

## Why Bother Praying?

(Acts 12:1-17)

### Introduction

1. Theme: Jesus accelerates us by the Holy Spirit to grow deeper through His family, wider in our impact for the gospel.
2. Issue: Why should we pray in suffering if sometimes God removes it & sometimes God permits it?

### How we face suffering can bring glory to God [Acts 12:1-5]

1. James: The first apostle martyred
  - a. [1] King Herod Agrippa I: Grandson of Herod “the Great” (cf. Matt 2:1).
    - i. Popular with the Jews: Devoted to man-made (not biblical) religious rules, compassionate, eased tension between Rome & Judea.
    - ii. Political issue to curry public favor: Escalate persecution against Christians
  - b. [2] Specific strategy: Single out the apostles, Jesus’ hand-picked disciples & trained leaders
    - i. Apostle James: Brother of John (gospel writer); 1 of the 3 closest to Jesus.
      1. Jesus gave the sons of Zebedee a nickname: “Sons of thunder”, for their passion.
      2. [Mark 10:39] Requested to sit at the right & left of Jesus’ throne when His kingdom comes. Jesus describes His cup/baptism of suffering & death, which they also will experience.
    - ii. Jesus’ prophecy fulfilled: Agrippa has James killed by the sword.
      1. Probably beheaded, a shameful sign of being apostate, cut off for “rejecting” the Jewish faith.
2. Peter: Next in line to be martyred?
  - a. [3] Jewish religious leaders respond positively, so King Herod arrests the leader of the apostles: Peter.
  - b. [4] Peter is imprisoned under guard of 4 squads of 4 Roman soldiers each. Why so many?
    - i. Roman procedure: Each squad keeps 3-hour watch during night, so none tired/sleepy.
    - ii. He isn’t tried/executed immediately due to Passover/Feast of Unleavened Bread.
      1. Illegal to have execution during holiday week according to Jewish man-made religious rules.
  - c. [5] As Peter imprisoned, next in line for execution, God’s people fervently, earnestly pray for him.
  - d. Discouragement: The Church was growing, but persecution increased; James is dead & Peter faces death.
3. Why doesn’t God always rescue us from suffering?
  - a. Jesus promises many good things if you follow Him because He is a good God.
    - i. Eternal/intimate relationship with Him & His family, peace/joy in this life, becoming more like Him, etc.
    - ii. Jesus also promises there will be suffering/persecution (cf. John 15:18-20; 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12).
      1. He’s not asking us to be a masochist/doormat, nor does He enjoy our suffering.
      2. Issue: It’s not “if” we’ll suffer, but when, & how we’ll face it.
    - iii. No amount of prayer kept Jesus from a cross, Stephen from stones, James from the sword. Why?
  - b. How we face suffering (even death) can bring great glory to God.
    - i. It can serve a powerful purpose in you & through you in 2 ways:
  - c. It strengthens our own faith (cf. Rom 5:3-5).
    - i. We’ll never know how much we trust God, how trustworthy He is, until He’s carried us in suffering.
  - d. It strengthens others’ faith around you (cf. Phil 1:14).
    - i. It shows others the love/power of Jesus & reality of faith; strips away petty pursuits & trivial anxieties; fires them up with the same passion, commitment & endurance.
    - ii. [Jerome] “The Church is built on the foundation of shedding its own blood, not that of others; by enduring outrage, not by inflicting it. Persecution has made it grow; martyrdom has crowned it.”
4. Application: How do you face suffering?
  - a. With a spirit of complaint/entitlement, or a spirit of thankfulness/faith (like the apostles; cf. 5:41)?

- b. Is comfort an idol in your life? Not wanting trouble, wanting an easy life?
  - i. But to follow Jesus & experience real life requires denial of self (cf. Luke 9:23-24).
- c. Is the point of life to be healthy, wealthy & wise? Or is Jesus worth suffering/dying for?
- d. How we face suffering can strengthen your faith, encourage others, to the glory of God.

### **Release from suffering can bring glory to God [Acts 12:6-11]**

1. A miraculous release
  - a. [6] King Herod is ready to have Peter executed in the dead of night.
    - i. After James' execution, Peter is deep asleep, not expecting rescue.
    - ii. As a political/religious "dissident", he's secure under heavy guard, no human way to escape.
  - b. [7-8] An angelic being supernaturally appears, wakes him, instructs him to get dressed.
  - c. [9-10] Peter doesn't say a word, half-asleep & complying, assuming he's having a vision.
2. Peter's response
  - a. Sometimes, Jesus does rescue us from suffering according to His good & perfect will.
    - i. Release from suffering can bring glory to God as well.
  - b. [11] Coming to his senses, Peter pauses & recognizes the work of Jesus, gives thanks, worships God.
    - i. How often does Jesus rescue us also from danger, harm, suffering?
    - ii. Yet we often attribute to fortune/coincidence, move on & forget about it.
  - c. Application: Like Peter, when God releases us from suffering, worship:
    - i. Stop & recognize His mercy, acknowledge His work, give thanks for His care & divine intervention.

### **God's people persistently pray for each other [Acts 12:12-17]**

1. God's people respond to the miraculous release
  - a. [12] Peter makes his way to Mary's home (mother of John Mark)
    - i. Meanwhile, the gathered believers (approximately 40-60) have been continuing to pray.
  - b. [13] Peter knocks on the gate
    - i. [14] Rhoda recognizes his voice, runs off to tell everyone, but forgets to open the gate.
  - c. [15] No one believes her. 2 theories:
    - i. Rhoda is crazy
    - ii. She saw "Peter's angel."
      1. Jewish man-made (not biblical) belief that each "good man" had a guardian angel, who appears in the person's form to deliver a message about them (e.g., their passing).
    - iii. We too are often slow to believe God's answer to prayers: We rationalize or disbelieve.
  - d. [16-17] Peter is finally let in, the people amazed, & he recounts the story of Jesus' work.
    - i. Peter instructs them to tell James (half-brother of Jesus), who now shifts to lead pastor & apostle in Jerusalem after Peter is driven out by the persecution & moves on to other ministries/missions.
2. Key: The people persistently prayed
  - a. [12] The believers' fervent prayer (cf. 12:5) continues as many gather together to pray at Mary's house.
  - b. In facing suffering, God's people persistently pray for each other.
  - c. It wasn't just one prayer, but persistent.
    - i. We continue to pray, not because we don't trust Jesus or think He's heard us.
    - ii. He instructs us to pray persistently (cf. Luke 18:1-8).
  - d. It wasn't just one person, but all together.
    - i. The communal Body of Christ at work together to fervently pray.
    - ii. God loves to hear His children call for His Kingdom to come, His will to be made manifest, to unleash Heaven on earth (cf. Matt 6:9-10).
3. Application: In the midst of suffering, a call for us as a church to fast & pray together for 3 days.
  - a. Our church started out strong this year, but has faced much suffering/spiritual warfare (cf. Eph 6:10-20).
    - i. Even though Satan has bloodied our noses, we can fight back together, in the Word & prayer.
  - b. In repentance & humility, fast & pray together for:
    - i. Broken marriages/families
    - ii. Significant, long-term physical/emotional/mental health issues
    - iii. Courage, opportunities & wisdom to reach out with the gospel in our marketplaces/community.
  - c. We were made to enjoy Jesus forever & give Him glory. Today we declare war against the kingdom of darkness through prayer.