

Acts 12 | Kent Stiles

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Preacher: Kent Stiles

[0:00] Good morning. Good morning. So there's a couple of observations I made today. Number one, Dave, the kids don't need your authorization anymore to go downstairs.

! And two, Phil, you're a brave guy. I mean, Ohio State, the day after the game, I mean, that is, I'll tell you what, I don't know, there was a, that offensive line was a little porous like Swiss cheese yesterday.

Good game. They still have that national championship though, right? You don't want to go in undefeated. Well, good morning. I am a bit hoarse this morning, so that probably is going to be to your benefit because I am determined that I have to speak softer, slower, and for a shorter period of time.

So we'll see, we'll see if that works okay. So it seems like everybody's been dealing with some ailments, myself included, and so just pray that the Lord will get me through the next 25 or so minutes.

I will echo what Jeffrey was talking about about day spring. So I got back late last night and it was neat to see, you know, a product of a lot of people here from Bethel, but I think I was, well, I was going to say I was the oldest one and don't tell Nicole this.

[1:22] She would have been the oldest one because she's slightly older, but you know, there wasn't anybody down there above, you know, mid forties. And there were about 50 to 55 kids and 20 or so staff and helpers.

And the Lord blessed us with good weather yesterday. And just to see how he's impacting the kids down there and also up here and seeing the younger people transition from campers to having a desire to serve.

And just the, just the impact that that's having. And so really a great time. And just pleased to see how this is going to, or interested to see how this is going to catapult into the, you know, women's conference here in January, the spring retreat that the young ones put on in April.

And then in the camp, it's just, uh, the Lord's really working in a neat way. So with that being said though, if you would turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Acts chapter 12, we're going to be continuing our study through this book of, uh, in the early church that was started several weeks ago.

We're nearing actually the halfway point, uh, a couple of weeks from now. Um, and Acts 12, it somewhat concludes the first long section or the story of Acts. And then that starting in chapter 13, we're going to see Luke begin to unfold new interest and focus, uh, will move away from Jerusalem and eventually lead to Rome.

[2:40] And the story of Acts and in chapters eight to 11, it's, it's mostly positive. The church was growing barriers were being broken down. Enemies were being, uh, converted and outsiders were being welcomed.

And there was a piece, somewhat of a peace and harmony and understanding. And what had to be confusing previously had become clear. And we see the geographical boundaries of the church were expanding.

But now here in chapter 12, what you see is a bit of a change. And that's just an overarching, you know, there, there obviously are difficulties and such, but that's just kind of overarching sense there. But in chapter 12, you see a bit of a change and, um, you know, God is God and God, he does what he pleases him. And what pleases him is always good, uh, for he is good.

And yet we may not always understand his ways. And the reason being our perspective is so limited and sometimes his goodness makes sense to us.

[3:44] And sometimes it doesn't. And so let me ask you if you've ever, have you ever prayed for something and you were surprised when God answered?

Have there been times that we've prayed for something? And sometimes when we pray to God, he answers and it seems like we're, we're shocked. And, and in one way that makes sense, uh, that there's a sense of which we should be astounded that the God of this universe would hear our prayers and that he would respond and that he would personally intervene.

But there's another sense of which we should never be surprised when God answers our prayers, as this demonstrates a lack of faith, I think on our part. And so this was a lesson that, you know, I think we learn and I continually learn.

And, uh, this was a lesson that the early Christians in Jerusalem had needed to learn. And God teaches us this lesson, I think here this morning through Acts chapter 12. Um, really Acts 12 has three components to it.

We will briefly go through everything, but, uh, the first part of the chapter, we're going to see the turn of, uh, or the return of persecution. Uh, we're going to see, uh, the, uh, uh, first instance of martyrdom of an apostle.

[5:06] We're going to see then, uh, another possibly taken captive and a miracle in his release. And then finally, we're going to see at the end of the chapter briefly, what happens to the person who was in authority or in power that, uh, brought this about and how the Lord deals with that.

And ultimately, uh, how that affects the church. So, uh, with that being said, let's go ahead and just open up briefly in a word of prayer. Heavenly Father, thank you for this day. Thank you for all that you're doing, Lord.

Thank you for your goodness and your mercy. Lord, we thank you for your faithfulness and your consistency. Lord, we thank you for this morning being able to be together here. As we look at your word, we ask that you would, uh, allow us to pull some things out of it that are applicable this morning, that our ears and eyes would be open.

As we look at the text, we ask this in your son's name. Amen. We're going to start at the first part of the chapter. And the story here begins with King Herod, and he's initiating a second wave of persecution against the believers in Jerusalem.

And, uh, there are several King Herods in the Bible. There was, uh, Herod, this one here in particular was known as Herod Agrippa I. He was, uh, it was the grandson of Herod the great, who was the one who tried to kill Jesus at birth.

[6:25] And he was also the nephew of, uh, Herod Antipas who was the one who joined forces with Pilate, Pontius Pilate, when they put Jesus on trial, ultimately leading to his crucifixion.

And so the story begins when Herod arrests James and he puts him to death with the sword. If you look at verse one and two, it says, it was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church intending to persecute them.

He had James, the brother of John put to death with the sword. Now there are two important men in the new Testament named James that we see. And I guess technically three, but there's James, the apostle and James, the brother of Jesus here.

Uh, this is James, the apostle, the brother of John. And unfortunately James had gotten caught up in this new wave of persecution, this time from Herod instead of the Jewish leaders. And we've seen persecution come in waves throughout the book of Acts.

And there's a period of persecution following a period of peace, followed by a new time of persecution. Ultimately we see here in the first two verses that, uh, Herod puts James to death by the use of the sword.

[7:36] And so he was the first apostle martyred for his faith, but he wouldn't be the last. We know that we'll see that time and time again, uh, over the next, uh, umpteen years, others would follow.

So Herod executed James and next he had Peter and his cross hairs. He had him arrested and look at verse three and five. And when I read this, think about the kind of attitude that Herod must've had as to why this was being done.

It says in verse three, when he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. That's a pretty, uh, demented type of personality, isn't it?

We see that Satan's hands, uh, are at work here and that because it pleased the Jews in the manner in which he would have taken James life. He now proceeds to go forward with Peter. Peter also, it says this happened during the Feast of the unleavened bread and after arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers.

[8:40] Each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church, it says, was earnestly praying to God for him.

So here, first off again, we see Peter, we see, I'm sorry, Herod's motivation. That when he saw that the killing of James was pleasing to the Jews.

And I don't have a lot of, I don't have enough time to go into Herod's background and the relationship he had with the Jews. But as many politicians are, they try to be everything to everybody. And, um, and so we have this, this relationship here in which he's trying to please them. And he sees that the death of James did so therefore he arrested Peter next. And it was Passover and Herod had planned to bring him out for public trial right after Passover ended had Passover not been going on.

He likely would have been brought directly to trial. And while he waited for this trial, he made sure that Peter was well guarded. And this is the first thing that kind of stands out to me when I read this section of verses.

[9:47] You have Peter who by all accounts is probably not a physical specimen, right? He's probably not one who would overpower multiple people yet what sort of resources are used to guard him.

It says there were four, uh, squadrons of four. So 16 people that were tapped to make sure that nothing happened to him to watch over him.

And so perhaps he, I don't know if it's because Herod heard about, uh, the apostles earlier escapes from prison. I don't know if that was the reason that, uh, you know, we see that throughout scripture, right?

I mean, you have guards at the tomb. You have, uh, people who are in shackles with other, with other guards, uh, being with the apostles. There is an overabundance of caution when it comes to trying to, um, watch over these individuals while they're in their care and custody.

Well, either way, Herod's taken no chances. And so, uh, however, what we see is he can't try Peter again until after the Passover. So this buys Peter some time. And we know, as we see in scripture, God's timing is always good.

[10:58] And God's timing is always right. And God's timing is always in control. But understand here that Peter was in grave danger.

Uh, again, James had just been executed and Peter was next in line and he was not going to get a fair trial. So there was a trial set for after Passover. It wasn't going to be a fair trial.

We don't see a lot of fair trials in, in scripture when it comes to believers. And so, um, Herod was out to please the people. They liked what had happened to James.

And so Herod was not about to give Peter a pass. And so Peter is locked up in prison, heavily guarded with a death sentence hanging over his head. Uh, literally if Herod intended to behead him as he did with James.

And so Peter's in prison and it says the church, it doesn't just say, uh, it says, uh, it says there in verse five, the church, what are they doing? They're gathering together and they are earnestly praying.

[12:02] They're earnestly praying. I think that's a really, uh, beautiful picture of the church and the, and the work that's being done in the form of prayer. And that praying for each other is an essential part of what we do as a church.

We, we've been studying prayer a bit during our Sunday school. We have corporate prayer as we do, uh, the first Sunday of the month. And really the idea of being intentional with our prayer, they

gathered together the early church.

And they, I imagine had to pause from their, uh, from their evangelism, their outreach to, to say, okay, that's part of what we do. But what we also do is we come together and we pray and we pray specifically for our brothers and sisters.

And that's what was going on here. Well, next, what we do see here is we move from Herod's persecution to the angel's rescue. So again, we have the execution of James.

We have Peter being taken into custody. We have the church who's earnestly praying for him. You know, this was a helpless situation for Peter, except for one detail.

[13:08] And that was again, that the church was praying for him. And when you have God and prayer in the mix, there's always hope for your situation. And that hope comes to fruition.

And Peter with the appearance of an angel. If you look at verse seven, this whole event, again, as I read through it, just kind of picture in your mind, because we're going to see later that Peter himself was trying to picture, was, was picturing these things in his mind and trying to figure out, is this real or is this not?

But just think about this sequence of events and what happens here and just God's hand and provision. It says in verse six, excuse me, the night before Herod was to bring him to trial.

Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains. So you can imagine he's on the floor sleeping. He's bound to two soldiers, not a really good recipe for escape.

And centuries stood guard at the entrance. So you have him tied to these soldiers, you have centuries at the gate or at the entrance. And it says, suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shown in the cell.

[14:19] He struck Peter on the side and woke him up quick. Get up. He said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. So again, it's the night before the trial.

I think I referenced this when we were a passage in Matthew. And we see Peter's two different personalities as to when he was in danger as a younger believer.

And we see him now. I don't think most people, if they knew they were going to be on trial and more than likely have their life taken from them the next day, that they would be able to sleep. But that's what he's doing.

He was sleeping. And the question I would say, would I be sleeping? I don't know if I would have that rest. That would be something that would only come from the Lord. It somewhat reminds us, reminds me of Jesus when he, he's sleeping in the boat in the midst of the storms and he's safe and secure in God's hands.

And I think that's what Peter was feeling here. In Isaiah 26, three, it says, you keep him in perfect peace. He's a sinner whose mind is stayed on you because his trust is in you.

[15:26] We read in Philippians 4, 6, and 7. Verse 6 and 7, do not be anxious for anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your request to God and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

That's a transcending peace, a peace that passes all understanding to think a gentleman who's going to be probably tried for something he didn't do and put to death, or unfair trial, put to death the next day, and he's there sleeping, and that does require the peace that passes no understanding, all understanding.

And so no matter how pressing the problem, no matter how desperate, I think for us, our situations might seem, no matter how immediate the deadline, I think we see that when you trust in God, we can sleep in peace.

And why is that? Because we know that God is in control. He's got the situation. We can trust in him. And so Peter was sleeping, but not the guards.

There were four squads, like I say, of four soldiers each. And so they would be working in rotation to stay awake at all times. And here's the situation. Peter is bound again in chains to two of them, two soldiers, one on either side.

[16:44] And they're wide awake, standing guard at the entrance to his cell. And the other set of guards, they're posted down the corridor. So you make sure that you got everything covered from all your bases. And

there's this locked iron gate blocking the exit so that there's no chance of rescue here without some kind of miracle that would take place.

And so it's at this point what we see is we see the angel appear. So the church is praying. Peter is sleeping. And God is working.

And we see that a light shines in the dark cell. And the angel, it says, he pokes Peter. And I like that detail. I mean, he didn't come in and Peter was in such a light sleep that he heard him and he woke up and wasn't sure what's going on.

He was sleeping so soundly that it says the angel had to poke him and wakes him up. And at that moment, we see that Peter's chains fall off.

He didn't take a key and open them. He didn't have someone else take them off. It says his chains were released from him. They fell off. And you'll notice here there's really no mention at this point in this account of the guards.

[17:53] So after all the buildup, they're completely ignored at this point. It's almost as if they're not even there. They certainly are. But I think that's the point. The guards were never an obstacle to God rescuing Peter.

And so I think the parallel is for us is don't let appearances fail you. You know, as Christians, we walk by faith and not by sight. And so we have Peter here.

The angel has woken up. His chains are off. They're in the prison. And then next, what we see in verses 8 to 10 is we enter into this dreamlike sequence we're going to read about.

That as the angel proceeds to rescue Peter, as you read the next verse, imagine this is a film director. So this imagery is painted pretty clear. And, you know, how would you like to film these verses in order to bring out this dreamlike feeling through the scene?

Well, look and see what Scripture says here in verse 8 to 10. It says, and again, just imagine again what this scenario looks like. It says, then the angel said to him, put on your clothes and your sandals.

[19:03] And Peter did so. Wrap your cloak around you and follow me, the angel told him. 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. They passed the first and the second guards and came to the iron gate, leading it to the city and opened for them by itself. So just pause right there. That alone, I mean, you think of all these things that are happening, chains falling off, angel, you know, kind of pinching you in the side.

Then you come to the end of the corridor and you say, okay, Lord, like you've brought me here only to be cornered by the guards. There's this big gate and all of a sudden, almost like a Disney movie, this gate just is almost like it comes to life and opens up to release them out of prison.

It opened, it says, by itself. And they went through it. And when they had walked the length of one street, it says suddenly the angel left him. So the angel tells Peter to get up.

He tells him to get dressed. He leads him out of the prison. And at this point, Peter doesn't even actually know what's happening. He doesn't even know, is this a dream or what's going on? He thinks he's dreaming or having some sort of vision.

[20:15] So they walk right past that second set of guards. They come to the iron gate, as I said. It opens on its own. They exit. And they go through the gate. They walk down the street.

And the angel leaves him just as quickly as he has appeared. And that's when we see Peter comes out of this dreamlike state. And he realizes that everything that had happened really happened.

Verse 11 says this. Then Peter came to himself and said, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.

So Peter snaps out of this dreamlike state. And he finds himself standing in the street. And it's at that point he says, that really happened. I'm not dreaming.

I can pinch myself. I'm not chained to the guards anymore. I'm not in prison. I don't have this trial tomorrow. Tomorrow hanging over my head. God had sent his angel to rescue me.

[21:18] I am a free man. And I can't imagine what that feeling was like for him at that moment. You know, in many ways, I think when God comes

through for us, he comes through in a big way and often feels like a dream.

And the Jewish exiles in the Old Testament, they felt that way when they returned to Jerusalem. When we read in Psalm 126, the first three verses, it says, When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.

Our mouths were filled with laughter. Our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us. And we were filled with joy.

You know, God is amazing. We don't understand all that he is doing behind the scenes. And it might seem like a long time waiting.

But then at that point, God moves. And we come to the full realization that he was working all the time. We just didn't see it.

[22:27] And that's what Peter sees here. Well, we've seen the persecution. We've seen the angels rescue. And next we look and we see the church's response.

You know, we saw earlier the church's first response to Peter's imprisonment and his impending trial was fervent prayer. You look at verse 12, it says, 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.

So again, they were praying together. They were praying corporately. They were praying here at the house. And Peter goes to Mary's house where everyone there is praying. And this is Mary, the mother of John Mark.

And that's the same Mark who wrote the gospel of Mark. And it's the middle of the night. And you have this large group of people praying earnestly for Peter for his release.

It kind of reminds me on a small scale of when we had these mission trips and we would sign up for hours to pray. And you knew that there was someone praying for you all throughout the night, every hour of the day, only in this occasion, they were all praying together.

[23:37] So it wasn't just one or two people. And so he goes to the house. And again, they're in the process of praying earnestly for Peter and his release.

And the next response we see is excitement and joy. Well, at least that was the part on the part of one of the people that had been praying. If you look at verse 13 and 14, it says, Peter knocked on the outer entrance and a servant girl named Rhonda came to answer the door.

And when she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, Peter is at the door.

Now, this is kind of a comical part of the story, right? I mean, I don't know if there's any, there's probably some blondes here. So forgive me if I say it's almost like Rhonda may have been a blonde who was ditzy or something, you know, like you might just at least let them in first, right?

Before you go tell everybody. But she was so excited that the first thing she does is she goes and tells the others. She recognizes his voice. She's so excited that she forgets to open the door and she leaves Peter standing there in the middle of the night and she runs back to the others.

[24:50] But it gets even better than that. When she gets back to the others, as we might imagine, they don't believe her. If you look at verse 15 to 17, it says, you're out of your mind, they told her.

When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, it must be his angel. But Peter kept on knocking. I don't know what was going through Peter's mind at this point. He's probably thinking, guys, you know, there's people around here.

It might be nice to make my way inside. So he keeps knocking. When they opened the door and they saw him, it says they were astonished. And Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.

He says, tell James and the brothers about this, he said. And then he left for another place. So Rhonda tells him, hey, Peter's at the door. And their initial response, I don't believe him.

They don't believe her. I'm sorry. What? Peter's outside? You're crazy. Peter's in prison. That's why we're here. We're praying for him. He's not outside the door. So stop interrupting us.

[25:50] We're in the process of prayer. And meanwhile, the person at the door keeps knocking. And when they finally open the door, there's Peter. And they're astonished.

And they're astonished that God would answer their prayer. Imagine the excitement that must have been when you have all these believers who are gathered together. They're in the middle of the night. They're praying for Peter. And then all of a sudden you hear him knock at the door. And I can understand why they wouldn't have believed that at first. I don't know that I would. And then you see him. And oftentimes, as we are as believers, we don't have the faith in which we believe without seeing.

We have to see it for ourselves. And we see him. And they're astonished. You know, we pray for something and God answers. And then we say, I can't believe God answered my prayer. You know, it says there that not only did they see him, but he explained the events of what had happened. So he didn't just say, hey, guys, I'm here. I'm leaving. He tells them what had happened. Imagine what's going through their mind as they're hearing this story.

[26:51] They must have been on the edge of their seat saying, this is the craziest thing I've ever heard of. Look, they're so excited, it says, that Peter tells them, hey, you guys got to quiet down. And we're in the middle of the night.

You know, people are, they're going to be looking for him, I'm sure. And he tells them how God sent the angel to rescue him. And he gives him instructions to tell James and the other believers. And then Peter, it says, he leaves and he goes to another place.

You know, what an amazing story. Again, when we read this, you know, we shouldn't glance over and take for granted. Oh, that's a really cool story. I mean, think about those events as they transpired and how miraculous those were.

You have this body of believers in this early church praying specifically for Peter. I don't know how they thought God would work that out. I don't suspect they thought it would be this way.

And I think that's oftentimes true for us as a church. We pray for people, we pray for situations. And oftentimes, I don't know that we know how the Lord's going to work it out. And generally speaking, it oftentimes doesn't work out the way that we would expect or in the manner that we would expect.

[27:55] And so we see the church's response. Well, what was Herod's response to all this? Look at verse 18 and 19. It says, In the morning there was a small commotion.

There was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards.

And he ordered that they be executed. And this is the response you would expect from Herod, right? I mean, a guy who's killing people for sport or for entertainment, he's probably pretty embarrassed, right?

You know, this is a huge, there's commotion in the morning and everyone's trying to figure out what happened. Herod makes a full search for him. They can't find him anywhere. He cross-examines the guards. I'm guessing the guards are probably blaming each other, but the guards don't know what happened.

They can't give him a straight answer. And so this was a common practice in these days, is that if the guard let the prisoner go that he was under order to watch, it would require then an exchange his life.

[28:59] We know maybe the more well-known story, four chapters ahead in Acts 16, when Paul and Silas are in prison and the doors open, what's the very first thing we hear? We see the jailer do.

He has drawn his sword to take his life and Paul says, Hey, we're all here. Because he knows that the loss of those prisoners would have required his life in exchange for theirs.

And so the fact that these guards were executed, they show that Herod had planned not only to execute Peter, but he was going to execute them in exchange for his life.

So we see the church's response. We see Peter's response. We see Herod's response. And ultimately, last, we're going to see God's response.

If the musicians want to make their way up here, we'll close here shortly. What's God's response to this?

[30:00] We're not going to spend much time on verse 21. It says, On an appointed day, Herod put on his royal robes. He took his seat upon the throne. He delivered an oration to them.

And the people were shouting, the voice of a God and not of a man. Immediately, an angel of the Lord struck him down because he did not give God the glory.

And he was eaten by worms. And he breathed his last. It's quite a way to go out. A lot of imagery in this chapter, right?

You know, God's judgment on Herod was quick. And it was decisive. And I would say, imagine the response of the people that witnessed that. Imagine the reverberations that would have gone throughout the land.

And look what ultimately happened. In verse 24, it says this, But the word of God increased and multiplied. The word of God increased and multiplied.

[31:01] You know, what a change of events. Just 20 verses prior to this, we see the apostle James losing his life. We see Peter taken into captivity, preparing for the same fate.

We see the people of God, the church, huddled together in prayer. I imagine there was a discouraging feeling that was among them. And how did God respond?

Even with all that happening, we see that he is sovereign. We see that he's watching. We see that he's in control. And the word of God increased. It wasn't suppressed.

It didn't decrease. It increased and it multiplied. So I think in closing, here's the question for us. We see Herod's response.

We see Peter's response. We see the response of the early church. We see the response of God. And the question then would be, what should our response be to all of this?

[32:01] I think what we want to see from this, we shouldn't be surprised that God answers prayer. And that when we pray in Jesus' name, in accordance with God's will, that we should never be surprised when God answers.

There's an old saying that says, when you pray for rain, be sure that you bring an umbrella. And so don't be surprised when God answers prayer.

Instead, be thankful. And give him all the glory and all the honor and all the praise. Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for this passage. Lord, we thank you again for your faithfulness. Lord, oftentimes we're forgetful people. We're a sinful people. Lord, we oftentimes try to take situations in our own control. I know myself, I get anxious about things. I try to take control of things. I think that I'm alone at times. And Lord, I oftentimes forget that my Father in heaven is the almighty creator, that he is the God of the universe, that he's all-knowing, that he's all-powerful, that he loves me, Lord.

[33:06] As a church, I would pray that we here at Bethel, that we would always remember that, Lord, that the power of prayer as we look out into a lost world and we pray for our brothers and sisters.

We pray for the lost, that we know that we're not just praying to someone who has no authority to do anything about it, but rather we have prayers that are through your Son brought to one who is almighty.

Lord, we thank you for your faithfulness. We thank you for your mercy. We thank you for your love. In your Son's precious name, amen. Thank you.