

God Breaks the Boundaries (Acts 12)

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Date: 11 September 2022

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[0 : 00] So I'm reading from chapter 12, but at the end of chapter 11, it says that the disciples all got together. They contributed money to help with their brothers and sisters who were living in Judea.

So that's the context as we go into the beginning of chapter 12. 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 a sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, 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. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

[1 : 06] The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and the 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.

[2 : 24] 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 the door.

When she recognised 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.

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had the thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

[3 : 36] Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. He had been quarrelling with the people of Tyre and Sidon. They now joined together and sought an audience with him.

After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

On the appointed day, Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, This is the voice of a god, not a man!

Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. Well, thank you for inviting me today.

[4 : 42] It's great. And it was really great to be part of William's Ordination this morning. That was really special and it was a lovely service as well. And it's great to have the opportunity to be able to speak with you at PCBC.

I visit lots of BCs. We come from PBC, which is Parramatta Baptist Church. I often speak at CABC. There's actually two of them, Chinese and Australian Baptist Church in Sydney. And then I also ran a Thai ministry at CBC, which is Central Baptist Church. So there's lots of BCs in my life.

And so it's really good. We feel really at home here because we've spent a lot of time in Chinese churches. And we also work for OMF, which of course has its roots in China, started as the China Inland Mission with Hudson Taylor.

So there's a lot of affinity between OMF and Chinese churches as well because of that historical link. As we said before, Debbie and I joined OMF initially and went to Thailand for 14 years.

[5 : 55] We learned to speak Thai after three or four years of very hard work. And then we were involved in sharing the good news about Jesus with Thai people and starting a church in Central Thailand, which is kind of the Buddhist heartland of Thailand.

When we came back from Thailand, I wanted to be involved in working with the 20,000 or so Thai people that are actually living in Sydney. And so we started with English classes and then had the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with many Thai people who came to Sydney.

And the great thing is that Thai people who are outside of Thailand often are more receptive to hearing about Jesus than those who are in Thailand because they recognise that they're outside their own culture.

They're curious about making friends and finding out about the culture of the place that they've gone to. And so we saw quite a few Thai people in Sydney come to know Jesus as well.

And that was really encouraging and helpful. Now, I understand that you've been working through the Book of Acts on the kind of the theme of breaking boundaries. So that's where I'm going to go today.

[7 : 11] Now, I'm sure that William has already told you that the framework for the Book of Acts is actually found in the first chapter. Do you have any idea what that might be?

Chapter 1, verse 8. Yeah. So Jesus says, You'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And that kind of forms the whole framework of the Book of Acts. That's basically where the whole Book of Acts is going. And at the end, we see Paul at the centre of the known world, the Roman Empire, and after the Gospel has gone out into many places around the Mediterranean.

So the Book of Acts, some people call it the Acts of the Apostles, but really, it's really about what God is doing.

It's not really about the Acts of people. All the way through the Book of Acts, we actually see God at work, almost in spite of people. You know, people are messy, people get things mixed up, people don't always obey, people don't always do the right thing.

[8 : 26] But in spite of that, we see God at work through the power of the Holy Spirit. And that is the most encouraging thing about the Book of Acts, is that he is at work in his church, in the early church, in spite of the selfishness and sinfulness and the slowness of the Christians that were there.

Now, a lot of people say, oh, we want to go back and be like the early church, you know. The early church was the perfect church. They had it all together. Well, no, they didn't. Okay? That's the big lesson that we have.

Don't think that the early church was kind of the ideal of what the church should be, because it wasn't. There were lots of problems, there were lots of conflicts, there were lots of issues. And it certainly wasn't perfect.

And that's what we need to remember. And then we see one of the most important things that the early church struggled with and took a long time to get right, and that was transcending cultural barriers from being a Jewish sect to becoming a faith that all nations and peoples could embody. And that's the most exciting thing. And you see in verse 11 that Peter has to explain why on earth he went to a Roman centurion and he ate with him. You know, the church was shocked.

[9 : 44] You shouldn't be, you know, going to those unclean people and doing things like that. But Peter just explains what happened and how God had led him.

And in the end, when they heard this, in chapter 11, verse 18, when they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.

And that is how we have the privilege of being part of what God is doing in the world. You know, how the Westerners were able to become Christians and to the point where, you know, a few decades ago, we thought that, you know, Christianity was a Western religion.

Now, we're seeing the church exploding in places like China, Africa, you know, and so we can't say anymore that being a Christian is a Western thing anymore.

In fact, Westerners are actually in the minority. You know, all that has changed now. But that's all possible because the early church recognised that the gospel, the good news about Jesus can transcend cultural barriers.

[10 : 54] Now, all the way through the book of Acts, we're kind of, you know, and through history, we see the church sort of growing, sort of like the beach, you know, the waves on the beach come in and then there's a whoosh and the church grows really fast and then it sort of retreats for a bit and then, you know, we see the waves coming in again.

It's a little bit like that in the book of Acts. And so, you know, we see lots of growth in chapter 11, but now, in chapter 12, comes the backlash. So this is kind of like the reaction and Herod reacts to the gospel growing and spreading.

And so, I want you, first of all, just to turn to the person next to you and just look back on the whole of chapter 12. If you didn't have it, you know, get it out on your phone, look up Acts chapter 12 and then just have a quick look through it and then, I'm going to give you just a little bit of, just one minute to do that and then, I want you to turn to the person next to you and just share very briefly just one thing that you like about the story that Debbie just read.

What do you like about the story in Acts chapter 12? Just one thing, okay? Not a whole lot of things and not a big explanation, just one thing, very short, one sentence, okay?

I'm going to give you just a minute to do that. Okay, so make sure you both have an opportunity to share. Okay, all right, what did you like?

[12 : 30] Okay, just call out some things. What did you like about the story? What did you like? Okay, yep, all right, somebody else?

What did you like? Okay, don't want to say? Well, you can have a go, yes, yes, you. Sorry, the door opened by itself, so just the power of God showing itself, yep, okay.

What else, someone else? Yeah, that's funny, isn't it? Poor Rhoda. She's probably just so excited. Yep, yep, that's right, yeah, because James had already copped it. He was dead, you know, so Peter probably thought, or the believers probably thought Peter, it's going to, same thing's going to happen to Peter too.

Yep, all right? Good. All right, so I'm going to summarise what I think, and it might match with what you think as well. I like the way that God breaks expectations, and somebody already mentioned that, which was really good, but he does it in a number of ways.

[13 : 49] First of all, he breaks the reader's expectations, because it's so funny, the whole story is quite funny, you know, it's just kind of ridiculous. Peter's let out of prison, and then the believers don't even believe that he's got out, and they're supposed to be praying.

Are they really, are they really believing what they're praying? You know, God doesn't always answer prayer in the way that we want or expect, you know, sometimes he'll do it in a different way. God is not a God who always works the way that we want or expect him to work. He'll work out of the box. I mean, when the Holy Spirit came in Acts chapter 2, how out of the box was that? Nothing like that had ever happened before, you know, God will do things in a different way. He won't always do the things that you want according to the timetable that you expect or want him to work.

He breaks Herod. You know, Herod tries to set himself up against what God is doing. You know, let's get rid of James, let's get rid of Peter, let's do the same thing to Peter that we did to Jesus, hey, on the Passover, we'll just wait till the Passover's over and then we'll do to him what we did to Jesus and, you know, it's worked in the past to solve our problems or did it.

[15:06] I'm not really sure. But in the end, Herod has it coming to him as well. Must have been a very ugly sight being eaten by worms.

This just kind of gives me the heebie-jeebies when I think about it. He breaks the expectation of the believers. The disciples don't actually believe that their prayer is answered and poor Rhoda does not even believe when she tries to tell the disciples that Peter is at the door.

You know, it's so much like us when, you know, we pray for things and then sometimes we don't even believe it when God actually answers our prayers and we think, oh, wow. when we were in central Thailand we were reaching out to all kinds of people and every day we used to go out to the same shop and buy our rice on chicken.

We had this guy who, yeah, chicken on rice, sorry. Chicken was on top. He didn't always wash his hands when he put that chicken on the rice.

Anyway, we used to go out there and, you know, wanted to build relationships with the local shop owners so we bought the rice anyway. Anyway, we did make friends with the chicken shop guy, the chicken rice shop guy and he told me he sold insurance in his spare time so he owned the shop but then he also sold insurance for AIA.

[16:36] It was a thing, it was a thing in central Thailand in those days. And anyway, so he asked me, he said, could you come and teach English to our office staff? And I said, yeah, okay, but, you know, I'll do it for free but my condition is I'll also, we'll do a short Bible study as every lesson.

So I had a study, some studies on John that I used as part of the lesson. So, went in a few times, got to know them and then one day I thought, I'd take it a little bit further and I say, now I'd like to pray for you that, you know, God will do something for you.

How can I pray for you? And my friend, the chicken rice guy, he just leaned back like this, I can still remember it, he just sat back like this.

He's a bit of a macho guy. And he said, well, I'm behind quota. I haven't sold one insurance policy this month and I want you to ask God that he'll give me one insurance policy every day next week. And I said, I'm not really sure that that's what God would want me to pray for you but, okay, that's what you want me to pray, I'll pray for you about that. Okay, so I did.

[17:52] Anyway, I went and bought my lunch with him six days later and I said, yeah, you remember how I prayed for you last week? I said, how'd it go? And his eyes just open up like this and he said, you wouldn't believe it, six days, I've sold six policies this week.

And I thought, okay, well, God obviously answers in a way that I wouldn't have expected or thought but, anyway, I'm very happy to hear it so maybe God is trying to get your attention. You know, that's what God does.

He breaks our expectations and he wants us to pay attention to him sometimes and so he'll do things in very surprising ways.

But he also, I think God also, in this passage, he breaks my understanding a little bit because there's some things I don't really understand about this passage. One of them is, who is James? Because you'll notice that James is mentioned in the beginning of the chapter and he's dead.

Okay, he's put to death by the sword and then Peter, towards the end of the passage, he says now, it mentions James, where is it?

[19:04] He tells them to go and tell James and the brothers about this. Okay, it's in verse 17. So, who's this James? I thought James was dead.

There must have been more than one James, right? Okay, so there were a few different Jameses. There was James.

Okay, now, I researched this so I'll tell you. It was a very common Jewish name but it doesn't help us to work out which one they're talking about.

Okay, so there's so many James. I think in Greek it's actually it's more like Jacob and the one who was killed was James, the brother of John, so the son of Zebedee who Jesus first called to be his disciples.

Okay, remember John was the disciple that Jesus loved and so he was the brother of James. He was one of the 12 apostles and so he was the one who was killed. He would have been a leader in the early church for sure because the apostles became leaders of the early church and so Herod thought that by eliminating the apostles then he's going to cut off the church.

[20:21] But the other James also was a leader in the church and we believe that this James was actually sort of the half-brother of Jesus. So he was probably one of Jesus' family that kind of didn't

believe him from the start but later on became a believer and then as a result of that became a leader in the church and so he is the James that kind of gives his opinion later on in Acts chapter 15 when they're deciding about how they're going to treat the Gentile believers.

Okay, so there's two James there. Now, what about the book of James? Who wrote that? I don't really know to be honest. I don't know which James it actually was. So, maybe you can tell me. Alright? But, that's the easy part about breaking my understanding about, you know, who James is. The other question is why James?

Why not Peter? Why was James killed and Peter was allowed to go free? We don't really know. You know, it's not that Peter was somehow more worthy than James and Peter would have been counting the rest of his days.

You know, it's interesting that Luke writes that Herod wanted to put him on trial after the Passover and so it seems like you know, this is a reference to Jesus' death as well and that Peter was likely to face exactly the same fate that Jesus did.

[21 : 50] So, Peter must have known what Herod had done to James and what he was now trying to do to Peter and make an example of him. And there would not have been a lot of confidence that God was going to intervene in this case and the believers probably had almost written Peter off and said, well, you know, Herod got rid of James so Peter is done for.

You know, he's not going to make it either. So it's really hard to understand why some people suffer so much or die when others seem to have, you know, such freedom from these kinds of burdens.

You know, I went to Bible college to prepare for ministry. I was in my mid-twenties when that happened and out of my class I can think of a number of people who are not alive today.

So we lived on a campus and we developed some deep friendships with our cohort, the people who, well, some were a year above and some were a year below but, you know, we all kind of went through together and we lived together, sometimes two to a room and I still keep up with many of them and I went through the list of, you know, who are still around and what they're doing and at least four people in my cohort are dead from cancer.

They've died from twisted bowel or suicide even and sometimes I think, well, why am I alive and they're not? They're dead.

[23 : 24] I've actually come very close to dying three times from car accidents twice and I had a pretty bad motorcycle accident but I'm still relatively healthy for my age.

God has given me a longer life and good health and I'm really thankful for that but that doesn't necessarily mean that I'm more blessed or more favoured than anybody else. so there's some things that I don't understand.

There's some things that are above my understanding and God breaks the boundaries of what I understand about life and what happens to people. What does this passage tell us about people? Well, it tells us that God is at work in spite of his people. there are no heroes in this particular story except maybe God and his angel who leads Peter out of prison.

Peter doesn't do anything except go where the angel tells him to go. The angel even has to slap him and say, come on, get up! Herod, you know, the other wicked man's story, just wanted to get rid of Peter in the same way that he got rid of Jesus and then James and in the end God broke him.

[24 : 41] And Luke, who wrote the story, tells us that Herod's death was a direct result of his refusal to praise God. He would have had plenty of opportunities to see God at work and to turn his life around.

He condemned Jesus. He was there. He knew about the crucifixion. He knew about the resurrection. And still, he refused to turn his life around. You know, some will set themselves on opposing the followers of Jesus to try and break them and in the end they themselves will be broken.

What about the believers? What do we learn about them? Well, they pray but they don't believe Rhoda when she tells them that Peter's at the door. Some people find it hard to believe when God answers our prayer.

People are fickle and fallible. People are not like God who is always reliable and secure, who we can trust completely. And who will keep working even when people give up.

See, God breaks the boundaries. Here we see God at work. It's all his work. It's not about people or the wonderful things that they've done. He is the one who breaks the chains around Peter.

[25 : 54] He is the one who breaks open the door of the prison. He is the one who opens the gate so that Peter can just walk through it and go back home. He is the one who breaks Herod. He is the one who breaks the expectations of the Jewish leaders who wanted to kill off Peter in the same way as James and Jesus.

It's not about the acts of the apostles. It's about the acts of God and what he does. And the Holy Spirit who empowers the church to spread the good news about Jesus with people from all over the known world.

how does this help us? What do we learn from this for ourselves? We're not likely to be thrown in jail.

You're not likely to be executed. I'd be very surprised if anyone in this room was. This story is quite different from the experiences of most of us. That's true.

But there are still some good lessons that we can take home from this particular story. One is that we need to choose our king very carefully. The people of Tyre they wanted to please Herod and so they praised him just to butter up his ego and to make him feel good.

[27 : 09] This is not the voice of a man this is the voice of God. Herod died because of what he didn't do and that was to give praise to God.

Don't follow Herod. Don't live for the praise of people. Don't oppose those who follow Jesus. Choose carefully which king you follow.

Choose to follow King Jesus. Peter couldn't see him but Peter knew him and Peter knew that he was in charge. For those of you who have already made the decision to follow the king I want to give you three exhortations or encouragements from this particular passage.

One is to pray. Prayer works even when we don't really believe it like the believers did. Prayer works not because you pray well or long and hard or loud or shout a lot or pray in tongues or whatever but prayer works because God listens to you and he wants to show that he is at work when you pray.

He will work his plans into your prayers. He doesn't have one plan that you have to magically follow but he will fit in with your prayers as well. He's big enough to do that.

[28 : 34] When you pray he will work and he will also change you through your prayers so that you become more in line with what God wants for people and for your life.

And sometimes God will answer prayer in the most surprising and exciting ways. We don't know what he'll do but we can ask for his will to be done and he will do that.

Second thing is to trust. Place your life in God's hands in the true king's hands and trust that he has put you in whatever situation you're in right now.

You know so often we find ourselves in situations that are uncomfortable that are painful situations that we don't really want to be in but this is God didn't put you there to punish you or to make your life difficult.

He put you there to help you to see that God is bigger than your problems and your enemies. You know Peter would have been very uncomfortable being chained up with soldiers on his right and his left and in front and behind.

[29 : 43] Roman prisons were not comfortable places but that didn't stop him from trusting God and getting sidetracked. I think another good lesson we can draw from this is just to wait.

You know a natural inclination is to want to fix a problem right away. I don't know maybe it's more a western thing than an Asian thing I'm not really sure but you know so often we have a problem and we want to do something to fix it right away.

God doesn't always work like that. Sometimes he'll fix things in his own time in his own way and maybe not in the way that we expect. I'm not saying that we shouldn't necessarily try and address problems that's fine but we also need to be patient and just allow God to do it his way sometimes. I'll give you an example of what I mean. Just in this last month I saw God at work. Our finance manager resigned last month and she was leaving on September the 9th and without a finance manager makes it pretty hard to run our company our organisation.

it's a pretty important job and I prayed and I asked everyone that I could think of if they knew someone who might be able to help and after three weeks I'd asked around everybody I knew I'd advertised everywhere I knew how to advertise and didn't have one single expression of interest and the day before we left for a two week trip around the North Island to just a work trip to get to know people we had a crisis meeting in the morning to talk about what we're going to do because it

didn't look like we were going to be able to employ someone and I was going away until basically until our current person left so we had this crisis meeting we talked about what we could do we found a solution that was going to be very expensive and not very satisfactory but we did pray which was good we remembered to do that and I thought well that's the way it's going to be because we're going away and we're going to be away so I'm not going to be able to do anything anyway at eleven o'clock that day a lady called up and she said I'm interested in the job and I said wow okay that's great can you come in today and so she came in at two o'clock we interviewed her she was very suitable and over the next few days that we were traveling around down to New

[32 : 29] Plymouth and Wellington I was able to follow up on all the references and go through the whole process of employing her and she was able to start last week with the proper handover now for me that was a miraculous provision from God and I'm so thankful for that you know we all face different problems and crisis in our lives I wonder what problem or crisis you're facing right now may not be that we're locked up in a jail but you know we all go through different things at different times in our life can you trust God in that situation that he's using that situation to bring glory to himself and that he will use that to bring the good news about Jesus to other people and that's the great hope that we have in verse 24 isn't it you know in spite of all these issues and problems that happened in verse 24 it says but the word of God continued to increase and spread and so we see that in spite of the backlash in spite of the reaction of the world to the expansion of the gospel the gospel still continues to go out and that's the hope that we have that's what we see through the whole book of Acts the way that God breaks new boundaries the way that God uses people to bring the good news to other people and that is what he wants you to be involved in as well to be involved in that process of sharing the good news of

Jesus with people around you and hopefully in spite of the problems of the things that are concerning you the things that are getting you down he can still use you in that process of sharing the good news of Jesus with others so why don't we pray that he will do that right now Lord Jesus we thank you that you are a God who breaks boundaries Father we thank you that you do things that we don't expect and you do even greater things than we hope for Father we thank you for the many times that you've intervened to keep us safe to bring us forward to help us to trust you to help you to us to see that you are a God who is in charge that you are really at work in our lives and in the lives of people around us

Father we thank you that you are living and active thank you that you work to increase our trust and our hope and our faith in you and Father we pray that you will help us to follow you to serve you alone and to give you the glory and the honour that is due to your name and that Father that we will continue to see people all around us coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour we pray in Jesus name Amen