

Acts 12:1-25

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Peter's Miraculous Escape From Prison

¹ It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ 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.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

⁶ The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Herod's Death

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. ²⁰ He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. ²² They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." ²³ Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

²⁴ But the word of God continued to increase and spread.

²⁵ When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from ^[a] Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.



Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 12:25](#) Some manuscripts to
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Introduction.

Last October, Lorie and I attended Cape Town 2010, sponsored by the Lausanne Movement. It was perhaps the largest and most diverse gathering of Christian leaders from across the globe that has ever been assembled together in one place. Over 4,000 people met for worship, prayer, Bible study, and to wrestle with some of the major problems the Church faces today – poverty, the global food crisis, HIV/AIDS, radical Islam, human trafficking, and the secularization and materialism of the West. It was an amazing experience Lorie and I will never forget.

Of the 4,000 delegates, only 10 percent were from the U.S. This was a majority-world conference, and most of the participants came from what is known as the Global South – Africa, South America, and Asia. At my table of six delegates, only 2 of us were white, and I was the only pastor. It was a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic panorama of the Church from around the world.

There were 300 delegates who were supposed to come from China, and this was going to be the first time Christians from that country would be a part of an international conversation about world evangelization. However, when they arrived at the airport in Beijing to travel to Cape Town, government officials confiscated their passports, and some were even put under house arrest. The government of China would not allow these Chinese Christians to attend the conference.

This is just one of many ways the church in China has experienced persecution in recent years, and reports continue to come out from believers in that country of arrests, imprisonments, beatings, and even deaths – all because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their desire to follow Him. We heard other stories of persecution while we were in Cape Town, and delegates told of how they faced opposition in places like North Korea, Afghanistan, Iran, and Somalia.

This is nothing new. The Church has experienced persecution from the time it began, and we read about this in our text today.

I. Herod's Persecution.

In Acts 12, the Roman government was not particularly friendly to the notion of people becoming Christians, and the religious establishment of Judaism was even more angry and resentful. The Roman Empire was an occupying force in Palestine in the 1st century AD, but they kept religious figures in power and encouraged a policy of collaboration. So the family of King Herod the Great provided not only opposition to Jesus Christ Himself during His earthly ministry, but also to the early church.

There are a number of Herods mentioned in the Bible who were all related to each other, and sometimes it's hard to keep them straight. Herod the Great was the one who ordered the slaughter of infants at the time of Jesus' birth. His son, Herod Antipas, is the Herod before whom Jesus appeared during His night of trials prior to the crucifixion. And Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great and the nephew of Herod Antipas, is the one mentioned here in our passage. He was the king of Judea and the ruler responsible for the death of James and the imprisonment of Peter.

In the early days of the church, believers were very familiar with prisons. In fact, this was Peter's third time to stay in one (see chapters 4 and 5). Nevertheless, the death of James, the brother of John and one of the sons of Zebedee, had to have shaken the community of believers in Jerusalem. Herod Agrippa seemed intent on keeping the peace, and if throwing Christians in prison and having a few of them executed was a means to that end, so be it. It appeared the church was a pawn in the hands of the



political powers, and they were helpless in the face of rulers and kings. But was this really the case? The truth is kings and rulers are the real pawns in the hands of God, and the Bible says nations rise and fall at His command.

James was executed, and Peter, perhaps the strongest leader of the early church, was a day away from experiencing a similar fate. The only reason he survived this long was because of a custom that didn't allow executions during holy days such as the Jewish Passover. Perhaps fearing some sort of escape, Herod doubled the guard so that a soldier was handcuffed to each of Peter's arms, and two more stood outside his cell. The early church wondered what they could do. They felt so powerless, and they knew that unless God intervened Peter would die the next day. So they prayed.

Jim Bankhead and I have a friend named Murray, and he is a prayer warrior. He prays for me, and he prays for our church every week. Once, after someone shared with Murray a problem they were facing, he replied, "Well, the least I can do is pray." But then it dawned on him, "No, the *most* I can do is pray!" So he wrote that sentence at the top of his prayer list, and it is still his practice to this day – "The *most* I can do is pray!" And so he does. The early church did, too.

Are you facing a crisis this morning? Do you feel imprisoned by a mound of debt? Is your business struggling and you wonder if it's going to make it? Are you at the end of your rope and wonder how you'll get through the next day? Then pray! The most we can do is pray, and God is not helpless among the ruins! The early church began to plead with God on Peter's behalf, much as a child would ask her father for something she is powerless to obtain herself. The church prayed in dependence on God, and a miracle happened.

II. Peter's Escape.

The church was praying. But what about Peter? He was asleep! And I don't mean dozing. I mean one of those deep sleeps from which it's hard to wake a person up. It was the kind of sleep that takes you deep into your mattress and from which when you do awake you are unable to move! Ever had one of those kinds of sleep?

This is the picture of a man who was at peace and trusting God. I'm blown away by Peter's ability to sleep securely in the arms of his heavenly Father and trust the Lord with his future. It's the night before his execution, and he's sound asleep. If I were in that situation, I'd be fretful and worried. I'd check the clock multiple times and wonder how many more hours I have to live. I'd spend the time writing letters making amends and tying up loose ends. But not Peter. He rests in God and deeply sleeps.

Do you and I have that kind of trust in God? Can we rest in His sovereign care like Peter did? Most of us have spent many a sleepless nights worried sick about what might happen the next day. I know I have, and I've got some growing to do to get to that place in my own discipleship. Perhaps you do, too.

I thought about this over the weekend, and it got me to thinking about climbing mountains in Colorado. To climb a 14,000 foot mountain there, you need to get an early start – as in four o'clock in the morning early! You begin hiking on the trail around 9,000 or 10,000 feet where it begins, and you hike by wending your way through a forest of blue spruce, lodgepole pine, and Douglas fir trees on a trail that feels spongy underneath your feet from fallen needles.

A few hours later, when you get to round 11,000 feet, the trees thin out and give way to lush meadows carpeted by wildflowers. Soon you leave the grass and dirt and begin stepping across a boulder field that are chunks of granite the size of wheelbarrows. Finally, after an hour of rock-hopping you reach the ridge, a narrow line of ascent that will lead you all the way to the summit. Looking back over your route, you feel like you've accomplished something special.



Down below, you see a tiny dot just at the edge of timberline. No, two dots. One dot moves, and the second dot looks red. It's then you realize they are people, hikers who have just started their climb. Then it hits you. From this vantage point, three hours ago you too were a dot like that, a speck of human life on a huge mountain. You feel small, and you get a glimpse of what God must see all the time. But you also gain insight into why you can trust God. He sees everything, and He is all-powerful. Even when we feel like tiny dots at the mercy of Roman kings and demanding bosses and frustrating children, God is still in control.

Peter was so asleep that the angel who appeared in his cell had to use more than just a bright light to wake him up. He had to kick Peter in the ribs and tell him to get up and put his clothes on! And even as Peter was leaving the campfires of the prison, he thought it was all a dream. He didn't know it was real. This was the work of God. The church may be powerless. Peter may be confused with sleep. The governing authorities may be firmly in control. Yet God makes a way. That's the way of the Spirit!

III. The Church's Reaction.

In this passage there is this comical scene of Peter's arrival at Mary's house. Evidently it was a common meeting place for the early church, and some believe it was perhaps at Mary's house where the Last Supper was celebrated. Some scholars also believe they were there when the Holy Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost. Peter found his way to this house, and he knocked on the door.

Can you picture the scene? Peter arrives, breathless, confused, pinching himself to make sure he's not dreaming, and he knocks urgently but quietly. It's the middle of the night, and he doesn't want to be discovered by the wrong people. He just broke out of prison! A servant girl named Rhoda comes to answer, and she inquires who's at the door. It is, after all, nighttime, and Christians are being persecuted. Caution is required.

Rhoda recognizes Peter's voice, but she doesn't think to open the door! In her excitement she runs to the group gathered inside, and tells them the good news. They all think she's crazy. But when she insists, they offer a far more likely explanation – "It must be an angel." Really?!

This is so like you and me. Here they are praying intently for Peter's release, asking God to deliver him, and when he shows up they can't believe it. The last thing they expect is Peter at the door, and the last thing they believe will happen is that God will actually answer their prayer!

To be honest, their amazement is comforting to me. We don't see here a group of people who are trying to muster up enough faith to get God to do what they want. Instead we see a gracious God hearing the feeble and unbelieving cries of His people, and He responds to their weak faith out of the magnitude of His love.

The longer I live the more I believe that I really don't know very much about prayer, I mean *real*, deep, believing prayer and the mysteries that surround it, and I want to learn more about cultivating a better understanding of it in my own life. Maybe you do, too. I also realize how confusing answers to prayer are at times. This passage presents in stark relief the dilemma of unanswered prayer. In one instance, the church is praying and Peter is delivered. In another instance, they pray and James is executed. I'm sure they were praying with equal fervency for both James and Peter. Why was one apostle rescued and the other not? It's a mystery to me.

I take comfort in the fact that not even Jesus was exempt from unanswered prayer. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed with both the faith of protest and the faith of acquiescence. First, He turned to God for help and pled, "Let this cup pass." Then He turned to His friends, who were sound asleep. Next He turned to the religious rulers, who accused Him. Then He turned to the state, which sentenced Him to death. Finally, the Lord uttered that awful cry of dereliction, "My God, My God, why have you



forsaken Me?” Why does God answer some prayers “yes” and others “no”? I confess it is a mystery to me, but I take comfort it was to Jesus, too.

How can we reconcile the lavish promises of the Bible with our actual experience of unanswered prayer? I don’t fully understand it, but I do think the key lies in seeing prayer as joining with God in His burden for this world.

C.S. Lewis writes that after thinking about this problem for many years and discussing it with just about every Christian he knew, he finally concluded that the kind of dauntless faith called for by Jesus occurs only when the one who prays does so as God’s fellow-worker, demanding only what is needed for their mutual work together. In other words, one who works in close partnership with God grows in the ability to discern what God wants to accomplish on earth, and he prays accordingly. “Not my will, but yours, be done, O God, on earth as it is in heaven.”

There is a book titled *Prayers of the Martyrs*, which reproduces actual prayers of people who were killed for their faith from AD 107 (Ignatius of Antioch) to 1980 (Archbishop Oscar Romero). It’s surprising that only a few of these martyrs prayed for their own deliverance as in the background lions roared, gladiators sharpened their swords, or assassins fastened ammunition clips onto their automatic weapons. Most often they prayed for their families left behind, for steadfastness of faith, and for strength to endure death without shame. Some even thanked God for the privilege of suffering, surprised they would be counted worthy. Others forgave their persecutors. Very few asked for a miracle.

When I read things like that, I realize I’ve got a long way to go in developing that kind of faith and that kind of prayer life.

Conclusion/Application.

The text began with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod on the throne. It ends with Peter free, Herod dead, and the Word of God spreading. This passage reminds us that no human force, and certainly no prison cell, can ever impede the progress of the Gospel. The Church of Jesus Christ belongs to God, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He is not helpless among the ruins of our lives or of the world.

Later on today, when you are trying to decide what you’ll order for lunch, or wonder how your brackets are doing in the NCAA tournament, or think about the vacation you’re planning to take this summer, remember there are those this morning who are wondering if they will be killed by nightfall because of their commitment to Christ. So let’s pray for them, even as the early church prayed for Peter. Who knows, their escape may even depend upon it. Amen.

