

*Words and Deeds: Prison Break*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*October 21, 2018*  
*Psalm 142; Matthew 10:16-22; Acts 12:1-19*

Today's final Scripture reading is Acts 12:1-19. May God open our hearts and minds as we read His sacred and perfect Word. "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. 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. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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." 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. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 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. In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 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. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while."

Sometimes the English language isn't our friend. Many words have multiple meanings that confuse the situation. When I hear the word "deliver," I think of pizza. I might think of having packages delivered by UPS or Fed Ex. But to be "delivered" has a greater and richer concept behind it. To be delivered is to be rescued, set free, saved, released. Now I know there've been a few times when having pizza delivered felt like being rescued! But today's story isn't about delivery but deliverance – and we as believers today have plenty to learn from today's passage about how we too are set free from bondage and delivered by our awesome God.

But first, we've got to deal with King Herod on the rampage. This is the third Herod we meet in Scripture. Herod the Great was the man responsible for the deaths of the infants in Bethlehem trying to hunt down Jesus. Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great's sons, had John the Baptist beheaded and tried to interrogate Jesus. This Herod today is Herod Agrippa, the nephew of Herod Antipas.

The Herods, who weren't Jewish by birth, bought their way into power and kept the populace of their kingdom happy by creating major public works (like the temple in Jerusalem) and pleasing their subjects. Herod Agrippa knew that the Jewish leadership is unhappy about the Christian problem. Not only do they see it as a cult, now more Gentiles are showing up in Jerusalem interested in learning about Jesus – and the Jews believed in complete separation from the Gentile world.

So Agrippa brings enough persecution on the Christians to keep the Jewish leadership off his back. And he does it in a big way – he has James executed. This is gigantic. James the first one of the twelve apostles to be martyred, and he was one of the inner circle. He was one of Jesus' three closest friends. He's the apostle John's brother. He was privy to Jesus' personal teaching; he was one of only three people to see Jesus transfigured up on the mountainside.

You would expect that James would be a world-changer, that Jesus spent all this time with him so he would be someone incredibly important – a leader of the church like Peter, or like his brother who by tradition lived into his 90s and wrote his gospel that explains that Jesus is God in the flesh. But James doesn't have that history. His death is reported matter-of-factly. We can only assume that it was done without any show; it's hard to know if there was even a trial.

It makes us ask: why did this happen? Why was this godly leader with so much potential struck down before he could accomplish much of note? Why is Peter saved but James dies? Theologian F.F. Bruce said it is “a mystery of divine providence” - which in everyday language means nobody knows why except God.

But the important question for us is not why James died but how he died. From God's point of view, James' death is precious in his sight.<sup>1</sup> For one, James died in obedience to Jesus' call on his life. He was still well-known to the church, and his death hurt them, but that shows that James was forever faithful. Second, he had the privilege to die in the service of Jesus. Sounds like a strange blessing, right? But if Jesus is central to who you are, if you want your life to stand for Jesus, if your life's goal is for people to see Jesus through you, dying because of your faith in Jesus is an honor. Sometimes someone dies playing golf or running and we say, “At least he died doing what he loved.” James died doing what he loved – honoring his Savior.

And last but not least, James was the first apostle to receive the promise he himself requested. You might remember that he and his brother James asked Jesus if one of them could sit at His right hand and one at His left in His Kingdom. James was looking forward to the day when he would reign alongside Jesus. He gets his wish earlier than the rest. We might question God's “why” in taking James when he did, but James gained the most by going quickly to our Lord's side.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lange's Commentary on Acts 12 is central to the three following points.

So now we get into Peter's escape. Herod is so pleased with how the death of James was received, he sees this as a huge political opportunity, so he has Peter arrested. There's really only one reason why Peter isn't immediately killed, and that's because of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It's a 7-day festival that immediately follows Passover. The Sanhedrin had been willing to fudge their rules in the death of Jesus to have His trial during the festivals. But here, it's Herod, not the Sanhedrin, calling the shots. Since Peter was going to be under lock and key the whole time, it wasn't worth blooding their hands during a sacred feast.

Peter's situation looks hopeless. He's under the care of four squads of four soldiers. This was typical of Roman practices, which made sure no guard stood watch during the night more than three hours. He's under double chain – tied to two different soldiers, which was only done for prisoners likely to escape. Peter and John escaped prison many years before by supernatural means, so they've all but assured the impossibility of Peter's escape.

And you know what? The church here is powerless. I am reminded of our own recent situation with the Brunsons. As awful as their situation was, an EPC deacon is the secretary of state who brought the situation to the attention of the president and vice-president. We had people calling the White House, signing letters, asking for help. The current administration did a great deal to get Andrew out of jail in Turkey. But the church in this era had no authority to ask anything from Herod. A Christian approaching him might have been imprisoned and executed.

So what did they do? They prayed. The Greek word here means they prayed eagerly, fervently, constantly, without ceasing. The church was in steadfast discussion with the Lord about Peter's predicament. They were praying to God for him. The text doesn't even say what they were praying for, exactly – we'll discuss that more in a minute – but they prayed.

That's what I want to focus on for a minute, what we see in this passage: *prayer and deliverance are directly interconnected*. Prayer is not a guarantee of deliverance, nor does a lack of prayer mean it won't happen. But when we bring God our urgent desires for someone's deliverance, God hears. It pleases God to be able to bring our desires to pass. God shows His love for us by often answering our prayers for deliverance with a “yes.” It is no accident that Peter was released following the fervent prayers of the saints. Prayer is the most powerful tool to break the bondage we live in.

We know the literal application of this passage is true because we've seen it with Pastor Andrew. What amazes me was that he was found guilty, yet he was sentenced to time served. The charges against him carried a 35-year sentence. Obviously political issues were at stake. But Andrew's release without harm shows that God still brings about physical deliverance.

I'm going to take this idea a bit further than just literal deliverance from physical chains. There is deliverance available from the spiritual chains in our own lives. And we need it, because we are an addicted nation and an addicted church. 13% of Americans are alcoholics. Over 10% are substance abusers. At least 40% have addiction issues related to food. Huge numbers – around 75% of church going men and 20% of church going women – report problems with pornography. Even smoking is making a comeback through vaping, both nicotine and marijuana.

There are forms of bondage that aren't physical addictions but are just as deadly to our souls. We need deliverance from our need for worldly success that drives us to work so much we neglect our families. We need deliverance from gossip and pride, the compulsion to present a picture perfect family on Facebook. We need deliverance from anger, road rage, our need to buy more stuff, our filling our days with meaningless distractions rather than pursuing our awesome God who can give our lives meaning and moves us away from the addictions we use to cover the pain we feel, the pain that ultimately comes from our separation from God and one another.

Prayer is the key. Prayer does not promise easy answers. Peter was not released on the first night of the festival but the last. Prayer does not mean that there won't be consequences; after his deliverance, Peter was on the run for a year until Herod's death. He was delivered, but he had to keep moving. Prayer doesn't mean there's no effort necessary. Peter doesn't rescue himself, but he still has to get dressed, put on his cloak, and follow. Prayer is not a simple answer or a quick fix. We do not save ourselves, but we act in obedience as we are rescued.

Fervent, earnest, unending prayer, however, puts our needs at God's feet. We lay down everything and we trust Him with the results. We keep going back, going back, knowing that we are fighting against the forces of hell itself, knowing that we are asking not just for help but divine intervention. God listens to this fervent prayer. And through it, He changes us. He puts in our hearts a love for Himself and a realization that no matter what, He is good.

Paul told the church, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." We who are pastors would like to be enough like Christ that we could say that without reservation. I'm going to be honest and say that I haven't yet been delivered from all my addictions. God works in His timing, even in pastors' lives. I think of the man I consider my mentor in faith, Dr. R.C. Sproul, who when he became a Christian was able to drop most of his vices instantly. Yet he couldn't kick smoking for 35 years, and his death last year at the edge of 80 was due to complications from that addiction.

What I can tell you to imitate is this: in every addiction that I battle, I am working with other men I trust to get to the root of them and weed them out, that as far as it depends on me, I am working to be obedient. And I am praying for them and they are praying for me prayers of deliverance from the struggles we face.

I encourage you to do the same thing – find someone who is willing to pray for you, to listen to your struggle without judgment, and then to ask God regularly for your deliverance as you practice the tools of obedience. As your pastor, I'm happy to pray with anyone, but I invite you to be regularly accountable to other people. I encourage men to pray with men and women to pray with women for a number of reasons, but primarily because we tend to fight the same fights and struggle the same struggles. Do not struggle for deliverance alone. The church earnestly prayed for Peter's release. We can ask the church to be praying for us too.

Now we get to Peter's prison break, and it's amazing and supernatural. There's no other explanation for it. And what happens next is a fun human story that illustrates our human nature. The angel has broken Peter out of prison, Peter's gone to the house of Mary mother of John Mark (who would write the gospel of Mark), he's knocking at the door, the servant girl Rhoda comes up to see who's there, and she's so excited she goes to tell everyone without letting him in!

What happens next is telling. They tell Rhoda, “It must be his angel.” They so don't know what to make of it, they move to folklore rather than the most obvious solution. The Bible doesn't speak of guardian angels, though it was a popular concept in Jewish thought that someone's angel appeared after their death. There was also an idea that the spirits of the dead stuck around for three days waiting to see if they might be revived. (None of this is in Scripture.)

They've been praying so passionately for Peter, yet when he shows up, they're like, “No, he's probably dead and some spirit has come to show us.” Meanwhile, Peter's a wanted man still waiting to be let inside! When they finally realize the truth, Peter settles them down so as to not create a disturbance, and he has them send word to James the brother of Jesus and the other leaders of the church. Then he hightails it out of town before he gets caught again.

Here's the last thing we should notice, and remember this one well: *God can answer prayer in supernatural ways beyond our wildest expectations.* We don't know the exact prayers of the saints for Peter, but for him to just walk up to their door was too good to be true. They couldn't believe it. They couldn't wrap their minds around it. Ultimately, even though these were loyal, faithful believers, their view of God was still too small.

Is our view of God too small? I think so. I think we bring requests for physical healing to the church and very little else because we think that A) that's what God's job is or B) our other issues are insignificant and not worthy of God's time or C) we're embarrassed by our personal problems or D) we don't see any way God could fix them. But our God wants to deliver us from the chains that bind us. He is honored and glorified when He delivers us in ways only He can.

God can fix broken marriages and bad relationships. God can heal wounded hearts and spirits. He can set you free from anything and do soul repair in a way only He can. He can bring wayward children and spouses and siblings to faith; He can give you peace in lonely times. *He can make a way.* I truly believe that. We see it in the Bible over and over again.

So don't sell God short. Don't believe that you have to do it on your own, and don't believe that God can't walk you out of the prison doors in your life that are barring the way to you living as a free and faithful child of God. Believe that He can do it for you and for others. Maybe the chains are literal, like with our Pastor Andrew. Maybe they're not. But God has the power to break them all. Maybe He won't do it today or tomorrow or next week. But as we fervently pray, it *will* happen.

Next week, we'll find out more about what happened with Herod and his evil schemes. But for this week, I encourage you – examine yourselves. Ask, “Where am I trapped? What part of my old, worldly, selfish life am I unwilling or unable to give up to live my life as a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ?” Pursue deliverance in prayer and with others; bring other Christians into your battle. And then live in hope, my friends, because God can change not only our situations, He can change us in ways that are beyond human understanding.