The Power of Prayer
Acts 12:1-11
SS Lesson for 11/01/2015

Devotional Scripture: James 5:13-18

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW AND KEY VERSE OF THE LESSON

Key Verse: Acts 12:5

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

LESSON INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

PRAYER AIDS IN ENDURANCE OF PERSECUTION (ACTS 12:1-4)

Endurance of threat of death (1-2)
- Threat of death endured by overcoming the deception of Satan (1 Cor 15:22-28)
- Threat of death endured because Jesus promises everlasting life (John 11:26)
- Threat of death endured because Jesus brings life and immortality (2 Tim 1:10)
- Threat of death endured because Jesus freed us (Heb 2:14-15)
- Threat of death endured because Jesus swallowed up death (Isa 25:8)
- Threat of death endured because Jesus took the victory away from death (1 Cor 15:54-57)
- Threat of death endured because Jesus has mastery over death (Rom 6:9)

Endurance of threat of imprisonment (3-4)
- Endurance of imprisonment by being faithful through Satan’s testing (Rev 2:10)
- Endurance of imprisonment by being prepared because it has been prophesied (Acts 20:22-24)
- Endurance of imprisonment through rejoicing in sharing persecution (Luke 6:22-23)
- Endurance of imprisonment through knowing Christians will be betrayed (Luke 21:16-17)
- Endurance of imprisonment by realizing the world hates Christianity (John 7:7)

GOD RESPONDS TO PRAYER (ACTS 12:5-9)

Responds through attentiveness to the prayers of the Church (5)
- Attentiveness to prayers that are continually (1 Thess 5:17)
- Attentiveness to prayers that are in the Spirit for all things (Eph 6:18)
- Attentiveness to prayers that are faithful (Rom 12:12)
- Attentiveness to prayers that are presented to God (Phil 4:6)
- Attentiveness to prayers that are devoted (Col 4:2)

Responds through the Angelic guarding (6-9)
- God sends His angels to protect those who are representing Him (Dan 6:22)
- Angels stand by God’s people (Acts 27:23)
- Angels guard God’s people’s ways (Ps 91:11)
- Angels guard God’s people (Luke 4:10)
- Angels minister to God’s people (Heb 1:14)

PRAYER CAN RESULT IN DELIVERANCE (ACTS 12:10-11)

Deliverance from captivity (10)
- Through the grace of God, Jesus led captives free (Eph 4:7-8)
- God sets prisoners free (Ps 146:7-9)
- In the time of God’s favor He will set the captives free (Isa 49:8-9)
- God breaks the chains of slavery (Ps 107:13-15)

Deliverance from unawareness through spiritual insight (11)
- Insight from God, which brings understanding (Phil 1:9-10)
- Insight through examining the Scriptures daily to search for truth (Acts 17:11)
- Insight through meditation on God’s Word (Ps 119:99)
- Insight through understanding the fear of God (Prov 2:3-5)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS
Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson teaches the blessings of **The Power of Prayer**. The **study's aim** is to have a greater appreciation for the role of prayer in our lives. The **study's application** is to pray with full confidence in the power of God to answer prayer.

*(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)*

Key Verse: Acts 12:5

**Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church**

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

The purpose of this section of Acts is to confirm Israel’s rejection of the Messiah. Luke has skillfully woven this theme throughout the entire book and it can be seen up to this point in 4:1-30 (esp. 4:29); 5:17-40; 6:11-8:3; 9:1-2, 29. This animosity of Israel set the stage for the first missionary journey.

Artfully, Luke contrasted the love of the church at Antioch for the saints at Jerusalem with the coldhearted enmity of **Herod** and the Jews for **the church**. The Herod mentioned here is Agrippa I, a ruler popular with the Jews for he was partly Jewish, being of Hasmonian descent. His kingdom covered basically the same area as that of his grandfather Herod the Great. He was known for doing everything possible to curry the favor of the Jews, so he found it politically expedient to arrest Christians and to execute **James, the brother of John**. Herod Agrippa I died in A.D. 44. His son, Herod Agrippa II, was king of Judea from A.D. 50-70. Paul was on trial before Agrippa II and his sister Bernice (25:13-26:32).

This situation clearly indicates that the church was an identifiable group which had become hated and despised by the Jews. The execution of James **pleased the Jews** so Herod apprehended and incarcerated **Peter... during the Feast of Unleavened Bread**. This seven-day spring feast followed immediately after the Passover. **Herod intended to bring out Peter for public trial after the Passover**. The “Passover” here referred to the combined eight-day festival, the Passover itself followed by the seven days of unleavened bread. For at least two reasons Herod would find it expedient to execute Peter. First, Peter was known as the leader of the church, and second, he had fraternized with Gentiles. Herod made certain that Peter’s imprisonment was secure by **handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each!**

Probably this means two were chained to Peter, one on each side and two were standing guard outside (cf. vv. 6, 10). The four squads probably were each on guard for six hours each. Evidently the authorities remembered Peter’s earlier escape (cf. 5:19-24) and Herod did not want that to happen again. **So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him**. The contrast is obvious: Peter was bound, but prayer was loosed! **Peter** was so trusting the Lord that he was sound asleep the **night before his trial** (cf. 1 Peter 2:23; 5:7). **He did not fear for his life because Christ had said he would live to an old age (John 21:18)**. This is the second time **an angel** helped Peter escape (cf. 5:17-20). Awakening, **Peter**, the angel told him to get dressed and follow him **out of the prison**. Supernaturally God caused the chains to fall off his wrists, kept the guards asleep, and opened the **iron gate**. One of the subthemes of Acts is the outreach of the gospel in spite of opposition. This is seen in Peter’s release. When **Peter came to himself**, braced by the night air, he acknowledged God’s deliverance for him from **Herod and the Jews**. He now knew this was no vision (v. 9).

Acts 12:12 introduces the reader to John **Mark** who figures prominently in Paul’s first missionary journey. Evidently his mother **Mary** was a woman of prominence and means. Probably her house was a principal
meeting place of the church, so it must have been spacious. Because John Mark’s father is not named, Mary may have been a widow. This same Mark is considered to be the writer of the Gospel bearing his name (cf. Mark 14:51-52; 1 Peter 5:13). The story of Peter’s unsuspected arrival at John Mark’s home is filled with humor and human interest. Joy in the Book of Acts is also evident here in the servant girl... Rhoda who answered Peter’s knock and recognized his voice. Though the saints were praying earnestly (v. 5) for Peter’s release, they did not expect an answer so soon! When Rhoda insisted, Peter is at the door! They replied, You’re out of your mind. It must be his angel. This statement implies a belief in personal angels, that is, angels who are assigned to individuals (cf. Dan. 10:21; Matt. 18:10). It also suggests a belief that an angel may look like the person with whom he is identified!

When they saw Peter, they were astonished (exestēsan; cf. 9:21). Peter’s mention of James indicates that James had a place of prominence in the Jerusalem church. Quite clearly this James was the Lord’s half-brother. After making himself known to the brothers, Peter left for another place. Where this was is not known. It is possible, because of 1 Peter 1:1, to say he went to Asia Minor. Later Peter was at Antioch of Syria (Gal. 2:11). Paul referred to Peter’s itinerant ministry (1 Cor. 1:12: 9:5). After an investigation of Peter’s escape, Herod... cross-examined the guards and ruthlessly ordered their executions. Herod no doubt justified such harshness by reasoning that guards whose prisoners escape are irresponsible and unreliable. Yet Herod lost 16 guards by his actions (cf. v. 4). Herod then left Judea to stay for a while in Caesarea, the capital of the Roman province of Judea, from which Roman governors governed the nation.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Our modern world, scientific and rational as it is, leaves no place for the power of the miraculous that comes through prayer. Christians may tacitly adopt this viewpoint in failing to appeal to God for his supernatural intervention. We may see this in failing to pray that God would rescue believers who are in peril because of their witness for truth. Today’s lesson looks at a time when Peter, the leader of the apostles, was within hours of execution. How would the church be different today if his life had ended that early? We can’t answer that question, but we know the result of his continued life: he ministered for another two decades, preaching and teaching the gospel of Christ.

The book of Acts is “volume two” of the books written by Luke, a companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11). There is great value in comparing the stories of Acts with the accounts of the Gospel of Luke (the “former book,” per Acts 1:1), for they were intended to be read together. Acts 12 relates the last of the big stories in the book’s presentation of events centered on and around the first-century Jerusalem church. Jerusalem is revisited in Acts 15 (next week’s lesson) and in chapters 21-23, but those sections focus on the results of Paul’s travels rather than on the Jerusalem church as such. The actions in today’s lesson occur within the time frame AD 41-44, more than a decade after the great Day of Pentecost. Two facts allow us to compute this. First, Acts 11:28 refers to a famine during the time of Emperor Claudius, who reigned AD 41-54. Second, Acts 12:23 notes the death of Herod Agrippa I, which occurred in AD 44. By the time of today’s lesson, the church had weathered the crises of the imprisonments of its apostles (Acts 4, 5) and the death of Stephen (chaps. 6 and 7). It had expanded the reach of the gospel to Samaria (chap. 8), to Damascus (chap. 9), to Gentiles in Caesarea Maritima (chap. 10), and to the regional capital of Antioch in Syria (chap. 11). We can surmise that the Jerusalem church was still the hub of Christian activities and the home of most of the apostles (see Acts 8:1b). By the time of today’s lesson, the apostles were veteran leaders and experienced teachers. Acts 12 presents a historical event in three parts. First is the arrest and execution of James, the brother of John. Second is the arrest and near-execution of Peter, leader of the apostles. Third is the cautionary conclusion of the death story of prideful Herod Agrippa I, grandson of the King Herod of Matthew 2:1 and Luke 1:5. There are several Herods in the New Testament. The one in our lesson had been sent to Rome as a child and raised in the imperial court with young Claudius. Herod was a reckless youth, and apparently fled Rome to escape creditors. He returned to Judea and eventually gained control of much of the territory previously ruled by his grandfather.
Major Theme Analysis
(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Prayer Aids in Endurance of Persecution (Acts 12:1-4)

1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.
2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.
3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread.
4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

Endurance of threat of death (1-2)

Threat of death endured by overcoming the deception of Satan (1 Cor 15:22-28)
22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 24 Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For he "has put everything under his feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. 28 When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

Threat of death endured because Jesus promises everlasting life (John 11:26)
26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Threat of death endured because Jesus brings life and immortality (2 Tim 1:10)
10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Threat of death endured because Jesus freed us (Heb 2:14-15)
14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil— 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Threat of death endured because Jesus swallowed up death (Isa 25:8)
8 he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.

Threat of death endured because Jesus took the victory away from death (1 Cor 15:54-57)
54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Threat of death endured because Jesus has mastery over death (Rom 6:9)
9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.
Endurance of threat of imprisonment (3-4)

Endurance of imprisonment by being faithful through Satan's testing (Rev 2:10)
10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Endurance of imprisonment by being prepared because it has been prophesied (Acts 20:22-24)
22 "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. 23 I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. 24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Endurance of imprisonment through rejoicing in sharing persecution (Luke 6:22-23)
22 Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. 23 "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

Endurance of imprisonment through knowing Christians will be betrayed (Luke 21:16-17)
16 You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. 17 All men will hate you because of me.

Endurance of imprisonment by realizing the world hates Christianity (John 7:7)
7 The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil.

God Responds to Prayer (Acts 12:5-9)
5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. 7 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." 9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

Responds through attentiveness to the prayers of the Church (5)

Attentiveness to prayers that are continually (1 Thess 5:17)
17 pray continually

Attentiveness to prayers that are in the Spirit for all things (Eph 6:18)
18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Attentiveness to prayers that are faithful (Rom 12:12)
12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
Attentiveness to prayers that are presented to God (Phil 4:6)
6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Attentiveness to prayers that are devoted (Col 4:2)
2 Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

Responds through the Angelic guarding (6-9)

God sends His angels to protect those who are representing Him (Dan 6:22)
22 My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king."

Angels stand by God's people (Acts 27:23)
23 Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me

Angels guard God's people's ways (Ps 91:11)
11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;

Angels guard God's people (Luke 4:10)
10 For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;

Prayer Can Result in Deliverance (Acts 12:10-11)

10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people."

Deliverance from captivity (10)

Through the grace of God, Jesus led captives free (Eph 4:7-8)
7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."

God sets prisoners free (Ps 146:7-9)
7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, 8 the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. 9 The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

In the time of God's favor He will set the captives free (Isa 49:8-9)
8 This is what the Lord says: "In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to
reassign its desolate inheritances, 9 to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'

'They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill.

God breaks the chains of slavery (Ps 107:13-15)
13 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. 14 He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains. 15 Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men,

Deliverance from unawareness through spiritual insight (11)

Insight from God, which brings understanding (Phil 1:9-10)
9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ,

Insight through examining the Scriptures daily to search for truth (Acts 17:11)
11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true

Insight through meditation on God's Word (Ps 119:99)
99 I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.

Insight through understanding the fear of God (Prov 2:3-5)
3 and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, 4 and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, 5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Up to this point, the Roman government has been reluctant to resist or oppose Jesus or those who followed Him. Herod Antipas (the predecessor of Herod Agrippa in our text), was actually eager to see Jesus, hoping that He might perform some miracle (Luke 23:8). Like Herod Antipas, Pilate found no guilt in Jesus, even though the Jewish leaders accused Him of inciting the people to rebellion (Luke 23:13-16). Indeed, Pilate knew the real reason the Jewish leaders opposed Jesus (Matthew 27:18). Pilate actually dreaded condemning Jesus and sought to release Him, especially after his wife informed him of her dream (Matthew 27:19-26).

All this is to show that the Roman government did not see Christianity as a dreaded foe, as the Jewish leaders did (see John 11:48). Herod’s actions in our text could have set a precedent that would have branded the church as the enemy of Rome, thus making Christians criminals. Humanly speaking, this would have hindered the spread of the gospel for many years to come. Peter’s escape and Herod’s death returned things to the status quo, facilitating the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire, beginning in Acts 13.

Thus, when Paul and Silas are arrested and beaten for proclaiming the gospel in Philippi, the city officials ultimately reversed their actions, leaving the new believers in Philippi free to practice their faith (see Acts 16:35-40). In Acts 18, the Jews again opposed Paul and Silas and the gospel, accusing them of preaching a gospel contrary to Judaism and to Rome. Out of Gallio’s disdain for the Jews, he refused to distinguish Christianity from Judaism, thereby maintaining the assumption that it was really a Jewish faction. This meant that Christianity was deemed a legitimate religion in the eyes of the Roman government.

In Acts 21, Paul follows the counsel of the Jerusalem church leaders and takes four men along with him to the temple to offer sacrifices. His Jewish opponents misrepresent Paul’s actions and seek to kill him for allegedly
defiling the temple (by bringing Gentiles into an area forbidden to them). The Roman army intervened, sparing Paul’s life. This began a process by which Paul would proclaim the gospel to Gentile leaders, all the way to Rome. It was under Roman protection that Paul and others advanced the gospel in Acts.

Were he allowed to persist in his intended course of action, Herod would have changed the course of history. He would have established a new precedent, namely that Christianity was an illicit religion. Christians would have been dealt with as criminals, and the apostles would have been hunted down as revolutionaries. By the events of our text, the God of all history spared Peter and removed Herod (who was playing god). Thus the advance of the gospel (Acts 13 and following) was assured.

Our text illustrates the sovereignty of God over human history, as well as His sovereignty over His church. One of the themes that runs throughout the Book of Acts is that of the sovereignty of God. The eleven apostles chose Matthias as the replacement for Judas, yet we hear virtually nothing of him in the rest of the Book of Acts. God sovereignly chose Saul (Paul), and he dominates the last half of the Book of Acts. The church chose seven men to oversee the care of their widows, so that they (the apostles) could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1-7). God chose two of these seven men to powerfully preach the Word and to be key leaders in the advance of the gospel (Acts 6:8--8:1).

Now, we find Herod opposing the church and seeking to kill its leaders. God will turn this situation completely around in Acts 12. Listen to these words written by John Stott:

“The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free and the Word of God triumphing.”

I cannot help but remember the response of the Jerusalem saints to the opposition of the Jewish leaders:

23 When they were released, Peter and John went to their fellow believers and reported everything the high priests and the elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they raised their voices to God with one mind and said, “Master of all, you who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them, 25 who said by the Holy Spirit through your servant David our forefather (Acts 4:23-30).

How foolish for men to set themselves against God and against His church! God is sovereign over His church and over all history. No matter how great and powerful a king or a nation may be, they cannot thwart the purposes of God. And no matter how few, how weak, or how precarious a position we may find ourselves in, we will prevail because God’s purposes will always prevail.

Our text presents us with a mystery. In this text, we read that James was executed while Peter was delivered from death. We would do well to recall the relationship between Peter and James. Peter, James, and John were a part of the “inner circle of three” that we read about in the Gospels (see, for example, Matthew 17:1; 26:37; Mark 5:37). Jesus invested more in these three disciples than the others. One of these three (James) died first; another (John) died last. Each of these three had the same exposure to Jesus, the same intensive training. Why would God appear to “waste” His efforts on James by his premature death?

The first answer must be, “We don't know, because God has not told us why James died first.” We must assume that his death somehow was instrumental in the progress of the gospel, as we can see in the case of Stephen’s death. In the final analysis, we must rest in the sovereignty of God, knowing that He purposed this for His good pleasure. God is God, and thus He can do as He sees fit. The explanation may only be revealed to us in heaven.

The second answer may reveal something about us. We tend to look at things pragmatically. It would appear that James was at the pinnacle of his productive life. For him to die (seemingly prematurely) appears to be a senseless loss. But this assumes that God “uses” people only for what they can produce. This assumes that God’s only interest in His saints is what they can do for Him.

This kind of pragmatism is often revealed by our choices and actions. Why is it that we spend more time evangelizing and discipling on the college campus than we do in the retirement homes or in an AIDS hospice? How is it that our homogeneous seeker-friendly churches seem to be found in the better parts of town, and they
appeal to the upper middle class? I fear we may tend to minister to and among those whom we perceive to have the most promise, who seem to have the most to offer our Lord in service.

And yet this does not seem to square with the people to whom our Lord ministered, or even those He chose to be His disciples. Suppose that God chose us because He desired a relationship with us, more than because He saw how much we had to offer Him in service?

I was recently reading through the Book of Genesis and came upon Enoch in Genesis 5. There I read that Enoch walked with God, and he was no more, because God took him (Genesis 5:24). Did God take Enoch because there was nothing left for Enoch to do, or did God take him to heaven because He desired to have a more intimate relationship with him?

It is true that Herod was the instrument by whom James was executed, but we could just as easily say, “And James walked with God, and he was no more, because God took him.” Why do we think that James was short-changed and that Peter was the fortunate one? If we believe Paul’s words in Philippians 1 correctly, then must we not say that “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21)? For His own purposes, God took James, and He spared Peter, but we should not feel sorry for James. He is the one who saw Jesus face to face first, while Peter and John had to wait.

Our text is but one of many texts which teach us that our God is the God of great reversals. He is not just the God of revisions, but the God of reversals. Israel was held captive in Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth at the time. Pharaoh was not about to let this people go, but after ten plagues he did. Then Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Israelites. The Israelites found themselves trapped between the Red Sea and the approaching Egyptian army. It looked as though they were finished. “But God...” God made a path in the midst of the sea, and the Israelites passed through, walking on dry ground. When the Egyptian army sought to follow them, they became mired in the mud, and they all drowned in the sea. God is the God of reversals. We can see this over and over in the Old Testament and in the New.

We were dead in our trespasses and sin. Our actions were not those of men who were free (though we thought so), but rather the actions of those who were held captive by Satan. We could not live up to God’s standard of righteousness. We could do nothing to save ourselves. We were helpless and hopeless – lost in sin. “But God...” (see Ephesians 2:1-10). We who were dead in our sins were made alive. We who were separated from God and from our fellow man were reconciled to Him, and to others. We who once were in darkness have come to the light. God is a God of reversals.

God often waits to act until the last moment, until it would appear that all hope is lost. And then when He acts in a dramatic way, it is obvious that only He could have done it. When He acts when all hope is gone, He receives all the glory. And we, like the saints gathered in the home of Mary, are not inclined to believe it.

These past few weeks we have been praying for a very young child named Courtney. Courtney’s body is riddled with cancer. At first it appeared that medical science might offer some hope, and we prayed that it would work. Now, all medical hope is gone. All that can save Courtney is a class A miracle from God. I fear that our prayers at this moment may be like the prayers of some of those gathered in Mary’s house. I don’t know this for a fact, but from their response to the appearance of Peter, I can’t help but wonder if some were not praying for a quick and painless death for Peter: “Lord, make the sword sharp and the execution effective.” I fear that we may be faltering in our prayers for Courtney at the time when they are most needed.

I want to tell a story about Hugh Blevins, a fellow elder for many years. One of our elders was diagnosed with cancer when he was in his 30’s. We prayed, and Dan was in remission for five years. Then the cancer came again with a vengeance. We prayed fervently at first, but when death seemed inevitable, the tone of our prayers began to change. One day our brother Hugh had something like this to say to us. “Men, I don’t know whether God will heal Dan or not, but I do know that He is able to heal Dan, even now. I cannot stop praying for Dan’s healing until Dan is healed, or until he dies.”

That is the way I want to pray for little Courtney, and for every other situation that seems impossible. I don’t want to be found doubting God’s power, or the fact that He can and does heal today. On the other hand, I do not
know whether Courtney is a “James” or a “Peter.” If God takes Courtney home, it will be a blessed thing. And if He heals her and has many years of life for her, it will also be a blessing from God. But let us not cease to pray in faith until God’s purposes for her are known.

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/17-first-gentile-church-acts-1119-1225)

Concluding Thoughts from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

How much time do you typically spend in daily prayer? a minute? five minutes? The believers in Jerusalem pulled an all-nighter as they prayed “earnestly” for Peter while he was in prison. Theirs were not quick prayers, sentence prayers, small prayers. If you read the rest of the story, you will find that many were praying when Peter showed up at the door of the house where they were gathered (Acts 12:12). They were praying so hard that they seem to have been annoyed at the interruption of Peter’s knock on the door! We may not know of someone who is in prison for his or her faith, but we do know of other ways that people are locked up in their lives. Do you need to be released from something that has put you in spiritual prison? Do you have a friend or relative who needs spiritual freedom? Are you willing to pray fervently for that person, just as the church prayed for Peter? God hears and answers prayers. God has the power to release us from all kinds of bondages.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. Rulers often are motivated by political power when they begin persecuting the church (Acts 12:1-3)
2. The church should pray together like a family when one of its members is in trouble (vss. 4-5)
3. Knowing that God is in control, a believer can rest in the midst of trouble (vs. 6)
4. Prayer is powerful because it is directed to an omnipotent God who often does more than we could ever ask or think (vss. 7-10)
5. God sends His angels to serve His people, but believers may not realize it until later (vs. 11)