

IMPRISONED FOR THE GOSPEL

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

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

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Acts 12

+ **SETTING:**

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.

DAY 1

READ:

Acts 12:1-5

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 12:1

NOTES

Violence. Execution. Sword. Prison.

These words aren't part of the typical experience for most in western cultures. But these are not merely barbaric concepts from a long-ago world. Christian brothers and sisters today face persecution and suffering in their continual reality. The earthly pain and sorrow they have endured for demonstrating their faith in Jesus is beyond the comprehension of many modern-day Christians—as is the particular joy of following in the footsteps of Christ's suffering.

Scripture promises great rewards for the one who sustains hardship and persecution for the sake of Christ. The Bible also proclaims that we should expect suffering not as unusual but as ordinary. Scripture tasks us with rejoicing in the fellowship of His sufferings. God deems us blessed when demonstrations of our faith cause us insult or injury. We ought to expect and embrace the fiery ordeals. May we, like so many who have gone before us, embrace suffering and consider everything to be a loss compared to knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:8).

What various types of opposition does the Christian church face today?

DAY 2

READ:

Acts 12:1-5

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 12:5

NOTES

Most children are naive to the cares of adult life—which is a good thing. That naïveté is part of what allows a child to be a child. Life is simple. They think mostly in terms of what is right in front of them and readily take joy in the little things. They are each the center of their own little universe and believe that life revolves around themselves.

Unfortunately, spiritually speaking, many Christians live a childish life and see life through a self-centered lens. They are unable to see past what's right in front of us and are consumed with comfort and control, safety and success. But these are not what we are called to, biblically speaking. We remain on this earth for a great eternal purpose, and we must not be naive to the battle that wages all around us.

When it comes to fighting this battle, prayer is our lifeline. As John Piper proclaims, "Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den."¹ Let's be people of God who pray fervently for His battle plan to be propelled forward.

What can you do today to become more aware of God's work around you so that you can enter into fervent prayer to help facilitate His battle plan?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"The faith which creates powerful praying is the faith which centres itself on a powerful Person. Faith in Christ's ability to do and to do greatly, is the faith which prays greatly."²

—Edward M. Bounds
(1835–1913)

DAY 3

READ:

Acts 12:6-10

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 12:7-10

NOTES

There are some dreams that feel incredibly real. So much so, that when we wake, we have physical symptoms of what we felt in the dream. Perhaps in the dream we are falling, and we awake in a jerk—heart pounding—just before hitting the ground. In another dream scenario, we may have a sudden realization that we've been enrolled in a course for weeks. But haven't been attending class or doing classwork because we didn't know about it! Upon awaking, there may be a deep sense of anxiety and frenetic energy due to the pain experienced in the dream.

Most dreams, however, have an element of reality missing from it. Things are typically topsy-turvy or simply just not quite right. This allows us to distinguish between dream and reality. Here in Acts, Peter experienced such an incredible, fantastical deliverance that he believed he was in a dream. Whether that feeling was divinely induced or just an extended post-sleep time that typically lasted only seconds, Peter was befuddled. In many ways, God and His ways are so much more than our brains can handle. One day, when we see Him face to face, we will get to bask in His full glory without the restrictions of this world and the earthly body we indwell. He is mighty and majestic. His ways are mysterious yet magnificent. And we will get to worship Him and His ways for eternity.

What magnificent things have you seen God do lately?

DAY 4

READ:

Acts 12:11-19

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 12:12-16

NOTES



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.

Though the early church members were intensely praying for Peter while he endured imprisonment (v. 5), they struggled to believe that he was knocking on their door. We don't know exactly what they prayed for, but it is conceivable that as they prayed for God's will to be done, asking for Peter's deliverance had to be somewhere on their list of potential outcomes. Yet when God answered their prayers, they were unable to embrace that reality. Perhaps after days of waiting, they had given up on that possibility and had moved on to praying for God to strengthen the apostle so that he could faithfully endure his trial and imminent death.

It's easy to give in to discouragement when it seems as if our prayers hit the ceiling. Though we may not know exactly how God will answer our prayers—with a “yes,” “no,” or “not yet”—we can know that He hears every ask and is continually working to carry out His perfect and purposeful will. Even though God's specific answer caught the early believers by surprise, they were still found praying! Especially when it comes to the kingdom coming, let's be people who pray both fervently and expectantly.

When trials come our way, how does prayer help?

DAY 5

READ:

Philippians 1:18-26

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Philippians 1:21-24

NOTES

We do not and cannot know God's particular will for many things in life. Here in Philippians, much like Peter's experience, the Romans had captured and imprisoned Paul, and he was facing the possibility of execution. Yet, he was confident that God would deliver him. But did you catch what his hope was in? He eagerly expected that Christ would be highly honored in his body, whether by Paul's life or by death (1:20). Paul knew that God would save him from his current situation, either through a physical release from his bondage or the ultimate salvation through death. Either way, Paul would win.

Paul's identity (Peter's, too!) was firmly rooted with Christ in heaven. He understood that this life is a layover, and eternity with God is the destination. Though he traversed this earth with gospel-purpose, he longed for the "better" day when he would gain his final abode and behold the face of Jesus.

There is so much about this world to which we attach ourselves and become entangled. It is easy to forget that this world is not our home. Our place is with Jesus. Our eternity will be filled with abundance and glory, unending joy and enduring peace through the presence of our Savior.

What might you need to release your grip on in this life so that you can better embrace your current God-given purpose and eternal future reward?

GROUP

NOTES


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)


POINT 1: Praying to the Lord for Deliverance (Acts 12:1-5)

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

 How can we cultivate more prayer in our lives?


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 From Day 4: **When trials come our way, how does prayer help?**

POINT 2: Following the Lord for Deliverance (Acts 12:6-10)

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

 What truths about God do you think Peter clung to while he awaited his trial?

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



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?

POINT 3: Praising the Lord for Deliverance (Acts 12:11-19)

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



Why are there times when we pray for something and yet doubt that it could happen?

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



How can we be encouraged by the suffering and deliverance of God's people around us and throughout the world?

MY RESPONSE

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:** How might remembering God's past faithfulness and powerful acts help you walk through your difficult moments today?
- **HEART:** How does knowing that Christ has already won the spiritual battle help relieve any negative feelings that threaten to overwhelm you?
- **HANDS:** How can I be aware of the prayer needs of those in ministry in my church and around the world?



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

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."⁴

—J. Vernon McGee (1904–1988)