

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, September 2, 2018

Acts 12:1-25 “The Power of Prayer Vs. Satan”
(Read vv. 1-11)

Intro. In Eph. 6:12 Paul wrote that we wrestle not with flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against spiritual wickedness in high places. He was saying that our battle is not really against fellow humans, but against spiritual beings, elsewhere known as the devil and his demons. Peter wrote that the devil is like a roaring lion that walks about, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8).

Even though the devil is not mentioned by name here, I believe that in Acts 12 we see a battle going on between Satan and the church. He had previously attacked the apostles with persecution in chapter 4. He had sought to corrupt the church through the sin of Ananias and Saphira in chapter 5. In chapter 7 he was behind the martyrdom of Stephen, and in chapter 8 he attacked the whole church through persecution, not just the leadership. Now in chapter 12 he is using secular authority to attack the church.

Do you realize that life is a battle? Do you realize that there is an ongoing war between the forces of darkness, and the forces of light, between God and Satan, and between demons and believers? Satan has many devices available to help him in defeating the work of God. He uses deception; he uses adversity such as persecution. Sometimes he even uses prosperity to lead us away from God. He sows seeds of division among God’s people. In many different ways he tempts us, seeking to divert us away from the work and lifestyle that God has called us to. We need to be aware of the different ways that Satan will attack us (2 Cor. 2:11) and how we can be victorious over Satan.

Well I am happy to say that God and His people won this battle here in Acts 12. So this morning we are going to learn what happened, and learn what we need to do to win the battle against Satan. So first of all, let’s consider more closely the fact that:

I. SATAN IS ON THE ATTACK

In vv.1-3 Luke says, “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also....” This was the first time that secular authorities joined in on the persecution of the church. I believe that Herod was a tool of Satan here. So notice with me:

A. His Purpose - What is Satan out to do in this world? One of his main goals is to hinder the work of the Church. The church was continuing to grow. Many people were being won to Christ. Everything he had tried up to this point had been a failure. So something else must be done! So notice:

B. His Plan - V.3 says, “And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also....” Up to this time we have seen various attacks upon the church. But none of the apostles had actually been put to death. Satan had not succeeded in bringing about

such a drastic attack upon the church. But now it seems that his plan is to kill the apostles. James and Peter were two of the leading apostles. I'm sure that he hoped that by killing the key leadership, Christianity would fail. After all, Paul called the apostles the "foundation" of the church (Eph. 2:20). Damage the foundation, and you can make the whole building fall. So as v.2 indicates, he killed James with the sword and now he was intent on killing Peter as well.

His plan is still the same. Satan's attack will always be upon the leadership of the church. And he succeeded in corrupting Jim Baker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Robert Tilton of Dallas. I could name other key Christian leaders who have fallen more recently. Their fall has brought untold harm to the cause of Christ. So if you are a leader of the church, be mindful that Satan has his eye on you, and you have a target on your back. I am mindful of the fact that Satan would love to lead me to fall away from the Lord, or intimidate me with various threats. So you need to pray for me and other leaders of the church.

C. His People - God has a people, and so does Satan. Jesus told the murderous religious leaders of His day in John 8:44, "You are of your father the devil...." Just as God works through men, even so Satan works through men. In this case Satan used government for his own purposes. Satan is called the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4). He has a great deal of influence in the nations of this world (cf. Luke 4:6). The book of Daniel indicates this (e.g. 10:13). So here he uses Herod as his instrument. This is not Herod the Great, the one that killed the babies in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus. Nor is this the Herod that Jesus stood before just before His death. This is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. Satan found a willing vessel to carry out his plan.

Of course, Herod had his own reasons for attacking the apostles. He had gained political favor from the Emperor, who had given him the authority to rule Judea beginning in 41 A.D. He made it plain that he would do all in his power to be agreeable to the Jewish people, who responded by giving him more popularity than the other Herods. Notice that v.3 says that killing James "pleased the Jews," especially the ones who had political and economic clout. There was agreement even in the general population. So since that proved to be popular with the Jewish people, v.3 says that Herod went after Peter the chief apostle. He was one of a long line of politicians who put political expediency ahead of doing what was right.

So in chapter 12 we read about the attack on the church by Satan's people. Next, let's consider together the fact that:

II. THE SAINTS HAVE A DEFENSE

What defense did the church have when their leader was arrested, and put in prison? They were now facing the power of Rome. They could not break Peter out of prison. According to v.4, Peter had at four guards at a time, one chained to him on both sides, and at least two others guarding his cell-door. Four groups of four guards would rotate shifts every 6 hours. I'm sure the prison was also very secure, built of stone and iron bars. They didn't have political clout to win Peter's release. They didn't form a committee to negotiate a compromise to get Peter out. They could not and would not stop preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. What would you do?

Well v.5 says, "...constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church." They used the only weapon that they had, and that was prayer. Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 10:4, "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds...." God allowed

them to get to the place where all they could do was pray and trust in Him. Long ago an English Clergyman, John Flavel (1627 – 1691), said that man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.

Has God ever let you get to the point that all you could do was pray? I know that I have been there! That is where God wants us. Hours of church work, and thousands of dollars in tithing is no substitute for prayer. It really ought not to take a great crisis to get us to pray, but too often it does. Will you make a recommitment to prayer right now?

So they all gathered at what was probably one of the primary meeting places of the Jerusalem church, the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. She was probably a wealthy woman since this house was large enough to accommodate many (v.12) people. Here we see the power of an earthly monarch pitted against the power of prayer to the Almighty. It is to the credit of these believers that they had not fled in fear of Agrippa or sought out hiding places. They simply gathered in large numbers to pray.

We ought to do the same thing. Listen, the Devil flees when the saints are on their knees! God has chosen to do in answer to prayer what He might not do apart from prayer. Do you know why we do not see a greater demonstration of divine power right here in our city in connection with gospel testimony? We do not see a greater demonstration of divine power because there is so little prayer. James wrote, “You do not have because you do not ask.” (4:2).

Now when we pray, we need to make sure that we pray the right way. So from the example of the early church, we see the kind of praying we ought to do. First of all, we need to engage in:

A. Pray Earnestly – Again, v.5 says, “constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church...” The word translated “constant” (*ektenos*) literally means “stretched out.” That could give a picture of protracted prayer over several hours.¹ However, it probably should be translated “earnest” or “fervent.” It would be similar to Luke’s use in Luke 22:44, where it refers to Jesus’ earnest prayer in the garden. This idea of earnestness perhaps comes from the idea of hands stretched out to God in fervent supplication. So I believe they were fervent in prayer on behalf of Peter. They put their heart and soul in their prayers. James 5:16 says, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

Examples of this type of earnest prayer from the Bible include Abraham pleading for Sodom, Jacob wrestling with God’s angel during the night, Moses standing in the breach for his people, and Hannah praying for a child. The Scottish reformer John Knox expressed this earnestness when he cried, “Give me Scotland or I die.” It is seen today in the prayers of parents as they agonize in prayer for their rebellious, unsaved children.

So when we pray, we ought to pour out our hearts to God in prayer. We ought to pray fervently for the lost. We ought to pray fervently for the Christian who is wandering away. We ought to fervently pray for Christians who are going through significant trials, such as a major illness. We should not be afraid to shed tears in prayer. Yet too many play it safe and don’t want to become too earnest in prayer. Doesn’t the greatness of the power of God and the greatness of the need call for greater earnestness?

Furthermore, there should be:

B. Pray with Many Others - It says in the last of v.5 that prayer was “offered to God for him by the church.” It wasn’t just the apostles that were praying. It wasn’t just the deacons that were praying. The whole church was praying. And notice in the last of v.12 that “many were

¹ Yet the word “offered” is in the present tense, indicating ongoing action.

gathered together praying.” Though we should value prayer with just one or two others, God wants many of His people to gather for prayer. But today, it seems that very few participate in the prayer ministry of the church. We have about 15 who gather on Wednesday night to pray, and about 6-7 who gather on Friday morning to pray. Our Sunday School classes have a time of prayer each Sunday, but that is not the primary purpose of the gathering. So as long as only a few are praying, we will see only a few examples of the hand of God at work.

Is there anyone else who will come out and join us for prayer on Friday mornings? How about Wednesday night? Will anyone start a new prayer group in our church? We have a new prayer room in our building. Who will gather with another believer or two and pray on a regular basis?

Furthermore, we should engage in:

C. Pray Expectantly - We should pray, expecting God to answer our prayers in a positive way if we are praying according to His will. In other words, if you pray for rain, don't leave your umbrella at home! Such expectancy arises from strong faith in God. Jesus said in Mk. 11:24, “Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.” He said in Mt. 17:20, “if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” That verse should have encouraged these Christians to pray for Peter, even though his release seemed impossible.

But the church evidently lacked the faith that they needed to have this kind of prayer. Now in vv. 7-11 we read that God answered their prayer, and sent an angel to deliver Peter from prison. Then in vv.13-14 we read, “And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.” Rhoda was so excited she left Peter standing at the gate! And in v.15 we see that they charged her with being manic (*mainomai*). But she kept insisting that it was Peter. So then they supposed it was his angel who had been sent to deliver a message. Meanwhile, Peter kept knocking at the gate, so they went out to see who it was.

Now notice the reaction of the people when they opened the door and saw Peter. V.16 says “they were astonished” (*existemi*). That word literally means to stand out of oneself. Our English idiom might say, “They're out of their mind.” They could not believe their eyes! And evidently, they could not believe that the answer to their prayers would come so dramatically and so quickly. But if they had expectant, believing prayer, they should have been expecting to see Peter any time! But it could be that the main thrust of their prayer was for God to strengthen Peter in the hour of trial, and they weren't even expecting Peter to be delivered.

Oh, that we would have such believing prayer that we are not surprised when God answers our prayers. If you are praying for the salvation of a soul, are you expecting them to be saved in some point? If you are praying for healing, do you expect that healing to take place? There should be only one reality that will temper our expectancy, and that is the will of God. God promises to answer our prayers if they are according to His will (1 John 5:14-15). So if you are confident that what you ask is God's will, then you should pray with faith and expectancy. But it is good to know, that in spite of our small faith, God often gives us more than we expect and always more than we deserve. Eph. 3:20 says, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.” What an encouragement this is to pray and ask God for great things, beyond what we might expect.

So when the church is under attack, many of us should pray fervently, with large numbers from the church, and with expectancy. And as we pray, there is another main point that we should draw from our text, and it is this:

III. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IS OUR HOPE

We can face trouble with confidence when we pray to God believing that He is sovereign. That means He is in control. When you go through the trials of life, always remember that God was not taken by surprise. He permitted those trials for a purpose, and if you will trust Him, He will overrule those trials for good (Rom. 8:28). So when you face a difficult trial:

A. Trust in God's Power to Deliver – It would appear that since James had already been killed, that Peter was sure to go next. It looked as though there was no hope for Peter.

Yet how vain it is to think that anyone can fight against God. Here we see that God rises to defend His flock against the wolves of Satan. And so while the Church was praying, God was working. He sent an angel in the middle of the night to rescue Peter. In v.7 we read that the angel appeared in the jail cell, radiating with great light. Yet, Peter didn't wake up. No doubt you have gone to your child's bedroom and turned on the light or opened the window shades to wake them up. And yet they just sleep on. So the angel had to strike Peter to wake him up! When he woke up, suddenly the chains just fell off his wrists by the power of God. Peter got his sandals and robe on and followed the angel out the door. In v.10 we read that they passed the 1st and 2nd guards. A Roman guard could be executed for sleeping on the job, as in fact happened according to v.19. I do not think they were sleeping. So why didn't the guards stop them? I believe the angel simply put them into a trance! Then in that verse we read that the iron gate that led from the prison to the city appeared to open on its own. In the Greek it is *automate*, from which we get our word "automatic". I would like to think that the door opened at the angel waived his hand in that direction! God was the first to invent the automatic door opener! Oh, the power of God! I remember as a child being impressed with the automatic doors that opened at the grocery store as soon as you stepped on the black mat in front of it! They became common in the early 60s.

So God responded to prayer in a miraculous way. There have been many other times when God intervened on behalf of His people miraculously. God delivered Paul from shipwreck (Acts 27) and from his first Roman imprisonment (Php. 1:19). There was one time in particular when it seemed that God delivered me from a head-on collision on a two-lane Highway in Georgia.

John G. Paton, a Scottish missionary to the New Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific, was a heroic figure in more recent missionary history. One night hostile tribesmen surrounded his mission headquarters, intent on burning it and killing Paton and his wife. The two of them prayed all through that terror-filled night, asking God to deliver them. When daylight came they were surprised to see the attackers leave. A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Christ, and Paton had an opportunity to ask him what kept them from burning the house and killing them. The chief replied, "Who were all those men who were there with you?" Paton said, "There were no men there; only my wife and I." But the chief said that they had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords in their hands. They seemed to circle the mission station, so the tribesmen were afraid to attack.² Paton realized that God had sent his angels to protect them.

² Cited in Billy Graham, *Angels: God's Secret Agents* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1986), p.3.

So there are times when we pray and ask God to intervene and do the impossible. But as we pray for divine intervention, there are two truths that we need to keep in mind:

1. God May Delay Deliverance - Notice that God intervened almost at the last minute. Peter had been in prison the whole week of the feast of Unleavened Bread (vv. 3b-4). When trouble comes our way, we often want God to do something right now! But God may choose to delay intervention. Omnipotence is never in a hurry. God feels no compulsion to work on our timetable.

2. God May Deny Deliverance - As we read in v.2, God did not deliver James from Herod's death grip. Surely the church prayed for him also. Why? James was one of the three closest disciples of the Lord. Both Peter and James were faithful to Christ. It is natural to raise questions as to why some are spared and others, as fully dedicated, are not. Why does God heal some Christians, but others are not healed? Some say the reason is that those who are not healed simply lacked enough faith. Yet the answer lies more often in the sovereign will of God. God had His own purposes for allowing the martyrdom of James. Jesus had even warned of it (Mt. 20:22-23). When the devil struck him down, God raised up a hundred to take his place, including James the brother of Jesus, who by this time had become the leader of the Jerusalem church (12:17; 15:13). Furthermore, James must have impressed many with his confident faith and testimony as he faced death. As has been said many times, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Besides, James got to enjoy the glories of heaven before any other apostle!

So we must leave it to God to let His sovereignty over a situation be expressed in the way he regards best. What is most important is that, like James and Peter, we remain faithful and obedient to God regardless of the outcome of a crisis we face. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego certainly expressed such faithful obedience when threatened with death (Dan. 3:16-18).

B. Peter's Example of Faith in God's Sovereignty - Now if you were in jail with the expectation of being put to death the next day, how would you react? I know that some of us would have been pacing the floor as a nervous wreck, like Miss Prissy did when she found out that she had to deliver Scarlet's baby! Some of us would have been crying. Some of us would have been praying. But we read in v.6 that when the angel came to rescue Peter, Peter was sound asleep, the very night before he was to be executed! He wasn't just sleeping. He was sound asleep. Even the bright light of the angel did not wake him up. The angel had to strike him in the side just to wake him up. How could he be sleeping? Herod was not making empty threats here. He had already killed one apostle.

How can we explain this? This is a calm sleep that springs from a good conscience and quiet confidence in God. He did not fear death. Jesus had conquered death. Furthermore, he had faith in the sovereign control of God. Nothing would happen to him that was not within the will of God. This confidence could have been based partly on what Jesus had said to him in Jn. 21:18. Christ gave a prophecy, "... when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." Peter was not old yet. He was probably still in his 40s. And Jesus implied he was to die by crucifixion. Herod executed James by the sword, and the same would have been the fate for Peter. So he wasn't worried, for he rested in the Word of Christ. And evidently, Peter learned early what he wrote much later in 1 Pet. 5:7, "Casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you."

What a lesson that is for us. So often we want to escape trouble, and we get upset at God for allowing troubles to come our way. But that is not right. At times God will calm the storm; often, His purpose is to calm His child.

C. Trust God to Deal with Your Enemies – Sometimes God allows bad things to happen. He allowed James to be killed. And when bad things happen, it may seem that nothing happens to those who do evil. So we may wonder if God is really in control. But here we see that yes, God is in control. He will judge the wicked. Luke begins this chapter reporting the death of James. As he nears the end of the chapter, he reports the terrible death of the one who killed James shortly thereafter. He says in v.23, “Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.” Herod reaped what he had sown. There is payday, someday. Wicked leaders, like Herod, may look invincible and hurt the church for a time. But God always has the last word.

D. Trust in God’s Purpose - V.24 says, “But the word of God grew and multiplied.” God’s church just kept on preaching and sharing God’s Word. Persecution didn’t hurt the church at all. God’s turned their evil into good. Ah! The failure of the devil! How this contrasts with Satan’s intent! I am glad that I am on the winning side. It may appear that we are losing battles here and there, but the ultimate outcome is sure for the child of God. So if you are not yet a believer, I suggest that you get on God’s side while there is still opportunity. Don’t follow Satan. He is a loser.

Conclusion: So how will you face trouble? Some of you are going through a time of trouble as I speak. Will you face trouble with prayer? Will you ask fellow believers to pray for you? Will you face trouble with confident faith? And Christians, when people ask us to pray, we need to respond with earnest, expectant prayer!

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, “Be” Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2: Acts* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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