

Roots

13 - Sleeping Loose

We are jumping back into our study through the book of Acts, looking at the foundation, the roots of this movement we know of as a Jesus' church. We started this series back in the fall asking some important questions. Questions like, how did the church go from a small group of about 120 people in an upper room in Jerusalem to about 1 million people all over the Roman Empire just 70 years later? How did that happen? How has the church, with all of its faults and mistakes and misrepresentation of Jesus throughout the ages survived? How did it move from a small town in the Middle East in the 1st century halfway around the world to 21st century Topeka, KS? How did all of that happen?

We're looking at some of the answers to those question by studying the book of Acts which explains the beginning of that movement of which we are a part. Just a real quick review, Acts is the second in a two volume set. The author of Acts is a guy by the name of Luke and his first book is called Luke and the second book is Acts. Luke is one account or story of what Jesus did and taught and Acts is the account or story of what Jesus' followers did and taught after he left. You can't really read one without reading the other, they're supposed to go together.

If you're new to our church and you're lost right now and have no idea what I'm talking about and you'd like to know what I'm talking about, you can go back and catch up on the first half of this series by going to our website and listening to those messages. They're archived there for anybody who wants them.

But we're just going to jump right back into this story and hit the ground running. We're in **Acts 12** today and we're going to be looking at one of the most interesting, compelling, attention grabbing stories in the book of Acts. In fact, all the creative people here today could take this chapter and make it into a movie or play. It's got all the elements of a great theatrical performance.

A little context, the church has grown outside of Jerusalem and outside of the Jewish people. If you remember back in chapter 10 Peter had a dream and went to Cornelius' house, this Gentile soldier and God kind of uses that to tell Peter that salvation and grace and forgiveness isn't just available to the Jews, it's available to

everyone. Salvation and grace and forgiveness isn't just available to the "right" kind of people or the "good" people or the "holy" people, it's available to everybody. And God does something in Peter's life during that visit and we start to see the church grow outside of Jerusalem.

In chapter 11 Peter has to explain his actions and defend himself against some criticism he was getting from some of the Jewish leaders because he was associating with Gentiles. That all kind of blows over and then Paul comes back onto the scene for a brief moment with his friend Barnabas in Antioch, where Jesus followers are first called Christians and that brings us to where we're at this morning.

We're back in Jerusalem and things aren't going real good for the church. **¹It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.**

This is not the same King Herod that killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem if you remember that part of the Christmas story. This is his grandson but the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree. This Herod is hated by the Jewish people because he's a traitor, he's friends with the Roman Emperor Caligula, but he's also a really savvy politician and he sees an opportunity here to take advantage of.

At this point in Jesus' movement isn't well received in Jerusalem. Mainly because they were including Gentiles in their worship gatherings and doing business with them and doing exactly what Jesus told them to do which made them heretics in the eyes of the Orthodox Jews and religious leaders.

So Herod thinks to himself, "If I start hassling and persecuting the Christians maybe my numbers will go up with the Jews." So he arrests some of them with the intent of persecuting them.

If you remember, back in the early stages of this series I told you that one of the original 12 disciples would not survive past chapter 12. James, one of Jesus' closest friends; Peter, James and John were kind of the inner-circle of Jesus' followers, is put to death.

Here it is, **²He(King Herod) had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. ⁴After arresting him, he put him in**

prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

So Herod sees his poll numbers shoot through the roof after he kills James and says, “I wonder what my numbers will do if I take Peter out.” He’s trying to pick off the leaders of the early church. So he arrest’s him but it’s during the Feast of Unleavened Bread which is a week long holiday and Herod’s not going to kill him during that. He just throws him in prison and decides to take care of it when the feast is over.

Peter’s in lockdown. He’s got a reputation for miraculously escaping prison so Herod has 4 guards around him at all times; 2 of them were actually chained to him and then 2 guards posted at the door, in a fortified prison, he’s not going anywhere.

Then Luke uses a little foreshadowing. ⁵So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Peter doesn’t know this. He doesn’t know the church was earnestly praying for him. All he knows is that he’s in prison, again. He knows that one of his best friends has been killed. He knows that Herod is basically just waiting for the feast to be over to do the same to him. He knows he’s getting ready to face a trial that’s really just a front to have him killed.

This was all happening during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a.k.a Passover, which was the same holiday that his Rabbi had been arrested, tried and crucified during. Don’t think for a second that was lost on Peter. He remembered quite clearly what happened to Jesus and he knew he was more than likely going to face the same fate.

So what’s Peter’s reaction to all of this? ⁶The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Peter was sleeping while chained to two soldiers, in prison, waiting for his trial and more than likely his death. Peter is sleeping.

We need to hang out here for a second. Peter’s sleeping. Just a real quick informal survey, how many of you struggle sleeping well? Some of you need to wake up your spouse so they can answer the question.

Some of us don’t sleep real well, night after night after night, week after week. All of us know what it’s like to need sleep and you try to force yourself to go to sleep

and it just makes it worse. You've got all these things you're thinking about or worried about and you can't shut it off but you really need your sleep so you just toss and turn. Anybody know what I'm talking about?

I don't know this for a fact, all I know is what we read here, but Peter seems to be sleeping like a baby. I don't know if this comes from this time in Peter's life or not but year's later he would write these words in **1 Peter 5, ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him(why?) because he cares for you.**

Peter's a work in progress, like all of us, but one of the things that Peter is figuring out is that God can be trusted with his anxiety. Chained between two guards, the night before he was supposed to be executed... Peter's asleep.

Let me say it this way, what was the last thing your parents would say to you before you went to sleep at night? Did you have a routine? Was there a special phrase they used? A special prayer? Do you remember?

Maybe you're parents prayed one of those memorized prayers like, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." What? No wonder junior's asking for water 5 minutes later. "I don't want to die mommy!"

Leonard Sweet writes about a family in Minnesota with 6 and 4 year old little girls. They have a special routine every night. The parents will get down beside their little girls' bed and say, "First of all girls, remember that you are special in the eyes of God. Secondly, remember that you are loved by us. And now, sleep loose."

Sleep loose? That's not how it goes. It's sleep tight, right? And what's the rest of it? Sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite. Again, how are we helping our children sleep well with that?

But this family twisted it around on purpose because they wanted their kids to rest in the security of God, in the love of their parents and now, sleep loose.

How many adults and children go to bed every night and sleep tight? It's an exhausting, uncomfortable way to get through the night, much less the rest of your life.

Peter didn't have it all figured out but he knew how to cast his cares on God. And on that night, chained between two guards he slept loose.

The next verse tells us that this angel comes in and there's this bright light shining in this little cell and even that didn't wake Peter up. Just picture this, the angel actually had to kick or hit Peter in the side to wake him up. That's how loose Peter was sleeping. But eventually he wakes up and the chains immediately fall off.

Now, have you ever had a dream that just seemed so real that you woke up and thought it was actually happening? A few months ago I had one of those dreams. I was dreaming that somebody had broken into our house and the part of the dream I remember was when they were sneaking into our bedroom. In my dream I saw them sneaking into our bedroom. So I laid there quiet and still, pretending like I was still asleep, until they got really close to the bed and I jumped up and turned into a cage fighter. I just went nuts on them.

The only problem was that I actually woke up and started cage fighting my wife. I was kicking and punching and my poor wife, she was scared to death, starts screaming at me telling me to stop and wake up. I did and my heart was beating so fast and I was half asleep, half awake so I wasn't even sure if what just happened really happened and I fell back asleep. Jana went to the couch for the rest of night and who would blame her.

Peter's half awake, half asleep, he's not sure if this is a dream so the angel helps him get dressed and get your coat and follow me. They move past the guards outside the cell, they get to an iron gate and it mysteriously opens by itself, they get out into the city and if you read the end of verse 10 and beginning of verse 11 it took Peter walking the length of an entire city street before he wakes up and realizes it's not a dream. That's how loose Peter was sleeping.

It's at this point that he realizes, "God has rescued me from what Herod was going to do to me" and then look at **v. 12, When this had dawned on him**(I think one of the things that dawned on him was that he was in severe danger as a fugitive. He has to get off the streets but where is he going to go in the middle of the night?), **he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.**

There are all kinds of people just praying their guts out that God would rescue Peter and save him from prison and a certain death sentence. **¹³Peter knocked at the**

outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴When she recognized Peter's voice, she opened the door and let him, took him to all the people praying so they could see that God had answered their prayers. Isn't that what your bible says? This is why you should read your Bible. You never know what I might say.

¹³Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" ¹⁵"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

This is one of the reasons I believe scripture is true. You don't include the story of faithless Christians when you're trying to prove that Jesus is the Son of God. You can't make this stuff up. They don't even believe that God might have actually answered their prayer while they were praying it. "You're out of your mind Rhoda. Be quiet, we're praying for a miracle."

¹⁶But Peter kept on knocking, and when (interesting word) they opened the door and saw him (it's not just Rhoda anymore), they were astonished. I'm sure they started celebrating and make all kinds of noise because, ¹⁷Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James (the half brother of Jesus who is emerging as the leader of the church in Jerusalem) and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

Rhoda's off to the side thinking, "Nobody ever believes me." And Peter just kind of disappears into the night. He's pretty much going to disappear from the pages of Acts. We'll see him one more time in chapter 15 but he steps aside to make room for what God is going to do through a guy named Paul. We don't know where he goes, there are a lot of theories but we honestly just don't know. Neither did Herod.

But sure enough the guards discover that he's gone and I love the way Luke states this, ¹⁸In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Under Roman law, if you were responsible for a prisoner and they escaped you faced the same

sentence they would have suffered. This is one of the reasons we believe that Peter was going to face an execution.

Herod gives up trying to find Peter, its months later, he's gone up to one of his palaces in Caesarea to deal with some foreign policy issues. He's trying to impress these foreign leaders so he puts on his best royal robes. When these other leaders from Tyre and Sidon see him and hear him speak they try to pacify him with, "This is no mere man. It's like he's a god." Herod basically says, "Thanks for noticing", doesn't deflect praise or honor to the one true God and Luke tells us that he's stricken down with worms and died.

There's actually a 1st Century historian named Josephus. He's not a friend to Christianity but he records a parallel history of this same event. He writes that Herod moves to Caesarea and for 5 days he suffered this severe, abdominal pain. There was supposedly a round worm that would infest people of this region that would obstruct the intestines and after a few days you would begin to vomit the worms themselves and then you would die, which is exactly how Herod died.

At the beginning of chapter 12 Herod thinks that He's in charge of the story and tries to take out the church leaders. At the end of chapter 12 he's puking up worms and dead and look at **v. 24, But the word of God continued to increase and spread.**

Wouldn't this make a great movie? You've got tension, comic relief, a guy puking up worms, the good guys win in the end, it's got such a great plot line.

But it's so much more than a great story. It's true. This is more than just a good script that Luke came up with. It really happened.

So what's the take away for us this morning? What does this have to do with us? Why would Luke record these events?

I think it's important because we see Peter kind of fade away from the forefront of leadership from this point on and Paul and his missionary journeys take center stage. Luke is very obviously making that shift.

I think it's important because of the dynamic of Herod, who believes he's the true King of the Jews, trying to stomp out the church by killing its leaders but the church only increases and spreads even more because the one, the true King of the Jews is the head of the church. I think that's important.

Those are certainly all important at this point in Acts and we can learn something from all of them but I want to point out something that takes place in this chapter that every single one of us deals with on a regular basis. It's actually two opposite sides of the spectrum that we bounce back and forth in between whether we're a Christian, Non-Christian, doesn't matter, when it comes to God's activity in our life.

I want to talk about those two sides of the spectrum in the form of questions that we ask from time to time. The first question we've all asked about God's activity in our life is this: **Why doesn't God do something about that?** It could be something personal or something you see on the news or read about that's happening in our world. We have all asked the question, why doesn't God do something about that?

The funny thing is, you don't have to think really hard to come up with a "that". Some of you are sitting next to "that". Some of you, "that" is back at home. Some of you work for "that". Some of you work with "that". Some of you own "that".

Then there's the more serious stuff; illness, war, hunger, sex-trafficking, injustice, and we just kind of find ourselves asking, "God, why don't you do something about that?"

In **Acts 12**, I think of what happened to James. Why does James end up dying and Peter got to go free? I'm sure there were people praying that James' life would be spared. Why didn't God do something about that? Why did God rescue Peter from jail and James had to die?

So that's one side of the spectrum and we can all identify with that but the other side of the spectrum can kind of be summarized with the question: **Was that really God?**

Let me explain what I mean. Have you ever asked God to intervene or provide and the answer comes so clearly and quickly that you find yourself thinking it was just a coincidence? You pray about something and the answer is basically knocking at your door and you're actually surprised that God has answered you that clearly and quickly. I've certainly been guilty of this.

The people that were gathered at Mary's house praying for Peter were concentrating so much on asking God to do something that they almost missed the answer to their prayer.

Many times we're so focused on requesting something of God, when he answer's we're tempted to think, "Was that really God? Did He just answer the request I've been praying about or was that just a coincidence?"

There are times when we ask God to do something about that and he may or may not. Other times when He does that we're tempted to give the credit to something or someone else.

I often times feel like the man who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus and asked him to heal his boy. Jesus asked the father if he believed if He could actually heal his son and they father said, "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!" We swing back and forth in between those two dynamics.

Here's what I want us to hear this morning; **people that God loved very much, James and Peter and those early Christians, heroes of our faith, experienced the same dynamic that you and I do.** He loved James very much even though he didn't rescue him. He loved that group of people that almost missed the answer to their prayer. He loved Peter even though he waited until the last possible moment to spring him from jail. These are some of the heroes of our faith and they experienced some of the same things that you and I deal with when it comes to God's activity in our life. They wondered why God didn't do something about that and they almost missed Him when he did.

So why doesn't God do something about that? The answer is we don't know sometimes. Was that really you God? The answer is we don't know sometimes. But here's what we do know, **we know that He can, we know that sometimes He waits and we know that we can trust Him in the meantime.**

Why doesn't God do something about that? I don't know but I know that He can, I know that sometimes He waits and I know I can trust him in the meantime.

Was that really God? I don't know but I know it could have been, I know I'm willing to wait longer if it wasn't, and I'll trust Him in the meantime.

I know He can, sometimes He waits and we can trust Him in the meantime. I know that's not emotionally satisfying but it's the thing that will allow us to sleep loose in the midst trying times. I know He can, I know sometimes He waits and I know I can trust Him in the meantime.

These were the same men and women who watched Jesus tried, condemned and crucified and that was it. Yes, Jesus told them he was going to raise from the dead on the third day, they had seen him raise Lazarus from the dead and even then they didn't believe. They weren't outside the tomb Sunday morning counting down, "10, 9, 8, 7, 6..." waiting for Jesus to roll the stone away. They thought he was dead and they thought he was staying that way.

But when they saw the resurrected Christ, something changed in them. It had too. You can't come into contact with the resurrected Christ and remain the same.

They walked away knowing that they weren't always going to have their questions satisfied or their prayers answered but they believed Jesus could, sometimes He waits, and they could trust Him in the meantime.

My hope this morning is that you'll walk away and if/when you find yourself in the wilderness, if/when you go through times, seasons and chapters of life where it seems like God isn't paying attention, isn't cooperating how you think he should or you're a little confused if that really was God or not, that He is in fact still with you. He hasn't promised to answer all of your prayers with a "yes", He hasn't promised you a pain-free, easy life, but He has promised to be with you through it.

So I thought we would end today by singing a song that we sing around here from time to time. Sometimes we pray silently, sometimes we pray out-loud but today we're going to sing our prayer.

This is a prayer to remind us that God is in fact in and with us no matter what life looks like around us. That our life circumstances don't necessarily reflect how God feels about us. That we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil because God is with us. Which mean, like Peter, we can sleep loose.