

# PETER'S IMPRISONMENT

*SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD*

Steve Zeisler

Acts 12 is our text in this message. It concludes the first long section of the story of Acts. Starting in chapter 13 Luke will begin to unfold new interests. The focus will move away from Jerusalem and will eventually turn to Rome.

The most prominent individual in the opening chapters of Acts is the apostle Peter. In some respects Peter was like an ice-breaking ship. I saw a documentary some time ago about these great ships that work where harbors and waterways freeze over and become impassable. They have enormously powerful engines and great wedges in the bow that drive into ice and break it up, allowing other vessels to follow the newly opened passage. In the same way, Peter was the strong servant of God whose work made possible so many other people's success in ministry. His calling was to take on hard things and break up the opposition so that other people could follow him. He was among the first of the disciples to follow Christ (Matthew 3:18-20; Mark 1:16-18; Luke 5:1-11; John 1:35-42). He preached the first sermon on the Day of Pentecost, explaining how the Spirit was baptizing believers into a living fellowship (Acts 2:1-36). Along with the other apostles, he led in the early experience of being opposed, hated, jailed, and persecuted (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-42). He laid hands on the first converts in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17). He was the door through which God invited Gentiles to join the church of Christ without having to first become Jews (Acts 10:1-11:18). Peter's great gifts and strengths and calling helped others in many ways in the first days of the church.

The story in chapters 8-11 was mostly about the good work of God. The church was growing, barriers were being broken down, enemies were being converted, outsiders were being welcomed. There was peace and harmony and understanding. What had been confusing became clear. And the geographical borders of the church were expanding.

But now in chapter 12 we come to a dark account of a vicious martyrdom that is reminiscent of Stephen's martyrdom in chapter 7. We'll find the events of this chapter to be hard, and the effect ultimately is not growth, but a gathering of the church to pray and understand and strengthen one another in the face of opposition.

## Dark opposition

Acts 12:1-5:

**Now 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. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 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.**

This evil destroyer, Herod Agrippa, laid hands on the apostle James, one of the "Sons of Thunder" and one of the dearly loved followers of Christ. To the cheers of the Jews looking on, James was executed without even being able to give a testimony. (When Stephen was martyred, we at least read a word of the glory of God as heaven opened.)

This event cut like a dagger, because not only did they lose James, but it signaled the end of the expected protection of the apostles. Many times the apostles as the leaders of the church had been rounded up, harassed by their enemies, thrown in jail, threatened with difficulties, and routinely set free by God to go on preaching. Their enemies did their worst, but it wasn't enough to stop them. The apostles continued to serve God, build up the church, and teach the word. But now it was as if the hand of God had been withdrawn, and the apostles were fair game for execution along with others.

So Peter, having been arrested, expected to die. It was only because the Feast of Unleavened Bread (connected with Passover) was taking place that it didn't happen immediately. We should remember that this was the time of year when Jesus died. Peter expected to be brought out in public and to lose his own life. In fact, the Lord in his resurrection appearance to Peter had predicted that Peter would be executed by enemies: "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" (John 21:18).

Verses 6-19a:

**And on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. 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. 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." 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. 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 went along one street; and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter came to himself, he said, "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." And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. 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. And 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.” 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 led him out of the prison. And he said, “Report these things to James and the brethren.” And he departed and went to another place.**

**Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. And when Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution.**

## **Inexplicable events**

This story is peculiar. Peter’s part ends on a rather reduced note; after his rescue he motioned for silence to those gathered, explained what had happened, gave instructions that those under the leadership of James (the brother of Jesus) be given a report, and then evidently went into hiding. That’s the last we see of Peter, this great, powerful servant of God, in the book of Acts, except for a brief reference to him in chapter 15. In contrast to his preaching on Pentecost, it was a quiet and lonely moment as he slipped off into the darkness by himself.

There are other questions that this text raises for us. If God could send an angel to save Peter, then why didn’t he save James? James was an apostle and friend who had walked all the places Peter had walked. He had been faithful and godly to this point. Why was his life forfeit without explanation?

Why didn’t Peter’s release from prison lead to public ministry as we saw in Acts 4 and 5? There, when Peter got out of the clutches of his enemies, he strode out boldly and again began to boldly preach Christ. So why in this episode didn’t Peter go to the middle of Jerusalem and speak of Christ the next morning?

Why were the soldiers killed? They were only doing their jobs. And we know that God was concerned for Roman soldiers. God drew Cornelius to himself (Acts 10), and later in the book of Acts when Paul is in prison, his jailer will become his brother in Christ (Acts 16:22-34). At the very end of the story Paul will be under house arrest, chained to Roman soldiers, and as we know from his letters, those soldiers will become believers in Christ. So why were these soldiers in chapter 12 allowed to be killed by Herod’s wicked whim?

There are other perplexing oddities. For one thing, Peter was hard to wake up. The angel had to whack him in the side. It reminds me of trying to get teenagers up to go to school when they’ve stayed up too late, and you have to tell them as the angel did here, to put on their clothes, tie their shoes, and so on. Peter didn’t know whether what he was seeing was real or not. He was confused and perhaps still partly asleep. And let’s not overlook the events outside the gate at Mary’s house. Rhoda came, heard that it was Peter, and left him standing alone. Nobody would come to the gate, so Peter had to keep knocking until they finally let him in. These details make us either laugh or scratch our heads or both. The whole thing is less than heroic.

This text of Scripture causes us to ask “why” questions that go unanswered. And our lives often have the same quality, don’t they? When we add up what’s happened to us, our circumstances, our hopes and dreams, we very often come to God asking, “Why did it turn out this way?” It seems to me that our Lord is rarely interested, either in Scripture or in our experience, in answering “why” questions. He leaves us without cogent explanations and predictable futures. We don’t get information about what is in his mind when he does what he does.

But God does answer “who” questions. And the “who” is Christ, the One behind events, the One who is our companion in events, the One who knows what he is doing. Christ is the One who begins and sustains and ends the story. And so in place of information about cause and effect we get the love of God, the certainty that the Lord knows even if we don’t know, and the assurance that the Lord will never forsake us because he loves us. When things don’t make sense, he can be trusted, and that’s as much as we need to know.

You probably remember the story in the news of Dana Curry and Heather Mercer, the two women serving the Lord by caring for the needs of the people of Afghanistan, who were taken into captivity by the Taliban. They were protected during the war, witnessed to their captors, were finally released, and came home to a hero’s welcome. A book has been written about them now. These two ordinary servants of the Lord were sent into harm’s way and were rescued. However, sometime later Bonnie Weatherall, a nurse with a similar mission of caring for hurting people in Lebanon, was killed for her faith. Why in one case were two saved and in another case one killed? We may never know the answer, but it’s not necessary for us to know.

Why are some of the most godly people, who go deep in their love for Christ and longing to serve him, who are willing to use their gifts and expend themselves for other people, put in chaotic families that demand so much of them that there is little left to give, although they want passionately to serve? And on the other side, why do some who have every opportunity, every means of support, all manner of blessings, never get around to giving away what they have been given?

Why cancer? Why infertility? Why joblessness? What we get back is “who” as an answer to the “why” questions. The Lord Jesus is with us and he will make sense of it all someday. The tapestry seen from the back is chaotic, but when we see it from the front, it will be beautiful.

This story in Acts 12 happens at night. It’s a dark story and a 180-degree turnaround from the outcome we would expect: growth, joy, enthusiasm, conversion. So it’s peculiar. But for all that, there are two important ideas in this

story that are very hope-filled, constructive, and helpful to us as we think of the ways of God in our own time.

## **“My peace I give to you”**

The first idea grows out of the fact that Peter was asleep while chained to his guards. He was in Jerusalem where the Romans had their soldiers stationed, almost certainly in the fortress of Antonia. This was the place where Jesus was tried on the night he was executed, also surrounded by Roman soldiers who mocked him and so forth. This was even the time of year when Jesus died, the Passover season. Yet Peter, finding himself chained to soldiers there, went to sleep. Commentators have always remarked on that. There is evidence that the church fathers noted Peter’s slumber and considered it important. So we would do well to think of what it suggests.

Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33.) This was the night before Peter would be executed, as far as he knew. His Lord had predicted that he would die at the hands of his enemies, James had died at the hands of his enemies, and he himself was in prison awaiting a mock trial the next day. It was quite clear where the train of events was going. Yet Peter fell into a slumber so deep that the angel had trouble waking him up. He was at peace. It was the sort of peace that Jesus promised to give in the face of tribulation, threats, anxiety, and danger. This peace was greater than the threats. I hope this picture of Peter peacefully sleeping will encourage us in our own trust of God. I have trouble sleeping at times when very minor worries or uncertainties await me in the coming day. Yet here was this man who thought he would be killed, fast asleep.

What are the kinds of pressures and anxieties that might have kept him awake? What might be going through your mind in that situation? Let me suggest a couple of things. First, there was no fear of death itself in him. He had no uncertainty about what would happen when he died. He knew that death itself was the entrance into the presence of God. Paul put it concisely in Philippians 1:21: “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” What he meant was, “What I have now—the love of God, the approval of God, the presence of God in my life, the welcome of God, the gifts of God—I only gain more of when I die. In fact it’s precisely because the Lord fills my experience now that I look forward to gaining more of him when the end comes.”

Another anxiety that might have kept Peter awake is anger at having his life cut short, being denied something that he thought he deserved. Would we feel that way? We want to see our grandchildren born, go places, enjoy our golden years. But there was no regret in Peter, no sense that God had withheld something that he would have been better off having.

Another thing that might have kept Peter awake was regret about the state of his relationships with people. If you know you are going to die, you might wish you had spent time with someone, apologized for some remark, mended fences. But Peter knew that the people he loved, loved Christ and loved him. The hard language that perhaps he used with someone, the bad attitude, the relationship that was broken, would not stay that way, because if they loved the Lord they would love him despite what remained undone. “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). There was nothing broken that God wouldn’t mend in the people he loved.

Finally, there was no outrage at the victory of evil. All of the Herods were terrible men, and Herod Agrippa was near the head of the line. He killed people at a whim, and as we’ll see in the next message, promoted worship of himself. He seemed to easily get away with things. So as Peter slept, his sleep might have been roiled by the fact that it seemed as if evil people were winning; how dare they? But Peter was not worried. Someone else would take care of Herod. Wickedness would not prevail. Injustice would not be allowed to go unpunished. The Lord who said, “Vengeance is Mine” (Deuteronomy 32:35), had not forgotten how to put things right.

Peter knew that he was immortal until the Lord was finished with him. No one can cut short what God intends for your life. No wicked scheme will prevent you from finishing the race. It ends when it’s time to end because the Lord has determined that your job is done and you should come home. So I imagine Peter turning to the guards chained on either side of him and saying to them, “You will only do what God permits you to do. I am going to sleep, because I know who is in charge of my life and death. Wake me in the morning.”

We would do well to ask ourselves some questions at this point. What if it turns out that tonight is our last night? Are we ready? What can make us ready to step from this world to the next without fear, consternation, anxiety, or worry? Again, Paul’s statement in Philippians makes an important point: “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.” If the first half of that sentence is true, then the second half will be true. If to live is Christ—if we are feeding on him, delighting in him, recognizing him, serving him, using the gifts we have, giving away what we’ve been given, being about our Father’s business in both worship and ministry—then to die is gain. There is nothing to be afraid of. But it may be that if we ask ourselves honest questions, we’ll recognize that the things of Christ are not at the center.

## **Fervent prayer**

The other important idea in this story that is instructive, and is a wonderful challenge to us, concerns the prayerfulness of the church. It says in verse 5 that they gathered together and prayed fervently. Fervency in prayer, it seems to me, is difficult if you are by yourself. It’s like logs burning in the fireplace. They burn hotter and more thoroughly if they are stacked together. And prayer that is fervent, consistent, genuine, and lasting is much more likely if we gather together to pray. It’s worthwhile to examine ourselves as a church at prayer. We have a lot of

events, plans, structures, and programs. I believe in them, and I think that they enhance who we are. But the core of what it means to be a community is to be people who will pray together, to have the kind of relationships that draw us together in difficulty and in joy. We are connected together in our connection to God.

Not everybody in Jerusalem gathered at Mary's house, but a good number were praying together. Are there folks in your life who can call you on the phone if they are in extremity, confusion, or struggle, with whom you would pray when asked? Are there some who will come and pray with you if you call, if things break down for you or become uncertain, if you don't know where to turn? We are not the church if we can't answer yes to these questions.

Jake Miller died two weeks ago. His wife Marjorie told me that at the very end, one of the last things he said to her was "Speak for me." He was having trouble speaking and perhaps he was not even able to keep his wits together. She said to me, "At first I thought he wanted me to talk to the doctors or get some medicine or change the bed or do something. But I realized what he really was saying was 'Pray for me. I need someone to speak to God for me.'"

Peter's peaceful slumber and the church's fervent prayer go together. Jake Miller could rest because he knew Marjorie would pray when he no longer could. May God strengthen us to rest and pray.

---

Scripture quotations are taken from New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 4757  
Acts 12:1-19a  
17th Message  
Steve Zeisler  
November 24, 2002

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright © 2003 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.