

Acts 12:1-24 Peter's Miraculous Escape from Prison and the Church's faithful prayers and doubts!! 27th July 2025

Prayer: *Thank you God for your promise of release to the captives. Thank you for answered prayer. May we be encouraged as we consider your word this day. Amen.*

This passage in Acts 12 always makes me laugh when I read that Rhoda goes to the door and hears Peter's voice – (an amazing answer to the prayers the household had been praying) but she then runs off without opening the door and leaves him standing there! We see here a bit of comic relief in the midst of the dramatic story in Acts.

I wonder what you would have done in Rhoda's position – and how would you have responded to her news – believing or doubting?

The chapter begins describing how King Herod had started persecuting the Church and even had James, the brother of John (the sons of Zebedee) executed. This Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great who had been the one threatened by Jesus' birth and had all the baby boys in Bethlehem killed. *This* Herod now feels threatened by this growing new movement called 'the way' – which he thought would have ceased after Jesus was crucified.

Herod seeks to preserve Roman peace and to please the Jews. While the Jews saw it as a threat to their religion, Herod saw the movement as political, a threat to his throne. His grandfather was threatened by the prospect of a King being born, this Herod is still concerned for his Kingship as this new movement talked of Jesus as being the Messiah, the King of the Jews...even though he was supposedly dead! The Jews had been pleased with the killing of James so now he imprisons Peter also. Herod is vain, but we see later that his vanity gets him nowhere!

As we have heard over the past few weeks Peter has been powerfully preaching the good news of Jesus, calling people to repentance and baptism, healing and even raising Dorcas/Tabitha from the dead. Many thousands had become believers through his ministry. The Church was growing.

It was Passover when Jesus was arrested and killed. It is Passover again (the festival of unleavened bread) when Peter is arrested, and the likelihood is that he was also to be killed. That may have been Herod's intention, but it was not God's plan for Peter to die then. We believe he did die as a martyr, but that came later.

At Passover the Jews remember their rescue out of slavery in Egypt, saved from the cruel and oppressive leadership of Pharaoh. God showed who was King then as he does again now.

While Herod sought to use his power for destruction, we see the contrast of God's saving power – Jesus is the *true* King whose reign is greater than any earthly King. Pharaoh could not stop the Israelites from leaving and neither could Herod stop Peter from being rescued, nor could he stop this Jesus movement from growing. But God could stop Herod, the one who considered himself like a God gets struck down and dies, while the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

But I've got ahead of myself...back to this engaging story...

When Peter was arrested it may have seemed that it was a helpless situation. The Church could have felt powerless; they could do nothing themselves but earnestly pray to God for him. I don't know about you but there are many times when I have felt inadequate to fix or solve a problem – prayer is the only thing to do.

So here they were praying faithfully, and you might think with some expectation that their prayers would be answered as previous chapters in Acts tell of many miracles, even one of the apostles release from prison in Chapter 5 and there will be another miraculous break out of jail story for Paul and Silas in Acts 16.

It seems Peter wasn't too anxious as he had fallen asleep, so that when he was woken by the Angel striking him on the side, he thought he was seeing a vision. He is used to seeing visions as we heard last week with the story of Cornelius.

The writer Luke describes in detail the degree of difficulty for escape – he was well guarded and chained (he was sleeping between two guards!)- this highlights the miraculous in this situation as the Angel leads him out of the prison where an Iron Gate opens by itself (a bit like the tomb stone that rolled away on Easter morn) and they walk out into the city and the length of one street. The Angel then leaves and Peter who had been half asleep suddenly is fully awake and sees the reality of his situation; *Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.*

He then goes to the house of Mary where many were gathered praying for him, and the comedy and irony begins....

It would make a great scene in a movie. Rhoda, who is stunned in seeing Peter, fails to open the door, leaving him standing outside, while she joyously goes to tell the others who proceed to tell her she is mad or that it must be Peter's angel, obviously considering him dead. (Makes me think of the disciples who didn't believe the women who told them that Jesus had risen and the tomb was empty) What happened to their faith?

Peter has to keep knocking until they finally go and open the door. They seem astonished, rather than delighted that God had answered their fervent prayers. Did they not believe that God who had performed many miracles, God who had raised Jesus from the dead would not have been able to release Peter from prison?

Maybe they doubted because James had been killed. Our faith can be shaken after such times. We don't know why God saved Peter and not James, but we do know that it was God's miraculous power that released Peter from prison. God had plans for Peter, and it wasn't his time yet.

The relating of their doubts and unbelief brings reality to this story and may bring comfort to us in times of our unbelief. We often picture the early Church as full of wonderful, faith filled people, and they were – but they were also ordinary humans like us – who may be full of faith one minute and doubting the next. There is a real ring of truth in this story.

I don't know about you, but I can really relate to their reaction. Often praying for situations but not always expecting answers to prayer. And then surprised if the prayer is answered!!

When I felt I was following God's call to take up ministry in Hobart a few years ago I had to pray and trust God to work out accommodation for two older teenage children still living at home and wanting to stay in Melbourne. Many people were praying for our family and especially the two older teens. God worked a miracle for our son Luke through an amazing series of events, finding him accommodation right near our old home. My then 19-year-old daughter Beth had written me a word she believed was from God, as I approached ordination and was seeking my first curacy –she wrote this well before the possibility of moving to Hobart had arisen – she felt God was saying that I should follow his leading and that the 'family would be ok'. That was encouraging for me and I remembered that when this prayer for accommodation was answered. It wasn't always easy for the kids and sometimes I needed to remind Beth and myself of the Lord's message.

She had heard and written the word from God for me, but then doubted at times of difficulty when the distance seemed great. But we have all seen God's hand at work in the family over the past years. God's hand was upon her and she ended up being a part of the Kew Baptist Church family where she met her now husband 😊

The Church were praying for Peter's release but then doubted Rhoda's word until they saw for themselves.

We are called to pray and that is the best thing to do when we face what may seem to be a hopeless situation...you may have something personal in your life that you feel powerless to change, or you feel like you've been praying for a long time and nothing has changed, I encourage you to keep praying.

I've shared a bit about the amazing stories that were shared in the Alpha course. In the session on 'Does God heal today?' there were stories of people being miraculously healed, but then Nicky would say that there have been many many more people who he has prayed for who have not been immediately physically healed, but it doesn't stop him, nor should it stop us, from praying. Prayer is always a comfort and blessing.

We should also be encouraged from this scripture to be faithful in praying for persecuted Christians in the world who are currently in prison. Miracles do happen...I have previously shared with you the amazing story of two Christian women released from Prison in Iran.

And within prisons people are being released in their hearts, finding freedom from sin as they hear the good news of Jesus through courses like Alpha and prison fellowship as we heard from Ian Whitehill earlier in the year.

Do not let your doubts stop you from praying. God is the sovereign King and he hears our prayers, though not always answering when and how we would like!

One day those who are against God will be humbled just like Herod was. (We need to be praying for our world leaders – turn your anger and frustrations into prayer.) And one day all who are sick and in trouble who trust the Lord will be released from their suffering. In the meantime, the word of God will continue to spread and flourish as we are faithful to share it, we see this especially in the places where Christians are persecuted.

God had showed that he was sovereign as Peter was released from prison, and Herod was struck down, but it wasn't the end of the persecution and suffering of Christians. Peter had to lay low for a time, Paul now comes to the fore as we continue reading Acts, but he

too will suffer greatly as he preaches Christ. He'll be flogged, left for dead and imprisoned and yet he will continue to preach and speak of the joy of suffering for Christ's sake. And still the church will grow despite opposition.

Let's have faith as we earnestly pray for those who don't know Christ, for those who are imprisoned in their minds, those who are sick and suffering, those who are trapped by the lure of the world. Let us believe that God is King and that he is still a God of miracles who seeks and saves the lost.

Let's pray:

Lord thank you that you are sovereign, that you are the King of Kings. As we look at all the suffering in the world, we pray for world leaders to be humbled under your hand, and we pray for that you would rescue those who suffer. Help us in our unbelief to continue to pray and put our trust in you. We pray for persecuted Christians around the world, those who are in prison, those who meet in fear as they worship. Give them strength and courage and may your word continue to spread and flourish.

In the powerful, rescuing name of Jesus I pray. Amen.