

## Herod's Early Release Program

Acts 12:1-19

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Here in our Scripture this morning, we have a powerful example of answered prayer.

Peter is arrested, the church prays, dramatic results occur. It is fairly simple stuff isn't it? Peter is arrested, the church prays, dramatic results occur. Insanely straight forward, completely uncomplicated, easily comprehensible: Problem, pray about it, solution.

It can't get any clearer than that.

So, it seems clear that this is what we do: When bad things come our way, we get the church together to pray, and God will take care of things. That's appears to be the example we see here in Acts 12.

Hold on. Let's look again at our Scripture.

Verse 2, "He, (that's Herod Agrippa) had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

The Apostle James was the number one guy in the church in Jerusalem. Without a doubt the church prayed for James' freedom, without a doubt the word traveled across the country about James' imprisonment, without a doubt thousands of prayers rose to the throne of God. James is a godly man, a good man, James is one of Jesus' three closest disciples; The church needs James, James is much loved by all; James is a deeply spiritual man and James has committed no crime nor has he broken any laws.

All that said, James is not released from prison is he? Instead, he is dragged out of his cell and executed by the sword. He is given a death without honor, for execution by the sword was reserved for those who had led away many people worshiping false gods (Deut. 13:14-16). It was reserved for those the religious leaders wanted to dishonor. Execution by the sword was specifically ordered for James to shame him before the population of Jerusalem.

God intervenes for Peter, but fails to act for James. Further, God allow James, a very honorable man, to die with dishonor?

How did things come to this?

Certainly the Lord God protects the ones he loves.

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Let's see how life can quickly take a turn for the bad for us and how God can move us through difficult times by taking a closer look at our Scripture.

If you look at verse 3 you will see that Herod Agrippa has Peter arrested. Peter has not committed any crime, but that is of no consequence, Herod Agrippa can arrest anyone at will. He's the king.

At first the Christian church was held great favor with the Jews, but over time the Christian church was literally decimating the population of the Jewish Synagogues by pulling synagogue members into the Christian church. Further, we saw last week that the church reached out to the Pagans and now the population of the church had more Christianized pagans than Christianized Jews. So many Jews, especially Jewish leaders would welcome persecution of the church.

Herod arrests Peter, not because of anything Peter has done, but because Herod saw that executing James the brother of John made him popular with the people who counted most in the region, the Jewish population. By the death of James Peter by de facto becomes the leader of the church, so he is obviously the next one Herod will go for.

Difficult times and difficult circumstances come to us, sometimes by our own sin or by our own lack of wisdom - but many times, difficult times and circumstances just fall upon us without any reason whatsoever. Whether we know the reason, or whether we don't know the reason, difficult circumstances are remain difficult circumstances, do they not? If I know why or I don't know why I am in difficult circumstances, that changes my situation little, difficult circumstances are difficult circumstances.

Additionally, whether it is fair or not fair for Peter to be in Jail waiting execution is really irrelevant. Fairness does not enter into the situation here. In fact, I think you will have a very difficult time finding the concept of fairness in the Bible. This situation for Peter, or James was not fair in any sense of the word...and I want you to note, there is no apology made for the lack of fairness here. Take a look at this section of Scripture, Luke just tells us it is a bad situation.

If you have difficult circumstances in your life and you feel that God has not been fair to you, well, you are placing a characteristic upon God, that cannot be placed upon God. If all things were fair in our lives, we would all be living in cardboard shack in the slums of San Palo Brazil, but instead, God has blessed us with the opportunity to live in Alaska. Of

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the seven billion people here on the planet earth, we get to live here in Alaska. Now how fair is that?

Today, here in America, being fair and being treated fair is a big deal. In the ancient Roman world fairness, unapologetically, did not exist, and here in this passage what has happened to these two men is not fair, but then again, difficult circumstances are rarely fair are they?

Now, there are several men named Herod in the Bible, and it is easy to get them mixed up. They did have one thing in common, they were horrible, self centered men. The Herod we have in Acts 12 is Herod Agrippa.

[Herod Agrippa](#) came to power around 34 A.D., when his step-uncle, [Philip II](#), died. Herod Agrippa was the grandson of [Herod the Great](#). Remember, Herod the Great was the one who had all the baby boys under two killed in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus in the Christmas story. Herod Agrippa's grandmother was Marianne, she was a princess from the Jewish [Hasmonean Dynasty](#), this made Herod Agrippa, part of the Jewish royal bloodline of the day - and very popular with the Jewish population.

His father [Aristobulus](#) was executed on 7 BC in Rome, Herod Agrippa was only four years old at the time. After his father's execution, his mother sent him to Rome for education. There he became childhood friends with Gaius and Claudius from the Imperial family. When Gaius became Emperor in 37 AD he gave his childhood friend Herod Agrippa part of southern Syria, Galilee and Peraea after sending another Herod, [Herod Antipas](#), into exile. After the assassination of Gaius, Agrippa's other childhood friend, Claudius was made emperor in 41 AD and Claudius increased Herod's realm by adding Judea. This made his domain was almost as large as that of his grandfather, Herod the Great.

Agrippa was more popular with the Jewish people than any of the other Herod's, mostly because of his royal ancestry and, he was much less of a jerk than any other Herod.

Herod Agrippa simply will do anything to maintain and increase his popularity - like the politician he was. Peter just happened to be handy.

The timing of Herod Agrippa was not very good because Peter was arrested at the beginning of the [Feast of Unleavened Bread](#) which is part of the Passover celebration, it was considered a Sabbath no matter what day it fell on. So if Herod executes Peter during

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the feast, he angers the population, which defeats the purpose of the execution, his increased popularity. So Herod throws Peter in Jail and waits.

Peter had been placed in the custody of 16 soldiers, 4 squads of 4 men each (verse 4). The guards would take shifts guarding him, it is not all 16 men at once. Peter is bound between two soldiers in such a way that if Peter moved too close to one soldier he would pull on the other soldier. This prevented any funny business. Then, outside the cell were two more guards. These guards would rotate at each watch. Peter was double guarded to make sure that no one would even try to break him out of prison. For a person to get to Peter they would have to go through a locked iron gate, subdue two guards outside the cell, subdue two more inside the cell and pick the locks.

Essentially what we have here is not only difficult circumstances, but difficult circumstances with no way out. It would take a small skilled army to break Peter out.

So what does the church do? (verse 5) They pray. Verse 5 describes a very intense kind of prayer, a round the clock tag team type of prayer. Now, we could say they resort to prayer because they cannot break Peter out, but that is not true - prayer is not the last thing they do, it is the first thing they do. These men and women have learned to rely on the power of God, So they pray.

We have been around long enough to know that prayer isn't a simple thing of: problem, prayer, solution. We do not tell God what to do and he obeys us. We do not say the magic words, or say the right words the right way for God to act as we desire. God is sovereign. Ultimately, God is in control. God will let James die. God will intervene for Peter - to us it is a mystery - to God who sees all time at once, it is no mystery at all.

Remember, as we have worked our way through the book of Acts we have seen that the book of Acts is first and foremost about Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God - everything else is a distant second. We also see this exact same thing in our lives - when we give our lives over to Jesus Christ, our lives become first and foremost about Jesus Christ - with who we are and what we want a distant second.

As a practical matter what that means is this: God is not obligated to give us a trouble free life here on this earth and God is not obligated to give us a life devoid of harsh circumstances and difficult situations. For you and I, without a doubt, difficult times will

come, and when difficult times do come, quick and easy answers will not be there waiting to rescue us.

However, however, that is not to say our prayers are not effective, God will, and does answer prayer. For us to assume that God will do what He will regardless of what we pray is simplistic and shows a lack of spiritual understanding. God clearly answers prayer, God is clearly influenced by prayer and moreover, prayer clearly influences us.

Now looking at verse 6, we see Peter is sound asleep. Peter is in difficult circumstances, really, impossible circumstances, and his sleep does not indicate that he is ignoring his problems or trying to hide from his problems, rather, it shows that Peter is submitting to the will of God. I would dare to say, that looking at how the events unfold, Peter had given into the inevitable and had no expectation of release. Peter sleeps because whatever the circumstances, Peter is living in the will of God - and that my friends is a great place to be. Imagine in your own life being able to fall soundly asleep no matter what is haunting you in your life?

Look, what we have here is a very common situation, one that you probably have been in yourself. Peter is in a situation where there is nothing he can do to change it. Perhaps if you have had a serious illness, like cancer, you know intimately the situation. There is nothing that you can do to make things better, the situation is out of your hands. But, you have friends and family praying for you, and perhaps, maybe, something will happen.

What is the best thing to do in a situation like this? Do what Peter does, rest in the Lord Jesus. Anxiety won't help, worry won't help, wearing yourself out won't help. Sometimes all you can do is rest in the Lord.

So what have we seen so far? When you are in a difficult situation where you are literally not in control, call people up, email them, text them, write letters and get people you know to pray for you, and then, like Peter, give the situation to God and rest.

You know, sometimes we are in a life situation where it is, for whatever reason, difficult for us to pray. I'm not going to say this is a good thing, but you know, this is a reality in our lives. Sometimes we have a hard time praying for ourselves. That's ok. That happens sometimes. I mean do you see Peter praying for himself here? No, he's sleeping!

There are times when you need to let others pray for you, for Peter, this is one of those times.

So the an angel appears in his cell and strikes Him. Angel in context here strikes Peter gently; The angel pokes Peter to wake him. Now Peter has been resting, really waiting on the Lord and the Angel gives Peter the message: Get ready, something is about to happen.

Notice in this section, the confusion of Peter. What we see here is this: Peter has no real idea about what is happening, but Peter obeys. For us it is the same, we will be resting, waiting on the Lord and He will expect us to be ready, He will expect us to move beyond simply waiting. Then for us, the Holy Spirit will prompt us, the Holy Spirit will give us instructions, but may not give us the full picture, still we need to obey and move out of waiting.

I want you to notice something that you may have not picked up. Did you notice that the guards were fully awake. I bet you assumed they were asleep, but there is never any mention of the guards being asleep. Look and see that in verse 7 it says that a light shown in the cell. Wouldn't the guards notice a light in the dark cell? No God had blinded them to the presence of the Angel and Peter.

The chains fall off of Peter, he walks out of the cells with the guards unaware, past the clueless guards at the cell door, past the locked iron gate and out onto the street.

The church population in Jerusalem was too large to meet in any one building so they spread out and met in different houses. [Mary, John Mark's mother](#), had a large house and so her house was a place to meet. Apparently it was the largest of houses and so this is where Pete heads first.

Peter thinks he is dreaming, Peter thinks he is seeing a vision. Why is that? Peter expects to die, Peter expects no rescue.....but neither do the people who are praying. How do we know that? We know that they expect no positive answer because when Peter shows up, they think it is an angel.

There was an old Hebrew tradition that your guardian angel accompanies you in death. So the church expects not a miracle, but an early death of Peter.

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Are they faithless? No, they are just going by recent history. James who was way more important to them than Peter, died. So why should Peter be free from jail if God did not spare such an important man as James? So they do not expect a positive answer to their prayer.

And take note of this, this is a very powerful thing to apply to your life, ready? The church does not expect a positive answer to their prayer, yet they pray. The people are obedient in prayer even though they put not real faith in their prayer.

Do you know what that highlights for us? God will answer my prayer whether or not I really believe what I am praying. Is my prayer more effective because I believe harder? Apparently not.

No one, not a single person in this story expects Peter to enter into Herod's early release program. Not Herod, not the guards, not the people of the church, not even Peter himself. Still God answers the prayer.

There was a small town in the South that had two churches and one distillery. Members of both churches complained that the distillery was giving the community a bad image, and to make matters worse the owner of the distillery was an out spoken atheist. The owner of the distillery didn't believe in God one bit.

The church people had tried unsuccessfully for years to shut down the distillery, but they were always were a day late and a dollar short. So finally they decided to hold a joint Saturday night prayer meeting.

They gathered together at one of the churches and asked God to intervene and settle the matter. That night as the people were praying there was a horrible thunderstorm raging outside and to the delight of the church members lightning hit that old brewery and it burned to the ground. The next morning the sermons in both churches was on the power of prayer.

Later that week the insurance adjusters notified the distillery owner that they were not going to pay for the damages because the fire was an act of God and that was an exclusion in the policy. The distillery owner was furious and he sued both churches claiming that they had conspired with God to destroy his business. But, the churches

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denied that they had anything to do with the cause of the fire. Things heated up until all parties stood before a judge who was to settle the case.

The judge opened the proceedings with these words: I find one thing in this cause most perplexing-we have a situation here where the plaintiff, an atheist is professing his belief in the power of prayer, and the defendants all faithful church members are denying the very same power."

So here in our passage we have faithful people who are earnestly praying a prayer they don't ultimately believe for a man of faith who himself is not praying, but instead, is resting in God allowing people to pray a prayer for him that they don't believe.

Is this crazy stuff?

Well, no, this is real life. How many times have you prayed for someone without a solid conviction that what you are saying will in fact happen. Let's be honest, deep down, many, many of our prayers are like this.....

Did you notice something else odd?

God appears to be OK with that.

Is a prayer more powerful because I secure a conviction behind it or not?

You know, what I see here is not so much a matter of conviction that this will occur or that will occur. I see this passage teaching us about obedience to the Holy Spirit.

Obedience to the Holy Spirit in prayer is more powerful than a strong conviction in prayer.

Consider this: The prayers of the people are effective, not because they believe they are effective, but because the one they pray to is effective. See, ultimately who is the one who will make things happen? You know the answer: Jesus Christ.

The Lord teaches us very applicable and very practical stuff here:

1. When you find yourself in difficult circumstances get others to pray for you.
2. It is OK to be in a place where you let others pray for you.

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3. When you pray for someone, just pray for them. Don't be concerned about how strongly you believe, instead, be obedient in prayer, be obedient in prayer. Obedience to the Holy Spirit is a powerful thing.
4. God is sovereign. God is in control. God will intervene if he so chooses.

In closing, let's address the sovereignty of God once again.

James the son of Zebedee is executed; Simon Peter is set free. Why one and not the other? Why does God act here and why does God not act over here?

Because God is able. God will act when He desires.

Our part of this whole equation is not to know why, instead our part of the equation is to be obedient in prayer, as odd as that may sound to some of you, understand that just being obedient is more powerful than anything else you can do.