

**Desperate Times** | *Acts 12:1-24 (NIV)*

Our passage begins with a story about a church in crisis.

In 12:1-4 we are told that sometime around 42 or 43 AD, a king named Herod Agrippa the I, who ruled over the territories of Judea and the Hebrew people under the Roman Empire, decided it was time to bring an end to the growing Christian movement in his kingdom. He began to round up and arrest the followers of Jesus Christ. He captured the apostle James (who had been among the very first of Jesus' disciples), and had him executed. Then, seeing how happy this had made some of his constituents, Herod took things a step further and arrested the Apostle Peter. Peter is thrown in jail to wait for his public trial, which in all likelihood was going to lead to his execution as well.

In the blink of an eye the church in Jerusalem has lost two of its most prominent leaders. Christians now live in fear that they'll be captured in Herod's next round of arrests.

Take a moment and put yourself in the place of these first century followers of Jesus. Imagine yourself among them. What might you be feeling? Frustration. Fear. Concern for yourself, your friends, your loved ones. Tension between your desire to remain faithful to Jesus as your Lord and Savior...but also to remain safe and not be the next one to lose your life because of what you believe.

A pastor named David Helm once summed up the feelings the Christians of this community must have been experiencing in three simple yet piercingly accurate words: they were **hopeless, helpless, and powerless**. This was their most desperate hour, and there seemed to be no clear way to escape their troubles.

Can any of you relate to these feelings? Perhaps some of you have come here today burdened by your own feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and powerlessness. Maybe you too feel trapped in desperate circumstances you can't escape.

It would not be too surprising if that were the case. I think we can all agree that the past few years have been very hard. We've lived through a global pandemic and experienced tremendous conflict within our society. The world is full of wars, disease, destruction, and so much confusion. Truth feels hard to come by. And it seems like every day there is a new study warning us that things like anxiety, depression, loneliness, isolation, and addiction are all on the rise.

It all piles up, gets to be overwhelming, and too often we are all left with a deep, deep sense of desperation. What can we do when there seems to be so much bad around us? ***How do we live, and how do we maintain our faith in Christ and trust in God in such desperate times?***

If you've had questions like these, or if you can relate to these sorts of struggles, then I hope this passage might be able to offer you a little bit of hope and guidance in the midst of your desperate moment. Because what we'll discover in Acts 12:1-24 is that there is something we can do when we feel desperate. We'll also see that God is willing and able to show up at times like these. And when he does, amazing and unexpected things can happen.

So, looking again at the passage – King Herod Agrippa begins to violently persecute the church in Jerusalem.

We're not told the reason why Herod all of a sudden decided to persecute Christians, but the most likely reason is he was attempting to stir up some popularity for himself and score some political points with his allies. Herod was well liked by the Romans (who had made him "king"), and by both the Pharisees and Sadducees. The opportunity to make all those allies happy by crushing Christianity – a strange new religious movement that had clearly separated itself from Judaism and refused to participate in Roman religious worship or the veneration of Caesars as gods – was too good to pass up.

So Herod began arresting Christians, executed James, and locked Peter away in prison where he was constantly watched by guards (probably 2 at his door and 2 chained directly to him).

In response to this situation, and in the face of all this power, the church humbly responds the only way it know how:

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

Acts 12 (NIV)

**In the midst of their desperation, the church earnestly prayed to God.**

Taken at face value, this seems like a no-brainer sort of response, right? When Christians are in trouble, they should take those troubles to the Lord in prayer. That's an easy one, thanks for pointing that out Pastor, let's move on to Peter's really cool escape from jail.

However, there is more going on here that demands our attention. Luke tells us that the church (that is, the entire local Christian community) gathered together and cried out to God on Peter's behalf. They earnestly – sincerely, and with deep conviction – devoted themselves to prayer in the midst of their desperate moment.

Luke, the author Acts, describes a scene of earnest prayer in one other place in his writings. Not in Acts...but in his Gospel:

*39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him...41 He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 42 "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." 43 An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. 44 And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*

Luke 22 (NIV)

*This church was praying just like their Savior in their most desperate hour, when facing their greatest need.*

As we consider our church, and how we react to our own desperate and troubled times...how often would we be able to say we pray just like the believers in v5? How often do we pray with the same earnestness, sincerity, conviction, or commitment that they displayed? At the moment of their greatest need, they turned to God. When they were hopeless, helpless, and powerless they invoked the awesome privilege of speaking to God, of being

heard by the Lord of all Creation, because they genuinely believed that unless God acts, nothing about their circumstance would change.

Where do we tend to go when everything is going wrong? What do we do when we're overwhelmed by how hopeless, helpless, and powerless the troubles of this world make us feel? In the midst of our desperation, do we earnestly seek God in continuous, ongoing prayer?

It's tempting to turn elsewhere. Sometimes our reaction to desperate times is to throw ourselves into possible solutions. We so dearly desire to fix what is wrong that we fail to slow down and first seek God's wisdom or will.

Sometimes we lean into despair and turn toward anger and grumbling. We crave the brief catharsis of complaining, so we voice every criticism we can think of with no real intent to work on making changes.

Sometimes we make idols out of the people we believe can help. Instead of seeking God, we turn to our favorite Christian author for a quick hit of self-help. Instead of spending time in prayer, we spend hours in podcasts or scanning social media, trying to find that one expert who has all the tricks, tips, and answers that will lead us to a better life.

We need to take seriously the example of these early Christians. We need to make our own commitment to earnest prayer.

In v3 it tells us that Peter was arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which is a week-long celebration. Herod was likely waiting until the end of this time to move forward with Peter's trial and execution. So in v6, when it says an angel visited Peter on the night before his trial, we can guess Peter has been locked up for at least a few days, if not a whole week. Which means his church has likely been earnestly praying as much as they can for days. They didn't just pray once and hope for the best. They didn't just tell God what was bothering them and then try to go work out a solution on their own. They kept at it, hour by hour, day by day, not sure of what would happen but absolutely sure that their prayers mattered.

This morning I'd like you to consider what it is in your life that may require earnest prayer before the Lord. What is so overwhelming to you that your only way forward is to gather with other believers and cry out to God in search of a solution? This week I encourage you to pray in the midst of your desperation, and not just by yourself, but with other Christians, too. Gather members of this church together and pray. If you are in a summer Small Group, don't just spend time talking about the weather or your time at the pool this last week. Share the burden of your heart and bring it before the Lord in prayer.

And as you do so, consider what we see in the rest of this passage:

**In response to the church's prayers and desperation, God took action in unexpected ways.**

In verses 6-19, we see a deluge of divine action. It is almost comical how much God steps into this story to get things done, and how absolutely no one was prepared for His hands-on approach.

- First, an angel of the Lord shows up, fills the prison cell with light, and yet still has to whack Peter in the side to wake him up and get him going (v6-7)

- And then Peter, who we later learn thought he was simply experiencing a vision and not a rescue, just...stands there. The angel literally has to tell Peter to dress himself (shirt, then shoes, then jacket) before finally getting him out the door.
- God breaks Peter's chains, subdues every guard, opens every door, and gets Peter safely outside the prison. ONLY THEN does Peter realize what has happened: God showed up!

*"11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "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."*

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- Peter then runs to the house of a woman named Mary where he knows his church regularly gathered.
- We're told in v12 that many people were there praying – presumably crying out to God in that very moment for Peter's safety and deliverance.
- Despite this, we then get a very humorous scene where the church is unwilling to believe God has actually responded to their prayer.
- Peter knocks on the door, a servant named Rhoda answers, and gets so excited when she recognizes Peter's voice that she runs to tell everyone else...and forgets to let Peter in.
- Meanwhile, no one will believe Rhoda when she says Peter is at the door, and while they are all telling this poor girl that she is crazy or inventing other possible explanations...there is Peter, still knocking away at the door.
- They finally let him in, and everyone is stunned. How could Peter possibly have escaped?! So he tells them the story, and sends people to let the other Christians and churches know that their prayers have been answered.
- Meanwhile, Herod awakes the next day to find out his prisoner is somehow gone, and is so furious that he questions (probably tortures) the guards and has them all executed.

No one in this *entire story* was ready for God to act in the ways He did. Not Peter, not his church, and certainly not Herod. God heard the prayers of His people, and they served as a catalyst for miraculous action that far exceeded anyone's expectations.

I find this comforting, because if I'm being honest most of the time when I pray I'm really not completely sure what I should be asking for. I know it is good to pray, and that it is right to go to God with all of my needs, but I must confess that often I really am not sure about the specifics.

This church was earnestly praying to God, but I don't think they were all that confident in what they should be asking Him to do. They certainly weren't expecting Peter to show up at their door that night. Perhaps they were praying for Peter's deliverance, but they left the details up to God and trusted Him with the results. Later, they were joyfully surprised by the enormity and miraculousness of God's reply.

Here's the encouragement I hope you take away from this: ***Give yourself the permission and freedom to pray even when you're not sure of what to ask or how God might respond.***

Sometimes it is enough to just let God know that you feel desperate, scared, hurt, and totally unsure of what to do next. He may very well respond in ways that you never expected and would never have thought to ask.

Some of you know that a few years ago I suffered a kind of collapse of my mental health. Day after day I was plagued by never-ending anxiety. It made me unable to do my job, unable to be a good husband, and more often than not left me in tears I could not stop and could not explain. For months, I existed in the most desperate situation of my life.

And yes, I prayed during this time. I would ask God to make it all go away. I would beg Him to let me wake up the next day totally healed. It never happened. And I did not know what to do.

And then, one day, God gave me a gift that I didn't know I needed and would never have guessed would be the first step toward healing: He put me in Pastor Steve's office where I completely broke down. Believe me, I had NOT been praying for the chance to have an anxiety attack in front of my mentor, spiritual leader, and employer.

But that's what happened. And when it happened, something I never could have anticipated, expected, or planned for happened: God showed up in my desperation. The church rallied around me. People who loved me and cared about me helped me find the psychological, medical, and spiritual therapy I needed to take steps away from burden and into freedom.

For the past 5 years I have been blessed to grow and heal based on the foundation of what God did that day. I had no idea what I needed to ask for back then. But God knew what I needed. And when I finally shared my desperation with Him and with others, and gave up trying to control everything, God took over... and FINALLY, things began to get better.

I want you all to pray when things get hard and trouble comes your way. I want your response to desperation to be genuine, earnest, committed prayer. But I also want you to pray *with the grace of not thinking you must tell God what must happen in order for him to take action*. You don't have to know the specifics of what you need. You can make your desires known, you can ask for specific things, but don't build up this false idea that unless you say just the right thing in just the right way, God won't help.

*Trust God to take action on your behalf, even in unexpected ways.*

Maybe you've been asking God for something for some time. Perhaps you are frustrated or hurt or even scared because nothing is changing, and the blessing you seek has not come. This week, as you pray, I'd encourage you to ask God to open your heart and mind to the things you may not be seeing. Allow Him to let you in on the ways He's been at work that you might have missed. What you've been praying for might be knocking at the door, hoping you'll realize it's there and let it in.

The last thing I want to be sure we note in this passage is:

**Even though we experience desperate times, God remains sovereign and His Word continues to spread.**

It would be a mistake to read this passage and simply overlook the difficult fact that while Peter experiences a miraculous rescue, James was not so fortunate. As Christians we must live with the tension that although we worship and serve the God who is mighty to save...He does not always do so, at least not in the ways we want. And although we believe our God is sovereign, and that believe Jesus has been given all authority in Heaven and on earth...we still experience very real hardships.

I will not attempt to explain away or smooth out what the Bible leaves as a hard, uncomfortable truth: *we're not done living in a world besieged by sin, suffering, and death.* And while I believe that our desperate prayers are indeed responded to by a God who blessedly acts on our behalf in unexpected ways, that does not mean our troubles are over forever. Not yet. As Christians we long for the world we know will be made right by the return of Christ as King.

But even as we wait in this place that is so often so hard to live in, we need to remember: God remains sovereign and His Word continues to spread.

Our passage begins with Herod in total control. He wields the power of the state to its fullest potential, even using it to arrest innocent people and murder an innocent man for nothing more than political advantages and popularity.

However...the passage end with Herod's hubris being his downfall and his death being declared as a judgment from God:

*21 On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. 22 They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." 23 Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.*

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For all Herod's power, despite the size of his kingdom, the influence of his earthly rule, and all his supposed piety...he was only, merely a man. And when he allowed the idea of his being "a god" to go unchallenged, **THE One True Holy God** finally said, "enough". And just like that, Herod's life was over. His power came to nothing. And in the final words of this passage, we are given no doubt as to where our hope truly relies, and who is truly in control:

*24 But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.*

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God's work will not be stopped by something and little and limited as a human king. No leader, no emperor, no senator, no president, no tyrant, no dictator, not one supposedly supreme power on this earth can prevent the plan of God from moving forward and coming to full fruition. The Word continues, always. The Gospel spreads and flourishes, always.

Remember this, in your desperate times: Your desperation will not last. Your prayers will be answered, for now perhaps only in part, but one day in blessed fullness. The sovereign Lord is making, and will make it so.

In every one of your desperate moments, as you try your best to navigate all the troubles of this world, call out in earnest prayer to the God who is sovereign and ready to reply to your prayers.