

Years ago, I was home watching ESPN, and the World Series of Poker came on. I watched as professional poker players made bets with millions of dollars riding on the tournament. On one hand, a poker player made a bet pushing all his chips into the middle. When the players turned their cards over, he was losing, and he had a very, very small chance of winning. The camera panned to the audience and focused on his girlfriend, who immediately hit her knees and started praying, “God, give Jimmy an ace! Please, God, give him an ace so he’ll know you’re real!” I wondered what exactly she was asking God to do. The next card was already in the deck. Was she asking for a magic card trick? If God helps Jimmy win, he’s causing Dave to lose. Maybe Dave’s mom is in the back praying for a king!

I don’t know if God wants us to be praying about poker hands or football games, but I do know that God wants us to bring our needs before him. The Bible says that we should pray on all occasions, with all kinds of requests. As we study Acts together, we are going to see that God’s people prayed all the time, especially when they were in need. Sometimes, God answered those prayers in miraculous ways. Today, we are going to study Acts 12 together. As we just read, Acts 12 begins with *the Crisis*. What’s happened? Luke tells us things are not well. Here’s some of the background we need to know.

In AD 41, Herod Agrippa was appointed king over Israel. Rome sent him there to be a vassal king, a puppet ruler, to keep the peace and secure tax revenue. His top mission when he got to Israel was to build alliances and consolidate power so he could govern effectively. He knew he needed to get the leaders who had influence with the people on his side, so he went to the Jewish leaders and said, “I want to become a Jew and study the Torah, and I want you to tell me how to govern these Jewish people well.” This was not a sincere act of devotion; this was political expediency—like when presidential candidates running for office suddenly become church attenders. They may not know all the words to the worship songs, but they know exactly where the cameras are.

In AD 42, Herod Agrippa began persecuting the church to curry favor with the Jewish leaders. The Jesus movement was roughly ten years old at the time. There were tens of thousands of believers throughout Jerusalem and the surrounding area. The church was growing like wildfire and the Jewish leaders hated it. After the leaders killed Jesus, many people believed he was the Messiah and started following him and worshipping him, which meant that they, the Jewish establishment, were losing power, influence, and money, and they were angry about it! It seemed like there was nothing they could do to stop the bleeding, but then a new king came to the area and said, “What can I do to make you happy.” They said, “Put an end to the church. Whatever it takes, just get rid of them!” So right away Herod did three things:

- He arrested Christians.
- He killed the Apostle James. (Herod noticed the Jewish leaders were cheering him on, giving him a thumbs up. Since the crowds were happy, to keep his power and get more of it, he intensified his persecution.)
- He imprisoned Peter, with plans to kill him.

If you were a Christian, this was a really, really bad situation. This was crisis time. Up to this point, there were some people who didn’t like Christians. There were occasional skirmishes and opposition, but nothing like this, nothing like the most powerful man in the land issuing a government sanctioned policy, with all the might of the Roman Empire, to arrest Christians and kill their leaders. Peter, the rock, the man who was the single most influential Christian leader at this point, the one Jesus told to shepherd and feed his sheep, was in the ancient equivalent of a maximum-security prison. Sixteen guards were on rotation with the full-time job of making sure Peter did not escape until he, too, was executed. Their leader was

locked behind bars, soldiers standing guard at the gate. And just to make sure nothing fishy happened, two soldiers were literally chained to each of his wrists. The situation looked bleak!

This was obviously an extreme situation, but there are times in life when it feels like we are in a crisis like this. All the doors are locked, no amount of human effort can change things, and the outcome looks inevitable. When the doctors say, “There is nothing else we can do.” When your child walks away from the faith. When the divorce papers are filed. When the third round of in vitro fails. The situations vary, but we all face crisis moments. In a church our size, there are many people who are in the middle of a crisis moment as we speak. Whatever it may be, I want to speak a word to you right now: You are not alone. God sees you, right where you are. God knows everything about the situation you are in. You are loved. This couldn’t be coming at a better time for you. God’s Word shows us what to do in a crisis.

After *the Crisis* came *the Prayer*. The situation looked bleak and hopeless, but the believers didn’t turn to despair; they turned to God. “So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him” (Acts 12:5). This is the turning point in the text, when God’s people prayed! This wasn’t a polite, quiet, thirty-second prayer before bed: “God, please remember Peter. If you can find a way, please help him out.” No, they gathered in houses to pray together earnestly! The Greek word translated here as “earnestly” is *ektenos*, which means “fervently, strenuously, intently.” The best picture is “at full stretch.” If you have \$1,000 in your bank account and you meet someone in need, “at full stretch” means that instead of handing a \$20 and saying good luck, you drain every last dollar you have to help. At full extension. You are giving it all. Nothing held back. That’s how they prayed! These weren’t drive-through prayers. These weren’t, “God, bless my day, bless my family, help me have a good week.” Those are good prayers. We should pray those prayers. But these were passionate prayers. These were desperate prayers, laying it all on the line. “God, we NEED you to move. We NEED you to intervene. God, move. God, come rescue your servants!” Think about the difference between texting a friend at 4:00 in the afternoon and asking a random question, “What are you doing for dinner?” and calling a friend at 2:00 in the middle of the night and saying, “Get out of bed. There’s an emergency!” That’s how the early church prayed when crisis hit. When we face a crisis, that’s how God wants us to pray, too.

Years ago, I got a text from my sister saying my nephew had stopped breathing. He was on a helicopter being life-flighted to the nearest children’s hospital. All I could do was stop and plead for God to move! About eighteen months ago, I was at home watching a football game while Keren and the kids were out front playing. I heard what sounded like a small crash. A second later, still from outside, I heard Keren yelling with terror in her voice, “Dan, get out here right away.” My stomach sank immediately. What had happened? How bad was it? I remember saying, “O, God.” What else could I do? “O, God, I need you.” “O God, help my family.” Fortunately, my nephew recovered. Fortunately, Hudson only needed ten stitches. But there are those moments when you call out to God because it’s the only thing you can do.

Never be cautious or hesitant to pound on the door of heaven. Bang on the door. Cry out at the top of your lungs. Plead for God to move. This is what God wants! Listen to the psalms:

- “As for me, I call to God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice” (Psalm 55:16-17).
- “Hear my prayer, Lord; listen to my cry for mercy. When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me” (Psalm 86:6-7).

After *the Crisis* and *the Prayer* came *the Provision*. God’s people pleaded and God responded. During the night, the night before Peter was going to stand trial and then be executed, Peter was fast asleep, which tells you something about his faith and confidence in God, doesn’t it? He was chained up with smelly, irreverent Roman soldiers on either side, hours from public humiliation and execution, just like he saw his friend James endure, and he was sleeping in perfect peace. An angel appeared in the prison cell

and a light started shining. But Peter was so fast asleep, he didn't wake up. Acts 12:7 says the angel literally had to strike him on his side to get him to come to. His chains fell off and they walked out of the cell, past the four personal guards, past each set of subsequent guards, on out of the prison, then to the house where everyone was gathered in the middle of the night praying for him. He knocked on the door. A servant came to the door and heard Peter's voice and was so overjoyed she forgot to open the door and let him in. She ran to share the news, leaving Peter on the porch getting bit by mosquitoes! Her leaving him at the door is funny, but it's not the funniest part. The funniest part is that when she interrupted the prayers for Peter's deliverance and said, "Guys, Peter's been delivered. He's at the door," they didn't believe it.

She kept saying, "He's really there. He's really there." They assumed she saw his angel. It's hard to know exactly what that means, but many scholars assume it means they thought he was already dead and his departed spirit was paying them a visit on his way to heaven. Again, impossible to know for sure what it means. But think about that: in their minds, it was more likely that an angel was knocking at the door, or that Peter's post-mortem spirit was at the door, than that God actually answered their prayers, set Peter free, and that Peter himself was at the door! God answered their prayers in a way, and with an immediacy, that they couldn't even believe! We need to make two observations here.

First, Peter could sleep because he knew God was awake. How could he have this sort of peace and calm amid such a crisis, sleeping hours before a soldier would cut off his head, just like happened to his friend James? How? Well, years ago, he was on a boat with fellow disciples in the middle of a lake in the most intense storm. Wind. Rain. Waves. He thought they were going to capsize and drown. But then he looked over and saw Jesus, who was in the same boat, in the same storm, sleeping in perfect peace. When Jesus woke up, he saw the terrified disciples and said, "Your faith is so small. You don't need to be so afraid." Then he said one word, and the storm became still. Peter had learned to not give way to fear, because Jesus is always near. "Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4). Peter could sleep, because he knew Jesus was awake.

Second, God isn't limited by the size of our faith. These people had gathered to pray for Peter, praying earnestly through the night. But when Peter came knocking on the door, they couldn't believe it had happened; they thought it was his spirit at the door! Which makes you wonder what they were praying for? Were they praying, "God, help him be found innocent at his trial?" Or, "God, cause Herod to let him go with just a flogging rather than an execution." Maybe they prayed for his release but didn't think it could actually happen. Regardless of what it was, God answered them in a way that blew their expectations out of the water. Something I see in Scripture, and that I've seen throughout my life, is that our Father delights in answering prayers in ways that simply overwhelm his children with joy. I know a dad in our church who got his kids hyped and excited all week long to go see a new Disney movie together as a family. When the big day came, they got in the van and drove past the movie theater—all the way to the airport where they got on a plane to fly to Disney. A good father loves to surpass the expectations of his children! I prayed to get married all through my 20s and assumed I might have to settle. Then, when I was 30, God provided a woman who was far beyond my hopes and expectations. Rather than only meeting the minimum standard of our prayers, God loves to be excessive and extravagant. "God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:2). That's just who God is. God not only provides; sometimes he provides exceedingly beyond what we hope or imagine. Even when we lack faith, God does not lack power!

That leads to the final observation I want to make about *the Kingdom*. God's purposes in the world, and the way he moves in response to prayer, are far bigger and far beyond our own circumstances. There is a clear juxtaposition in the aftermath of this prayer-prompted miracle.

- Peter was miraculously released (Acts 12:10).
- Herod miraculously died (Acts 12:23).
- The word of God continued to spread and flourish (Acts 12:24).

When God saved Peter and condemned Herod, God wasn't just helping a good guy out and letting a bad guy get what he had coming to him; he was advancing his kingdom in the world!

This tells us something very significant. Our prayers shouldn't first and foremost be about us and our preferences and comforts. They should be about God—about his name, his glory, and his kingdom. It's not that our comfort doesn't matter at all. Rather, God's eternal kingdom matters infinitely more. Our focus in prayer should not be for *God's kingdom* to help advance *our lives*, but rather for *our lives* to help advance *God's Kingdom*. This is the focus of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Yes, pray for daily bread, pray for deliverance, but first and foremost, pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Many of us love and have been encouraged by Psalm 46:10. The Lord says, "Be still, and know that I am God!" That's encouraging. That's empowering. But what does God say in the rest of the verse? "I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." Not, "Be still and know that I am God, so you will never have troubles." Not, "Be still and know that I am God, so I will deliver you from every hardship." No! He says, "Be still and know that even in the midst of hardship and trouble, I will work all things together for the good, and I will find a way to use this for my glory!"

When we do that, we must trust God with the outcome, which prompts us to deal with the hardest part of this passage, and honestly, the hardest part of prayer! Acts 12 not only tells us about God saving Peter, but it also tells us James was killed with a sword. We have to presume God's people prayed for both Peter and James. But one was killed and the other was miraculously saved. God answered one prayer, but not another. One mother got to welcome her son home with hugs and kisses; another mother had to bury her son. How do we respond to that? Many of us walked into church today with prayers God hasn't answered in the way we wanted. Why does God answer some of our prayers and not others? The truth is, on this side of heaven, we simply do not know. It's not because God isn't aware. It's not because he lacks power or love. We know that God is engaged in our lives, that he is good, and that he works all things together for the good of those who love him. Sometimes the "good" that God provides takes the shape of immediate healing and deliverance. Sometimes the "good" is eternal in nature and is on a timeline that we can't comprehend from our vantage point. Sometimes God's answer is, "Yes, and here's the miracle." Sometimes his answer is, "Not yet; trust me while you wait on my perfect timing." Sometimes his answer is, "No, but I will give you grace to walk through this." Sometimes the answer we desperately want won't come until we see him face-to-face.

I have some dear friends who, through no fault of their own, had an unexpected change at work that impacted them financially. They might have to sell their home. They texted and asked for prayer and for God's provision. They concluded the text by quoting Job 1:21: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." Yes, we want God to make a way. Yes, we want to stay in our house. But whether or not the Lord provides in the way we hope—the name of the Lord be praised. That's a kingdom prayer!

Let's conclude with time in prayer. Here are four areas we can focus on:

- Earnestly praying in response to a crisis.
- Trusting God during the storm.
- Asking for God to increase our faith.
- Desiring God's interests to outweigh our own.

Acts 12

1 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. 3 When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 4 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.

5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

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 has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

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 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 other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.