

## But the church was praying – Acts 12: 1-5

### Introduction to Release International

[S2▶] Release International is a Christian ministry called by God to love and serve persecuted Christians. [S3▶] We were founded in 1968 through the inspiration of Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor who was imprisoned for his faith for 14 years during the Communist era. Some of you may have read his well-known book *Tortured for Christ* which tells his story. After he was released, Richard was able to escape to the West. He made it his mission to let Christians here know about their fellow believers suffering persecution and challenged us to stand with them.

[S4▶] Today we continue that legacy. We work with partners on the ground in around 30 countries across the world bringing all kinds of prayerful, pastoral and practical support to Christians who suffer because of their faith. [S5▶] And there is also an important UK facing side to the ministry. We want to call Christians in the UK into fellowship with our persecuted brothers and sisters so we can support them, but also so that we can learn lessons of Christian discipleship with them.

### Bible Reflection - Background

[S6▶] One of the things we always want to do at Release International is to have a biblical perspective on the subject of persecution. We should be moved by the humanitarian tragedy of the situations we hear about, but we also need to think about persecution at a deeper theological level. And when we read the Bible, we find out that it has a lot to say about the subject. So I want to share some verses with you just now from the book of Acts which will help us to think through how we should respond. This is Acts 12: 1-5. [S7▶]

<sup>1</sup> It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup> He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (NIVUK)

In the previous few chapters of Acts the focus has been moving away from Jerusalem. After the death of Stephen, the church was targeted by the religious authorities and most of the believers were forced to flee.

But now in chapter 12 the focus comes back to Jerusalem, and we hear about the renewed resistance the church is facing. Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, was appointed to the position of King by the Roman authorities which was not very popular with the Jewish people. They didn't like the external influence of an occupying power.

To counter that, Herod had worked very hard to try to please the people and this seems to be the reason for his aggression towards the church in Acts 12. At this stage in the story, followers of Jesus were still part of the wider Jewish community, but people viewed them with suspicion and they were becoming increasingly marginalised. So, in order to score extra points with the people, Herod decides to attack the leaders of the church. First, he kills James. James was the first of the twelve apostles to be martyred. Imagine the impact that would have had on the early church - when they turned up to their next meeting and one of 'the twelve' was gone.

And when Herod sees how much this pleases the people he decides to go after Peter too. If the death of James went down well then getting Peter, the main spokesman, would make him a real hero. So, he has Peter arrested and thrown into prison under very tight security until the Passover festival ends when he can bring him out for another public execution.

### **Voice Magazine Story – Zafar Bhatti**

[S8▶] In Pakistan the minority Christian population are often targeted and are vulnerable to false accusations of blasphemy against Islam.

[S9▶] Zafar Bhatti has been imprisoned since July 2012 after he was charged with sending a supposedly blasphemous text message from a phone that didn't even belong to him. He has always denied the charges. In 2017 he was finally tried and sentenced to life in prison, and in 2021 that sentence was upgraded to a death sentence in accordance with the strict blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

In prison Zafar has experienced pressure to convert to Islam. He has been beaten and there have been attempts to take his life. Release International partners regularly visit Zafar, and they are very concerned for his health. His wife Nawab is also struggling and is finding it increasingly difficult to travel to visit him. You can read more about Zafar's story in Release International's current *Voice* magazine.

### **Bible Reflection – but the church was earnestly praying to God for him**

In Acts 12 the church in Jerusalem was under great pressure. James was dead and Peter was in prison, heavily guarded and awaiting a similar fate. [S10▶] But verse 5 is a really striking interjection and it sets up the miraculous events that follow. 'So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.'

Let's just take a minute to break that verse down. First, it was the **church** who prayed - the people of God, gathered together with one voice, lifting up their brother Peter.

Second, the church's prayer was **earnest**, or fervent. That it is the same word Luke uses to describe Jesus' prayers in the garden of Gethsemane. This was serious, committed prayer.

And third, their prayer was directed **to God**. Ultimately, it wasn't the intensity of their prayer that really mattered – it was who they were praying to. They were in a desperate situation, but the Creator of the universe had their backs. He was in control, and he would hear their prayers.

Prayer is powerful. John Stott writes that prayer is 'the only power which the powerless possess.' We don't know exactly how prayer works but we do know that God asks his people to pray, and he uses those prayers to accomplish his purposes in the world.

## Voice Magazine Story – John Cao

[S11▶] Pastor John Cao was working as a missionary in Myanmar just across the border from China. He was helping impoverished children from minority backgrounds and had established several schools. Chinese officials knew that he crossed the border because of his work and they allowed him to do so for three years. But in 2017 he was arrested and sentenced to 7 years in prison. This was part of Communist Party's rising campaign to suppress the Chinese church.

In prison John was kept in cramped conditions and monitored closely. The guards refused to give him a Bible and they wouldn't even let him kneel down to pray. They heavily censored the letters he received from his family and when his mother travelled 20 hours to visit him the guards only allowed them 3 minutes together because she happened to mention that someone was praying for him.

However, despite this treatment John never lost hope. In prison he was very conscious of the Holy Spirit's presence, and he led several other inmates to faith. He said his greatest encouragement was knowing that Christians across the world were praying for him.

John was released in March this year and although he is still being closely monitored by the authorities, he has been able to share his story. Again, you can read more about that in the current *Voice* magazine.

I want to read you an extract from one of the poems that John wrote in prison about the power of prayer. 'You can take away my freedom, but you can't take my prayers. My prayers have wings and leap over the towering iron mesh wall. Many brothers and sisters have heard them. They fly freely every day and reach Heaven above the blue sky.'

## Conclusion

[S12▶] We're not going to read the rest of Acts 12 but I'm sure most of you are familiar with what happens next. Peter is miraculously rescued from prison - an angel appears, his chains fall off, the prison gates open by themselves, and Peter walks out right under the noses of these heavily armed guards.

Like Peter, some Christian prisoners of faith today are freed. We've already heard about John Cao in China. [S13▶] Back in October 2022 Iranian Christian Nasser Navard was unexpectedly released after serving only half of his 10-year sentence for 'forming and establishing illegal house churches.' His early release gave him the opportunity to spend precious time with his elderly mother before she died the following month. All through that summer Release International had been calling Christians in the UK to pray for Nasser and it was amazing to see those prayers answered.

[S14▶] However, it is also true that many of our Christian brothers and sisters remain behind bars, sometimes for many years. And the church needs to continue to pray earnestly to God for them – for protection, for perseverance, for opportunities to share their faith, and for freedom. You can find out more information about people like Zafar Bhatti in Pakistan, Dr Kilfu in Eritrea, and Pastor Wang Yi in China in the current *Voice* magazine and online in the Prisoner Profiles section at [releaseinternational.org](http://releaseinternational.org).

[S15▶] Dr Berhane Asmelash is Release International's partner for Eritrea. He is a former prisoner of faith and today he works tirelessly to help Christians who have been arrested and imprisoned in Eritrea. (His new book, *Brother, I have come to arrest you*, is available to buy on Release International's website.)

Dr Berhane knows how much prisoners of faith value prayer and he urges Christians in the UK to commit to praying for them. He remembers a letter he received from one prisoner with this simple but profound comment, 'It is your prayers that keep me alive.'

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

## Call to action

[S16▶] Please do pick up a copy of the *Voice* magazine at the table afterwards so you can find out more about the work of Release International. The magazine comes with a daily prayer diary to help you pray for persecuted Christians in an informed way. It's free, and if you fill in one of the *Stay in Touch* cards, it can be sent to you regularly by post or email along with some of our other news and prayer communications.

As we have seen, praying is one of the most important things we can do for our persecuted brothers and sisters, so please do sign-up to get this information today. And there are lots of other resources available on the Release International website, YouTube channel and podcast.

[S17▶] And finally, could you also please consider giving financially towards Release International's work. In Romans 12:13, the Apostle Paul encourages us to 'share with the Lord's people who are in need.' Along with work in other areas, Release International funds several projects supporting Christian prisoners of faith and their families in places like Eritrea, China, Iran, and Pakistan. By giving to this work, you can make a significant contribution to their needs. You can make a donation here today, through the card in the *Voice* magazine, or you can visit [releaseinternational.org](https://releaseinternational.org) to give online.

[S18▶] Thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you today. May God bless you.