

## THE STRUGGLES AND SUCCESSES OF LIVING FOR JESUS

### ACTS 12:1-19

#### Notes

Living for Jesus moves from the mountain high experiences of victory and success to the valley of death and defeat, often with not much time or warning in between.

The idea that living for Jesus or being a Christian is some kind of cake walk or only for those who are soft is spread by those who have never truly followed Jesus.

Living for Jesus, I mean truly following Jesus: allowing his will to become your will; allowing his preferences to become your preferences; learning to put Christ ahead of self, job, spouse, and the world, this is not an easy, nor is it a one-time event.

Living for Jesus, honoring Christ in our lives seems more like living on a pendulum, swinging from one success to one struggle after another.

Can we be honest for a moment? Pull back the curtain and have a moment of truth in our hearts and minds?

Yes, we can feel like we have had a good week living for Christ and then within a few hours or days of that victorious feeling, we can fail in sin miserably.

We can pray to the Lord earnestly for something, a healing, a job, a miracle and he seems to answer and come through and then at other times, it seems like our prayers fall on deaf ears and what we prayed for with all our might does not come to pass (our loved one dies, the bank takes the car, the relationship falls apart, we don't get the job).

This back and forth is not meant to discourage. Both successes in following Jesus and struggles in following Jesus are meant to bring us closer to Jesus and to strengthen us to engage the world for his glory.

This rivalry in our lives of living for Jesus and falling in sin; of seeing successes for Christ's glory and embarrassment on his behalf; of the kingdom of darkness opposing the kingdom of light.

It may seem like this back and forth happens because the opposing forces are equal, but the Kingdom of God has no equal.

In our text this morning, we are moving in Acts Chapter 12 and in this chapter, we see some striking differences regarding successes and struggles.

Our passage shows us that advancing the kingdom of God has built in costs for those who follow Jesus.

As we work our way through the passage, I want to encourage you to consider a few questions:

- What is God trying to accomplish in me during this season in my life?
- How can God use this event or circumstance for his glory?
- Is God using this situation to get my attention and draw me close to him?

Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. <sup>2</sup> And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. <sup>3</sup> When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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." <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

#### **A. LIVING FOR JESUS IS COSTLY (1-4)**

Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. <sup>2</sup> And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. <sup>3</sup> When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> 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.

In this passage Luke mentions King Herod. This is not the same Herod we have read about in Matthew, that was Herod the Great.

This King Herod is Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great.

His grandfather was a genocidal maniac, even murdering Agrippa's dad.

Herod Agrippa was the last ruler with the royal title reigning over Judea.

He was a flip flopper. Being raised in Rome and friends with the emperor, when he was in Rome, he followed and lauded Roman customs.

Being a Jew when he was in Judea he made friends with the religious leaders, endearing himself to them.

Luke tells us that he "laid hands on" the Christians, persecuting them. He more than likely did this to endear himself to the Jewish leaders.

Luke moves from a general persecution of the church to the specific persecution of James.

Herod had upped the persecution of the church by beheading one of its leaders.

His grandfather committed the genocide of toddlers and infants in Jerusalem trying to kill Jesus and now Agrippa was following in his footsteps by murdering those who followed Jesus.

This James was James the Son of Zebedee, of Jesus' inner circle, the brother of John.

James was a leader in the Jerusalem church and by taking him out Herod was trying to kill the moral of the church.

James gave his life for the cause of Christ. James made the ultimate sacrifice.

James shows us that living for Jesus is a costly endeavor.

This text shows us that living for Jesus guarantees opposition to come into our lives.

Jesus promised as much in **John 16:33**, "*You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.*"

As we stand for biblical truth in a world that is moving farther away from any sense of objective morals and ethics, we will increasingly experience persecution from leaders, employers, friends, and even family.

## **B. LIVING FOR JESUS IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART (1-4)**

Notice this.

King Herod may have increased government sanctioned persecution of the church; he may have had James murdered, and he may have had Peter thrown in jail, but know this; the King was and still is in charge.

King Jesus was in charge when the church was scattered. Jesus was in charge when Stephen was stoned to death earlier in Acts.

Jesus was in charge when James was beheaded and when Peter was thrown in jail.

Jesus is in charge in your life as well.

Yes, living for Jesus is difficult at times.

When we must make the strenuous choices between what's good and what's best; when we have to say goodbye to a relationship because it is not honoring Jesus.

When we must be disciplined by the Lord because of continued unrepentant sin; when we must stand up for the gospel in a world that is opposed to all things righteous-these things are hard to do.

Continuing to fight the good fight, forging ahead in the race, standing firm in battle can get tiring, but I want to encourage you that the same Jesus who saw his church flourish, the gospel go forth, and his glory made known throughout history, even in the midst of all manner of hardship, can do the same in your life right now.

What are we to do when we are faced with persecution? How are we to respond when trials seem dark on every hand?

### **C. EVEN WHEN THINGS DON'T GO YOUR WAY, WE ARE TO CONTINUE IN PRAYER AND DEVOTION (5)**

*<sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.*

Luke tells us that Peter was in prison. Since it was the week of festivals, Herod could not execute Peter.

Peter was held in the Fortress of Antonia, situated on the northwest corner of the Temple.

When the church was pressed and pushed by Herod; when James' life was taken from him, and when the leader of the church was imprisoned with capital punishment what did the church do?

Did the church stop living for Jesus? Did they tamp down on the gospel influence? Did they scatter once more?

Look at what the church did-they gathered in prayer and devotion to the Lord.

The word "fervently" means "without end, strenuous, earnestly."

When the church was pushed against the wall, when it was all on the line, the church did not take up arms against Herod; they did not stage an attack to retrieve Peter, they did what Jesus did as he was facing death.

The church went to God in prayer, seeking, knocking, searching, beseeching God for a miracle, for an answer, for strength.

### **D. PRAYER IS THE FOUNDATIONAL BEDROCK OF THE CHURCH (5)**

How often have we prayed for a healing, a restoration, a miracle, but then we couch our prayers in "what if's" and "maybe's."

Far too often the prayers of the saints of God are but "pop" prayers that pop up at the dinner table, at times of importance, or in solemn moments.

The church has forgotten who her Lord is and what he desires-an intimate relationship with his bride.

The church went to praying over the situation with Peter. After the death of James, the church could not bear to lose another of its leaders.

The church prayed for Peter, and they prayed boldly. They had no idea how Peter could escape the clutches of Herod, but they prayed.

Can I encourage you this morning? Ask God in prayer for the desires of your heart and ask boldly.

But you may say, “Oh, preacher, don’t say that. You will give people a false hope.”

Often, we hold back our prayers and put limits on them to avoid disappointment or to keep God from looking bad to others.

Swindoll comments, “*God’s sovereignty isn’t threatened, and His goodness isn’t compromised if you plead earnestly-supplicate shamelessly-for good to prevail.... He will honor your earnest desires, if not in the manner you hope, then in some unexpected way you cannot foresee*” (Acts Commentary, 236).

May we be a people of unceasing prayer, bold prayer, shameless prayer, asking God for the miraculous for his glory.

What about you today? How would you describe your prayer life?

Is it a prayer life that is vibrant, non-existent, or maybe a prayer life on life support?

Prayer is more than just a hot line of hope in a time of despair. Prayer is our lifeline, holding us fast to our glorious redeemer.

#### **E. GOD LOVES RESCUING PEOPLE (6-11)**

*<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.<sup>8</sup>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.”<sup>9</sup>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.<sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.”*

The day before most executions is extremely tense.

Here is Peter shackled and bound between two guards in his cell and two on the outside, with guards rotating every three hours.

In an instance in which most people would be sleepless and frightful the text tells us that Peter is asleep in his bed.

Unbeknown to the church and while Peter slept, God answered the church’s prayer by sending an angel to not only visit Peter but release him.

Luke tells us the angel struck Peter, “struck” means to kick, to wake him up.

Luke does not tell us the state of the guards at this point, but God must have caused them to be in some trance or fall asleep.

Peter, thinking himself sleeping, is awoken, has his chains broken, led out of prison, and set free.

The church prays boldly for Peter and Peter is then released from his chains.

This text shows us how God loves rescuing people.

- Rescued Adam and Eve by providing covering in their shame
- Rescued Noah by providing a boat for his family
- Rescued Abraham by providing a lamb for the sacrifice
- Rescued Elijah against 400 prophets of Baal
- Rescued David from Saul
- Rescued Jesus from the grave
- **Rescues us from our sin, both the sinner and the saved**

Are you in need of rescuing this morning?

God loves rescuing us.

#### **F. GOD PROVIDES FOR US IN OUR TIME OF NEED (6-11)**

Because God loves rescuing us, he provides for us in our time of need.

The Psalmist tells us that God is

- Our shield in battle
- Our refuge in retreat
- Our rock in the storm
- Still waters when we are weary
- Our guide through tough times
- God loves to provide for his children.

Time and again in Scripture and throughout church history, when the people of God have need, they go to God and God in his graciousness provides for his people as they need.

What are you in need of this morning?

I want us to notice something important here, just a quick note, but important none the less.

#### **G. EVEN IN GOD'S PROVISION, WE STILL MUST GET UP AND FOLLOW HIM (6-11)**

Peter is woken up by the angel and he does not understand what is going on, he even thinks he is asleep.

Even still, he gets up and follows the angels' leading and commands.

When God rescues us, we are not called to be passive.

In the middle of your rescue God may be calling you to obedience, to serve, to surrender, or to change directions. Whatever the case, be willing to follow his lead.

#### **H. REJOICE WHEN GOD ANSWERS YOUR PRAYER (12-17)**

*<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. <sup>17</sup> 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.*

The church is in peril as they pray for Peter. This is the night before his execution. Surely, he would end up like James, beheaded, and the church would be down one more leader.

Too often the church prays prayers it does not really believe will be answered.

Rejoice when God answers your prayers.

Trust in his goodness when he does not answer your prayers the way you expect.

Don't be shocked by God's grace

#### **I. SHARE WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR YOU (12-17)**

*<sup>17</sup> 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.*

Peter reviewed the story once more to the church and then instructed them to share the good news of God's gracious rescue with others.

---

How are you in need of rescuing right now?

What is God trying to teach you during this season of your life?

How is God trying to draw you to himself?

David Crowder has a song titled, "He is" and the lyrics drive home an important point for us.

*If you're troubled  
Heavy hearted  
Come to Jesus and find your peace*

*If you're run down  
Empty handed  
Come to Jesus and find your strength*

*If you're wandering  
In the darkness  
Come to Jesus and find your way*

*If you want freedom  
Need forgiveness  
Just come to Jesus and find His grace*

*Comforter, Counselor, Prince of Peace  
Author and Maker of everything  
Defender, Deliverer, King of Kings  
He is, He is*

*Helper and Healer forevermore  
Savior and Shelter through every storm  
My Refuge, Redeemer and Lord of Lords  
He is, He is*

*Child of Heaven and Son of Man  
Provider, Protector, the Great I Am  
Alpha Omega, Beginning and End  
He is, He is*

*Hope for the hopeless  
Rest for the weary  
Help for the hurting  
He is, He is*

*Mending the broken  
Bearing the burdens  
All that you're needing  
He is*

*All that you're needing  
He is*