

"THE PASSION OF PRAYER"

Acts 12:1-17

Do you have a passion for the Lord? David Jeremiah defined passion. . .

Passion is the inner spark, provided by God's Spirit, that ignites you to live out your God-given purpose. The more you understand about why you take up space on this planet, the more you need the inner fire of passion to live out that purpose.... I am absolutely convinced that life is meant to be lived with powerful emotions and heightened expectations—with joy, fulfillment, excitement, and purpose. I am convinced that when we live with passion we honor God powerfully, for it is then that we resemble Him most in spirit. (Life Wide Open: Unleashing the Power of a Passionate Life, p. 3)

We've seen passion in athletes as they compete to win a game. We've seen it in singers and musicians as they perform for the crowd. We've seen passion in politicians as they deliver their stump speeches.

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Here's my question for you today? Do you, do we as a church, demonstrate a vibrant passion for prayer?

Open your Bible to Acts 12. This morning I want to take you inside a real prayer meeting where passionate praying was taking place. It had been about 12 years since the Lord Jesus had been crucified, raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, and had sent the Holy Spirit to indwell believers on the Day of Pentecost.

Luke has been recording great kingdom victories— 3000 saved on the Day of Pentecost, the Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, the Gentile centurion Cornelius, and the mixed crowd in Antioch. The enemy was being crushed!

Stephen, the godly deacon, had been martyred and a wave of persecution had pushed many believers into Judea and Samaria where they preached the gospel and planted churches. Let's pick up the story in verse 1 . . .

Acts 12:1–4... about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in

order to mistreat them. 2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. 3 When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people.

King Herod Agrippa I was the king, and he was accountable to Rome. He knew that it was in his best interest to stay in the good graces of the Jewish leaders. What better way to do that than by launching a wave of persecution against the hated followers of Jesus.

In this passage, we are going to be introduced to two major events. The first is the death of the Apostle James (Mark 10:35-40) and then the arrest of the Apostle Peter. Imagine the devastating effect this must have had upon the church.

Jesus promised no special protection for even His closest followers. In fact, He warned them to be ready for persecution.

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King Herod Agrippa I assigned 16 soldiers to guard Peter. Once the feast was completed Herod intended to have him executed. This would certainly win Herod some brownie points with the Jewish leaders, and, for this maniacal leader that's all that mattered.

The situation looked extremely bleak, even hopeless. What could the little community of believers do against the armed might of the Roman Empire? ¹

Acts 12:5... So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

What an amazing verse of Scripture this is! On one side of this spiritual skirmish is the wicked ruler Herod. He was out to destroy the fledgling church by executing its strongest leaders. James had already been killed. Now Peter was being held in maximum

¹ John R. W. Stott, [*The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 208.

security, and it seemed certain that he would be executed soon. The phrase "but prayer" is the turning point in the story. . .

- **The situation looks desperate, *but!***
- **It looks like Peter will be put to death, *but!***
- **It looks like the church will fail, *but!***

In the face of overwhelming odds, the church called on God. Never underestimate the power of a praying church. Notice that they prayed "fervently" or "passionately." We'll come back to this prayer meeting shortly. What happened next in this story is flat out amazing . . .

Acts 12:6–10... On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap

your cloak around you and follow me.” 9 And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

If you were chained to two Roman soldiers and facing the possibility of being executed the next day, would you sleep soundly? How do we make sense of this? Later on, Peter wrote something in his epistle that sheds some light on this moment in his life. . .

1 Peter 5:6–7... Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, **7** casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.

What gave Peter such confidence and peace? To begin with, many believers were praying for his deliverance. Beyond that, I believe Peter knew that Herod could not kill him because of the promise Jesus had made to him.

John 21:18–19... “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.” **19** Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me!”

Peter’s faith gave him the freedom to sleep like a baby!

Luke has already referred to angelic activity about fifteen occasions in his Gospel and the early chapters of Acts. The Lord *allowed* Herod to kill James, but He kept him from harming Peter. The throne of heaven was in control, not the throne on earth. I love what John Piper had to say about this text...

Luke put this chapter together to make this plain for the early church: you may feel small and insignificant in the Roman Empire; you may think that you are overpowered when some of your best leaders are killed on a political whim.

But the truth is: if you stay with Jesus, you win, and if you oppose him, you lose. So be encouraged. Be bold and courageous to spread the Word of truth and leave the outcome to God.

Jesus is on His throne today. I don't know what tragedy, darkness, difficulty, or hardship you might be facing. You need to remind yourself that the Lord our God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. Like Peter, you can trust Him and cast all your cares upon Him!

Acts 12:11–12... When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." 12 And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

Peter headed for the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Keep in mind that the church had been praying **fervently/passionately** for Peter's deliverance.

Acts 12:13–17... When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. **14** When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. **15** They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." **16** But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened *the door*, they saw him and were amazed. **17** But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place.

Even though they weren't praying with the faith that we would expect them to pray with, God graciously answered their prayer. I guess you could say that their faith was about the size of a mustard seed, but Jesus said that even small faith can accomplish great things.

The "*James*" Peter refers to here was the half-brother of Jesus who became the recognized leader

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of the church in Jerusalem and who wrote the epistle that carries his name.

CONCLUSION

Here's the challenge I sense the Holy Spirit wants to drop in our hearts today regarding this thrilling story and our visit to a first century prayer meeting:

PASSIONATE PRAYER MOVES GOD'S HAND!

Jack London described passion like this . . .

I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather that my spark should burn out in brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The proper function of man is to live, not to exist. Ed. Irving Shepard, *Jack London's Tale of Adventure* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), vii.

We must inject this kind of passion into our praying. Let's revisit that first century prayer meeting (vs. 5) to learn some basic keys . . .

1. THEY PRAYED CORPORATELY.

Acts 12:5, 11-12... So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. **11** When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." **12** And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

There is incredible power and purpose when the church comes together to pray. The situation for them was urgent. We are just beginning to search for our next pastor. Praying individually and praying corporately is essential!

2. THEY PRAYED SPECIFICALLY.

Look at verse 5 again—"prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God." Focused prayer unites the church and gains the favor of our Lord!

3. THEY PRAYED PASSIONATELY.

"Fervently"— This word speaks of unceasing activity, normally involving a degree of intensity and/or perseverance.² Here are some examples . . .

- **Elijah prayed with great passion on Mt. Carmel.**
It rained after 3.5 years of drought.
- **Hannah prayed with great passion for a son** (1 Samuel 1:10-15). She said, "*I have poured out my soul before the Lord.*"
- **Jesus prayed passionately in Gethsemane.**

Passion eliminates sluggish, lifeless, casual, halfhearted, or apathetic prayers. Passionate prayer pours forth from a burdened heart and soul (Hannah).

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² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, [*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*](#) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 655.

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I'm asking every believer to unite in passionate prayer for God's will concerning the PST and for clear direction to the next pastor. Will you make this commitment today?

The greatest of all needs is the need to be saved. Are you saved? This very minute you are walking a tightrope. . .

John 3:16–18... "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. **17** "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. **18** "He who believes in Him is not judged; *he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*"

I'm sure people have been praying passionately that you will repent of your sins and receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord by faith. Come to Jesus today!