

Since our time together is short, today we will end our journey through the Acts of the Apostles, and What Matters in the Church. My hope is that these series of sermons prepared you for your next pastor. With our focus on Acts 12, we consider this morning *Invading the Impossible*.

Acts 12:1) About that time King Herod violently attacked some who belonged to the church, 2) and he executed James, John's brother, with the sword. 3) When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter too, during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 4) After the arrest, he put him in prison and assigned four squads of four soldiers each to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. 5) So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him. 6) When Herod was about to bring him out for trial, that very night Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while the sentries in front of the door guarded the prison. 7) Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. Striking Peter on the side, he woke him up and said, "*Quick, get up!*" And the chains fell off his wrists. 8) "*Get dressed,*" the angel told him, "*and put on your sandals.*" And he did. "*Wrap your cloak around you,*" he told him, "*and follow me.*" 9) So he went out and followed, and he did not know that what the angel did was really happening, but he thought he was seeing a vision. 10) After they passed the first and second guards, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened to them by itself. They went outside and passed one street, and suddenly the angel left him. 11) When Peter came to himself, he said, "*Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's grasp and from all that the Jewish people expected.*" 12) As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was called Mark, where many had assembled and were praying. 13) He knocked at the door of the outer gate, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer. 14) She recognized Peter's voice, and because of her joy, she did not open the gate but ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the outer gate. 15) "*You're out of your mind!*" they told her. But she kept insisting that it was true, and they said, "*It's his angel.*" 16) Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were amazed. 17) Motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. "*Tell these things to James and the brothers,*" he said, and he left and went to another place. 18) At daylight, there was a great commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter.

The prayer meeting that opened the prison doors is one of four early church prayer

meetings recorded in Acts. After a glance at the Antioch church, Dr. Luke focused attention back on Jerusalem one more time. Acts 12 is the final narrative that highlights the apostles and the Jerusalem church. From this point forward, Jerusalem's involvement in the advance of first century Christianity will connect to Paul's ministry. The ministry of Peter and his fellow apostles fades into the background. As noted previously, persecution scattered the Christians away from Jerusalem, except for the apostles. Though they remained unscathed and unharmed by the persecution following Stephen's death, the opening lines of Acts 12 noted high alert: *"About that time King Herod violently attacked some who belonged to the church, and he executed James, John's brother, with the sword."* This Herod is Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, who sought to kill Jesus in his infancy by executing all male children under the age of two. Grandson Agrippa retained his grandfather's terror through violent attacks on Christians, including the probable beheading of James, the brother of John, Zebedee's sons of thunder. Seeing how those violent actions pleased the Jews, Herod proceeded to arrest Peter also and imprison him under heavy security – four squads of four soldiers each in rotating shifts, perhaps to ensure that what happened the last time Peter was imprisoned in Acts 5 did not reoccur. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

As we've discovered from our journey through what matters in the church – prayer matters. A snapshot of the other three Acts prayer meetings produced evidence that prayer matters because of the unity factor, the boldness factor, and the missionary factor. **This prayer meeting in Acts 12 demonstrates the Fervency Factor of prayer.** Notice again the contrast of verse 5: *"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him."* ***Ektenos* = earnest, eager, fervent prayer.** Luke used this same word to describe how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion: *"Being in anguish, He (Jesus) prayed more fervently (ektenos), and His sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground."* (Luke 22:44)

The scenes of this prayer meeting define the evidences of fervent prayer.

**1. Fervent prayer activates God's peace.** Let's just let the words of the text sink in: *When Herod was about to bring him out for trial, that very night Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while the sentries in front of the door guarded the prison.* (6) While the church prayed fervently, Peter slept peacefully. Only God can orchestrate peace in the middle of the worst crisis. In just a few days, and even hours, our world has been turned upside down by COVID 19. This coronavirus pandemic has erupted quickly, causing our President to issue a national emergency and our governor to proclaim closures and sanctions affecting our normalcy of life for at least the next 30 days, and perhaps longer. Increasing pressure could cause unprecedented disruptions to our social, economic,

and financial systems. How are you handling it? How should we, the church, respond to it? Just a thought, but how about fervent prayer? Fervent prayer that calls out to Almighty God for divine intervention to protect our country and its citizens. Fervent prayer for those who are infected for God's healing touch and for those who will lose loved ones for God's comfort. Fervent prayer activates God's peace, and

- **God's peace eliminates anxiety.** That scene in Matthew 8 amazes me: As Jesus got into the boat, his disciples followed him. Suddenly, a violent storm arose on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves – but Jesus kept sleeping. So the disciples came and woke him up, saying, “*Lord, save us! We're going to die!*” He said to them, “*Why are you afraid, you of little faith?*” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. (Matthew 8:23-26) A violent storm, waves swamping the boat, but Jesus kept sleeping, then awakened to rebuke the winds, and there was calm. It's a command, not a suggestion – Philippians 4:6-7: “Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And *the peace of God*, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” When we pray fervently, anxiety and worry dissolve and dissipate, and the peace of God moves in!

**2. Fervent prayer activates God's protection.** While the church prayed fervently and Peter slept peacefully, God dispatched one of His angels to protect Peter from Herod's violence and free him from prison. With a kick in the side, the angel awakened Peter and ordered his movements: “*Quick, get up.*” “*Get dressed.*” “*Put on your sandals.*” “*Wrap your cloak around you.*” “*And follow me!*” Slipping past the guards, the city gates opened before them, and they escaped past one street and then another, and the angel disappeared. Fully awake and alert, Peter responded: “*Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's grasp and from all that the Jewish people expected.*”

- **God's protection often engages angels.** These spiritual beings, created by God as “*ministering spirits*”, according to Hebrews 1:14, show up literally all throughout the Bible. When they show up, it is never about them, but always “*to inform us further about God, what he does, and how he does it.*” (Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 155) Angels continually praise and glorify God; reveal and communicate God's message to humans; minister to believers, including protection from harm; execute judgment upon the enemies of God; and accompany the Lord in His second coming. (Erickson, pp. 156-157). God dispatched this angel to protect Peter from Herod's harm and to deliver Peter from certain death. We remember Daniel's testimony from the lion's den: “*My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths; and they haven't harmed*

me.” (Daniel 6:22) After Satan, a fallen angel, tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Matthew recorded, “*then the devil left him, and angels came and began to serve him.*” (Matthew 4:11) Both of these angelic dispatches occurred after Daniel prayed and after Jesus prayed.

As a postscript, following Peter’s deliverance from prison, verses 21-23 describe the end of Herod: “*On an appointed day, dressed in royal robes and seated on the throne, Herod delivered a speech to them. The assembled people began to shout, “It’s the voice of a god and not of a man!” At once an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give the glory to God, and he was eaten by worms and died.*” Don’t mess with God.

**3. Fervent prayer activates God’s provision.** Now fully awake and not dreaming, Peter hurried to the prayer meeting. This scene causes a chuckle. A servant girl name Rhoda answered Peter’s knock at the door. Hearing Peter’s voice, she left him knocking and interrupted the prayer meeting: “*Peter’s at the gate knocking.*” “*You’re out of your mind!*” they told her. But she kept insisting that it was true, and they said, “*It’s his angel.*” (This is just an aside, but one of the questions about angels is this one: Is every Christian assigned a guardian angel? Here’s one affirmation. The prayer warriors dismissed the answer to their prayer as “Peter’s angel.” Jesus warned the disciples in Matthew 18:10 about disregarding children: “*See to it that you don’t despise one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of my Father in heaven.*”) Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were amazed.

- **God’s provision elevates “amazing”.** Both Peter and the church members praying for him responded in shock and amazement at God’s answer to their fervent prayers. We believe that our God answers prayer, and yet, we often respond as did these Acts 12 believers. Our God IS ABLE to answer our fervent prayers with provision, power, and protection. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 3:20-21 that we pray to an amazing God “*who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us – to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*”

**Fervant Prayer Invades the Impossible!** These first century Christians removed the word “*impossible*” from their vocabulary. The question of the hour is “*have we, the 21<sup>st</sup> century church, removed impossible from our vocabulary?*” When the Bible says in Mark 10:27, “*With men it is impossible, but not with God, because all things are possible with God*”, do we believe it or not? When the Bible says in Luke 1:37, “*For nothing will be impossible with God,*” do we believe it or not?

The impossible confronts all of us. It presses our minds, stalks our days, storms our circumstances. Impossible blocks our future, pierces our present, and haunts our past. But there is a way to face impossibility. Fervent prayer invades the impossible! (See Jack Hayford, *Prayer is Invading the Impossible*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1977) *I'd like to see the day when we remove the word "impossible" from our vocabulary.* I'd like to experience just once before I die a church so consumed by fervent prayer that NOTHING is impossible with God. If we ever engage prayer meetings that breach the impossible, then we'd better look out. *"O what peace we often forfeit. O what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."*