

Peter's Release

Valley Center January 19 2008

Walter Hermann of Racine, Wisconsin, had wanted a long time to go. It was going to be great! He had made plans long in advance. He didn't want to miss out. Imagine it: tickets to Sunday's NFC championship game between the Green Bay Packers and the New York Giants! A friend named Andrew Duncan was over last week helping him clean up a bit, and not realizing the value of the four tickets, removed the rubber band that held them together and put one of the tickets through the paper shredder. As he was doing it, Andrew asked, "Are we sure you want to shred these?" Walter's wife had placed the four tickets in the trash bin, thinking that they were worthless. The shredded pieces of the ticket were retrieved from the shredder, placed in a plastic bag, and the ticket office called. Walter will be at the game tomorrow, with a friend, his daughter and daughter's boyfriend.

When I read that story yesterday, it reminded me that there's another event upcoming that has a lot more significance than football, and you have been given a ticket. It's not to Lambeau Field in Green Bay; it's eternal life in heaven with Jesus! Don't shred your ticket! Don't throw away your opportunity to be there!



The story we're going to look at today is one that is familiar to many; it's the story of Peter's release from prison, recorded in Acts 12. We'll look at the story in its original setting and then see how it applies to the church collectively and to us individually. I love this story! It tells us so much about our wonderful God and His ways!

We're not sure exactly when this happened, but we have a few benchmarks. In Acts 15, we're told about the Jerusalem council, which convened about the year A.D. 49, and we know that the stoning of Stephen, recorded in Acts 7, took place around A.D. 34. We're led to believe that the events of Acts 13, reporting the first missionary journey of Paul, occurred around A.D. 45. The death of Herod, which closes chapter 12 of Acts, is dated in A.D. 44. It is likely then, that the story which begins that chapter could have been earlier that year or the previous year.

"Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And 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 when he had apprehended 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." Acts 12:1-4.

The name "Herod" was similar to "Pharaoh," in that it served more as a title than a personal name. There were many Herods. The term "Herod" comes from a root which is also the source of our word "hero." The Herods of the New Testament were called "kings," but their authority was limited and subject to Rome. This Herod is known as Herod Agrippa I. He was a grandson of Herod the Great who was the Herod of Jesus' birth, and brother to Herodias whose daughter Salome danced before Herod Antipas, the one who gave the execution order of John the Baptist.

Our story opens with the beheading of James, identified as the brother of John. This, of course, is not the James who is called a "pillar of the church" in Acts 15 and who penned the epistle of James. Among the original disciples, the James the son of Zebedee, of Acts 12, was the first to suffer martyrdom, while his brother John lived the longest. You might remember that their mother asked Jesus if they could occupy the highest positions in the new kingdom, and Jesus asked if they were willing to drink of the "cup" that He would drink, the cup of affliction. Both James and John indeed drank from that cup.

Perhaps James was selected because of his role as a leader of the church. It could be that he, styled by Jesus as a "son of thunder" conveyed his preaching with passion, and led him to becoming a target of violence. He was the first disciple to follow His Lord in spilling his blood. That he died "by the sword" indicates that it was by beheading, in accordance with typical Roman executions (the Jews preferred stoning). There is an epilogue preserved by the historian Eusebius from Clement of Alexander that reports that the one who accused James became a disciple when he saw his patience and faith, in a similar way that Saul, who witnessed Stephen's death became converted.

Agrippa executed James as a political ploy, to please the "Jews," who were becoming increasingly concerned with the explosive growth of Christianity. He suffered the disease of so many holding public office, which was to judge the merits of his decisions by the fickle compass of human opinion. He spit upon his finger and held it to the wind of popularity, to determine which direction his political policy should go. How sensitive he was to popular opinion is illustrated by an incident recorded by the Mishna (Sotah 7.8) that tells us that while reading the law during a Feast of Tabernacles, he came upon the text that says "Thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother" (Deuteronomy 17:15). Because he was not a Jew but an Idumean, or Edomite, tracing his lineage through Esau, He burst into tears when he read this. The crowd reacted by shouting, "Our brother art thou! Our brother art thou!" And he was comforted. Agrippa professed to be a sympathizer of the Jews.

That the Church was suffering persecution and now martyrdom was a clear and certain result of her faithfulness in ministering the pure gospel of Jesus. The reason why the Church today lives in relative ease is because she has left her commission and sought to elevate acceptance with the world above faithfulness to her calling. We've done our best to accommodate and blend in, and avoid appearing different, weird or strange. But being "different" is what we're called to be! When the Church again follows the path of obedience as did the early apostles, there will be a reaction. The "salt" of the Gospel will again stir up animosity as it did when first applied.

When Herod saw how successful the killing of James was, he "stretched out his hand" and arrested Peter, another leading apostle, and secured his imprisonment with four squads of soldiers, each squad being four guards, making a total of sixteen. There was thought that the execution of James was conducted somewhat privately, and it

would be judicious to have the beheading of another leader of this "way" done more in the public eye, and thus be a warning to others.

But this would be a little tricky. If it were done with the huge crowds of the Passover, there just might be enough sympathy expressed toward the apostle that it would hinder the purpose. The last thing they wanted was for Peter to give one of his impassioned sermons before the multitudes, against which they had no answers. So, even though Peter was in chains, he awaited execution while the authorities bided their time, waiting for the right opportunity.

As mentioned, this was just before the time of the Passover, which was in the spring of the year. Through an unfortunate translation, the KJV has "Easter," but the word in the original is *pascha*, which refers directly to the Passover held yearly, dating back to the time of the Egyptian Exodus. How ironic that while the religious leaders celebrated the heritage of deliverance from Egypt, they placed Christ's messenger in bonds, and plans were being made to kill him!

"Peter was therefore kept in prison, but *constant* prayer was offered to God for him by the church." I can't answer the question of why the prayers of people influence the God of omnipotence. One might think that if something is good, it would be done by the Lord irrespective of human petition. But the Bible is filled with accounts that demonstrate that the prayers of people brought answers from heaven. It was when Moses' arms were lifted to heaven, assisted by Aaron and Hur, that Israel was victorious against the Amalekites. When Elijah prayed, the Lord answered by fire and by rain.

This is not to say that it is because of the inherent merit or natural goodness of people that God is forced to intervene. People on this earth are sinners, whether they are believers or not. Even Daniel, when requesting that the Almighty bless and restore fallen Jerusalem, explicitly confessed his sin and the sin of his nation and relied totally on the goodness and mercy of God, and the honor of His name. Having noted that, it is within the providence of God to do in answer to the sincere prayers of His people that which He otherwise would not do. Otherwise, what would be the point of praying at all? The number of stories in the Bible that include the prayers of God's people being answered are too numerous to mention.

When their beloved Peter was put in chains, the church prayed. They felt that the young church couldn't survive without his leadership. We are given the account that it was "earnest" or "constant" prayer

that was offered. The word is *ektenos* which comes from a medical term which means "to stretch out the hand." Notice this: the chapter opens with Herod's "stretching out his hand" in an act of violence. In verse 1 a different word used, but also describes earnest and intense activity. Satan "stretched out his hand" in opposition to God's purpose. The Church "stretched out her hand" in conformity with God's purpose. Who would win? Satan uses his energy to harass the Church: the Church needs to respond with the same intensity of purpose in the struggle between good and evil.

The word *ektenos* describes intense strain, earnest effort and resolute perseverance. It was used to describe a horse whose legs are fully extended, stretching its muscles at the finish line, or an athlete exerting his utmost effort, striving with all of his energy in competition; a runner with taut muscles straining and striving to the limit.

This word is used in portraying our Lord in Gethsemane. "And being in agony, He prayed more *earnestly*." Luke 22:44. Peter himself used the word when he wrote his epistle. "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another *fervently* with a pure heart." I Peter 1:22.

In our language, the same root of this word, "ten" means both to "stretch" and to "hold." Take this short "ten" point quiz to get a picture of this word. All of the answers have the root "ten" in them. (The answers are at the end of the sermon)

- 1) The tough band of fibrous tissue that *holds* muscle to bone is called a _____
- 2) If something is *stretched*, we say it is under _____
- 3) The maximum something can be *stretched* without breaking is called its _____ strength
- 4) A piece of cloth that is *stretched* out to provide a shelter while you're camping is called a _____
- 5) If someone has the attribute of being persevering and *holding* onto something tightly, he or she is said to be _____
- 6) That part of a plant which *holds* onto to something is called its _____
- 7) A piece of wood might be *held* to another by means of a _____
- 8) How long you've *held* your job is called your _____
- 9) If you have a *leasehold* on real estate, you are a _____
- 10) If I am successful in *holding* your focus, I have your _____

The purpose of this exercise is not to improve your vocabulary, but to gain an understanding of what kind of prayer the church was offering for Peter in prison. It was "stretched to the limit" prayer. It was persevering and earnest prayer. It was **tenacious** prayer. It occupied their full **attention**. It was **intense** prayer. It was the kind of experience that Jacob had while wrestling with the Angel when he said, "I will not let You go, except You bless me."

The reason why the Church does not see the successes she should is largely because she is too lax in her prayer life. When was the last time you engaged in this type of prayer for someone's soul? Did you pray for someone today? Was it intense prayer, tenacious prayer? We need to pray like the Church prayed then! God will hear and answer prayers like that!

"And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison." Once before Peter had been arrested and put in prison (Acts 5:18), and this time the authorities wanted to take no chances. Chained with a sixteen guard command, they felt their prisoner was secured.

God's sense of timing is amazing! It seems as if He deliberately waits until the darkest hour before bringing deliverance! It was when Herod was "about to bring him out" that God acted. Those who cling by faith and will not let go will be rewarded. Those who "endure to the end" and have the "patience of the saints" will be saved. God waited till the "last minute" for the deliverance, to bring honor to His name.

And what was Peter doing the eve of his execution? He was sleeping! This is the third time the Bible records the sleeping of Peter: the other two aren't favorable to his faith, but this one was.

He was sleeping at the Mount of Transfiguration, when he should have been listening to the words of Jesus, Elijah and Moses.

He was sleeping on the Mount of Olives when he should have been praying to escape the hour of temptation.

This time his sleep was the sleep of *faith* and not *failure*. His trust in the Lord had grown to the point that if his work on this earth were done, that was okay with him. He didn't spend the night in a fretting and anxious fit. He was content to commit his life into the hands of his Savior knowing that He does all things well. Is that the condition of your faith when tried? It can be, if you learn to trust like Peter!

“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, saying, ‘Arise quickly!’ And his chains fell off his hands.” What were chains and commandos in comparison with one angel! What was a locked and barred prison cell in comparison with the authority of the Almighty! Oh, how foolish men are to fight against God!

Author F.F. Bruce relates the story of Sundar Singh, a Tibetan Christian who was likewise freed miraculously from a prison. For his preaching of the gospel, he was thrown into a well, and a cover was put over it and securely locked. The plan was that he would be left in the well until he died. While he was down there, he could see the bones and rotting corpses of those who had already perished in there.

On the third night of his imprisonment, he heard someone unlocking the cover of the well and removing it. A voice told him to take hold of the rope that was being lowered. Sundar was grateful that the rope had a loop he could put his foot in, because he had injured his arm in the fall down into the well. He was raised up, and the cover was replaced and locked, but when he looked to thank his rescuer he could find no one. When morning came, he went back to the same place he was arrested and started preaching again. News of the preaching came to the official who had him arrested, and Sundar was brought before him again. When the official said someone must have gotten the key and released him, they searched for the key - and found it on the official’s own belt. God is still writing the Book of Acts!

“Then the angel said to him, ‘Gird yourself and tie on your sandals’; and so he did. And he said to him, ‘Put on your garment and follow me.’” There’s an important lesson in this verse. What Peter couldn’t do for himself, God did miraculously. With respect to what Peter could do for himself, no miracle was given. Peter couldn’t remove the shackles, put the soldiers to sleep or open the prison gate. God did that for him. But Peter could put on his sandals and his garment. No miracle was given for Peter to do that, nor to walk out the prison complex once he was freed, nor to find the home where prayer was being offered. All these things God had already given him the ability to do, and no extraordinary miracle was forthcoming. Pay attention to this lesson! In the same way, no miracle for spiritual renewal will be provided to the one who does not take the time to spend daily in His Word. No miracle of regeneration is promised to the one who won’t breathe in His Spirit daily in prayer. We suffer too much from spiritual

anorexia, starving ourselves from His word. We suffer too much from spiritual asphyxiation, choking off our prayer life with other concerns.

What was the angel's instruction? He simply said, "Follow me." I know it's ridiculous to suggest this, but it's possible that Peter could have remained there and argued with him saying, "I'm not taking one step forward until you explain where we're going, and answer every question I have about this matter." That would not have been a good decision! Plenty of evidence was at hand to make it clear that this was God's doing, and so to follow the angel, even if all questions weren't yet answered, was the proper course of action. So it is true for us. God gives us sufficient evidence to bolster our faith, yet does not promise to have every cloud of doubt cleared from the sky. But if we will "follow Him," His blessing will attend us, just as it did Peter. But how many are still in the cell awaiting every doubt to disappear before they step forward!

"So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision." Just two chapters previous, Peter received a vision that seemed real to him. Now he's not sure if his reality is just a dream. He might have had to feel the brush of cool evening air on his face a while to realize that this was real, and he wasn't dreaming it.

"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." The gate was no doubt opened by an unseen angel. We have in this account the **story of the two gates**, the one securing the prison, and the one on which Peter would knock as he came to the home of Mary where the Church was praying. The lesson of the two gates is the same as the lesson of the sandals and handcuffs: What Peter couldn't do, God would accomplish miraculously. For what Peter could do by himself, no miracle was provided. This first gate was opened by a miracle of God, because Peter couldn't have opened it by himself. But there was no miracle to open the gate at Mary's house. Peter had to knock. Don't expect a miracle to achieve something God has already put within your reach!

Where did Peter go when he was delivered? It was to the house where the Church was praying. In fact, because the Church was young and unable to afford dedicated buildings of worship, this was the "Church." Think about what that means to you and me. That's where we should go when God has intervened in our lives in a special way. No

it wasn't perfect, because the people inside weren't perfect. Yet that's where God wants us to be when He's delivered us.

Now we come to the part of the story that must bring a smile even to angels' faces. When Peter knocked at the gate, a young girl named Rhoda answered. We'd call her "Rose" today. Have you ever heard of a flower called a "rhododendron"? It means "tree flower." When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate." She didn't open the gate for Peter, not because she didn't believe that a miracle had happened, but she became so excited that she lost her presence of mind for the moment. On the other hand, the adults who were inside struggled when it came to believing. Doesn't the Bible say something about "childlike faith"?

"Go away, Rose," they said, "you've lost it. You're beside yourself." When she insisted, they said, "Maybe it's his angel." In effect they said, "Stop interrupting us, Rose! Can't you see we're praying for Peter's release?" Strange irony! Oh, the kind forbearance of God toward His children! Are we really any different? Take note that if you have faith, even the Church might think you're crazy!

God answered the fervent and tenacious prayers of His people when Peter was taken prisoner. Sad to say though, just nine chapters later Paul was taken prisoner, perhaps in the same ward. But we read nothing about the church engaging in earnest and constant prayer for the one they supposed had undermined the traditions of Moses. Whom did God use to expose the murderous plot against Paul's life while he was incarcerated? Was it the elders of the church? No, it was Paul's nephew that God used to bring the warning to the centurion. We are left to wonder if God would not have worked mightily in Paul's behalf to free him as He did Peter, if the Church had put aside her prejudices and agonized over the safety of the Apostle Paul.

Today we, individually and as a church need to pray more. God is waiting to become involved in the lives of His children. Miracles are standing ready. Deliverances await for the Church to pray. Are you praying for someone? The chains of sin imprison many. God will work mightily to free people from the bonds of selfish pride, egotism and gossip. He stands ready to deliver from the enslaving habits of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. He's ready to deliver from abuse of appetite. He's ready to break free the bonds of lustful thinking. He's ready to burst the chains of doubt and despair. Will the church pray? Will you pray for someone this week?

This story speaks also concerning Jesus' Return. One day soon, in answer to the earnest prayers of the Church, He will wake the saints and say, "It's time to get up. It's time to go." The shackles of mortality will drop in the twinkling of an eye. We'll be delivered from the prison of this dark, sinful life. It may take a moment or two, as it did for Peter, to answer the question as to whether it's real or a dream. We'll be like the released captives who sang, "When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.'" Psalm 126:1-3. May that day be soon: meanwhile, keep praying!

(Answers to the "ten" point quiz)

- 1) **tendon** 2) **tension** 3) **tensile** 4) **tent** 5) **tenacious**
6) **tendrils** 7) **tenon** 8) **tenure** 9) **tenant** 10) **attention**