deliverance. Acts 12 plays an essential role in the life of the church because it demonstrates 7 realities...

- The reality of martyrdom and persecution—some will die for Christ as James did.
- The power of God to deliver through prayer (as Peter was delivered). Prayer is the means to seek and receive God’s deliverance.
- The destructive nature of self-exalting pride and the wisdom of honoring God regardless of the risk. Herod’s pride resulted in death and the church’s risky faith resulted in deliverance.
- They mystery of God’s providence and that whether He delivers through rescue or through death, we are called to the same response of persevering faith.

- Persecution may temporarily injure the church, but it cannot eradicate the progress of the word. Don’t stand against the word unless you want to fall like Herod. If you want to grow, ingest the word.
- The church’s one job (unrelenting mission) is to spread the word regardless of the weather (regardless of winds of favor or winds of persecution)
- God is able to overthrow man’s malicious plans and replace them with his own plans for justice and salvation.

You may not be facing deadly persecution today, but many of you are enduring circumstances that have worn you down and you are tempted to despair. You feel like giving up.

You feel like giving up:

- investing in your marriage
- your struggle against an ingrained sinful habit (alcohol or lust)
- resisting your thoughts and natural tendencies with the truth
- choosing to hope in God when everything around you makes you sad or angry
- battling against your self-centeredness and pride

Beloved, giving up is not an option. But you need to lead your heart, so tell yourself, right now, “giving up is not an option. I will trust the Lord.” You can cling to hope. You can keep persevering because...

- God is present in the dark.
- God is powerful to deliver.
- God is preeminent over all dominion.

Prayer Challenge: “Lord, reassure me of Your presence in the dark, reinforce my faith in Your power to deliver, and reign over me and my circumstances as You reign over every dominion.”

¹ Ibid., 213.

² Ibid.

Communion:

At the beginning of the gospel story:

- Jesus was dead
- Our soul was imprisoned
- Sin and evil seemed to be reigning

But God *overcame the malicious plots of men to destroy His Son by working out His own plan of salvation for sinners.*

At the end of the gospel story:

- Sin's curse was dead
- Our souls are free from sin's bondage
- Jesus is reigning over us with love, empowering us to live in the light

It's been a while since we have taken communion together. For some of you that means it's been a while since you have examined your heart. *What are you clinging to today that Jesus paid for you to be free of?* Your willingness to forsake it not only determines whether you should partake of the Lord's supper, but also indicates where you stand before God. I urge us to confess our sin and seek the renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Bread: Jesus' sinless life was given in our place to pay for the guilt of our sin and replace death with life.

Cup: Jesus' blood was shed to replace God's wrath with the Father's favor.