

Acts 12:1-25

“The Power Of Prayer, The Peril Of Pride”

Sharing Christ informally, encouraging others regularly, giving & meeting needs generously. We might recognize these things as the *ingredients* of church growth & *evidence* of strong discipleship.

In Ch 11 the church in Antioch (some 300 miles north of Jerusalem) was growing gangbusters & experiencing an incredible spiritual awakening. It wasn't birthed by a professional preacher, or experienced evangelist, a leading apostle or well-known prophet. It came into fruition as the result of a few “average” individual believers simply sharing their faith w/the folks around them.

It's true that a strong pulpit ministry is invaluable concerning the spiritual growth & development of the *people* of God that they might be equipped to effectively walk in the *purposes* of God for their lives. In the book of Eph Paul wrote, “*And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,*”¹ God places gifted people in the *body* of Christ in order to help us better understand the *Person* & *work* of Christ. God wants us to be growing in the knowledge of His word...

But to what end? To the end that we might be effective/fruitful in the work that He has for us to do! Most assemblies won't grow simply because the pastor is really good at communicating the word. It's a mutual endeavor of the pastor equipping the saints & the saints out & about sharing the love of God, the word/ways of God w/a hurt & dying world around them. That's what was happening in Antioch.

Believers were simply sharing w/people they met along life's way. They were encouraging one another; Don't give up, don't give in, don't throw in the towel, keep going, keep pushing, keep pursuing Jesus. (*sharing w/those outside, encouraging those inside*)

& Finally; being informed of a need & they *determined* to give generously, each according to their ability. Funny thing about human nature & giving, if we don't “determine” to give, we probably won't. But the principle of *scripture* is that you can't out give God. Jesus said, “*Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.*”² We reap according the measure we sow. God will not be a debtor to man.

¹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Eph 4:11-13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

² *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Lk 6:38). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

So the disciples in Antioch prepared a gift to help meet the needs that were present in the church *in* Jerusalem & at the end of Ch 11 they sent it *to* Jerusalem by the hands of Barnabas & Saul. So, Ch 12 becomes a “meanwhile back in Jerusalem” vignette.

Vs 1

Leaving a scene of salvation/celebration in Antioch, we’re brought into the sobering scene of persecution that’s happening in Jerusalem.

We read here that Herod the king, “stretched out his hand” (that is, he made it his aim, his intentional agenda) to “harass” (oppress, afflict & harm) some from the church...

Now don’t be confused here w/the name “Herod”. This isn’t the man in Matt’s gospel who was trying to destroy Jesus by killing all the male babies 2 yrs old & under who were in Bethlehem & the surrounding districts. Same family; not the same man. This is that man’s grandson, the nephew of the “Herod” who had J.B. beheaded & played a role in the trial of Jesus... They were a lovely family... Not! ☺ For as much as this man wanted to please the Jews, the Herods were like public enemy #1 of God.

And because it pleased the Jewish religious leaders to persecute the church; he made that his aim. At the end of the day it was all political. It raised his approval ratings w/the religious authorities, so he was all about it...

Vs 2

& That’s all we get. This is the 1st *foundational* leader of the church, the 1st *apostle* to be put to death for his faith, & we get one sentence. James would die 1st, his brother John (who wrote the gospel of John, 1st, 2nd & 3rd Jn & the book of Rev) would die last. But the focus of this Ch isn’t so much upon the *death* of James as it is (spoiler alert) the *deliverance* of Peter.

But undoubtedly this sent waves of shock & devastation through the church, shattering any illusion that somehow the 12 apostles perhaps enjoyed some unique sense of Divine protection. As a matter of fact, if *anyone* would’ve come under a unique hedge of protection, certainly it would’ve been James. He was 1 of the 3 more intimate followers of Jesus. Perhaps you recall when Jesus went up on the Mt to pray & spend time w/the Father, that it was Peter, *James* & John whom He took w/Him & was *transfigured* before them. James saw Jesus radiating w/glory from the inside out! (Matt 17)

When Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead, He put everyone out w/the exception of Peter, *James* & John. (Mark 5)

When He prayed in *agony*, in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of His betrayal, He made all the other disciples wait in a certain place but He brought Peter *James* & John further in w/Him & shared His heart w/them, fell down & prayed where they could see Him.

But listen to me, Jesus *never* & in *any way ever* promised some kind of special protection for even His *closest* followers. As a matter of fact, what He *did* say was things like, **“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.”**³ He said, **“A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.”**⁴ & Again, **“In the world you will have tribulation...”**⁵ Jesus was very open, very honest about the afflictions, oppressions & persecution His followers will face in this world.

So; far from all your earthly troubles being over when you believe upon the Lord J.C. I’m going to be honest w/you, in some respects you’ll open up a whole new batch of them! But hear me; this world is not our *hope*, & this world is not our *home*. We are *in* the world, but not *of* the world; we’ve been called *out* of the world. We’re just pilgrims & sojourners passing through. & We’re trying to pull & persuade as many people as we possibly can along the way to believe on the Lord Jesus that they too might be delivered from the bondage of sin & death & find eternal life in Him.

At one-point James & John asked Jesus if they could sit at His right & His left hand in His kingdom. He said, “You don’t know what you’re asking for. Can you drink of the cup I’ve been called to drink?” They were all, “Oh yeah, for sure!” Jesus said, “& You will, but as for who sits at My left & My right, that’s not up to Me, but My Father will decide that.” Here James is martyred for his faith.

Vs 3-4

You see this tightrope Herod is walking? He wants the Jews to think he’s religious so he won’t execute Peter during Passover or the week following (which is the Days of Unleavened Bread), yet he’s willing to murder Peter if it will increase his public approval ratings in the polls. **He’s a man pleaser... Politics hasn’t changed, has it? That’s not to imply that every politician is corrupt, that’s not true. However; the depths of depravity to which many politicians will sink to improve their public approval ratings is staggering.**

³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Mt 10:16–17]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁴ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Jn 15:20]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁵ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Jn 16:33]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

It happens today, it happened then, there's nothing new under the sun, human nature hasn't changed. He's thinking; "Man, if they liked it when I had James beheaded, they're going to *love it* when I put *Peter* to death." So he has him arrested, placed in prison, under guard & when the time is right (in about a week) he'll have him tried & put to death.

It was common practice to chain a prisoner to one soldier. But Peter has "escaped" prison before (Acts 5), so Herod assigns a high security detail to guard him this time. 4 squads of 4 soldiers, chained to 2 of them, 2 watching outside the cell & changing rotation every 3 hrs.

It's mission impossible for Peter. How could the church *possibly* intervene for him? Organize a protest & storm the palace? No. Boycott every product imported from Rome? No. Write letters to Caesar requesting Herod's removal? No.

They did, what we should do when we feel up against a wall & stuck. Overwhelmed w/seemingly no way out; personal crisis upon you or your family. What can you do? What should you do? Notice

Vs 5

It's been said, "The shortest distance between a problem and a solution is the distance between your knees and the floor. The one who kneels to the Lord can stand up to anything." -- Author Unknown. We're to pray. Write it down, read it later; Phil 4:6-7.

In this corner; political clout, soldiers & prison cells. In this corner; the power of prayer. Which will prevail?

*Listen; it doesn't matter which door is shut, which gate is locked in front of you, there's an *open* door before you whereby you can access the very throne of God anytime, anywhere through prayer.*

So let's talk for just a minute about *prayer*. Let's take note of what kind of prayer was taking place here. #1 We read that it was "constant" prayer. This word has a couple of meanings packed into it. 1st of all it means what it says, "unceasing", "unrelenting", "continual". *It wasn't a 1 & done kind of prayer. These disciples knew what had happened w/James. & Now Peter was in prison they set themselves to praying. Perhaps there was a 24 hr prayer gathering in Jn Marks house & the disciples would come & go at different times of the day ensuring ongoing prayer at all times.*

But there's another aspect of this word here that perhaps fuels the unrelenting aspect of it. It carries the idea of "earnestness."

Literally, the word pictures someone stretching out as far as they possibly can for something... There you are, you're locked in a cell, the key falls off the guard's belt & he leaves the room. You're reaching through the bars, it's just beyond your fingertips, you're reaching as far as you can, w/all that you are. **They were praying w/all that they knew how, it's the same word Luke uses to describe the agonizing prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here's what I'm saying, they really cared about what it was they were petitioning God for, it meant everything to them, they were reaching deep.**

I believe that too often our prayers lack power because they lack passion; that is (truth be told) we want God to care about something that we really don't... & It's not that passionate prayer persuades a reluctant God. It's more that it demonstrates that our heart is in line w/the things of His heart... My kids have no problem asking me over & over again for something that's important to them. Jesus said, **"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."**⁶ Those words, "ask, seek & knock" are in the present tense. The idea is, "Keep asking, Keep seeking, Keep knocking, don't give up, don't give in. Pursue God passionately, persistently."

& Remember who you're praying to! They offered constant prayer "to God". Don't focus the enormity of the problem, but the reality of who God is! The Creator of the heavens & the earth, the One who spoke light into the darkness, the One who holds the universe in the span of His hand, the One for whom nothing will be impossible!

10 spies focused on the giants of the land, 2 chose to trust in the power of God. An entire army so an undefeatable foe in Goliath, 1 shepherd boy saw an opportunity for the glory of God. Trust in the Lord w/all your heart, lean not on your own understanding. For you it *is* impossible. But remember that for the God whom you serve; *nothing* will be impossible.

They prayed passionately, persistently, they made their prayer to God, they prayed specifically (for Peter) & they prayed collectively (as the church). Somehow & for some reason God has ordained exponential power in agreement. Pray w/one another.

Vs 6-11

Can you imagine that! Peter was so at peace that he was sleeping between 2 guards on the eve of his execution! How is that even possible!? Narcolepsy!?! ☺ Hey, he slept on the Mt of Transfiguration, in the Garden of Gethsemane... I'm just sayin...

Listen, it could be that he simply had that peace that passes understanding granted to him through personal prayer & the prayers of the people.

However; in Jn 21 Jesus promised Peter that he would live to be old. So equally plausible is the fact that he wasn't worried about it, because he trusted what Jesus had told him... That doesn't mean that he knew how God was going to work it all out, but he trusted that He would.

Either way, he was KO'd between 2 guards & the angel had to bump him on the side to get him to wake up! & Even then he wasn't certain it was really happening, he thought he was in some dream state, having a vision... The angel is all, "Hey, get your shoes on man, we gotta go!" & The chains just fall of him. He stands up & begins to follow the angel who is leading him beyond the guard posts, doors are opening on their own, they're walking right through...

Here's the point, all these things seemed like impossible obstacles, chained to guards, locked doors, iron gates... But this is the power of prayer. Opening doors, breaking chains, setting captives free...

The question comes up. Why was James put to death, but Peter delivered? Well; I can tell why it wasn't. It wasn't because Peter had faith but James didn't. Again, many people have almost become conditioned to believe that if they just have enough faith, all their problems will go away. However, that's not at all what the bible teaches... One might argue that it in fact takes *more* faith to endure hardships, afflictions & persecutions.

We like to point out that faith will cause you to walk on water, work miracles, overcome the impossible (& that's true). Yet equally true is that faith will cause you to endure hardship, bear up under affliction & be unwavering in the face of persecution. Consider carefully the section of scripture in Heb Ch 11. Yes, through faith people subdued kingdoms, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, received their dead raised to life & so much more. Yet we also read, that through that *same faith*, *"Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth."*⁷

⁷ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Heb 11:35-38]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Faith isn't some magic power that eliminates all our problems. It's that ability that enables us to trust God no matter what. It's casting all your cares upon Him, knowing He cares for you (something Peter would later write). It's Shadrach, Meshach & Abed-Nego standing before the king, facing the fiery furnace; *"our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."*⁸ My life is not my own, it belongs to God & I'm going to serve Him regardless. *We're not mercenaries (serving God so long as it suits us, or is of profit to us), God forbid... Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. The bible teaches that God is for us, not against us, has thoughts of peace & not of evil, to give us a future & a hope. We're going to rest on that come what may, & that will anchor us through the storm.*

Ultimately, we've all been appointed a day in which we will die. & None of us are going to be late for that appointment. Best to simply be prepared for it. God wasn't finished w/Peter yet, still had plans for him. So he was delivered (through prayer).

Vs 12-17

You've got to love the transparency of scripture. We like to put these people on a pedestal above us, truth is, they were exactly like us... 😊 "Oh God, please deliver Peter, set him free for the glory of Your name, show Yourself powerful on our behalf oh God for w/You, nothing will be impossible!" (Knock, knock, knock...)

"Guys! Peter is at the gate!" "You've lost your mind, he's in jail!" I don't know if this is like you (though I suspect it may be), but it's definitely been true of me. It's like they knew God *could* deliver him, just didn't really think God *would* deliver him. They were blown away that God *actually answered* their prayers!

It's not the greatness of their faith that's on display here, it's the greatness of the grace & power of God that will move mountains based upon the faith that will measure even in the amount of a mustard seed! - I wonder if you're praying about an immovable, impossible obstacle right now? Be encouraged, God can do the work... Their faith wasn't overwhelming, but the power of their prayer was found in where (& in Whom) that faith was placed...

⁸ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Da 3:17-18]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Now; the “James” in view here, wasn’t the brother of John who’d been executed, but the brother of Jesus who’d come to believe in Him after the resurrection. He became a prominent leader in the early church.

& Let’s learn this lesson. God expects us to use common sense. God protected him, delivered him & saw him safely to this place. But now he gets out of town. Couldn’t God just keep him safe there? Of course. But He expects us to use that sanctified common sense He’s given to us. It’s time to get out of town...

Vs 18-19

“No small stir”. Translation? Herod was *furious* & searched *extensively* for him. & In that day, if you were a soldier guarding a prisoner & he escaped... you fulfilled their sentence... Herod has them put to death, & then heads to Caesarea for some R & R.

Vs 20-21

We don’t know why Herod was angry w/these people, but their grain was imported from the area of the Galilee & Herod had been w/holding it... They needed bread, so they decided to butter him up a little, they made his chief of staff their friend & got a meeting on the books.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Herod wore a robe woven of silver thread that refracted the early morning sunlight (it was a robe that would’ve been the envy of Elton John, I’m telling you 😊).

Vs 22-23

This is the peril of pride. God hates pride. The bible says, *“Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall.”*⁹ & Again, *“Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty,”*¹⁰ (arrogant, prideful). He was corrupt from the inside out & God gave him over to worms to be eaten from the inside out... Whoever exalts himself will be humbled & the one who humbles himself will be exalted. How hard it can be to say, “I’m sorry”, “I was wrong” ... Allow God to form & fashion humility in your life... Is your goal to make a name for yourself, or to glorify, magnify Jesus? It’ll change everything.

This Ch begins with Herod killing James & ends with God killing Herod! You can’t fight God & win... Let’s finish up.

Vs 24-25

⁹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Pr 16:18]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
¹⁰ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Pr 18:12]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Herod died, but the word of God grew & multiplied... This is the power of prayer & the peril of pride... God is on the throne. He's in control. Serve Him w/all your heart that His kingdom might be multiplied, the body might be edified & He will be glorified in your life.

Prayer Points:

God we humble our hearts before You; it's our desire to draw near *to* You. Be glorified, magnified in this place & in our lives. You're so faithful to *equip us*, may we be faithful to *serve You*, to walk in the works You've prepared for us. May we be a people of prayer, increase our faith to the glory of Your name.

Listen, God loves you. Jesus gave His life *for* you, turn from your sin, trust in Him & you'll be forgiven of all your sin, made new right here, right now. It's not a big mystery, believe on the Lord J.C. & you will be saved.