

IMPRISONED FOR THE GOSPEL



+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Praying to the Lord for Deliverance (Acts 12:1-5)
2. Following the Lord for Deliverance (Acts 12:6-10)
3. Praising the Lord for Deliverance (Acts 12:11-19)

Background Passage: Acts 12

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God responded to the church's prayers and delivered Peter from prison.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When Peter was arrested and put in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. God delivered Peter miraculously, but the church failed to believe he had been rescued at first. In a similar way, Jesus had taught His disciples that He would die and be raised again, but they too failed to believe at first. When they saw and experienced the resurrected Savior, their faith increased.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because God's love, power, and sovereignty are proven in the resurrection of Jesus, we pray with anticipation that God works in us and through us as we seek to make Jesus known.

GROUP TIME

Group content found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

INTRODUCTION

ASK: As participants arrive, ask: **When times get tough, what are some common go-to actions?** (try to contain and control the situation; push through it; pray to God for help; reach out to friends and family for assistance)

TRANSITION: When going through problems or trials, it's easy to rely on our own strength instead of God's strength through prayer. But because of Luke, we can be reminded of how prayer can deliver us in times of suffering. Though God's people were being persecuted by Romans, they were not the ones in complete control. The King of kings was ultimately in control and could trump their plans at any moment.

SUMMARIZE: Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- A year had passed since Peter's appeal to the Jerusalem church to accept God's salvation of the Gentiles. Luke provided a few details of this time, including the fact that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The stoning of Stephen caused many Christ-followers to scatter to avoid persecution. Their relocation served as a catalyst to spread the gospel message beyond the mostly Jewish regions surrounding Jerusalem. But persecution continued. Yet God remained faithful in delivering His people.



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POINT 1

PRAYING TO THE LORD FOR DELIVERANCE (ACTS 12:1-5)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 12:1-5** from his or her Bible.

1 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.

INTERACT: In groups of 3-4, ask, “What motivations are behind the strategy to stomp out the leader of a movement?” (jealousy; a need for power; a desire for control; economic or political motivations)

EXPLAIN: Use **PACK ITEM 3: SUFFERING FOR JESUS**, reminding your group how persecution continued, here through Herod; but God would still be in ultimate control. Discuss **verses 1-4** and the following idea (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 90):

The early church faced opposition and persecution, but it responded with fervent prayer.

- “About that time” (Acts 12:1) refers to Luke’s last episode provided in the narrative. There was a severe famine in Judea, and the church at Antioch was active in the relief efforts (11:27-30).
- Like his grandfather, this Herod had a reciprocal relationship with the Sanhedrin. The new Christian movement threatened these temple leaders. This Herod sought support for his rule from the Jewish leaders, in particular the Pharisees. Any action he took that pleased the Jews was a win for Herod.
- According to Acts 12:3, the arrest took place during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. This festival ended right before the Jewish Passover celebrations. One festival flowed right into the other, and neither allowed for a public trial. There are many parallels here between the arrest of Peter and the arrest of Jesus, including the timing of the Festival of Unleavened Bread being an issue (Mark 14:1).
- In a power play, Herod sought support from the Jewish leaders by attempting to suppress the Christian movement.



KING HEROD

This is not the same Herod mentioned in the Gospels. Known as Herod Agrippa I, this Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great, raised within the Roman aristocracy, and at this time ruled over Jewish territory.¹ Some even referred to him as the king of the Jews.²

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan.”³

—John Bunyan
(1628–1688)

ASK: (DDG p. 90)

How can we cultivate more prayer in our lives? (by praying through Scripture; by remembering to pray throughout the day, not just at meals; by having intentional prayer times with others; by studying about prayer)

HIGHLIGHT: Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine “Prayer and Providence” in their DDG. Discuss **verses 5** as it refers to the doctrine (DDG p. 90):

Key Doctrine #31: Prayer and Providence: If God is in control and already knows the future, why pray? The Bible teaches that although God has a plan for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the means God uses to accomplish His divine purpose. Even though God knows the end result, the means that lead to that end result will be accomplished through prayer. In this sense, it is true that “prayer changes things,” and it is also true that God uses prayer to change our hearts so that our will comes into conformity with His.

- Peter was in prison but the church was praying. They knew that that was all they could do. They relied on God through prayer.
- The same Greek for “earnest prayer”(v. 5) was also used in Luke 22:44 to describe Jesus, who “prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” His urgent prayers occurred mere moments before His betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion—which Jesus knew full well was coming. The church felt the same weighty compulsion to cry out to the Almighty Father on behalf of Peter.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 90)

From Day 4 in the DDG: **When trials come our way, how does prayer help?** (in that we put our trust in God; in that we humble ourselves and submit to God; in that we rely on God’s power and not our own; in that we find comfort in joining with other believers in requesting of God)

TRANSITION: Herod thought he had Peter and another blow to the Christian movement “in the bag,” but the church knew different. Through their fervent prayers, they recognized what Herod and others could not—no one can thwart God’s plan to propel the gospel of Christ.

POINT 2

FOLLOWING THE LORD FOR DELIVERANCE (ACTS 12:6-10)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 12:6-10** from his or her Bible.

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.

DIG: Instruct group members to look over Acts 12:4-6 on their own and underline all the security facts about Peter’s imprisonment. (sixteen guards assigned; secured in prison; bound with two chains; two soldiers flanked Peter while he slept; sentries guarded prison doors). Explain that even in the toughest situations, God is at work.

EXPLAIN: Discuss the following idea as it refers to **verse 6** (DDG p. 90):

When we stay faithful to God, even in trials and suffering, we can have peace.

- Herod went to great lengths to ensure Peter could not escape, probably in response to Peter and John’s miraculous rescue in Acts 5:17-20. This time, the apostle was shackled to two guards, one on each side.
- Imprisonment to await prosecution was typical of the time. Instead of a place to mete out punishment, the Romans used prison as a holding cell until a trial could be held. A public trial could not be held until the end of Passover, so Herod had to hold off before he could deal with Peter.
- Peter had days in prison to think, hope, and pray. He did not know what the morning would hold. Would God intervene and bring rescue? Or would He allow Peter to die, like James? The night before a trial, most people in his position would be rightly nervous. Confident in the good purpose of God regardless of the outcome, Peter slept soundly.

ANGEL

Throughout Scripture, Old Testament and New, we see God using His messengers, angels, to serve Him and do His bidding. These are created spiritual beings, not transformed, deceased human beings.

ASK: (DDG p. 90)

What truths about God do you think Peter clung to while he awaited his trial? (God is sovereign; suffering for Christ was expected; man can kill the body but not the soul; Christ was worth suffering for; God is always victorious)

INTERACT: Direct the group to study the passage once again; this time note any evidence of divine, miraculous provision. (angel appeared out of nowhere; his chains fell off; guards did not notice any of this, or were unable to stop it; walked past two sets of guards; iron gate opened up by itself). Remind your group that though God may not always take you out of a tough situation, He is always able to as Almighty God. But His will and purposes are sometimes beyond our understanding and we need to trust in Him.

HIGHLIGHT: Discuss **verses 7-10** while highlighting the following (DDG p. 90):

Not even the most thought-out, perfectly executed schemes of man can thwart God's plan.

- First, we see that Peter slept so soundly that the angel had to poke him to wake him.
- Luke left no room for doubt that this rescue was miraculous. It was not yet time for Peter to head to his eternal home. Even the best attempts of the (seemingly) all-powerful “king” of the Jews, Herod, were impotent against God's purpose.
- The angel instructed Peter what to do and he obeyed, even though he was in a daze (v. 9).
- Once he left the city and was safe, the angel left him.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 91)

How can we grow in our trust in God that we can have peace even when things don't seem to go the way we expect? (study the Word to understand God's character and will; hear other people's testimonies about how God turned a bad situation for His glory; stay in prayer for God's will and His people)

TRANSITION: Though he escaped, Peter would end up being martyred for his faith in Christ. It can be hard to understand God's specific plan for particular situations. But no matter the outcome, we can trust that He is in control and all powerful. God allowed Peter's arrest, but this night was not to be his last night on earth. God had more work for Peter to do.

POINT 3

PRAISING THE LORD FOR DELIVERANCE

(ACTS 12:11-19)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 12:11-19** from his or her Bible.

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. **18** Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. **19** And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

INSTRUCT: Point the group’s attention back to Acts 12:5, which records that the church was fervently praying. Take note of the fact that Luke did not mention the actual petitions they brought to God. Discuss the following idea as it refers to **verses 11-15** (DDG p. 91):

Though the gathered believers were praying fervently for Peter, when the news of his appearance reached them, they did not believe it.

- After realizing that God had rescued him, Peter headed straight to his church family to bring the good news of his deliverance. He knew exactly where they would be. Peter knew the disciples would be gathered at Mary’s house, the mother of John Mark. Luke reiterates that they were gathered there in prayer (v. 12).
- And when Peter knocked, the servant girl, Rhoda, recognized his voice but didn’t let him in because of her “joy.” Instead, she ran to tell the others that Peter was there, but no one believed her.
- Luke did not disclose the details of exactly what the church prayed for in Acts 12:5. They may have prayed for Peter’s release. They just as easily could have prayed for Peter to be faithful through his imminent trial and execution as well.
- Their surprise at Peter’s appearance does not necessarily mean that they doubted God’s power to release Peter.

- Though there is no biblical support for the doctrine of guardian angels, it's possible that Jews believed that God appointed an angel to each person. They also thought that each heavenly being bore the image of the person they protected. These thoughts, however, could also be part of Jewish superstition.⁴ But this could explain why the disciples might have thought Peter was actually "his angel" (v. 15).

ASK: (DDG p. 91)

Why are there times when we pray for something and yet doubt that it could happen? (we know we don't know God's plans fully; we're not sure our prayers are in line with God's plan; we may not trust that God could do it)

EXPLAIN: Luke clearly presents throughout Acts that the persecution of the church and the execution of Christians propelled the spreading of the gospel; but the testimonies of God's mighty deliverance did as well. God knew just what His people needed and when they needed it. Discuss **verses 16-19** with the following idea (DDG p. 91):

The faithfulness and sacrifice demonstrated by those who followed Jesus into death emboldened the church.

- The disciples were "amazed" (v. 16) when they saw Peter. They were surprised and in awe.
- The Roman soldiers involved in Peter's imprisonment understood the punishment for failure in their job. The law stated that whatever penalty was due to the prisoner, the guards who failed would receive that punishment. Those men had nothing to gain and everything to lose from Peter's escape. Their execution further points to the validity of God's miraculous intervention to free Peter.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 91)

How can we be encouraged by the suffering and deliverance of God's people around us and throughout the world? (we are reminded that God is always in control; we are reminded that God is victorious; we see our own trials and suffering as light in comparison; we stay fervent in prayer for the saints)

TRANSITION: Regardless of the outcome, God is all-powerful and always in control—even in our most desperate situations. Whatever comes our way, we can trust that God's plan is best, and He will use all things to further His kingdom.

JAMES

The James who was executed by Herod mentioned in Acts 12:2 was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. He and his brother John were the sons of Zebedee and known as the Sons of Thunder. In Acts 12:17, Peter instructed the church members to inform "James and the brothers" of God's miraculous rescue. This James in verse 17 refers to the half-brother of Jesus, not the son of Zebedee.

MY RESPONSE

SAY: When Peter was arrested and put in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. God delivered Peter miraculously, but the church failed to believe he had been rescued at first. In a similar way, Jesus had taught His disciples that He would die and be raised again, but they too failed to believe at first. When they saw and experienced the resurrected Savior, their faith increased. Because God's love, power, and sovereignty are proven in the resurrection of Jesus, we pray with anticipation that God works in us and through us as we seek to make Jesus known.

HEAD:

Even when it seems as if our circumstances are spiraling out of control, God is in control. In His good sovereignty, God allows adversity, suffering, and untimely death to enter our lives. But He also provides radical rescue from harm in some situations. Regardless of which He ordains for us, we can trust that He sees all, knows all, and has a righteous purpose to use every event in our lives for His glory.

How might remembering God's past faithfulness and powerful acts help you walk through your difficult moments today?

HEART:

The evil one is continually at work to disrupt God's plan, discourage His people, and destroy His creation. We are smack dab in the middle of a cosmic coup—an assault on the preeminent rule and sovereign power of God. Knowing this, it can be easy to give into despair, fear, or panic. But if we are in Christ, we win. There is nothing that God can't deliver us from, and there is no evil plot that can rob us of our eternal inheritance.

How does knowing that Christ has already won the spiritual battle help relieve any negative feelings that threaten to overwhelm you?

HANDS:

Prayer is an ordained part of God's purposeful battle plan. Forces all around us seek to suppress the truth about Jesus. At times, we may find ourselves under fire. But we must recognize that other Christians are under constant affliction for their faith. We must fervently pray for God's servants.

How can I be aware of the prayer needs of those in ministry in my church and around the world?

PRAY: God, we thank You for letting us be a part of Your work. Continue Your work today and deliver Your people from persecution. Amen.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Life and death are in the hands of a sovereign God. When you and I rebel against His decision, it is simply too bad for us. This is His universe, not ours. It is God's church, not ours. The hand of a sovereign God moves in the church."⁵

—J. Vernon McGee
(1904–1988)

POINT 1: PRAYING TO THE LORD FOR DELIVERANCE

(ACTS 12:1-5)

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COMMENTARY

“Herod would not risk his favor with the Jews by executing Peter during this time, since that would be considered a desecration. The Passover was eaten on the eve of Nisan 14 and was followed by seven days of eating unleavened bread, ending on Nisan 21. Luke used the term ‘Passover’ for the entire period. It would have been after the holy days had ended that Agrippa would have brought Peter forth for public trial and surely also for execution (v. 4). Peter was placed under heavy security, being guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. This was the usual Roman practice, changing guards every three hours throughout the twelve night hours to assure maximum alertness.¹⁴⁶ Why the heavy guard? Perhaps the Sanhedrin had informed Agrippa of their own experience in jailing the apostles on a previous occasion (5:19). While Peter waited in prison, the Christians used their most effective means of assistance. They prayed continually for him (v. 5).”⁶

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ILLUSTRATION

Assassinations are intentional. One can see how the elimination of a particular ruler has changed the course of history. Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Julius Caesar, Abraham Lincoln, JFK, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are some notable assassinations, several of which occurred just in the last century. Each tragic murder was a strategic hit on a nation, regime, or movement. Some ignited violence. Others forwarded freedoms. The desired outcome varies, but most assassins are sent not just to kill a leader, but to slow down—or completely stop—the direction, power, and progress of that particular leader.

The same was true in the first century. Leaders killed influencers to stop the spread of an undesirable movement. The expansion of the Christian message was no exception—then or now. Eleven of the twelve apostles were murdered for their involvement in advancing the gospel message of Christ. Here in Acts we see the attempt to put down Peter. It was only because of the timing of the Passover that the Romans did not send him to trial and execute him right away. In this instance, Peter escaped death. Though he would die a martyr about twenty years later, it would be in God’s timing and plan, not Herod’s. Since then, an uncountable number of souls have been slaughtered in the name of stopping the spread of the Christian faith. But it hasn’t halted. Instead, it has flourished as a result of the persecution that was meant to stomp it out.

EXTRA

POINT 2: FOLLOWING THE LORD FOR DELIVERANCE

(ACTS 12:6-10)

+ COMMENTARY

“As the imperfect tenses in verse 5 make clear, Peter’s imprisonment and the early church’s prayer lasted for several days. The story moves to the night before the day on which Herod intended to bring Peter out of prison and take him before the people (verse 4) for trial and summary execution. Luke describes the method of imprisonment in more detail. Peter was handcuffed to a soldier on each side in the prison, and the door was guarded by sentries. During the night—the regular time for such events—an angel of the Lord entered the prison and the place shone with a supernatural light. Peter was asleep, untroubled by the thought of what he expected to happen the next day, and had to be awakened by a nudge on his side. As he stood up, the fetters holding him to the soldiers fell off his hands. Half asleep, he heard the angel tell him to put on his daytime clothing preparatory to leaving the prison. He walked out of the open door of the prison, following the angel and not unnaturally thinking that he was dreaming it all. There were three gates to be traversed before Peter reached freedom. The story does not make it clear whether the first two were open or closed, but the implication is that they were open while the guards were sleeping. The third door was the massive outside door of the prison, and it swung open of its own accord, letting Peter and the angel pass out and along the street. Once they had walked away from the immediate vicinity of the prison, the angel disappeared, and Peter realized that he was really and truly free, thanks to divine intervention.”⁷

+ ILLUSTRATION

If you need to keep a toddler contained, there are many tactics you can employ. It could be a secure highchair—with its tray filled with snacks—as a front-row seat to their favorite TV show. Or perhaps you throw a few books and a blankie in a crib and hope they take a nap. Another option is to place the child in a safe, gated room to play. There are many little ones who are content to enjoy the alone time with their toys. Others are not so happy to be by themselves. They long to be with someone and will do anything to get back to where they want to be. So, they might resort to crying, screaming, and throwing a fit until the caretaker relents. Still others may be a bit more crafty. Instead of using their energy to protest verbally, they get to work to find a way out. It is these little escape artists that push the limits of cribs, gated rooms, and secured seats. They climb over barriers, squeeze through spaces, and crawl up doorjamb, doing things no one ever dreamed a child was able to do.

Once a feat has been displayed by a preschool fugitive, the chink in the armor has been exposed, and the child will then continue to exploit that weakness. Additional barriers must be put in place to avert further escapes.

Unlike the above example, Peter’s breakout was not due to a gap in the defense protocol. This was a code red surveillance detail, using a Roman method proven to prevent a criminal getaway and implemented by men whose lives were on the line. This was a 24/7 high alert security system. Peter’s deliverance from prison had no earthly explanation. It was a miraculous display of God’s power.

POINT 3: PRAISING THE LORD FOR DELIVERANCE (ACTS 12:11-19)

+ COMMENTARY

“Peter continues knocking until someone finally opens the door. By now readers are used to the reaction: ‘they saw him and were amazed’ (Acts 12:16). Peter settles them down and retells the story, and also asks them to let ‘James and . . . the brothers’ know before he wisely moves on to another place (v. 17). James, the brother of Jesus, is now prominent in the Jerusalem church (cf. ch. 15; Galatians 1–2). Peter, on the other hand, moves on. The original Twelve, and also Paul, are not primarily attached to a single place, and it does not take long even for Peter not to be the central character in Jerusalem any longer. The apostles move about preaching the gospel and making disciples (per Jesus’ brief), while others, such as James, take on local leadership roles. Peter and John eventually find themselves far from Jerusalem, writing letters to people living far from Jerusalem (1-2 Peter; 1-3 John; Revelation). Understandably, there is ‘no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter’ (Acts 12:18). It is not hard to imagine the pit in their stomachs when it dawns on them that he really is gone. Now they have to answer to Herod, which goes very much the way they probably expect. Herod looks for Peter but cannot find him, and so he executes the guards. After this debacle, Herod goes north to put some space between himself and Judea. But the God of Judea is in Caesarea, too.”⁸

+ ILLUSTRATION

The Princess Bride fans will recognize in this spoof of a fairy tale that the good guy—the Man in Black—is on a quest to save the love of his life, Princess Buttercup. The bad guy—Vizzini—has kidnapped the princess and is on his way to deliver her to Gilder to start a war for the evil Prince Humperdinck. Though Vizzini has formidable henchmen, the Man in Black always finds a way to catch up to Vizzini. Each time the Man in Black proves his canny ability to out-do the kidnapper, Vizzini cries, “Inconceivable!” The villain just couldn’t come to grips with the fact that someone had found a way to elude his adversity.

Scripture gives us many glimpses into impossible feats enabled by our powerful God. He gives sight to the blind, calms storms, parts seas, walks on water, and plagues rivers into blood. He can break chains, send down bread from heaven, and stop or even reverse the path of the earth around the sun. Furthermore, he protects his people from death by fire, execution by devouring lions, and even delivers people back from death. But our rational (and often skeptical) minds have a hard time believing these things have happened and continue to happen. It is good for us to remember that God is the creator of all and can do what He wills with the very world He holds together by His power alone. Nothing is inconceivable for our God.

References

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4. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 222-223.
5. J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: Church History (Acts 1-14)*, electronic ed., vol. 40 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 138.
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8. James M. Hamilton Jr. and Brian J. Vickers, *John-Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. IX, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 450–451.