Power or Prayer?

5-Day Devotional

Prayer and Power

Acts 12:1–19

The Setting

It's Passover, and Pharaoh is back. A Jewish king kills, the church prays, and in the dark God delivers. Luke tells the story during the days of Unleavened Bread—so hear Exodus in the background all the way through.

1 Pandering Isn't Leadership (vv. 1–4)



- Herod arrests believers; James is killed; the crowd is pleased, so Peter is next.
- Power that spends people to secure itself—Pharaoh's old pattern in a new robe.
- Legal doesn't always mean righteous.
- A leader who only asks "May I?" and "Will they cheer?" never gets to "Is it right?"

2 Prayer: The Church Holds One Man (v. 5)



- Sixteen soldiers, chains, a locked city—and the church has a house and a night.
- They pray for one vulnerable man, by name.
- Like Israel in Egypt, they cry out. They were weak, and they prayed anyway.
- James is in the story too. The prayer is the same, but the outcome is different.

3 Peter: Follow, Don't Fight (vv. 6–19)



- Asleep in chains, Peter is wakened by an angel.
- Passover night, dressed to go: belt, sandals, cloak—a gate opens by itself.
- It feels like a dream, and he follows anyway.
- He doesn't draw a sword. He just leaves, because he's following.
- Herod's power handles failure by punishing others—the guards die, not Peter.

4 Who Is the Weak One? (v. 19; 1 Cor. 1:27)



- A king, soldiers, and a crowd—and Herod still needs all three to feel like someone.
- Peter is the one in chains, and the church is a house full of people who can't even recognize the answer when it knocks.
- "God chose the weak things to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).
- Prayer doesn't make them strong. It's who they turn to.

Life Is Messy



- Life is messy. We all have a James and a Peter—someone who got the recovery or the reconciliation, and someone who didn't.

> *"I believe; help me overcome my unbelief."* (Mark 9:24)

- Prayer doesn't automatically mean we get what we want.
- Sometimes the answer is deliverance, sometimes it's endurance, and always it's the presence of God.

The Landing

Follow and Pray

Herod's calling is to hold and display. Ours is to follow and to pray, and neither asks us to control anything.

Day 1: The Danger of Living for Applause

Reading: Acts 12:1-4

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jewish leaders, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. After 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.

Devotional: Herod Agrippa did not arrest Peter out of conviction. He did it because it earned him approval. That is a sobering mirror to hold up to our own lives. How often do our decisions bend toward what will make us look good rather than what is right? God calls his people to lead and live with integrity, anchored not in the applause of others but in faithfulness to him. When your moral compass is set by the crowd, you will always drift. Ask yourself today: whose approval am I truly seeking?

Personal Reflection: In what area of your life are you most tempted to seek the approval of others over the approval of God?

Practical Application: Identify one decision you are facing this week. Before acting, ask whether your choice is driven by principle and faith or by what others will think of you.

Day 2: God Moves in Hopeless Situations

Reading: Acts 12:5-11

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

The 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. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

Devotional: Sixteen guards. Chains. A locked cell. From every human angle, Peter was not getting out. And yet God sent an angel, and Peter walked free. The story of Peter's miraculous release echoes the first Passover in Exodus 12, where God's people were told to put on their sandals and be ready to follow. The pattern is consistent throughout Scripture: what looks like a dead end to us is often the very place where God chooses to act. Never assess your situation without leaving room for what God can do. Hopelessness is not the final word.

Personal Reflection: What situation in your life right now feels like a locked cell with sixteen guards outside the door?

Practical Application: Write down one circumstance that feels hopeless. Beneath it, write the words: "Nothing is impossible for God." Return to it each day this week as a reminder.

Day 3: Following Instead of Fixing

Reading: Proverbs 3:5-6

> *Trust in the Lord with all your heart*
> *and lean not on your own understanding;*
>
> *in all your ways submit to him,*
> *and he will make your paths straight.*

John 10:27

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

Devotional: When the angel told Peter to get up, put on his sandals, and follow, Peter did not negotiate. He did not reach for a sword this time, as he once had in the Garden of Gethsemane. Fourteen years of walking with Jesus had taught him something essential: he was not the one in charge. There is a profound freedom in that surrender. So much of our anxiety comes from believing we must fix, control, and manage every outcome. But Jesus calls us to follow, not to lead the way ourselves. In moments of uncertainty, the wisest thing we can do is simply take the next step he shows us.

Personal Reflection: Where in your life are you trying to fix a situation that God is asking you to simply trust him with?

Practical Application: Practice a moment of intentional surrender today. When you feel the urge to control an outcome, pause and pray: "Not my will, but yours be done."

Day 4: The Power of Persistent, Humble Prayer

Reading: Acts 12:12-17

> *When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"*
>
> *"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."*
>
> *But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.*

Matthew 6:9-13

"This, then, is how you should pray:

"'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Devotional: While Herod spent people like loose change for applause, a small house church gathered and prayed through the night for one man. They were not praying for a platform or a political outcome. They were simply drawing close to God on behalf of someone who was vulnerable. And yet even they doubted when the answer arrived at the door. This is the honest reality of prayer. We pray, we hope, and sometimes we are surprised when God answers. Prayer is not a button we push to move God into action. It is a relationship, a connection to the one who holds all things in his hands. Keep praying, even when you are not sure what to expect.

Personal Reflection: Is there someone in your life right now who needs you to pray for them the way this house church prayed for Peter?

Practical Application: Set aside ten minutes tonight specifically to pray for one person by name. Do not ask for anything for yourself. Simply bring that person before God.

Day 5: Honest Faith in the Midst of Uncertainty

Reading: Mark 9:21-24

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Romans 8:26-28

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Devotional: The father in Mark 9 did not pretend to have everything figured out. He came to Jesus with his need and his doubt held in the same breath: "I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief." That is not weak faith. That is honest faith. The church in Acts prayed for Peter even while quietly assuming he might already be on his way to heaven. They were not confident in the outcome, but they were sure in their God. That is the invitation for all of us. We do not have to resolve every tension or guarantee every result. We simply have to keep showing up, keep praying, and keep trusting the one who holds the master plan of the ages.

Personal Reflection: What does it look like for you personally to choose prayer over the pursuit of control, comfort, or status?

Practical Application: Close this five-day guide by writing your own version of the father's prayer from Mark 9. Be honest about where your faith is strong and where you need God's help to believe more fully. Carry that prayer with you into the week ahead.