Dave was a minister at the church where I did my internship. It was a really great church, and Dave fit in well there. He was the student minister for a long time, and eventually transitioned into adult ministry. Things were great for Dave, except for one thing. He and his wife Jennifer had tried for about 10 years to have a family, and during all that time, they had never had any success.

Of course, they prayed about it all the time. They really felt that God had called them to have a family, but weren’t sure what to do next. Their prayers seemed to go unanswered, and they weren’t sure why.

Maybe you have had an experience of prayer like that. Maybe it was the same kind of situation, trying to have a family, or maybe you were praying about finding the right job, or finding a spouse. There are few things that more disheartening than praying about something that means so much to you, only to feel like your prayers were going unanswered.

In Acts 12, the disciples had that same kind of experience with prayer. They were praying earnestly about something that mattered so much to them, but they weren’t sure that God was going to answer their prayers.

**Acts 12:1–4 ESV — 1** About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. **2** 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. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. **4** And 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.

We see several men named Herod throughout the New Testament. They were not all the same man, they were a family who were all descended from Herod the Great.

Herod the Great’s father was appointed the procurator of Judea by Julius Caesar, and he passed that power down to his descendants. They were known as Kings of Judea, but they were under the power an authority of Rome. The Jewish people saw them as traitors to the Jews partly because they were descended from a rival people group, but also because they supported Rome to keep their positions of power.

Herod the Great was responsible for renovating and adding onto the Temple and completing a whole list of other construction feats around Judea. He is also the one we know from the birth story of Jesus, who was responsible for ordering the boys two years and younger killed in Bethlehem when Jesus was born.

When he died, he split his power between three of his sons Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip. Archelaus is the one who was in charge of Judea by the time Mary and Joseph returned from Egypt with Jesus, and the reason they went to Galilee instead. Antipas is the one we know from the Gospels who executed John the Baptist, and is also the one that Pilate sent Jesus to during his trials.

The Herod that we see here in Acts 12 is Herod Agrippa. He was actually the grandson of Herod the Great from one of his other sons, so the three that ruled were his uncles. But by about 41 AD, through a series of some cutthroat political manipulations and his uncles falling out of favor with the Romans, Agrippa ruled over almost the entire kingdom that his grandfather had. His uncles were out of power, and he was the new King of the Hill. It was really a lovely family.

Herod Agrippa was trying to get on the good side of the Jewish people, which his family had failed to do in the past, and he decided there was no better way to do that than to set about destroying the followers of Jesus. He was doing the same thing that Saul had done, but now it was probably even more popular with the Jews because by this point the church had started to welcome Gentiles into their midst as well.

When Luke says that Herod began to lay violent hands on those that belonged to the church, the word he uses there is the word κακόω (kakoo) which means to cause harm or to mistreat. This is the same word that Stephen used when he spoke about the affliction of the Israelites under slavery in Egypt. This was a serious thing, targeting those who were in the church. And it was all just to make Herod more popular with the Jewish people.

When Saul was persecuting the church, he was at least doing it out of a sense of duty to uphold the laws of Moses. He was persecuting the church because he was zealous about his Jewish faith. Herod was only out for his own gain.

Luke also tells us this was during the days of Unleavened Bread, the seven day feast that followed Passover. This was when all the Jewish people would be on high alert, watching everything their leaders did. This was when a lot of revolts happened, it was when Jesus was killed, so the people were watching carefully, and that’s when Herod decided to act.

James was killed by Herod, and became the first of the Apostles to be martyred. You’ll notice that there was no attempt to replace James as an Apostle the way they replaced Judas. James did not die as a traitor, he died as a faithful apostle and follower of Jesus. In fact, Eusebius, who was a leader of the church in the third century tells us that the man who was tasked with guarding James was so moved by his witness that he also put his faith in Christ and willingly died with James because of it.

When Herod saw that the people were pleased he arrested Peter as well. Peter, James, and John were Jesus’ inner circle. Jesus allowed them to experience things that the other nine never did, like the transfiguration. They were the ones who went furthest with Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane.

Herod wasn’t attacking just anyone in the church, he was going after the senior leadership, the leaders of the Apostles. Up to this point, the church had enjoyed some pretty significant success. We’ve seen over and over how they overcame struggles, and then they prospered and added to their number. The church was in the thousands by now, and spreading and growing all the time.

Luke told us in Acts 2 that the church enjoyed the favor of all the people. That has obviously changed at this point, because the Jews were happy to see the leaders of the church arrested and killed. Peter was now in prison, and James had been killed.

Peter had already escaped from prison once before, so he was put under strict guard. Each of the four squads were made up of four soldiers each, and they rotated watches every three hours throughout the night. It’s also very likely that he was shackled to the two guards inside the cell, while the other two guarded the door. Herod wanted to be very sure that Peter did not escape.

But while Herod had this show planned to boost his popularity, God had something very different in mind.

**Acts 12:5 ESV — 5** So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

We don’t know exactly what the believers were praying for that day, whether it was for Peter’s safety, or his release, or both. But we do know they were praying earnestly for Peter. Luke uses the word έκτενως (ektenos) there. It means to be persevering, to do something eagerly, fervently, constantly. This is the world Luke uses when he talks about Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he began to sweat drops of blood. He uses that same word here to talk about the prayer of the believers for Peter.

This was the very first thing the believers did. They went to their knees in prayer. They didn’t make signs and go protest in front of the prison, they didn’t file an appeal to try to get Peter released, they didn’t plan a daring escape attempt, and they didn’t even take to Facebook to see how many likes they could get on their post about releasing Peter from prison.

The first and only thing the disciples did when Peter was arrested was to go to God in prayer. They knew something that we often forget. Our most important resource, our most powerful weapon, the one thing that gives us any ability to succeed in this world at all is the fact that God is on our side. Prayer is how we stay connected to him, and prayer is how we ask God to act when we need him the most.

The most important thing we could possibly do in a time of crisis, is go to our knees in prayer. We have a God who hears our prayers, and who cares for us. He acts when we pray earnestly like the disciples were for Peter. God heard their prayers, and he acted.

One thing that you’ll notice as you read through Scripture is that God often chooses to do incredible things in such a way that the only explanation is that God acted. God often does things in such a way that there is no way it could have happened by human hands. That’s what he does with Peter as well.

**Acts 12:6–11 ESV — 6** Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. **7** And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. 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. **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.”

Two things I want you to notice here. First, Peter was sound asleep. He knew that James had been killed by the very man that had arrested him, and he was next. But Peter knew God had everything under control. He was not afraid, he was not fighting back, he was peaceful and sleeping, even while chained between two Roman soldiers. In fact, he was sleeping so deeply that the angel had to strike him to wake him up.

Then, even after Peter was out in the street, he still didn’t realize what was happening was real. It wasn’t until he found himself out on the street alone that he realized that God had really sent an angel to rescue him from prison. What he assumed was a dream or a vision was really a miracle of God. Imagine waking up and realizing that.

**Acts 12:12–14 ESV — 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. **13** 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.

Peter went to the place he knew the disciples would be. It happened to be where they were praying earnestly for him. You can decide if that was a coincidence or not. When they heard a knock, they sent a servant girl to the door, and when she recognized who it was, she ran to tell everyone else, but left Peter locked outside the gate.

I can imagine what Peter felt like, because my kids have done the same thing to me before. I used to come home and go up to the door with an armful of groceries and just barely manage to knock on the door. Then the kids run to the door, open the blinds, they say, ‘Hi Daddy!’, and then run back to tell their mom that I’m home. It took a while to get them to understand that they needed to unlock the door and let me in first. Unfortunately, the next part of the story is not so humorous.

**Acts 12:15–16 ESV — 15** They said to her, “You are out of your mind.” 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.

This group of disciples had been praying earnestly for Peter, they had been persistent, and eager, and constant in their prayer. In fact, they were praying for Peter at the very moment he showed up at their door. But when the answer to their prayer was right before them, they didn’t believe it. They thought that it was Peter’s angel, which seems as though they thought Peter might already be dead. Here they were, praying for Peter, and all the while they assumed that their prayers had gone unanswered.

There could have been a lot of reasons for that unbelief. The Apostles, including Peter had been arrested before and miraculously released from prison. But this imprisonment was different. Every time they had been arrested before was always right after a victory for the church. They were arrested because the church was making waves and affecting the people of Jerusalem.

This time, James and Peter were arrested one at a time, they were all alone in prison. This didn’t happen after a victory for the church, it happened because Herod wanted to boost his publicity ratings.

Maybe most importantly, James had been killed. One of their leaders, one of Jesus’ inner circle, was executed. I have no doubt that the church prayed just as earnestly for James’ release as they did for Peter, but he was killed instead.

The church was shaken. They had faced persecution before, they had even had brothers and sisters killed. But it seems Herod’s attack on the leaders of the church had the desired effect. They were still praying earnestly for Peter, but with that nagging voice in the back of their heads that said it wouldn’t do any good.

Despite their unbelief, there Peter stood in their midst, delivered by God from the clutches of Herod. But God wasn’t done yet. Herod was not only attacking God’s people, he was also an incredibly arrogant man.

**Acts 12:21–23 ESV — 21** On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to [the people of Tyre and Sidon]. **22** And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” **23** Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

Herod was sitting there allowing these people to call him a god, to worship him. God wasn’t about to let Herod get away with that. In the book of Daniel, we see God humble Nebuchadnezzar because he thought too highly of himself. It wasn’t until he acknowledged God for who he was that he was restored to his position as King. Herod didn’t just think too highly of himself, he allowed people to worship him, and for that he lost his life in a pretty awful way.

After Herod was gone, we read this: **Acts 12:24 ESV — 24** But the word of God increased and multiplied.

So, after everything that happened, even the death of one of the leaders of the church, this still ended up being a victory for the church.

Now, this is kind of an odd story in the midst of the book of Acts. Some people think that Luke put it here to transition the main focus from Peter to Paul, from the church in Jerusalem to the Gentiles who would hear the Gospel and believe. Regardless of why Luke put it here, we have a lot to learn from this little episode.

The first thing we need to learn is that prayer is no joke. Often times we don’t take prayer nearly as seriously as we ought to. Because we went to Bible college, Beth and I are good friends with several people who are now missionaries all over the world. One of the parts of being a missionary that I’m not sure anyone enjoys is fundraising.

The one thing you will almost always hear missionaries say as they are doing their fundraising is that they do need money, but more importantly they need your support in prayer. You might think that’s just the obligatory line they have to say so you feel like you’re still helping if you can’t give money, but it’s not. Missionaries ask for your prayer support over your monetary support because they are on the front lines of taking the Gospel to the world, and they really do rely on our prayers more than they do our money. And that’s not just true of missionaries.

Prayer is not just some feel good thing that we do to make ourselves feel better, or to make people feel better when we tell them we’re praying for them. Prayer is not just some ritual we go through, or mantra that we chant. We pray because it’s real, and it’s powerful. We pray because we have a God who listens to us, and cares for us, and intervenes in our lives when we need him the most. One of the worst mistakes we can make is thinking that prayer doesn’t matter.

Number 2, God honors prayers that glorify him. We’ve been having pizza and game night with the kids on Friday nights. Our kids take turns praying before dinner, so last Friday was Addy’s turn. She said, ‘Dear Jesus, Thank you for today, help us get good sleep tonight, and give me lots of good luck so I can win the game tonight. Amen.’ I’m not so sure that is the kind of prayer that God honors. We see several examples in Scripture where God answered prayers in mighty ways because they sought to honor and glorify God.

When David was on the battlefield he said to Goliath, **1 Samuel 17:45–47 ESV — 45** …“You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. **46** This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, … that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, **47** and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord’s, and he will give you into our hand.” And of course, we know the end of that story. Little 12 year old David killed the giant warrior with a single stone.

When Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel, he prayed **1 Kings 18:36–37 ESV — 36** …“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. **37** Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” And then fire fell from heaven and consumed everything on his altar and the altar of the prophets of Baal.

When Jerusalem was surrounded and about to be destroyed by the Assyrians and there seemed to be no hope left, Hezekiah went to his knees, and he prayed **2 Kings 19:19 ESV — 19** So now, O Lord our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone.” That night, an angel of the Lord killed 185,000 soldiers in the Assyrian camp, and they packed up and went home.

When we pray for God to be honored and glorified, God answers those prayers in a big way. The prayer of the disciples that day brought honor and glory to God, and he answered it in a mighty way.

My question for you this morning is what do you pray for? Do you pray to win the lottery, for your team to win the World Series or the Superbowl? Are the things you pray for really things that honor and glorify the Creator, or do they honor and glorify his creation?

What if instead of prayers that don’t honor God, we pray for God to develop us into men and women with integrity and character? If we pray for God to make us bold to speak about the Gospel? That God will work use us to do his work, and lead us by the Holy Spirit? What if we pray that God will make his name known in the city of La Porte? That those who don’t know Jesus in our community will hear the Gospel message, and that he will use us to do that? Those are prayers I can stand before you and say without a shadow of a doubt God will honor.

Third, God doesn’t always answer prayer the way we think he will. He certainly didn’t when James was in prison. I have no doubt the disciples were praying just as earnestly for James as they were for Peter. So, what made the difference? Sometimes, even when we pray in all earnest, even when we think what we are praying for will honor and glorify God, He has something bigger in mind. I won’t pretend to know what that was in this case, why James was killed and Peter was set free.

Maybe God had planned to discipline Herod all along. Maybe the death of James spurred on the growth we see at the end of the chapter. But I do know this: the church learned that day that even after a great loss, God is still at work. That’s a lesson we need to take away from this story as well, because we live in a world where it seems like losses abound.

There is evil in the world, and sometimes as Christians we will suffer. But our God has already won the war with evil. Sometimes it may seem like evil is winning all around us. When it does, remember the words of Jesus from **John 16:33 ESV — 33** I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Dave and Jennifer had tried for nearly ten years to have a family of their own, and nothing seemed to be happening. So they made the decision to become foster parents. When they got an opportunity to adopt two of the kids they had fostered, they jumped at the chance. Only days after the adoption was final, Jennifer found out she was pregnant with a little boy. A few years later, they had a little girl. God had something far better in mind for Dave and Jennifer than they had for themselves. And that is always true of every one of us.

Even when things don’t seem to be going our way, God is still at work. He is still sovereign, he is still all powerful, he will accomplish his will no matter what, and he listens when his people pray.