Acts 12:1–9 — When God Doesn’t Answer the Way We Expect

START HERE

Have you ever prayed for one thing and experienced something completely different?

What did you expect God to do? What actually happened?

LOOK AT THE WORD

Read Acts 12:1–9 together.

In Acts 12, the church is experiencing both the movement of God and the reality of suffering. The Gospel is spreading, but persecution is increasing. Herod has James, one of Jesus' apostles, put to death and then arrests Peter.

The church doesn't know what will happen to Peter, but they respond by praying earnestly.

Peter is eventually rescued from prison, but James is not. That tension raises an important question for all of us:

What do we do when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we expected?

The passage reminds us that following Jesus does not mean we will never suffer. It means we can trust God and bring our disappointment, fear, and uncertainty to Him.

DISCUSS

1. When faith meets disappointment

Read Acts 12:1–4.

Herod arrests believers and has James, the brother of John, put to death. Then he arrests Peter.

James was one of the twelve apostles and part of Jesus' inner circle. The early church had already experienced God miraculously opening prison doors in Acts 5, so they had reason to wonder why God didn't intervene for James.

What do you think the church may have been feeling after James was killed?

Why can it be difficult to understand God when He doesn't intervene in the way we expect?

Have you ever experienced a situation where you wondered, **"Where was God?"**

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2. Prayer is where we take our disappointment

Read Acts 12:5.

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

Peter is surrounded by soldiers, chains, guards, and a prison. The church doesn't have the ability to control the situation, but they do have prayer.

The message says:

"Prayer is how the church responds to disappointment."

The believers don't understand what happened to James, but they don't allow that disappointment to keep them from God. They pray for Peter anyway.

Why do you think disappointment can sometimes cause us to pull away from God?

What does it look like to bring our disappointment **to** God instead of carrying it **away from** God?

When you're hurting or confused, what tends to keep you from praying?

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3. What do we do when we don't understand?

Read Acts 12:6–9.

Peter is facing what appears to be certain death. He is chained between two soldiers, yet he is sleeping when the angel comes to rescue him.

The message connects Peter's peace to his later words in 1 Peter 5:7:

> "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

Peter doesn't understand everything that is happening. He simply gets up, follows the angel, and takes the next step.

What stands out to you about Peter's response?

Why do you think Peter was able to sleep in such a difficult situation?

What might it look like for you to "take the next step" when you don't understand what God is doing?

Is there an area of your life right now where God may be asking you to trust Him one step at a time?

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4. God may be working before we can see it

Peter follows the angel out of prison, but at first he doesn't even realize that what is happening is real. He thinks he is seeing a vision.

It isn't until he is outside the prison that he realizes God has rescued him.

The message makes this observation:

"Just because you cannot see what God is doing doesn't mean God is doing nothing."

Have you ever looked back on a situation and realized later that God was working in ways you couldn't see at the time?

Why is it difficult to trust God when we can't see what He's doing?

What would change if you genuinely believed that God could be working even when you don't see evidence of it yet?

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5. Following Jesus doesn't mean we won't suffer

The story of James and Peter creates a tension we can't ignore:

James dies. Peter is rescued.

Both followed Jesus.

Both were loved by God.

Both were valuable to the mission of the Gospel.

The manuscript points out that none of us will make it through life without suffering. We live in a broken world where things are not yet as they should be.

The promise isn't that Christians will never suffer.

The promise is that **we never suffer alone.**

How does this challenge the idea that if we follow God, our lives should become easier?

What difference does God's presence make when He doesn't remove the difficulty?

How can we encourage someone who is experiencing suffering or an unanswered prayer?

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6. What does faith look like when God doesn't answer the way we want?

Sometimes God opens the prison door.

Sometimes He doesn't.

Sometimes the healing we pray for happens here.

Sometimes it doesn't.

Acts 12 reminds us that we cannot measure God's goodness simply by whether He gives us the answer we wanted. The manuscript points us toward trusting God even when we don't understand His ways.

What is the difference between trusting God and trusting God to give us the outcome we want?

What does it mean to pray faithfully while still being willing to say, **"Not my will, but Yours be done"?**

Is there something you've been asking God to change that you need to surrender to Him?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Take a few minutes to reflect silently:

1. **What disappointment am I carrying right now?**
2. **Have I been allowing disappointment to create distance between me and God?**
3. **What unanswered prayer is hardest for me to trust God with?**

4. **Where might God be asking me to take the next step even though I don't understand the bigger picture?**
5. **What would it look like for me to bring my disappointment TO God instead of carrying it WITH God?**

TAKE IT WITH YOU

This week, take one step:

- **Pray honestly.** Bring God the disappointment, fear, doubt, or frustration you've been carrying.
- **Take the next step.** You don't have to understand everything God is doing to obey Him today.
- **Trust His presence.** When circumstances don't change, remind yourself that God has not left you.
- **Encourage someone who is hurting.** Sit with them in their uncertainty instead of trying to explain everything.
- **Surrender one outcome.** Ask God to help you trust Him even if His answer isn't the one you hoped for.

Challenge:

Identify one disappointment or unanswered prayer you've been carrying.

This week, spend time praying:

"God, I don't understand, but I bring this to You. Help me trust You with what I cannot control."

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray that God would help your group:

- Bring their disappointments **to God instead of away from God**.
- Trust Him when they don't understand what He is doing.
- Remember that following Jesus does not mean we will never suffer.
- Experience God's presence and peace in difficult circumstances.
- Have faith to take the next step even when they cannot see the whole path.
- Trust God's goodness even when His answer is different from what they expected.

- Become people who faithfully pray for one another in seasons of suffering and uncertainty.