

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

An Ordinary Prayer In An Extraordinary Trial

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Acts 12:1-17

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 12.

If we only draw one lesson from our passage this morning, let it be this: God delights to do EXTRAORDINARY things through ordinary means.

Quite frankly, this is a lesson that we sorely need. We are so easily dragged into discontentment, aren't we? Surrounded as we are by a social media that presents everyone else's lives as shiny and exciting, enamoured as we are with stories of grandeur and glory – we often find ourselves looking at our own, mundane lives and despising how excruciatingly *ordinary* they are.

We *hate* ordinary.

But, brothers and sisters, our God is a God who *delights* to use the ordinary!

Ordinary worship gatherings. Ordinary Bible study. Ordinary friendship. Ordinary faithfulness. Ordinary men. Ordinary women. Ordinary churches. And, as we will see in our text today, ordinary prayer meetings. These ordinary means are the tools that God has entrusted to us to TRANSFORM the WORLD!

Look with me now to Acts 12. We will be reading verses 1-17. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. (Acts 12:1-17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In our passage this morning, we read about an extraordinary trial. Before we go further, I want to invite you to try to empathize for a moment with this congregation. Their brother, and teacher, and friend, and apostle James was arrested. Jesus affectionately referred to James and his brother John as "the sons of thunder!" This was a brother with a big personality – a larger than life character. He was one of the three inner disciples.

James was arrested. And then, with a roaring applause, Herod had James beheaded. The church in Jerusalem – a church that likely included James’ brother John, likely would have heard the cheers from wherever they hid during the execution.

In the pangs of their grief, they receive a report that Peter too has been taken into custody. Herod has assigned four squads – sixteen soldiers to guard Peter during the Passover. His intentions are obvious – he clearly plans to make a sacrifice of his own once the Passover has concluded.

What could the church do in the midst of such an extraordinary trial?

And that brings us to this simple, unremarkable, downright ordinary detail that we will spend our morning considering. Look again at verse 5:

So Peter was kept in prison, **but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.** (Acts 12:5 ESV)

Behind the extraordinary trials, we catch a beautiful glimpse of an ordinary prayer meeting. There is so much that we can and should learn from this example. So, with the time that we have this morning, let’s consider what we see here:

An Ordinary Prayer In An Extraordinary Trial

As we consider this prayer, we learn first and foremost that:

1. They prayed as a first response

This is vital, and we need to see it and be chastened by it.

When this church saw Herod’s evil intentions, what did they do? Where did they turn? Luke wants us to see that they immediately turned *to the Lord in prayer*. We have seen this pattern again and again in the Book of Acts and – disclaimer – we’re going to see more of it in the passages to come. Luke continues to repeat this lesson because Luke – inspired by the Holy Spirit – understands that **WE NEED TO HEAR THIS AGAIN AND AGAIN!** I know that I certainly do.

Listen: When crisis strikes, you will instinctively turn to the place where you expect to find a solution.

So, where do you turn, Christian? Spend a moment and honestly wrestle with this question. When the trials hit, where do you instinctively look?

Do you jump into problem solving mode – anxiously running 1,000 scenarios in your brain and winding yourself up into a frenzy?

Do you jump into rage mode – stomping your feet, shaking your fist and trying to force your way out of the discomfort?

Do you jump into politics – manoeuvring and protesting to try to shift the gears of the system in your favour?

Perhaps you find yourself jumping into escapism. Perhaps you turn to alcohol, or drugs, or porn, or Netflix, or overeating, or whatever else helps you to numb the pain.

Where do you turn? In your heart of hearts, where do you expect to find the solution to your trial?

As I mentioned, this first point is so basic that you almost wonder if it needs to be said. *Of course* we should turn to prayer first! We know that!

But do we know that?

How did you respond to Covid? How did you respond when the family budget wasn't adding up? How did you respond when you received that report from your doctor? Now, don't hear me wrong – there is a time for planning, and working, and even politicking – but where do we turn FIRST?

Martin Luther once wrote:

This we must know, that all our safety and protection consists in prayer alone. We are far too weak to cope with the devil and all his might and his forces arrayed against us, trying

to trample us under foot. Therefore we must carefully select the weapons with which Christians are to arm themselves in order to stand against the devil.¹

We must carefully select the weapons with which Christians are to arm themselves. That is a timeless quote, and we would have avoided so many tragedies and travesties and outright embarrassments in church history if we had only taken heed of that council. The Apostle Paul – a man not unfamiliar with trials and tribulations – wrote to the church from prison and reminded them:

do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7 ESV)

When extraordinary trials come our way, let us be a people who turn to prayer and who turn their FIRST. That's the first lesson we learn from this example. Second, we learn that:

2. They prayed earnestly

In verse 5, we are told that earnest prayer was made by the church. In verse 12, we find them praying late into the night. Albert Mohler once wrote:

Our theology is never so clearly displayed before our own eyes and before the world as in our prayers.²

I believe that's true – and as we consider the prayers of this church in Jerusalem, one of the things we learn about their theology is that they clearly believed in a BIG GOD who answers prayer.

Why else would they turn to Him first? Why else would they plead with Him deep into the night? They truly, deep-down believed that God was the only One with the power to deliver Peter. So, rather than spending their effort planning a protest, or baking a nail file into a cake, or bribing a guard, this church did serious business with God. They prayed the way that Jesus taught them to pray. Do you remember the parable of the persistent widow? We find it in Luke 18:

¹ Martin Luther as quoted in Graham A. Cole, *Against The Darkness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 241.

² R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Prayer That Turns The World Upside Down*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 7.

And he told them a parable **to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.** ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ **And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?** Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:1-8 ESV)

If a bad earthly judge will eventually give justice to a woman who persistently brings her requests to him day after day, then *how much more* ought we to expect from our good Heavenly Father? Keep coming! Keep praying! Keep pleading!

When trial and tribulation hit this church, they remembered what their King had taught them.

In my time as lead pastor of this church, we have not yet experienced the kind of trial that has led to an all-night prayer meeting. But, I suspect that day will come. And I hope that – when our faith is tested and our theology is exposed in prayer – we will give evidence that we genuinely, deep-down believe in a BIG GOD who answers prayer. I hope that we are learning even now what it means to pray earnestly.

As we continue to consider this ordinary prayer meeting, we learn also that:

3. They prayed together

Look again at verse 5:

So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God **by the church.** (Acts 12:5 ESV)

Peter was being lifted up – not just by some of his individual friends – but by the church. In verse 12, we read:

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.** (Acts 12:12 ESV)

Now, the church in Jerusalem was made up of thousands of people, so this gathering didn't represent the whole body of believers. But what we find here is a faithful prayer group meeting late into the night to pray for their brother.

I have said it before, and I will say it again – something powerful happens when the church prays TOGETHER.

Now, this isn't to say that there is no place for private prayer. Of course we should pray privately! The Gospels teach us that Jesus regularly departed by himself to quiet places to pray. Private prayer is one of the ordinary means of grace that God uses to build up His church, and we would all do well to grow in our personal prayer lives. Yes.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny the fact that – when extraordinary trials come upon the church in the New Testament – the church finds a way to come TOGETHER in prayer.

In this individualistic culture that we find ourselves living in, I suspect that many of us in the room don't actually believe this. We are so used to doing everything by ourselves that we don't see a need or a benefit in praying together. But why, then, is it that the New Testament church always seems to have come *together* in prayer in their seasons of adversity? We see it here. We saw it in chapter 4, when Peter was released from prison the first time. We will see it again in chapter 16 when Paul and Silas are imprisoned. Something special happens when we pray together.

When we pray together, we obey Proverbs 27:17 as we sharpen each other. Have you ever had that experience? Have you ever prayed with someone and walked away thinking, "I was really transformed as I prayed with him or her"?

When we pray together, we obey Galatians 6:2 as we bear each other's burdens. Sometimes, the person that you're praying with can't even put words to their needs. Sometimes, all they can do is sob – and what a privilege it is to put an arm around that person and to lift up the words that they can't get out.

When we pray together, we obey Hebrews 10:24-25 as we inspire love and good deeds in one another. Have you ever gone into a prayer meeting feeling like your faith was the size of a mustard seed and come out ready to charge hell with a water pistol?

When we pray together, we obey Colossians 3:16 as we teach and admonish one another.

When we pray together, we grow in the unity celebrated in Psalm 133:1. It's hard to hold grudges against the person sitting next to you as you commune with God. It's hard to feel divided as you lift up your requests with one heart and one mind.

And ultimately, when we pray together, we obey Romans 15:5-6 as we glorify God with one voice.

We need to pray together. It is a gift from God. Which is why, as I have said previously, if you have never prayed with another believer – if your prayer life is solely personal – then you are robbing yourself of a good gift that your Father has designed for you.

So, pray with your spouse. Pray with your kids. If you don't have a spouse or kids, then pray with your friends. Join a prayer group. This is a spiritual muscle that is systemically weak in our Christian culture – and that needs to change because the next thing we learn as we consider this story is that:

4. Their prayers mobilized the angels!

We see this amazing detail in verses 5-12:

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. (Acts 12:5-12 ESV)

Luke tells this story in such a way that he won’t allow us to miss the connection between the prayer meeting and the angelic rescue. He literally sandwiches this miraculous story with the prayer meeting in verses 5 and 12! Do you see that?

This ordinary prayer meeting mobilized an angelic rescue mission!

Now, before you accuse me of reading something novel into this text, we see something similar in the Book of Daniel. In Daniel 10, the angel Gabriel appears to Daniel and declares:

“Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, **your words have been heard**, and **I have come because of your words**. (Daniel 10:12b ESV)

God sent the angel Gabriel in response to Daniel’s prayer. God sent an angel to Peter in response to the church’s prayer. If that makes you squeamish, then you’re likely not praying as boldly as you ought.

Listen: There is a form of Christianity – particularly here in the western world – that affirms all the correct doctrines in *theory* but that denies the spiritual realm in *practice*. And that is dangerous because we are in a spiritual war!

Our great heroes of the faith understood this! Martin Luther wrote the beloved hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and it is FILLED with references to the spiritual realm. The third verse says:

And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us
we will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him!³

³ Martin Luther, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, 1527.

One little word shall fell him! And in the second verse, Luther comforts us with the reminder that we have a King on our side – a King whose name is Lord Sabaoth. Does anyone know what that means? “Sabaoth” is a Hebrew word for “the hosts of heaven.” When we sing that line, we are declaring that Jesus is the Lord of ANGEL ARMIES! And He is WITH US!

And we can sing that with boldness because it is EXACTLY what we see here! And this reality ought to change the way we pray! Now, this doesn’t mean that we should pray to angels. No one in the Bible EVER prayed to angels. But we should pray to our heavenly Father with full assurance that every force of heaven is at His disposal. Let that reality be your exclamation mark when you pray “Let Your kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!” Seeing that, let us learn to pray BOLDLY!

When this church knelt down to pray, an angel blinded the guards, unshackled the chains, opened the prison doors, raised the iron gate, and led Peter back to the seemingly ordinary prayer meeting.

There is no earthly king who can thwart the will of God! There is no jail cell that can constrain the spread of the gospel! The gates of hell will not prevail against the church because the God of angel armies is our shield! Do we pray as if we believe this to be true? These believers did!

Their prayers mobilized the angels!

Yet, while it is tempting to end the sermon there, we are reminded of one last lesson in this story, and that is that:

5. Their prayers were not all answered in the same way

This story presents us with a mysterious case study in prayer. In the same passage, we see tragedy and triumph – sorrow and salvation. The story that began with the beheading of James ends with the amazing scene in verses 12-17. Look there again with me:

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. (Acts 12:12-17a ESV)

Can you imagine how awesome this must have been for everyone in the room? This immediately became everyone's favorite story to share! As they prayed through tears for their brother Peter, the sound of a knock on the door was heard. "It can't be! Rhoda, you're out of your mind! You're seeing things! It's his angel!" All the while, Peter is still standing outside – an escaped convict – waiting for someone to let him in.

What a story! What an answer to prayer!

But I can't help but wonder how John must have felt as this story was recounted. No doubt he was overjoyed to see Peter! But I'll bet his joy would have been doubled if he could have seen his brother James too.

In this story there are two Apostles in peril. One is beheaded. The other is led into freedom by an angel. The same church was praying for both men! What do we do with that?

Here, we catch another glimpse into the mysterious providence of God. As they prayed for Peter, God's answer was "yes", and as they prayed for James, God's answer was "no."

Both answers were wise. James was delivered from his trial into glory. Peter was delivered from his trial into further service. God was glorified and His purposes were fulfilled in the "yes" and the "no." G. Campbell Morgan wisely observes:

There is infinite comfort in that; the comfort of the revelation of the fact that One Who could deliver Peter, and in wisdom did so, was equally wise when He did not deliver James.⁴

The same God who opened the prison doors allowed the sword to fall on James' neck. The same church prayed for both. And that can make prayer difficult, can't it?

⁴ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 298-299.

Sometimes, we pray for healing and God heals. Other times, our prayers for healing turn to lament at that brother or sister's funeral. Sometimes we pray for the prodigal son, and he returns! Other times, he persists in his rebellion to the bitter end.

God – in His unsearchable wisdom – answers every single one of our prayers – yet He answers each of them differently. He is not a vending machine or a genie. He is the Lord.

And He is good.

And that is enough for us to know.

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. (Deuteronomy 29:29 ESV)

How does it all work? Why is it that God has ordained to use the prayers of His people to bring about His purposes in the world? And why is it that He doesn't always answer us in the way that we might expect?

The secret things belong to the Lord.

Luke did not record this story so that we could tie a bow around our neat and tidy theology of prayer. He recorded this story so that we would see and savour and MARVEL at the glorious God Who has chosen to do extraordinary things in response to our ordinary prayer.

So, let us not despise the small things. In particular, let us not neglect the ordinary prayer meeting.

Let's pray first. Let's pray earnestly. Let's pray together. Let's pray to the God of angel armies! And, let's pray in submission to the will of God Who answers each of our prayers – even as He answers them differently.

To that end, let's pray together now.