

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Delivered From Death To Life

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Acts 12:1-19

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Introduction:

This morning we are going to be talking about deliverance. Our God is a **God of Deliverance who routinely steps in to Deliver his people.**

This type of deliverance is from death to life. Deliverance is a theme that runs throughout the bible which is clear from all the stories of deliverances we have in it. How about when **Moses** took the Israelites out of Egypt through the parting of the Red Sea, or **Daniel** surviving the lion's den, or when **Mary and Joseph** escaped with baby Jesus to Egypt when Herod was looking for them? I'm sure you can think of many others, but it's clear that in each of these stories, God delivered his people by going before them, orchestrating their deliverance from certain death.

This morning we are going to read about another great deliverance - it's that of Peter from prison in Acts 12 - a deliverance that perfectly and clearly reveals God's plan for his people. When all hope was lost, God came through and delivered Peter from certain death. In this episode, we see that Herod had a wicked plan, BUT the church prayed, God provided, and Peter was delivered.

Join with me now as we begin reading at verse 1:

“About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 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!” But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.

Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.” (Acts 12:1-19 ESV)

In every episode of God’s deliverance of a person or a people, we see that his plans are greater than any other. Amen! Peter is imprisoned, the church prays, and God delivers when all hope was lost. God’s deliverance of Peter in this scene has three key elements in it: A Wicked Plan, A

Praying Church, and A Saving God. Let's begin by looking a little deeper into Herod's Wicked Plan as we see it in the text:

A Wicked Plan

To provide some context for us, in the previous chapter, the church is thriving in Antioch, but the church in Jerusalem was being harassed by a new persecution led by Herod. That's pretty much the flow of the book of Acts in a nutshell- highs and lows. In fact, if we were going to give our sermon series a subtitle, it would be something like "The early church: from Heyday to Mayday and Back Again". The church is thriving in Antioch, chapter 11, and now, chapter 12, she is enduring persecution under Herod.

This isn't Herod Antipas who was involved in the trial of Jesus nor Herod the Great, the king at the time of Jesus' birth. Here we meet Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great.¹ He became the main persecutor of the church after Saul's conversion. And his first major target as we see in the opening verses, was James. James, son of Zebedee, was the brother of John who years earlier had been called by Jesus to follow him while they were in a fishing boat with their father in Matthew 4:21-22.

“...Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.” (Matthew 4:21-22 ESV)

James here is the first of the original twelve to die for their faith. Interestingly, church history tells us that his brother John was the last disciple to die as an old man near the turn of the century. While James died when the church was in her infancy, his brother was preserved for another 50 years leaving for us the Gospel of John, three epistles, and the Book of Revelation. **Some saints bear witness through their life, others through their death.** As Jesus reminded them.

¹ Herod the Great- (37-4BC) King at the time of Jesus' birth. Visited by the wise men. In an attempt to kill Jesus, he ordered Jewish boys under the age of two to be killed. Matthew 2:1-15. Herod Antipas- (4BC-AD39) He put John the Baptist to death (Matthew 14:1-12). Pilate sent Jesus to him before his crucifixion (Luke 23:7-12). Herod Agrippa I- (AD 37-44) The Herod of today's story and grandson of Herod the Great.

“The cup that I drink you also will drink” (Mark 10:39 ESV)

Not every Christian dies of old age. That was a reality the early church knew all too well. And not just the first century church either.

If you were here a couple of weeks ago, when I preached on the conversion of Saul, I mentioned that Saul’s conversion – though miraculous – did not end the persecution of the Christians; something we see plainly in this text. But the church had to wait until Emperor Constantine came and provided relief to the Christian persecution in the 330s. There’s a great quote by St. Jerome from this era of flourishing and reflection:

“The church of Christ has been founded by shedding its own blood, not that of others; by enduring outrage, not by inflicting it. Persecutions have made it grow; martyrdoms have crowned it.”²

So, Herod didn’t know that his plan was about to backfire. Having successfully pleased the Jews by killing James, he turned to another leader in the early church, Peter. His plan was to make another example out of Peter by means of public execution.

Peter was arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread – a weeklong festival coinciding with Passover.³ His trial though would have to wait until after the Festival was over. After all, Herod was doing this to score some points with the Jews – to gain some political power and favour- and so he wanted the Jews to be able to witness this execution. Since he had been appointed king of the Jews in Jerusalem by imperial edict, he would, as he did with James, have tried Peter in his court of law before executing him. We can assume that this trial would have involved the Jewish authorities in the legal proceedings against both James and Peter.⁴

² Jerome’s *Letter 82: To Theophilus Bishop of Alexandria*, (Rome, 399AD).

³ The specific Passover referenced in Acts 12 fell on April 5th in 41AD.

⁴ Eckhard J. Schnable, “The Persecution of Christians in the First Century”, *JETS* 61.3 (2018): 525–47.

Herod's plan was to take Peter out of the picture. To do that, he first restrained him, and by that, I mean quite literally with guards attached to him. Peter wasn't going anywhere. In fact, Herod calls for four squads of soldiers. This was the maximum-security arrangement at the time for a prisoner: four squads, each comprised of four soldiers (16). They guarded him around the clock in shifts of six hours during the day, and three hours each during the night.

Herod wanted to make sure that Peter wasn't going anywhere.⁵ Herod puts **10 obstacles** in Peter's way: two chains on his hands, the two soldiers at the other end of those chains, the door of his prison cell, the two guards on the other side of that door, the first and the second guard posts and of course let's not forget the great iron gate.

We should pause to ask why Peter - **a preacher** - was restrained to such a degree? He wasn't dangerous. But, perhaps Herod was coming to realize that the proclamation of the word of God was a DANGEROUS thing for his empire. I wonder if, in some ways, Herod had a higher estimation of the preached Word than we do. Regardless, this would make for a truly great escape if it could be pulled off.

The king's plan was short lived because the true King had rendered a different verdict for Peter.

Herod's plan, as do any plans that oppose God, are defeated in Jesus' name. A plan in opposition to God, fails.

We are going to take a closer look at how God did that, but first, let's take notice of what the church was doing in this episode. Because here, we don't see a defeated and broken church who just lost James and now has resolved to losing Peter, instead we find:

A Praying Church

In verse 5, the text gives us a glimpse of what the church was up to.

⁵ Peter had a habit of getting beyond Herod's reach. In Acts 4, Peter and John were brought before the council but they were ultimately released.

“So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was *earnestly praying* to God for him.” (Acts 12:5 ESV)

They were in earnest prayer. Simple but powerful!⁶

The church couldn't break Peter out of jail, neither could they plead with Herod for his release. But what they could do was pray; and pray earnestly they did. The church wasn't asking God for a **favour**, they were asking for a **friend**. They were asking God to save their **friend** by his power to do what only he could do in that situation. You know, sometimes I think we ask God for the strength to do something that only he has the power to do. We put it on ourselves and struggle when we should be giving it to God and trusting him in faith. The church here could have been caught up in a frenzy of emotions and rash actions, but instead they prayed earnestly for God's will to be done. How many frustrations and mistakes could we be saved from if we just went to God in prayer first?!

Acts chapter 12 teaches us that in this life we will have many uncertainties and you can either get lost IN them or you can TAKE them to God in prayer. You can ask him for direction.

Prayer is, by definition, a means of revealing God's providence – God's plan - to us. Prayer is the window into the heart of God. It is a window by which we can see and access the providence of God. The providence of God refers to his power to uphold, guide, and care for his creation.⁷ He upholds everything by his sovereignty, he guides everything by his rule, and he cares about everything because of his great mercy and love. He is in charge. If you want to know your Father's heart, pray to him each and everyday that you might come to know his will.

Jonathon Edwards said,

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 251

⁷ TGC, Definitions: “The Providence of God”.

“Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is to life.”⁸

Praying is like oxygen to the church so a church without prayer is slowly suffocating. This should be something we do at every turn. Every obstacle in this life is an opportunity to pray. When things are perilous, we often turn to prayer, and yet the reality is that without prayer we find ourselves in perilous situations. We find ourselves in the waiting. And when we are in the waiting, it is there that we must pray earnestly.

As Matthew Henry wrote,

“As long as we are kept waiting for a mercy, we must continue praying for it.”⁹

And how could the church give up?

That’s the most **obvious application** for us, if we are to call ourselves the church: let us be found praying. As much as we may want to write off the church for their apparent disbelief, let’s not forget that at least they were found to be praying. And how often do we miss that most basic step? What would it look like for us to be a church that’s found praying?

In every and any circumstance, let us be on our knees before him. That’s what the church did, and that’s how God revealed his plan to them by saving Peter from the jaws of death. He is indeed:

A Saving God

After seeing Herod’s wicked plan, it’s pretty easy to see God’s plan of salvation. He is in charge. God in his **providence** had a different plan for Peter. And he made that clear by showing that no prison – no plan of an earthly king - could stand against his providential will. Herod may have had his plans, but God’s are ultimate!

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, Henry Rogers, Sereno Edwards Dwight (1839). “The Works of Jonathan Edwards, A.M.: With an Essay on His Genius and Writings”, p.75

⁹ *Matthew Henry Concise Commentary* on Acts 12:12-19

This was such a miraculous deliverance that when the angel appears, Peter thinks he is seeing a vision because the laws of nature were being broken right in front of him. He can't believe it! Bright lights don't just shine out of nowhere, chains don't just fall off, gates don't just open, and guards don't just sit there and let prisoners come and go as they please! But that is how God delivers Peter. Mind you, the angel had to first wake Peter up – because just like in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter was sleeping rather than praying – but Peter soon arrives at the house of Mary where the church was having a prayer meeting.

He was united with the church.

Now, God clearly didn't communicate his plan to the Christians, because when the girl who was sent to the gate hears Peter's voice, though she immediately recognises his voice, but the others couldn't believe it was Peter. Isn't it interesting that God easily opened the prison gate for Peter to escape, but the gate at the home of the Christians remained shut? When they should've been welcoming God's deliverance of Peter, they were caught up in shock and unbelief. Why were they so surprised when the girl told them, "He's here"! To make matters worse, their response was, "Girl, you are out of your mind!"

In fact, when they do finally decide to go to the gate, where Peter has been left out in the open to be easily recaptured (let's not forget that little detail), the text says that they expected to see his angel. Now why in the world would they think that?! It's hard to know the 'why' so I'll just say that 'I think', so take it or leave it, that this probably is referring to a notion that arose from a common Jewish belief that individuals were assigned at birth with a celestial spirit whose office it was to guard and defend them.¹⁰ We might call it 'a Guardian Angel'. Whatever reason these Christians had for their assumption; they clearly didn't expect Peter in the flesh.

So, the question must be asked: where did all this disbelief come from? Were they praying earnestly in verse 5 for something that they didn't actually believe God could do? Were they just

¹⁰ Matthew 18:10: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."

going through the motions because they KNEW they were supposed to pray, rather than because they BELIEVED God could answer their prayers? If they truly believed, then surely, they would have run to that gate to greet their brother.

Sometimes Christians pray big prayers but forget that they are praying to a big God.

He is a SAVING GOD.

Our PRAYERS MATTER.

Because the OUTCOME is HIS

Well, there it is, from start to finish, an incredible story of a truly unbelievable deliverance. But it most certainly isn't the greatest deliverance in human history. There is something deeper going on here. Because Peter's great escape was only a TEMPORARY escape from death. He got out of jail, good for him, but he still died 20 years later. He may have escaped Herod's sword, but he didn't escape crucifixion under Nero.

God's plan was certainly more POWERFUL than Herod's plan, and the church's prayers are certainly a GUIDE for us as a church today, but there MUST be something greater. Something worth dying for like James and Peter and the other apostles did; here it is: God Delivers us from Eternal Death to Eternal Life. We don't escape death, but God can deliver us to eternal life.

I'd like to call this:

Eternal Deliverance

We cannot have a sermon on Acts 12 and simply end with Peter running around the countryside being delivered from Herod. His escape points to a much greater one. And for that we need to zoom out just a bit. Ultimately, Peter's great escape pales in comparison to Christ's victory over the grave.

In fact, Christ didn't just escape death, but by his resurrection, he defeated death!

Peter's deliverance has some shocking similarities to Christ's resurrection. Did you catch those? Some scholars even call Peter's escape in Acts 12 "Peter's resurrection". Not that he truly died in jail as Christ did on the cross, but that he was delivered from death just as Christ defeated death. (The grave couldn't hold Christ and the prison couldn't hold Peter.)

We see these similarities in their common **arrest and trial** under a Roman ruler at the pleasure of the Jews; then there's the **timing** of both being connected to the Passover; there's **divine intervention** via the angels; then there's the **guards** that were either paid off at the tomb or killed here to save face; then each account had a **woman** sent as the messenger heralding the good news; and finally, we see a **doubtful group** of Christians who couldn't believe that God did what he said he could do.

The great escape may be Peter's, but the greatest escape in history belongs to Christ. Not even death could hold the Son of God. In Christ Jesus, an escape has been provided – an eternal escape. His victory is now made available to you! **There is eternal deliverance from death granted to those in Christ.** To be clear, Peter's escape is meant to point to Christ's resurrection. Every 1st century Christian would have recognised that, and we would be wise not to miss it here because it means that the **same God who rescued Peter** is the **same God who defeated death**, who is the **same God who can save you** from your sins, offering an escape from death. I love this verse in Psalm 68:

“Our God is a God of salvation, and to God, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.” (Psalm 68:20 ESV)

Jesus – the Lord – holds the key! His way leads to life everlasting.

Man's way leads to death. We are reminded of that in this story as the guards, having lost Peter, are executed, verse 19. 16 guards were killed as a result of Peter going free.¹¹ **Let that sink in.**

¹¹ The guards were, by Roman Law, liable to the same penalty as the escaped prisoner. See: *Code of Justinian 9.4.4*

What a stark contrast! God gave Peter life, while Herod took the lives of 16 men. Church, choose this day whom you would serve: the king of life or the king of death. There is only 1 true king whose way leads to life.

Our only hope is that there IS an ETERNAL deliverance.¹²

God has provided a way of deliverance for you in Jesus Christ. Our job here and now is to stay alert, to pray, and to be kept by him until then. Luke already told us that in the first part of Acts known as the Gospel of Luke. In Luke he warned:

“But stay awake at all times, *praying* that you may have strength to *escape* all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”
(Luke 21:36 ESV)

Jesus has made a way for you to escape eternal death.

Peter’s story is here to remind us of the freedom that we can experience in Jesus.

No, he may not always provide an escape from this world’s wickedness, however, he is good, and he is in control, and he is working out his kingdom plan. If you feel easily overpowered by the trials you face, stay with Jesus, and you win. I’ll tell you, the early church certainly felt small and insignificant against the backdrop of the Roman empire, but with Jesus, they not only survived, but they thrived and grew. We know how the story ends: “it is finished”.

So be encouraged.

Don’t be impressed by the world’s temporary triumphs over the gospel.

Be bold and courageous to spread the Word of God and leave the outcome to him.

¹² *Barnes Notes on the Bible*

May Peter's escape from prison motivate us that we are no longer chained down by sin and death.
We are freed through Christ.