

Acts 12:1-19 (NIV) ¹It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ²He 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. ⁵So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. 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. ⁷Suddenly 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. ⁸Then 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. ⁹Peter 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. ¹⁰They 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. ¹¹Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." ¹²When 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. 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." ¹⁶But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place. 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. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while.

44-12-01-Hesitations of Belief

faith, unbelief, persecution, prayer, miracles

Acts 12:1-19

God often overrules unbelief with divine intervention.

INTRODUCTION: (Text as the Scripture Reading)

–The faith of believers can get sidetracked, especially during painful circumstances, like persecution. When Herod killed the Apostle James, it cast a shadow over the faith of the church in Jerusalem. When Peter was arrested with the same objective, that shadow's darkness deepened.

–Why did God allow this? God may tell us in the afterlife, but for now, faith calls us to ask Abraham's rhetorical question in Gen 18:25b, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Our shortsighted vision and limited wisdom lead us to join Paul in two other rhetorical questions– Rom 11:34, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

–In trial, trouble and tribulation, we must exercise our faith in God's character. We don't need much faith for gently rowing our boat merrily down the stream of a dream-life, until we hit the rapids! When life is threatened, prayer becomes a reflex! But a focus on our fears can take faith out of our prayers. Even so, **HOM.idea**, as He did in this passage, where we see 3 cases of unbelief, or at least, 3 **hesitations of belief**....

I. Peter's Hesitation to Believe

A. With the death of James on his mind and Christ's prediction of his death in his memory, Peter might have been *disheartened*. (Often we imagine great spiritual leaders incapable of diminished faith or despair. But no one is exempt from human weakness. That's why God directs us to pray for our leaders and those in authority.)

[Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, suffered from chronic depression.]

B. We're to "walk by faith not by sight," but faith can be distracted by the threat of our circumstances– v.4, 6. 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...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**.

C. So, when an angel showed up and "his chains fell off," it seemed *too good to be real*, and at first, Peter didn't believe it was– v.9, 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.

TRANS: This is not one of those miracles Peter could later talk about and say, “*See what happens when you have strong faith?*”– v.10-11b, *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 sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches...”* **He didn’t believe it, until it was over, but God can intervene despite our hesitations of belief.** We see this again in...

II. The Church’s Hesitation to Believe

- A. Going to John Mark’s house, where a prayer meeting for him was being held, (v.13-16) *Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door.* ¹⁴*When 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.”* ¹⁶*But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.*
- B. If they’d had faith that God would hear and answer their prayers, they might have said, “*Rhoda, you’re out of your mind to leave him standing outside in the dark!*” **But they didn’t believe he could have escaped,** even though they’d prayed for it: “*It must be his angel.*”
- C. When troubles weigh heavy on us, making us *slow* to believe, we may *go through the motions of devotion* with little or no faith.
1. They were doing the right thing– v.5, [with] *Peter...in prison, ...the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*
 2. But just as faith without works is dead, so works without faith is dead– Heb 11:6. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (They *earnestly* sought God for Peter, but not with *earnest faith* that God would answer their prayers.)

TRANS: God’s intervention can overrule our unbelief. But on what *basis* does He act, if *not* in response to *Christian faith*? On the *basis of His goodness*. [“*God is good all the time; and all the time...*”] We are free-will agents only because God is, and His *will* is *free* and *sovereign*. Wisdom and love guide His actions, and that may be all the explanation we get. So, we should trust Him with Abraham’s kind of faith: “Will not the Judge of all the earth do **right**?” God does the right thing both for believers and for unbelievers, like this grandson of Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa I.

III. Herod’s Hesitation to Believe

- A. God is the God of the lost as well as of the saved– Mat 5:44-45. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
1. God asks us to behave as He Himself does: with kindness. [God was kind to Herod. As a young man in Rome, he enjoyed favor with both Caligula and Claudius. Together, they installed him as king of essentially the same geographic dominions ruled by his grandfather, Herod the Great.]
 2. God’s graciousness to people is meant to lead them to Himself– Roms 2:4. Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance? (But God’s political goodness to Herod didn’t change him.)
- B. When God thwarted Herod’s murderous plans for Peter, he again had an *opportunity to believe*. **But instead of seeing this miracle of escape as a sign of God’s blessing** on the Jesus-followers, “*he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed*” for negligence.)
- C. I said that God does the *right thing* for *unbelievers*, and that right thing can ultimately be punishment. (After this, Herod left to speak at Caesarea and there he met his punishment– v.21-23. 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 of 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.)

CONCLUSION:

–In His love, God lets mercy postpone judgment– 2 Pet 3:9b. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. **But in His wisdom, God limits that mercy. It begins and ends in Christ. We, as Peter and this prayer meeting, may hesitate in belief, yet we remain in God’s limitless mercy in Christ.** Herod’s **hesitation of belief** was fatal, because he was **not** in Christ. His unbelief left him facing judgment.

–When we *repented* of our sins and *trusted in Christ*, the Holy Spirit placed us *spiritually in Him, safe in His loving mercy*. But as we grow in Christ and learn to *trust Him in the midst of harsh circumstances*, our *weaknesses in faith* may decrease. Meanwhile: **God will continue to overrule our hesitations of belief with divine intervention.** Why does He do that? Because *God is good all the time*, and all the time God is good! Amen!