

Acts 12:1-25

1. Whereas in Acts 8, the ordinary disciples were targeted, now, the leaders are under attack: one of the three disciples closest to Jesus is beheaded, and a second, Peter, suffers a narrow escape. Luke records that the disciples prayed “earnestly” (*ektenōs*) for Peter, using the same term he used of Jesus’ agonized prayer in the garden (Lk 22:44). God’s answers swing from “no” to “ABSOLUTELY YES.”
 - a. Based on their response to Peter’s deliverance, what were they expecting?
 - b. What lesson about prayer, if any, can we take from this passage?¹
 - c. When does it make sense to pray for something which appears impossible and which God has said no to before? When is this just raising false hopes?
2. Once again, Luke uses language and structure to draw an artful parallel between Luke and Acts (See Table below; Keener 315). What does Luke want you to understand from this?
3. Luke packs this passage with Shakespeare-level irony:
 - In the first Passover, the Israelites are *sandaled and girded*; Peter, when summoned for escape, has neither cloak nor sandals on
 - While the church is praying for Peter’s escape, he sleeps (much as he slept when Jesus prayed in the garden?)
 - While an angel frees Peter, his supporters mistake *him* for an angel
 - Just as at Jesus’ resurrection, *no one listens to women*
 - Peter believes the *angel* is a vision just as the men after Jesus’ resurrection believe the *women* had seen a vision²
 - Peter’s guards can’t keep him out, but can’t get his own supporters to let him in

Beyond good storytelling, what can we learn from these surprising elements?

4. By this time, Peter was ministering underground due to general persecution (8:1-4). Now he gets out of dodge completely (Gal 2:11-12 has him in Antioch) to wait out Herod’s reign, and by Acts 15 he is back in Jerusalem. All the rules of narrative would lead us to expect that Peter will be a crucial player in the rest of Acts, yet the focus almost immediately shifts to Paul, with Peter receding from the spotlight. What little we know of Peter’s later activities include his visiting Antioch and totally screwing up by avoiding meals with Gentiles. So why did God spare Peter in such a remarkable way? What narrative principle of Acts makes sense of this?
5. The emphasis in Acts is on the activity, leadership, and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, in Acts we find angels freeing leaders from prison (5:19; 12:7-11); giving directions to Philip (8:26); appearing in a vision to Cornelius (10:3-7); delivering deadly vengeance (12:23); and protecting Paul (27:23). Angelic accounts are not restricted to antiquity. Two famous accounts include members of the Huaorani people in Ecuador seeing angels over the jungle after the slaughter of Jim Elliot and the missionaries, an experience which contributed to their later openness to the gospel; and the account of

¹ *Spoiler*: Ben Foust points out that the only faith needed for prayer is whatever it takes to open your mouth.

² What role did they think visions played? Did Peter think God would send him a vision to comfort him the night before his death? Did the men in the upper room also think God had sent a vision to the women for consolation?

John G. Patton, Scottish missionary in the South Pacific, who, with his wife, was saved from attack by what tribesmen later described as “hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords”.³

As practical, modern Christians we don’t *disbelieve* in angels so much as we fail to see the *point* of them. Functionally they are irrelevant to us. To quote Tish Harrison Warren,

As children of the Western Enlightenment, we have emptied the cosmos of supernatural life, as surely as industry emptied Cape Cod of cod. Our default now, however subconsciously, is to imagine the cosmos as an empty sea on which we drift alone. It’s not full of enchantment, not teeming with mysteries, and certainly not crawling with angels... We Christians can be tempted to make our faith less enchanted. We try to prop it up with respectability. But the fact is, we still believe a lot of weird stuff. If we do not embrace an enchanted cosmos—the weird stuff—we miss the fullness of reality, the fullness of God, and we will never fully embrace the mystery of our own lives. To endure mystery, we must learn to surf the teeming waves of wonder.⁴

We minimize belief in angels, miracles, visions, etc., very practically recognizing that God chooses not to act in those ways in our lives. In doing so, our imagination shrinks, and it is imagination that drives prayer; what we can’t imagine, we can’t pray for. Maybe angels were unlikely to appear to us, but with them goes prayer for *any* out-of-the-ordinary action by God in our lives. How can we recover our imagination without pretending God will do things God doesn’t *want* to do?

Jesus in Luke 22-24	Peter in Acts 12
Passover setting (Lk 22:1)	Passover setting (Acts 12:2)
A Herod (Antipas) is among the powerful oppressors (Lk 23:6-12; Acts 4:27)	A Herod (Agrippa I) is the powerful oppressor (Acts 12:1)
Laying on hands (Lk 9:44; 20:19)	Laying on hands (Acts 12:1)
“Arresting” (Lk 22:54)	“Arresting” (Acts 12:3)
“Handing over” (Lk 23:25; 24:7)	“Handing over” (Acts 12:4)
“Angels” announce to women (Lk 24:23)	An angel guides Peter (Acts 12:7-10) and he announces his freedom to a woman (12:13)
Women are disbelieved (Lk 24:11) and disciples later disbelieve “for joy” (24:41)	Rhoda left Peter “because of joy” (Acts 12:14), and disciples disbelieve her (12:15)
The disciples think Jesus a “ghost” (Lk 24:37)	The disciples think Peter a ghost of sorts (Acts 12:15)
After conversation, Jesus withdraws (Lk 24:51)	After conversation, Peter withdraws (Acts 12:17)

Fun fact: “[Agrippa] lavished wealth on public entertainments, including an occasion where he publicly exterminated 1,400 criminals (*Ant.* 19.337). Publicly executing James or Peter might appear to him a small matter.” [Keener, 316]

³ Fernando, 371 for Patton, and *Christianity Today*, “Did They Have to Die,” Sep. 16, 1996, p. 20, for Jim Elliot and friends.

⁴ From “Angels in my Bedroom,” *Christianity Today*, Feb 1 2022, p. 38.

Background and Leader's Notes:

First, a note of background: Jewish folklore held that guiding and protecting angels “were sometimes thought to resemble the human beings they protected.” [Fernando, 362; Barrett, *Acts*, 515]⁵

⁵ The only other verse in the NT which might suggest guardian angels is Mt 18:10, but this interpretation is contested. “D. A. Carson thinks that the angels in Matthew 18:10 are the spirits of little ones who have died.” (Fernando, 366)