

Acts 12 - Williams

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Preacher: Tad Williams

[0:00] To the Ritter family for music and a mandolin this morning if you noticed a mandolin kind of fun. Amen. We are preaching through the book of Acts.

Let me begin with just a reminder of some of the context. We have seen the Spirit of God overflow at Pentecost and thousands come to faith in Jesus Christ.

And the early church has grown. In Acts 6 we saw the leaders of the church in a very humble and gracious way invite new leaders into the Christian church.

Leaders who actually speak a different language and who dress differently. And the gospel expands. Some of those new leaders become very prominent leaders.

We heard about Stephen. We heard about Philip. Philip the evangelist shares the gospel with an Ethiopian eunuch. And so the gospel is expanding out of Jerusalem to Ethiopia and Africa.

[1:11] We meet Saul. The persecutor who is dramatically brought to faith in Christ. We meet Barnabas.

Barnabas actually travels and invites Saul into ministry with him in Antioch, a city north on the Mediterranean coast from Jerusalem.

The gospel is expanding. The good news of Jesus Christ. Notice right at the end of chapter 11, Daniel preached on this last week.

So the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Barnabas and Saul are in Antioch like I mentioned. But now they're given this money to take to Jerusalem. And so the author sort of uses that. It seems to shift the scene back to Jerusalem.

[2:11] Because chapter 12 is a story about the church in Jerusalem. We've been away from Jerusalem for a while. Now we come back to Jerusalem. And it's interesting because the scene shifts with this mention of Barnabas and Saul going to Jerusalem.

Look all the way at the end of our chapter. Chapter 12, verse 25. And Barnabas and Saul return from Jerusalem. So this Barnabas and Saul in Jerusalem frames this chapter.

But it's interesting that actually the story of chapter 12 has nothing to do with Barnabas and Saul. We hear about Peter and the angel. But notice that framing. It's a very deliberate.

Let's shift the scene back to Jerusalem. It could be that Barnabas and Saul go to Jerusalem and hear this story and bring it back. That could be the explanation. But anyway, it's a very deliberate shifting of the scene back to Jerusalem.

Because the author wants to tell this story. And wants us to learn and reflect on it. I read a commentator this week who was, I would say he was confused.

[3:19] But very good commentator. Excellent. He said, it's not immediately obvious what the point of this chapter is. And it's easy to respond that way, you know, to these interesting chapters and interesting stories.

But when you notice how deliberate this writer is, shift the scene, tell us the story, then bring us right back to the story he's developing of.

Okay, pay attention to those kinds of things. It's very, very deliberate. This is not an accidental story. So let's pay careful attention to it. Here's my plan for the sermon. I just want to read back through the story with you, pointing out some details, highlighting things as we go.

And then after that, I want to reflect on three lessons. I will give you the three lessons right now so you can notice them as we go along. I want to reflect on the power of God to rescue and kill.

The power of God to rescue and kill. I want to reflect on the ministry of angels. There's a lot of angels, angel talk in this chapter. So let's think about that.

[4:28] And then I want to reflect on the power of prayer. Okay, so those are the three things we'll end this sermon thinking about together. But let's just start at the beginning, chapter 12, verse 1.

And let's notice some important things along the way. Okay. We're back in Jerusalem. It's been a while, about that time. Verse 1. Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

He killed James, the brother of John, with the sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Okay.

Herod the king. This is a new character. In the New Testament, we actually meet four different kings who are called Herod. And this is a new one for us.

We have not met this character yet in the New Testament. This is the grandson of the king Herod, who was the king when Jesus was born. The king who ordered the killing of the babies in Bethlehem.

[5:26] That character is called Herod the Great. Herod the Great. He establishes the Herodian dynasty. He actually had ten wives.

Herod the Great and lots of descendants who become kings. This Herod is a grandson of that Herod. This is the Herod who's known to history as Herod Agrippa I.

So this king Herod seizes James, the brother of John, and he kills him. And when he recognizes that this pleases the Jews, those who are opposed to Christ and to Christianity, he arrests Peter also.

During the Days of Unleavened Bread, the Days of Unleavened Bread is the week following the Passover. So the Passover week is the week of unleavened bread.

This is the same week that Jesus was arrested and killed about 12 years before this. We're 12 years down the road from the death of Jesus.

[6:35] But it's this same week. And so Peter is put into prison. Herod assigns four squads of soldiers. And Peter is kept in prison.

But earnest prayer for him was made by the church of God. Earnest prayer. The word earnest there is a word that can also mean striving or straining.

So this church in Jerusalem is striving in prayer for Peter. And this is a bleak scene. This is a bleak opening as we come back to Jerusalem.

A new king who violently kills one of the major leaders of the Christian church. James is the brother of John. These are the sons of Zebedee.

These are two of Jesus' disciples who are closest to Jesus. Peter, James, and John are sort of an inner circle of the disciples of Jesus. You remember Jesus takes those three up to the Mount of Transfiguration.

[7:38] I mean, this is a core member of Jesus' inner circle. James, dead. Peter, in prison. And so this church is in earnest prayer.

That's our introduction to the Jerusalem scene. Now we get this long story in the middle that really slows down and gives us details of Peter being led out of prison.

And I think you can tell that the early church, the Jerusalem church, loves this story. Loves these details. There's humor in it. We'll see. There's delight and wonder at how all of this happens.

And so we're given these details. We're meant to appreciate them. Let's do that together. Peter.

When Herod, verse 6, When Herod was about to bring him out on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and centuries before the door were guarding the prison.

Peter's sound asleep. Two soldiers are chained, a handcuff on each wrist, chained to the soldiers beside him.

[8:57] There's a soldier outside the gate of his cell, and then another soldier we'll see in a moment. Four soldiers. A squad of soldiers is four. And Herod, it said, had assigned four squads, 16 soldiers, who would rotate four by four every three hours.

So every three hours, these soldiers would uncuff themselves from Peter, and two new soldiers would come cuff Peter and lay down. And Peter is sound asleep. In fact, the story enjoys the fact that Peter is so sound asleep that he doesn't know what's going on.

Peter is groggy throughout a lot of this. I think the author is poking a little fun here at the soundness of Peter's sleep. But how about you?

Would you be sound asleep in prison the night before you're going to be executed? With two soldiers chained to your wrists who switch every three hours?

Peter is sleeping so soundly, so peacefully. I think we can well assume that Peter is at peace with God.

[10:09] And he is sleeping in the confidence of God's power. Not knowing if he'll live past tomorrow. But he's sleeping in a sort of maximum security situation.

In verse 7, Behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and light shines in the cell, and the angel strikes Peter. See that? He, the angel, struck Peter on the side and woke him up.

The word is a somewhat violent word. He struck. He kicked him. Or hit him. I read one commentator who said, The angel nudges Peter awake.

No. No, that's not what the word is. The word is more violent than that. It's, he struck him. He, come on. So the angel wakes Peter up forcefully.

Says, get up quickly. And the chains fell off his hands. The angel says, dress yourself. And he does. And they walk out. The guards aren't aware of it.

[11:16] The cell door opens. They walk past the century guarding. The first, the second guard. They approach the iron gate, verse 10, leading into the city.

And it opened for them of its own accord. The iron gate. Of its own accord translates a Greek word. Where do I have it in my notes?

The Greek word. I thought about just going for it. But Daniel Bear calls me out on this stuff when I fumble Greek words. So I have it in my notes. Automate.

Okay. It's the word we get automatic from. The gate opens automatically. And we are intended to just be amazed by all this, all these details.

The power of God. Four squads of soldiers. Maximum security prison. The best techniques of guarding a high-risk prisoner.

[12:23] No problem. One angel. Iron gate opens automatically. Peter comes out into the air of the city. He's revived.

He realizes he'd not been dreaming. It's not a vision. This is real. This is real. Verse 12. When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark, John Mark. We hear about John Mark again at the end of the chapter. And then in subsequent chapters, he becomes a somewhat important character.

This is probably a large house. There's a lot of people gathered there praying. This is probably a wealthy family. They have a servant who answers the door.

The door is across some sort of courtyard from the house. This is a large house. And Peter knocks on this door. And the servant girl named Rhoda comes and answers.

[13:34] And here again, I think we see the humor, how the early church enjoyed this story so much, because this is quite a funny telling of the situation. Situation she wrote in verse 14, recognizes Peter's voice.

And in her joy, she did not open the gate, but ran and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, you are out of your mind. But she kept insisting on it. And they kept saying, ah, it's his angel.

Somehow, it's his angel makes more sense to them than you are out of your mind. There's been a lot of discussion about this statement.

It is his angel. What do these early Christians understand about angels? Where they think, no, this is not Peter.

It's his angel. His angel? It seems there is a belief at this time in personal guardian angels. And it seems that there's also a belief that sometimes the angel can take the human form and be some sort of body double.

[14:48] Angels, remember, is one of the three things I want to focus on here.

And so this is a moment. It is his angel, they say. We'll get to that more later.

Peter. But Peter, verse 16, continued knocking. And when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. It's really Peter.

But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of prison. And he said, tell these things to James and to the brothers. Then he departed and

went to another place.

It's not exactly clear who this James is. Peter says, tell this to James and to the brothers. You remember James, the brother of John, is dead. He was killed at the beginning.

[15:48] So this is another James. A lot of debate about this. You might remember there were two disciples named James.

There's James, the brother of John. And then there's James, the son of Alphaeus. A lot of people think this other James might be that other disciple. Others think this James might be a brother of Jesus, who's the same character who writes the book of James.

But anyway, there's another leader, prominent leader named James at this time that Peter sort of hands things off to. And then he departs and goes to another place.

Quite a mysterious little way of putting it. And this family, this home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, is known.

It's a known place where the Christians gather. This family has taken quite a risk to allow their home to become known as a gathering place for Christians.

[16:52] And so Peter leaves that place and goes somewhere else, and the text doesn't tell us. And as you can imagine, when day comes, there is no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.

And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered they should be put to death. I don't want to hear any complaints about your boss.

I don't think any of you have a boss like this. Herod executes the soldiers. And then he leaves Jerusalem. Goes from Judea.

That's describing Jerusalem. To Caesarea, another city, and spent time there. Keep going.

Now Herod was angry with the people. The scene shifts to this other city, to Caesarea. And attention comes back to Herod, right? The chapter started with Herod. Herod the king. And now we're at the end of the chapter.

[18:00] And the attention comes back to Herod. And the writer wants us to see something about Herod. Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon.

And there's a political debate. And they come to his aide named Blastus. And there's some debate about it says they persuaded Blastus.

Some say that means they bribed him. Who knows? There's some political intrigue going on here. Verse 21. On an appointed day, Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them.

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

That word struck is the same as what the angel did to Peter in prison. The angel in prison strikes Peter to wake him up.

[19:04] And now an angel strikes Herod down, because he did not give God the glory. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us this same story, recounts this same story, very similar details.

It's a fascinating example where the biblical account really lines up with an extra biblical historian describing this scene. Josephus gives us a little more detail, says that Herod was wearing a silver robe that is glistening in the sun.

He delivers this oration. The people are shouting the voice of a god and not of a man. And in Josephus' account, he just says Herod collapses on the stage and is taken back into his personal residence where Josephus says he dies five days later.

That doesn't contradict this. That can easily fit with this. Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down because he did not give God the glory.

He was eaten by worms and he breathed his last. There's been a lot of speculation about this. This can also be translated, he breathed his last and was eaten by worms, which is maybe a poetic way of saying he died and realized the end of all men, something like that.

[20:35] Or it could be that he died of a parasitic worm infestation. It could also be. We should be careful, though. I read some stuff this week where people went on and on about the worms coming out of his ears and his eyeballs.

And maybe we should be careful before we get carried away with those kinds of details. What is not up for debate is that an angel of the Lord strikes him down and he dies because of his pride and of his idolatry.

He will not give God the glory. He will not deflect glory to God. He assumes the role of God. He enjoys that kind of praise. And the angel of the Lord.

And of course, this is the power of God to kill. Think about that in a minute. That's the end of the story.

Luke, the author, gives this sort of stamp of approval that he gives throughout the book of Acts in several places. But the word of God increased and multiplied. So this incredible story, these events, has the effect of increasing and multiplying the word of God.

[21 : 49] And then, like I pointed out at the beginning, Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. It's his mother who's hosting the big group in her house. That's our story.

Those are the details. There's many other fun details. I think those are important ones for us. Let me turn now to a little deeper look at these three lessons.

Three lessons from Acts 12 for our thought and application. Number one, I want to reflect on the power of God to rescue and to kill.

This is clearly something this chapter brings into focus for us and wants us to think about. God has total power.

He has the power to rescue. He has the power to kill. He rescues Peter from prison through this impossible high security kind of context.

[22 : 53] And then he strikes down the man who's the king. You know, at his point of peak political power and oration.

And so God has the power to rescue and kill. But I don't want us to miss the fact, this little note right at the beginning of the story, that James is killed.

God does not rescue everyone, not even all Christians. He does not spare all Christians from pain and suffering.

He does not liberate them all from prison. God rescues Daniel with an angel who closes the mouths of the lion.

But we know that early Christians were thrown to the lions and they were not rescued. And so sometimes you hear, I would say, excessively triumphalistic statements about no weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper.

[24 : 12] Except the weapon that was fashioned against James. That weapon prospered. And so as we think about the power of God to rescue, think about the power of God to kill.

The angel of the Lord rescues. The angel of the Lord kills. God does not rescue James. This story wants us to grow in our faith, our conviction about the power of God.

It wants that to shape our prayers. It wants that to shape our belief. It wants, the story wants to shape the way we live, our lives in this world, in great conviction about the power of God.

But if we're going to grow in maturity in that, we need to have the maturity to recognize God does not rescue everyone. Does not spare everyone.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. So notice that in this story, we're celebrating Peter's relief, rescue from prison, but James is dead, the beloved disciple of the Lord.

[25 : 30] God does not rescue everyone. He does not heal everyone. He does not prevent all Christians from pain, suffering, and death. But nonetheless, he has all power. So the power of God to rescue and kill.

That's number one. Number two, I want to reflect on the ministry of angels. This is one of the passages in the New Testament that is at the center of angelology. Okay.

The theology of angels, what we believe the Bible teaches about angels. So just a quick summary. Angels are real. They operate in the world. And Jesus is the stairway on which angels ascend and descend.

Okay. This is something Jesus says in John chapter one. He's talking to the disciple Nathanael, but also to all disciples. And he says, you will see the angels of heaven ascending and descending on the son of man.

[26 : 35] Okay. That's an allusion to Jacob in the old Testament and the vision that Jacob has at Bethel where he sees a ladder and angels ascending and descending. And Jesus says, you will see angels ascending and descending on the son of man, on me, on Jesus.

Jesus is the ladder by which angels ascend and descend and operate in the world. So angels are real. Jesus teaches that.

He teaches his disciples that. And these early Christians clearly believe that. And we should too. A belief in the power of God and the possibility of angelic intervention will change our life and bolster and fortify our faith.

It will. And that's the point of the angel stories in the Bible. The point of the angel stories in the Bible is not to get us to worship angels.

Okay. We should not worship angels. We should not become, I would say, unduly fascinated with angels or fixated on angels. I don't think we need to become fascinated with the names of angels or calling out to angels.

[28:02] We should never pray to angels. You should never seek to communicate directly with an angel. The book of Hebrews makes this very clear that Jesus Christ is superior to angels.

Jesus Christ is our mediator. We can pray to God. Abba, Father, Jesus teaches us. Pray to God directly. And Jesus is our mediator.

There's a sense in which we become fascinated with angels when we lose our fascination with Christ.

So be cautious of that in your own life and as you talk to others. Angels are real. It's a mistake to deny that or to ignore that but it's also a mistake to become unduly fascinated or fixated on angels. The ministry of angels. Number two. Here's the third thing. The final thing I want to reflect on this morning. The power of prayer. This story clearly brings together this remarkable miracle of God, the angel liberating Peter from the prison with the fact that these early Christians are fervently praying, straining in prayer.

[29:29] And many, many commentators over the centuries have seen that connection and have reflected on prayer in this passage. What is this chapter teaching us about prayer and the power of prayer?

The Bible teaches us that there is a mysterious relationship between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility or the activity of humans in the activity of prayer.

Okay, so prayer is this thing that clearly involves the sovereignty of God and the power of God working but it also involves humans praying. And exactly how these things work together is mysterious.

We can err as we think about prayer. We can make a mistake by overemphasizing one at the expense of the others. We can overemphasize God's sovereignty in prayer and ignore prayer or neglect it or be very hasty.

You wake up and say, well, God, take care of all the problems today. Thanks. That's not what the Bible teaches us. It's not how the Bible teaches us to pray.

[30:46] But we can also err by overemphasizing human input into prayer or human activity. God wants us to pray and the Scripture wants us to understand that prayer in some way mysteriously frees God to operate.

If you're not awake right now, you should be awake when I say that. And I ran that one by Dan Godoy before the service.

He said, whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Let me read you a quote from a Christian preacher named Ray Stedman. Ray Stedman says this, commenting on this chapter, he says, as a result of their intercession, God was free to act in unusual and remarkable ways.

So my radar went up when I read that this week and Dan Godoy is scowling at me real hard right now. Dan's preaching next Sunday. Come back. He might really be setting the record straight, you know, which is good.

We talked about that. Okay, but I want you to think about that with me. Their intercession, these early Christians in this house of Mary, their intercession, this pastor says, frees God up to act in unusual and remarkable ways.

[32:17] Is that right? Is that accurate? Is that the right way to understand what's going on here? In the book of James, James chapter 4, verse 2, we are taught that you have not because you ask not.

And we're taught in James 5, 16 that the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. We know that Jesus prayed.

We know that Jesus spent long time in prayer. We know that Jesus wanted to pray together with his disciples and he wanted them to pray with him for a long time.

So does the amount of time that you spend in prayer matter? Does praying together with other Christians matter?

Or change the efficacy of the prayer in any way? You say, no, no, not at all.

[33:21] Then why did Jesus do it? Why does he want his disciples to pray with him and they fall asleep and he says, you could not pray with me for even an hour?

Like that's nothing? An hour? When was the last time you spent an hour in prayer with some other people? These early Christians are all night in prayer.

And we have record from other early Christian sources that this became a somewhat common thing. All night prayer meetings. Is that irrelevant to what happens with the angel and Peter?

Does it facilitate it in some way? Does it enable it? Does it free God to do something he would not otherwise do?

You might remember the intriguing comment. I think it's in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus goes back to his hometown and it says he could do no miracles there because of their little faith.

[34:36] Does that prohibit God from doing a miracle? a famous Christian preacher in England almost 200 years ago now Charles Spurgeon he says this he says we shall never see much change for the better in our churches until the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of believers.

For the most part prayer is treated as a last resort a thing to be turned to when everything else has failed. Is that true?

Does our prayer and our attention to prayer and our faithfulness in prayer facilitate God's work in and through our church? We have to be so careful here right?

Between God is sovereign and human responsibility we can err in either way on this but I want to challenge us to think about it I've been challenged this week to think about this I want to challenge you I want to challenge us as a church to grow in prayer.

What does it mean? Does it matter how often we pray how long we pray for how many people we pray with let's think about those things be challenged by this passage many many Christian interpreters have been challenged by this passage on these questions.

[36:22] God is powerful to rescue and to kill we can take great comfort in that great encouragement we should also be sobered in the reality that God does not rescue everyone the ministry of angels is real angels are real that should also encourage us and comfort us we should be careful not to go beyond what scripture teaches we should certainly be careful not to worship angels or become unduly fascinated with them and prayer is powerful in ways that are very challenging to think through the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working may God help us to understand all these things and grow in response to his word let's pray heavenly father we thank you for this beautiful story that you've given it to us in the form of a story full of fascinating and fun details that you want us to pay attention to and to appreciate and to engage our imagination in so that we can learn and grow and be challenged in multiple ways all at the same time as we read this story help us to do that fill us with your spirit grow us as a church in prayer grow us in your power may your will be done may your kingdom come fill us with your spirit

I pray in Jesus' name amen Thank you.