

Don't Forget the Umbrella Acts 12:5

One particularly hot summer, a local village was on the verge of crop failure if they didn't get any rain so they decided that they would all gather to pray. On the designated day all the people met in the center of the village, but only one boy came with an umbrella.

Is it your habit when you pray to carry an umbrella? In other words, do you pray expecting your requests to be answered? What kind of faith are you exhibiting when you pray?

The text we will look at today has a village, if you will, of people who had gathered for prayer. Our passage this morning is found in **Acts 12:5**.
"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for Him."

The Message: "All the time that Peter was under heavy guard in the jailhouse, the church prayed for him most strenuously."

The Amplified Bible "fervent and persistent prayer."

The Contemporary English Bible "the church never stopped praying for Peter."

Have you ever faced a problem that seemed insurmountable, a situation with no possible human solution? That was what this church was facing.

The situation was dire and absolute hopelessness was setting in.

You came away from your doctor visit with an unwanted diagnosis.

The meeting with your boss was about downsizing and you were among those chosen to ease the bottom line.

The mortgage is due along with property taxes and there is nothing in the bank to cover them.

We see in the opening of our text that absolute hopelessness is perceived.

I. ABSOLUTE HOPELESSNESS IS PERCEIVED

"So Peter was kept in prison"

The word "so" takes us back to the opening verses of the chapter where we notice the persecution of the church.

A. The Persecution of the Church

Let's keep in mind that Jesus warned the disciples that they would suffer persecution on account of their association with Him.

John 15:18-20 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also.'"

The King Herod of our text died in A.D. 44 so the persecution spoken of in this passage happened in A.D. 43, less than 15 years following the crucifixion and ascension of Jesus.

For a moment, let's consider the mastermind of the persecution.

1. The mastermind of the persecution

We need to understand that Herod was not a personal name, but a family or surname. So as we look at the Gospels and Acts we see several Herods mentioned.

There was Herod the Great. He is Herod who built the Temple in Jerusalem but he is also known for the deadly assault on children born in and around Bethlehem because of the disturbing report brought to him by the Magi that a King had been born. He was put on the throne by Mark Antony of Rome.

The successor of Herod the Great was his son Herod Antipas. He became ruler of Galilee and Pernea and further tarnished the family line with his marriage to Herodias, who was his brother's wife. It was on account of her that John the Baptist was beheaded. He is also the ruler who met with Jesus at His trial and became friends with Pilate.

His successor was Herod Agrippa I, who was the grandson of Herod the Great and son of Aristobulus and Bernice. This Herod is the King in our text. According to *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, he was “a man of gracious manners, of kindly spirit in the main, gifted with extraordinary powers of eloquence, and quite vain. He was keenly fond of popularity, and possessed much magnetism.”

But his desire to be popular with the Jews would be the characteristic that would cause him to begin the persecution of Christians. The passage continues by showing us the method of persecution.

2. The method of persecution

We read that he “**arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them and had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.**”

Persecution is something the church has known from its very beginning.

This past week I was reading about persecution in India, which is hostile toward Christianity. Under the new Prime Minister, there has been a concerted effort to purify the Indian populace making it entirely Hindu. Christians comprise approximately 27 million people, which is roughly 2% of its 1.3 billion population.

In 2018, Christians experienced an attack every 24 hours. Informants live in every village and report on the activities of Christians that result in attacks and arrests. Churches have been demolished and burned. Worship gatherings have been disrupted, crosses and graveyards vandalized, Bibles and other Christian literature confiscated and burned, and pastors beaten and jailed. They are often arrested on false accusations for violating the State's anti-conversion laws and held for weeks. But in spite of the persecution, many Christians choose not to press charges determined to show love and forgiveness.

To win favor of the Jews, Herod persecuted Christians. **Verse 5** tells us that Peter was among those targeted and sentenced to prison.

B. The Prison Sentence of Peter

His arrest happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. **Verse 4** says that Herod's plan was to hold a public hearing after the Passover. That's what the religious leaders wanted to do with Jesus, but He forced them to move things up to coincide with Him being the Passover Lamb. We read that four groups of four soldiers guarded Peter night and day. They had six-hour shifts. While two were shackled to him, two more stood guard outside the prison cell.

This isn't Peter's first run in with the law. It happened first back in **chapter 4**. Guards seized Peter and John who had been preaching in the Temple. The following day they were brought before the Jewish religious ruling body to answer for their actions. Instead of answering their questions, Peter began to preach about the resurrection of Jesus whom they had crucified. After some deliberation, the religious court ordered them to stop preaching about Jesus.

Verse 21 says “**after further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them.**”

With a big target on their backs, we flip a page in our Bibles and find that once again Peter and other apostles were arrested by the same group and thrown in jail. This time however, they were miraculously rescued from jail by an angel who opened the cell and led them outside. The angel told them to continue to preach in the Temple.

There was no little stir the next morning when the guards realized that Peter and the others were missing. After an interrogation of the guards, they were told that the apostles were again in the Temple preaching. They were rearrested and questioned by the religious leaders who intended to murder them. But a wise teacher of the law spoke and cautioned them to consider their actions lest they find themselves fighting against God Himself. So the apostles were warned again not to preach about Jesus. They were beaten and released.

For a third time here in **chapter 12**, Peter is in prison. It says he was being “**kept**” there. That

word means he was being constantly guarded, watched or held fast. They were waiting for the end of the Passover so they could try him in court and because of what had occurred before when he somehow managed to escape a locked cell, they were taking no chances. So they bound him in chains between two soldiers. We might say it was maximum security. There was no seeming way of escape for Peter.

How would you like to have that guard duty?

From every human vantage point, it was absolute hopelessness. From time to time, we may also look at circumstances with the same thought. Our situation looks impossible. The odds are stacked against us and we see no way out, no hope of seeing the situation turned around.

That's how Elisha's servant felt. We read in **II Kings 6** that one morning his servant got up to make coffee or maybe he opened the front door to get the morning newspaper. It wasn't the headlines that startled him, but the massive horde of Aramean soldiers that surrounded the city. He cried out to Elisha asking the prophet what they should do. Elisha simply prayed that God would open the eyes of the servant so that he could see the vast army of God filling the surrounding hills.

Then there was the time the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem threatening the city with destruction. King Hezekiah took the demands of their captain and spread them out in prayer before God who delivered them (**II Kings 18-19**).

When Moses and all Israel stood between the Red Sea in front and the Egyptian army behind they seemed hemmed in. He told them not to fear but to stand and see the salvation of God (**Ex. 14:13**).

John Phillips wrote something we would do well to remember in those kinds of impossible situations. **"As the iron gates of Herod's prison clanged shut, the gates of heaven swung open wide."**

What are the iron gates that have been shut around you in your world?

What are the guards that are shackled to you that make your situation dire?

What guards stand by that make it seem hopeless?

The verse begins with a word that implies hopelessness given the circumstances Peter found himself in. Yet, where God is concerned, abundant help is prevalent.

II. ABUNDANT HELP IS PREVELANT

Following the comma in my Bible, the author uses a conjunction to show a shift in thinking, to reveal a change about to take place. It's the word **"but"** and it's used to introduce a contrasting thought that has already been mentioned. **"SO Peter was kept in prison, BUT..."**

Synonyms include words like yet, nevertheless, nonetheless, however, even so, or still. My favorite is the word except. That word tells me there is change in the wind, something different, something better is about to happen. It implies hope where there once was none.

"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was outside the jail protesting his arrest."

"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was petitioning the governor's office for a stay of execution."

"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was planning a daring rescue."

"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church had hired a top notch attorney to defend him."

Scripture doesn't say any of that.

"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him."

Where God is concerned, abundant help is prevalent. There are four thoughts I believe that phrase conveys to us.

The first is that prayer was congruent.

A. Prayer Was Congruent – "the church"

You might be thinking what in the world does that word mean. Well, I'm glad you asked. I like that word. Say it with me – CONGRUENT.

Here's how the dictionary defines congruent: to come together, to be in agreement, to be harmonious. In geometry it means to have an identical shape as something else.

Here we have the church gathering together for the single-minded purpose of praying for one specific thing. They were in agreement about what that was. Their prayer was identical.

Folks, we get together and pray about a lot of things. We have a prayer leaflet that has a laundry list of needs for each day with different things to pray about.

We pray for the physical, mental and spiritual health of one another.

We pray for pre and post surgeries. I have one coming up March 1 and I'm glad to know you are praying now for the surgery to be a success and for recovery to go well.

We pray for our Deacons and teachers.

We pray for our missionaries, and when we get information, we pray for specific things on their behalf whether it's language studies, translation work, visa applications, home repairs or any other number of needs they face as missionaries.

We pray for the persecuted church.

We pray for our military and government officials both state and federal whether it be legislative, executive, or judicial personnel. With the retirement of Justice Breyer we should be praying for the next nominee.

We get together and pray about many different things. But in our text, they were together praying in harmony about one thing and only one thing.

Prayer was an essential part of the early church. We read in **Acts 2:42** that they devoted themselves daily to prayer. That means they were dedicated to it or better yet, prayer was a priority as they met. It wasn't out of convenience when they had time, it was a conviction, something they committed themselves to do with other believers.

According to Jewish tradition, 10 men were required to either hold synagogue or pray in public. Jesus changed all that when He declared in

Matthew 18:20 "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of you."

When was the last time or has there ever been a time when you gathered with other believers to pray about one thing only? What is it that has weighed so heavily on your heart that you called up some friends and met around the living room to pour out your request to God?

We are told in the passage that these believers met in the home of Mary who was the sister of Barnabas and who was the mother of Mark. He's the same guy who accompanied Paul and Uncle Barnabas on the first missionary journey but who then ran home when things got tough. It was on account of him that the Paul/Barnabas team broke up. He's the one some scholars believe is the unnamed guy in the Garden when Jesus was arrested, who was grabbed but managed to get away sans clothes. But he is the guy who authored the second gospel bearing his name and who later on was asked by Paul to join him because he was profitable for the ministry.

It was Mary's home where they met. She must have been financially well off to have a servant and to house the church for a collective prayer meeting.

Now we aren't told how long they prayed or how many days they had been praying.

Did they begin praying the moment Peter was arrested? Was it just a one time prayer meeting? Did they set a time for Tuesday night at 7 and pray till 8 or did they pray all day and all night, every day? Did they stop to eat or did they fast? Did people leave to go to work and then return to continue praying with the group? We don't know, but it's my belief that it was an ongoing prayer meeting. The rest we are left to imagine.

Let me ask this before moving on: **What are we as a church single-mindedly praying about in this year?**

Their prayer was congruent – they were in agreement about what they were praying for.

The second thought I notice from our verse is that prayer was continuous.

B. Prayer Was Continuous – “the church was earnestly praying”

The KJV says they prayed “**without ceasing.**”

There are two words in the New Testament that are translated continuous. One means just that: ongoing, constantly, without ceasing. It’s the word used in **I Thessalonians 5:17** where we are told to “**pray without ceasing.**”

Jesus conveyed the same idea in **Luke 18:1** which we looked at two weeks ago. It’s the idea of having an attitude of ongoing prayerfulness all day long.

The word used in our passage was originally a medical term that meant to stretch out muscles to their limit. It’s used here of prayer that was deep, earnest, and fervent – stretched out to its limit.

Matthew Henry writes “**Times of public distress and danger should be praying times for the church; we must pray always, but then especially.**”

Peter uses the word in **I Peter 4:8** to describe that our love for one another as fellow believers is to be fervent, intense, deep. It’s not to be superficial.

Luke describes Jesus’s prayer in the garden just before His arrest as being intense.

Luke 22:44 “**And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.**”

The author wants us to understand that this church, unified in their prayer for Peter, intensely prayed.

Do we pray with such earnestness? Do we stretch ourselves out when we pray?

Prayer was congruent – the church gathered.

Prayer was continuous – the church earnestly prayed.

Third, prayer was centered – they prayed to God.

C. Prayer Was Centered – “the church was earnestly praying to God”

God isn’t our last resort. He is our first resource.

Peter being jailed was a major crisis for the church.

James had already been killed, the church was being persecuted and now the lead speaker for the Apostles was in prison to be executed next.

When things seem impossible, pray first to the God of the possible.

Pray to God because it is an act of obedience. As part of God’s kingdom family it something we are expected to do. Someone said that we can’t claim to be walking in the ways of God if we aren’t praying.

Praying is an act of dependence on God. The church needed God, so they prayed. We need God daily to strengthen us when the impossible overwhelms us. But never think that we only need Him when things are going bad for us. The truth is we need Him as the hymn says every hour.

Praying to God is also a way to demonstrate our adoration of Him for all He does for us.

We need to pray if we want to enjoy a relationship with Him. Their prayer was centered on God.

The final thought from our verse is that prayer was concise.

D. Prayer Was Concise – “the church was earnestly praying to God for Peter”

We aren’t told what they prayed for, only that they prayed to God for Peter.

Did they pray for a miraculous delivery?

Did they pray for him to have peace through the abiding presence of God while he waited for trial?

Did they pray that he would have a bold testimony with the guards to clearly proclaim the gospel to them and that they would get saved?

Did they pray that he would have wisdom to speak in his defense?

Did they pray that he would be calm as they were getting ready to lop off his head?

We don’t know. All we know is they prayed. They could have been praying for any or all of those things or something entirely different.

How many of you have ever prayed for something only for God to answer in a different way?

When I first got the diagnosis for my torn rotator cuff and my appointment with the surgeon was scheduled, it was six weeks away. We started praying that there would be a cancellation and I could have my appointment moved up. A week and a half ago I called to see if there was a cancellation. There wasn't. I still had to wait until February 10. I mentioned that my regular doctor had recommended I see someone else in the same office. Did he have any earlier availability? He did and it moved my appointment up two weeks. I mentioned it at prayer meeting that night and Pastor Jim said he prayed that morning that I would get my appointment moved up. I would have been happy with a cancellation, but God had another plan different from how I had been praying.

We don't know what they were praying for, only that it was for Peter. God was answering their prayer in His time. **How many of you know that God is never early and never late when it comes to His answering our prayers?**

There they were praying, and God was already at work. On the night before he was to go on trial an angel visited him in his cell. Peter was sound asleep, so much so, that the angel had to slap him on the side to rouse him. That's peace, that's faith, that's confidence in God. The man who once feared the storm, was now resting in peace. He didn't know whether he was going to be freed or sentenced to death. But he could rest regardless of the outcome because it was in God's control.

Had it been written then, he might have been singing **All the way my Savior leads me;**
What have to ask beside?

Can I doubt His tender mercy,
Who thro' life has been my Guide?
Heavenly peace, divinest comfort,
Here by faith in Him to dwell!
For I know, whate'er befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well;
For I know, whate'er befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well.

Or maybe he was quoting **Isaiah 41:10 "Fear thou not; for I am with thee. Be not dismayed; for I**

am Thy God. I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness."

Isaiah 26:3 "Thou will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusts in Thee."

Whatever they were praying on behalf of Peter, he was at peace.

Henry Ironside writes "Prayer is the source of God's needy people."

He went on to say that "we dishonor God with our lack of faith."

Here's what I see. The church was earnestly praying, but I'm not sure they were expecting an answer or expecting an answer so soon. When the answer did come with a knock on the door, they didn't believe it was Peter. So, they may have been earnestly praying but I'm not sure it was accompanied with faith.

Are any of our prayers like that? We ask, but we don't believe?

After moving up to Barakel, we needed to take a trip down to our home church in Pontiac. We didn't have the money and back in those days it cost about \$20 to fill the tank for a round trip visit. Mom said we needed to pray. So we did. The mail came in. There were four letters. She opened the first letter and there was a \$5 bill. She opened the second letter and there was a \$10 bill. She opened the third letter and there was a nice note. She opened the fourth letter and there was another \$5 bill. She asked who prayed and my brother said he did, but he didn't believe it would come. And here's something else to keep in mind. God was already at work answering our need before the mail came in.

When the knock on the door was heard, they never believed it was Peter even though they had been praying for him. They had two different things in their minds. Since persecution was going on, they may have feared that it was the authorities coming to arrest them. When they sent Rhoda to see who

was there, and she came back excitedly telling them it was Peter, they didn't believe her. They thought she was crazy thinking she had seen his angel.

On a positive note, it tells me that they believed in angels who watch over believers. But sadly they didn't think it was Peter. They thought it was an angel who was able to make his appearance look like Peter.

I'm not aware that I have ever met an angel. I could have but didn't realize it. But there is something I know about angels from what I read in Scripture. If they wanted to get into a room they wouldn't have to stand outside and knock. They could just appear in the room.

To their surprise and delight, when they did go and check out who was knocking it was Peter. God answers prayer. I hope they learned as we should as well that when God is in it, prayer is enough. I hope they learned that in the waiting God's timing is best. What lessons of faith, peace, and joy would we otherwise miss out on if God answered our prayers too soon?

Yes, the circumstances around Peter's imprisonment looked impossible, even hopeless. But when we involve God, abundant help is only a prayer away. There was great danger, but there was a great deliverance.

Let me repeat the quote from John Phillips: "As the iron gates of Herod's prison clanged shut, the gates of heaven swung open wide."

**Are you earnestly praying for something right now?
Can you invite others to join you?**

But remember this, when you earnestly pray to God, pray in faith and don't forget your umbrella.