

# Acts

## -Acts 12:1-25 - Why God has us pray

Back in **Acts 9:31** the “church enjoyed a time of peace...strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit.” Then in Acts 10 and 11 there was more encouragement too, when the Spirit flung open the doors of the church to the Gentile world as well, starting with Cornelius a Gentile Roman centurion. And shocking though this was to the Jews in the church, they heard Peter out and after he’d finished describing how the Holy Spirit “had come on all” in Cornelius’ home in **Acts 10:44**, “they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life,’” **Acts 11:18**.

So these were heady times as the next stage of Jesus’ promise in **Acts 1:8** kicked into gear - first Judea (Acts 2 to 7), then Samaria (Acts 8), and now “to the ends of the earth” as the Holy Spirit took what Jesus had died and been raised back to life as “Lord of all” for, to the Gentile world too. At this point in time, then, twelve or so years after the Holy Spirit had crashed the party on Pentecost, it seems that nothing could stop the juggernaut of the Holy Spirit powered church from growing.

But in **Acts 12:1** things take a nasty turn for the worse, because in AD 44 King Herod Agrippa - brother of the King Herod Jesus met with on the way to his crucifixion - “arrested some who belonged to the church,” including “James, the brother of John” in **verse 2**. James had been one of Jesus’ original twelve disciples, whom Jesus had affectionally called a “son of thunder” in Mark 3:17. And James must still have been a fiery character for Herod to take note of him too.

Up to this point James hasn’t been mentioned in Acts, but he’s clearly a highly respected leader in the church at Jerusalem, so it must have been a huge shock when Herod had him “put to death with the sword,” in **verse 2**. James was an apostle too, one of the original twelve, so why did God allow him to be murdered, and especially when things were going so well in the church? It didn’t make sense.

But things then took another ugly turn for the worse, because “When Herod saw that (James’ death) pleased the Jews” in **verse 3**, “he proceeded to seize Peter also,” and right in the middle of the Feast of Unleavened Bread too.

And that's important to note because Jerusalem was packed during the Passover/Unleavened Bread season, so arresting Peter and throwing him in prison in preparation for a "public trial" (verse 4) would rapidly spread the news that Herod meant business. And this time, instead of just a couple of guards outside the apostles' jail cell in Acts 5:23, Herod had Peter's cell guarded by "four squads of four soldiers each," **Acts 12:4**.

So it looked like Peter was going to suffer the same fate as James. But there's a difference, because while "Peter was kept in prison" awaiting his public trial "after Passover" (verses 4-5), the church "**earnestly prayed**" for him - but there is no record that the church did that for James. Perhaps they'd expected God to free James like he'd freed all the apostles back in Acts 5:19. The apostles seemed to be invincible, so what was the worry?

But James was dead, and now Peter could be dead too. It shocked the church into earnest prayer for him, with interesting results, because "The night before Herod was to bring Peter to trial," **verse 6**, "Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains." **Peter was fast asleep.**

But how could he be sleeping soundly the night before his execution? Was it because an angel had already rescued Peter from a jail cell back in Acts 5? But an angel hadn't rescued James. This time, therefore, there was no guarantee Peter was going to be rescued, and yet here he was sound asleep, with no fear at all.

How could that be? Well, the only clue we're given is that the church was praying earnestly for him. Was the church praying earnestly what the Holy Spirit intended from this incident, therefore, but if so, why? Was it to clue us ALL in as to **why God has us pray** in the first place? Because why DOES God have us pray? Why were they earnestly praying for Peter, for instance, when they knew now that **apostles** could be killed too? There was no guarantee, therefore, that their prayers would save Peter's life. So why pray?

But while the church was earnestly praying for Peter, "an angel of the Lord," in **verse 7**, "suddenly appeared (in Peter's jail cell)" as a bright shining light. The angel shook Peter awake, and told him, "Quick, get up," at which point the chains tying Peter to two soldiers "fell off Peter's wrists."

Well, if Peter had thought this might happen, he would have been dressed and ready to go, but he wasn't ready at all, because in **verse 8** the angel had to tell Peter, "Put on your clothes and sandals, wrap your cloak around you and follow me."

It sounds like Peter was floundering around completely befuddled, which **verse 9** confirms, because Peter “had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.”

Peter clearly hadn’t anticipated or expected anything like this to happen, because he stumbled after the angel, past the guards to the iron gate exit, which “opened for them by itself,” and out they both walked into the fresh night air to the end of the street, at which point “the angel left him.” And only then did Peter “come to himself,” **verse 11**.

But this was Peter the apostle, who’d personally witnessed the Holy Spirit arriving in a gale force wind and fire, healing a man crippled from birth, healing thousands more people of whatever was ailing them, and freeing all the apostles from a locked jail cell. But after all that lot, Peter could still hardly believe what had happened to him was the Holy Spirit’s doing (verse 11).

But “when it dawned on him” that it really was the Holy Spirit’s doing in **verse 12**, Peter’s first thought was to head straight to the house of Mary, John’s mother, “where many people had gathered and were praying.” So they’d been praying all through the night so far, not knowing that Peter had slept so peacefully that he had trouble even recognizing a brightly shining angel in his jail cell, and now here he was standing on their doorstep.

What happens next in verses 13 to 17 is comical. Peter knocks on the door and calls out at the same time. Rhoda, a servant girl, recognizes Peter’s voice, but instead of opening the door to let him in, she rushes off in the opposite direction, joyfully yelling, “Peter is at the door.” Well, you’d think those praying would start yelling joyfully too, but instead they stare at poor little Rhoda and accuse her of being “out of your mind.” No, no, she cries, it really is Peter. But, someone replies, “It must be his angel,” which surely would be shocking too, but no one gets up to even check that out either. Meanwhile, Peter’s still knocking and when someone finally opens the door and in comes Peter they’re all “astonished,” **verse 16**.

But why are they astonished? They were all **praying** for something “**astonishing**” to happen, weren’t they? And if not, why were they praying? Clearly they hadn’t expected anything like this to happen in response to their prayers, so what were they praying for instead? Surely by now they knew how the Holy Spirit worked, because **nothing but** astonishing things had happened since the Holy Spirit had arrived on Pentecost. So why were they finding it so difficult to believe this is what the Holy Spirit was **still** doing?

They'd prayed earnestly before too, and extraordinary things had happened, so what was different this time? There wasn't anything different, but they (Peter included) were still having trouble believing this was the Holy Spirit at work.

And when Herod got wind of Peter's escape he didn't believe it either. He blamed the guards and had them executed instead (verses 18-19). So there really was a chronic problem here: The Holy Spirit was doing extraordinary things but was only getting disbelief, resistance and shock in return.

But the message here in Acts 12 is clear, that when there's a desperate need, as there was in the church after James was killed and Peter imprisoned, the Holy Spirit is all for doing whatever is necessary to answer the need. But notice what the Holy Spirit does first. **He has the church pray.** The same thing happened in **Acts 11:21** too: When "the Lord's hand was with them,....**they turned to the Lord.**" This is what the Spirit does in us: inspires us to pray.

Why? For the same reason he inspired them to pray in Acts 12:5 - so that he will answer those prayers with extraordinary things happening. He inspires both the prayer, therefore, and the answer to it. So it's all the Holy Spirit's doing, and this is what WE are now part of too, so get used to it. Get used to finding ourselves praying earnestly - and acting really dumb when extraordinary things happen too, if the answer isn't be what we expected. Or we might not even know something extraordinary has happened, but rest assured that if we've been inspired to pray earnestly, then extraordinary things are happening, or will happen, or have already happened. It may not be escaping from a locked prison cell, but there are many other prisons we desperately need rescuing from, like man-made religions, addictions, harmful personality weaknesses and engrained bad habits.

When God inspires us to turn to him, as the Holy Spirit in us will do, we can then expect extraordinary things to happen, and not just to ourselves but to others too. And again in extraordinary ways. Guaranteed the church would never have guessed, for instance, that in answer to their prayer for Peter, the Holy Spirit would later strike at the very heart of the problem, which was King Herod himself. And the timing was interesting too, because in Acts 12:20-23 Herod, in the middle of a fit of self-glory is struck down by an angel, "and he was eaten by worms and died," **verse 23.**

And who would have guessed that the church would "continue to increase and spread" too, **verse 24?** But that's why God has us pray, so he can amaze and shock in his answers. What fun he must have with people who believe that.