

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Kept In the Master's Hand Acts 12:1-25

God expects us to see His hand even in the most difficult of circumstances. To those who have faith, God's fingerprint can often be spotted in the most unlikely places.

We've learned that God transformed Peter from an impulsive, fearful man to a leader with strength and unwavering determination. A man who was willing to proclaim the gospel of Christ even in the midst of significant opposition.

It might be that we may have the mistaken impression that whenever he would be opposed, Peter would immediately prevail over whatever opposition might have come against him. But this is just not the case. In fact there were times when it appeared as if Peter's enemies would triumph. There were times that his very life appeared to be on the verge of being cut short. There were times when the Lord would lead Peter into particular situations that would appear to have no way of escape. The Lord would lead Peter into situations that would render Peter perfectly helpless.

Rather than destroying Peter's faith, each of these situations only deepened his trust in the Lord. His knowledge of God only grew in the midst of His trials.

Hopefully you remember that on the night Christ was betrayed, Peter had promised, "**Lord with you I am ready to go both to prison and to death**" (Luke 22:33). BUT that very night he slept when he should have been praying, and later that same evening denied his Lord.

Now fourteen years have passed. Those dark moments in Peter's life had become a faint memory. A new and different Peter had emerged. He no longer cowered in fear but willingly placed himself in harm's way for the cause of the gospel. He no longer slunk away from the threat of persecution. And because of this new boldness on the part of Peter we find him suffering from time to time.

Not a suffering however outside of God's providence. Not a suffering outside of God's plan. This is clearly demonstrated for us in **Acts 12**. In this particular account of one of Peter's many imprisonments we will see three links in the chain of God's providence that testify to His sovereign power and wisdom.

Peter Arrested

Let's us look at **Acts 12:1**, "**Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them.**" This is a reference to Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great who had the male infants killed when Christ was born in Bethlehem. This grandson, who was known for his cruelty, delighted in pleasing the Jews. As a trial balloon, he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword which is recorded for us in **V. 2**, "**And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.**" Now let us look at **V. 3** "**And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of unleavened bread.**"

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The feast of unleavened bread was a 7 day period of time following the passover meal when only unleavened bread could be eaten and which was considered an extension of the passover celebration which is clear as we continue to read in **VV. 4-5**, **“and when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church, to God.”**

Peter was arrested unjustly, he had not violated neither moral nor secular laws. He appears to have been taken into custody only for political expediency. He simply had been born at the wrong time and at the wrong place. Peter, it would appear had been dealt a bad hand and there was not a whole lot that could be done about it. In our time, in the country we live, we would have legal recourse. But this was not the case with Peter. He was up the creek without a paddle. **PETER HAD TO ENTRUST HIS CASE SOLELY TO GOD WITHOUT A HINT OF HUMAN HELP IN SIGHT.**

But God followed Peter into prison. Our Lord does not have to restrict His entry to the posted visiting hours. He does not observe the restrictions we do when we take a friend to the airport and come to the sign, “Passengers only beyond this point.” As Joseph learned, God goes with His people into the dungeon, and accompanies them when they cross a border from one country to another. He goes with us to the school, the factory, the home, and the hospital. In **Heb. 13:5-6** it says, **“He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you, (6) so that we confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to Me?’”**

Peter found himself in a dungeon with sixteen soldiers assigned to guard him (4 squads). Probably they worked in shifts of four, one was chained to each of Peter’s arms, one guarded the entrance of the dungeon, and the other guarded the entrance to the prison itself. Thus sixteen soldiers on six-hour shifts worked round the clock to make sure that Peter would stay put. After all, he had had a history of jailbreaks! (**Acts 5:17-32**). Herod may have heard of his miraculous deliverance years before. The king’s reputation was at stake, so no one took any chances.

What were the odds of Peter escaping alive? Not great. The only light in the darkness is found in one short phrase, **“But prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God” (Acts 12:5)**. Peter was in prison according to the plan and purposes of God (**Eph. 1:11**).

Peter Was Rescued

There is a second link in the chain of Divine providence. Let us read **VV. 7-10**, **“And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and roused him, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And his chains fell off his hands. (8) And the angel said to him, ‘Gird yourself and put on your sandals.’ And he did so. And he said to him, ‘Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’ (9) And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. (10) And when they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and sent along one street; and immediately the angel departed from him.”**

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This was a judicious use of divine power. The Lord exercised power over the guards and over all the physical restraints that had been put in place.

The rest of the story is well-known: Peter walked out into the cool night air and realized that he had not been dreaming. He immediately went to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark, where the church was praying. Now let us look at **VV. 13-14** “**And when he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer (14) And 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.**”

We might expect that they would believe her! They were praying in the will of God, with a measure of faith that Peter would be miraculously delivered from the death that awaited him. But they had two alternate explanations for Rhoda’s excited remarks which we read in **V. 15** “**And 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.”**”

Isn’t it amazing that some of us have an explanation for everything. Sometimes it is so difficult for us to believe that God answers prayer that when He does, we attribute His goodness to natural causes. **IRONICALLY, PETER WAS ABLE TO GET OUT OF THE GATE OF THE PRISON BUT HE WAS NOT ABLE TO GET THROUGH THE GATE INTO THE PRAYER MEETING!** However the persistence of Peter who continued to knock on the door paid off and we see in **V. 16**.

Peter Vindicated

A third link in God’s providential chain was the death of Herod. This king went to Caesarea and, according to Josephus, dressed in shimmering silver to deliver an address to his followers. We read in **VV. 22-23** the following. “**And the people kept crying out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” (23) And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.**”

Josephus, in his “Antiquities of the Jews,” gives us the details of this event. He describes the great multitude that came to see Herod, who on the second day put on the garment of silver tissue. Some of his followers cried out that he was a god and not a man. Then a severe pain arose within him and he showed signs of violent torment. Five days later he died.

Obviously, the king should not have received the worship that was coming in his direction. When the people wanted to deify him, he should have pointed out that he was indeed only a man. But because he took the glory that belongs to god alone, he was smitten and died a painful death of worms.

But what does this all mean? Why these providential links in God’s plan for Peter’s life? Why the arrest, the rescue, and vindication? These things did not happen simply to fascinate the curious. The Lord had reasons for directing the events as they occurred. He had lessons for Peter to learn. **WHAT WERE SOME OF THOSE LESSONS?**

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God is Sovereign

Notice that James was killed with the sword but Peter lived. The martyr was James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of the Apostle John. He was among the three most favored disciples, present at the Mount of Transfiguration and invited by Christ to share the agony of Gethsemane. James lived within the will of God and he died within the will of God. Why was Peter spared and James not? Was it because the church prayed for Peter and did not pray for James? I don't believe that we can find the answer there. It would seem reasonable that the church would have faithfully supported both men in prayer. And yet the undeniable fact of the matter was that the Lord chose to answer the prayer for James, NO and to answer the prayer for Peter YES. God wanted James to die for His glory and He wanted at this particular time obviously for Peter to live for His glory.

God is sovereign in all things. He does not have to explain to us the reasons for his choices. We just simply need to know that all that happens is as a result of God's choice. **(Read Ephesians 1:11)**. God had chosen that James would die at a certain time in a certain way for his glory.

What is interesting to note is the fact that all the events in respect to Peter's deliverance should not have taken the church by surprise in light of the words of Jesus that we find in **John 21:18** **19 "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.' Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God."** Those who had heard of this promise should not have been taken by surprise. And certainly the events as they transpired should not have taken Peter by surprise. Peter had a blueprint for his life that very few people have the opportunity to know. And to be quite frank I don't know if I would like to know what Peter was given the opportunity to know.

But though we may not have God's specific blueprint for our lives laid out for ourselves as clearly as Peter had, I do not believe that peace comes into our lives because we know what the future holds but rather peace comes into our lives because we know who holds the future.

God is Triumphant

Peter had to learn that God is Triumphant. This chapter opens with Herod in control, having killed James and with specific plans to kill Peter. Interestingly, it closes with Peter alive and well and Herod dying a shameful, excruciating death. We should never judge the circumstances of life by their appearance, but in light of God's eternal plan. This chapter is a microcosm of the reversal of fortune that Satan and his power will have in the final day. The devil always loses, even when it appears he is winning. Only the final battle really matters.

Ps. 37:12-13 says, **"The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes at him with his teeth. The Lord laughs at him; for He sees his day is coming"**

God is Powerful

Finally, Peter had to learn that GOD IS POWERFUL. God can open an iron gate and cause alert soldiers to fall asleep. He can do as He wishes with the forces of nature and the evil intentions of men. **EVEN WHEN WE ARE IN THE HANDS OF MEN, WE ARE ACTUALLY IN THE HANDS OF GOD.**

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How much better to be in prison, bound with chains, yet free in spirit, than to be in a palace, bound by the ravages of condemnation of self-serving anger that torments the soul! There are dungeons far worse than the barren prisons of Jerusalem or Rome. Herod, though technically free, was enslaved by powers stronger than the soldiers he had charged to keep Peter bound.

Perhaps you feel imprisoned within your home, job, school, or factory. You may feel chained to circumstances or subject to the whims of those about you. Worse, you may feel the inner torment of shame, frustration, and anger that others have caused. Or you may be in a prison of your own making. I'm reminded of a blacksmith during the Middle Ages who bragged that no one could ever break the chains he made. Then one day he was imprisoned, and looked at the chains that bound him and found his own mark. There is a prison of the soul, the prison of fear, of guilt, of regret--- these and a thousand other voices cry out for freedom.

When Christ was in Nazareth, He went to the synagogue and read from Isaiah the prophet: **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor, He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).** Our Lord is a specialist at freeing prisoners!

CONCLUSION

Peter's prison experience reminds us that there is no chain that is too strong, there is no dungeon that is too deep, there is no gate that is too high but that God is greater still.

Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley the famous revivalist, often meditated on his own spiritual conversion. After months of agony, questioning, and doubt, the light of the Gospel dawned upon his soul and he felt as if he had been loosed from a fearful personal prison. To celebrate this great liberation, he wrote the song, “And Can It Be That I Should Gain?” one of the greatest hymns of all time. Notice the powerful imagery of this spiritual prisoner experiencing the freedom of Christ.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me.

Peter's body was in prison, but his heart was free. Even in darkness there was morning in his heart. The fearful Peter had been changed into the fearless Peter. The sand had become a rock.