

## **The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Prison Break**

Acts 12:1-24

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Dan Hoffman

Today we are in Acts chapter 12. Please grab your device or the Bible in the pew in front of you, and follow along.

This is my probably my favorite chapter in Acts, so today is going to be fun for me. Hopefully you will have a good time too. I've been looking forward to this sermon since we started the series several months ago.

So how many of you have grown increasingly aware that there is a lot of stuff going on in the world that we don't have control over.

So think natural disasters: Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria. Two category 5 storms that have caused devastation in the Gulf and the southern States. Think the earthquake in Mexico this last week that killed hundreds. Or think of the fires that displaced a major part of our province. Many people are struggling with disaster.

Or think of political struggles like those going on between the two name-callers leading the States and North Korea. This has potential to cause global difficulty. And all this is out of our control.

Or think of the internal disasters we struggle with even these are beyond us. I have friends with marriage troubles – their relationship is rocky and full of instability. I know other people who are looking up from the bottom of a financial pit they don't think they are ever going to crawl out of. Others are struggling with health problems, or their loved ones have health problems. This last week a friend died of diabetes after a long and bumpy fight.

So many things in the world are beyond our control, and maybe you've felt it this week.

Regardless where your storm is coming from, Acts 12 speaks incredible comfort into every situation imaginable within the human experience – God is in absolute control. We call this the sovereignty of God, but that isn't a very emotional word. And so it often doesn't provide the comfort that it is supposed to provide.

So I love the way one of my mentors describes the sovereignty of God. James MacDonald says "God rules the universe with His feet up." That means He isn't stressed out. When Irma and Maria are on the warpath He isn't sitting on the edge of His throne biting His nails. When the worst things imaginable are happening in your life God isn't caught off guard. He isn't surprised. He has it. God is in control. He is sovereign. And on top of this He loves you. And that means we can trust Him.

Do you need a little of that this morning? I think we all need to be reminded this from time to time. And for you that might be today. So I've got four encouragements from Acts 12 that I want to share. Let's get started in verse 1.

[Read Acts 12:1a]

Now just a little Herod lesson to start off. You probably know of Herod. But what you may not know is Herod isn't a name, it's a title. And this means there were all sorts of Herods around in the first century. So there was Herod the Great – or the not so great. He was the guy who was killing babies when Jesus was born. He had a bunch of sons who took the throne. The first was Herod Archelaus. He was so ruthless the people quickly killed him. Then there was Herod Antipas, another one of the not-so-greats. He is the guy Jesus called "that fox" in Luke 13. This is the guy who married his niece even though she was already married to his half brother. And then chopped John the Baptist's head off when he called him on it. Finally there was Herod Agrippa who was the grandson of Herod the Great. And he is the guy in our passage today. So this is a great family of trouble makers.

Look again at Acts 12

[Read Acts 12:1-4]

So about that time –we aren't sure exactly when this is. There is a break between chapter 11 and 12 and now it is somewhere around 12 to 15 years since Pentecost. And Herod Agrippa is in control and persecuting the church. He was throwing people in prison and then he runs James through with the sword as a crowd tester.

Now James was one of the big three. This is Peter, James and John. So imagine how this would have shaken up the early church. Jesus, what's happening! Things are going from bad to worse, and now one of your favorite disciples gets killed.

James is probably the number 3 guy. I know we always say Peter, James and John. But I'm just going to go out on a limb and say that John is number two and James is number 3. Are you okay with that? But killing number 3 made the Jews so happy that Herod decided he was just going to go straight after number 1. And so he grabs Peter – he's not hard to find, and throws him in prison. But it's just before Passover and you can't go killing people at Passover. So he is going to hold him for the weekend and then finish him off. That's the plan, and everyone knows it.

Now put yourself in the early church. It's been a few years since Saul was causing trouble, but this time the persecution means business. Herod isn't messing around. Just imagine what the Christians were thinking. Have you lost it Jesus? Have things gotten too big for you? Is now the time to start panicking? Have you ever asked Jesus that?

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His answer is “No... I’ve still got it.” Here’s the first point. God is in control even when I’m suffering.<sup>1</sup>

This is one of the foundations of our faith. God is in control. And this is true when things are going well and we feel like He is in control. When you get the promotion you are hoping for. And when the diagnosis comes back benign. When the person who has been giving you a hard time at the office quits, God is in control.

But He is just as much in control when we don’t feel it. When nothing is going the way we planned. When the tests come back terminal. When you get kicked out of the house you are renting and have to move. When no one in your family can get along. God still isn’t close to throwing His hands up in frustration. God never gets jostled when the waves are crashing over the helm of your boat. God is sovereign, ruling the universe with His feet up. And He loves us.

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I don’t know if you’ve ever seen one of those Chess Master’s play. I watched a game once – actually it was about eight games at the same time. There were eight guys on one side sitting in front of eight boards. And each of them were studying and trying to figure out what to do next. And the Chess Master was on the other side. And he would just walk down the line and go boop, boop, boop. And all eight of the games were over in about 10 minutes and he had won them all.

That’s the way God is with all of our lives. He can handle it all at the same time.

Now usually we are okay with this if a week after the disaster strikes everything gets better. Then we say “God sure walked me through that one.” And it’s nice when things work out that way. But there is no promise in scripture that this is the way it is going to happen for you.

The promise in Scripture is that:

In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:28-29)

The good, that God in His sovereignty is working out for you in the midst of the disaster you are walking through, is not your health or your wealth or your even your physical survival. Those would be small and temporary goods. God is working towards your ultimate good which is conformity to the image of His Son.

So in the midst of the storm you are walking through God is building your faith. Faith is the ability to know that God is good even when things aren’t good. It is the ability to trust that He is in control when things are out of your control.

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<sup>1</sup> Outline and some content adapted from Pastor James MacDonald “God is in control” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJozS-mUOIQ> (Accessed September 22, 2017)

And God uses the adversity we face to build faith and Christ-likeness in us. But He won't thwart our free will. If we don't want to be conformed to the image of His Son He will not force us into our greatest good.

But He also knows we aren't good at seeing the big picture. So Hebrews 12 tells us:  
The Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He chastens everyone He accepts as His son. (Hebrews 12:6)

So when we drop the ball He tosses it back. He doesn't let up. He keeps working to accomplish His means in our lives. So don't be discouraged if things are difficult, because this means God is at work.

Now, if everything is going good and has been good for a long time that's when you might want to question. Because God doesn't make any exceptions with the children He loves. All of us get chastened. So if you aren't being chastened you need to sit up and ask "am I a child of God?" But you don't need to ask this in the hard times – then you know.

Look with me at verse 4 again:

[Read Acts 12:4-6]

How many think Herod has a fair trial planned for Peter? He is going to look at the evidence and make sure Peter gets justice for all the terrible things he's done like healing lame people and raising dead women.

No, Herod knows exactly what he is going to do. He is going to parade Peter out, and rile up the crowd and then chop his head off. All to get a few publicity points.

And all this is going to happen tomorrow morning. And it's night – it's the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. And Peter is guarded by four squads of four soldiers each – 16! That's a lot of soldiers for one guy. Of course the reason for that is that Peter has a bit of a reputation. In chapter 4 the Sadducees threw him into jail, but he got out. Then in chapter 5 he was back in jail, but broke out. So demonically inspired Herod isn't taking any chances this time. Peter is well guarded. Chained between two thugs with 14 other soldiers all keeping watch. Herod is going to take Jesus' church down tomorrow morning.

Do you feel like the enemy has almost torn you down? That's his plan. He is a roaring lion and he wants you destroyed. Has he almost succeeded?

It looks like that is what is going to happen to Peter, but as time ticks by God's grip does not falter. Here's the second point. God is in control even in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour.

Things are getting close to the wire for Peter. By all accounts it looks like in just a few hours the sun is going to come up and Herod is going to assemble the people and that's going to be it.

Have you ever found yourself in a spot where you need God to come through, and you need Him to come through now? Not after lunch. Right now.

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Our church has a secretary named Leanne who has been working here for about 12 years. And I asked her if I could tell this story.

Leanne is a single parent of a daughter with special needs. Amelia is 19 years old, but has the intellectual ability of about a 2-year-old. But because she has just turned 19 she is aging out of the children's social assistance program and heading into the adult program.

Now all of this came to a head this this last summer. And Leanne found herself in a terribly sticky spot. Amelia's care had run out. But the funding for her new care hadn't kicked in yet. And that meant that Leanne couldn't work like she usually would, because she needed to take care of her daughter. But if she doesn't work then she doesn't have the money to take care of her daughter. And so it looked like an unescapable vortex of financial disaster. She felt desperate and defeated.

Then one day, as she was working on some paperwork for Amelia's adult care and she came across a BC law which says after you work a job for 5 years your vacation pay changes from 4% to 6% of your wagers. But she has been getting 4% for her entire 12 years here – it was a mistake. And so what that meant was we owed her over \$1500 in back pay.

We got our accountant working on this right away, but even so it took a little while to figure out. But finally, in the middle of summer, right when all her resources had run out, and just before she was scheduled to take a trip to visit her son and new wife – the 11<sup>th</sup> hour – the cheque arrived. Our accounting mistake turned out to be God's saving plan for Leanne. "I know you are going to need a bit of extra cash in the summer of 2017, so in 2005 I'm just going to put My finger in this to provide. I've got this, I've got you. Even when everything looks like it is going wrong I'm sovereign in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour."

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Now here is where we get to a challenge in the text. Look again at verse 6. This is the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. Herod probably isn't going to wait till lunch time to get his party going. It's going to be first thing in the morning. And Peter knows what is going to happen. He saw the preview. James is dead. But what does verse 6 say Peter was doing as he was chained to those two guards?

Peter is sleeping!

Think about how easy it is for something to keep you up at night. I don't know about you, but it's classic for me. I come out of a committee meeting here at the church, and my mind is whirling. Nothing terrible has even happened – we just had a discussion about business. But there I am watching the numbers click by on my clock and

wondering about how things are going to work out. Am I the only one who does this? Are you ever kept awake at night?

Not Peter. He's moments from the end of his life, chained between two guards – which can't be comfortable. And he is sleeping. How? Because he knows Jesus is in control. Now does this mean he knows he is getting out? No. But that's irrelevant. It's like Paul writes:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:21)

Peter knows Jesus is in control even in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. And so he is sleeping, even moments before being executed. Peter knows he isn't going to leave this place a second before Jesus says it is time. Friends, this is really living. This is what the faith that God is in control can do to your life.

Do you need a little more of that today?

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Well this is where the story takes a turn. Look at verse 7.

[Read Acts 12:7]

I get a kick out of this. The angel shows up and strikes Peter in the side. This is a good clomp. This is the same word used in John 18 where we read:

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (John 18:10)

That's not this – that's this! So Peter is really sleeping. I can just picture the angel trying to give him a little nudge. Trying to whisper in his ear. And then finally saying "forget this", and giving him a good kick. "Quick, get up!" And the chains just fall right off Peter's wrists. Verse 8.

[Read Acts 12:8-10]

This is the same way the story would read if it had been my wife the angel was rescuing. She isn't the morning person in our house. And so Peter gets all his clothes on and takes a stroll out of jail and down the street before he actually wakes up. Now to be fair to Peter the angel could have brought coffee.

And really Peter has had lots of crazy visions, so when chains are falling off, and gates are opening by themselves. And the guards are just standing there. Maybe they are sleeping, or maybe they are playing angry birds on their phones – distracted guarding. Peter just figures this must be a vision. It isn't until he is out on the street and the angel is gone that he realizes God is sovereign, and has saved him, in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour.

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Here's the third point: God is in control even when my faith is weak.

This is the good news in this text. I need this part. Look at verse 11

[Read Acts 12:11-14]

So Peter is knocking. It's midnight. And there is a prayer meeting going on inside. And they aren't expecting visitors, so the door is locked – after all Herod is about. So Peter keeps knocking and eventually Rhoda comes to the door. She is probably a young girl of around 10. And she recognizes Peter's voice. He might have been singing that great 1970's song "Rhoda, open the door." I don't think she knew that song either. And so she just leaves him standing there.

She is excited, but she doesn't let him in. Instead she runs back to the prayer meeting where everyone is praying for Peter. And these are good Christians so they are praying in faith – "Please God, save Peter from Herod." They are all praying this. And that's when Rhoda comes in and says "Hey guys, Peter's at the door."

And verse 15 is their response:

[Read Acts 12:15]

How's this for faith at a prayer meeting? Weak, right? Instead of daring to dream God might have answered their prayer, they think Rhoda has lost her marbles.

Now did God know how weak their faith was? Yes. But He answered their prayer anyway. God is in control even when our faith is weak. How many people know this is good news. Isn't it good news that God doesn't have a little faith meter plugged into the side of each of us and until it red-lines He is sitting there saying "I'm totally not helping them." Isn't that good news?

Now faith is important. Without faith we can't please God – that's what Hebrews says. But praise God His sovereignty supersedes our faith. This means that God is in control our weak faith isn't in control. This is why one of the best prayers in the Bible is the prayer the dad with the sick boy prays in Mark 9. "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." Do you pray that? I pray that a lot.

Well the story continues. Look at verse 16.

[Read Acts 12:16-19]

So stuff hits the fan back at the prison. Imagine how excited the guard was who got to tell Herod what had happened. Not fun! Herod wasn't happy. But then we jump forward in time a bit and we get to the last point I want to bring out. Look at verse 19

[Read Acts 12:19-22]

God is in control even when the wicked seem to prosper.

Time has passed as we get to these verses. After the whole Peter thing Herod went on a vacation. He left Judea, the hill country, and went down to Caesarea which is by the sea. And then the story picks up with him having a squabble with Tyre and Sidon. Now these people relied on Herod for their survival. And so they put on a little production for their king - to get on his good side. One day, when he was making his kingly address, the people all cried out together saying "This is the voice of a god, not a man." And Herod enjoyed this until we get to the next verse:

[Read Acts 12:23-24]

I'm going to keep this short. The fact is we don't always get to see God's justice roll out – perhaps we rarely do. But by faith we know that it will. In the end, every wrong and injustice will be made right. God will make sure everyone gets what they deserve. And we need to know this even when the wicked seem to prosper. We can trust God in this. Some get justice now, but all will get justice in the end.

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Friends, God is in control when I'm suffering, God is in control in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. God is in control when my faith is weak. And God is in control when the wicked prosper.

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Let me conclude by bringing this close to home. Just think about yourself for a second. Maybe close your eyes. What is it in your life that has risen up and has you struggling to believe that God is in control. What disaster has raised its head and threatens to take you down. What storm has crashed over the walls of your hull and has you wondering if Jesus is still in control, or if now is the time to panic.

Maybe it is a relationship struggle between you and someone in your family. Maybe it is your marriage. Maybe it is financial. Maybe it is a mental or physical sickness in you or a loved one that has left you feeling vulnerable. Whatever it is allow the Word to pour faith into you today. Know that God really is on the throne in heaven – He is in complete control, and He loves you. So trust Him; trust that no matter what happens, He is dedicated to using every difficulty and evil you experience for your ultimate good. He is conforming you into the image of Jesus.

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If you've got something specific that has been causing you to question whether Jesus is really standing at the right hand of the throne of heaven and in absolute control, then draw that to mind as I close us in prayer. Maybe lift your hand as a sign you are offering it to God.

Let's pray.