LIFE BIBLE MINISTRY

Acts 12 :1-19

When believers gather to pray

Pastor Paul LeBoutillier · April 26, 2026

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

And we are in the book of Acts. So open your Bible there if you would, please. Acts chapter 12. And we're beginning the 12th chapter of Acts this morning as we make our way through the Bible. Sunday morning through the New Testament, Wednesday evening through the Old.

Here we are in the book of Acts and in the 12th chapter. We're going to read together through the first five verses and then we're going to pray. I will get farther than that today, but that's as much as I want to read here to start off and kind of set the stage for us if I could. So follow along with me as I read Acts 12 beginning at verse one. It says, about that time, Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

He killed James, the brother of John with the sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of unleavened bread. 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. So Peter was kept in prison.

Here's the part I want you to focus on this morning. But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. Let's stop there and let's pray. Father, as we dig into the scriptures this morning, as we open our hearts to the message of this passage, we pray for your Holy Spirit to lead us. We ask you to speak to us.

As Brian prayed, Lord, we're in agreement. You be the teacher here today. We are the students and we want to learn and we want to grow and we want to be nourished and equipped. And we believe those things come through your word as the Holy Spirit brings that word to life. And so we ask, Lord, that you would do just that.

And we ask it in the name of our Savior, Jesus. Amen, amen, amen. So here's what's kind of going on. You notice that it tells us in this passage that King Herod arrested James, put him to death, and then

arrested Peter once he realized that the Jews were fairly thrilled with that. By the way, this is Herod Agrippa I.

You read a lot of people named Herod in the Bible. Frankly, they're not all the same person, not by a long shot, but they are related. This man is a grandson to Herod the Great. That's what he's known. I don't think he was all that great, actually.

He was the one that demanded the murder of all the baby boys near Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth, or at least within the first few years of it. And so that's what he had to deal with before God. Anyway, he was king of Judea, kind of. And the reason I say kind of is because he was put into that position by the Roman emperor, who was Claudius Caesar at the time. And so he was kind of a puppet king, but at the same time he had enough authority to cause trouble, and he did.

He was fairly popular among the Jews because even though he was Idumean, which is a Greek form of saying he was an Edomite, his background was really of Edom, not of Jacob, but he did keep the law. At least he tried to keep the rigors of the law. He kept the festivals, the Jewish festivals. And because of that, and really that alone, he was a popular king with the people, and he enjoyed that popularity, and he wanted to maintain that popularity. And that's one of the reasons why we read that he was doing what he was doing here.

You'll notice in verse one, it says, "'About that time, Herod the king laid violent hands "'on some who belonged to the church. "'We don't know who these people are. "'They were unnamed, but they were obviously living "'in or around Jerusalem at the time.'" And it says that Herod began to become violent with these people, and then it says in verse two that he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword. Now this is James, one of the 12. One of the 12.

This is one of the 12 men who was chosen by Jesus to follow him during his earthly ministry. He was not only considered one of the 12, James was considered one of the three, because you had the 12 disciples, and then you had the three, Peter, James, and John, who were taken in to places where the other disciples were not allowed to go. They were taken to the Mount of Transfiguration when the other disciples were not allowed to do that and to see that and to hear what those three men saw and heard. And so he was a man who got to be on the inside track of a lot of pretty amazing things, and yet he's the one that Herod put to death. And then we're told in verse three that when he, and that means Herod, saw that it pleased the Jews, he was a man who loved being liked by the Jews, so he proceeded to arrest Peter, and then we're told that that happened during the time of unleavened bread, and of course we know that's the seven days following Passover.

So that's all part of the Passover celebration. And it says in verse four that when he sees him, he put him into prison, and he guarded him with four squads of soldiers, and a squad of soldiers was four. So this is four squads of four soldiers. So you can kind of tell that he doesn't want to let him go. He doesn't want to see this guy escape or anything happen.

So 16 soldiers are guarding this one man, right? And it says in the latter part of verse four that he intended to bring him out after Passover, and the reason for that is because during Passover, it was decided that no trial could go on, or no execution could take place during the entire Passover week, which of course included Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread and so forth. And so he intended to bring him out afterwards, but then we were told at the end of verse five that earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. So the body of Christ came together and began to pour out their hearts before the Lord concerning Peter. And that's where we're gonna pick it up here.

Look at verse six as we kind of move on. It says, 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. So he's got a lot of people involved in this guard, or guarding of Peter. And it says, behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him and a light shone in the cell. And he struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, get up quickly.

And the chains fell off his hands. 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. And he went out and followed him.

It tells us here he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real. He thought he was seeing a vision. Peter had already been part of a few visions and I imagine they seemed very real at the time. And this seemed like it was just kind of a vision, even though it seemed real. But in verse 10, it says, when they passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city, and it opened for them of its own accord.

And they went out and went along one street and immediately the angel left him. 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. And 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. Pause there with me, please, for just a moment. This is the home of John Mark, where this prayer service is going on.

John Mark is the nephew of Barnabas and he is also the author of the gospel of Mark. And he was a man who later on became a very close attendant and assistant to Peter, interestingly enough, which is why we believe that the gospel according to Mark is essentially the memories of Peter concerning the life and ministry of Jesus. And this is the home where this prayer meeting is going on. And we knew this, of course, because we took note of the fact that in verse five, it said earnest prayer for Peter was being lifted up by the church at that time. And we assume that because Peter was asleep when the angel came into the cell, that this prayer meeting was probably going on all night.

I don't know how many of you have ever been part of an all-night prayer meeting. I have done it one time, just one time. And it was a long time ago. I was in my 20s and I actually arranged it. I was an assistant pastor on staff at a church.

in Montana and just decided it would be really cool if we did an all-night prayer time. And we finally gave up, I think, around four o'clock in the morning. I sent everybody home after, because it's really hard, you know? It's hard being, you know, in prayer for a long time. And it was even a little weird because I'm sitting there praying, and there's all these people, you know, we're in our sanctuary at the time, and we were praying.

And all of a sudden I'm praying in my head or in my brain, you know, and all of a sudden I realize I'm kind of praying weird words. I mean, I don't even know what I'm saying. And I realized I was kind of like half falling asleep, you know, while I was praying. So I kind of went, okay, that's it, we're done. And I just kind of sent everybody home.

But so, you know, I learned my lesson through that circumstance. It was a very difficult thing to do. But the next portion of this passage is almost a little humorous, because it says in verse 13 that when Peter knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda, who obviously wasn't the brightest bulb in the pack, came to answer it, and she's recognized Peter's voice. And in her joy, she didn't even open the gate, but she ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. So she just, she was so excited, she just ran back into the house and started telling everybody, Peter's out there.

And I want you to notice verse 15, would ya? They said to her, you're out of your mind. That's the response of people who were praying for Peter's deliverance. Does that, get it? They're praying for Peter to be delivered.

And when they hear that he's at the gate, they say to Rhoda, you're crazy, you're crazy. Which is really kind of interesting. I think if I were Rhoda, I would have probably said, well, then what exactly have you

been praying for? You know? But anyway, it kind of raises the question here about prayer that I think needs to be raised, and that is just simply this, when you're praying, do you pray with expectation?

And that's an important question, I think. When you pray, do you pray with expectation? Do you pray expecting? I've always loved a statement that David made in the Psalms, and I like it particularly how it appears in the NIV. Let me put it on the screen.

From Psalm 5, it says, in the morning, Lord, you hear my voice. In the morning, I lay my request before you and wait expectantly. It's always kind of struck me when I read that passage. When Peter says that, I lay my request before you, because I don't think, most of us, especially when we're going through trouble, we don't really have a hard time laying our requests before God. We're fairly motivated at times to do that, but waiting expectantly, sometimes I think that's where we stop.

I don't think we get there sometimes. And the reason, well, there's probably lots of reasons. Maybe I'll just kind of share a little time of true confessions here, because I remember, you know, there was a time in my own life where I knew that I stopped waiting expectantly, and the reason I stopped waiting expectantly when I prayed was because I'd gotten so turned off by the hyper-faith movement, the word-faith movement. Some of you know it by different names, but, you know, there's all these guys on the internet, they used to be on TV. Maybe they're probably still on TV, but they would preach about faith to such a degree or in such a way that you just know in your spirit something's wrong.

And I was actually exposed to the hyper-faith camp back when I was fairly young in the Lord, and the church that Sue and I were attending at the time kind of came from a little bit of that background, and we didn't really know about it. All I knew is that there were, I felt like there were excesses that people were holding as it relates to the word of God and what the Bible has to say on faith, and my reaction to the word-of-faith movement was to kind of numb myself a little bit concerning the topic of faith altogether, and I started kind of discounting, you know, a lot of what the Bible had to say on the topic of faith, again, because I was having a knee-jerk reaction toward these abuses and these excesses that I saw, and I wasn't really strong enough in my understanding of Scripture at the time to have anything really more than just a knee-jerk reaction. You know, I couldn't find the balance from God's word. All I knew is that this doesn't sound right. That's all I knew, and so my response was, you know, just kind of back off on the whole sort of a thing, but the problem is, every time I started reading through the gospel accounts again, Jesus kept popping up with these statements about faith that really made me uncomfortable, you know, and I remember reading my Bible and reading some of the things Jesus said about faith and thinking to myself, why did you say that?

That was not a really, don't you realize that some of these yahoos on TV grabbed a hold of this statement and they ran with it to unbiblical ends, and I actually kind of took issue with some of the things Jesus said. Things like Mark 11, let me show you this on the screen. Mark chapter 11, therefore, this is Jesus talking here. He says, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours, and I'm like, Jesus, why did you say that? That was dumb.

Don't you know that people are exploiting this idea and they're just running off half-cocked and getting people in all kinds of a mess, and then Matthew 17 was another one. Jesus saying, truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, move from here to there, and it will move and nothing will be impossible to you. I thought, boy, you obviously didn't think through that one. You see, that was the problem. I kept running into these passages that the hyperfaith guys were quoting, and it created a crisis of faith for me, personally, that went on for years.

Really, it went on for years, because I knew that the hyperfaith conclusions were wrong, but I didn't know how to apply what Jesus said. You see, I couldn't find the balance. I couldn't find the balance between what Jesus said and what these yahoos were saying. Anyway, over a period of time, I eventually made some important discoveries in the word of God, and it kind of came slowly, little by little, and mostly as I started teaching through the Bible. I've been teaching chapter by chapter and verse by verse through the Bible for the better part of 40 years, and I started running across other scriptures that started tipping me in the area of balance, and one of them was in a very unlikely place.

It was in the Old Testament book of Lamentations, of all places. You know what Lamentations is? I mean, it comes right after the book of Jeremiah, and it's basically Jeremiah's cry of mourning and grief when he saw Jerusalem destroyed and the people of Judea taken captive into exile into Babylon. What a strange place, but as I'm going through Lamentations, let me show you what I found. Lamentations 3.37, who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?

See, that's the opposite of what the Word Faith guys were teaching. The Word Faith teachers were telling people that if you speak, you can make it happen. You have the ability. You have the creative ability. In other words, God has given you and me creative ability through our word just as he creates through his word.

They like to do that. They like to liken your word and God's word, and yes, God did create by speaking. Let there be light. Boom, there was light, so on and so on, and they refer to that, and they say, God's given you the same ability. You can speak, and you can speak it into reality, and then I come across Lamentations, and it says, who can do that if God has not decreed it?

In other words, if it's not God's will, if it's not God's word, right, to speak. Then I also discovered something else along the way. I discovered that when you're praying and when you're believing and when you're putting your faith in God, I discovered that you can't. Raise the sovereignty of God from the equation. That one took a while for me to, you know, going, doing, kind of hit the old gray matter there.

But it happened when I read about that time of suffering that Jesus was enduring in the Garden of Gethsemane for those however many hours before his arrest and something that he said there that just impacted me powerfully. Up on the screen, it's from Matthew 26, and it says, going a little further, he fell on his face and prayed, saying, my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. And when I read that verse, when I read that passage, I thought to myself, there it is. That's it.

That's the balance I've been looking for. That's what I needed to know. I could see that God wanted me to pray with faith, but I could also see that he had given me an example of humility, humbling myself before God in prayer in such a way as to submit myself ultimately to his will, regardless of what I'm praying for, to submit to his will. Mm. And you know, the reminder to be humble was only even punctuated and underscored when I got around to Isaiah chapter 55, and I read this on the screen.

God's speaking here, saying, for my thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. And I thought, wow, you know. So God's thoughts are so much farther above my own. But if Jesus, the son of God, gave me an example of submitting my will and my prayers to the ultimate sovereign will of my father in heaven, then I could do no less, you know?

I realized he wanted me to trust him and have faith, but he wanted me to trust him even if I didn't know what he was gonna do. And he taught me that that's where real faith actually lies. It's not in having a goal and saying, I want this and I believe I'm gonna get it. It's having, sure, you can have your goals and have your prayer requests, but it's laying those requests before God and saying, you know what, Lord? I trust you, I trust you.

I'm gonna hope in you no matter what. I found out that that's real faith. I found out that real faith is trusting God when you don't know. We're in the middle of verse 15. If you wanna keep reading with me there, it says, but she kept insisting that it was so, this is Rhoda, and they kept saying, oh, it's his angel.

I don't know where they got that conclusion. Anyway, again, if I was Rhoda, I'd have said, angels don't need to knock, all right? They just come in, right? Yeah, anyway. All right, but Peter continued knocking,

and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed, but motioning to them with his hands 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.

Okay, now wait a minute. I thought we just saw that James was killed. Well, yeah, that's true. This is a different James already. This is James, the half-brother of Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, whom Jesus appeared to personally after his resurrection, and who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

This is that James, and so it says here at the end of verse 17, then he departed and went to another place. Now, when the day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. Can you imagine the guys who were chained next to him? Can you imagine those guys? He was chained to some guys, and can you imagine when they all kind of wake up from this obvious God-inspired stupor that he put them in, and they kind of shake the dust out of their eyes, and they look, and Peter's gone, and the chains are just lying there, and the door is still locked, and the other sentries are still posted outside that door, and there are 16 of them, and Peter is nowhere to be found.

Can you imagine what that was like for these guys? I mean, talk about a moment of panic. It's just incredible, and so to say there was no little disturbance is a bit of an understatement, and after verse 19, Herod searched for him and did not find him. He examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death because, you see, under Roman law, that was the rule. When you're guarding a prisoner who is condemned to die and you lose him, you have to pay his price.

That was just the way it was. Boom, and then it says simply that he, and that refers to Herod, went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there, and I love, this is a great story, isn't it? I mean, this is one of those stories we don't mind reading. It's fun to read. It's fun to go through, and you love hearing about God's miraculous deliverance, you know, of Peter, but then we remember that Peter was delivered and James wasn't, and that takes a little bit of the fun out of it.

We look through the text to see if there's some sort of an answer to this, and the only thing that we can find in the text is that in the case of Peter, the church was earnestly praying. That's really the only difference. There isn't any mention after James' arrest of whether or not the church was praying. And we're kind of left to wonder if that was the key element, you know, to Peter being delivered in this particular way, and I'm willing to bet that some of you would probably answer that question by saying, well, yeah, I think so. I think that is the key difference.

No question about it, and then I'm also willing to bet that some of you aren't as sure about that conclusion, necessarily. There are some people who think very deeply about prayer, and I know that because sometimes they'll write to me or talk to me about their questions related to prayer, and I realize as soon as they ask their question, wow, you're a deep thinker. You haven't just taken this thing at face value. You really pondered this issue, and some of them, some of the questions that I've gotten over the years have really challenged me to think through prayer. In fact, in my book and on my blog, there are a couple of questions that appear there related to prayer.

Let me show you the first one. This one came a number of years ago, and it said, in light of God's sovereignty, does it really make a difference for us to spend time in prayer? And you know, when I read that, I remember the first time I thought to myself, that's a good question. It comes from a deep reflection on the sovereignty of God, and if you've ever really just sat and pondered the sovereignty of God, sovereignty means there's no one above him. Nobody can tell him what to do.

He is completely and ultimately and utterly in charge, and so when you ponder that sovereignty in a way that begins to really enlarge its meaning in your heart and understanding, you start thinking about things like prayer, and natural questions come up like, well, does prayer even matter when you're dealing with a sovereign God? Does prayer even matter, you know? And then somewhat related to that question is another one that came up, and that is, how is it possible that our prayers can influence God? And this question arises from someone who has most likely received a revelation of the grandeur and the majesty of God, in other words, his bigness. This is really very similar to David's statement when he said, Lord, when I consider the heavens, the work of your hands, what is man that you're even mindful of him, the son of man, that you even care about him, you know?

And what David was doing is that he thought just a little bit about how God is almighty and powerful and immense and infinite, and he came to this idea, how is it possible that you're even pondering my life in any way? Why do you even care? And how in the world could my prayer, my prayers make any difference in the grand scheme of things? So that's where that question comes from. Yeah, aren't you glad you don't think that deeply?

I don't know, maybe you do. Those might keep you up at night, though, you know, sort of a thing. Well, I tell people from time to time that if you ponder some of those questions too long, you'll get a brain cramp. And you will. Well, I'll guarantee it, but you know, at the end of the day, all we know, all we know is really three things about prayer.

We know that God's word exhorts us to pray. We know that God promises to hear us, and we know that prayer makes a difference because we see in the word that it makes a difference. And so we have to be careful not to let our deep ponderings about these questions remove the basic essence of what we know to be true. That's one thing Pastor Chuck Smith used to say to us at pastor's conferences and things like that. He would say, you're going to run into things in the Bible for which you don't have an answer.

And when you do, when you come up upon something that you don't know, fall back on what you do know. And this is, and so what we do know is God says, pray. I will hear you. Prayer makes a difference. Amen.

Amen.