

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

August 13, 2017, Pastor Jeff Harrison

### **Praying in Hard Times**

Acts 12:1-24

#### **I. Introduction:**

##### **A. Special Announcements – Worship Center and Family Growth Gathering**

Good morning friends. As we start, I'd like to express my gratitude to God for providing us funds and incredibly faithful servants to remodel this Worship Center. Jack and Sue Biros, Charlie and Chris Laughlin, Jacob Rusch, Rick Clayworth, my wife Stephanie, Allison Pailles, Luisa Gross, Joel Richardson, Lee Fletcher, and Barry and Karla Hannant. So would you join me in praising God and thanking these servants?

It's great to have a more welcoming place for guests to experience the life changing grace of Jesus and form relationships. And we also made some updates designed to help the room disappear more so we can more easily focus on the God we're here to worship and adore.

And we long, by God's grace, to excel still more in having our Worship Center be a place where we help you take next steps with Jesus, so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus; a launch pad for all kinds of ministry done in love to the glory of God. And so, as we resume worshipping here, let's pray and rededicate the space to God...

I'm excited to see how things look next Sunday when more updates are done, and for John Dyer to join us then! John will help us think biblically about how we use media and technology and give parents ideas for equipping their kids to use media and technology well. John is a Dallas Seminary graduate, web developer, and has written a very helpful book titled *From the Garden to the City*, so we're excited for John to speak in both services.

Then after second service next week we'll have a question and answer session with John from 12:30-1. And while the teens and adults have snacks and a Q&A with John, we'll provide lunch for kids elementary age and younger while teaching them about Augustine. To help us plan snacks for the teens and adults and lunch for the kids, please sign up in the foyer today if you're staying after second service next Sunday. You won't want to miss it!

##### **B. Jeff's story shows some challenges to praying in hard times**

Now earlier this summer my family took a trip to Galveston with our extended family. And while swimming in the ocean with my five-year-old son Grant, he experienced an unfortunate rite of passage for Harrison boys, being stung by a jellyfish. Back when I was stung

as a little kid, my parents weren't sure what to do as I cried, so they tried giving me a bath. Unfortunately, rinsing with fresh water activates more of the jellyfish's stingers, so little Jeffrey only cried more.

But my childhood trauma was not wasted, because when Grant was stung, I had a plan. So first I carry Grant from the ocean to the sand as he's crying and leave him with family and then I run to get the jellyfish sting medicine at the front desk of the place we're staying. And then I run back to the beach and comfort Grant while gently applying the medicine to his leg, which is already red with lots of raised spots.

Now after applying the medicine and looking for stingers to remove Grant exclaims, "It still hurts!" as he squirms uncomfortably in the beach chair, and so I send someone to our room to get the kid's Advil.

Now I've run out of ideas for helping Grant as I continue to comfort him. And at this point Grant, who's shaking his arms in response to the ongoing pain, says to me, with desperation in his voice, "Pray!"

Well isn't that a novel idea. Maybe Grant's pastor dad should pray, and maybe he should have come to that conclusion before being reminded by his five year old only after running out of other ideas to address the situation.

So I begin to pray for Grant, and I notice a variety of things going on in my heart in this hard moment. I must currently decide, do I express my deepest longing, which is for God to instantaneously heal my son. What if God doesn't answer that prayer as I'd like with my son whom I love so much?

Now big picture, your typical jellyfish sting isn't that big of a deal, but in the moment, as your young child is in pain and desperately says, "Pray!", it's painful if you pray a bold prayer and your child's pain continues. And as I start to pray I also think about the prayer's possible impact on Grant's simple faith, how it could grow if God immediately answers the prayer, how it might be negatively impacted if I pray boldly and the pain continues.

And what will the extended family listening in, who wouldn't typically pray in a situation like this, think as they observe what happens after I pray. Do I instead pray something safer, like that God would work through the medicine to gradually take the pain away and heal Grant's leg? I recently heard Pastor Craig Barnes aptly describe the dynamic going in my heart by calling it

becoming a public relations official for Jesus, praying in ways that assure Jesus looks good and everyone's faith comes out safe.

### **C. What can we learn from the early church about praying in hard times?**

Now I'm guessing I'm not the only one who's faced challenges praying in a hard time. We all face hard times. A mental health challenge, or a broken relationship, or a life altering diagnosis, or experiencing racism, or the loss of a loved one. Sometimes faith falters as we struggle to keep trusting God in ongoing hardship, or God feels distant as we stop asking Him for what we really want, or we fail to pray altogether.

Today we're continuing our series on the book of Acts and will consider the question, "What can we learn from the early church about praying in hard times?" If you've got a Bible, turn to Acts chapter 12, where we'll see the early church's prayer in a hard time.

## **II. God's response to the church's prayer in a hard time**

### **A. The hard time – murder and imprisonment (Acts 12:1-4)**

While you're turning to Acts 12, let me tell you about the book. Acts is about the early church, those first followers of Jesus. In Acts, God works through the church to spread the good news of Jesus despite great opposition. Early in the church's existence, thousands and thousands start life changing relationships with Jesus, and God works through them in amazing ways. We saw this last Sunday, in Acts chapter 11, where God weaves an amazing story of worldwide impact as the church of Antioch keeps opening their hands to bless people.

But the early church, like us, has both ups and downs. Seeing the flourishing of the early church, Satan strikes hard in Acts 12. Now we're not talking about red, pitchfork wielding Satan of popular culture, but we are talking about a real, evil spiritual being who attacks. So let's see how Satan brings a hard time to the church in Acts 12 starting in verse 1. **(1-2)**

12 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup> He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

Now the Herod family ruled the Israelites during New Testament times. And the Herods were generally unpopular among the Jews because the Jews did not like non-Jewish rulers ruling them on behalf of the foreign Roman government.

And to make things worse, the Herods were a wicked family, maintaining their power by any means necessary. The Herod here in Acts 12 is Herod Agrippa the first. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, who killed all the young boys in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth to try

to murder Jesus before Jesus could threaten his throne. And he was the nephew of Herod Antipas, who approved the beheading of John the Baptist and was one of the leaders who tried Jesus.

And the Herod here in Acts 12 continues the family's wicked, scheming ways, looking to increase his favor among the Jewish people by attacking the church. He starts by arresting some Christians and then murdering James, who is the first of Jesus' 12 disciples martyred for his faith. And Herod is not done, let's look at verse 3 to see how he brings more hardship. **(3-4)**

<sup>3</sup> When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

Things are not looking good for Peter, or the church. As verse 3 says, Herod sees his popularity rise by killing James, so he decides to arrest Peter also. Now back in Acts chapter 5, Peter and other disciples of Jesus were thrown in prison, but that time they escaped when an angel unlocked the prison doors.

And Herod is determined to keep that from happening again, so he has four squads of four soldiers guard Peter. Each squad takes turns so that no one would fall asleep on the job. At any time, two soldiers are chained to Peter while two more guard the door of his jail cell. Plus there are other guards at the prison, so Peter is well-guarded. And James has just been killed, and all of this is happening at Passover season, the time of year Jesus was killed.

### **B. The church prays and God answers (Acts 12:5-12)**

So let's see how the church responds to this hard time in verse 5, which says: **(5-6)**

<sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. <sup>6</sup> 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.

As Peter's in prison, the church holds prayer meetings. But now a few days have passed, and God has not answered their prayers as they'd like. Peter remains in a cell, scheduled to face Herod and likely be sentenced to death the next day.

And on top of that, in the Bible book of John, Jesus told Peter that following Him would include a martyr's death. In John 21, Jesus tells Peter, "Very truly I tell you, when you were

younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

As Peter sits in prison, he’s likely in his mid 40s, and given that James has just been murdered and the lower life expectancy of the ancient world, I wonder if Peter is thinking about that prophecy from Jesus. But then things change in verse 7, which says: **(7)**

<sup>7</sup> Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

I find it very interesting that despite being alone, unlike his last time in prison, when he had other disciples with him, and despite mourning the death of his friend James, and despite being in prison a few days now unlike the last time, when he was quickly freed, and despite knowing he was scheduled to face Herod tomorrow, and despite the prophecy of Peter’s fate as a martyr, Peter sleeps so soundly that the angel strikes him hard to wake him up.

I believe God is responding to the prayers of His people here by gifting Peter with peace in hardship. And like the early church, Christians today can bless people with prayer. For when we pray, God moves. And let’s see how God continues to move starting in verse 8. **(8-12)**

<sup>8</sup> Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. <sup>9</sup> Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup> They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. <sup>11</sup> 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.” <sup>12</sup> When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.

I find it interesting how bewildered Peter is here. The angel has to instruct Peter to get dressed. And then, as Peter’s escaping, he assumes it’s just a vision. It seems Peter does not anticipate God freeing him from prison this time. But eventually, Peter comes to himself and realizes he’s been delivered. And so he goes to Mary’s house, where the church is praying for him.

### **C. God’s initial answer exceeds the church’s faith (Acts 12:13-17)**

I bet the church will be so excited when they see Peter, let's see how they respond, starting in verse 13. **(13-15)**

<sup>13</sup> Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup> When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" <sup>15</sup> "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

What an interesting response. The church has multiple days of prayer meetings for Peter, prayer verse 5 describes as earnest. Yet when Rhoda joyfully reports Peter's presence, their first response is, "You're out of your mind." And when Rhoda keeps insisting, the church comes up with a more "reasonable" explanation. No it's not Peter, it must be his guardian angel knocking, who just so happens to look like Peter and for some reason is at their prayer meeting rather than with Peter.

Now as we see the church's response, I see two possibilities here, both of which can encourage our imperfect prayer in hard times. One possibility is that the church hasn't prayed for Peter's release, even though they'd already seen it happen once before. Perhaps the church prayed for smaller things, like for Herod to only beat Peter instead of killing him, or for Peter to experience God's peace and empowerment to witness boldly before dying. And so when Peter shows up they can't believe it.

If that's the case, then God answered in a way above and beyond the church's prayer. Which can encourage us to keep praying in hard times, for who knows how our heavenly Father might work far more abundantly beyond all we ask or even think.

Now a second possibility is that the church had prayed for Peter's deliverance, but as days passed and their prayer remained unanswered, doubt crept in. They keep praying, but are struggling to believe, and so when the answer to their prayer shows up at their door, they can't believe it.

If that's the case, we again see God's grace, that He moves in response to our prayer even when it's mixed with doubt. And in this case the scene becomes amusing in a way. These Christian "believers" unable to believe that God actually answered their prayer, their faith too weak at first to even open the door and let the answer to their prayers in their prayer meeting. Ironically, in one sense it was easier for Peter to get out of prison than it was for him to get into the prayer meeting for him.

But Peter keeps knocking and we see in verse 16 what happens next. **(16-17)**

<sup>16</sup> But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup> Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

What an amazing story of God answering the prayers of His people. Here at Passover time, when the Jewish people celebrate their deliverance from slavery, the early church can celebrate Peter’s deliverance from prison. God graciously working through imperfect prayer that was either too small or mixed with doubt. You might call it prayer given with faith as small as a mustard seed, yet God still works powerfully through it. As one Bible scholar said it, “Peter was bound, but prayer was loosed.”<sup>1</sup> Or as another said it, “The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **D. God works beyond the church’s prayers (Acts 12:18-24)**

Now let’s see how God keeps working beyond the church’s prayers, starting in verse 18. **(18-19a)**

<sup>18</sup> In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Here we see Herod’s wickedness again, killing his blameless soldiers. And around this time, Herod also threw his weight around with the people of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon depended on the Jewish people for their food supply, and they displeased Herod, so he planned to cut off their food as retribution despite the horrible consequences for the poor.

So Tyre and Sidon, in desperation, bribe one of Herod’s key officials to get a meeting, and then grovel before Herod. Let’s read about it, starting in the middle of verse 19. **(19b-22)**

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. <sup>20</sup> He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king’s country for their food supply. <sup>21</sup> On the appointed day

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Toussaint in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* on Acts 12.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Watson, quoted by Warren Wiersbe in the Acts 12 portion of *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol 1.

Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people.

<sup>22</sup> They shouted, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.”

Proud Herod was happy for the leaders of Tyre and Sidon to grovel before him, and for Herod to get to show off. We see in verse 21 that Herod wears his royal robes, and Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, said that Herod also wore a fancy silver garment on this occasion.<sup>3</sup>

And Herod also took the opportunity to show off his oratory skills, delivering an address after removing the trade embargo. And the people of Tyre and Sidon know what prideful Herod wants, so they wildly praise his speech in verse 22.

Our heavenly Father is incredibly merciful, but He is also just, and Herod’s wicked, selfish life reaps its consequences in verse 23, which says: **(23-24)**

<sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

I don’t think the church was praying for Herod to be judged by a quick death, that would go against our call to pray for our enemies, and further the church didn’t even seem confident their prayer could get Peter freed from prison. But the church was earnestly calling out to God to intervene in Peter’s unjust imprisonment.

And so in response to prayer, God engineers quite the reversal. At the beginning of Acts 12 Herod rules the whole region and is able to murder James and arrest Peter to further increase his great influence. And even once Peter escapes, Herod’s pride is alive and well as he murders the four soldiers and plans to oppress Tyre and Sidon unless they grovel before him.

But then Herod meets the end of everyone who lives a wicked, prideful life apart from God. Instead of Herod continuing to oppress God’s people, and anyone else he wants, and murdering Peter, Herod is judged by Peter’s God. And as Herod suffers those horrible consequences, the church thrives, as verse 24 says, the word of God spreading and flourishing.

### **III. Conclusion**

#### **A. In hard times, keep praying and asking for prayer**

In Acts 12 the turning point of the story comes in the middle of verse 5, which says, “but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”

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<sup>3</sup> Per Warren Wiersbe in the Acts 12 portion of *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol 1.



And like the early church, if we want to see God's power released in hard times, we too must keep praying and asking for prayer. That's the secret of the reversal here in Acts 12, it's not the church's ingenuity or strategies or resources that reverse the situation, it's their prayer. Now there's nothing wrong with using the creativity and strategy and resources that God has gifted us with, it's just that our foundation must be dependence on God expressed in prayer. In fact, depending on God to do what only He can do is one of our core values. We love to see the life-transforming, surprising, powerful things that God does when our prayers and the rest of our lives are characterized by dependence on Him. For God delights in showing His power through ordinary people like us when we put our confidence in what He can do.

So let's keep praying and asking for prayer. In your program this morning there's a sermon outline insert. Let's get it out, on the bottom and the back you'll see a list of opportunities to pray and ask for prayer. We have an email prayer chain, prayer cards in the program, prayer for ministries, prayer meetings, prayer in small groups, prayer by the elders, informal prayer. So let's take full advantage of these resources, for when we pray, God acts.

### **B. God still works through prayer**

Just last Sunday we heard about God answering a prayer here at Northwest decades in the making. 23 years ago the church bought the 2 acres next door for \$40,000 in the hopes of using them to bless more people with the love of Jesus. And then over 10 years ago we purchased the 12 acres behind the church building for \$125,000, and then sold the 2 acres next door for \$120,000 to pay for the 12 acres.

And we kept praying for the opportunity to reach more people with the love of Jesus and a building expansion Master Plan was made. And over the past decade God has graced us with a wonderful season of worship, ministry, and outreach that has not required building expansion. So a few years ago, the elders began to ask God if the 12 acres could be stewarded in a new way to bless people in Jesus' name. And after months of prayer and discussion, the elders and members decided to explore selling the land. And God provided an amazing opportunity for the contingent sale of 10 of those 12 acres to a developer who'd purchase the land if they received tax credits.

And just last week we found out that the developer received those tax credits, and early next year the sale should close and we'll receive over 2 million dollars! An amazing resource to

steward in sharing the love of Jesus with our neighbors, including our new neighbors when apartments are built on the 10 acres.

It all started with the prayerful purchase of 2 acres for \$40,000. And since we're only selling 10 acres, we still have our 2 acres, only now we also have over 2 million dollars coming soon. And as we talked about last Sunday, who knows what story God might delight to author here at Northwest as we prayerfully open our hands and steward that money however God leads. So let's keep praying and dreaming about that before God.

Now sometimes when we pray, God's provision doesn't happen on our timeline. If you were part of Northwest 23 years ago and praying and dreaming about how God might use those two acres to help us bless more people, it would have been easy to lose hope and stop praying along the way. For years went by with nothing seeming to happen.

### **C. Like Peter, we can rest in our loving Savior**

But I hope seeing how God worked through the early church and is working among us today encourages us to keep praying and asking for prayer. That's our application today.

But before we close, as one of your pastors, I feel we also need mine this passage for what it has to say to us in those painful times when our prayers are not answered in the way we long for. The early church wrestled with this challenge too, I bet Peter and the rest of the church prayed for James when he was arrested, yet James was killed.

Perhaps as Peter sat in his jail cell he cried out, "Why God, did you hold back your mighty hand and not save James?" Despite that unanswered prayer and that Peter does not expect to be delivered from prison, remember how soundly Peter sleeps in verse 7. The angel has to strike Peter to wake him up. Now the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and in the Greek language the term for "strike" here is a very strong term<sup>4</sup>, it's actually the same term used in verse 23 when the angel strikes Herod dead. So we're not talking about a gentle pat, we're talking about the angel having to really smack Peter to wake him up. So how is Peter sleeping so soundly through such hardship?

I think there are two answers, the first we've already covered. The church was earnestly praying for Peter, and I believe God answered those prayers by providing Peter with the supernatural peace of God. And so today, if you're struggling in hardship, please don't struggle alone. Take advantage of those opportunities on your outline to invite your church family to

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<sup>4</sup> See *BDAG* on **πατάσσω**.

pray on your behalf. Even if you feel self-conscious about asking for prayer, don't hold back, ask for the prayer you need. For when we pray, God releases His power.

Now I think the second key to Peter's peace is his growth in his relationship with Jesus. While with Jesus during His earthly ministry, Peter kept trying to tell Jesus what to do. When Jesus tells His disciples that He's come to die and rise from the dead, Peter tries to talk Jesus out of it. When Jesus tells His disciples He's going to wash their feet, Peter tries to talk Jesus out of it. When Jesus says Peter will deny Him three times, Peter tries to talk Jesus out of it. It took Peter a while, like it sometimes does for us, for the lesson to sink in that Peter was not in charge and that His gracious Savior was always up to things way beyond Peter's largest notions at the time.

And so, as we close today, may God empower us to live out these words of Pastor Craig Barnes, who speaking of Peter in Acts 12 says, "Remember Peter had spent three years trying to tell Jesus what He had to do, and it never quite worked out for Him. But now, filled with the Holy Spirit, I think Peter has learned to express his fervent desires, and then to leave them in the hands of a Savior he knew he would never understand, except that this Savior, in life and death, would always be gracious to him. It's the best way to get a good night's sleep. In life and death, we belong to God." Let's pray...

Dismissal – Don't forget to sign up for the Family Growth Gathering in the foyer, and go in peace to love and serve the Lord.