

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 12:1 as we continue our journey through the book of Acts.

We got our reports back of our folks watching online. We have nearly 2,000 folks that watch online during the month. (Clapping) So you can wave to them. I see you sittin' there in your underwear. Put on some clothes. (Laughing) No idea what they're doin'. Anyway, that's quite a reach. We got a letter from a fellow in South Korea - a pastor who listens every Sunday; from a fellow in Turkey, who is meeting with his family in a house to teach them the Bible. So there're some good things that technology has. It's not all Facebook. Sometimes it's good stuff. So keep that in your prayers nonetheless.

The book of Acts is thirty years of history. It is the first thirty, thirty-five years of the church. It is everything you would want to know and that the Lord would have us to know about the church as it was born - how He blessed it, what they came to do, what the church should do. And so it is a great book to read as a church member, a person who belongs to Jesus. This is the way that the church should behave. This is what we should invest ourselves in. This is the kind of people that God uses. And things haven't changed. I mean, our cultures change, but God began this work by His Spirit, and that work will continue by His Spirit. In fact, one of the most often quoted little phrases in the book of Acts is "they were filled with the Spirit" or "led of the Spirit" or "by the Holy Spirit." And we're going to read that a whole lot more before we get to the end of the book.

We are currently in chapter 12. We have gone through ten years of the early church (or so). We've spent a lot of time with Peter in the last little while as God brought Peter through the prejudice of being a Jew and how, when he got saved, that God actually wanted to save Gentiles. And we went with Peter, and we learned with Peter, and the church was quickly adopting, if you will, the heart of God to save all men. In chapter 12 or so, we begin, if you will, with the ministry of Paul. But before we do, we have to put Peter to bed. We're going to spend the next couple of weeks still with Peter. But notice, if you look back even to chapter 11, that the church that was born in Antioch in Syria was a work that God did through a fellow named Barnabas. There had been a whole lot of folks that ran off when

Stephen was killed in Jerusalem. Most of the people hadn't gone very far, but there were some folks who had traveled 300 miles to the north, and they began to share with what were called the Hellenists. Those were, for the most part, Jews that lived in Gentile cultures, but you couldn't even identify them in the way they behaved from those that were in Jerusalem which were purely practicing Judaism, much more legally, if you will. And so God began this work. Barnabas was there. He loved what he saw. He realized he wasn't a teacher though. There was a moving of God's Spirit far away from Jerusalem, certainly as far away as we've gone in the book of Acts. Barnabas, having a relationship with Paul years earlier, went to find Paul. He lived in Tarsus. It wasn't that far away, about 100 miles or so. He brought him back to this Antioch church. They began to teach together, and for a year they taught God's Word. The place just exploded. And Antioch in the Bible and in the book of Acts becomes the central sending place, the central ruling place, for the church work of reaching the world for the next fifty years. So we find this church that was birthed as, really, the center of God's missionary efforts to reach the world. And it is from there that Paul will be sent out. It is from there that Paul will go back to respond to the people who've been praying for him. He gives reports. He's accountable to this church who has been involved with him from the beginning.

We also learned in Acts 11 as well, as we were finishing the chapter, that there in Antioch there were some prophets who had shown up that began to bring God's Word forth. There was a fellow named Agabus (you'll run into him in about ten chapters again). He turned out to be a true prophet of God. He predicted, by God's Spirit, that there would be a famine that was coming into Jerusalem and the poor there. And so this young little church that Paul and Barnabas were pastoring with others determined to send relief; and they gathered money together, and they sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to drop the money off and just to say, "We want to bless you guys, and we're so thankful for what the Lord has done." And this young little church became, really, the place where God began to reach out to people around them. So it is an integrated, interrelated body that works in harmony. There is a great revelation, I think, in the book of Acts of how God brings all people together under the one banner of His Son.

Tonight Luke will take us back to Jerusalem at a time when the Romans have gotten angry at the church. For most of the time up to this point it has been the Jews that have turned against the believer. But now it comes more from Rome itself, and it comes about the time that, at the end of chapter 11, the aid has shown up

from Antioch for the poor. Like I said, by the time we get to chapter 13 and beyond, we will be running with Paul the rest of the way through the book of Acts. We will be bringing you, in the next couple of weeks, very nice clearly-detailed maps of Paul's travels - how far he went. When we're able to tell you how long he stayed in places, we can do that. But hopefully, by the time we get to the end of the book of Acts, you're going to feel really good about how God works and how He worked to establish this work of His church throughout the world early on.

Tonight just eleven verses. We're going to start at verse 1 and head towards verse 11. We'll get Peter out of jail. Next week we'll get him to join the church over there that was praying for him, talk about answered prayer and how big is a mustard seed of faith, really. And that'll be next week. But tonight we want to just look at "Peter, Prison and Prayer" - three P's - "Peter, Prison and Prayer." And, like I said, by the time we get to verse 17, we will read that Peter has departed; and aside from one meeting in chapter 15, we won't be seeing or hearing from Peter again in the book of Acts.

So let's start at verse 1. "Now about that time" (that time being, if you look back to the four verses before, the time that Paul and Barnabas showed up 300 miles away to deliver these goods) "Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church." There are lots of Herods in the Bible. And if you are new to the Bible, or you're a young believer, it's easy to get confused when you read because there are a lot of them, and you want to know who is who. I'll help you with that today. But it would be something that you certainly want to get a hold of from a historical standpoint. This would be Herod Agrippa I, which would mean he is the grandson of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was that fellow who, years earlier, had demanded that they murder all of the male children two years old and under in the Bethlehem district because he had heard that the Messiah had been born from the Magi, and he wanted to be sure that if there was a possible birth of a Messiah, he got rid of Him; because he had, absolutely, this desire to hold on to power. Herod Agrippa I was, like I said, his grandson. He was also (this Herod) the nephew of a fellow named Herod Antipas. Antipas was the fellow who beheaded John the Baptist. And you remember that he questioned him about his illicit relationship with another woman that wasn't his wife; in fact, it was his brother's wife. It is that Herod Antipas that Pilate sent Jesus to when he tried to get out from under having to make any decision about Him. So this Herod, here, was the nephew to that Herod Antipas, the grandson of Herod the Great. Herod the Great married a Maccabean woman named Mariamne. And from history, now,

he had eight wives. He killed six of them because he was worried about them turning on him. Before he murdered her, however, she gave birth to a son named Aristobulus. Aristobulus was one of the fifteen sons that Herod had put to death in his paranoia. So this was a crazy man, this Herod the Great. He sought to protect his throne. Well, before Aristobulus was put to death, he had a son named Herod Agrippa I - this Herod. His mother quickly sent him to Rome. She hid him from this crazy lunatic grandfather, Herod the Great. In Rome, this Herod (Agrippa I) befriended a guy named Gaius. Gaius was the grandnephew of Tiberius Caesar - there won't be a test on this, don't worry (Laughing) - who later changed his name to Emperor Caligula (you might remember from history) in 37 A.D. And he gave to Agrippa this position as king over Galilee and Perea, that area on the other side of the Jordan River. Because he did such a good job, Caligula finally gave to him the rulership over Judah as well. It would be his son (Herod Agrippa II) that we will find Paul appearing before years down the road when he is imprisoned in Caesarea and asked to go to Rome. So there're a bunch of Herods. You can space them in your mind by time, and since you know Bible history pretty well, you can kind of place them in the right places. But this is Herod Agrippa I. This Herod was very interested in Judaism. In fact, he was an Idumean, which meant he was a distant descendant of Esau. They were sometimes called Hasmonean. So that came from the Hasmonean kingdom, if you will. So he had a Jewish background in his history. Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote that there was rarely a day that passed in the life of Herod Agrippa I (this Herod) when he didn't come to the Temple to offer sacrifice. He was very much enthralled with Judaism. He was liked by the Jewish population more than any Roman overseer in these days. So that's the days in which we find ourselves here.

Notice that he, Herod, targeted the church and, in particular, the apostles who, for the most part, were the only people that really, in leadership, stayed within Jerusalem up to this time. That wouldn't last. But they were still there now. So he came to harass them and to disperse them and to continue to go after the believers in Jesus. And he did so with a purpose, and his purpose was very clear - he loved Judaism, and he wanted the respect of the Jews. He oversaw the Galilee, the Perea ministry, the Judean area. He was pretty much over every place that the Jews called home. And so this was good for him. And he liked it, and they kind of aspired to him. He saw this Christian sect as an easy target to make points with the Jews that he ruled over. And I suspect that the Jews in town, their ire was raised when they began to hear that this church was now accepting Gentiles. So it wasn't just they're preaching Christ, but now they're preaching it to Gentiles, which

didn't set well with him at all. So there's this fresh round of opposition (ten years in) that begins here at this time when Paul and Barnabas also arrive with money from the Gentile fellowship in Antioch for the poor. And notice that he begins to harass.

Verse 2 says, "Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword." So he promptly arrests James the apostle, the brother of John; one of the two Sons of Thunder. He is the first apostle martyred, the second person in the book of Acts that is martyred by name, along with, obviously, Stephen, just for his faith. And he is the brother of John. Now we ran into James and John. I mean, these guys were studs in the church. Right? These were guys that had been around since the beginning. In fact, you might remember that James' and John's mom came to Jesus (there in Matthew 20) - the mother of Zebedee's children - and she said to Jesus (she actually got on her knees in front of Jesus and a crowd). And Jesus said, "What do you want?" and she said, "I just want You to grant me that one of my sons can sit on Your right hand and the other of my boys can sit on Your left hand when You take over or come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said, "You don't know what you're asking for. You don't understand what the cost is of sitting there. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink and be baptized with the baptism that I'm about to be baptized with?" He talked about His suffering. And they said, "Oh, yeah. Whatever it takes to get the job, we're gonna do it." Didn't get it at all. Didn't really hear it. And Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup, and you will be baptized with the baptism that I am being baptized with. But as far as sitting on My right hand or My left, that's not Mine to give. That is prepared for those by My Father, who He has chosen. I can't give you that. But you are going to suffer." And, interestingly enough, here comes James, and the first apostle to face his death for his faith was James. Now John would later be exiled to Patmos for his faith. We took a group on the "Footsteps of Paul" this last year, and we were able to spend the day in Patmos where he was exiled. It's a barren kind of a place. It's close enough to the coast to realize you're not there but far enough away to where you can't get there. He is the only apostle (John) who will not die in martyrdom for his faith, though, again, history tells us they tried to boil him in oil, and it didn't work. I can only assume that God was involved with that because usually, you get boiled in oil, it works. So God delivered him through it. But the cup of suffering in this life can be severe for walking with the Lord. Now we're going to read of another James later - the senior pastor in Jerusalem. He is the half-brother to Jesus. He wrote the book of James. Not

this guy, it's another guy. So you can kind of keep your Herods and Jameses all straight in your mind.

Well, he kills James with a sword; not for any other reason than for his faith. "And," we read in verse 3, "because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread." So here's an insight in the 1st century into the nepotism and the abuse of power in Rome. Peter was arrested for doing nothing. James was killed for the same thing. They were both believers in Christ, outspokenly so. They were an offense to the Jews, obviously. Peter had caused lots of controversy in going to preach at the house of Cornelius. I'm sure that that was local news. I'm sure everyone knew. It was a big deal. And yet, because he was an enemy, if you will, to the religion of the Jews at the time, Herod grabs Peter up after he had killed James because he just sees this is going to be even more favor for him to curry from the people that he is overseeing. It's a pretty good commentary on Rome's power at the time and also on the nation of Israel at the time and their extreme hatred for Jesus ten years later. It's still the war that rages. Right? You can read, over in verse 11, where Peter is delivered (and we're going to stop at that verse tonight). But when Peter gets outside, this is what he says to himself. "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from" (a) "the hand of Herod and" (b) "from all the expectation of the Jewish people." They wanted and expected Peter to be dead. So, both Herod and the people that he was ruling were now gathered against the church. And I suspect that Peter was a far bigger fish to fry than James was, at least from what we are given to understand - his outspoken nature. His ministry was well-known to the church, and the nation expected to see him killed. This is the climate in which the Word of God is going forth. I know that we complain sometimes that we live in this generation that's so anti-God in so many ways. But God does His best work when there's opposition. Right? And these guys stayed the course. I mean, the church thrived. All we're going to read is thriving church through all of this. So don't be too discouraged when, "Ohhhh, we live in California. It's the worrrst." All right. Then shine the brightest. Be that light.

So Herod knew the people he was ruling well. He planned to give them what they wanted. The nation expected him to die. You should understand that, just a few years down the road - twenty-five years down the road, the nation is going to be overthrown by the Romans and the Tenth Legion led by Titus, and they're going to be dispersed out of their land for nearly 2,000 years, and they continue to reject Jesus.

Now the comment at the end of verse 3 is important because the Feast of Unleavened Bread was those seven days that followed the Feast of Passover, and they were filled with different kinds of offerings. The main activity during this time was for everyone in a house to scour it, from high and low and every place that you could look, just looking for leaven, which was a type of sin in the Bible. It represented sin. It gets in, and it affects the whole bread or yeast, if you will. So, outwardly, their homes were ceremonially cleansed during this time. Inwardly, these religious folks wickedly were joying in the fact that Peter's about to die. It's kind of a weird picture. Right? On the outside, they're all goin' through their religious ritual. On the inside, they're goin', "Hey, next Monday, high five. Peter is done. We've had enough of that guy." So they are looking forward to the coming death of some church leaders. But it shows how little religious tradition can impact your heart. You need to be born again. The Jewish law did not allow for trials or executions during feast days which, if you just look backward, Jesus' trial was the most unusual and the most illegal in every way. But He had come to give His life. So here the mention is that Herod arrests Peter, but he wants to wait until the end of the holidays to carry forth his nefarious plans, if you will, and he hoped to fully take advantage of the fact that he's making a lot of people happy under him. He's going to have an easier time of it, and Rome's going to be real happy with him. He's going to look good even though he just has to kill off a few believing apostles, if you will.

"So," in the meantime, verse 4, "when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover." The word "squad" is the Greek word "*quaternion*." It means four. There are four squads of four soldiers or, if you will, sixteen soldiers in all. It seems like four each shift were working to guard Peter during the week of waiting. Historically, we're told that Romans, when they had maximum security, put two soldiers in the prison cell with the prisoner and had them both chained to him. So here's a guy that's chained to two soldiers. There are two soldiers that stand outside the cell in case anyone would like to come from the outside to break them out. And Peter got treated as a dangerous criminal who could not be trusted, who posed the greatest kind of threat. This is maximum security ministry, if you will. Why so many? Well, okay. If you've been with us since we started, Herod had been told by the Jews what happened the last time Peter had been put in prison (in Acts 5). And you might remember that they had locked him up in the common prison that night, but at night the angel of the Lord had come and opened the prison, and they just got out. Now they didn't leave. They just went back to the

Temple and started preaching again. But he had a history of escape. Old Peter, you couldn't put him in Alcatraz. He'll get away. Right? I mean, the Lord was with Peter. "So let's really keep an eye on this guy." This has happened before, and it was embarrassing. So Herod's taking no chances. We know the sixteen guards could not keep the Lord from having His way. But understand that, from a worldly perspective and Herod in all of his might, he just beefs up security to the max. "This is as much as I can do and then, certainly, we're going to be fine." It would have been, I would think (just try to put yourself in Peter's shoes), a long week for Peter. He was being held at the Antonia Fortress. It was a Roman presence on the Temple Mount because that's where all the trouble was in Jerusalem. And in the northwest corner of the Temple Mount, there is this holding tank. It's where the soldiers lived; it's where they were always ready for riots and fallout, and it had happened there a lot. So they kept the soldiers there to quench the problems and all. And meanwhile Herod is just waiting to make sure that Peter, after he gets through this week, is going to be his next public relations execution. His idea is, "After the Feast, we're killin' a guy." The expectation of the nation is, "When this Feast is over, we're killin' a guy." And then you're the guy. You're Peter. How did Peter feel? I don't know. Life is over? I mean, think about it. James is dead, and he's next. This is not an idle threat. This was the truth. This was happening. Jesus had met with Peter, remember, in John 21. And when Peter questioned what Jesus said to John (which some had misinterpreted that he was going to last until Jesus returned), he said to Jesus, "What about John?" And Jesus said, "Let Me worry about John. But let Me talk to you. When you were young, you were able to dress yourself and walked around wherever you wanted. But when you get older, they're going to stretch out your hands, and somebody else is going to dress you, and they're going to carry you where you don't want to go." Then John writes, "This He spoke to Peter concerning his death with which he should glorify the Lord." And most people reading that and looking ahead realize that Peter, a few years down the road, was crucified upside down. Not because that's how they killed people. Peter didn't want to be killed the way Jesus was. He said, "I'm not worthy. Put me upside down." Right? So Peter knows this. So I don't know if Peter, watching the sword be applied to James, thought, "Well, I'm gettin' out. Number one, I'm not that old. And number two, they're not crucifying anybody - these Romans. They're killin' you with a sword these days." Don't know if that entered into his mind or not. I don't think that would have been much comfort. But it had to be a long week of just wondering.

We're told in verse 5, "Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church." The iron gates swung closed in Herod's prison, but the gates of heaven stood wide open, and the church was crying out for Peter's life. It is hard to determine from the Bible, and certainly history doesn't tell us, on what day of the seven-day event Peter was arrested. We don't know. We just know it was during that week. But we do know that when he was arrested, there was an emergency prayer meeting at the church, which went on constantly. This was pretty serious business. Right? The church. Imagine if that was us. "The second apostle in a week has been arrested; one has been murdered, the other one is slated for Monday. If you've ever prayed before, pray now." And in the church of Jerusalem, there was constant prayer. The word "*ektenes*" means without letup. This was a day and night kind of dedication, intently, to ask the Lord for help. This word "constant" is sometimes translated fervent; other times more earnestly. It all means the same thing. This was prayer with the kind of urgency that you find when you really need God to do something. This week, heaven was being bombarded - the throne of God - with the cries of the saints for Peter's deliverance. I know that you all pray. But when you really need something, there's a difference in how you pray.

We had, this week, the opportunity to have the National Day of Prayer. So thankful for all of you that showed up and prayed with us. But I think that if there was a fervency about our concern for the nation, we would pray a lot more than one day a year. It would be part of our cries to God on a continual basis. Because as you're aware of your need, as you're cognizant of your need, prayer tends to be the way that you turn because now if God doesn't work.....you've heard people say, "All we can do now is pray," which belies their hope in God. Because if that's all you see, you don't know the Lord a bit. You should always pray first. Don't do anything until you pray. And when you've done that, pray some more! It's the most powerful gift that God has given you - access to His throne. Well, that's how this church was praying in this generation. It meant more to them than anything else. And if your country means more to you than anything else, pray. Not just one day a year. Pray every day. We have elections comin' up and things goin' on. Lord, revive us! Pray for revival in America. Wouldn't it be cool to have a huge national revival in our country? Man, that's what I'm askin' for.

So the church was encouraged to pray by their faith in God, by their experience with God. They can remember back when Peter and John were first arrested, and the church prayed, and they were able to be let go the same night or the next

morning. They let 'em go. Then all of the apostles were grabbed (in chapter 5), and that didn't look good. In fact, this time the Romans had kind of beaten up on some of them (towards the end of chapter 5), but there was a miracle, and again they were released. So, "Let's pray again." It seems like God's battin' two for two as far as jailbreaks are concerned. So the world plans, and the church prays. And I would say to you never underestimate the power of prayer. It is one of the greatest lessons in the book of Acts. The effective prayers of the saints cannot be minimized. Pray. And then pray some more. It is an amazing, an amazing work, I believe. And we have prayer meetings here a lot - we meet on Saturday mornings, we meet during the services, Tuesday morning we have a prayer time as well. But I think if we, as a church, truly believe God answers prayer, rather than the fifty or sixty people that show up every week, we'd have a thousand people showing up. Some people just can't. You're busy. But I'm just saying if you really have that kind of an urgency, you go to the doctor tomorrow, and he goes, "You've got cancer, and you've got three weeks to live," you're praying. You're praying like I've never heard you pray. Maybe the Lord'll answer, maybe He won't. But I'll guarantee you, all of a sudden there's time in your life for prayer, and there's a reason to pray. So understand that the church here are the minority. They're under the gun. They've got no power except God's power. And their leader, Peter, certainly the big shot in the early church - preached on Pentecost, went to the Gentiles - seems to be at everything that the church can point to, and now he's slated to die. They took this seriously, and they really began to pray. They really began to pray and to cry out to the Lord and to ask Him to deliver them. Constant prayer. Day and night. Up all night, as Peter was about to be brought out to what would become a mock trial and then execution - with no reservation - by a guy that could have cared less. He had absolute power.

That's all that we know about that week, except for verse 6. "And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night" (so the night before his execution) "Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison." So, again, there's that "*quaternion*," those four guards. The time of his execution had arrived. The church had been praying with anxiety and anguish, if you will, in earnestness. And here we find Peter sound asleep the night before he was to be killed. What would you be doing on the evening before your execution? Sleeping? Soundly? You've done nothin' wrong. You've just preached Jesus, and they don't like it. And, "We're gonna just take your life as a result." Was he pale with fear? Was he unable to rest? Was he ready to deny the Lord just to lengthen his life or to save his neck? Was he

praying with courage, for strength? No! Peter was snoring. He was snoring. All right. Let me give this to you. He sleeps a lot in the Bible. He's kind of known for sleeping. If it's not shootin' his mouth off, it's sleepin'. Right? At the Mount of Transfiguration, he fell asleep, woke up and started shootin' his mouth off to where the Father in heaven had to say, "Hey! Listen to Jesus. Shut up, Peter." It's right in there - the original. You can go read it. In the Garden of Gethsemane, "Watch with Me for an hour," and Peter went, "Yeah, I gotta go to sleep." Now he's about to get killed. Falls asleep again. On the mountain, he failed to expect to see anything. In the Garden, we are told his spirit was willing, but his flesh was weak. But I think here, honestly, Peter went to sleep because he trusted the Lord. We've got Peter ten years away from being saved and ten years away from having all those experiences with the Lord, and it seems like Peter finds himself at rest, if you will, before the Lord. That psalm, Psalm 4:8, "I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety." I think Peter finally went to sleep because he'd arrived at a place of maturity spiritually. Because I don't know how else you go to sleep when you just know everyone's going to cheer your death except the church itself. So, no doubt the prayers of the saints had strengthened him. Maybe his conversation with Jesus (there in John 21) assured him this wasn't the time to die.

But notice verse 7. It says, "Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up." That's pretty amazing! The angel shows up, he turns on the light, and he's still got to kick your bed. So Peter wasn't just slumbering; Peter was snoring. He was out. He was in REM sleep right there in the Bible. He was dreamin', right? He was out like a light. In fact, when he gets out of jail, he says to himself, "I'm dreamin'. I must be dreamin' because I'm amazed I'm about to be sprung from prison." So, he's sleeping so soundly that an angel of the Lord has to stir him, turns on the light, doesn't wake him. I can just see the angel going back to heaven, goin', "Now there's a guy who really trusts God. I had to shake him just to wake him up." A couple things that I want you to see, verse 7. Luke uses an interesting word for prison here, one that you won't normally find for prison. He uses the word "*oikema*," which means home or house. But it is usually a word when you say, "I'm going home." That's really what the translation is. It's interesting that Peter had settled down at home in a place of prison because God had put him there, and he was at peace where the Lord had brought him. It really suggests that Peter, wherever God put him, was at home. "As long as the Lord's with me, I'm good." Right? Even in this horrible place that was really a holding cell for him to die.

We read in verse 7 that the angel, when he finally shook his bed and got him up, said this to him, " 'Arise quickly!' And his chains fell off his hands." Here's my question. And I always suggest to you that you should read the Bible with questions. My first question when I read this (for the first time years ago) was, "Why is he in such a hurry?" Like, the guys are gonna wake up? I mean, they're in charge. Obviously these guys have passed out. There's no one else around. The chains are falling off, doors are opening. "Hurry up, Peter!" Where's the angel goin'? What is the deal here? And I would say to you that all I've been able to come up with over the years was that (a) when you find angels in the Bible doing God's work, more often than not you will read that they're in a hurry. Don't know why, but go check it out. I'll guarantee you. I've looked. I'm right. Not all of them, but a lot. "Hurry up. Let's go. Here we go." And I think the second reason, maybe the underlying one, is when God wants you to do something, you should get busy doing it and not drag your feet. Right? Come on. If the Lord is movin', let's go with the Lord. You remember Lot? "Come on. Let's go. Come on." Draggin' around, angels tryin' to move 'em. We're just draggin' our feet. "Peter, get dressed! Let's go, buddy!" (Pastor Jack makes a loud yawning sound) "Okay....." Combing his hair. "Come on! You gotta go!" There's no reason for him to be in a hurry except we get to the Bible, and we read, "Redeem the time because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16). In other words, get busy. Quit putting off. Quit putting distance between you and the thing that God is calling you to. Get busy! Go do it now. You may not have tomorrow, but you can do it today. So, get busy. And I think that that is maybe the lesson for us. The fact that the chains fall off and the guards are apparently comatose - those are things only God could do. But Peter could hurry up. Right? God did His part. Peter has to do his. That's always the way it is. And I think it's a lesson that is worth learning. "Get dressed," he tells him. Right? "Get up!"

Verse 8, " 'Gird yourself and tie on your sandals.' " "Let's go, pal. What're you doin'?" He's like a drill sergeant, this angel. "Put on your garments. Let's go. Follow me." "All right, all right, all right!" But I think this is the deal - there is this mixture, when God works, of the ordinary with the extraordinary. Why couldn't the Lord have just woke Peter up and his clothes were already on him? It seems to me that would have been a small (Pastor Jack snaps his fingers), "There you go. Now we've got that." He is the Lord. But the Lord does what you can't do. The guards can't wake up. The chains fall off. The door opens wide. "Hey, Peter. Put on your shoes, dude. Come on! Put on your pants. What're you doin'?" Shakin' Peter. "Let's go, let's go!" With the loaves and the fishes - you remember that

miracle - Jesus multiplied to feed thousands, but then he had twelve apostles run up and down the hills to serve people. He could have just given everyone some. "Okay, close your eyes. There you go. Fish and chips for everyone." He could have done it. But He makes these guys run up, "Here you go. You need more bread? I'll be right back." And there's that part that we can do, and then there's the part that we can't do. And it's a lesson that's repeated constantly. And I'll tell you why. God loves for you to participate in His miraculous work. But it's going to require you to do something that you can do. For example, you want people to get saved? You go tell them the gospel. And God'll have to save them. You want to see somebody get healed? You pray, you lay your hands on them. Then depend upon God to do what you can't do. You see, there're things you can do, and God waits for you to do those. He doesn't need you. Don't get the wrong idea. But He wants you to participate. And it becomes this important kind of lesson. When Lazarus (John 11) was raised from the dead (he'd been in the grave for days), he came wrapped up like a Jewish guy, all wrapped up. And what does the Lord say? "Take that stuff off of him." Why couldn't He just raise him up and have it fall off? It'd be cooler. Because you can do that. We can't raise him from the dead. When Jairus' daughter is raised from the dead (Mark 5, Luke 8), the Lord says to her parents, "Give her something to eat." Couldn't He just raise her up full? Come on, do the whole deal! No. He does what you can't. You do what you can. He's not dependent upon you, mind you, but He wants you to learn that you participate with Him, and your dependence is upon God. But you don't get lazy, you don't sit around, you don't put your hands in your pockets. These people that tell me, "I'm lookin' for a job....." "Have you gone out and knocked on doors?" "No, man, I'm waitin' for the Lord to call me." "He's not gonna call you! Go fill out some applications. Then see what He does." You can't move a boat that's docked. "Man, we're goin' out to the ocean." "No. You're stuck on the dock, you knucklehead. Go! Untie. Paddle." God loves for you to participate. But remember this, and you can learn it here. He'll do what you cannot. He will not do what you can. It's just the way it works.

Verse 9. Got me fired up now. (Laughing) "So he went out and followed him," (Peter did) "and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him." Okay. Peter doesn't know whether he is dreaming or he's awake. Sometimes people ask me, "What's the difference between a vision and a dream?" And to be honest with you, from a biblical

standpoint, I can't even tell you. I have no idea. They're both works of God that somehow I'm involved with. Right? Peter, I think, got outside and thought, "Man, I'm half asleep, and I'm dreamin' I'm gettin' out of here. And that's probably exactly what I want." But it seems to me that dreams and visions in the Bible are almost interchangeable terms, and Peter says so here by his question. I've always wondered if I've had a dream, and it's a vision, but I just thought it was just a dream. Peter had had them before; he's just not sure. I know there's a great verse in the Scriptures for the timid. And one of my favorite verses is in Proverbs 14:4, and it says, "Where no oxen are, the trough is clean; but much increase comes by the strength of an ox." Translation - if you don't want to pay a price, you don't get anything in return. "Hey, look how clean the barn is!" "Yeah, but you don't have a horse. If you had a horse, you'd get a lot of work done. But then it comes with cleaning and feeding and tending. But if you don't want to pay the price, then you're also not going to see anything." So, take a step of faith. Worse, I think, if you get an animal, you'll end up with a dirty barn. But at least you'll be in the will of God. I always think, as I read this of Peter, that if there's nothing ventured, there's nothing gained. There's no safety on the sidelines. You don't get anything done.

Well, anyway, Peter gets out of prison. He's not sure. He sees all of this, but he's not sure what's goin' on until he gets outside, and now he's standing outside the gates, and it's nighttime, and maybe it's cold. I don't know. But he looks around, and the angel's gone, and then he goes, "I guess this is really a miracle."

In fact, verse 11 says, "And when Peter had come to himself, he said, 'Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.' " Again, notice the balance between the divine and the mundane. Maybe that's a better way to put it. The angel gets him out, but he's going to have to figure out - now that he's out - where to go. "Now you're on your own." "Well, can you just take me? Can you give me an Uber angel?" (Laughing) Do your best, then commit the rest. Now outside, like I said, Peter comes to himself. He realizes he's not dreamin'. And to Peter's surprise, he realizes that God has delivered him from Herod's wickedness and from the expectation ("*prosdokia*" is the word - it means fervent hope) of the Jewish people. They wanted him dead; they're not going to get him dead. Herod wanted to use him for political gain; that wasn't going to happen here. "Thank You, Lord. You got me out." And Peter wakes up, and he's standing in the street, he doesn't know

what to do, angel's gone. God has done what he could not do so that he can do what he can.

So how do we apply these lessons? Well, here're a couple things to think about. Verse 2 and verse 11 should bring you the question - why didn't God spare James, and what had he done that was so bad that he got taken out early? Because I know Peter, and he's done a lot of stupid stuff. I wouldn't vote for him to be saved. Maybe James. Right? I mean, from a purely observational standpoint, maybe Peter deserves it and James doesn't. We cannot know, from a Bible perspective, the purposes of God in all that He does, and it is further confused to us by the apparent inconsistencies in God's actions. Here, He delivers Peter while James is murdered by those wicked men. And whenever you look at the things of God, and you don't have any understanding or you have no explanation, then go back to the light that you do have. In other words, get as close to the answer as you can even though you may not get a specific one because there're lots that you know about God that doesn't change - that He's a good God, that He wants to be known, that He's for you and not against you, that He's going to finish the work that He started, that He does all things well. I mean, you can make a list. So before you get to, "Why did James die and not Peter?" start down the road with the things that you know so you're not falling off the cliff all the time with all these answers that you can't come up with. One thing for sure - God's plan for James and his ministry was finished. Right? He had run his race. He had made it around the track. He had done what the Lord gave him to do, and he had fully run his race. One day down the road, Peter will run his last lap as well, and he will not get delivered. There'll be no divine jailbreak. There will just be this brutal, upside-down crucifixion for a man of his faith. But not yet. Not yet. The difference between James and Peter is time and God's timing. That's all. Those are the only things.

God has numbered your days and mine. He has appointed to us a set of days. If you faithfully walk with God, you can be assured of seeing all of them. But there are certainly ways you can cut off your life from God's complete revelation, and people do it all the time. God has appointed a life for you. You can live it to the fullest for His glory. But then, even so, when His plans are finished, you'll be finished - no matter when that is. We are told in the Bible that disobedient lives can cut lives short, whereas faithfulness is a key to find all that God has for you. That doesn't mean you'll live to be 100. I met a lady here, by the way, Sunday. I don't think it was her first time here, but I had not met her. She came up to me,

and when you're older you tell people right away how old you are. It's like you're a kid, right? "I'm 5½. I'll be 6 in July." This lady said, "Hi. I'm 102." I said, "You gotta be kiddin' me." She goes, "And I do water aerobics every day." (Laughing) I said, "You're the best!" She was born in 1916. Whatever she's doin', man, the Lord has plans for her, and that was pretty amazing to think about. She has been around a long, long time. If you walk faithfully, you will see all that God plans. But if you don't, and Paul said it to the Corinthian church - there're folks here taking communion, not discerning the Lord's body, and they've died (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). It doesn't say they should have died. They died because of their sin. Sin cut off and cut them short from all that God intended for them to have. We can certainly have a hand in that. But, at the same time, God's plans will not be thwarted. So there's that balance. But like I said, it doesn't mean you'll live to be 100; you'll just fully accomplish God's purposes.

If you go to Genesis 5, for example, and you begin to read, you have a list there of the righteous branch of Adam through his son, Seth - the descendants of Seth - which will eventually lead you to Jesus. You're given their ages, some of their families, some of their descendants. But invariably, what you read in every one of the sentences at the end is, "And they died." They died at 180, they died at 260, they died at 400 years old, but they just kept dying. Until you get to Genesis 5:21, where you read, "Enoch lived to be 65 years old, and he begot a son named Methuselah." When he had Methuselah as a son, it says that "Enoch began to walk with God and did so (walking with the Lord) for 300 years. He had sons, and he had daughters during that time. All of the days of Enoch were 365 years." And then it says, "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." Didn't die. Just got taken. First interruption in this whole, "You die, you die, you die. Hey, what happened to Enoch?" Three-hundred and sixty-five years. He's a type of the rapture, where God is going to gather, one day, His people to Himself. Enoch was 65 years old when his son was born. According to verse 22, the birth of his son turned the heart of his father to the LORD. In fact, they're attached in one verse. We don't know Enoch's life prior to the birth of his son. But whatever happened, and however that boy was born, it had a profound effect upon his father, and, as a result, he began to walk with God. And for the next 300 years, that's how he lived his life in a culture that was all but not walking with God. He was walking with God, and then God took him. His son, born at 65, Methuselah, is the longest recorded life in the Bible. He lived 969 years. Now you would think, with all the people we read about, that if you lived almost 1,000 years (which put our 102-year-old lady to shame), if you lived that long, that you would have a whole

book in the Bible written about your accomplishments. Let me give you the two accomplishments of Methuselah. Number one - he dies in the year of the flood, which means he could have been healthy at 969. Number two - when he was born, his dad got right with God. Nine hundred sixty-nine years. His accomplishment? He turned the heart of his father to the LORD. A short life, not an incomplete life. But neither is a long life so fruitful. It assures me that if people die young sometimes, that doesn't mean they miss out. We hear people at funerals sometimes talk about someone's untimely death. If someone is young, before they're allowed to (what we believe) live out their whole life, we say things like that. "They went before their time." Not true if you're walking with the Lord. And compared to eternally, two years, 100 years, ain't gonna matter much. It just matters from our perspective. But if you're convinced that when you die in this life, God gathers you to heaven, and there's a better place for you - a place of perfection - then there is no really untimely death at all. Paul said, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Is gain! He puts together one of these win-win situations. Right? "If I live, I'm gonna live for Jesus. If I die, I'm gonna go hang out with Him. I can't lose." That's the way he views it. Now, you should understand that when Paul wrote that, he had been given by the Lord a taste of heaven. He had seen the other side. He had something to go on. But that's what God wants to give to us because once we see what is waiting for us, I don't think you'll ever grieve those that have gone before you. You'll be happy for them. You'll be looking forward to meeting with them someday. But I don't think any of them would want to come back. "Oh, just come back." "Are you nuts?! I'll just wait for you right over here." When we cry for those that have died, it's because we lose. We need their friendship. We need their support. We miss their fellowship. "I feel like I've been left alone." But when God's plans are over for you, you'll go to be with Him as they did. God has a specific plan. He has a specific purpose. And it just seems to me that if you're walking with the Lord, you'll be indestructible until He's done with you. I always think about those two witnesses in Revelation 11 who come, and it says if anyone tries to harm them, fire comes out of their mouths. Remember those two guys, the two witnesses? They devour their enemies. If you try to mess with them, they'll kill you. They have the power to shut up heaven. They have the power not to have it rain. They have the power over the waters to turn to blood. These guys are - you see all the Marvel Comics and the DC Comics, these superheroes - there are a couple of superheroes at the back of the Book. But then you read this. It says, "When they finished their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war with them, overcome them and kill them" (Revelation 11:7). When they finish their work,

the enemy is allowed to take them out. But until they finish their work, they're good, they're bulletproof. And so are you. You walk with God, you be faithful to the Lord, don't tempt the Lord, don't go jumpin' off the corner of the Temple. Do what God gives you to do, and I think that you can be comfortable and know that God's plans are the best. So when you get to verse 11 and then verse 2, and you ask yourself, "Why doesn't God spare James?" my only answer to you is He does everything well, and James is finished. You don't want to be here five minutes after God's done with you. You'll just be hangin' around, and you'll be in trouble.

Secondly, the lesson of God doing only what you cannot and fully expecting you to do what you can is an important one. Right? When Peter is in jail, he can't get out. When he's bound in chains, he can't get out. When the doors are locked, he can't get out. When he tries to get past the guards, he can't get out. God works. Outside, the church is praying. Outside, the angel leaves. Outside, Peter's left on his own because now we enter into the realm of something Peter can do. And I always like that. Do your best. Do your best, and then let God do the rest. But you do your part. And I'm not saying He depends upon you to do your part. But I'm telling you, if you don't go out and share, you'll never see anybody get saved, and you'll go, "How come God doesn't use me?" and the answer will be because you haven't done your part. Open your mouth. Tell someone. Pray for them. "How come God never answers my prayer?" Maybe you're not praying.

Which brings me to the last point, and we'll talk about it a lot next week because we're going to find that the church (next week) that was meeting night and day for prayer for Peter, the people that were most surprised when Peter got out were them. Which you would think should not have happened. They should have gone, "Oh, man, we're praying for you. I'm glad you came. It's about time. Man, we're cuttin' it close!" No. They went, "That's Peter." "No. Peter's in jail." "No! Peter's out." "No. He's in prison. Maybe it's his ghost. What are you? Crazy?" So, here's my question. The Bible says if you have the faith of a grain of a mustard seed, you can move mountains (Matthew 17:20). These guys opened prison doors in prayer, believing virtually none of what they were saying. So how much faith do you really need to move the hand of God? I can't cover that tonight. You'll have to show up next week. Ha ha ha ha ha. (Laughing)

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
May 29, 2018