**Peter and the Jailbreaker**

(Acts 12:5-11)

A group of politicians were in a meeting one day, trying to decide how to spend the taxpayers’ money. One of them said, “I say we *cut* the budgets of our schools, and *double* the budgets of our jails.” One of the other politicians said, “Why would we want to make life nicer for our *prisoners* than for our *students?”* The first one replied, “Because—as politicians—we’re never going to go back to school, but we just might end up *in jail!”*

Well, speaking of being in jail, in our last lesson we saw that King Herod had thrown *the Apostle Peter* in jail, after *executing* the Apostle James. And when that happened, the Jewish kingdom church figured that Peter’d be killed next. So they did what I hope the members of *my* church would do if I were arrested and placed on Death Row. Let’s find out what that is in the first verse of our text:

**“Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him” (Acts 12:5).**

If I were wrongfully arrested and scheduled for execution because of my faith, I would hope that the members of my church would pray without ceasing, as opposed to baking me a cake with a file inside. Any attempt to stage a jailbreak would be an incorrect response, even in the case of a sinful persecution of a pastor.

As the story continues, we see

**“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” (Acts 12:6).**

In our last study, we learned what it means when it says that Herod was about to take Peter and “bring him forth.” He was about to bring him forth *to the unsaved Jews* to let them clamor for Peter’s life, the way they demanded the Lord be executed rather than Barabbas. That way Peter’s blood would be on *them,* not him.

But don’t overlook the fact that Peter is *sleeping* here. How much sleep would you be able to get if you knew they *executed* the last apostle they arrested? His situation looked absolutely *hopeless.* But Peter knew his Bible, and his Bible said:

**“Many there be which say of my soul, *There is no help for him in God…* But…I laid me down *and slept…*for the LORD sustained me”(Psalm 3:2,3,5).**

**“There be many that say, *Who will shew us any good?* LORD, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us…*I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep”* (Psalm 4:6,8).**

Peter had *perfect peace* that night, all because *he knew his Bible.*

Of course, Peace like that doesn’t come automatically, just because you know your Bible. You *also* have to do what the prophet Isaiah said when he prayed,

**“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, *whose mind is stayed on Thee:* because he trusteth in Thee.”**

If you want to be able to sleep when *your* neck is on the chopping block—or even if you’re just worried about something that’s keeping you awake—you have to learn to *stay your mind on the Lord.* That means to keep your mind *fixed* on Him.

You know, with a little practice, you can learn to control what you think about, even in the most worrisome of circumstances. The night before I prepared this message to preach it in my church, I had something that I needed to block out of my mind so I could get some sleep. It was something I couldn’t do anything about until the following week. So every time I started to think about it, I just kept putting it out of my mind, and telling myself that I was just going to trust that whatever happened, God’s grace would see me through it. I’m actually pretty good at it, because I’ve been doing it for many years.

But God wouldn’t tell us *all* to stay our minds on Him if it weren’t possible for us all to do it! God never tells us to do anything we can’t do. So I would encourage you to start working on staying your mind on the Lord, and *you too* will be sleeping better, and be a whole lot happier in life.

But now, I don’t know much about breaking out of jail—which is probably a good thing in a pastor!—but I’d imagine you have to be *awake* to do it. That’s probably the first rule of jailbreaking, right? So God woke Peter in the next verse of our text:

**“And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands” (Acts 12:7).**

Now I have to tell you, that makes me laugh every time I read it. I mean, Peter is sleeping, so he’s probably horizontal on the floor. So for an angel to smite him, I picture him kicking him in the ribs. Gently, of course, but firmly.

And that shows how *deeply* he was sleeping. I don’t know about you, but the light from a shiny angel would be enough to wake me up. Whenever I plan on sleeping past dawn, I wear one of those night-shade sleep masks to bed so the morning light won’t rouse me earlier than I plan. And angels are really bright! Luke describes them as “men…*in shining garments”* (Luke 24:4) But Peter was oblivious to the light from *his* angel!

As an aside, it might interest you to know that angels are *not* described as shiny in the Old Testament. But the New Testament was the dawn of a new day for the people of Israel, and their angelic messengers reflected that in their bright brilliance.

But when the light from that shiny New Testament angel didn’t wake Peter, the left foot of fellowship delivered to the solar plexus did. Acts 12:7 adds the detail that when Peter rose up, his chains fell off. Then in Verse 8 we read:

**“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.”**

Now, we’re not told what happened to the two soldiers that Peter was sleeping between. But if I had to guess, I’d say they probably *fainted* from fear. You know. Like the soldiers guarding the Lord’s tomb. When that angel rolled the stone away to show that the Lord had already risen, it says the guards became “as dead men.” In other words, those hardened Roman soldiers *fainted like sissies.*

And that could be what happened here. All we know for sure is that Peter was not free, and off like a dirty shirt out the door! Then our text says:

**“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” (Acts 12:9).**

And by “a vision,” it means *a dream.* Compare what we read in Job:12:8:

**“He shall fly away *as a dream…*he shall be chased away *as a vision of the night.”***

So Peter thought he was only *dreaming* that his chains dropped off. But there they were, clanking around on the floor!

But his chains weren’t his only problem. In our last lesson, we saw that he was being guarded by more than just the two soldiers who were passed out in his cell. Herod had assigned *four quarternions of soldiers* to guard him. That means a total of 16 soldiers stood between Peter and freedom.

So how did the angel deal with *them?* Well, all we are told is,

**“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” (Acts 12:10).**

Somehow that angel just walked Peter right past those guards. The Bible doesn’t say *how* he did that, but it reminds us of what happened when a bunch of unsaved Jews tried to rock the Lord to sleep in John 8:59, where it says of them,

**“Then took they up stones to cast at Him: *but Jesus hid Himself,* and went out of the temple, *going through the midst of them,* and so passed by.”**

As you can see, the Lord just walked right through them, right under their noses. And that’s what seems to have happened here. Peter and the angel walked right past 16 Roman soldiers who were guarding Peter as if their lives depended on it—because their lives *were* depending on it! Roman soldiers were *executed* if their prisoners escaped. So I guarantee that those sentries hadn’t nodded off.

But think about that! Peter’s inside in jail, sleeping like a baby under a sentence of death, but his guards are free men outside of jail, but are too terrified of death to be able to sleep! And that despite the fact that they knew there was an iron gate keeping Peter behind bars even if they *did* nod off.

But verse 10 says that the iron gate opened of its own accord. That reminds me of how a married couple from my church and I were attending a Bible conference in Michigan years ago, and we were staying in rooms at a nearby hunting lodge. The ranch had one of those electronic sliding gates at the entrance that opened when we pushed the button on the garage door thingy they gave us to use during our stay. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt safer. I had a gate that only *I* could open, and I was surrounded by hunters with guns—and two human shields from my church!

But when Peter’s iron gate opened like somebody pushed a button, it reminds me of something the 12 apostles said after the Lord calmed the sea:

**“What manner of man is this, *that even the winds and the sea obey Him!”* (Matthew 8:27).**

Hey, if even the wind and waves obey the Lord, that iron gate didn’t stand a chance of *disobeying* Him and standing in Peter’s way. Did you know that the only creature in all of God’s creation that ever *dares* say no to God is *man.* God programed salmon to swim thousands of miles to lay their eggs in the location where they themselves were spawned. The Monarch butterflies that are found across the United States and Canada all travel 2,500 miles every year to the same spot in Mexico. Every creature on the planet does exactly what God tells him to do, and never disobeys. Only man has the *audacity* to say no to God. Think about that the next time you’re thinking of saying no to something God tells *you* in His Word.

But now, all this time Peter still thought he was dreaming. But once the angel left him—and nothing else seemed to be happening in his dream—it says in the last verse of our text:

**“And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.”**

Now you’ll notice here that after the angel departed in verse 10, this verse says nothing about the angel giving Peter any instructions about what to do now that he was once again free to serve the Lord. I point that out because it stands in stark contrast to what happened the *first* time God sent an angel to spring Peter out of jail. Back in Acts 5, we saw:

**“…*the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and* brought them forth, and said, *Go..and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life”* (Acts 5:19,20).**

Now why did the angel stay that *there,* but nothing *here?* It’s because, as we discussed in our last lesson, God was *discontinuing* the kingdom program through the 12 apostles, and starting up the grace program through the Apostle Paul. *Paul* was now in charge of speaking the words of eternal life, so the angel didn’t re-commission *Peter* to speak those words.

Everywhere you look in the Book of Acts, you’ll see little proofs that God was *phasing out* the kingdom program—proofs that we need to keep pointing out, so Christians today will quit following a discontinued program, and begin following the hints that God gives us that lead us to follow Paul instead.

But now, the question is: Why did God allow James to be killed, and Peter to be spared? Why the difference? Well, there’s actually two answers to that question.

First, God spared Peter because He had something else he needed Peter to do. And we don’t have to guess as to what it was, because there’s only one other time Peter appears in the Bible after this, and that’s in Acts 15, where the apostles were deciding if Paul’s new ministry among the Gentiles was of God. At that famous council in Jerusalem, Peter stood up and testified on Paul’s behalf by pointing out that God had sent *him* to a Gentile first, a story we read about in Acts 10. That was actually why God *sent* Peter to see a Gentile, to pave the way for Paul’s ministry. And that was the first reason God spared Peter, so he could testify for Paul.

But that doesn’t explain why God allowed James to be killed. What *does* explain it is that God wanted James and Peter to become types of the Lord’s death and resurrection. If you’re not sure how that would work, let’s back up to some *Old Testament* types of the Lord’s death and resurrection. The first is in Leviticus 14:4-7:

**“Then shall the priest…take…two birds…*and…command that one...be killed*….As for the living bird, he shall…dip…the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed…*and shall let the living bird loose into the open field.”***

The dead bird in that sacrifice was a type of the Lord’s death, and the living bird was a type of His resurrection. Dipping the released bird into the blood of the slain bird pictures how the Lord rose from the dead with his wounds still open. Do you remember what He told Doubting Thomas?

**“Reach hither thy finger, *and behold My hands;* and reach hither thy hand, *and thrust it into My side:* and be not faithless, but believing” (John 20:27).**

So the bloody living bird was a good portrayal of the Lord’s resurrection body. His body no longer *contained* blood, but you get the picture. And when the living bird flew away, that depicted the Lord’s ascension into heaven after His resurrection.

We have *another* type of the Lord’s death and resurrection in Leviticus 16:3-10, where Moses wrote,

**“Aaron…shall take…two…goats…and…bring the goat…*and offer him for a sin offering.* But…the scapegoat…*let him go…into the wilderness.”***

Do you see how *that too* typifies the Lord’s death and resurrection? One goat dies, and the other is released to live on.

But we have a *human* type of the Lord’s death and resurrection in the death of James, and the release of Peter. And I don’t know if you know this or not, but the Lord *predicted* that James would die:

**“James and John…come unto Him, saying…Grant unto us that we may sit, one on Thy right hand, and the other on Thy left hand, in Thy glory. But Jesus said …*can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?* And they said…*We can.* And Jesus said unto them, *Ye shall indeed”* (Mark 10:35-39).**

Now the Lord wasn’t talking about His baptism *in water* there. He was talking about the baptism *of His death.* He called His death a “cup” when, in the shadow of the cross, He prayed:

**“O My Father, if it be possible, *let this cup pass from Me:* nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39).**

And He called His death a *baptism* when He said:

**“I have a baptism *to be* baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!” (Luke 12:50).**

When He said that, He’d *already been* baptized with water. He was talking about the baptism of His death. That means when He told James that he would be baptized with the baptism his Lord was baptized with, He was telling James that he would have to be *killed* like He was.

Now if that confuses you, its because most Christians are unaware that the word “baptism” means *identification,* as it does in the very *first* baptism, one that Paul recalled when he wrote the Corinthians in I Corinthians 10:1,2:

**“…all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; *And were all baptized unto Moses* in the cloud and in the sea.”**

Now as you may remember, the Jews didn’t get *wet* when they were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Exodus 14:22 says,

**“the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea *upon the dry ground:* and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left”**

That pillar of cloud led the Jews to the Red Sea, with Pharaoh’s army hot on their heels. But when the sea parted, they weren’t sure they wanted to follow Moses in between those massive walls of water. I mean, what if those walls *closed* as mysteriously as they opened. So they thought about going back to Egypt. But when they looked back toward Egypt, they saw Pharaoh’s chariots of iron *bearing down on them.* At that point, they said, as it were, “We’re with Moses!”

Do you see how that shows that the word baptism means *identification?* They were baptized, or *identified,* with Moses in the sea, and James was baptized, or identified, with the Lord in His death. And James will be identified with the Lord in His resurrection when *he* rises from the dead someday.

Now in all of this, James and Peter were types of Tribulation believers. Some of them will be killed in the Tribulation, and some will live through it—just like James was killed, but Peter was spared to live on. But *all* Tribulation believers will have the perfect peace that Peter demonstrated for, like Peter, they’ll be thinking of Scriptures like Psalm 4:8, where David wrote,

**“I will both lay me down in peace, *and sleep:* for Thou, LORD, *only makest me dwell in safety.”***

The Book of Psalms is going to serve as the prayer book of believing Tribulation Jews. Because of that, they’ll be able to sleep peacefully in *their* prison cells because they’ll know what Peter knew, that if they’re killed God will raise them from the dead. You can *always* feel safe if you know that even death won’t be the end of you, right?

And you can feel that safe as well, for *you too* have been identified with the Lord in His death. Your apostle Paul told the Romans,

**“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ *were baptized into His death?* Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: *that like as Christ was raised up from the dead*…*we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection”* (Romans 6:3-5).**

You too were baptized into the Lord’s death and resurrection. Back when you believed the gospel, God took you back to Calvary and made you one with Christ in His death, and someday you’ll be one with Him in His resurrection, as Paul wrote there.

But at this point, I should pause and tell you that God may have broken *Peter* out of jail, but He’s not going to send an angel to spring *you* from prison if you are incarcerated. That’s because there’s been a dispensational change since Peter’s day.

But that doesn’t mean God doesn’t care about us. He just chooses to *show* His care for us in a different way. You can actually see this dispensational change develop in the accounts and descriptions found in this transitional book of Acts. For instance, when Paul got thrown in jail in Acts 16, we read,

**“…*suddenly there was a great earthquake,* so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately *all the doors were opened,* *and* *every one's bands were loosed”* (Acts 16:26).**

Doesn’t that sound like what happened to Peter? Paul’s chains fell off, just like Peter’s chains. The doors to Paul’s prison were opened, just like Peter’s iron gate. As you can see, God showed Paul how He cared for him in the same way He showed Peter in the early part of Acts.

But look what happened when Paul was in prison at the *end* of Acts:

**“Paul dwelt *two whole years* in his own hired house…” (Acts 28:30).**

Paul was what we today call a high profile prisoner by that time, so he was incarcerated under what we call house arrest. But as you can see, God let him rot in jail *for two whole years.* No earthquake. No chains dropping off. No gates opening of their own accord.

But we know that God still cared for him, for the *rest* of Acts 28:30 says,

**“Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, *and received all that came in unto him”* (Acts 28:30).**

Paul was allowed to be visited by other believers who ministered to his every need. *That’s* how God showed Paul that He cared when the transition period of Acts was over.

Now you’re probably thinking that if you were Paul, you’d rather God staged another jailbreak to show He cared! But that’s not how Paul felt about it. We know that to be so because of what he wrote the Philippians *during* that two year incarceration:

**“…*your care of me hath flourished again*…I have all, *and abound:* I amfull, *having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you…”* (Philippians 4:10,18).**

As far as Paul was concerned, he was living a “full” and *abounding* life—even though he was in jail. And you can live a life like that as well, if *you* get thrown in jail.

You say, “But I don’t *want* to be in jail!” I don’t blame you. I don’t either. But what if I told you that God could use you in jail better than He can use you *outside* of jail? Would that change your mind?

I ask because as I respond to the letters we receive at *Berean Bible Society,* not a week goes by that I don’t hear from a prisoner for the very first time, a prisoner who came to know the Lord because some *other* prisoner shared Christ with him. There’s just something about being in jail that makes Christians get over their shyness about telling others about the Lord. And there’s *also* something about being in jail that makes people *listen* when you tell them about the Lord.

And once you learn that serving the Lord in ways like that is more important than getting out of jail, you can say what Paul *also* said to the Philippians:

**“I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, *therewith to be content”* (Philippians 4:11).**

Paul wrote that in prison, chained between two soldiers, just like Peter. Now *that’s* learning to be content.

You know, there’s more than one kind of prison in life. Some people feel imprisoned by a difficult marriage. God doesn’t promise to deliver us from that kind of prison either. Others feel imprisoned by *loneliness.* Then there’s the virtual prison of *hopelessness* you feel when you can’t pay your bills, and you can’t get out of debt.

Then there’s this. Christian prisoners often write me to say that the absolute *worst* part of being in prison is the unbelievably *depraved* prisoners that surround them. You may be able to relate to that. You may have to go to work each day and be surrounded by the same kind of people. You may live in a neighborhood alongside the same kind of people. God doesn’t promise to deliver us from those kinds of prisons either.

But He *does* promise to show He still cares about you with the warm love of a church family. Even if you get imprisoned on some difficult situation in life *for two years or more,* like Paul, you can still be like Paul and receive all the believers who come to comfort you.

Here’s another thing. God doesn’t promise that the day won’t come when the some politician in government throws you in jail, as happened to Paul. And He doesn’t promise that some ruler in government won’t *kill you,* like James.

Of course, if you know your Bible, you may be wondering if I’m right about that, for Paul tells us in II Corinthians 1:9,10,

**“…we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: *in whom we trust that He will yet deliver us.”***

That sure sounds like Paul expected to be delivered from death.

But did you notice that Paul didn’t say, “We had the sentence of death, but we trust in God, *who broke us out of jail in Acts 16.”* Instead he said, “We had the sentence of death, but we trust in the God *who raises the dead.”* That’s the kind of deliverance he was talking about, the deliverance *of the resurrection.* That’s the only kind of deliverance from death that God promised Paul, and it’s the only kind He’s promised you.

But can’t you be satisfied with a promise as wonderful as that? Look what God promised the believers in Israel:

**“I will…*open…the two leaved gates;* and the gates *shall not be shut;* I will go before thee, *and…I will break in pieces the gates of brass,* *and cut in sunder the bars of iron:* And I will give thee the…hidden riches of secret places, *that thou mayest know that I*…*am the God of Israel”* (Isaiah 45:1-3).**

Doesn’t that sound like what happened to peter when that iron gate opened to him? The first part of God’s promise there came true when God brought the people of Israel out of Babylon after their 70 years of captivity and incarceration there. But those “hidden riches of secret places” won’t be theirs until God fulfills that type, and opens the gates to bring the people of Israel into their kingdom. Peter’s experience here in Acts 12 was a type of that entrance into the kingdom, just as the Jews’ release from Babylon was.

Do you know what the Jews will say when that type is fulfilled and they enter the kingdom? Psalm 126:1-3 foretells what they’ll say when it records what they said after their release from Babylon:

**“When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, *we were like them that dream.* Then was our mouth filled with *laughter*, and our tongue with *singing*: then said they…*The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad.”***

Peter thought that *he* was dreaming in the type of that day he experienced in our text. But someday the dreams of the people of Israel will become a reality.

And so will yours! Someday all the iron gates and bars that imprison you in life will be cut in sunder, whatever your particular kind of prison may be, and you’ll be enjoying the hidden riches of secret places in heaven. And when that happens, you’re going to think, *“I must be dreaming.”* And in that day, *your* mouth will be filled with laughter too, and your tongue will be filled with singing.

And you’ll be saying with the psalmist,

“The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad.”