

# YOU

Bible Study

**Sermon Series: How to Share Christ**  
**To be used with: Trust God to Work**  
**Sermon Title Possibilities: The God of Surprises**  
**Scripture: Acts 12:5-11**

**Connection with Unit Theme:** To complement the small group study How to Share Christ, these sermon outlines will follow the same theme as the small group study, so the pastor can reinforce the study from the pulpit.

**Introduction:** As I write this, we have just begun a new year. Many people, including me, were quite glad to see the old one end! We had the coronavirus pandemic, which still hasn't ended as I write. The sickness and deaths were bad enough, but it also had a devastating impact on many people financially. Businesses were closed down and people were out of work. If that weren't enough, we've just come through one of the most contentious presidential elections in history. Many are worried about what the future holds. Will there be increased pressure on churches to compromise their beliefs? Will the hostility toward the church grow into outright persecution?

I don't claim to know the answers to these questions, but I do know that our God is still in control. I also know that this is no time for the church to shy away from proclaiming the gospel. On the contrary, we must proclaim it more loudly and boldly than ever. People may not listen to us, but the results are in God's hands. Our duty is to trust Him and obey Him. He often does His greatest work in the darkest of times.

## **The unfriendly conditions.**

A. King Herod was making trouble for the church.

1. This was Herod Agrippa I, who ruled all of Israel at this time.
  - a. He was the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist put to death, and the grandson of Herod the Great.
  - b. He had gained his power largely through his connections with the Roman emperors Caligula and Claudius.
  - c. He was politically astute enough to build good relations with the Jewish religious leaders.
2. He set out to "vex certain of the church".
  - a. The word translated "vex" means to harm, mistreat, or oppress.
  - b. He had James, the brother of John, beheaded.
  - c. The Jewish leaders were pleased by James' execution, so Herod arrested Peter and planned to kill him, too.

B. How did the church respond?

1. They took the matter to God in prayer.
  - a. No problem is too big for Him to handle.
  - b. He gives us peace in the midst of difficulty.
    - An old hymn says, "Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

2. Are we praying for our country?
  - a. Some dark times may be ahead for our nation.
  - b. God never promised us life in this world would be easy, but He did promise He would be with us.

### **The unexpected caller.**

- A. Peter was kept under heavy guard.
  1. This was not the first time he had been in prison.
    - a. He and the other apostles were put in the temple prison earlier, but an angel delivered them (Acts 5:19).
    - b. This time they chained Peter between two Roman guards and posted two more outside his prison cell.
  2. The guards and chains were no match for God's angel.
    - a. The angel caused his chains to fall off and led Peter out of the prison.
    - b. Peter was still half asleep, and he did not fully realize what had happened until he was outside.
    - c. God delivered Peter from a hopeless situation. Likewise, He can work in our country even if the situation seems hopeless.
- B. Peter went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark.
  1. A servant girl named Rhoda greeted him at the door.
    - a. She was so excited that she forgot to open the door and let him in!
    - b. She told everyone who it was, but they didn't believe her.
      - "It is his angel." Jewish tradition taught that every person has a guardian angel. When a person died, they believed his guardian angel would appear to his friends in the form of that person.
  2. When the people realized it really was Peter, they were "astonished".
    - a. They had prayed for Peter's release, but they were surprised when God answered their prayers.
    - b. God can answer prayers even when our faith is lacking.

### **The unlikely conclusion.**

- A. Herod got what was coming to him.
  1. He had some trouble with Tyre and Sidon, but they sent a delegation to him to resolve their differences.
    - a. While they were there, they attended a festival in honor of Caesar, and Herod delivered a speech.<sup>1</sup>
    - b. His speech and his spectacular apparel really impressed the crowd, and they hailed him as a god.
  2. Herod was immediately smitten by an angel.
    - a. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, he began to feel terrible pains in his stomach.<sup>2</sup>
    - b. "He was eaten of worms" – That is, he was stricken with a disease that involved worms or some other parasite in his body.
  3. Earthly rulers come and go, but the church marches on!
    - a. Herod set out to destroy the church, but he was destroyed instead.
    - b. Many other rulers down through history have tried to destroy the church, and they failed just as Herod did.
- B. Saul and Barnabas returned to Antioch.
  1. They had brought an offering from Antioch to Jerusalem.

- a. Their arrival in Jerusalem is mentioned at the end of chapter 11, and it says nothing about the departure until the end of chapter 12.
  - b. Evidently, they were in Jerusalem during Peter's imprisonment, and they were also at the prayer meeting at John Mark's house.
2. Saul and Barnabas were later sent out as missionaries.
    - a. Saul later changed his name to Paul, and he began a long ministry carrying the gospel to other lands.
    - b. When all was said, Herod was dead, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ continued to spread throughout the world.

**Conclusion:** One of the most fascinating periods of history was the great prayer revival of 1857. That year, the Supreme Court issued the infamous Dred Scott decision, which was a huge setback for those who opposed slavery. The country was heavily polarized, violence was breaking out in various states, the political system was in a mess, and the economy was shaky. Does any of that sound familiar? It was a day very much like our own! Be that as it may, in September of 1857, a man named Jeremiah Lamphier began a weekly prayer meeting at a church in New York City. Only six people attended the first meeting, but as word spread, attendance grew rapidly. Before long, similar prayer meetings were organized in cities all over the country. Most of them were led by laymen, not preachers. They were very simple meetings, lasting only one hour, and they focused on prayer instead of preaching.

Critics will note that these meetings did not prevent the Civil War. That's true enough. Still, the prayer meetings planted the seeds for great revival movements that took place during and after the war. One young man attended one of these prayer meetings in Chicago, and it made a tremendous impact on him. His name was Dwight L. Moody, who became one of the greatest evangelists of the nineteenth century. I don't know what the future holds for our country, but don't think for one minute that God has relinquished control to anyone. He is in control even in the darkest of times. Who knows how He might turn these circumstances for His own glory? He is a God of surprises!

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 19.8.2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.