

INTERNATIONAL SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

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Peter Delivered from Prison.
Lesson Text — Acts 12:1-17.

The touching story of this chapter brings out three features of the experience of every Christian who is loyal to Christ—persecution, prayer, protection. The three men prominent in the narrative are Peter, James and John, the close companions of our Lord.

Herod was vexing the Church. To confess Christ was to hazard the life. For three hundred years Christianity was a persecuted religion in the Roman Empire. No wonder Paul wrote "All godly shall suffer persecution."

At the King's command James had been slain with a sword (v 2). This was in line with our Lord's own words to His disciples: "I came not to send peace, but a sword (Matt. 10:34). He was the first martyr among the apostles, and as his Master had foretold, he drank the martyr's cup (Matt. 20:23).

James was the first of the apostles to be restored to the actual presence of his Lord. He is the only apostle whose death is recorded in the Scripture, and only ten words are used to tell the whole story (v 2). One may get a scanty obituary on earth, yet have an abundant entrance to heaven.

Herod persecuted Christians because he saw that it pleased the Jesus (v 3). There are plenty of people who will throw up their hats and cheer the man who is in some devilish business. Great applause usually means nothing. The man who gets the most of it is usually on the wrong track.

The officers were widely congratulated when they finally landed Peter—that persistent preacher—behind the bars. They took no chances on his escape, for they placed sixteen soldiers to guard him (v 4). Peter was "kept in prison (v 5), but as he afterward wrote, he was "kept by the power of God" (1 Pet. 1:5).

Again we meet that little word BUT. "But prayer was made without ceasing of the church (v 5). The saints petitioned heaven, not Herod. They had the key to the prison and knew it not. Prayer changes things. If one is on God's side, he is safe in appealing his case to the King of kings.

There is much difference between trying to get God on your side and praying on God's side. A Southern plantation owner had great confidence in the prayer life of one of his slaves. Being greatly concerned about his interests during the Civil War, he asked the negro to pray for the success of the Confederate Army. The darky began to pray, "Strengthen de legs of dem soldiers so dey can run" His master stopped him. Did you ever ask God to keep us niggers in slavery?" asked the negro. The master hesitatingly replied, "No." "Den, Massa, all de prayer is on de odder side. When ah prays, ah prays on God's side."

Get the picture of Peter's predicament. There were Herod's soldiers watching under arms. Lined up on the other side was a little company of Christians "watching unto prayer." They prayed "without ceasing." The original word means "stretch-out-ly," signifying great intensity. To present a petition is one thing—to press suit is another. Some people lodge a petition in heaven's court and let it lie. They are evidently not expecting much of an answer, or they would stand by to receive it. Prayer is not only taking hold of God but it is tenaciously holding on.

The night before his proposed murder, "Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and keepers before the door" (v 6). Probably he was the only Christian in the city who slept. Herod himself did not rest as well. Perhaps Peter had taken for his pillow the words of the Psalmist (Psa 4:8): "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety."

Herod paid Peter no small compliment by placing him under such heavy guard. The devil is always paying Christians compliments of that kind. Why so many arrangements and so much effort against Christianity if it is only a powerless

fake, as the skeptics would have it? One of the best arguments for the Bible is the number of volumes printed yearly in the effort to destroy it. The striking feature of the account is that God did not seem to heed the Christian's prayers until Peter's hour was close at hand. Three hours more, and off would have gone his head. God often delays His answer until the very eve of our extremity.

What man has not been made a better man for having been brought very close to the fatal hour and then delivered by the mighty hand of God? For seven days and nights those Christians had prayed, and then a light shined in Peter's prison and an angel brought a legal discharge from heaven (v 7). What a great consolation such an answer must have been to these believers! What confusion it brought to their enemies! The morrow's sport had been spoiled. If God delays, we may usually figure that He is working out some greater blessing.

Did you ever notice that God is never in a hurry? Peter was not told to grab his clothes and run, but to "gird himself," and even to take time to "bind on his sandals." "Cast thy garment about thee," said the angel, "and follow me." Slowly he was to be led past all obstacles. Would not any prisoner with such a chance to escape have bolted for the door, dressed or not? We are impatient and run ahead. If we regulate our pace to fall in with God's will, we will make better progress.

Peter thought he was walking in his sleep (v 9). Nevertheless, he obeyed orders and marched right up to the iron gate. If God is with us, no obstacle can stand when we get to it. The door opened. Peter found himself in the street and the angel left him standing there (v 10). God is economical of His miraculous power. He does not reveal Himself in continuous miracles. He does not do for us what we can do for ourselves. "Where do I go from here?" thought Peter (v 12). He might have taken to the open country, but something drew him straight to the house where the prayer meeting was going on.

In the time of stress, there is nothing like the fellowship of God's people. We would enjoy the church more if Herod got after us oftener—and he would if we stood as we ought for the Gospel.

Peter's knuckles thumped impetuously on the door. Rhoda recognized his voice without, but in her joyous emotions opened not the door, but ran back to tell those present that Peter was without. It was harder for Peter to get into the prayer meeting than to get out of jail.

In the meantime the believers whose prayer had been interrupted were trying to convince the girl that she was crazy (v 15). She insisted it was Peter. "No," they said, "it's an angel." Bang, bang! went Peter's knuckles on the door till some one ventured to open it, and there was the answer to their prayer.

Perhaps we had best not cast any stones at these Christians. It is easy to pass judgment on the faith of others, and say they did not believe the answer to their own prayers. "They were astonished" (v 16). The word "astonished" contains no thought of unbelief. It describes the joy of faith. They certainly looked for Peter's deliverance, but who would have expected him to show up at the prayer meeting? Have we not often found when the answer came that it seemed too good to be true?

Pith and Point.
Count it a blessing when God delays an answer to your prayers to enlarge your capacity to receive (v 6).

Make it your business to please men and you will be easy prey to the devil (v 3).

Times of public distress should be praying times (v 5).

The devil may surround a praying man with stone walls and iron bars, but he has no way to roof him in.

The promise of God is not simply to the act of prayer but to the habit of prayer (v 5).

Prayer has put light into many a dark prison place (v 7).

We never know how precious the Church is until we've been among its enemies for a spell (v 12).

The prayer closets of God's people are where the roots of the Church grow.

Suggestive Questions.

What other sleeps of Peter are recorded? (v 4; cp. Lk. 9:32; 22:46).

What may Peter have recalled when he was taken prisoner just following James' martyrdom? (Mk. 14:31).

Was this the first time Peter had been helped out of jail? (Acts 5:19).

Of what do the unusual precautions of the authorities remind us? (v 6; cp. Mt. 27:65).

What may be the believer's assurance, even though surrounded on all sides? (Psa. 34:7; 27:3).

If we desire guardian angels to direct us, what must we do on our part? (Prov. 3:6).

Who can break our chains (Isa. 61:1) and make us free indeed? (Jn. 8:36).

Was Rhoda the only damsel who recognized Peter's speech? (v 14; cp. Mt. 26:69-73).

Golden Text Illustration.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivereth him out of them all—(Psa. 34:19).

A blacksmith who had been converted, and who had been a faithful witness for Christ, was subject to much persecution from his rough companions. One day one of these unbelievers asked him how he stood so much persecution. "You have had a constant string of trouble," said he, "ever since you became a Christian." The blacksmith was tempering a piece of iron for a carriage spring. After heating it, dipping it in water, and pounding it, he finally cast it aside to the scrap heap. "Too brittle," he remarked, as the unbeliever waited for his answer. He found a good piece and hammered it unmercifully, finding it satisfactory. "Well, I'll tell you," he remarked, "when God wants a man for His service, He has to temper him with persecution. I am in His hands. I am kept by His power, and His word says that 'when He has tried me I shall come forth as gold.' That's how it is."

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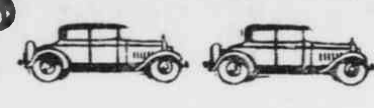
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