



**Sunday School Lesson for October 30, 2005
Released on October 26, 2005**

"Peter in Prison"

Printed Text: Acts 12:1-16

Devotional Reading: Psalm 46

Background Scripture: Acts 12:1-17

Time: A.D. 44

Place: Jerusalem

ACTS 12:1-16

1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth *his* hands to vex certain of the church.

2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Pe'ter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

4 And when he had apprehended him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.

5 Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.

6 And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.

7 And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon *him*, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Pe'ter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from *his* hands.

8 And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.

9 And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.

10 When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him.

11 And when Pe'ter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his an-gel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and *from* all the expectation of the people of the Jews.

12 And when he had considered *the thing*, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.

13 And as Pe'ter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rho'da.

14 And when she knew Pe'ter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Pe'ter stood before the gate.

15 And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.

16 But Pe'ter continued knocking: and when they had opened the *door*, and saw him, they were astonished.

LESSON AIMS

Examine the account of Peter's imprisonment and his deliverance through the intercessory prayer of the church.

To realize that God responds to the intense intercessory prayers of His people.

To encourage Christians to gather for earnest intercessory prayer.

INTRODUCTION

What do you do when you are in trouble? Do you pray? Of course most of us do. When we have grief, illness, problems, and indecision, the natural thing for the Christian to do is to pray (Jas. 5:13-18). Prayer should not be relegated to being a last resort, as is the attitude of many. In fact, prayer should be our first option when facing any difficulty or decision. Even so, we often find ourselves praying with greater intensity when facing some circumstance that is totally beyond our control. Such was the situation faced by the church in Jerusalem when their preeminent leader, the Apostle Peter, was arrested and about to be executed by King Herod.

Interestingly, those praying for Peter were quite surprised when their prayers were answered with his release. Are you ever amazed at how quickly God answers some prayers?

LESSON BACKGROUND

The apostles were natural targets as soon as the persecution of believers began. Luke (the author of the book of Acts) reports that they stayed in Jerusalem in spite of the pressure against the Christians (see Acts 8:1). Life could not have been easy for this hardy band. The martyrdom of Stephen brought a strong initiative from Jewish authorities to stamp out this group known as "the way" (see Acts 24:14). Jesus had called them to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8), but He never promised them that they would not suffer. Acts is a record of how the witness of the gospel spread throughout Jerusalem, then through Judea and Samaria, and to the world. In telling this story, Acts also relates some of the ways that the gospel was opposed, especially by Jewish authorities.

Today's lesson is a good time to remember that Palestine in the days of the apostles was still dominated by Roman rule. At times the Romans governed Palestine with proconsuls, or governors. At other times they used client-kings. (Sometimes they used both at once.) A client-king had authority only as Rome dictated. But if the king was governing efficiently in the eyes of Rome, then he had freedom to govern as he wished.

The Herodians were client-kings. Herod the Great (of Matthew 2:1-12) was shrewd in his political maneuvers. This gave him a prominent role as king in Palestine (37 B.C. to 4 B.C.). His sons, Herod Archelaus (see Matthew 2:22), Herod Philip (Luke 3:1), and Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:1, 2), each shared in rule over Palestine after the death of their father. The following generation of Herodians produced Herod Agrippa I, the Herod in today's lesson.

THE DEATH OF JAMES

1. What do we know about Herod the Great's dynasty? (vs 1)

Herod the Great believed in persecuting the righteous. There were several rulers by the name of Herod who followed in the footsteps of Herod the Great, who was the first procurator of Galilee. He also ordered his murderous troops to kill all of the male children in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16) ages 2 years old and younger during the time of Christ's birth. After his death, his kingdom was divided amongst some of his sons (he had a total of 7). One of the sons was named Herod Antipas. He ruled over Galilee and Perea (4 B.C. - A.D. 39) and also killed John the Baptist (Matthew 14: 1-12). Herod had another son named Aristobulus whom he killed for plotting against him. This son, Aristobulus, had a son named Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the Great) who is mentioned here in this week's lesson. Agrippa I ruled over the domain of Herod the Great from A.D. 40 until his death in A.D. 44. He too, just like his notorious family, was an enemy of righteousness and concocted murderous plots as we will see throughout the lesson.

2. Which James was martyred? How was he killed? (vs 2)

In verse 2, Luke identifies this James as the brother of John. He is easy to distinguish from the other men named James in the NT, because he is never mentioned in Scripture apart from his brother John (Matthew 4:21, 10:2 and Acts 12:2). James and John were among the first followers of Christ (Mark 1:19-20) and were part of His inner circle (Mark 5:37, 9:2; 13:3; 14:33). James was one of the first apostles to be murdered. He was killed by a sword (possibly beheaded). This type of execution was used when someone was accused of leading people to follow false gods (Deut. 13:12-15).

3. Why did Herod have the Apostle Peter arrested? (vs 3)

After Herod killed James, the brother of John, the Jews were well pleased. When Herod saw how this had boosted his popularity amongst the Jews, he decided to apprehend Peter and put him in jail to further their satisfaction.

4. What is meant by the term "Easter"? (vs 4)

Easter in this context translates the Greek word *pascha* and is translated "Passover". Of course, the date of Easter is often coincident with the date of the Jewish Passover. As in the case of the death of the Lord Jesus, Herod planned to execute Peter at Passover time.

5. What did the church do while Peter was imprisoned? (vs 5)

During Peter's imprisonment, the church was earnestly praying to God. Prayer is the way man communicates with God. Prayer can be expressed as communion, adoration, thanksgiving, confession, submission or intercession; which is what may have been going on here. Peter was being held as a prisoner and the church had assembled themselves together to pray on his behalf which could mean a number of things. They could have been praying for his strength to endure, they could have been praying for him to stay strong in the faith, his release, etc... Although we don't know specifically what the church prayed for, we do know they prayed without ceasing. What interests me about this verse is that under these satanic circumstances, the church did not try to take matters into their own hands but instead they took it to God in prayer.

THE DELIVERANCE OF PETER

6. What precautions did Herod take to prevent Peter's escape? (vs 4 & 6)

When Herod arrested Peter, he put Peter in the hands of four squads of soldiers. A squad consisted of four soldiers each. This was a total of 16 soldiers that rotated in groups of 4 to watch Peter. Peter also was bound in chains. At all times two guards were chained to him in his cell while the other two stood guard outside the cell door (vs 6). Herod used some drastic measures to prevent Peter from escaping and it's obvious he did not consider the act of divine intervention.

7. What details are given concerning Peter's release? (vs 7)

As Peter slept between the two soldiers, an angel of the Lord appeared in the prison whose presence brought forth a divine light (in a dark prison). This light was the presence of God's divine power. Significantly, neither the light nor the words of the angel of God awakened the soldiers chained to Peter. The angel awakened Peter, lifted him up and told him to get up quickly. As Peter obeyed the words of the heavenly messenger, the chains fell off. Considering Peter's physical state (sleepiness) during this time, he could not have engineered such an escape on his own. This was the intervention of God.

The angel continued to instruct Peter further by telling him step by step how to dress himself. (vs 8) He told Peter to gird himself which means to wrap a wide cloth around the waist. The angel then told Peter to bind up his sandals which consisted of wrapping the long leather straps around the calf. After Peter was dressed, the angel told him to follow after him. (vs 9) As Peter was following behind the angel, he thought all of this was just a mere dream. It can't be actually happening.

Nevertheless, he follows the angel out of the cell. (vs 10) As they walk past the guards, (who apparently were a deep sleep for they heard and saw nothing) they had come to an iron gate which lead to the city. This gate opened by "divine power" to allow Peter and the angel to walk out of it. In other words, Peter was released by the power of God from King Herod. Peter went his way on down the street and the angel then departed; for his mission had been completed.

After Peter walked, he had time to focus in on the events of the night. He realized his deliverance from the hands of Herod was no dream. It was in fact very real. The angel of the Lord had appeared and rescued him from the death Herod had planned for him.

THE DOUBTING CHURCH

8. Why were some believers meeting to pray for Peter? (vs 12)

In verse 5, the text states the church was in a continuous praying state. Here in vs 12, one of the locations where prayer meeting was taking place was at the house of Mary. They had been interceding on behalf of Peter since his imprisonment. We must take note to the dedication and persistence of these believers. How fortunate for Peter to come upon the home where prayers were being offered up on his behalf.

9. What humorous account involving Rhoda did Luke relate? (vs 13 & 14)

When Peter had come to the house of Mary (the mother of John surname Mark) where they were praying, he knocked on the door. A girl by the name of Rhoda heard the knock and went to the door. Although she recognized Peter's voice, she did not open the door to let him in. She was so overwhelmed with joy, she ran back to tell the others who were in prayer that Peter was outside the gate.

10. What did the Christians conclude about Rhoda's report concerning Peter's presence at the gate? (vs 15 & 16)

When Rhoda had relayed the news of Peter to the church family, their response to her was that she was out of her mind. Rhoda, however, didn't change her story. She firmly stated that she knew what she was talking about but they still didn't believe her. They went on to say that the voice she heard was that of Peter's angel (meaning his guardian angel). Now isn't this something? The church members had been praying for Peter continuously but showed no signs in believing Rhoda. No one would get up and investigate her claims. As Rhoda continued to proclaim the presence of Peter, Peter was still outside the gate knocking and finally the church family, who must have heard him, went to the gate and opened the doors. They were astonished!

CONCLUSION

Today's passage does not guarantee that all believers will escape the hands of their tormentors. Church tradition holds that Peter eventually will embrace his own martyrdom in Rome. If victory means expecting to escape the trials that come against us, then modern Christians will be sadly disappointed. What is guaranteed is that even though all earthly forces may assemble against the Word of God, they cannot prevail. Victory for God's truth is assured. Evil kings can try to silence God's messengers, but the Lord will break the chains and spring open the doors so that the truth can run free.

Our role as witnesses gives us the privilege of participating in this universal victory over the evil one. So when God chooses to intervene on our behalf and snap the chains or spring open the doors, we should never accept these actions selfishly. It is not because we have attained a special holiness that God moves on our behalf. But because we serve faithfully as His messengers, we gain the joy of experiencing the victories that come.

PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for this week's lesson. Thank you for showing us what the power of prayer can do. There is nothing too hard for you to work out. As we saw in the lesson Father, the prayers of the righteous indeed avail much. Your power is superior to all the forces on earth that want to harm Christians, and we thank you for interceding on our behalf. We ask that you strengthen us in faith and in courage. For we know that Greater is He that is within us than he who is in the world. Lord God we love you and we magnify your name. In your darling son Jesus' name, Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God lets us participate in His victories, and the evil one is reminded constantly that his days are numbered.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Study **Acts 9:3-18** "**Paul Meets the Lord**"

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