

## Unit 32

# The Sent Church

*Acts; Epistles*

### Memory Verse

“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,  
but it is the power of God to us who are being saved.”

—1 CORINTHIANS 1:18

# The Church Is Sent to Trust God

**SESSION IN A SENTENCE:** God responds to the prayers of His people even when they may have difficulty seeing Him at work.

**BACKGROUND PASSAGE:** Acts 12:1-19

Praying and believing are essential if we are to participate in the process of evangelizing our family, friends, and neighbors. Pause for a moment and reflect on how you came to know Christ. Was it through a family member, a friend, a Sunday School teacher, or a well-placed gospel tract? Most likely someone somewhere prayed for you, for an event you attended, or personally for boldness as he or she interacted with you. Again, take a moment to reflect on the fact that your salvation in Jesus Christ most likely involved one or more people who were praying for you.

Now think about people who are unsaved, perhaps a close family member, a trusted friend, a coworker, or a neighbor. Regardless of their relationship to you, they are loved by God, and yet, they are still in bondage to sin. Are you praying for their salvation?

How often are you praying for the salvation of others?



Never

Rarely

Sometimes

Daily

# Group Time

## Point 1: Praying Ferently in a Time of Fear (Acts 12:1-5)

<sup>1</sup> About that time King Herod violently attacked some who belonged to the church, <sup>2</sup> and he executed James, John's brother, with the sword. <sup>3</sup> When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter too, during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him.

The enemy of God—the devil—opposes the church, God's people. At times he does this through people in positions of power. King Herod was one such willing pawn. The maltreatment of believers at the hand of Herod escalated from violent attacks to the murder of one church leader. Then after an assessment of public opinion, finding that the Jews were happy with the persecution of the church, Herod escalated the attack with the arrest and scheduled execution of a second church leader, Peter. The enemy clearly had found a powerful ruling family willing to use extreme measures to oppose the work of God, but God's plan can never be thwarted.

Given Herod's power, support, and ambition, the church would have much to fear. But God is all-powerful, in full support of His people, and good. Today, one of the most significant conflicts in our world is not a battle of nation against nation but the battle that rages between our heads and our hearts. Informed by the truth of Scripture, we may acknowledge with our heads that God is good, but in the midst of pain or suffering, we often question in our hearts, "Where is God?" Here we see the early church acted on what they believed—they prayed fervently to God, the One who is good and gives hope in the midst of hopeless situations.

**Prayer and Providence:** The Bible teaches that although God has a \_\_\_\_\_ for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the means God uses to \_\_\_\_\_ His divine purpose. Even though God \_\_\_\_\_ the end result, the means that lead to that end result will be accomplished through prayer.



How have you seen God work things together for good through your prayers?

## Point 2: Recognizing God's Work in a Time of Rescue (Acts 12:6-11)

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> "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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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."

Herod took steps to ensure Peter would not escape from his prison before he could have the apostle executed. Perhaps he was aware of Peter's previous escape, along with the other apostles, from the prison of the Sadducees in Jerusalem (Acts 5:18-19). Multiple guards and layers of security should have been sufficient, but Herod did not account for God's will in the matter. Peter's miraculous escape is clear evidence of the almighty power of God.



### Voices from Church History

"Even though all who are imprisoned and in chains for Christ's sake are not delivered in such wonderful ways, yet there are universal promises that all who give themselves to God's service are under his protection."<sup>1</sup>

—Rudolf Gwalther (1519-1586)



What are some ways God has demonstrated throughout Scripture His all-powerful nature to protect and deliver His people from bondage?

In the confines of the prison, the Lord's angel appeared and gave Peter five commands. If one takes the time to unpack these commands, one comes to understand Peter's faith, which was fueled by the fervent prayers of the church. Even though Peter thought what was happening was a vision from the Lord, he obeyed without question. Whatever method God chooses to reveal His message, now primarily through His inspired Word, when God speaks, we must listen and obey.



### Point 3: Disbelieving in a Time of Deliverance (Acts 12:12-17)

<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> He knocked at the door of the outer gate, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> "You're out of your mind!" they told her. But she kept insisting that it was true, and they said, "It's his angel." <sup>16</sup> Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were amazed.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

When Peter realized his deliverance was not a dream, he did not seek to put as much distance as possible between him and Herod, which is what most would do. Rather, Peter went to where the church was assembled and praying for him. His presence at the gate was evidence of answered prayer and an encouragement to the church that the Lord indeed is in control. Our presence in the church gathered not only brings comfort and support to ourselves but encourages others to remain steadfast in the faith as well.



How have you found the church to be an encouragement to your faith?

It would be easy to fault this gathering of believers for a lack of faith and failing the test of being ready for the knock (Luke 12:35-38). But consider the facts: 1) the church was still meeting together and praying for Peter late into the evening; 2) even at that hour, Rhoda was there to answer the door; and 3) her response was not fear but joy and excitement that led her to forget to open the gate and let Peter in! The church prayed in faith, but they still had their doubts, as shown by their disbelief and alternative explanation for Rhoda's news. When we pray, we must pray in faith, believing that God will answer our prayers, even if He answers them in ways we don't expect.



How should the details of this biblical account affect how we pray?



# Daily Study

## Day 1: Read Acts 12:1-5

Reflect on the fact that James, a disciple of Jesus and brother of John, was executed at the hand of King Herod, while Peter, another disciple, would miraculously be set free. Did God display greater love to Peter than to James? Many believers find it easier to acknowledge God's sovereignty when His will aligns with their preferred outcome. This seems especially true in cases of a physical need or emotional distress. But in His discourse on prayer during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Your will be done" (Matt. 6:5-15).

The church's fervent prayer for Peter likely was spurred on by the knowledge that James had been martyred. Difficult times often lead to fervent prayer. Peter's coming deliverance was God's response to their fervent prayer. But that does not mean James' martyrdom was outside of God's plan.

When we pray, we should do so honestly, confessing the desires of our hearts in accordance with God's Word. But we always do so in submission to God's will, trusting that He knows and does what is best.



What circumstances are you facing right now that are God's invitation to fervent prayer?



### Voices from Church History

"Some people think God does not like to be troubled with our constant coming and asking. The only way to trouble God is not to come at all. He encourages us to come to Him repeatedly, and press our claims."<sup>3</sup>

—D. L. Moody (1837-1899)

## Day 2: Read Acts 12:6-11

When we read the miracle narratives of the Bible, such as Peter's divine deliverance, we often tend to focus on the miracles and overlook the details of the text. This is a frequent error people make when studying such passages. We would do well to remember that the details of the text are also the inspired words of God.

In this text we read that the angel struck Peter. Peter required more than a gentle nudge to wake him up. Peter was sleeping soundly that night, even though the clock was ticking toward his execution the next day. Having complete trust in God allows us to rest rather than worry.

Note also that when the angel instructed Peter to get up, get dressed, and put on his sandals, Scripture says he did so. When one trusts God, even in situations that seem impossible, and is obedient to His instructions, one can rest well in the assurance that God is in control—regardless of the outward circumstances.



Are you resting today in the assurance that God is in control? Why or why not?

## Day 3: Read Acts 12:12-17

One of the wonders of the church is how its members model equality in a world of inequality; at least they should. The house of Mary reflected her affluence, with room enough for people to gather, a gate for protection, and a gateway attendant. Mary availed her home to the church as a meeting place. In contrast to Mary, the servant girl, Rhoda, would have been at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum. And yet, we find both women, and presumably many other men and women of different levels, assembled together for the purpose of prayer.

Jesus called, and calls, His church to unity. Through His apostles, He described His bride as one holy people united in the faith (1 Pet. 2:9-10) and challenged them to overcome all the distinctions that cause division in the world, whether ethnic, social status, or gender (Gal. 3:28). Believers are “all one in Christ Jesus,” and there is a place for every believer in the church.



What are some ways you can help foster unity in your church?



## Day 4: Read Acts 12:18-23

Death is said to be the great equalizer. It is foolish to go through life with an attitude that death is something one can avoid or put off for a season. Death is not fair or unfair. Death is a reality that is wrought by sin (Gen. 2:17; Eccl. 3:2). No person is innocent. The guards deserved death, not because Peter escaped but as a result of their being sinners by nature and by choice.

It is easy to find justice in Herod's death and even some measure of fitting irony in the king's final days. We can easily connect the dots from his tyrannical conduct to his macabre death. It is harder to make the connection when it comes to the guards who were led to execution.

As Paul reminds us, "For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). The only way to ensure the sting of death does not overtake us is through knowing Jesus Christ. For those who know Christ, our last enemy, death, has been abolished.



In what ways does the certainty of death frame the way you see your life?

## Day 5: Read Acts 12:24-25

The death of Herod ushered in a season of growth and vitality for the church. Behind the scenes, the church was engaged in fervent prayer. If you thirst for a season of growth, the prerequisite is prayer and obedience. God removed Herod without an election, political coup, or vote of no confidence. We often substitute programs and political action for prayer; thus, we run ahead of God and wonder why the church doesn't experience God's message flourishing and her membership multiplying.

It also is possible to delay appropriate action and sidestep ministry service. Many believers may relate to accepting a church responsibly or having set a spiritual goal only to be sidetracked. We could understand Barnabas and Saul using the events of this chapter to postpone or abandon the relief effort for which they were commissioned in Acts 11:27-30, but they remained steadfast. Based on the actions of faithful people in Scripture, if we are to be faithful, we must pray and obey.



What are some things that sidetrack you from praying and obeying? How will you persevere in faithfulness?

