

Expectations – Acts 12:1-17

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Just Like Jesus*

1. The goal of a disciple is to be just like the rabbi.
2. We've seen some great examples of the success of the first disciples of Jesus in our study in Acts so far.
3. We see another one today.

B. *Asleep in the Storm*

1. One day Jesus told the boys to climb in a boat & head to the other side of the Lake.
2. Half way across a massive storm whipped the surface into huge waves that threatened to swamp them.
3. Though at least 4 of the disciples were professional fishermen who'd spent their lives working this body of water, they feared this was their end and started howling like a bunch of little girls.
4. The whole time, Jesus was sacked out in the stern; sound asleep at perfect peace.
5. They woke Him up and pleaded with Him to do something.
6. He got up, yawned, stretched, and with complete confidence, spoke peace to the waves, which immediately subsided.
7. Then, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, He turned to the disciples & rebuked them for their lack of faith.
8. Both Matthew & Mark tell us if the disciples had been frightened before by the storm, NOW they were terrified, scared stiff in the realization of Jesus' power over nature.
9. There was at least one disciple there that day upon whom Jesus' example made a permanent impression.
10. He put that lesson to good use a few years later.

II. TEXT

A. V. 1

¹ Now about that time Herod the king stretched out *his* hand to harass some from the church.

1. This was Herod *Agrippa I*, grandson of the famous Herod the Great.
 - a. He was raised in Rome, as a childhood friend of both Gaius & Claudius; who later became Emperors.
 - b. When Gaius ascended the throne as Caligula in 37 AD, he gave his friend Agrippa the title of *King* and set him over both Syria & Israel.
 - c. When Claudius succeeded Caligula 4 years later, he *expanded* Agrippa's territory.
2. Though his power was greater even than his grandfather's had been, Agrippa realized the key to ruling the Jews lay not in the use of force but in currying their favor by *adopting* their religion & customs.
3. Because his *grandmother* was in the Jewish royal line –many Jews considered

- Agrippa their legitimate king.
4. But because he was a Herod, and so a despised Idumean,
 - a. And because his title & power were conferred by Rome.
 - b. While Agrippa was accepted as king, the Jews weren't real excited about him.
 - c. He knew their *reluctance* to fully accept him & set on a course to *earn* their respect.
 - d. He wanted not just their political *submission*; he wanted their *hearts*.

 5. This takes place about 10 years after the death & resurrection of Christ.
 - a. The followers of Jesus have now been *officially excommunicated* from Judaism.
 - b. The Sanhedrin had approved the persecution of believers in an attempt to force their renouncing Christ.
 - c. Those, like Stephen, who were caught *publicly preaching* the Gospel were to be executed.
 6. But persecution hadn't ended the movement as the Sanhedrin hoped.
 - a. It only scattered the disciples to other cities where like sparks tossed into dry kindling the faith caught and grew into *dozens* of churches.
 - b. Agrippa knew the frustration the Jewish leaders were having with the Church & decided to lend a hand.
 - c. His force carried the official weight of Rome.
 7. From Agrippa's perspective, attacking the followers of Jesus was a no risk, win-win sitch.
 - a. It would further ingratiate him with the Jewish leadership.
 - b. The Christians were *powerless*, so there was no fear of retaliation.
 - c. They had not an ounce of pull in Rome.
 - d. He could oppress them with impunity and there'd be no downside.
 8. But Herod made the mistake so many rulers & despots have made throughout history – He failed to consider God.
 - a. Persecution has been a consistent theme throughout the long course of the people of God.
 - b. Ever since the Fall plunged this world into rebellion, the lost have opposed the godly.
 - c. That oppositions ranges from mild antagonism to torture, murder, & systematic attempts to wipe out faith.
 - d. And *yet*, the Church grows; people still come to faith in Christ.
 - e. The Church will *never* be conquered by the hate of man or power of hell.
 - f. She is an anvil that's worn out many hammers.

B. V. 2

² Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

1. In Matthew 20 we're told how James & John's mother asked Jesus to give her sons special roles in His Kingdom.
 - a. He asked if they were ready to drink from the cup of suffering He was soon to take.
 - b. They assured Him they were and He said one day they indeed would.
 - c. Well, that day came here, at least for James.

2. The Sanhedrin had given orders anyone guilty of apostasy was to be beheaded.
3. Herod became the agent of their dirty work & had James executed.

C. Vs. 3-4

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.

1. James' death made the Jewish authorities happy, which tells us a lot about them.
 - a. What was James' crime? He followed Jesus.
 - b. He was a good man who lived a simple, godly life.
 - c. His great error, in their minds, was that he dared to defy their demand he reject Jesus as Messiah.
2. When Agrippa saw how oppressing the leaders of the Church advanced his acceptance by the Jewish authorities,
 - a. He stepped up his efforts & went after the big gun, the most visible leader of the Church,
 - b. The one guy who'd publicly defied the Sanhedrin several times – Peter; **leader** of the Apostles.
3. Pete was arrested & placed in the maximum security ward of the Antonia, the Roman fortress next to the temple mount.
4. 4 squads of 4 soldiers each were assigned to guard him.
 - a. 2 soldiers were chained to him, 1 on each side.
 - b. 2 more were stationed at the door to his cell.
 - c. The guard was changed every 6 hours to make sure they stayed alert.
 - d. This was the kind of guard that was given only to the most dangerous prisoners who it was suspected would attempt an escape.
 - e. Herod thought for sure Peter's comrades would stage a rescue so the Antonia was placed on high alert.
5. Peter was arrested during Passover week when trials could not be held.
 - a. They'd have to wait till the holiday was over before the trial could begin.
 - c. So Pete was stashed in the prison for days.

D. V. 5

⁵ Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

1. The believers knew full well how this would all end. Stephen's trial had already shown them.
2. The trial would be a sham & Peter would be executed.
3. There was only one way this could end, unless they did something about it.
4. But they didn't follow Herod's suspicion & plan a break-out; they broke out in prayer.
5. Luke mentions prayer in the Church in Acts 17 times!!
 - a. It's one of the most consistent things they did.
 - b. They understood prayer was a central part of what it means to be in

- fellowship with God,
- c. And one of the most important things believers can do when they gather.
 6. But now that Peter's in prison & facing execution, the *intensity* of their prayers went way up.
 7. The NKJ V says "*constant*" prayer was offered up.
 - a. The word refers to *intensity*; it speaks of *quality* rather than *quantity*.
 - b. But the quality is made evident by the *amount*, the *volume* of prayer that goes up.
 8. Let me use an illustration –
 - a. A mother with a dangerously sick child goes to a doctor she knows has both the skill & medicine to make her child well.
 - b. She can go about seeking him for help 4 ways –
 - 1) Go once & sit quietly in the waiting room, then leave after 10 minutes.
 - 2) She can go & sit quietly for 10 hours.
 - 3) She can go once, but instead of sitting quietly, she can shout loud enough to be heard by the doctor in one of the exam rooms down the hall. But leave after 10 minutes.
 - 4) She can sit & yell at the top of her lungs for 10 hours, making sure he knows she's not leaving till she gets what she came for.
 9. This last method was what the church was doing for Peter.

E. V. 6

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.

1. It was the eve of Peter's trial & Herod was determined he would *not* get away.
 2. *Being* his last night, we would expect Peter to be *wide awake*, going over his options.
 - a. Should he recant? No way. He'd already gone that route at Jesus' trial & knew it was wrong.
 - b. Maybe he should review every detail of his life & plead for forgiveness, just to make sure he was ready to face God.
 - c. Or maybe he should plead for rescue.
 3. He did none of this – he was at perfect peace, so he went to sleep!
 4. You see, Peter *knew* how all this would end – He'd soon be following James.
 - a. If something unusual happened, he'd be released & that'd be good because it would mean more time to minister to others.
 - b. But if he died, well, that was even better because it meant he'd get to go home & see Jesus.
 - 1) For Pete, there was nothing better than that.
 - 2) 10 years had passed & Peter missed his best Friend.
 - 3) The thought of seeing Jesus again filled him with longing.
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- 4) This last week I attended a funeral.
 - a) Some of the family shared great stories of times with the departed.
 - b) One of the things they all said as a word of comfort was how they knew he was in a better place & that his desire to be reunited with his wife was now realized.

- 5) I'm sure that's exactly where Peter was as he contemplated his last hours.
 - a) They weren't moments to be held on to & lamented over.
 - b) They were more to be **endured** as the prospect of seeing Jesus again loomed before him.
 - c. So, having a big day ahead & wanting to face it well, Peter knew he needed a good night sleep.
 5. If you knew tomorrow would be your last day on earth – how would you spend tonight?
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6. But when I read this, of Peter's sleeping on the eve of his near certain execution, I'm reminded of Jesus asleep in that boat while the storm raged & the disciples freaked out.
 7. Because of the resurrection, Peter has a completely different view of death.
 - a. It's not something to be feared & resisted.
 - b. It's a portal into the presence of Christ.
 - c. Oh death, where is your sting? Oh grave, where is your victory?
 - d. Peter's peaceful rest is proof he's not just a victor over fear, he's **more than a conqueror**.
 - e. He's a disciple who's just like his rabbi.

F. Vs. 7-12

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.

1. This was all a wild miracle.
 - a. Either all 4 guards watching Peter were put to sleep, or some kind of a time warp froze them in place.
 - b. The angel roused Peter by poking him sharply in the side & telling him to get up.
2. Take note of the **urgency** in all the angel does.
3. There's a reason for that we'll consider Wednesday night when we cover this in more depth.

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.

4. Peter was awakened out of a dead sleep by circumstances so unusual, he didn't realize it was real.
5. He thought it must be a dream or vision.
6. Following the angel's word, he put on his garments & followed him out of the cell.

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.

7. Peter had been housed in the innermost maximum security ward.

8. Passing by 2 manned checkpoints, they came to the front gate of the Antonia; a huge, locked iron gate that required 2 strong men to open.
9. As they approached, the locks opened, the bars lifted, & the door swung open automatically.
10. Once clear of the prison, the angel led Peter a full block down the street, then disappeared.

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.”

12 So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

11. Once the angel was gone & further action required Peter’s own counsel, he came to & realized it was no dream.
12. God had just staged a rescue operation & he was free.
 - a. Neither Herod nor the Jewish authorities would get their way.
 - b. The first time Peter & John had been busted out of prison by an angel, they were told to go right back to the temple & continue preaching.
 - c. This time, the angel breaks him out & once clear, jets back to heaven.
 - d. Peter knew the sitch had changed –that God wanted him to *pursue* his continued deliverance.
13. Though it was late, he knew a place likely to have a group of believers.
 - a. Mary, Barnabas’ sister & John Mark’s mother had made her home one of the primary meeting places for the Church in Jerusalem.
 - b. Peter went there quickly, knowing as soon as the guards realized he was gone, a search would be mounted.

G. Vs. 13-16

13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. 15 But they said to her, “You are beside yourself!” Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, “It is his angel.”

1. The door Peter knocked at was the gate in the stone wall that bordered the street. Just inside it would be an open courtyard, then the house with another more secluded open area on the other side.
2. That’s where the disciples were gathered for prayer.
3. Rhoda was a young servant girl whose job was to welcome guests into the home by washing their feet.
 - a. Her station would be to sit within earshot of the gate so that if someone came, she could hear them knocking.
 - b. Peter arrived & knocked & she went to perform her duty.
 - c. But it was well past the time when guests were welcome, so she asked who it was.
 - d. Peter whispered it was he. Though young, Rhoda was a believer, & had

- heard Peter preach many times so she knew his voice.
- e. Realizing it was he & knowing the prayer meeting was dedicated to his release, she went running to them to give the good news he was at the door.
4. **Question:** Why didn't Rhoda just let Peter in?
 - a. V. 14 says she was so excited, she got flustered & wasn't thinking clearly.
 - b. I want to suggest the thought of letting him in didn't occur to her at this point because God wanted to teach us an important lesson through what follows.
 - c. Watch for it . . .
 5. She goes running to her master & the disciples & tells them Peter's at the gate.
 - a. They said, "You're crazy!"
 - b. When she insisted, they tried to silence her by saying that what she heard must be Peter's guardian angel.
 - c. It was a lame reason but all they were trying to do was shut her up – why?
 - d. ***So they could pray for Peter's release.***
 6. I don't know about you, but if I really thought it was an angel, I'd want to go check it out!
- 16 Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.**
7. Peter kept knocking, becoming more insistent.
 - a. They needed to let him in because it wouldn't be long before guards came looking for him.
 - b. Finally, they realized someone was at the gate & went to check it out.
 8. When they opened & Peter stepped in, they were stunned. Sure enough, it was he!
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9. It's their reaction we have so much to learn from.
 - a. They were ***astonished***.
 - b. When Rhoda first told them Peter was at the gate, they didn't believe & felt no inclination to go see.
 - c. Yet what were they doing there at Mary's house in the wee hours of the morning?
 - d. What had they been doing for the last week?
 - e. Praying; earnestly, fervently, intently & intensely.
 - f. But a crucial element of prayer had been lacking – **Expectation**.
 - g. Prayer had become ***form***. Even their intense, fervent prayer – it had become ***routine***.
 10. There was no sense of ***expectation*** in their prayer.
 - a. They prayed for Peter because they knew it was the right thing to do.
 - b. But James had already been executed & Peter was in the most secure prison in all Israel.
 - c. There was nothing that gave hope or encouragement to their prayers.
 - d. But they knew it was still right to pray for him.
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11. Listen, our prayers, specially earnest prayers like this, need to be ***coupled*** to an ***eager expectation*** that God hears & will do what's best.
 - a. That expectation will keep us in the right place so that we can receive the answer when it comes & praise God for it.

- b. God hears & answers *every* prayer.
 - c. The answer is a “Yes,” a “No” or a “Wait.”
 - d. What we need to remember is that **HOWEVER** God answers – It’s the right & best one.
 - e. We must never lose that sense of expectation that He will answer our prayer.
12. Some years ago, there was a drought in the Midwest.
- a. Every week that went by, more crops failed.
 - b. Hundreds of farmers stood in danger of losing everything.
 - c. All the churches in the area agreed to hold a joint Sunday evening prayer meeting to ask God to send rain.
 - d. The turn out was huge & the crowd earnest in prayer. Different pastors took turns leading the meeting.
 - e. Finally the last pastor stood & stepped behind the large pulpit.
 - 1) Gripping the sides he fixed the crowd with a steely glare & asked,
 - 2) “Why did we come here tonight?” He was greeted with stunned silence.
 - 3) He asked again, “Why are we here?”
 - 4) Someone timidly said, “To pray for rain ?”
 - 5) “YES!” he bellowed. “To pray for rain!”
 - 6) “Now, tell me” he challenged – “Does God hear prayer?”
 - 7) The people responded a bit more confidently, “Yes,”
 - 8) He pressed on, “Does God answer prayer?” They replied even louder than before, “Yes, sure.”
 - 9) He asked, “Do you believe God will send us rain?” And now the crowd responded in volume equal to his challenge, “Yes!”
 - 10) He replied with not a word but just looked around the room, as if searching for something.
 - 11) Finally he said, “Then why do I *not see* a single umbrella or raincoat?”
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13. Contrast vs. 15 & 16 with v. 11.
- a. The Christians had *no expectation* of Peter’s deliverance while the Jewish authorities had *every expectation* of his death.
 - b. Their expectation was *thwarted* while the *unformed expectation* of the believers was *realized*.
14. I’ve talked with lots of people through the years who prayed for something because they knew it was the right thing to ask, but had *little expectation* or *hope* it would happen.
- a. For instance, I’ve known several people who prayed for their spouse to get saved.
 - b. They did, & became so on fire for God, they wanted to make some changes in the home & marriage the first spouse wasn’t real happy with.
 - c. He or she was half-hearted, compromised, lukewarm, & the fervent faith of their newly saved mate made them uncomfortable.
15. It’s important we couple our prayers to an expectation of God’s goodness that considers what *difference* the answer will make, then embrace it gladly when it comes.

H. V. 17

17 But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

1. His presence created such a hubbub they were chatting away furiously & he had to urgently motion them to be quiet.
2. Time was short and Herod's search parties would soon be scouring the City. He needed to get way.
3. So he told them to carry word of his release to the other leaders.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Keep Your Eyes on God

1. Let's end with this –
2. The entire church at Jerusalem had spent a week praying for Peter.
3. On the eve of his trial they called an all night prayer meeting for him.
4. God heard & answered their prayers – & Peter was miraculously delivered!
 - a. But they couldn't believe it when it happened!
 - b. So, it wasn't the greatness of their faith that accomplished Peter's release.
 - c. It was the grace & power of God.
5. Christian, don't slip into thinking effective prayer is about the mechanics of prayer or some special technique.
 - a. Like using the right words or formula.
 - b. Visualizing the right image.
 - c. Do we pray in Jesus' Name or Jesus's name.
 - d. Is it, Ah-men or Ay-men ?
 - e. If I use a little tremolo in the voice, is God more inclined to answer?
6. Effective prayer isn't about the mechanics, it's about *where we're looking* for help; to God.
7. If we can get our eyes off ourselves & the problem & on to Him, we'll see clearly that nothing is too hard for Him.
8. In many sports, one of the most important keys to success is this simple rule – Keep you eyes on the ball.
9. In *Life*, **THE** most important key to success is this – *Keep your eyes on God.*