

“Livin’ On A Prayer”
Acts 12:1-19
Pastor Jarrett Stephens

We have been in our *FORWARD* series for the last few months and this is the last sermon we’ll look at in the book of Acts this year. We are going to take a little break beginning next week. We have a three week Christmas series coming your way and then we’ll jump back into this *FORWARD* series in January and finish the book right before summer.

I hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving with your family and friends. I said this in an email to the church right before Thanksgiving and I sent a message to our staff on Thanksgiving, just letting you know...letting them know that one of the blessings my family is MOST grateful for this year is being a part of this church.

It's hard to believe that nearly one year ago, I stood here preaching in view of a call and to think that you voted me in to serve as your pastor. Debbie and I are just so THANKFUL for you and this past Thursday when we gathered around our table we bowed together in prayer, you, Champion Forest were on our mind and heart as we said thank you to the Lord for his many blessings in our life.

And speaking of thanksgiving and prayer, the title of the message today is: **Livin’ On A Prayer**

If you are a child of the 80’s you know this to be one of the hit songs of the band *Bon Jovi*. It was released in 1986 and talk about thanksgiving, can I just say how thankful I am to be a child of the 80’s...you can’t imagine how fast I could roller skate when this song came on!

Illus. A child of the 70’s & 80’s – I found an article this week entitled *101 Reasons To Be Thankful You Grew Up In The 70’s & 80’s*. Here are just a few of my favorites!

1. Your lungs are supercharged with today’s clean air because they adapted to pull oxygen from air that was 82% cigarette smoke. – Ha! That’s true for me...Ting story.
2. You got to play the first generation of video games in their first incarnation AND your thumbs are super well-developed thanks to all those hours spent working out with your Atari joysticks.
3. You know how to use a rotary phone, should the need arise. You know how to use a push-button house phone, should the need arise. You know how to use a CB, should the need arise.
4. You know what real cartoons look like and sound like.
5. You had the freedom to roam around the moving car when you were a kid! – SO true! Station-wagon.

6. You know how to solve a Rubik's Cube by pulling all the stickers off and putting them back on in the right places.
7. You know Big Hair will come back in style someday, and you're ready.
8. You rode into the weekend on a steady diet of *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, and *Dallas*.
9. You can still operate a TV when the remote breaks.
10. You witnessed the birth of the Happy Meal.

Ha! I loved growing up in the 80's...and I thought of that *Bon Jovi* song when I read the passage of scripture we are looking at today. This is one of the GREAT stories in the New Testament...been looking forward to preaching it all week. So, let's get after it.

Acts 12:1-5 – “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ²He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. ⁵So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”

Now, before we get into the context and begin to unpack all that is taking place here, let me give you the big idea behind this passage of scripture and I'm going to give it to you in two words.

It's the words: **TRUST and ENTRUST**

These two words seem to me to be the theme of scripture as it relates to our relationship with God. I spent an entire chapter writing about these two words in my book, *The Always God*.

You see from the very beginning as God establishes a relationship with his people, he calls on them repeatedly to trust him and to entrust their lives to him.

You look at the life and teachings of Jesus. So much of what he taught was trying to get across this message to his followers – you can trust God and entrust your life, your family and loved ones, all that you have and own to him.

He even gave us images of God to help us in trusting him and entrusting our lives to him, calling God “Father” and referring to him as “Shepherd” – what was the point? We can trust God and we can entrust the entirety of our lives to him.

Now, this is EASY to embrace when everything is going great! It's EASY to trust God when there aren't hardships, trouble, hurt and pain. The problem is, that's not reality.

Life is full of ups AND downs...and it's in the down times of life especially, that we have to be reminded of this truth over and over again – that we can trust God and entrust all that we have...all that we are...to him.

And that's what THIS passage I believe teaches us. That:

1. We can trust God in the midst of trouble.
2. We can trust God in the midst of pain.
3. We can trust God in the midst of confusion.

Let's look at this first one: **We can trust God in the midst of trouble.**

Look at **Acts 12:1** – “**About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.**”

Now, persecution as we have seen is nothing new for this early church...they have experienced it time and again. Just think about all that we have seen in this *FORWARD* series so far.

- In Acts 4, Peter and John after healing a lame beggar are arrested in the Temple for preaching Jesus...
- In Acts 5, the High Priest arrests all of the apostles and put them into prison...
- In Acts 7, Steven the deacon is stoned to death...
- In Acts 8, the persecution is so bad that the Church is forced to scatter...

The early church has known persecution, but for the most part that persecution came from the religious authorities! To the High Priest, the Sanhedrin...this group of apostles and their followers were apostates! They were deceiving people and leading them astray from the laws and tenets of Judaism.

In the mind of the religious leaders and authorities, these “Christians” were causing people to commit blasphemy against God and needed to be stopped. And the way to do it was persecution – kill the messenger, kill the message. Suffering will surely bring silence.

So, for most of the early years of the church, the threat came from inside Jerusalem and more specifically than that came from inside the Temple.

What we have here in Acts 12 is the first persecution coming from outside the Temple...it's coming from the State if you will, that is under the hand of a man, named Herod Agrippa 1.

Now, madness ran in this guy's blood. Just follow me on this. His grandfather was Herod the Great. You remember him!

We are getting ready for Christmas and it was at the birth of Christ, where Herod The Great is visited by some wise men from the East. And they come to Jerusalem looking for the one who “was born King of the Jews”.

Herod does his research, finds out this “King”...the Christ is to be born in Bethlehem and wants the wise men to go find the boy and send word back to him. When they don’t, the scripture says that Herod “became furious” and sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and the entire region who were two years old and under – madness.

This is Herod Agrippa’s grandfather. He murdered one of his wives, her mother, three of his sons – one of which was Agrippa’s father. This guy was a total NUTJOB. And you are going to see that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree!

Herod Agrippa’s uncle was a man that went by the title and name Herod Antipas. This is the Herod that put John the Baptist to death because John the Baptist had called him out for sleeping with his half-brother’s wife.

He is the one that during the trial of Jesus, when Pilate heard Jesus was a Galilean, sent him to Herod Antipas because Herod was over that territory. When Jesus wouldn’t perform miracles for Herod, they mocked him, put kingly clothing on him and sent him back to Pilate. This was Herod Antipas, the uncle of Herod Agrippa 1.

Now, Herod Agrippa himself was raised in Rome and through a number of circumstances and knowing who to kiss up to, Herod Agrippa is eventually appointed to rule over most all of the Palestinian territories – he eventually ruled over more land than even his grandfather it’s why he was referred to as “the King of the Jews”.

Agrippa 1 was the ultimate politician! This guy...he knew what to say, when to say it...and he was in quite the position. He had to keep Rome happy and the way to do that was maintain peace. And what was the best way to maintain peace? Keep Jerusalem happy.

So, that’s what he did. He helped the Jews rebuild their northern wall. He moved the “capital” if you will from Caesarea back to Jerusalem and curried favor doing “little things” that kept Jerusalem (i.e. the religious leaders) happy and therefore Rome at peace.

One of these “little things” that he did to stay in favor was to help “stamp out” this little renegade group that was causing so much strife with the Jewish leaders. And so he (v. 1) “laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church”.

Not only is the church experiencing persecution from religious leaders, but now it is experiencing persecution from political leaders...this is a first and from this point on, it’s not going to be safe to be a Christian anywhere!

This is a church in trouble and what God is teaching them in and through this is that he can be trusted in the midst of trouble.

Secondly, we learn through this passage that: **We can trust God in the midst of pain.**

Acts 12:2-3a – “He killed James the brother of John with the sword,³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also...”

Now, put yourself in the place of these early followers of Jesus. James was one of the apostles. He was a part of the inner-circle of Jesus!

There were some occasions in the life and ministry of Jesus where he included only three others – Peter, James and John. In Matthew 17, on the Mount of Transfiguration, where who Jesus was on the inside was manifested on the outside, only Peter, James and John were there to see it.

In Mark 5, when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus, along with the girl’s parents, it was only Peter, James and John that were able to witness this miracle. They were with Jesus when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night that he was betrayed and arrested.

In the minds of the disciples and certainly in the minds of the early church, Peter, James and John were a big deal. They were the leaders of this movement Jesus had started. And now, one of them is dead...talk about pain!

Their hearts had to be broken. They had to be disturbed within. One of their leaders beheaded by the State (btw – Jesus prophesied this would happen in Mark 10:39) and on top of that, Peter has been arrested and he is awaiting the very same fate.

You know, it’s hard to trust God when you’re in trouble. I think it’s even harder to trust him when you’re in pain...when you’re hurting at the heart level.

And this is just where the devil loves to play head games with us, isn’t it? When we’re in trouble, when we’re in pain, he likes to take us to worst-case scenarios in our mind. And his goal in all of this is to chip away at our trust in God.

- He’ll cause us to doubt God’s goodness – “if God was good, you would not be facing this sort of trouble...”
- He’ll cause us to doubt God’s care for us – “if God really cared for you, you would not be facing this painful situation...”
- He’ll cause us to question whether or not God is really in control – “If God was really powerful and in control, he would have kept this circumstance from happening to me and would have kept my heart from breaking like this.”

And if he can get our mind off in a ditch of fear or worry or anxiety and lock us up from moving forward by faith, he can keep us from the peace and power that is ours that comes when we trust him and entrust our lives to him.

Trusting God is such a BIG part of the Christian life. And what God is teaching his church here in Acts 12 and what he is teaching you and me though Acts 12 is that he can be trusted!

Of course, he can be trusted in the good times when everything is going well, but he can also be trusted in the seemingly bad times.

- We can trust God in the midst of trouble...
- We can trust God in the midst of pain...

Third and finally: **We can trust God in the midst of confusion.**

Peter is in prison. Now, he's already been bailed out of jail once – in Acts chapter 5, they were in jail and an angel came and broke them out – remember?

It's different this time...the temple guard didn't place them under arrest, Herod did. And he's going to make sure no one breaks them out. He puts four squads of soldiers to guard him (v. 4) and they bound two soldiers to him!

Acts 12:6-19 – “**Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night** (Can I just say, God is never late! He's always on time...now, we may feel like he's pushing it...but he's NEVER late!), **Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.**”

Now, this is just crazy, right? Peter KNOWS that his life is about to end and look at him! I'd be crying like a baby and Peter is sleeping like a baby.

How is this? Can I tell you his secret? He'd learned how to trust God and entrust his life to God. This is the secret to power and peace and rest – it's those two words: Trust and entrust.

And where did he learn this? From Jesus! Peter would write later in the letter bearing his name.

1 Peter 2:21-23 – “**For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.** ²²**He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.** ²³**When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.**”

Peter was trusting God...entrusting his life to God! He's also the one that wrote in **1 Peter 4:19** – “**Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.**”

And then in **1 Peter 5:7** – “**Casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.**”

Trouble...pain...I tell you why I added confusion here in just a moment shouldn't be a cause for losing trust, but instead is an opportunity deepen our trust in God!

Illus. Tests in school – You do know God tests our hearts! This is the testimony of scripture (Duet. 8:2, Jer. 17:10, Ps. 7:9, 11:4-5, 66:10, Job 7:18, Prov. 17:3 – “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.)

God tests us! And often times the test comes in seasons of trouble, pain and confusion. The question is, “Will we pass the test?”

Peter is passing the test...he’s actually sleeping through it! Peter could sleep when his life is in danger because he had such a trust in God that if God delivered him and saved him from death – GREAT! If God delivered him and saved him through death – GREAT!

His job was to trust and entrust – and it was the secret to him being at peace and able to rest when most would be up worrying and wringing their hands. He’s asleep...and I’m talking REM sleep. Look at what happens:

Acts 12:7-12 - “**And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell.** (Now what’s taking place here is supernatural...this is an angel of the Lord we’re dealing with here. And if you have problems with angels and the supernatural you are really going to have a tough time with Christmas coming up! A lot of angels and supernatural stuff going on surrounding the birth of Jesus!) **He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands.** ⁸ **And the angel said to him, “Dress 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 followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.** (he must have thought this was another Acts 10 trance of some kind)

¹⁰ **When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.** ¹¹ **When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”** ¹² **When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.”**

Note this...it’s the second time it’s mentioned that the Church was praying (v. 5) “earnest prayer” – fervent prayer was being lifted up on Peter’s behalf. Just a side note here...prayer works!

Puritan Thomas Watson – “The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel.”

It was **Charles Spurgeon** – “Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscle of omnipotence.”

Now, I’ll be the first to say, I don’t understand this...I don’t get it! I can almost certainly assure you this early church was praying:

- Just as hard...
- Just as fervently...
- Just as passionately...

For James as they were for Peter. Why did God rescue Peter, but not supernaturally deliver James? The answer: I HAVE NO IDEA.

This is why I'm teaching today what I believe this text teaches and that is: We can trust God in the midst of confusion. I don't know why God seemingly responds to some prayers with action and to other prayers with silence...and we won't know the answers to questions like this, this side of eternity.

Deut. 29:29 – “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

Isaiah 55:8-9 – “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

I don't know why God chose to let James be beheaded in one instance and let Peter go free by way of an angelic release. That's God's business...I do KNOW that he can be trusted in the midst of whatever trouble, hurt or confusion we find ourselves in. This is the testimony of Linda and Jerry Atkins.

Illus. The Christmas Tag – Linda Atkins – It's a book she wrote as she processed the grief of losing her son, Jeff in a tragic car accident as a freshman in college at Texas Tech in 1990. Many of you walked with her and Jerry and their other son, James as they had to travel this path no family would ever desire to go down.

I wept as I read the book. Linda has been so good and kind to me and my family. I had no idea. I can't imagine the hurt...the pain...the sense of confusion she and her family felt. I'm sure the grief STILL sends waves of those types of feelings from time to time. In fact, Linda admits in the book they do.

I so appreciated the honesty she shared...and speaking about learning to trust God. Listen to what she wrote:

“There were many days that I cried out for the Lord to hear my plea for help and pull me out of the pit of despair. He did time after time. I would visualize myself in the bottom of a deep pit, quoting that scripture (Isaiah 59:1 God's ear not too dull his arm not too short to save.) crying out to be rescued and sense His hand reach down and grasp mine, slowly pulling me up and setting my feet on solid ground again. May it be perfectly clear that what He did for us, He will do for you too, if you put your faith and trust in Him. As Christians, we aren't promised a life without heartache, trials, and tribulations, but we are promised peace amidst our storms.”

What's the way to this promised peace? It's to trust God and entrust our lives – all that we are and all that we have to him.

Isaiah 26:3 – “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”

Back to our story! **Acts 12:13-16 – “And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. (Love the honesty and transparency of the scripture! This is humorous isn't it? Rhoda is so excited she doesn't even let Peter in!) ¹⁵ They said to her, “You are out of your mind.” (You're coo-coo for cocoa puffs! You're crazy...out of your mind little girl.) But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, “It is his angel!” ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.”**

The point needs to be made here that they were praying and shocked when God actually answered their prayers! Let's be a people that aren't shocked when God comes through!

Warren Wiersbe – “God could get Peter out of prison, but Peter couldn't get himself into a prayer meeting!”

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

Trust and entrust...if this text teaches us anything it's that we can trust God:

- In the midst of trouble...
- In the midst of pain...
- And in the midst of confusion...

Let me show you how though...it's one thing to say, “Trust God and entrust yourself and all you have to him.” It's another thing to tell you how!

Here's how you can “trust and entrust”. One word: **PRAYER** – It's Livin' on a Prayer!

As we bring this message to a close, I want to pullout three truths about prayer:

1. Prayer demonstrates trust

This early church was committed to prayer. When Peter was arrested, the scripture says in (v. 4) – but “earnest prayer” for him was made by the church.

This early church...they didn't have an earthly power...they had no earthly influence. When their backs were up against the wall, they used the only weapon at their disposal. And it is a powerful weapon! It's prayer.

2 Cor. 10:3-4 – “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.”

Whenever you and I decide to pray, we are demonstrating trust. Because in the act of prayer, we are admitting that whatever we are going through at the time is too big for us...it's too much for us...it's understanding that we can't handle this...whatever “this” may be.

And it's through prayer that we are asking God to step in and to help NOT just alleviate the trouble we're in or the pain or the confusion we are feeling, but to help carry us through it if it be his will.

Prayer demonstrates trust! So, the next time you are in trouble...in pain...confused...and wondering how do I trust God in the midst of whatever it is, you are in, go down on your knees and start praying! This is where the battle is won! Prayer demonstrates trust.

2. Prayer develops trust

In prayer, we don't get God to see things from our perspective! The gift of God in prayer is that we begin to see things from his perspective. Prayer is where we get the mind of Christ. It's in prayer that we get the strength to pray and ask God for what we desire, but we model Jesus and say, “not my will, but yours be done.”

And this isn't just some “tag on” phrase we put at the end of the prayer as a cop-out in case we don't get what we ask for. NO!

Praying God's will is the most mature thing we can do because we are acknowledging that we don't know what's best, but YOU, O God do...and we trust you!

Prayer is what develops the trust muscle. Prayer demonstrates trust. Prayer develops trust.

3. Prayer deepens trust

Phil. 4:6-7 – “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

When we pray, our trust in God is solidified because what we find is that he comes through on his promises. We give our anxieties to him and in exchange, he gives us his peace...he proves that he does care for us!

I'm convinced this is why Peter was able to sleep on the very night before he was to be executed. He had listened to Jesus pray. He had learned to pray. And in prayer, his trust was deepened, and it took him to a different level spiritually.

The more we pray, the more we get to know God and as a result the more our trust in him will deepen.

Illus. Babysitting the girls – I would never trust someone with my girls that I didn't know. I would certainly never entrust something that precious to someone that I didn't have confidence in. But if I know them...I'll trust them and entrust my girls to them.

Prayer is where we grow in our knowledge of God. And as a result we will grow in trusting him and it becomes so much easier to entrust all that we have to him.

We CAN trust God in the midst of trouble...in the midst of pain...and in the midst of confusion...but only if we will commit to being a people of prayer.

I want to invite you to a deeper level of trust in God than you've ever experienced before...and it all starts with a commitment to prayer.

Would you pray with me?

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.