

## Scripture Reading:

Acts 12: "1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. 4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. 5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. 7 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." 9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people." 12 So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. 13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. 15 But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." 16 Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place. 18 Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. 19 But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there."

# 'The Prayers of the Saints'

I guess we all have our favorite parts of the Bible, especially if we are diligent and read it as we should on a regular basis. I have to admit that the portion that we have before us this morning from Luke's orderly account is one of my favorites indeed. It is our final peek at the life of Peter, it is a great story w/ a good lesson on prayer & can lead to an interesting discussion of God's sense of humor!

So first, let's consider what has happened: We spoke last week of trials: There is going to be a severe famine in Jerusalem and King Herod has killed James with the sword. Now Peter has been arrested and of course we have just read the story of his miraculous escape.

➤ So, it is natural to ask, why was James allowed to die and Peter allowed to live?

-- Was Peter more righteous than James?

-- Did the Saints forget to pray for James as they did for Peter?

Obviously the answer is NO to these types of questions and so we need to look to the Scriptures for our guidance here.

Consider what we learn from the great hall of faith in Hebrews chapter eleven as the writer gives us great detail about the early Saints like Abraham, Moses and Rahab. At verse 32 he goes on to say...

**Hebrews 11: 32 “And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: 33 who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. 35 Women received their dead raised to life again.”**

- **All great victories in this life as we see this morning with Peter, but that is not where the hall of faith ends: The writer continues...**

**“And others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. 36 Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented-- 38 of whom the world was not worthy.”**

**These Saints are more like James who was killed by the sword! Through the eyes of men, these Saints did not see victory in this life: Yet they are listed among the faithful.**

- **Again, why did God deliver some Saints from great peril while others faced cruel deaths?**

**Sometimes we can see how God is working all this together for good like in the life of Moses but at other times, like here with James and Peter it largely remains a mystery. Thus we must often proclaim with the Apostle Paul those comforting words he uses to conclude his reflections on God’s sovereignty in Romans 9-11:**

**“33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments & His ways past finding out! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?"**

- **We must also remember that we are NOT called on to just understand all this academically, but we are to be ready to put it into practice in real life!**

**We see this most clearly with Daniel’s friends as they are about to be cast into the fiery furnace after they refuse to bow before the King’s idol:**

**Daniel 3:14 “Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up? 15 Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?" 16 “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 17 If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. 18 But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”**

**These faithful men knew that God could deliver them if He chose, but they made it clear to the King that they were NOT going to worship his idols even if they knew God had chosen to let them be martyred.**

- **This is the confidence and faith that we need in all of our Christian walk!**

**So keeping all of this in mind, let’s take a closer look at what happened here in Acts 12 with Peter:**

Acts 12:4 “So when [King Herod] had arrested [Peter], he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.”

- Both King Herod and the crowds had gotten a taste of blood with the murder of James and now there would be even more blood and excitement with Peter right after the feast days!
- However, I am sure King Herod and the Jewish leaders discussed how the Apostles had escaped from prison once before and so King Herod takes NO chances this time [*describe the prison security*]

Luke then shows us that there are two sides in this battle:

5 “Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.”

What an amazing picture of what we often see throughout Church history as the Spirit of God works to glorify Jesus by filling the earth with His Kingdom!

- King Herod has all the power, the soldiers, the laws, the public support, the prisons and everything that he needs to not only defeat the early church but to humiliate them in the process!
- On the other side we have Peter in chains and a praying Church!

All the Old Testament pictures of God’s people being delivered can be brought to mind, with Gideon and his few men, Moses and his staff or Elijah and his mantel.

- All facing overwhelming odds and yet all delivered by the power of God.
- May we learn to have such confidence and to be a praying people!

It is Peter himself who teaches us the next great lesson about trust and contentment:

- The man who not long ago cowered before a lowly slave girl during the trial of Jesus has come to a point of fully trusting His Lord.

Peter has just seen his fellow Apostle and friend James, murdered by King Herod. Now he faces a similar fate, and after being in jail all week, we come now to the final night before his trail and execution... Luke tells us in verse 6:

“And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.”

- Peter was so at peace with what he faced that night & the following day, understanding that His Lord was in control... That he slept!
- Truly a great example of what it means to be anxious for nothing!

What follows is truly a great miracle! It is humorous to see how some try to explain away what happened with stories of bribes or strange lightening.

- We should not be afraid to see miracles as miracles!

We know that God controls all things:

- We know that He created all that exists from nothing and that through Jesus all things consist and hold together.

God sustains and moves His universe forward each and every day by what we see as ordinary means, or what can be called natural means, though today that has become very confused with the worship of nature by the pagan environmentalists.

- What we have before us is a time where God accomplishes His ends by extraordinary means or supernatural means:
- What we would rightly call a miracle.

We have discussed how this can be seen today in the area of healthcare: God has greatly blessed us with ordinary means of healing the sick and even raising the dead when we see that as preventing someone from dying as they would have in the past. However, we also pray for and rejoice when God uses extraordinary means to accomplish more quickly what doctors do in ordinary ways and sometimes what doctor simply cannot yet do today.

- However, it is important to remember that God is fully in control of both!

We believe the sun will come up tomorrow morning and bring great light: That is because God will command the sun to come up tomorrow, just as He had the angel bring light into a dark cell for Peter:

- The sun coming up is expected and so an extraordinary event or miracle would be for the sun not to come up some morning
- An angel appearing and beaming light into a dark cell was not expected and so we have before us a real miracle in the cell

7 “Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, “Arise quickly!” And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and tie on your sandals”; and so he did. And he said to him, “Put on your garment and follow me.” Just as we saw revelation in the midst of real history last week, now we have a miracle taking place in the midst of real life:

- There is a real man Peter
- He is in a real Roman jail cell
- Peter has to put on his sandals and tunic!
- They leave a REAL prison.

9 “So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.”

- Perhaps Peter is thinking that once again he is being given special revelation like the vision of all those animals that he saw in Joppa.
- That is not surprising, but it soon becomes apparent that he is escaping a jail in the real world

10 “When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord;”

Peter was being held in King Herod’s jail under maximum security! He had two guards by his side, two guards at his door and then all the security in the rest of the prison to get past. Whether God put the soldiers to sleep or in a trance or simply blinded their eyes, we are not told. But Peter gets safely past them and all of the physical restraints like chains and heavy iron doors and gates which open and let him pass!

10 “When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, & immediately the angel departed from him.”

- The angel’s mission was done!

**11 “And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.”**

**It is often like this in our Christian walk: God gets us through tough times and it is only after the fact that we are able to properly reflect on how He has cared for us once again!**

**12 “So, when [Peter] had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.”**

**Yes, it is important for us to notice that Peter now takes responsibility for his actions.**

- **Peter did not gloat or dance in the street having been set free**
- **Peter did not go back and taunt the soldiers at the prison**
- **Peter did not go by and wave at King Herod’s palace**

**Peter’s first instinct was to find some of the brethren and share his amazing story and then to find safety.**

- **We are reminded again that Christians do not go looking for martyrdom nor persecution**

**Now we come to the fun part of the story!**

- **The battle between the might of men and the power of prayer has been won and yet these Saints are not sure enough in their faith to accept Peter’s appearance**
- **I am pretty sure God smiled and we have certainly chuckled as we have told the rest of the story down through the ages!**

**So Peter goes to where he is sure some of the Saints will be gathered...**

**13 “And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.”**

- **Now I personally think that this servant girl was the one with the faith to really believe God for an answer to the prayers that were being lifted up for Peter...**

**She hears Peter’s voice and immediately returns to announce the good news, leaving Peter to stand knocking at the gate. However, it seems there was just no convincing these Saints that God would and in fact had answered their prayer beyond what they could have hoped for!**

**15 “But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel.””**

- **Either the girl is crazy or she has seen a ghost!**

**Now I don’t want to be too hard on these Saints, mostly because we would likely have done the same, or can remember times in our lives where we actually have! Peter had been in jail all week and they had likely prayed all week. This was the final night and most had probably resigned themselves to the fact that Peter was going to join Stephen & James in heaven very soon. But God had other plans and so Peter is standing in the street waiting for someone to answer the gate...**

**16 “Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.”**

- **Yes, they were astonished but also joyous and they break out in a celebration!**

**17 “But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.”**

- Peter is again not ready to presume that God will protect him from careless actions
- Peter is anxious to tell the incredible story of his release so he gives them all the details of his release.
- Peter's release is significant and he wants word to get to the church leaders...

**“And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.””**

Those who would have Peter to be the first Pope or even head of the Church struggle to explain why it is James who is to be told here and why this same James will be the one who heads the first Church Council in Jerusalem a few years later.

**“And [Peter] departed and went to another place.”**

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, this will be the last that we hear from Peter except for his brief appearance at the 1<sup>st</sup> Church Council Luke gives no more details of his work although we know that it included some travel from the writings of Paul. The work of taking the Kingdom to all the earth will now fall to the Apostle who was the one born out of time:

- The Apostle to the Gentiles, Saul of Tarsus and we will begin our study of his work after the Advent season.

Next week we see the final bit of history given to us in the Bible about the Nation of Israel. Standing in stark contrast to the deliverance of those in the New Covenant, King Herod will meet with a very bad end, reminding us that Jesus said that all of Jerusalem will soon be destroyed.

- The work of that nation and that city now falls to the Saints who are taking the Good News to the ends of the earth

The Saints who are fulfilling the promise made to Abraham that through his seed, the Lord Jesus Christ, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. As we learn to take seriously this work that we have been given, may we learn well the lessons of the blessings and curses that will follow those who obey or disobey God.

- May we seek the blessings given to Peter and avoid the pride of King Herod

And when we face the trials and tribulations that will come, may we be the praying people that we saw here today! James tells us that, “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

Those who follow our suggested daily readings from the Psalms and Proverbs would have been reminded of this with the reading of Psalm 66 this past week, and I will close with these comforting words:

**Psalm 66: 16 “Come and hear, all you who fear God, And I will declare what He has done for my soul. 17 I cried to Him with my mouth, And He was extolled with my tongue. 18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear. 19 But certainly God has heard me; He has attended to the voice of my prayer. 20 Blessed be God, Who has not turned away my prayer, Nor His mercy from me!”**

**Communion Meditation: Genesis 27:**

**“27 And [Jacob] came near and kissed [his Father]; and he smelled the smell of his clothing, and blessed him and said: "Surely, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field Which the Lord has blessed. 28 Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. 29 Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, and let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you!"**