



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

Peter's Deliverance from Prison

Acts 12:1-19

September 2, 2007

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I. **King Herod Persecutes the Church**

- Throughout the Bible the writers of the Scriptures often speak of individuals who stand in stark contrast to God. These men [and even at times, women] are people of limited strength who seek to thwart the plans of God. Inevitably, they are brought to ruin by the One whose power is limitless. In the New Testament, one such man was King Herod Antipas. However, he was one in a line of rulers who continually stood against the will and power of the LORD. This family was the family of the Herods.

- John MacArthur writes:

‘The patriarch of the family was known in all modesty as Herod the Great. He ruled Judea from 47 B.C. to 37 B.C. Then dubbed ‘King of the Jews’ by Antony, Octavius, and the Roman Senate, he ruled all of Palestine from 37 B.C. until his death shortly after Christ’s birth (Matthew 2:15).

Herod the Great was a particularly bloodthirsty ruler. He executed one of his wives, Mariamne, her mother, and three of his sons (the last one five days before his own death). Shortly before his death, he lured prominent Jewish leaders to Jericho where he imprisoned

them. Knowing the people would not mourn his death, he ordered that these leaders be executed after he died. That way, he reasoned, there would at least be mourning going on at the time of his death. Fortunately, his made scheme was not carried out. Most barbaric of all was Herod's slaughter of all the innocent young male children near Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). He sought vainly by this cruel act to kill the true King of the Jews, who was safely in Egypt with his parents.'

- King Herod in this chapter was Herod Agrippa I. John Polhill continues, 'His father, Aristobulus, had been executed in 7 B.C. by his grandfather for fear that he might usurp his throne. After his father's death, while still a child, Agrippa was sent to Rome with his mother, where he was reared and educated along with the children of the Roman aristocracy. [Two such children were Claudius, his contemporary, and Caligula [Gaius], the grandnephew of Tiberius]. These childhood friendships eventually led to his ruling over a Jewish kingdom nearly the extent of that of his grandfather. In A.D. 37, when Caligula succeeded Tiberius as emperor, he gave Agrippa the title of king and made him ruler over the territories formerly ruled by his uncle Philip, lands in the Transjordan and the Ten Cities (Decapolis) north of Galilee. In A.D. 39 Caligula extended Agrippa's rule by giving him Galilee and Perea, the territory of his unclce Antipas, who had been sent inot exile. Finally, when his former schoolmate Claudius became emperor in A.D. 41, he was given rule of Judea and Samaria, which had been under Roman procurators for thirty-five years. He was truly 'king of the Jews' now, ruling over all of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, the Transjordan, and the Decapolis.

Though king, Agrippa was hardly secure. Much of his good fortune was due to his friendship with Caligula, and Caligula had not been a popular emperor with the Romans. In fact, Agrippa could not count on always being in the good graces of Rome. It became all the more important for him to win the loyalty of his Jewish subjects in order to give him at least a firm footing at home.'

- According to the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, Herod Agrippa went to great lengths to try and win the support and approval of the Jewish people. He was especially known for seeking the favor of the powerful and influential Pharisees.
- No doubt, Herod Antipas was quite familiar with Jesus and his band of followers, as his uncle, Antipas, had been the one who tried Jesus, as recorded in Luke 23:7 and Acts 4:27.

a. James is Martyred

- In **Verses 1-2**, Luke quickly describes the work of Herod Antipas, stating that 'about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.'
- This passage does not specifically state the manner in which Herod has James killed. The phrase 'death with a sword' could mean one of two types of death, depending upon whether the reference is meant in terms of a Roman or Jewish execution.
 - If it was Roman, then the phrase 'death with a sword' would mean that he was beheaded.

- However, if the reference is Jewish, then it would have meant he had the ‘edge of the sword’ thrust through his body, as Jewish law forbade beheading as a desecration of the body [Deuteronomy 13:15]. Furthermore, if he was executed in the Jewish mode, this would have meant that the charges against him, in accordance with Deuteronomy 13:12-15, involved encouraging the people of God to ‘go and serve other gods’.
 - James, the son of Zebedee, has the distinction of being the first of the apostles to be martyred, and the only one recorded in Scripture.
 - Furthermore, James death fulfills the prophecy of Jesus Christ, in Mark 10:38-39, when he tells John and James, ‘The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism which I am baptized.’ [Note: Jesus never said that James and John would suffer death together. According to tradition, John lived longer than any of the apostles, experiencing exile rather than martyrdom.]
- Luke spends very little time explaining James’ martyrdom. The reason for this seems to be that his primary focus is on Peter’s deliverance from prison. It remains known only to God, and in the mystery of his sovereignty, why James suffered martyrdom so early, and Peter was delivered. Yet, Luke’s point in conveying these two stories together seems clear: God is in absolute control, and His will is always accomplished. Sometimes His will involves death; other times, deliverance. Yet, in all situations He is working all things in accordance with His plan, ultimately, for His glory.

b. Peter is Imprisoned

- Immediately following his account of James’ martyrdom, Luke writes, in **Verse 3**, ‘When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread.’
 - Luke’s note that ‘When [Herod] saw that it pleased the Jews [to put James to death],’ demonstrates Herod’s desire to appease the Jews over which he ruled.
 - Furthermore, it appears that through James’ death, Herod was ‘testing’ the reaction of the Jews. It must have been good, as he proceeded to do the same to Peter.
 - Furthermore, he cleverly proceeded to arrest Peter, ‘during the days of Unleavened Bread.’ Passover was observed on the night before Nisan 14 and was followed by the weeklong festival of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This entire period is often referred to [and this is how Luke uses it in Verse 4] as ‘Passover.’
 - It was during this time that thousands of Jewish pilgrims would flood the streets of Jerusalem. Therefore, by arresting Peter during this time [and waiting until just after the holy days has passed – for it would have been a desecration to try or execute him during Passover] Herod ensured that the maximum number of Jews would be present to witness his acts of justice against the leader of the Christian community –

a community that had welcomed Gentiles and angered the most conservative of the Jewish leaders [both of Pharisaical and Sadducean stock].

- Then, in **Verse 4**, Luke writes, ‘When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after Passover to bring him out before the people.’
 - It seems clear from this Verse that it had been Herod’s plan all along to make a **public spectacle** out of Peter, by bringing ‘him out before the people’ ‘after Passover.’

II. The Brethren Pray for Peter

- When word got back to the Christians in Jerusalem, they began to pray.
- Luke writes, in **Verse 5**, ‘So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.’
 - Luke seems to be drawing a powerful contrast in this Verse – Peter is in prison, **BUT** the church prays to God.
 - Unfortunately, it seems that this is one of the reasons why the church today is so weak, so impotent – it does not pray.
 - Furthermore, it also seems that many Christians today are afraid to pray for healing, deliverance, etc., as though to pray for such things would be less ‘spiritual.’ Yet, this appears to be exactly what the church was praying for concerning Peter – that he would be miraculously delivered.
 - In fact, Luke says that the church prayed **fervently**.
 - This word is the Greek *ektenes* [ektenes], which is a ‘medical term describing the stretching of the muscles to its limits.’
 - It is also the word used of the prayer of our Lord when He was in the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Luke 22:44 states, ‘And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.’
 - This is certainly the type of prayer the church needs today – agonizing prayer. Tragically, we are lazy in our prayer lives [not to mention our spiritual lives as a whole], and, even with the most urgent of prayer requests, we quickly become tired when God does not act as we would like, and we simply stop praying, often moving to some other means of pursuing what we want.
- John Stott writes, ‘[The church] believed that somehow, whether or not by another miracle, God could grant release to the jailed apostle in answer to their prayers. Here then were two communities, the world and the church, arrayed against one another, each wielding an

appropriate weapon. On the one side was the authority of Herod, the power of the sword and the security of the prison. On the other side, the church turned to prayer, which is the only power which the powerless possess.’

- Once again, this demonstrates the eternal, biblical principle that God chooses the foolish things of this world [such as the cross and prayer] to shame the wise [such as King Herod].

III. Peter is Delivered from Prison

- Luke begins the explanation of Peter’s delivery in Verse 6; however, he sets the stage in **Verse 4**: Herod ‘put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him...’ Then, in **Verse 6**, he states, ‘Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.’
 - Given the information in Verses 4 and 6, Peter was guarded at all times by four soldiers. He was chained to two – one on each side of him – and two soldiers guarded his cell door.
 - Even by Roman standards, this was most certainly heavy security. Normally, it was sufficient for a prisoner to be chained to only one soldier. However, not for Peter. Once again, Luke’s intention seems clear: **As was the case at the guarded tomb in which Jesus was buried: NO amount of human action can thwart the plans and will of Almighty God.**
 - Peter was guarded by four squads of four guards. This would allow the guards to change shifts every three hours throughout the twelve hour night period in order to ensure maximum vigilance and attentiveness.
 - It is certainly possible that the reason for such a heavy guarding was because the Sanhedrin may have possibly informed Herod Agrippa of what had happened to the apostles who were miraculously freed from the prison [recorded in Acts 5:19].
 - Yet, the purpose of Luke’s inclusion of this detail is to demonstrate that **there is no way Peter could have escaped. Herod made sure of that. No degree of human effort, cleverness or ingenuity could have helped him at this time. In fact, his situation was utterly helpless and hopeless.**
- So helpless is the situation, that it seems that Peter had not intention of trying to escape. Luke emphasizes that **Peter was sleeping**. No doubt he had placed his fate in the hands of the LORD. Peter, certainly understood that God was in control and trusted His will. However, he obviously knew that it would be no use in attempting to escape. So he slept for, in his mind, the last time.
- Further, Luke heightens the tension for the reader when he writes, in **Verse 6**, that Peter is not ‘on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward...’

- It was at **this very point** when, in **Verse 7**, ‘an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and woke him up, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And his chains fell off his hands.’
 - This is one of the most beautiful pictures of our salvation in all of the New Testament.
 - Just as Peter lay in his prison cell, completely unaware of his coming deliverance, so we were prior to our salvation. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, completely unaware of our need for deliverance from our sin...Then, God revealed Himself to us and quickened and illuminated our hearts the light of the Gospel.
 - Apart from a miracle from God, Peter was going to die. Again, his situation was hopeless.
 - Yet, Peter also does not seem to be aware of his coming deliverance. Yet, **as he is sleeping**, an angel of the Lord **appeared to him**.
 - In fact, the angel had to wake Peter, and when he did, he told Peter, ‘Get up quickly.’ At that moment, Peter **DID NOT** take his chains off...**they FELL off**. Peter was completely passive in this deliverance – It was indeed, an act of God alone. Yet, there was still more to go.

- Once the chains fell off, the angel said to Peter, in **Verse 8**, ‘Gird yourself and put on your sandals.’ Peter did so. And the angel said again to him, ‘Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’
 - The Angel of the LORD does **EVERYTHING**. It is miraculous as well that the guards remain asleep, or at least completely unaware of what is happening.
 - Once Peter is woken from his sleep and his eyes are open, he is simply to obey and follow the angel of the LORD. Yet, again, everything is taken care of.

- In **Verses 9-10**, Peter continues to follow the angel, not even knowing if the experience was real or a vision.
 - They passed by the other two of the four guards and came to an iron gate. Yet, once again, **Peter did NOTHING!** The gate opened by itself!
 - Then, Peter and the angel went into the city, and the angel departed. NOTE: Given these details, it is most likely that Peter was being held in the Tower of Antonia, on the northwest corner of the Temple complex.
 - At this point, in **Verse 11**, Peter realized that he had been delivered by the Lord, saying to himself, ‘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.’

- In other words, God’s plans were not thwarted; rather, He, as the KING of KINGS thwarted the plans of Herod and the Jewish people!
- The most significant truth from this account is clear:

Peter did NOT escape...He was DELIVERED!

- Just as Peter did not escape from prison, so we cannot escape from the prison of sin and death in which we find ourselves. We, too, must be delivered.
- Another powerful truth in this story is how it parallels another beautiful picture of our salvation: the EXODUS.
 - The Hebrew people did not escape from Egypt, they were delivered. Through God’s demonstration of His power in the ten plagues, God forced Pharaoh to release the people of God...even going as far as giving them supplies for their journey.
 - The parallels between this account and the Exodus are inescapable:
 - ‘the night before’ [Acts 12:6; Exodus 12:12]
 - ‘quick, get up’ [Acts 12:7; Exodus 12:11]
 - ‘put on your...sandals’ [Acts 12:8; Exodus 12:11]
 - ‘the Lord has rescued’ [Acts 12:11; Exodus 18: 4,8-10]

IV. Peter Bears Witness to his Deliverance

- After his deliverance from prison, Luke writes, in **Verse 12**, that Peter ‘went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.’
- Then, in **Verses 13-14**, Luke continues, ‘When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. 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.’
 - What it appears is that the home-church that Peter was a member of may have met in this home – the home of John Mark’s mother, Mary.
 - Luke adds a bit of subtle humor, noting that the servant girl Rhoda [which means *rose*], upon hearing the voice of Peter at the door, **left him there** and ran to tell the others. [Never mind if he might get caught by the authorities again!]
- When Rhoda told the group that was meeting and praying, **Verse 15**, ‘They said to her, ‘You are out of your mind!’ But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, ‘It is his angel.’

- This is also a bit ironic, as the very group that was praying for Peter’s deliverance denied it had happened when God answered their prayers!
- Furthermore, they tried to explain it away, saying, ‘It is his angel.’
 - This statement reflects a popular Jewish view of the day which held that each person has a guardian angel as a counterpart. It was further believed that when an individual died, the guardian angel assumed the appearance of the human he protected.
- Luke continues, in **Verses 16-17**, ‘But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had let him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Report these things to James and the brethren.’ Then he left and went to another place.’
 - Peter knew that he had to act wisely. Therefore, he motioned to the group to remain quiet, and then he **bore witness to the miracle of his deliverance by God**. Then, assuming the authorities would look for him there, he left.
 - So it should be with us, that we, to would bear witness to the miracle of our deliverance in salvation.
- Luke concludes this section, stating, in **Verses 18-19**, ‘Now when the day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution.’
 - It seems that when the soldiers realized what had happened, they panicked [‘no small disturbance’]; yet, it did not matter. God had delivered Peter, and there was no way they would be able to explain his disappearance.
 - According to Roman law, based upon the *Code of Justinian* 9.4.4, a guard who allowed a prisoner to escape was subject to the same punishment the escaped prisoner had been sentenced to. Therefore, it is most likely that Roman soldiers were executed.

- F.F. Bruce writes, ‘That James should die while Peter should escape is a mystery of divine providence which has been repeated countless times in the history of the people of God. By faith, says the writer to the Hebrews, some ‘escaped the edge of the sword’; by faith others ‘were killed with the sword’ (Hebrews 11:34, 37).
- Herod successfully murders James and imprisons Peter; however, the end result is that the Gospel message spreads even more rapidly than if Herod had done nothing.
- What a great joy to know that whether in life or death, God’s will is always accomplished!