

The Holy Spirit

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Acts 12

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⁴ 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. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (Acts 12-NIV)

While serving his country, the soldier also served the one in command on the home-front- the Mrs. One day she requests that he go to the commissary to get some bread and Starbucks coffee. She gave the orders, and he says, “yes mam!” And off to the commissary he goes.

With a very short grocery list in tow, the soldier was in the check-out line after a few minutes. We pick up the story with a soldier, Starbucks, and short grocery line. Behind him is a base spouse with an overflowing shopping cart. Groceries. Clothing. And big Screen TV.

As he approaches his turn at the grocery check-out line, he thinks, I will be home shortly. Assignment completed and a happy wife. He thinks this mission is so effective, this deserves a promotion.

As two items are being scanned the check-out clerk invites him to place his hand in the nearby fishbowl and pull out a slip of paper. With that confused look on his face, he hears, “if you pull out the correct slip, then all your groceries are free,” the clerk announces.

He fires back, “how many correct slips indicating free groceries are there?” asks the soldier. She pauses and makes eye contact and declares in joyful exuberance, “ONLY ONE!”

The fishbowl is full of others slips of paper who clearly did not win the commissary lottery. The chances are slim. The odds are slightly better than winning Powerball.

The hand goes in.

The winner comes out.

And the clerk declares, “you have won our daily grocery prize, paying for all your groceries.

Coffee and Bread. What waste the soldier thinks, and then suddenly he turns around and says to the lady pushing the cart with groceries, clothes, and big screen TV, “hey honey, can

you believe what just happened to us, **we won!** We are the winners and don't have to pay a penny for our groceries." She steps up next to him. He smiles and puts his arm around her.

He winks at her. She whispers to him. And the clerk begins ringing the cart containing well over \$250 dollars' worth of groceries. She joins him in a magical moment, standing side-by-side and wedded by good fortune.

A few minutes later he is pushing the cart, and she is strolling alongside with a smile on her face. In the parking lot they consummate the temporary union with a kiss, and a hug of thanks.

He loads her groceries, and she is on her way. He carries his bread and coffee to his vehicle and off they go with one amazing story to tell their family and friends.

Some of you are wondering, wait pastor, that story was a bit suspect don't you think? A bit sinful. It's a bit sinister. Yes, he should not have **lied**, and she should not have **pretended**.

But, taking that into account, that was one surprised mom, who has a story to tell about a day she received more than she deserved.

A story not too distant from the apostle Peter Acts 12. He too was suddenly aligned not with groceries, but a gift he did not deserve. Peter will find himself on the right side of the sovereignty of God, which leads not to his **execution**, but his **evacuation**.

With the death of James his cousin, and the government authorities are newly wedded to the Jewish religious authorities, Herod sees nothing but political capital with Peter being imprisoned and soon to be executed like James.

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Suddenly an angel appears. Chains drop. Peter is slapped upside the head and instructed to get dressed. He staggers in a sleepy stupor past some guards fully awake but completely blinded to what has happened. A gate opens miraculously, and Peter is led by the arm down the street. Peter is free! Can you find the Holy Spirit deliverances?

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. (Acts 12-NIV)

Peter did his part and got dressed, the Holy Spirit and did his part and led Peter to safety.

Most of us would read the story of Peters freedom and miss the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that guided and guarded Peter every step of the way.

Holy Spirit summoning angels. (vs 7)

Holy Spirit picking locks. (vs 7b)

Holy Spirit blinding guards. (vs 10)

Holy Spirit opening gates. (vs 10b)

Thinking people who read this story often scratch their heads and pause wondering why did James lose his life, yet Peter retained his? Good question.

Before I answer that, let me ask another related question. Look at your notes and the screen. Since God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good, why does He let so many bad things happen?

The existence of evil and suffering in our world seems to pose a serious challenge to truth, our Great God is good and loving God.

If God were all-knowing, it seems that God would know about all the horrible things that happen in our world. (Read Prov 15:3)

If God were all-powerful, God would be able to do something about all the evil and suffering. (Read Ps 147:5)

Furthermore, **if God** were morally perfect, then surely God would want to do something about it. (Read Is 61:8)

And yet we find that our world is filled with countless instances of evil and suffering. These facts about evil and suffering seem to conflict with the claim that there **exists a perfectly good God**. The challenge posed by this apparent conflict has come to be known as the **problem of evil**.

Journalist and best-selling author Lee Strobel commissioned George Barna, the public-opinion pollster, to conduct a nationwide survey. The survey included the question "If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?"

The most common response, offered by 17% of those who could think of a question was “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?” (Strobel 2000, p. 29).

If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good, why does he let so many bad things happen? This question raises what philosophers call “**the problem of evil.**”

The question I really want to answer is, what is evil? Evil is the corruption of good. Evil arises from the misuse of our will.

Evil is the opposite of God or good. God is always good, so evil is the opposite of what God is. Everything that God does is good, (Ps 111:17-NCV) We take what God created as good and use it in bad ways.

Evil is not them; it is often us. Ouch! Painfully honest!

Evil is the opposite of love. Evil is always unloving. It is not loving to lie, steal or hurt people. Jesus was asked, what is the most important commandment in the bible? Jesus said, oh that is easy, “love God and love your neighbor.”

Evil is the opposite of not loving God and not loving your neighbor. Does that make sense? What I am saying is that evil is unhelpful.

Evil is unhealthy. Evil is unfair. Evil is unwise.
Evil is unreliable. Evil is untruthful.

Evil is always about selfishness. Evil is about me. *James 3:16, “wherever there is selfishness, you find disorder and every kind of evil sin.”*

We open Acts 12, with the struggle to understand these kinds of thorny theological issues. In Acts 12, for the first time, the Roman government, and the Jewish religious establishment band together to stop the Jesus Movement.

Listen. Sit up. Wrestle with this! Acts 12 makes it blindingly clear that Christians and people in general live in a world filled with evil, and some will die for Kingdom causes. But the ultimate outcome is assured, Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done.

Others will experience supernatural intervention through the prayers of God’s people.

Prayers that heal the sick.

Prayers that can banish evil powers.

Even prayers that can provide miraculous provisions of God’s blessings.

And those blessings can come in the form of financial miracles, job opportunities and even University acceptances. All and so much more provided by our Great God.

King Herod decided his popularity would get a fresh boost in the polls if he arrested Jesus' disciples.

In the end though, you need to know that powerful anti-God players are always brought down. Haman gets hanged. Goliath got a headache as a young slinger then cut off his head.

Look at the end of Acts 12 and see what happens to the Herod responsible for the death of James the brother of John.

²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. ²² They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." ²³ 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. (Acts 12-NIV)

In the opening verses of Acts 12, we meet the New Testaments notorious succession of puppet kings bearing the title Herod. Not so much a name, but more a title, like Mr. President. Ceasar.

Anyone familiar with the life of Jesus in the gospels would know of **Herod the Great** who slaughtered the baby boys of Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus.

^{16a} Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under ... (Matthew 2-ESV)

Herod Antipas was responsible for having the head of John the Baptist cut off because John called out Antipas immoral life. (Matt 14)

In our text we meet **Herod Agrippa 1**, he was a puppet king answerable to Rome. He knew his success was tied to his ability to keep the peace in Jerusalem-Pax Romana. Herod Agrippa got the message from Rome, "get a grip, Agrippa or be stripped of your post."

The earliest apostles were held in such high esteem, local Jewish authorities, and Rome, never dared touch them beyond some low-level harassment and temporary imprisonment.

They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. (Acts 4:3-NIV)

It is now 10 years since Pentecost; Roman and Jewish authorities are reading the winds of political change and become more brazen. Gentiles are filling Jewish synagogues, and the expansion of Jesus message has gone 300 miles from Jerusalem to Antioch.

The Jesus followers and Jesus disciples are increasing in Holy Spirit supernatural power, even possessing the power to raise the dead. We pick up our story, at the funeral of James and imprisonment of Peter. Question?

How does a person make sense of two seemingly different outcomes? James is cut down. Peter is prayed out.

The religious establishment attempting to stomp out Christ followers rejoiced and celebrated to see the head of James taken off. Agrippa decided to terminate the big fisherman, but he had to wait until a couple Jewish festivals were completed.

The Jewish authorities thinking was, if we must take off a few days to worship God, then get right back to killing Christ followers. So, in the spirit of the holidays, Peter celebrates Passover in prison.

⁴ 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.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (Acts 12-NIV)

Again, why was James allowed to die, and Peter was prayed out of prison? Both James and Peter are needed by God to carry out the message of Jesus. In fact, one would put James spiritually a little further ahead in the class of Peter.

Both James and Peter were a part of the inner circle of Jesus. When Jesus wanted to recharge his eternal and heavenly batteries he went up on the slopes of Mt Hermon, he took Peter, James and John and had a confab, a board meeting a retreat with his heavenly Father and some guests of the Father's choosing.

¹ After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. (Matt 17-NIV) ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. (Matt 17-NIV)

The book of Hebrews gives us glimpse of the answer to this question. *By faith, says Hebrews, some "escaped the edge of the sword" (11:34), and by faith others "were slain with the sword" (11:37).*

The passage in Hebrews spells it out, some live, and some die. But all live by faith. All are rewarded for their faith. Will make heaven because of faith.

There is a plan unfolding and arrangement of life experiences that if we could see it, would take our breath away. It would be more than surprising it would be downright shocking. Surprising. Stunning.

Does God really care about such activities in a person's life?

Is God Sovereignly in control of everything?

Is God in control of the big picture?

Nothing happens in your life or mind that is accidental, coincidental, incidental, God's activity is only God-ccidental.

Is it possible that God is in control to such a degree that nothing is beyond his reach, no molecule or monkey, no Adam or atom ever goes astray? Is that possible? Job says emphatically, YES!

But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases. (Job 23:13-NIV)

If you should choose to allow Christ to run your life, Christ followers adhere to the truth that all the events of their life on earth, in the heavens and under earth are under God's rule.

God does whatever He purposes for whatever He pleases.

Nothing in the universe happens unless God either causes it or permits it.

Psalms 115:3 (ESV) "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."

Years later, the big fisherman would receive this tutorial about persecution and prayer in 1 Peter 3:12, and all who resist God.

*For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. (1 Peter 3:12-NIV)*

Never underestimate the power associated with your prayers. While the angel released Peter from prison, it was the prayers of God's people that summoned the angel.

While Peter was in prison, the church used its most powerful weapon and aimed it at the power of darkness.

Peter's testimony that he could sleep as the ax blade is being sharpened, and the guillotine is being rolled into place is because Peter trusted his heavenly Father. He knew Jesus was orchestrating a plan to save the world that Peter was willing to play his part. Small or Big.

As Peter dozed off that night, he remembered the scriptures and allowed their truth to tuck him in. Jesus told Peter, that everyone who lives by the sword will die by the sword. God is more powerful than any sword wielded against his children.

Snooze. Snore. All we heard that night was the sound of subtle breathing.

Jesus also told Peter that he would live a long life, impacting the kingdom of God and that he would be allowed to enter old age bringing glory to God.

... 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. (John 21:18b-NIV)

It has been hardly 10 years since Jesus pronounced that promise over Peter. Peter slept with an assurance that his hour had not come. He did not know how he would be released, but he slept in the confidence that God has this. How about you?

⁶ 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. (Acts 12-NIV)

16 guards protecting Israel's most famous Christ follower. Guards changed shifts every six hours. Peter was going nowhere by earthly standards. By now, Peter is accustomed to imprisonment, this is his 3rd time being jailed.

Where does Peter get his confidence and peace? Again, from the promises of God. The main cause of Peter's peace is that he relied on God's sovereignty, he knew God was working a plan that could not be stopped by Herod.

I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (Job 42:2-NET)

Got anyone praying for you? Are you praying for others? It is the responsibility of the church to pray for others, especially those facing difficult situations.

Never forget that prayer is more powerful than prison bars.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (Acts 12-NIV)

Pray with intensity. Pray with passion. Pray with faith. Ask God to intervene and let him know what you want. Be bold.

Stop worrying about the outcome of your prayers. Is this really the will of God? Stop qualifying your prayers, "if it be Your will."

God's purposes cannot be stopped, but your lack of faith in praying can. God's sovereignty is not threatened, and His goodness is not compromised if you plead earnestly.

Supplicate shamelessly.

Petition passionately.

Thank God, tenderly.

God might alter some circumstances and even do it miraculously, but you have to do your part.

For God to prevail, Christians have to wail. Travail.

Those in the house of Mary praying, knew that the only hope of seeing Peter in this desperate hour was call on the God, who has done it before. So, pray with faith. Where do we get faith from, the word of God. Because God has done it before, God will do it again.

You are experiencing affliction; the church is earnestly praying.

You are experiencing sickness; the church is earnestly praying.

You are experiencing an impossibility; the church is earnestly praying.

I want to end today by inviting those who are in some form of imprisoned circumstances, be it sickness, financial hardship, broken relationship, threatening personal attacks, or anything else to stand in the aisles here in the sanctuary. Go ahead and move now.

The church is going to pray. And we are going to pray expecting results. Now, to get on the same page for prayer, I want you to look up to the screens and let's start by making this faith-filled declaration.

Father,

I believe and declare that "nothing is impossible with God." Your power and purposes cannot be stopped. I am calling on the name of Jesus Christ that is above all names and invoking Jesus Christ's authority that is given to His disciples. This authority can cast down and cast out all forms of evil imprisonment and evil influences. Set my brother or sister free from attacks, addictions, or anxieties.

I declare Jesus Christ's authority is released through my prayers to break spiritual chains and walk out **into** freedom. Our victory in prayer was secured at the cross of Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2-NIV)

In Jesus' Name, Amen.