

Saved by Grace

Week Commencing 17 April 2023

Notes for next week's sermon on Acts 12: Answered prayer when you least expect it!

Last year in Term 2, we worked our way through chapters 1-9 under the heading "New Beginnings". We saw the exciting way the church grew under the Apostles: how a once rag-tag group of Christ's followers had gone from being locked up in an upper room terrified for their lives to becoming bold leaders of a church that grew in new ways. What turned them around? Two things: 1. Though they'd seen Jesus murdered, they also saw Him alive, whom God raised from the dead! 2. They received the Holy Spirit to enliven, transform and empower them to be the people of God. When we last left this account of the early church (just after Christ's resurrection and ascension), we read the conversion of Saul of Tarsus – an amazing display of God's grace to a rebel who had been killing Christians!

Only Grace could change such a murderer into becoming one of the church's most effective teachers and evangelists. And only Grace can change us to become his people, commissioned to reflect his love and grace to a needy world. It's fitting, then, that we've called this new series "Saved by Grace" because these chapters in Acts explore how the early church wrestled with the implications of God's grace extended through the Lord Jesus. Such grace astonished the Jews. Why? Because it now extended not only to them but to the Gentiles and to the whole world!

DAY 1: Read Acts 12: 1-5

Acts 10 showed us the power of prayer in that God spoke to Peter and Cornelius as they "prayed continually to God" (10:1). The miracle of transformation became evident to all when both Cornelius and Peter listened to the Lord, put off their old ways and took on the new! When God's Holy Spirit works through prayer, change happens. It might not be as we'd expect but it is always as God directs.

Now we meet King Herod – the grandson of Herod the Great, the king who slaughtered babies when Jesus was born. King Herod did not venture far from his family's immorality. He saw Christ's new church as a nuisance and threat to his power so he began to persecute them. When he had James, John's brother, killed by the sword (beheaded), his popularity grew with the people. (This James is not to be confused with James, the brother of Christ who wrote the epistle of James). In fact, murdering James pleased many of Herod's citizens who also didn't like Christians, while many political figures were likewise ready to persecute Christians if it would make them politically popular. As a result, Herod's ego grew. So during Passover Week, he went after another church leader who'd been with Jesus – Peter. Herod had Peter arrested and thrown in jail, assigning four squads of soldiers to guard him around the clock, one squad of four soldiers for each shift. And then Herod plotted Peter's public execution after the Passover.

What he did not realize, however, was there was a power far greater than his: prayer. Even while Peter was being heavily guarded in the jailhouse, Peter's friends – other disciples of Jesus who formed the early church – were praying earnestly: "most strenuously" as The Message puts it. No matter how much violence Herod planned, God's response to his people's prayers changed the event. Likewise, no matter what's happening in our lives or in the world, something powerful happens when we gather together to pray, asking God to intervene and once again rescue his people! What can you be praying for now?!

DAY 2: Read Acts 12: 6-11

Nothing is too hard for God! Even when the circumstances seem impossible, our Almighty Lord can make a way, especially when God's people gather to pray earnestly. As one commentator put it: "Earnest prayer has power not because it in itself persuades a reluctant God. Instead, it demonstrates that our heart cares passionately about the things God cares about, fulfilling Jesus' promise If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire and it shall be done for you (John 15:7)."

While Herod kept Peter in prison, the church had time to pray. And even though things looked grim for Peter, God's purposes were great. Just look at verse 6: "The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance." An escape seemed unlikely. Bound with chains and surrounded by guards, Peter had little chance of

getting away, or little hope that his fate would not be like that of James. Still, showing no signs of anxiety, Peter slept between the soldiers.

Then the unexpected happened. An angel appeared, struck Peter to wake him up and told him to get dressed. Peter – the fisherman who had denied Christ and challenged the Lord on so many things – was worth rescuing! Groggy as he was, Peter did as the angel said, passed the first, then the second guard, until finally they arrived at the city gate – which opened on its own for them! The angel left Peter who suddenly realised he had not been dreaming. God had once again extended his grace, rescued him from the hand of Herod and given Peter another chance to do what he'd been called to do. How does Peter's miraculous escape speak to you today? Notice how God provides for every step of the way, even opening the gate!

DAY 3: Read Acts 12:12-19

Peter knew where his brothers and sisters would be gathering for prayer and didn't hesitate to go show them their prayers had been answered. But then we read the delightful moment of excitement as Rhoda, a young servant girl, went to the door and was so beside herself with joy at hearing Peter's voice, she forgot to let him in! Instead, she ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. The natural, true-to-life feel of this account reinforces the reliability of the historical character of the Book of Acts.

Sadly, the other disciples did not believe Rhoda, just as they had not believed the first eyewitnesses of the Resurrected Jesus. And why would they? It was humanly impossible for Peter to be out of prison, let alone knocking on the door. They'd seen what Herod had done to James. And they knew how many soldiers were guarding Peter. The circumstances had blinded them – and yet they had still prayed! God's grace exceeded beyond their human limitations.

Thankfully, even while they kept debating with the girl, Peter kept knocking. Finally, they opened the door, "and they saw him and were amazed." Visible, living proof that their prayers had been answered! When they finally calmed down, Peter described each step of the miraculous escape, building their faith and instructing them to pass on the news to (the other) James and their brothers. (From this point on in Acts, James takes on a primary leadership role, no doubt strengthened by God's mercy on Peter.) And while these early Christians celebrated the hope of God's faithful intervention – again! – Herod's soldiers experienced a very different outcome. Peter was nowhere to be found, Herod was furious and the soldiers were put to death, as was Roman practice for guards whose prisoners escaped. When we put our hope in the greatness of the God of Peter, even the most daunting circumstances can be overcome by his power! Pray now for God's power and grace to intervene in what might seem an impossible situation.

DAY 4: Read Acts 12: 20-15

This chapter begins with Herod exerting what he believes is an unstoppable power and yet ends with a reality we would all do well to understand: God is God. And He is a jealous God. He will not give his glory to another. As John Stott writes, "Luke's artistry (in this chapter) is evident: It opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free and the Word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish his own plans in their place."

When the people saw Herod on his throne, and heard his dazzling oration, they were too easily swayed in the moment. They lacked any spiritual discernment and so they worshiped him as "the voice of a god and not a man!" Immediately, Herod was struck down because "he did not give glory to God" and was eaten by worms until he died. The manner of Herod's death was appropriate to his spiritual state; he was corrupted from the inside out.

It's a powerful warning to all of us to earnestly pray for discernment and to give God the glory due his name. What's more, our faith in the Crucified/Resurrected Christ is deepened from the last two verses: "But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark." In other words, we are believers because of the power God imparted to those early disciples – and their faithfulness to him did in fact multiply God's word throughout the centuries, across time and continents until we, too, heard the good news of God's grace! Ask God now for humble faithfulness to spread his word and to love others with His glorious grace!

Resources: The Message of Acts by John Stott and <https://enduringword.com/commentary/acts-12/>.