

STRANGER THAN FICTION

ACTS 12:1-19 APRIL 22, 2020

Reality television shows draw in their audience with the promise of authentic coverage of incredible situations. Viewers tune in to see hilarious and shocking things happening on the screen, with the producers *hoping* you'll spread the word about the show, saying "You can't make this stuff up!"

Except they *do*. Whether it's *American Idol*, *Real Housewives*, *The Biggest Loser* or *Pawn Stars*, the casting, the scenes, and the conversations are regularly manipulated in such a way to generate the most dramedy possible. On *Cupcake Wars*, contestants have been told beforehand what their "mystery ingredient" will be and are instructed to act surprised on film. On *Duck Dynasty*, extra bleeps are added in to make it seem like the family is swearing at each other more than they are. On *House Hunters*, there is no deliberation. The decision has already been made on which property to buy well before the cameras start rolling.¹

As Theophilus turned the page from what we call Acts 11 to Acts 12, he must have been astounded. Things more hilarious and shocking than any we see on reality television play out in rapid succession. And it was all true! But it wasn't just fun and games. After reading about amazing triumphs in Jerusalem, Samaria, Syria and beyond, after seeing sorcerers brought down, eunuchs lifted up, centurions brought in, after seeing the world's greatest enemy of Christ become a church leader and power going out all over the world, suddenly we see the empire strike back in a big way. In the midst of all the great work of God, the Church endures some heavy and painful blows.

What was Theophilus to think? What was the *Church* to think? What conclusions might they come to in light of the major developments that take place in this passage? Tonight, we can discover with them some of the realities at work in this Church age and find hope in these troubled times.

Acts 12:1 - About that time King Herod violently attacked some who belonged to the church

We begin with the phrase, "about that time." Our memories are sometimes short, so what *had* been going on? Well, it was a time when the Gospel was going out to the Gentile world, with remarkable success in some places. It was around the time when Paul and Barnabas were in the area. In fact, it's possible they were in Jerusalem at the time. They had come from Syria back to Judea to bring relief from the church in Antioch. Because it was also a time of severe famine in the region and the Christians are in great need. So, on top of real economic stress and hunger, they're now facing violent persecution from the government.

When we study this section, the headlines are always about James and Peter. But we should pause to note that it wasn't *only* apostles who suffered. There were multiple victims of the tyrant's crimes.

Acts 12:2 - ² and he executed James, John's brother, with the sword.

It's hard to imagine how much of a shock this would have been. On the one hand, the apostles knew their love for Jesus Christ would bring them trials and tribulations. But, we're at about 44AD here. Not *that* far removed from the resurrection. And here he have *James*, one of the 12, one of the 3 in the inner circle of Jesus, suddenly taken away. No final words. No closing sermon recorded by Luke. No last minute rescue. How could such a thing happen?

¹ <https://www.editorchoice.com/reality-shows-fake>

There have been a few movies that surprise audiences by killing off a major star early in the film. Hitchcock killed off Janet Leigh at minute 47 of *Psycho*. In *Children Of Men*, Julianne Moore's character dies in the first 28 minutes. In the age of COVID, lots of people are re-watching the 2011 movie *Contagion*. In that movie, 6 characters die in the first 12 minutes. One of them being Gwyneth Paltrow, despite her prominent place on the movie poster.

Eusebius, a Christian historian living in the 300's, gives us a story from James' death that had been handed down from Clement. He reports that that the one who led James to the judgment-seat, when he saw him bearing his testimony, was moved, and confessed that he was himself also a Christian, and then was beheaded beside the apostle.²

Despite the shock the believers must've felt, we commend the fact that they did not scatter when one of their shepherds was struck down. They weren't part of a personality cult. They weren't there to see some celebrity. James was merely an *under-shepherd*, and those that remained continued to fix their eyes on the Lord Jesus.

Acts 12:3-4 - ³When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter too, during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴After the arrest, he put him in prison and assigned four squads of four soldiers each to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover.

The way it's written makes us think that Herod had begun his murderous campaign on a whim. "What should I do today? Let's kill some Christians!" But then he saw it was winning him some points with the right people, and so he mobilized his efforts to maximize political profit.

Peter would spend at least a few days in jail, upwards of a week. Herod and the Devil were licking their chops, but the story's setting clues us in that God is about to do something big. Passover, Unleavened Bread, these were all about commemorating how God had *delivered* Israel from her bonds, saved the people from the death angel, rescuing them in the night.

Now, Peter had already "escaped" prison once, back in Acts chapter 5, and he was a miracle worker. So, Herod wasn't going to take any chances. Guards would be watching Peter on shifts at all times, until he could be paraded out before a bloodthirsty mob.

Acts 12:5 - ⁵So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him.

The situation is bleak. The church in Jerusalem doesn't have the strength it did back in chapters 2 through 7. They were hungry. They were helpless. One of their beloved apostles had just been killed and another was about to be. I'm sure they felt like the very ground beneath their feet was giving way. But, here we see an important spiritual reality at work: Even when we are helpless, we have prayer at our disposal. They drew up in formation to fight against the wiles of the Enemy. Satan had wheeled out his heavy artillery: Herod and his government. But, in response, the Christians armed themselves with corporate prayer. We're told they did so *fervently*, meaning constantly and with great passion. One descriptor of the word is with "tension." It was a muscle they were flexing, and *kept* flexing together, asking God to move and to intervene.

² Eusebius *Church History II ch. 9*

We find ourselves in an unstable time. It's hard to predict what tomorrow will bring. But this is the reality revealed by God the Holy Spirit: We have this spiritual muscle - prayer - specifically *corporate* prayer, and we should flex it even when we feel helpless. Because God is *always* able.

Acts 12:6 - ⁶When Herod was about to bring him out for trial, that very night Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while the sentries in front of the door guarded the prison.

I took comfort in something small here. It was such a strange thing that we all had to *miss* Easter in our regular way this year. As a church family, that's always a Sunday filled with joy and expectation and celebration. Peter missed Passover that year. I'm sure he was discouraged by that. But the Lord was still with him, still mindful of him. And we see that he was ruled by peace. Could *you* sleep with 2 heavy, iron shackles on your wrists and big, burly soldiers tied to the other ends? I couldn't.

But what a great demonstration of Godly peace this really is. Obviously Peter wasn't *worried* about being executed. That would've kept him awake. But, it doesn't really seem like he's *resigned* to death either. If he was sure he was about to die, I'd expect him to be writing last minute notes, maybe making a few goodbyes. Some commentators suggest that he *knew* he would be delivered because Jesus had predicted he'd live to an "old age." Maybe, but, even then, wouldn't you expect him to stay awake to see the fireworks?

Instead, this seems to be a perfect representation of the kind of peace God wants us to have. One that passes understanding. One that is full of trust in the Lord, whether He deliver us or not. Whether He gives or takes away, peace ruling the heart.

Now, as we see Peter's miraculous deliverance, we shouldn't resist the urge to chuckle. It reads like a Dean Martin/Jerry Lewis bit, as the angel has to spell out each motion for the groggy apostle.

Acts 12:7 - ⁷Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. Striking Peter on the side, he woke him up and said, "Quick, get up!" And the chains fell off his wrists.

There's some interesting angel information to consider. It's unrealistic for us to think that these guards were *also* asleep, as they were on either a 4 or 6 hour shift. So, it would seem that all of this was *visible* to Peter, but *invisible* to everyone else. We also see that the angel has power over material objects like shackles and gates without touching them.

The angel's behavior reinforces the idea that they're sort of grumpy from our perspective, at least when it comes to dealing with humans. Often, in movies like *City Of Angels*, angels are depicted as being very enamored and fascinated with how we do things. That does not seem to be the case when it comes to the Biblical record. When the angel lit up the dark room and Peter didn't wake up, the angel gave him a big *whack* on the side and starts trying to get him out of his captivity, only to be met with persistent sleepiness.

Acts 12:8-11 - ⁸"Get dressed," the angel told him, "and put on your sandals." And he did. "Wrap your cloak around you," he told him, "and follow me." ⁹So he went out and followed, and he did not know that what the angel did was really happening, but he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰After they passed the first and second guards, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened to them by itself. They went outside and passed one street, and suddenly the angel left him.

There are a couple of things I found remarkable here. First, it's an encouragement that sometimes *even the apostles* were confused about what was happening in their lives. I mean, Peter had even been *delivered by an angel from prison once before* and he was still not sure what the Lord was doing. Our part is never to understand everything, how could we? Our part is to trust the Lord, expect Him to be moving in our lives and obey His leading, whether we fully understand or not.

Second, whether you're Peter, or the church, or Theophilus reading this later, you've got to think, "Wait, *that's it?* You took him *one block away* from prison and then just *left* him?" I'd love a heavenly police escort not just out of the prison building, but somewhere safe! But there Peter is, on the street corner, bleary-eyed and slowly realizing that he had been brought out of his cell, which made him a fugitive, by the way.

Peter had his own exodus experience that night. And though he would be pursued, like the children of Israel were by Pharaoh, he could rest in the knowledge that he was going with God. We can wish God would "do more" to heal or to deliver or to defeat our enemies. But what we should rest on is the fact that God *is* about His business, He *is* mindful of our plights and our sufferings, and He has not deserted us. He is with us always, even to the end of the age.

Acts 12:12 - ¹²As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many had assembled and were praying.

How did Peter know which house to go to? We don't know and have to speculate, but I think it's because that's where they had gathered to pray previously for James. I've heard Bible studies on this passage that say the church had failed, *refused* to pray when James was taken by Herod. That, if they had only prayed, he would've been saved, too. Why think that? If anything, reading between the lines, Peter assumed there'd be a group ready to receive him at Mary's house. We'll see he's not going to stay long, he needed to get out of Dodge, so he went to the *one place* where he could tell everyone he was ok.

For the believer's part, we see that they were still awake, late into the night, praying for their friend. They might have done this for *days*. And, it would've been a scary time for them to be gathering. Remember: It wasn't just apostles being targeted, but all sorts of Christians. Yet, in faith they put their lives on the line that they might *pray*.

Acts 12:13-14 - ¹³He knocked at the door of the outer gate, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴She recognized Peter's voice, and because of her joy, she did not open the gate but ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the outer gate.

If the previous scene was closer to slapstick comedy, this is more like the cringe humor of *The Office*. Here you have Simon Peter, on the run, if he's found out he'll be killed, and there's going to be a drawn out argument over whether he's actually at the door. Little Rhoda gets carried away in the excitement of it all and leaves him hanging there. At first, the angel could barely get him *out* of the cell, now he can't get *in* to the house!

I just love this because it's a great, candid moment. These were real people and real situations. Not scripted. Not punched up for TV. If you're Peter, you *must've* been think, "What in the world is going on tonight?" And, we think that a lot, too, right?

Acts 12:15-16 - ¹⁵“You’re out of your mind!” they told her. But she kept insisting that it was true, and they said, “It’s his angel.” ¹⁶Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were amazed.

What did they mean, “It’s his angel?” Some point to the traditional Jewish belief that each person had a guardian angel. Others say they meant it was Peter’s spirit, that he must’ve been executed. But, if either of those were *really* what they thought, *wouldn’t they have opened the door for that?* It makes more sense to take the position that they were humoring little Rhoda.³ Clearly they didn’t believe she was right about someone being at the door, so they were probably just giving her a “there, there.” But finally, they heard the pounding, and there before them was the very man they had been praying for God to deliver.

Commentators make much out of their “lack of faith” in prayer. They say, “they were praying, but clearly didn’t believe.” They were surprised, to be sure, but is it *fair* to say that about these faithful Christians? When’s the last time any of us prayed round the clock for God to do something? Luke had assessed them as fervent and serious in their prayer. They didn’t have some sort of *blind*, prosperity doctrine in the way that they prayed. After all, God had allowed James to die. He had allowed Stephen to die. He had allowed others to be beaten, imprisoned and killed. It can be hard for us to maintain faith when we pray for big, miraculous things, But that doesn’t mean we should stop. It means we should continue and to supplement those prayers with that wonderful line from the Gospels: “Lord, I believe. *Help my unbelief!*” But we should also accept the fact that sometimes the Lord doesn’t give the *kind* of deliverance that we want. And that’s ok. In the end, what we want is what *God* wants. And so we try to balance all of that as we pray.

Acts 12:17 - ¹⁷Motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. “Tell these things to James and the brothers,” he said, and he left and went to another place.

Peter wasn’t going to wait or waste time. He knew he was going to need to run for his life and go into hiding. There’s no command in Scripture for God’s people to *categorically* refuse to run and hide when persecution like this is coming. Sometimes we see Christians running, sometimes they do not run. The Holy Spirit guides.

There were a bunch of James in the New Testament. It seems that this one is James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, who would later write the New Testament epistle. He had, apparently, become a leader in the church in Jerusalem. We’ll see him again in chapter 15.

Incidentally, we notice that when James, one of the 12, was beheaded, he was not replaced the way Judas had been. Now that the Church had been well established and the Gospel was going out, when James died, they retired his number, as it were. His personal, apostolic office closed up shop. There are no genuine apostles operating on earth today.

Acts 12:18-19 - ¹⁸At daylight, there was a great commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹After Herod had searched and did not find him, he interrogated the guards and ordered their execution. Then Herod went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

³ <http://media.calvaryhanford.com/acts/30thewormsgointhewormscomeout.pdf>

A prison break is *always* a black eye, but it was an especially bad one for Herod. He decided to go stroke his pride on vacation, but not before meting out some cruelty on these soldiers. This was the custom at the time. If you were guarding a prisoner and they escaped, you would take the punishment that was meant for him. This is a sobering reminder to all unbelievers that you do not have tomorrow guaranteed to you. Your life may be taken in the morning. What comfort it is to us to know that Peter, assuredly, had shared the Gospel with these men over the days of his imprisonment. Perhaps, as they were each in turn being led to the block, some or all of them called out to Jesus Christ for mercy, receiving it in full measure.

If we were the local church living through this passage, or if we were Theophilus reading it for the first time, we would be shocked at the developments. Once again, the reality was brought home that we are not promised ease, advantage, or even *survival* in this life. These Christians were hard-pressed, hungry, now were being hunted, and some were paying with their lives. But, what about the miraculous power of God? What about the advance of the Gospel? Well, as we read, we see that was happening too. While suffering *was* a reality, and continues to be, we see also some other realities at work: That God is still *just* as powerful as He ever was. He is mindful of His people and their plight. He is attentive to their prayers. He is able to change even the most dire of circumstances in a moment. But, He also allows us to experience His grace and power in the midst of suffering and weakness. When we ask, “Why, God, didn’t you save James also?” In a sense, it’s the same sort of question as “Will You *now* establish Your Kingdom?” Lord, let’s get to the part where there’s no weakness, no suffering, no struggle, no defeat of any kind.

That’s coming. But, for now, God is on a mission to save. And the reality of that mission is that His strength is made perfect in our weakness. We may feel unstable, helpless, discouraged, but this passage teaches and proves that we have one another for support, prayer is still powerful, peace is provided, and God is in charge. Let’s continue with Him, standing resolute with one another in the faith, fearing no evil for the Lord is with us.