

cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there'. Can you see what's happened? Herod, the killer of Christians leaves the area. And not only does he leave, but he ends up being struck down by an angel because he would not give glory to God. And the writer Luke concludes by saying 'But the word of God continued to spread and flourish'.

You see there's a clear correlation between the prayers of the people and the eventual outcome. The persecutor falls but the Church of God rises. It's not contained to just releasing Peter from jail. Luke is saying that when the Church of God falls to its knees and prays, when people call on God, God will do far more than we have asked because of his will to see his Church flourish today.

Today you might be praying for something that you are wrestling with. Remember that those prayers are filled with a power that none of us will ever comprehend. It's not about the content of your prayer that is foremost importance, it's the person you are praying to that matters most. The people didn't really know what to pray for with Peter, but the faithfulness of God had something far greater in mind. That is God's power. That is God's plan. That is God's purpose; that when we pray, He does the impossible, he increases our expectation, and he does more than we ask.

Today I know that for some of you, you need God to do the impossible, but you haven't asked him to do it. Today why don't you cry out in honesty and say, 'God here is the impossible thing I need from you today, increase in me my expectation of what you actually are able to do in your sovereignty, and may I have the faith to know that you have a much bigger plan through my prayer that will bring more glory to you and will increase your Church here in this community'.

When we set out in September 2019 to begin this series, who would have thought that on this Sunday, just as we go into a week of prayer for our parish, that we would be sitting on this very passage. God wants to increase our expectation in this week ahead of what he is wanting to do through us as we come out of our homes from lockdown and declare our trust in him.

There's a joke about 2 gentlemen who end up dying on the same day and arrive at the same time at the pearly gates in front of Peter. Now I realise that for some of you this theology is a mess, but it's a good joke – trust me. So one of the men is a taxi driver, and the other is the minister of a church. So they both arrive at the gates, and Peter is standing and asks the first man who he is. So the taxi driver says I'm Jimmy Boyd and I was a taxi driver around Belfast. Peter checks his list, hands him a beautiful silk robe and lets him in. The minister is next, and again Peter asks him his name. So the minister says I'm The Most Reverend John T Murray Bachelor of Divinity, Master in Theology, and I was the minister of a church for 40 years. Peter looks down the list, hands the man a cotton robe and lets him in. The minister is astonished and challenges Peter. Hey, I was a minister for 40 years, preaching to people every week and all I get is a cotton robe, whereas that guy in front of me drove people around but gets the better robe. What's going on? Peter replied, oh you see up here in heaven we base everything on the results on earth. When you preached, everyone in your congregation went to sleep. When the taxi driver picked up his lifts, every single passenger prayed earnestly that their life would be spared and get to their destination safely.

And indeed prayer is so important. In fact the pattern of prayer within our church family receives a great deal of emphasis. This next week we will come together in St John's and dedicate each night to praying for guidance from God for our parish. Prayer is a powerful weapon in the life of God's Church, but we must exercise it.

We continue our series today in the Book of Acts, and now as we come to Chapter 12, the story opens with King Herod arresting Christians, and persecuting them. So just a bit of context here, this is Herod the grandson of King Herod the Great. And this is a messed up family. His father was murdered by his Grandfather, because he was afraid that he would take the throne from him. And then Herod in this story is shipped off to Rome to stay with his mum. Herod is greatly influenced by the Emperor's family in Rome which messes his head further and makes him into a nasty piece of work. He is eventually shipped back to again to rule. In AD37 he is granted the title of King. Because Herod is in charge of all the area including Judea and Samaria he becomes rather touchy when he hears that the followers of Jesus still consider Jesus as King even though he is no longer with them in person. So he is not going to have any followers of Jesus pointing more and more people to this King of the Jews. Therefore he makes it his mission to kill Christians. He puts James in custody and then beheads him. And then next he grabs Peter and puts him in prison with the intention to do the same thing.

Out of that the local church begins to pray. Verse 5 says 'So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him'. This earnest prayer is what I am calling for us all to do in this next week. This passage tells us what happens when we pray, and so it's timing could not be any better. What happens when the Church prays, what happens when I pray?

Well firstly we learn from this passage that when we pray God does the impossible.

What a great story we read here. The people begin to pray, and we don't know what they prayed for or how long they pray. But what we know is that it's likely that Herod is preparing himself to do to Peter what he did to James – the wheels are in motion, but the Church prays. Set this in your heart today. When you earnestly pray things that would otherwise not happen, will happen. When you leave your requests before God, when you trust him with a situation, you have got to be ready that God will do things that we can't imagine. God will do the impossible. So our story says that God's people began to pray and God sends his angel at just the right time to break Peter out of jail. Today if you are feeling like giving up, remember God and only God can do the impossible.

Secondly, God increases our expectation when we pray.

The more you pray, the more anticipation you will have of what God can do. If your expectation of what God can do is low, it may be linked to the amount on which you are calling on God. When you pray, when you come along to the weekly prayer meetings, when you are together calling out for the presence of God to come, the more you wait on him, the more your anticipation of what he will do increases. Let's see what happens in verse 13 – 'Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized 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.

Here's Rhoda and she comes into the church prayer time explaining what she has seen. It's Peter, he's here. Can you imagine the looks on their faces. 'No, he's not Rhoda, just sit down and keep praying. Calm down'.

But she keeps insisting. And it says, 'When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

So why would they not agree to Peter being there but believe that it might be an angel. Well in those times there would have been a popular belief that everyone had a guardian angel that would have looked like you. It's not a biblical belief, it's a popular belief of that time. So they are saying to Rhoda, 'look Rhoda it's not Peter, he's probably dead, it's his guardian angel out there'.

But the issue here is that their expectation is really low. They are praying, and when we keep praying our expectations will go up. And so God will respond to the prayers of his people. We have got to start praying even if we feel our expectation is low. And we need to keep praying.

But Peter continues to knock at the door. Can you imagine it? He's literally walked out of prison with no effort at all because of the angel with him. He's now wandering the streets, so I am guessing he's knocking the door frantically so he can get inside to safety.

And so when they eventually open the door they are amazed, because their expectation of God was that he wouldn't be able to do that. They didn't expect that

level of miracle would be possible. But here are important points about this for us today :

It is so comforting, because all of us can relate to this. We want to have faith, but I know at times I have one foot in the faith pool and one foot in the doubt pool. Our mind is wrestling between the 'Yes, yes yes God you can do it', and then there's the 'no, I don't know how he is going to be able to do this'.

That's how you can see the early Church struggling with praying for miracles. This is the church that would have seen Jesus doing the most amazing things, and yet they doubt to believe. We can relate to this.

One of the other things is that it adds credibility to this account. You can see the sceptic looking at a passage like this where an angel releases Peter from prison and the guards don't even notice it. And the sceptics can say 'oh that's such a myth'. But if it's a myth then why would the story have those early Christians saying that they didn't believe it? Why would there be a story about a servant girl coming in to convince them that it had actually taken place. No one writes a myth like that. And so it adds credibility to the whole gospel record.

But the most important thing here is that God wanted to increase the church's expectation, and God wants to increase our expectation today. Whatever you are praying for at present, raise your expectation of what God can do. Somewhere along the way these folks had lost sight of what God was able to do. In our period of having the church buildings locked, I worry that for some of you, you have lost touch of what God is able to do. He hasn't shut up shop. No, in fact I think we are going to see an incredible revival take place as a result of this lockdown period because God has been demonstrating his love in an incredible way through his Church in these times. We have got to up our expectation folks. Maybe when these early Christians saw James having his head taken off, they are beginning to feel despondent and doubtful. Their expectation of what God is able to do had been literally cut down in front of them.

But in this period, God is saying trust me, believe me, increase your expectation of what I am going to do in your life. So in your life right now, whatever it is, don't lose heart. Lift your head, pray, raise those expectations that God is going to do something amazing.

Finally, what we learn from praying is that God always does more than we ask. Remember James 5:16, 'The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective'. It's not that we are powerful. It's God that is powerful. God is bigger than you and me, so don't ever just contain God to what you want. Allow God to be God in your prayers, and be ready for what he is going to do when you and I surrender to his power. You see our story doesn't just end with the church praying and Peter being saved from death. Verse 18 tells us that 'In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter'. That's an under exaggeration if there ever was one. But then in verse 19 that we didn't read it says that 'After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find [Peter], he