

# Acts 12:12-17

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*Peter goes to a woman named Mary's house, where a prayer meeting is taking place. Believers have stayed awake praying for him all night. Peter knocks at the gate and a servant-girl hears his voice. The servant announces to everyone that Peter is free, but no one believes her. Peter knocks and knocks, and finally the Christians let him in. He tells of his rescue, asks them to spread the word, and then leaves.*

Earlier, before describing Peter's rescue from prison, Luke informed his readers that the Jerusalem church was already ceaselessly praying for Peter, "but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God" (v. 5). However, it appears that they were praying for him to pass from this life as a faithful witness, because "the Jewish people were expecting" Peter to be executed (Acts 12:11).

*And when Peter realized this (that for sure the Lord had sent forth His angel and rescued him from the hand of Herod and from execution, v. 11), he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark (v 12).*

He probably went there because it was a common place for the Jerusalem believers to gather. *John who was also called Mark* will appear at the end of this chapter, though he was likely at his mother *Mary's* house that night as well, praying with the others. *John Mark* is traditionally believed to be the scribe of the Gospel of Mark (based on Peter's recollections about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ).

There, at *Mary's* house, *many were gathered together and were praying* (v. 12).

The *many* believers did not go to Herod and try to petition him to see if he would change his mind about Peter. They did not go to the Pharisees and Sadducees in power and ask to make a deal, or beg for Peter's life. Nor did they try to plan to storm the prison, to spring Peter through force or cunning.

What they are doing at *the house of Mary* is showing that they believe that there is power in prayer. While Peter is in prison, they are on their knees praying for him. They are seeking after God, petitioning Him on Peter's behalf. They are pleading with God for the entirety of the night.

However, it seems they are praying for something other than Peter's release, because they all expected him to be executed (Acts 12:11). Further, they were completely shocked when Peter was released. It is likely they are praying for Peter's peace (which was answered, as Peter was soundly sleeping earlier in the jail) as well as Peter's faithfulness in death.

We are not told what hour it is, but it is clearly the middle of the night. Morning will not come until verse 18. And all through the night, the believers of Jerusalem have been praying nonstop for Peter.

Peter arrives at *Mary's* home: *When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer* (v. 13).

*Mary* appears to be financially well off, since she has both a *servant-girl* and a *gate*, which means she possibly has a foyer (an entryway) between the house and the outside city. Or, possibly, there is a wall around *Mary's* house. *Rhoda*, the *servant*, comes to see who is knocking at *the door of the gate* in the middle of the night.

The *gate* is such that she cannot see the one standing at it but can only hear them speak. Peter asks to be let in, probably identifying himself. She hears him, and her reaction is one of excitement:

*When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate* (v. 14).

She is so excited that she forgets to let Peter inside.

She *ran* into the inner room of the house and tells her mistress *Mary* and the other believers that *Peter is standing* outside at the *front of the gate*.

Although they have been praying all night for Peter, this apparently was not something they were praying for. It does not seem to have been within their range of expected outcomes, although this is not the first time Peter has slipped out of prison by God's intervention (Acts 5:19-20). Similar to the women who reported Jesus's resurrection (Luke 24:10-11), the people assembled do not believe poor Rhoda.

*They said to her, "You are out of your mind!"*

They think it is more likely that she is crazy than she is telling the truth. Perhaps since she has been awake so late, they wonder if she is dreaming, not in her right *mind*.

Rhoda does not back down. She knows what she heard at the gate.

*But she kept insisting that it was so*. Peter is free and standing outside of the *gate*. The scene is comical enough that Rhoda, so giddy to hear Peter's voice at the gate, completely abandons him there to announce the good news to those inside.

It grows even more absurd that she and the other believers get locked into an argument about whether or not Peter is at the gate, rather than going outside and proving it one way or the other.

The believers dismiss Rhoda again,

*They kept saying, "It is his angel."* (v. 15).

It is debatable what they meant by saying *It is his angel*. Some interpret this to mean that they believed Peter had died, and his spirit was speaking to Rhoda, or that a "guardian *angel*" of Peter's had talked to her. These interpretations are unlikely for several reasons. For one, Jesus never taught about our spirits lingering after death. He taught that we go to Paradise (for

believers) or to Hades (the place of the dead, for unbelievers) (Luke 16:22-23). So for these devout believers to believe in ghosts, something contrary to their faith, is not impossible, but not probable.

Furthermore, these believers are skeptics in this moment. They are dismissing Rhoda's claim that "Peter is outside." Their argument is, "Nonsense, Peter can't be outside. Peter is in prison, surrounded by guards." It makes little sense that they would sooner conclude that, rather than Peter actually being freed from prison, Rhoda was interacting with a spirit or an angel. Why would they think it more likely that spirits were talking to the servant-girl? That would mean they were picking a dubious supernatural explanation in favor of a logical supernatural explanation (remember, Peter had been freed from prison by an *angel* of the Lord before—Acts 5:19-20).

What then did they mean by *angel*? It bears remembering that the word *angel* is the Greek word "angelos," which means "messenger" or "herald." It does not always refer to a spiritual being, such as in Matthew 11:10, which refers to John the Baptizer, a human man and a messenger:

"Behold, I send my messenger ["angelos"] ahead of you,  
Who will prepare your way before you."

So perhaps the believers thought Peter had sent a messenger, someone to update the church on his condition in the prison. In any case, they did not believe Rhoda that Peter was physically standing outside the door, free from his captivity. They dismissed her as crazy, or concluded that someone other than Peter was outside, while she firmly attested that she knew whose voice she had heard.

As this debate drags on, Peter is all the while outside, pounding on the gate to be let in:

*But Peter continued knocking.*

At last the believers go outside and see who calls: *and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed* (v. 16).

It was Peter after all. He stood there, no one chasing him, no sounds of alarm in the streets of Jerusalem. He had been dragged away by sixteen soldiers earlier that day, and now here he stood at Mary's gate. The believers were *amazed*. Their prayers had been answered, but apparently in a manner that went far beyond their expectations and it astonished them.

Their reaction—they were *amazed*—is interesting. They would not have stayed up all night praying for Peter if they did not think it would help, and yet they were incredulous at Rhoda's announcement that Peter was outside, and all the more amazed to learn she was telling the truth.

It would seem that they were praying for Peter to be strong in his martyrdom. They knew that being a faithful witness, not fearing death, led to the greatest possible reward in God's kingdom. Jesus had taught this principle many times. Jesus also revealed to John that this applies to all believers (Revelation 3:21). But in this case, God answers their prayer in an unexpected manner; it is not yet Peter's time to be martyred. That will come later.

It is reasonable that the prayer warriors would expect Peter to be killed. The context of this moment was that James the Apostle had just been put to death. Perhaps they had prayed for James as well. For Peter they had prayed all night, whatever their doubts or fears, and God had answered them. He had given Peter peace, Peter having been soundly sleeping the night before his expected death (Acts 12:6-7). But God also decides to deliver Peter not by giving him the strength to endure a martyr's death, but rather by breaking him out of the prison.

Peter gets to the point immediately, which is characteristic of him:

*But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, for they were all probably voicing their amazement and badgering him with questions, and now became quiet at the wave of his hand, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison (v 17).*

Peter is sure to give God the credit and glory for his escape. How could it have been otherwise? The *Lord had led him out of the prison*, and his life had been saved.

Lastly, Peter said, "*Report these things to James and the brethren.*"

*Then he left and went to another place (v. 17).*

We are not told where he went, only that it was *another place*. Perhaps his own residence. Perhaps to tell others of his freedom. We know Peter had a wife (Matthew 8:14-15), and she may have been elsewhere in the city, worried for him. But he does ask the prayer group to give a *Report to James and the brethren* that he had been freed from *prison by the Lord*.

Which *James* did Peter mean? It was obviously not James the Apostle, who had just been put to death. This *James* was probably *James* the half-brother of Jesus. *James* was a leader of the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19, 2:9). It appears he was a leader among the church elders, since he seems to speak on their behalf or is specially mentioned (Acts 15:13, 21:18). This *James* wrote what is regarded to be the earliest of all the church letters, The Book of James. He had not originally believed that his half-brother Jesus was the Messiah (John 7:5).

But eventually *James* put his faith in the risen Christ and served as a shepherd over the other believers in Jerusalem. He will speak in defense of Jesus's gospel of grace at the Jerusalem Council in a few chapters (Acts 15:13-21), to put a stop to attempts being made by certain Jewish believers who wanted Gentile believers to be required to keep the Mosaic Law in order to be righteous before God.

Thus, Peter wants word of his rescue from prison passed on to one of the leading members of the church, so that he can both hear of God's goodness and pass on the wonderful news to other members of the church. It is probable the members of the Jerusalem church were lying low now that the Apostle *James* was murdered and the Apostle Peter was imprisoned, as well as the fact that King Herod had arrested and beaten other unnamed believers (Acts 12:1).

But God was putting a full stop to this wicked king's persecution against His people. In the following passage, Luke will report that it is Herod rather than Peter who dies. His fate was in no small part due to his mistreatment of his fellow Jews, especially those who worshipped God's own Son.

## **Biblical Text**

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