

# Acts 12

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, hello, and let me add my welcome to the rest. My name is Simon and I'm a member of St Silas Church, and welcome back to my flat where this is being filmed again due to the lockdown.

Thank goodness you've tuned in for this evening's service. Our passage tonight has suspense and comedy and justice, drama, even cliffhangers. I mean, who needs Netflix when you have Acts chapter 12?

Now, before we get into this exciting passage, let me pray. Father God, we thank you that you are with us. We thank you that though we are separate from one another, you will teach us through your word as you have promised. Amen.

Well, it was all going so well, wasn't it? Back in March, we had gotten through the darkest months of winter. We were going into a bright spring. 2020 might actually be a whole year without a vote or referendum.

The Olympics were coming up, weddings were planned, family holidays were booked. We even had a church weekend of evangelistic events planned. It was all going so well. And then out of nowhere comes coronavirus to stop everything for everybody. Travel stops, work stops, socialising stops, meeting in a church building for service stops.

[ 1 : 26 ] And we're all left a bit shell shocked and unsure of what to do next. It's hard not to feel incredibly small and powerless in the face of the whole thing. At the moment, normal life has grown to a halt. And there's nothing any of us can do to fix it.

I think the question on a lot of our minds, Christian or not has been, what is God doing? How is this helping anyone? What good could possibly become out of this set of circumstances?

Seemingly, the only thing that we can do of any real use is to pray and even that can seem quite hard in lockdown. But let me ask you then, in the face of dark times, both for the church and for the world, does God know what he is doing? And is prayer as small as it seems?

Well, to get an answer to that question, let's dig into Acts chapter 12. If you've closed your Bible or switched to another app, then please go back to Acts chapter 12. And let us time walk back to the chapter that the keen-eyed amongst you would realise that we actually forgot to preach on back in our Acts series.

Ironically, the chapter 12 is actually pretty important and pretty crucial to the structure of the book of Acts. But it's a chapter that you could be forgiven for not noticing that we missed.

[ 2 : 52 ] Earlier, in Acts chapter 9, we've had the miraculous conversion of Paul. The church's great persecutor has become one of its great witnesses. Later in chapter 10, we have Peter seeing a vision that turns out the gospel will be able to go to all nations, to the Gentiles as well.

In chapter 11, that's confirmed as some Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit, and the church decides to send out some missionaries. Now, if you skip chapter 12 and go straight to 13, you have the very first overseas missionary journey.

And that all seems to flow quite well, doesn't it? It's all going so well for the early church. But it would be incredibly unusual in the pattern of the gospel going out, for it to go out without any obstacle whatsoever.

And that's where chapter 12 fits in. A reminder that as the unstoppable gospel goes out, it's often opposed, and the progress is costly.

So tonight, we're going to look at chapter 12 under three really simple headings. The early church is facing very real threats. They themselves are very average people.

[ 4 : 07 ] And they are taking out a gospel of a very powerful God. Very real threats. Very average people. And a very powerful God.

So, looking at verses one to four. Herod. He is the villain of our story. A name that would send shivers up the spine of anyone in the New Testament. This Herod is king of Judea. And that area, though, actually is under Roman rule now. And he turns out to just be mates with one of the Roman governors. This Herod of Acts 12 is the grandson of the baby-killing Herod of Jesus' birth time.

And he is the nephew of the Herod who killed John the Baptist for the sake of his lover. And was presiding over Jesus' trial. The Herod kings have a pretty bad reputation.

They are not a friendly family for the church. These kings have always opposed Jesus. In his infancy, in his adulthood, and now with the believers.

[ 5 : 14 ] Herod is a name that would strike fear. And he is the embodiment of anti-Jesus state power. First thing we learn about him in verses one to four.

Is that to carry favor with the Jewish leaders. He's been arresting Christians and most recently targeting their leaders. Those three names that we hear. James, John, Peter.

Well, they were often found together in the Gospels. Being Jesus' closest disciples. The ones of the closest insight into his teaching. No surprise in Acts we find that they are constructing and teaching the early church.

And notice that whilst it's only a small mention. The impact of James' death would be huge for the early church. James is the first apostle to be martyred.

The first of the twelve to be killed. So imagine the sadness, the fear and the grief that would grip the church. Not only that, but Peter is now in prison as well.

[ 6 : 17 ] And it looks like we're going to lose him too. It makes sense though, doesn't it? If you want to destroy this religious sect, then cut it off at the head. Get rid of its leaders and it'll just go away.

Now, Herod is trying to impress Jewish leaders. So we can't have Peter put to death on the Passover itself. That doesn't work. But he's also too big a prize to lose.

So, he puts Peter, this average Galilean fisherman, under the control of four sets of four. That's 16 Roman guards.

This is like the Roman equivalent of Alcatraz level security for Peter. It's likely that there will be two soldiers on the way into his cell and even potentially two soldiers chained to him at all times so he couldn't leave.

These are really dark days for the church. It was all going so well, but just at the moment the gospel is about to spread out to the rest of the world.

[ 7 : 18 ] A major setback. Some arrested. One leader killed. Another arrested and awaiting trial. The threat to the church is very real. It looks like the mission might just end before it's even left Judea.

It might have felt like loss after loss is coming. So many things taken away at once. The world's powers are rearing their heads and seem like they are in control.

And the church begins to seem helpless. Why was James killed and the others safe? What is to become of Peter? How will the church continue without its leaders?

Well, to all of those questions, Luke, the writer of Acts, is going to show us that in all of this, God is working out his purposes for the gospel going forward.

Now we'll see more of that as the story continues. But what about us? How do we feel when the spread of the gospel seems seriously and significantly under threat?

[ 8 : 21 ] When the anti-God powers of our world take shots at the church and even seem to win significant victories. When governments begin to restrict Christian liberties or even actively persecute believers like some countries in the Middle East and Asia.

Or what about the more mundane threats to the gospel? Distracting consumerism. The recent lockdown meaning that we can't meet as congregations or hold evangelistic events.

Or even like this passage. What comes when significant Christian leaders die? The sad news this week has been that the famous evangelist, Rabbi Zacharias, has died of cancer.

You see, when these challenges come to the church, we can find ourselves asking, what is God doing? If we find ourselves asking those questions now though, just put them aside, that puts us side by side with the early church.

They faced real threats and so do we. We may not be under such acute persecution as brothers and sisters in other countries, but we shouldn't be surprised to find big challenges for the spread of the gospel in our own time.

[ 9 : 36 ] So how did the early church react? Well, in the face of these very real threats, these very average people started praying. When faced with questions, threats and vulnerability, they turned to God in earnest prayer.

Now, I don't know about you, but since the lockdown started, I've been making some significant discoveries. For instance, only a five minute walk away from my flat is the beautiful walk along the River Kelvin, which I actually enjoyed quite a lot.

I've discovered that the Mellish Chee Shop on Great Western Road has been classed as an essential business by the government, which I totally agree with. And I've discovered that putting mayonnaise on the outside of cheese toasties makes them like 10 times better.

Who knew? Now, those may have been fun, but I've also discovered some harder things. Trying to care for your family when they are struggling, but very far away can be absolutely heartbreaking. Zoom calls are good, but they're such a dull substitute sometimes for seeing people in person. And an experience that I found that I've shared with others is that I've actually found prayer and Bible reading times harder in the lockdown.

[ 10 : 57 ] I think we all told ourselves that if we had the time, Bible reading and prayer would just kind of fall into place. We all just struggled because we were busy.

But take away the busyness and it turns out that it isn't easier. I haven't become a mighty warrior of prayer where the world's most brilliant quiet times. I'm just muddling along as usual.

I wonder if this is something you've been feeling too. The lockdown has reinforced the idea that you're just an average Christian who struggles with their spiritual life. Well, if that's you, then A, welcome to the club and B, you are in the right place.

Because that's what the church has always been made up of. Very average people. And that's our second point. The early church faces a real threat and it's filled with very average people.

Now, I think our passage in Acts today is wonderfully human. The people in it aren't spiritual superheroes. They're just believable, flawed people. So let's follow our story on from verses 5 to 17.

[ 12 : 08 ] What's going on whilst Herod is causing strife? The believers are doing the only thing they can do. Praying in earnest to God. Leaving us with just a little suspense at what's about to happen.

What is God going to do in answer to these prayers? Well, then the scene shifts to Peter. In prison, at night, before his trial. Where he is, as usual, found asleep.

All of a sudden, he's pretty roughly woken up by an angel. And the chains holding him just fall off. He's led by the angel out of the prison. And in verse 9 we're told that a dazed Peter just thinks that he's dreaming.

Until he gets safely out of the prison. And realises that this is actually happening. Peter is clear in retrospect though. See verse 11. Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches.

Peter is under no doubt that this miraculous escape is the Lord's doing alone. I mean, he can barely believe it's even happened. Next, Peter goes to see the other believers in the place that they are praying.

[ 13 : 21 ] And in one of the most wonderfully and kind of comically human moments in the New Testament, Rhoda, the servant girl, answers the door and is so excited to hear Peter's voice that she runs before she even lets him in.

And poor Peter has been locked up in prison and now he's locked out of the house. The other believers inside the house are convinced that Rhoda's gone loopy from the late night praying and just assume that it must be an angel or something.

Because there's no way that Peter was getting out of that prison, right? And yet, a few more insistent knocks later and there was Peter, miraculously freed and totally unharmed.

This surprise leads them to some commotion, so much that Peter has to call them to be quiet and explain what happened to them. He then tells them to go and tell the other believers as well.

And joy of joys, the Lord has answered their prayers. He really is back with them. But notice what Luke is stressing all the way through this account. Just how average these believers were.

[ 14 : 27 ] They're praying for Peter, yet their prayers don't really seem to have space for the idea that God might actually free him from prison. Even Peter himself, when freezes, just doesn't think that it's happening until he's fully out.

Rhoda is so bewildered with joy that she forgets to even open the door for him. And all they were doing is praying. But notice how important that is. God was responding to the wobbly, limited prayers of faithful believers.

It wasn't the quality of the believer or the quality of the prayer that mattered. It was the quality of the God they were praying to. Even to these prayers that have such a limited view of what God might do.

God responds by rescuing Peter and showing his faithfulness to his people and his promises. Jesus' unstoppable gospel will continue to go out. So let me ask you. Can you be an average Christian?

When the challenges and struggles come, can you pray? If the answer is yes, but it's a bit of a struggle and you find your prayers are far from impressive or consistent.

[15:44] Great. We shouldn't be surprised to find that we are just limited people. And the good news is that though our prayers seem so weak and wobbly, we pray to a God who is powerful and perfect.

The strength and ability is not in us, but in him. Now, to get this right, the believers were still praying and this in no way lessens the importance of prayer.

In fact, it sets the stakes higher. If God really does respond, then how are we praying? Have we already decided what God is capable of? Or are we praying like Paul in Ephesians tells us to?

To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. So, if you've been finding prayer in lockdown hard, or in general find your prayer life rocky and often muddled, well, take heart.

The good news from Luke is that God responds to our prayers and enacts his purposes through the prayers of totally average believers. We might not see the answers, but we can be sure that God is always enacting his great purpose of building his kingdom and making himself known.

[17:03] Let me pray. We can be sure that God is at work and the gospel will prevail. And the gospel will prevail. Because under very real threat, these very average people prayed to a very powerful God.

Now, the last part of our passage, we're going to find out how God deals decisively with Herod. But I think it's worth just taking one moment to ask the question, what about James?

The prayers of the believers didn't stop his execution. Now, this may be true, but that doesn't mean that God isn't faithful. In Psalm 116, we hear this.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants. It isn't the lack of care for James that means his life is taken whilst Peter gets to live.

We can say with confidence that James, upon his death, was received into the arms of a loving God. But this does mean that a much greater purpose than just the safety of his servants, God's purpose to build his kingdom, to show the whole world his glory, is bigger than the life of any individual believer.

[18:21] The message for us is that though Herod may have killed a messenger, he could not kill the message. All the might of the Herod kings and of the Roman Empire are nothing in the face of a few praying believers and the unstoppable gospel.

Because as Christians, we worship a very powerful God. Now, in our last section here, verses 18 to 25, we see how God answers the believers' prayers about Herod.

Now, he's found the prison empty and his prized Peter is gone. Herod is angry and so angry that he puts all of the prison guards to death.

It seems he's more of a danger to his own people than he even is to the church. Realising that he isn't going to win any favour with the Jewish leaders without Peter, he moves to Caesarea in order to settle one of his political disputes.

The people of the coastal towns of Tyre and Sidon have been quarrelling with Herod, but due to their need of food and Herod's control of it, they are asking him for peace.

[19:32] When they go to meet him, we find Herod at his most proud. We see in verse 21, he is in his finest royal robes, sitting on a throne. And when he addresses the people, they treat him as if he is a god.

After all, he controls their food supply, so I assume a little bit of flattery goes a long way. But here he is, the embodiment of all earthly power, the great threat of the church, the man on whom the people of Judea so thoroughly depend for their livelihoods, dressed in his finest robes, being told

that he speaks like a god, reveling in his own glory, struck down in an instant.

Herod has gotten far too big for his boots, starting to believe the lie that maybe he is a bit godlike, and that utter pride and hubris is his immediate downfall in verse 23.

Refusing to pay respect to God, he is struck down, and we get the grisly detail, that he was eaten by worms and then died. All that bluster, all that power, and he poses no obstacle whatsoever to our very powerful God.

And notice what comes because of this. Herod dies but, verse 24, the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

[ 20 : 58 ] You might well harm the messengers, but you can't get in the way of the message. And from verse 25, we see the beginnings of a new mission beyond the realm of Judea, one that goes out to the ends of the earth.

The unstoppable gospel has no obstacles. So there we are. There is our missing chapter from the story of Acts.

One with tough times, but through which the gospel only flourishes. The threats are very real. The people are very average. But our God is very powerful.

So my question to us all this evening is, do you believe that God's purposes are as powerful as this? That even in the darkest of days for the church, there is just no obstacle to the unstoppable gospel?

God's big priority is not the safety of his people, but the building of his kingdom for his glory. And that's actually good news for us.

[ 22 : 04 ] No matter how bad things get, no matter how dark they look, no matter how powerful the anti-God forces in the world seem, God is always working out his purposes.

He can always be trusted and we can always pray. So let me ask you, are you praying in line with God's priorities?

Is our concern to be on board with God's mission to the world? Or are we just focused in on our own circumstances? When we pray, are we praying for the gospel going out?

For friends who don't yet know Jesus and for our leaders? Or do we find our prayers are small, focused in on ourselves and just on the here and now?

And what about the current lockdown? Is the thought that could change our attitude towards this entire trying time, the thought that God is achieving something bigger than we understand?

[ 23 : 05 ] That he will use even this to advance his purposes? The good news is, I don't need to be able to understand how God is doing that in order to trust that he is at work.

Coronavirus is a challenge for us, but it is no obstacle to God or to the gospel. Jesus will bring good out of even this.

Well, I hope you can see, as Luke has been telling us, responding by praying as an average Christian is a great thing. In the right sense, the Christian life is gloriously mundane, but there is nothing mundane about our glorious God.

So let's pray, believing God's priorities really are the best for our lives and for the whole world, and go forward trusting him. Let's pray together.

Father God, we thank you for the gospel, that nothing can stop you building your kingdom and bringing your people home. Father, we ask that you would be glorified and that your name would be made known around the whole world.

[ 24 : 16 ] All this we ask and pray, in Jesus name. Amen.