

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

MAY 23RD–24TH // BOOK OF ACTS

MARTYRDOM & IMPRISONMENT (ACTS 12:1–5) KING HEROD'S VIOLENT ATTACK (V. 1)

The King referred to in v. 1 would have been Herod Agrippa I, who ruled Judea from 41–44 A.D.

- He was a “puppet king” who, though Jewish, was under the thumb of the Roman Empire.
- The Jews at that time generally hated the King, so Herod apparently saw persecuting the Christians as a way to win Jewish approval.

As a “territorial monarch” (puppet king), Herod's favor with Rome depended on his ability to keep the peace of Rome.

- In Israel, that meant advancing the majority and suppressing minorities, especially disruptive groups like this growing band of Christians.
- So, Herod has James (John's brother) captured and “executed...with the sword” (beheaded or run through with a sword).

“...IT PLEASSED THE JEWS...” (V. 3)

This campaign of violence against the Christians was pleasing to the Jewish leaders and authorities who had already killed Stephen.

- When Herod saw his approval rating rise after killing James, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.
- This was during The Festival of Unleavened Bread, a seven-day Jewish feast that began the day after Passover each spring.

JEWISH LAW WOULD HAVE REQUIRED ALL MALES IN ISRAEL TO ATTEND THE FESTIVAL IN JERUSALEM.

It seems like Herod strategically arrested Peter during a time of year when thousands of worshipping visitors would be in the city—a perfect time for him to win public approval and make an example out of Peter.

- Executing someone during a feast would have been taboo, so he threw Peter into prison (v. 4).

The apparent plan of Herod was for Peter's execution to take place after the festival in a public setting in Jerusalem.

- It must have seemed bleak and hopeless for Peter the night of his arrest in that prison cell.
- There were four squads of soldiers guarding him, and v. 6 tells us that he was chained between two soldiers.
- “So Peter was kept in prison,” BUT...” (v. 5)

“...THE CHURCH WAS PRAYING FERVENTLY...” (V. 5B)

The only weapon available for this church was prayer—they had no political or social power.

- They could not organize a march, a sit-in, a protest, or a boycott to demand their rights and get Peter released.
- The church's strategy was to pray fervently to God on behalf of Peter.
- Do we see prayer as our first option? Or last?

I GUESS ALL WE CAN DO NOW IS PRAY...”

Living in our modern, materialistic, and convenience/results-focused world can give us delusions about our own sovereignty.

- In other words, we often forget how many things are actually out of our control.
- So, when something happens that we cannot control, instead of praying to the God who is in control, we often try everything else first.

WHEN THE BATTLE IS TOO BIG FOR US TO FIGHT

When our trust has shifted from God's sovereign and loving care for our lives to our own control, crippling anxiety is inevitable.

- It is spiritually exhausting and completely unsustainable to assume that certain outcomes rest entirely on us.
- Prayer is an invitation to release our need to control and cry out to the God who truly is in control.

PRAYER CHANGES THINGS

Prayer changes outcomes—God is not distant or indifferent; He acts in response to the prayers of His people in ways we cannot see.

- Prayer changes our awareness—it opens our eyes to the reality of God's presence.
- Prayer changes us—before it changes anything else, it reorders our desires, calms our fears, and reshapes our trust.

PRISON BREAK (ACTS 12:6–19)

HOW WOULD YOU SLEEP THE NIGHT BEFORE A TRIAL THAT COULD LEAD TO YOUR DEATH? HOW DEEP IS YOUR TRUST IN THE LORD?

The night before his trial, Peter is asleep, chained between two soldiers (v. 6).

- He's already seen God miraculously deliver him once, so he knows God can rescue him, and even if not, he is going to be with the Lord.
- Deep faith shows up most clearly under pressure.

STRUCK BY AN ANGEL (V. 7)

Luke says sixteen soldiers are assigned to guard Peter—“four squads.”

- He's chained to two guards, with others stationed at the doors and watching the perimeter.
- In the middle of the night, an angel shows up, strikes him on the side, and tells him to get up and get dressed.
- As Peter stands, the chains fall off his wrists.

Peter assumes he is dreaming but follows the angel anyway as they pass through multiple guard posts (vs. 8–9).

- Somehow, the guards do not see him—whether they are asleep or God simply blinds their eyes, Peter walks right through.
- As they reach the iron gate leading into the city, the text uses the word “automate”—the gate opens on its own as Peter walks out (v. 10).

THE ANGEL LEAVES, AND PETER REALIZES WHAT HAS ACTUALLY JUST HAPPENED (V. 11).

Back in Jerusalem, the church is gathered in Mary's house, praying earnestly for Peter's deliverance (v. 12).

- While they are still praying, Peter shows up and knocks at the door (vs. 13–14).
- A servant named Rhoda hears his voice and runs back inside instead of opening the door.

THE GROUP DOES NOT BELIEVE HER—THEY ASSUME SHE IS OUT OF HER MIND (V. 15)

Isn't it interesting that God has just answered their prayer, yet this group of Christians refuses to see and receive their answer?

- Sometimes our doubt and cynicism show up in our inability to recognize God's work in our midst.
- Eventually, this group acknowledges that it must be “his angel.”

MANY 1ST-CENTURY JEWS BELIEVED EACH PERSON HAD AN ASSIGNED GUARDIAN ANGEL.

Some thought these angels resembled the person and appeared after their death.

- This was not a biblical teaching, but it was a common cultural belief.
- They can't believe God answered their prayer, but they are ready to believe Peter is dead!
- This is what happens when we expect the worst.

MEANWHILE, THE ANSWER TO THEIR PRAYER IS STANDING AT THE GATE STILL KNOCKING!

Finally, they open the door—and there he is.

- Shock turns into loud celebration until Peter has to quiet them down.
- He explains what happened, tells them to inform the other church leaders, and slips away to “another place” (v. 17).
- God answers prayer.

PETER ONLY APPEARS ONCE MORE IN ACTS (CH. 15), BUT TRADITION SAYS HE LATER MINISTERS WIDELY IN THE CHURCH AND IS EVENTUALLY CRUCIFIED UPSIDE DOWN IN ROME UNDER NERO.

Herod responds to Peter's escape by executing the 16 guards.

- Herod is a tyrannical, oppressive bully.
- This is the question that is left hanging: How will God respond to Herod's tyranny?

EXPECTING THE WORST AND MISSING GOD'S WORK

When we assume the worst, our imagination get trained to interpret reality through fear and negativity instead of faith.

- Even when God answers clearly, we can miss it because we were not prepared to recognize His work in the form it actually takes.
- God is often moving in our lives—but if we are full of fear, negativity, and doubt we won't see it.

A GOD AND NOT A MAN? (ACTS 12:20–25)

HEROD LEAVES THE PETER SITUATION BEHIND AND HEADS OFF TO HANDLE ANOTHER POLITICAL CRISIS.

Tyre and Sidon are suffering from the famine predicted in Chapter 11 and depend on Judea for food supplies.

- Herod wasn't happy with these two cities; however, they sought reconciliation through Blastus (a household servant) and arranged a public audience with Herod during a festival (v. 20).

HEROD APPEARS IN ROYAL ROBES AND TAKES HIS SEAT TO GIVE A PUBLIC ADDRESS (V. 21).

Ancient accounts place this moment during a major athletic festival honoring Rome.

- This is a group that only wants his food.
- As he speaks, the crowd starts chanting that he is, a god, not a man (v. 22).
- He does not correct them—he receives it and likely welcomes it.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THAT MOMENT—THRONE, ROBES, PRAISE—AN ANGEL OF THE LORD STRIKES HIM DOWN.

The text says it happens because he refused to give glory to God (v. 23).

- Luke records that he is “eaten by worms,” and the Jewish historian Josephus describes a slow, painful death days later. Herod is quite literally eaten from the inside out—a picture of what the love of power, money, and glory will do.

GOD'S RESPONSE TO A PROUD, VIOLENT RULER WHO USED POWER FOR HIMSELF IS DECISIVE AND FINAL

The same God who delivers His people also confronts injustice, pride, and tyranny.

- God knows how to deal with bullies—we can trust Him to make wrong things right.
- The chapter closes by shifting attention from Jerusalem and Peter to Barnabas and Saul in Antioch (vs. 24–25).

GOD IS FULLY CAPABLE OF FIGHTING OUR BATTLES FOR US

- We can easily find ourselves overwhelmed by the battles that we face in this life.
- Impossible situations can take the form of addictions, medical diagnoses, broken relationships, financial woes, or family conflict.
- This can lead to crippling anxiety, fear, worry, doubt, depression, and restlessness.
- Some battles are too big to fight on our own.
- We serve a God who's not only capable but willing.
- He can break chains that we think cannot be broken.
- He can open doors that we are incapable of opening.
- He can deal with our enemies and put a stop to their injustice and wickedness.
- He can give us peace and strength to endure.
- **Our responsibility is simply to cast our burdens at His feet in prayer and allow Him to work however He sees fit.**
- Our responsibility is to exercise our faith and let Him be God instead of trying to do it ourselves.
- *What's your biggest worry right now?*

WHAT IF GOD IS WORKING AND MOVING IN YOUR LIFE, BUT YOU CANNOT SEE IT?

- What if the answer to your prayer is actually knocking at your door—but you refuse to see it because you've gotten so used to expecting the worst? What does that say about your faith?
- God does not always answer our prayers the way we think He will—but He is always good and His ways and plans are better than ours.
- *“Be humbled by God's power so that when the right time comes he will honor you. Turn all your anxiety over to God, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6–7, God's Word Translation).*