

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

Stretching Exercises

(Acts 12:1-17)

Study #15

Introduction: Staying (or getting) flexible...

Because joint flexibility decreases as people age, stretching exercises become increasingly important with advancing years.

I've always had an issue with flexibility. I've never been able to sit cross-legged on the floor comfortably. I can't touch the floor with my fingertips while my legs are straight.

And as I've gotten older, I've noticed something. That tightness, that inflexibility, has become more pronounced.

With my current exercise program (Crossfit), I've gained some flexibility in joints that have long been restricted and have gained range of motion that I've actually never had before. And I'm encouraged that there is hope for increased flexibility even for me!

Now, for those who, like me, believe that the body (at least in some regards) provides a picture of the soul, this image of decreasing flexibility signals a warning.

I remember the time I remarked to Kathy - and I was not talking about my physical life - *"I'm a pretty flexible guy."*

I believe that she was drinking something at the time, because I remember that she almost choked.

That was my wife's not so subtle way of questioning my self-assessment of being a pretty easy-going, adaptable, flexible person.

I took her response to heart a number of years ago and have made it my aim to be a bit more flexible, a bit more open to change.

Clearly, "flexibility" and stretching exercises and increasing range of motion are important issues for the body. They are also important for the soul. And they are very important for our church.

Walking with God means getting involved in an adventure that will stretch us to the max. Be warned. If we are not flexible, willing to broaden our views, and eager to change and grow and develop and adapt, God's great adventure will be really uncomfortable!

The story we'll explore today in Acts will invite you and me and us to stretch and change in two specific, very practical arenas.

Luke gives us a time stamp at the beginning of chapter 12 with the words, *"Now about that time..."*

So, what follows happened around the same time that the church located in the city of Antioch was helping the church in Jerusalem in a time of famine.(Acts 11:27-30)¹

In other words, right about the time that LOVE was flowing back and forth between churches, HATRED reared up against the church in the form of outright persecution against the church's leaders.

Apostles Under Attack (much to the dismay of a watching church) (vv. 1-4)

The Death of the Apostle James (vv. 1-2)

[1] Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them.

¹ Remember, in the original manuscript, there were no chapter divisions.

Herod? Which Herod is THIS?

You should know that there was actually a dynasty of the family of the Herodians, and that several Herods are mentioned in the New Testament. If you didn't know that, you might think that that the one Herod really got around!

There was **Herod the Great**, the Roman installed (non-Jewish) ruler of Israel when Jesus was born. He was the one who ordered the death of the infants in the areas around Bethlehem, in an attempt to get rid of Jesus.²

There was also **Herod Philip the First**³, and **Herod Philip the Second**⁴, **Herod Antipas**⁵, **Herod Archelaus**⁶ and **Herod Agrippa II**⁷.

And, there is **Herod Agrippa I**, the King we meet here in Acts 12.

This Herod was the king of Judea, but he was not a full-blooded Jew. While his mother was Jewish, his father was Idumean (or "Edomite" - that is, a descendant of Esau, Isaac's older, unchosen son).⁸

He had been educated at Rome. He strictly adhered to Jewish law. And he was a pretty popular ruler among the Jews over whom he ruled.

² Mentioned in Matthew 2, Herod the Great reigned from 41 BC until shortly after Jesus was born. He was the one who received the visit from the magi from the east. FYI, Herod the Great married ten times.

³ The first husband of the woman named Herodias who was responsible for the death of John the Baptist. He is mentioned by the name "Philip" in Matthew 14:3. He held no official office and was the father of Salome.

⁴ The founder of Caesarea Philippi, which was named after him.

⁵ He ruled the regions of Galilee and Peraea during the days of Jesus' public ministry. He was the second husband of Herodias and was the one who consented to the death of John the Baptist.

⁶ The ruler of Judaea and Samaria and Idumaea. History records him as a thoroughly bad ruler. He was ultimately deposed and banished, and is only mentioned in Matthew 2:22.

⁷ The man before whom Paul will later appear (Acts 25).

⁸ His mother was Mariamne (related to the Jewish patriots, the Macabees). His father was Aristobulus IV and his grandfather was Herod the Great.

Luke tells us that he "***laid hands on some***" in the church (although only two are singled out in this chapter). I wonder why he wanted to trouble the followers of Jesus?

Why would Herod mistreat Christians?

Well, earlier, even though the apostles had spent time in jail and Stephen had been stoned to death, Jesus' followers had enjoyed a fairly decent reputation in Jerusalem.

But, by AD 44 (the time of this passage), Christianity had mostly fallen out of favor with the general populace. (I suspect that the loss of popularity had something to do with the church's acceptance of Gentiles.)

As time went on, more and more people began to think less and less of the church of Jesus Christ.

And Herod, being the astute (read "sly") ruler he was, recognized this drop in popularity, and saw in it an opportunity to become even more popular with his subjects. He would arrest and execute the primary leadership of the now un-popular Christians!

The first target was the apostle James, one of the "sons of thunder", so called because of his zeal for God.

James, the first apostle to die

One time, when the brothers James and John told Jesus that they wanted to sit at His right and left hand in the coming Kingdom, the places of honor, the Lord told them that He couldn't promise them THAT.

However, He did promise them that they would "***drink the cup***" that He was going to drink. That "***cup***" was the cup of suffering.

Sure enough, here is James fulfilling Jesus' words to him in Acts, a short twelve years after Jesus' own death.¹⁰

⁹ Mathew 20:22, 23

¹⁰ This is likely AD 44, the year of Herod's death.

[2] And [Herod] had James the brother of John¹¹ put to death with a sword.

Herod singled James out, arrested him and put him to death unjustly, just as Jesus had been killed unjustly. And he was killed in Jerusalem, where Jesus had also been killed.

The death of James was obviously a tragedy for the church, as he was a highly respected leader in the church. But it also would have been a wake-up call for the members of the church on a personal level.

To this point, only NON-apostles had been forced to flee Jerusalem to escape persecution. Only Stephen, a NON-apostle, had been martyred. Apostles had been imprisoned, but had miraculously escaped.

There seemed to have been an air of invincibility surrounding the apostles. Until now. No more.

With the death of James, a new reality came crashing down on the church. God is not always going to protect His people - whether regular church-goers or even apostles - from suffering and from death.

This event marked a huge change in what the church could expect from God. Now they realized, *“Anything can happen. Not even apostles are protected.”*

When Herod saw that he had pleased the people by putting James to death, he took aim at another of the apostles, the spokesman for the group - Simon Peter.

The Arrest of the Apostle Peter (vv. 3-4)

Next up - the apostle Peter!

[3a] When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he (i.e. - Herod) ***proceeded to arrest Peter also.***¹²

¹¹ James was the first of the apostles to die. John, the last. Thus, the deaths of these two brothers forms a parenthesis between which all the apostles lived and labored and eventually died.

Peter had been the prime leader of the Jesus movement from the very beginning.

He spoke at Pentecost. He spoke after the healing of the lame man in front of the Temple. He spoke to the Sanhedrin. Peter was everywhere!

Because of his high profile, the leaders in Jerusalem had actually been trying to control him for some time, either by imprisonment or threats.

Herod, ever the political animal, saw a way to make even more hay with his subjects by doing to Peter as he had done to James.

He had Peter arrested and placed in jail during one of the three holiest seasons of the year, the Passover season, the same season during which Jesus had been arrested and put to death.

Timing is everything...

[3b] Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. [4] When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people.

Herod knew that a public execution during Passover would have been offensive to the Jews,¹³ so he didn't force the issue, didn't rush things.

He just kept Peter languishing in lock up in the Roman prison called Antonio Fortress, located just northwest of the Temple area. (This was the very place to which Jesus had been taken to be scourged.¹⁴)

And you'll notice that Herod made sure Peter stayed put. A total of sixteen soldiers were assigned to this "Public Enemy #1"!

¹² Part of the rationale for going after Peter could easily have been his recent fraternization with the Gentiles (See Acts 10-11 and the story of Cornelius).

¹³ Mark 14:2 shows that.

¹⁴ It is not the same prison to which Peter had been taken earlier, as recorded in Acts 5. That was a Jewish jail.

There were four six hour watches every twenty four hours, and four soldiers assigned per watch. At each watch, two soldiers were chained to Peter's wrists, and two stood guard at the door to his cell.

Maybe, knowing how many sympathizers Peter had in the city, Herod feared Peter's friends would try to help him break out of jail.

(Or, was Herod afraid of another mysterious jailbreak like the one recorded in Acts 5, when an angel escorted Peter and the rest of the apostles from prison in the middle of the night? Sixteen soldiers does seem like a lot of guards for one guy...)

Before we move on to the rest of the story, let's pause for a moment for a stretching exercise.

Stretching exercise: Christian faith as "country club" or "salvation army"?

Put yourself in the shoes of the early church. Many of your fellow Christians have fled Jerusalem following the martyrdom of Stephen. You have now watched Herod imprison and execute James. Peter is in jail awaiting the same fate?

What would you be thinking? What would be feeling?

You would likely be thinking through what you have heard from others about Jesus' description of life for His followers.

- Matthew 5:11 - ***"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."***
- Matthew 5:44 - ***"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."***
- Luke 21:12 - ***"But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake."***
- John 15:20 - ***"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also."***

For much of the last 2,000 years and in many of the places where the church has existed, the image of the church facing hardship is the most prominent image.

As we meet this morning, many millions of our brothers and sisters around the world are facing the exact same level of opposition the early church faced under Herod Agrippa I. And, as we meet this morning we are not facing hardship right now on account of our faith in Jesus.

But here is a stretching thought. It is not the experience of the persecuted church today that is remarkable. It is our experience that is remarkable.

Historically, being an outspoken Christian involves a near certain exposure to risk, suffering, and loss.

Today, you and I are called to allow God to *stretch* our understanding of our faith and to embrace it as much more than a convenient escape to personal peace and comfort.

To follow Jesus is to:

- gladly engage a world in desperate need and to sacrificially meet those needs in His Name;
- willingly stand against error and proclaim the Gospel regardless of consequences;
- eagerly share Christ's love with those whom He desperately loves, knowing that we may be rejected, along with Him;
- never turn back, no matter the hardship or pain or loss.

Despite what you may hear from whatever source you may hear it, following Jesus Christ is not an invitation to a comfortable life in a country club. It is a call to join a "salvation army."

And so, having stretched our minds to realize what we've gotten into when we have started on this path to follow Jesus, let's turn back to Acts...

Seeing what had happened to James, the church no doubt feared the same fate for Peter.

And of course, they would have wanted to do everything they could to help Peter.

But, they had NO POWER over the politics of the situation (and they followed a Master who would have frowned upon a violent jailbreak attempt). So what could they do?

Well, in the face of a terrible outbreak of persecution, in the face of the potential loss of a dear brother and a critically important leader, the least they could do was also the most they could do. They PRAYED.

Parenthetically: Meanwhile, back at the church... (v. 5)

[5] So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

This was a prayer meeting that began at the time of Peter's arrest - at whatever point that was - and that continued for some time.¹⁵

Passover is the season when the Jews remember God's great deliverance of the nation from Egyptian bondage. And in Jerusalem, on that year, the Christians were praying that God would perform another mighty act of deliverance on behalf of Simon Peter.

While the church was praying, God was moving to deliver!

An Apostle Delivered (much to the shock of a praying church) (vv. 6-17)

Peter's Miraculous Release from Prison (vv. 6-11)

Peter was SLEEPING!

[6] On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.

¹⁵ As one author observed, we are not told what they were praying. We assume it was for his deliverance, but it could also have been for God's will to be done, and for Peter's encouragement while he was languishing in prison.

Isn't that amazing?! Would you have been sleeping if you were chained to Roman soldiers, sentenced to die, with the executioner's sword only hours away?

Me? I find it hard to sleep before a doctor's appointment, so it is tough to imagine sleeping before my execution. But Peter was asleep, a testimony to the peace God is willing to give to those who truly trust Him, even at the most stressful moments.¹⁶ (I'll trust that in the event I face something really extreme, God will give me the same grace He gave Peter.)

However, Peter didn't get to sleep all the way through this night. At some point, his dreams were interrupted by an angel who showed up in his jail cell.

Led by the hand to freedom

[7] And behold, an angel¹⁷ of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands.¹⁸ [8] And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." [9] And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. [10] When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street; and immediately the angel departed from him."

So, they walked right past the prison guards whom God had thrown into a deep stupor. They made it out of the cell and even out of the prison complex, safe and sound.

¹⁶ What a tremendous application by Peter of the verse we read in 1 Peter, "casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you." (5:7)! Nice to see Peter practicing what he preached...

¹⁷ Angels are ministering spirits, sent for the help and aid of those who are set to inherit salvation. (Hebrews 1:14)

¹⁸ Did Charles Wesley envision this scene when he wrote, "I woke; the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed Thee" in the hymn "And Can It Be"?

Through this whole exchange Peter thought he was dreaming, that it was a “too-good-to-be-true” experience. And it was only when the angel left that he realized how real his deliverance was!

Slow to take it in

[11] When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”¹⁹

So, Peter found himself standing all alone in the middle of a deserted Jerusalem street in the middle of the night!

Now, had I been Peter, I might have been tempted to flee to a safe place (as in OUT OF TOWN!) immediately after having been set free from prison. But not Peter.

Upon being released, he did what you probably would have done. He went to church!

Peter’s Surprise Arrival at a Prayer Meeting (vv. 12-17)

Hello? Anybody home? (vv. 12-16)

Off to the home of Mary (v. 12)

[12] And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark²⁰, where many were gathered together and were praying.

As you know, there were no church buildings at first. In fact, Christians met in public buildings and in homes for the first several centuries of the church’s existence.

¹⁹ In his commentary, British scholar William Barclay wonders if this passage describes a miracle or not. I mention this here to demonstrate that not everybody whose writings you read will have as high a view of Scripture as you do. Be prepared. Obviously, God performed a miracle in Peter’s deliverance from prison, and Barclay simply betrays an anti-supernatural bias.

²⁰ John Mark, the author of the second Gospel and participant in the first part of the First Missionary Journey.

Evidently Mary’s home was large enough for sizeable gatherings, so it isn’t surprising that hers was chosen for the meeting where people were gathered to pray for Peter’s release.²¹

They were deeply concerned for Peter. That’s obvious from their willingness to pray for hours and hours, if not days and days. They also clearly believed that God heard and was willing to answer - or else why pray?

So, they were praying. And I say, “*Hats off to them!*” They prayed fervently. They were praying in the middle of the night.

And in the middle of their Prayer Meeting, Peter showed up!

Rhoda’s report - disbelieved! (vv. 13-15)

[13] When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. [14] 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. [15] They said to her, “You are out of your mind!” But she kept insisting that it was so. And they kept saying, “It is his angel.”²²

So here is Peter, present and knocking at the door in answer to the prayers of the believers who are STILL praying.

Rhoda, this sweet little servant girl, answered the door and was so overcome with excitement at Peter’s appearance, that she forgot to open the door to him.

She rushed back to the prayer meeting, in progress, and announced, “*Peter’s at the front door!*”

She is shushed, with, “*Rhoda, be quiet. We’re busy asking God to free Peter.*”

Rhoda: “*I know. He’s at the door right now!*”

Grown-ups: “*We can’t be bothered by you now. Rhoda. We’re praying.*”

²¹ Evidently, she was a woman of means. She had servants, at least, which is somewhat telling.

²² Evidently, there was a belief in personal angels, angels who were assigned to individuals.

Rhoda: “*Peter’s standing outside! God has answered your prayers!*”
 Grown-ups: “*You’re imagining things. No doubt it is his guardian angel. Leave us alone so that we can pray for Peter’s release.*”

All the while, Peter keeps knocking! Finally, these good pray-ers hear a knocking on the front door from Peter’s, by now, bruised knuckles.

They’re thinking, “*Who on earth could it be knocking on the door at this hour? Rhoda, would you please be a dear and go answer the door for us?*”

To which Rhoda replied, “*You come with me!*”

Come on in, Peter! (v. 16)

They did. A group of them stopped their praying to answer the door - and got the surprise of their lives.

[16] But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed.

Peter tells the tale (v. 17)

[17] But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, “Report these things to James²³ and the brethren.” Then he departed and went to another place.

Wow! Look at what God did. And let’s not miss the fact that He did what He did as the people prayed.

Are you ready for another stretching exercise? This time, God’s Word calls us to stretch our prayer muscles.

Stretching exercise: Prayer as a “good idea” or “lifeline to God”?

Every Christian is grateful for the access God has provided to praise Him and to worship, to confess, and to make requests by way of prayer.

And just about every Christian with whom I’ve ever had a serious conversation will admit to an aspiration to pray. Even if our prayer life is not what we wish it was, we WANT to be pray-ers.

BUT, to become the pray-er we dream of becoming will be a *stretch* for most of us.

When James (again, the half-brother of Jesus) wrote his contribution to our New Testaments, he included these words ***[4:2] You do not have because you do not ask.*** - and I’ve wondered if he was thinking about Peter’s release from prison as he penned that thought.

In prayer, God has graciously provided us a way to participate in - and even affect - what He is doing in the world.

Prayer is a mighty weapon, given to us by God to affect change. He is pleased to use our prayers to make things happen that wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t prayed.

Once, a man told C. S. Lewis, “*Praying for particular things always seems to me like advising God how to run the world. Wouldn’t it be wiser to assume that He knows best, and just let Him act without our advice?*”

“*On the same principle,*” Lewis answered, “*I suppose you never ask a man next to you to pass the salt, because God knows best whether you ought to have salt or not. And I suppose you never take an umbrella, because God knows best, whether you ought to be wet or dry.*”

The friend protested, “*That’s quite different!*”

To which Lewis replied, “*I don’t see why. The odd thing is that God should let us influence the course of events at all. But since He lets us do it in one way (our action), I don’t see why He shouldn’t let us do it in the other (our prayer).*”

²³ This James is not the apostle. He was killed by Herod. This James is the half-brother of Jesus. He did not believe in Jesus during the Lord’s earthly life. Now, though, James is one of the leaders of the church. We learn from church history that James was martyred by stoning in AD 62.

It is admittedly difficult to pray:

- for the salvation of loved ones for years and years;
- for decades for grace in overcoming character flaws;
- to pray for physical healing that is slow in coming;
- to pray for spiritual revival and renewal when the truth is that you're just in a valley and can't see your way out.

It is even more difficult to maintain perseverance in praying for the advance of Christ's Kingdom now when the progress is - from our perspective slow, slow, slow!

But, God has promised that when we pray a couple of things happen that would not happen if we didn't pray.

One, we deepen our relationship with God as we talk to Him.

And two, we get to participate with God in changing lives, and in changing history.

Prayer is the response of a heart that is depending on God. Community prayer is the response of a church that is marked by a growing dependence on God.

Can you see yourself passionately pouring out your heart to God, admitting to Him that the things you care most about in life are the things that are beyond your control and asking Him to do what only He can do?

Can you see us, as a church, growing in dependence on God to the point that we would give ourselves to something we were passionate about in prayer, together, for hours and hours, or for days and days?

Maybe your prayer muscles have atrophied of late and maybe you are needing to *stretch* those ligaments and maybe you are needing to *change* to become the prayer warrior you have always dreamed of becoming.

Be encouraged. People of any age can engage in stretching exercises to benefit their bodies. And that spiritual stretching can begin this day as you simply, earnestly, honestly, go to God and pray.