

Creekside Community Church
Primal Church: The Acts of the Apostles
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Riding God's Momentum
Acts 12:1-25

I come from a family of swimmers. But sadly, I didn't inherit the swimming gene. I'm the black sheep in my family. Really, I'm more like the black cat, because I'm a bit cat-like in the water. And I'm reminded of this whenever we go to the beach. When I bodysurf, I struggle against the water. I look like I'm getting into a bar fight with each wave. And not surprisingly, the wave always wins. And I'm so envious of my dad. Many of you know that he's a swimmer. But here's what he won't tell you; he's a *really good* swimmer. And when he bodysurfs, it's effortless. He picks the right wave. He chooses the right spot. He starts swimming at just the right moment. And while I'm trying to avoid drowning, he's just gliding across the water.

I think that image – the image of riding a wave – helps us to conceptualize the Christian life. To catch a wave, you need to know what it's going to do. Then, you must be responsive to it. And then, you must work in concert with it. And that's a lot like following Jesus; because God isn't static. He's active. We've seen this in the book of Acts, haven't we? God is expanding his kingdom. He's seeking and saving the lost. He's the initiator. And he invites us to participate in what he's already doing. Now, some of us are action-oriented. We want to serve God now. Do first. Think later. But not all activity is effective. In fact, if we aren't aligned with God's purposes, we can actually work against him. On the other hand, some of us tend towards passivity. We assume that God's active. But we don't participate in his work. And, if we don't respond to God's activity, the wave of his work may pass us by. So Christians aren't just called to activity. Nor are they just called to passivity. Rather, God calls us to a kind of responsive activity. We don't create the momentum. But we do choose whether or not to ride it. Now, all of that may sound very conceptual. So what does it look like in practice? What does the church look like when it's moving with divine momentum? And how do we mirror God's movement? How do we align with his activity? Acts 12 helps us fill in the details of this picture.

And if you have a Bible, you can turn there now. Acts is the New Testament history of the earliest Christians. And that's why we've entitled this series *Primal Church*. Acts reveals what Jesus created the church to be. So even though it's about the first century church, it has tremendous relevance for the 21st century church. In Acts, Luke recounts the spread of the gospel message throughout the Greco-Roman world. And that's what Acts 12 is ultimately about; the progress of the gospel.

In this passage, the Christian movement faces formidable opposition. But ultimately God's power prevails. According to verse 24, *"...the word of the Lord continue[s] to grow and to be multiplied."* That's a good summary of the chapter. God's kingdom triumphs over earthly powers, as more and more people come to believe in Jesus. So God is working. How do we participate in his work? Here are three insights from the passage. To align ourselves with God's activity, we pray for God's help. We multiply for God's ministry. And we submit to God's greatness. Pray, multiply, and submit.

A. Pray for God's Help: Let's begin with prayer; because prayer is the primary way we express our dependence on God's power, and access that power. Let's look at the passage. *"Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. ² And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. ³ And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ And 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."*

In chapter 11, we learned about the church in Antioch. The Christians in Antioch collect resources for the impoverished church in Jerusalem. And they send this financial gift by way of Paul and Barnabas. Luke will circle back to these two at the end of the chapter. But first, he gives us a snapshot of what's been happening in Jerusalem.

Herod is persecuting the Jerusalem church. At this time, Israel was ruled by Rome. Herod was connected to the Roman Imperial family. This benefitted him politically, as he was eventually granted kingship over Israel. Now, that name *"Herod"* may sound familiar. It occurs throughout the New Testament. This particular *"Herod"* was named Agrippa. He's the grandson of Herod the Great, and the nephew of Herod Antipas. Herod the Great tried to murder Jesus. And Herod Antipas killed John the Baptist, and conspired in Jesus' crucifixion. So the Herods have a rich history of opposing Jesus. And Agrippa follows suit by opposing Jesus' followers.

He arrests some believers. And then he kills James, who was one of Jesus' closest followers. These actions please the citizens of Jerusalem. And when Herod perceives this, he arrests Peter as well. Interestingly, Peter is arrested during the festival of Unleavened Bread, just like Jesus was. Herod imprisons Peter. But he doesn't want to disrupt the festival. So Herod decides to try Peter once the Passover is finished.

At this point in history, the church had become quite large. And now, some believers – including Peter – were openly associating with Gentiles (non-Jews). The surrounding Jewish community frowned upon this. And it appears they viewed the church as a growing threat to their religious identity. And Herod is more than happy to swim with the tide of public opinion. The Herodian family didn't always get along with the Jews. So Herod is eager to placate the masses, and keep the peace by stamping out the Christian movement.

This is a desperate time for Jesus' followers. Peter – the leader of the early church – is in

prison. He is about to be publically tried. And in all likelihood, he'll be executed. And to ensure that Peter can't escape, Herod assigns four detachments of soldiers to guard him. Peter is chained to two soldiers, while two additional soldiers stand guard. And throughout the night – every three hours – four new guards take over for the previous four. So escape is impossible.

And the church faces an impossible situation. But how do they respond? Verse 5; *“So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.”* The Christians don't form a militia. They don't plot Herod's assassination. Instead, they pray. In fact, the *entire* church prays. And they pray relentlessly. As we'll see, they pray through the entire night. And, according to verse 5, they pray *“fervently.”* This church agonizes in prayer. And God responds.

“And 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. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and roused him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And his chains fell off his hands. 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 And 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.”

On the night before Peter's trial, an angel appears in his jail cell. The angel has to literally hit Peter to wake him up. And then, Peter groggily gets out of bed. His chains fall off. And in essence, he sleepwalks to freedom. God blinds the guards to what's happening. And even Peter doesn't know what's happening! He thinks he's having a dream. He staggers out of his cell; walks past one set of guards; and then another. And then, he comes to the main prison gate. And it opens for him automatically. The angel walks with Peter for one more block. And then he disappears. And at this point, Peter truly, *“wakes up.”*

And 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.” ¹² And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ And 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 And 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.” ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. 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 James and the brethren." And he departed and went to another place."

Peter realizes that God has indeed delivered him. And apparently, he also realizes that Mary's house is close by. So, he begins to walk there. Mary was a wealthy Christian widow, who used her home for various church gatherings. Mary's son is John Mark, who wrote the Gospel of Mark. He becomes more prominent in the next few chapters.

Now, this passage is hilarious, isn't it? Peter is knocking on the door of this house. But inside, believers are having a prayer meeting... for him. Rhoda hears Peter knocking. But when she sees him at the door, she runs away! She's so excited that she forgets to let him in. So she runs inside, and says, "Peter's here!" But the people are incredulous. For some reason, they think it's his angel. Many Jews believed that each person was protected by a specific angel. And that angel functioned as a person's "double." Now, I've got to be honest: I have no idea why it'd be easier to believe that, than to believe Rhoda. But anyways, the church gets into an argument about angels. And meanwhile, Peter is still standing at the door, knocking. Finally, the people answer the door. And Peter tells them what happened.

And I want you to notice two things about this story. First, notice that God does *all* of the delivering. Twice Peter says that the Lord rescued him. Peter contributes nothing. And second, notice that God delivers Peter in response to prayer.

So how do we align with God's activity? By asking him to be active; by praying for his help. John Stott says that prayer is the only power which the powerless possess.¹ In this passage, the church is powerless. So they ask God to do what *only* he can do. And when we feel powerless, prayer seems natural, doesn't it? In impossible situations, we feel compelled to pray. After all, what else can we do? But the truth is, we're *always* desperate for God's intervention. Ministry is what God does through us. Paul says, "I planted, Apollos water, but God caused growth" (1 Cor 3:8). God saves people. He grows people. His momentum *is* what propels us forward. And *His* power is primary. And conversely, I have far less power – and far less influence – than I assume.

I was reminded of that recently at a dental appointment. Now, I have a confession to make. I don't floss. And before you flossers berate me, hear me out. I know that I have a problem, ok? I'm past the denial stage. I'm just unwilling to change. And sometimes, I fear going to the dentist; because I know that I'm going to be cross-examined. "Alright Jeffrey, how often do you brush your teeth?" "Two to three times a day." "And how often do you floss?" "4...1..6 times...month..year." My hygienist knows that I don't floss. So, she gives me the flossing sermon. Perhaps you've heard it. She shares all of the blessings of flossing. And then, she warns of all the curses associated with not flossing. And here's the thing; *she's right*. I can't argue with her. And yet, I *will not* floss. So several months ago, I was sitting in the dentist's

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (TBST: Dowers Grove, Ill: IVP, 1990); 209.

chair. And I was listening to the flossing sermon. Captive audience, right? And, I had this epiphany. I thought, *“I hear this sermon every six months. And it’s irrefutable. And yet, I refuse to take 30 seconds out of my day, and floss. I preach to people for a living. And I don’t tell them to do little things, like floss. I tell them to do huge things, like give their lives to Jesus. Why in the world do I think they’re going listen to me?”*

We change slowly, don’t we? At least I do. And I vastly overestimate my ability to influence outcomes. So think about the things you want most in life. Maybe you want a sickness healed; or, a relationship reconciled. Maybe you want your spouse to change; or, your kids to walk with Jesus. We’re utterly dependent on God for all these things. So how diligently are you asking God to do what only he can do?

The Bible says that, *“God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble”* (James 4:6). And here’s one way you could paraphrase that; *“God is opposed to the prayerless, but gives grace to the prayerful.”* Pride says, *“I am sufficient. And I don’t need help.”* And when I’m prideful, I’m prayerless. I don’t ask God for help. And God opposes me. But if I’m humble, I express dependence. And God empowers me. So how do we apply this? Here are two suggestions. First, an application. This passage highlights the power of corporate prayer. The whole church prays together. Corporate prayer is powerful, because it aligns us. We all move with God in the same direction. We value corporate prayer. And that’s one reason we’re starting a monthly worship and prayer night. It’s on the third Thursday of each month. And it’s right here at Creekside. It’s a chance for us to praise God, but also to align by praying for the same things. And we’d love to see you there. That’s one suggestion. Here’s a second; ask yourself: *“is there anything that I’m working for fervently, but not praying for fervently?”* When I work prayerlessly for something, I’ve forgotten whose work is primary.

B. Multiply for God’s Ministry: So how do we align with God’s activity? First, we pray for his help. Second, we multiply for his ministry. Once you understand that God creates the momentum – that his work is primary – you begin to view your role differently. Each of us plays a part in God’s work. But none of us is indispensable. And God can work powerfully through *anyone*. And when you realize those two things; that you’re not indispensable, and that God can work through anyone; your perspective begins to change. You stop focusing so much on doing, and more on equipping. You begin to focus on training others; on multiplying the conduits through which God can work.

Look again at verse 17: *“And [Peter] said, “Report these things to James and the brethren.” And he departed and went to another place.”* Peter is no longer safe in Jerusalem. He has to leave. But before leaving, he says, *“tell James what happened to me.”* Now clearly, this isn’t *“James, the brother of John,”* who’s mentioned in verse 2. That James is dead. Actually, this is James, the brother of Jesus. So, why does Peter want James to know what’s happened. Here’s why; Peter is actually transferring his leadership to him. Now, that isn’t explicit here. But it becomes clear later, in chapter 15. James becomes the new leader of the Jerusalem church.

Now, think about that. This is an emergency leadership transition. And how does it impact the church? Does it struggle? Does it limp along? No. What does verse 24 say, *“the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.”* God’s kingdom continues to expand, because this church built leaders. It wasn’t dependent on any one personality. And therefore, even as some senior leaders are being killed, and others are fleeing for their lives, the church continues to grow. That’s crazy, right?

Many churches are built on one personality. But what happens when that person needs to be replaced? Often, the church is crippled. W.A. Criswell pastored First Baptist Dallas for years. In the 1970’s he announced his plan to retire at age 65. But he didn’t step down until he was 84. In essence, he made himself too indispensable. And the church struggled to make a leadership transition for decades. And it suffered as a result.

None of us is indispensable. And God can use anyone. And that means we must focus less on what we can do, and more on what we can train lots of people to do. And that’s humbling, because that means it’s not all about me, and my giftedness. I was talking to one of my mentors. And he asked about my ministry. And I gave him a list of all of the things I was doing. And then he said, *“ok, but who are you training to do ministry?”* And *that* list was a lot shorter. And he was very frank with me. He said, *“Jeff, I don’t know if we would hire you. You don’t seem that focused on training others.”* It was such a helpful corrective.

And it forced me to ask, *“why?”* Why do I gravitate towards doing, and away from training? Well, here’s my theory. Training other people is counterintuitive. There are things you do well. And you should train others to them. But what happens when you train people? You ask them to do those things. But they don’t do them that well as well. That’s why they need to be trained. And in the short-term, it’s easier to do those things yourself. It’s more efficient. My kids are obsessed with making breakfast. And that makes mornings challenging. My kids are young. And right now, they’re terrible at everything. And I tell them that daily. (Don’t panic, I’m just kidding). No, they just haven’t developed fine motor skills. I mean, good grief, don’t throw a ball to them. But they insist on helping with breakfast. And that’s perilous, because the kitchen is a death trap. I’m barely awake. The stove is on. There are knives everywhere. Jake wants to make a smoothie. And I’m barely conscious, *“no Jake, don’t turn the blender on while your hand is in there.”* Making breakfast is dangerous. And it takes forever. So why do I let them help? Because I don’t want to make them breakfast for the rest of my life. They need to learn. And they want to learn now.

Training isn’t efficient in the short-term. But it is so effective in the long-term; because you multiply your impact exponentially. You give God all of these conduits to work through. And this has so many implications. If you’re a parent, are you doing things for your kids that they’re ready to? Are they ready to serve other people? Are you helping them study the Bible for themselves? These are ways to encourage and challenge them. Some of you have years of professional experience. Maybe there’s a young adult who’s eager to glean your wisdom.

They're asking, "how do I advance God's kingdom through education, or law, or business?" You have the insight they need. Are you looking for that relationship? And all of us can invest in youth. We want to equip parents to disciple their kids. But our vision for youth ministry encompasses far more than that. Psalm 145:4 says that, "*One generation shall praise Your works to another, And shall declare Your mighty acts.*" That's our desire; one generation proclaiming God's greatness to the next. And we all have a stake in that. Are you investing in those coming behind you? If not, pray that God would bring a person to mind.

C. Submit to God's Greatness: How do we align with God's activity? We pray for God's help. We multiply for God's ministry. And finally, we submit to God's greatness. Peter has just escaped from prison. And now, Herod discovers what has happened. "*Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.* ¹⁹ *And when Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.*"

The soldiers are baffled. They don't know how Peter escaped. Herod searches for Peter. But he's nowhere to be found. And Herod probably suspects that this is an inside job; that the guards conspired to set Peter free. So after interrogating them, he executes them. And at the end of verse 19, Luke fast forwards a few years. And he tells us what ultimately became of Herod. We'll see why in a moment.

"*Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country.* ²¹ *And on an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them.* ²² *And the people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"* ²³ *And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.* ²⁴ *But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.* ²⁵ *And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.*

Luke tells us what happened in Caesarea. For some reason, Herod is angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So he places a trade embargo against them. These countries relied upon Israel for food. So they attempt to reconcile with Herod. Representatives travel to Caesarea. They find a sympathetic ear in Blastus, one of Herod's key advisors. Blastus brings the representatives before Herod. And the two sides hammer out a peace treaty. On an appointed day, Herod comes before the people. And he announces the treaty. The Jewish historian Josephus also records this event. And his description corroborates Luke's. Josephus says that Agrippa wore a silver cloak. And when the sun hit it, Herod gleamed with brilliance. And the crowd was in awe. They cry out, "*this is the voice of a god, and not a man.*" And immediately, Herod is eaten by worms! "*Eaten by worms,*" was a catch-all medical term in the 1st century. It

denotes a terminal illness. Herod may have died from phthiriasis. We don't know. But we do know *why* he died. Herod gave glory to himself, and not to God. He took himself more seriously than God. And he suffered the consequences.

Do you see why Luke tells us the rest of Agrippa's story? At the beginning of this chapter, Agrippa looks unstoppable. And the church looks doomed. But ultimately, Herod is doomed. And God's movement proves to be unstoppable. Luke is reminding us that *no power* can stop the wave of God's kingdom movement.

He's also giving us a warning. If we stand against God, we won't prevail. We need to take God seriously. And here's the implication. When we take God seriously, we don't have to take ourselves so seriously. Compared to God, we simply aren't that impressive. I mean, look at this story. Everyone besides God looks ridiculous, don't they? Peter sleepwalks out of prison. Rhoda forgets to let Peter in. The church prays for Peter. But when God answers their prayers, they're incredulous. *"Guys, Peter's here!" "Not now, Rhoda, can't you see we're praying for Peter?!"* The people call Herod a god. But then, he's eaten by worms! God is great. His kingdom prevails. He's going to accomplish his purpose. And we can submit to that. And let me give you three reasons that's great news.

First, it means God's in control. So we can relax. An insanely huge amount of reality is beyond our control. So we can let go of our compulsive need to manage everything; to fret over every outcome. We can breathe. Look at Peter. He's about to be executed. But he's getting REM sleep! See, Jesus told Peter that he was going to suffer. Peter knew Jesus was in control. And he believed that Jesus had things well in hand. We can relax. Second, we can live free from guilt and shame. If you know Jesus, you never need to wallow in shame. God says you're forgiven. You're accepted. Pride comes in many forms. Some people constantly beat themselves up. They say, *"I know God forgives me, but I could never forgive myself."* Now, think about that for a moment. Is your standard of righteousness higher than God's? God says, *"My perfect Son died so that you could be pardoned."* And you say, *"yeah, but God, I've got standards! Unlike you, I have high expectations for myself?"* See, that's a way of putting yourself in God's place; of making your opinion weightier than God's. So if you constantly feel guilty, you may be taking yourself too seriously. The judge of the universe has pardoned you. And if you disagree, the good news is that you're wrong. And God's right. We can relax. We can live free from shame. And third, we can rest. God's work is primary. So the universe isn't going to unravel if you take a day off. You're not indispensable. Eugene Peterson had a great tweet last week. He said, *"if we do not regularly quit work for one day a week, we take ourselves far too seriously."*² God is great. And therefore, you can relax, you can live free, and you can rest.

God's kingdom is advancing. And he invites us to join his story. But left to ourselves, we don't align with God. Scripture says we're at enmity with him. We oppose him. So Jesus comes

² <https://twitter.com/PetersonDaily/status/564072191135059968>.

to do for us what we couldn't ever – and wouldn't ever – do for ourselves. He perfectly submits to God; he always mirrors God's movement. And in doing that, he places himself on a collision course with sin and death. The waves of temptation crash against him, but he never falls. He triumphs over temptation, so that you can be credited with his perfect life. And then, he dies the death you deserve to die. And he rises so that you can live in God's forever family. And if you trust in Jesus, you get to join in God's movement. You get to play a part in this massive story. It's terrifying. It's thrilling. It's so much bigger, and more wonderful than the story of your glory. Let's pray.

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