

Wake Up, Peter

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

Delivered On: March 13, 2010

This Sermon is available in audio format for listening or downloading on our Audio Sermons web page

The book of Acts is one of the most exciting books of the Bible, recording the deeds ("Acts") of the apostles. What might be a different title for it? Instead of the "Acts of the *Apostles*," it might be called the "Acts of the *Spirit*," because it was truly the Lord's power that brought about the energy and activity that resulted in the growth of the church.

Early on there was a healing of a crippled man who had been left at the gate of the temple hoping for charitable gifts, and Peter said to him, "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I to you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk." The man was miraculously healed, which caused no small stir among the people and leaders. When asked about his authority to do this, Peter responded, "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?" He went on to tell them that it was by the power of Jesus that the man was healed.

About 12 years after Jesus' death the same conflict between the Jewish leaders, who had crucified Jesus, and the apostles and followers of Jesus was going strong. The religious teachers continued to reject the principles of Jesus, and so it was that Herod, in order to gain the favor of the hierarchy, placed James, one of the original twelve in prison and then executed him by beheading him. "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.

This was in the spring of the year, when Passover was held; the time of year when Jesus was crucified. I wonder if Peter thought about this as he was placed in chains? Did he remember the words of the Lord, when speaking to him He predicted that some day "you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish"? John 21:18.

If it did come to his mind, it didn't interfere with his ability to sleep! "Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 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." Acts 12:5, 6.

There had been previous occasions when Peter's eyes had been heavy with sleep, to his downfall. When Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, with Him to the mount on which He had been transfigured, at which time Moses and Elijah had appeared and spoke with the Lord about His "decease" ("exodus"), Peter and the others had not been able to keep their eyes open. When he did awaken, there came from his lips a foolish and forgettable statement.

When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and selected Peter and the two brothers to pray near Him as He struggled with the cup He was about to drink, three times Jesus came, hoping to find them in the fellowship of prayer with Him, but He found them sleeping. He had told them, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation." Matthew 26:41. Sleep overcame them. Had Peter "watched" and "prayed," the story of Friday morning would have been different. He wouldn't have denied his Lord.

Here, in Acts 12, we find Peter asleep again, at least for the moment. In response to the earnest and persistent prayers of the church, the Lord was about to do something. He was about to take action. "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. 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.' 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." Acts 12:7-9. These verses will be the basis of our study today. There are lessons in this story that speak to us in 2010.

Though it is a state of restful repose given to us by the Lord for therapeutic benefit, in the Bible "sleep" is often used as a metaphor for spiritual unconsciousness; for being unaware of vital happenings. Was it not when Samson slept that the barbers removed his hair, the token of the Spirit's presence and power? Was it not when the maidens of the parable slept that the bridegroom was preparing to come? Was it not "when men slept" that the enemy sowed the tares in the Master's garden?

When we are in a deep sleep, we are unaware of events taking place about us. For this reason, the Bible uses this as an illustration of being spiritually unconscious. Paul wrote, "Therefore He says: 'Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.'" Ephesians 5:14. Again, "For when they say 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of the darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober." I Thessalonians 5:3-6.

A great deliverance, in answer to the prayers of the Church, was about to unfold, and Peter was sleeping! "Wake up, Peter"! Question: could it be that a "great deliverance" is about to take place on our planet, but "Peter" is asleep? Could it be that the greatest of all events, the second coming of Jesus Christ in power and great glory, is about to shine forth, but that we are asleep? "Wake up, Peter"!

Notice the components of this deliverance of the apostle, and how they relate to us. Two things God did for Peter to bring him from his slumber. First, the Bible says that preparatory to his awaking there was *illumination*. "Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a *light shone* in the prison." "Let there be light" was the first command given in Genesis 1, and in a similar way, the light shining in Peter's prison cell was a new beginning. It was time to wake up! Our bedroom window faces in a direction that catches the early sunlight, and sometimes it is the light of the morning that brings an end to my sleep. We need the light of heaven to wake us up!

How does this happen for us? How do we become awake; how does the "light" shine in our prison cell of apathy and negligence? It's when we open our minds to the Spirit that we begin to "see the light." That Bible that had been sitting on the shelf gathering dust, is now opened and the distractions are put aside. Light begins to shine in our hearts.

"Your Word is a lamp to my path and a light to my feet." Psalm 119:105. Are you reading your Bible each day? The quiet moments filled before with useless or harmful thoughts are now aimed in a godly direction. The light is beginning to shine in our hearts. We are prompted, sometimes early in the morning, to get on our knees and pray to the Lord, asking Him to give us a new heart, a new way of thinking, a new direction, new priorities. The light is beginning to shine! The light that illuminated the prison cell of Peter is waiting to shine in our lives! The Voice that cried, "Let there be light" in the beginning is ready to recreate our hearts.

"Light" in the Bible refers to spiritual wisdom that occupies and takes control of the mind. Jesus is that Light. He is "the true Light, which gives light to every man who comes into the world." John 1:9. This light is not found in the teachings of Confucius or Buddha, Hinduism or Islam. It is found in Jesus Christ. He is the "Light of the world." John 8:12.

But not all receive the light. They remain in darkness, comfortable with the works of the flesh, unwilling to experience the changes that Jesus brings. But Jesus came to save us from darkness and sin, and to give us a totally new way of thinking and doing, so that we might live among holy angels in His kingdom. That's a great transformation! His objective is to take away from us all covetousness, pride, gossip and self-seeking. He, as the refining fire, is shining His light that we might be cleansed and purified; that we might be awaked to the realities which are about to break forth. The kingdom of the Stone is about to strike the toes of the image and bring to a complete halt all things earthly. Are we ready? Are able to stand? Are we awake?

To help awaken Peter, a great light shone. Then the Scripture says the angel "*struck* Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, 'Arise quickly.'" When I looked up the word translated "struck," I expected to discover a word that described a gentle nudge, a mild touch. Not so. The word translated "struck" is quite an emphatic word. In the KJV it is translated "smote." That's not necessarily the same thing as a gentle nudge. Sometimes it takes more than a gentle nudge to wake us up. This word is the same word that describes what Peter did with his sword to the servant's ear in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was being arrested. What happened when Peter "smote" the man in the Garden? He cut his ear off, didn't he. This is the very same word that is used later in Acts 12 to describe the judgment that came upon Herod for not giving God glory.

"Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died." Acts 12:23.

Sometimes we need a violent shake to wake us up. Sometimes we need something dramatic to save us. It might take a powerful shove. A few days ago, March 1, Cleveland police officer Lieutenant John Lambert, a 22-year veteran, had stopped his patrol car on highway 176 to assist an 18-year old, whose car had slammed into the guard railing due to the icy surface. As they stood between the two cars, suddenly officer Lambert ran full force into the 18-year old driver, shoving him over the railing. Did you see the video clip of this? It was caught on Lambert's car camera. (See <http://www.foxnews.com/search-results/m/29251883/heroic-police-officer-caught-on-tape.htm>.) If the film stopped right there, at the moment he ran into him with such force, Officer Lambert's actions might have been misinterpreted. He might find himself the object of criticism or a lawsuit. But what really happened?

A 30-year old woman driving her Toyota Echo toward them had lost control of her vehicle, which stuck the patrol car and then careened sideways toward them. Thinking quickly, officer Lambert plowed into the young man standing near him, sending him catapulting over the railing, but most likely saving his life. He "smote" him in mercy. The driver was unhurt, though the officer sustained broken bones including his pelvis. It required being "smitten" to save the driver's life. The angel "smote" Peter to break him from his slumber.

There are times when God, in His mercy, "smites" us to shake us up from our sleep. It may be a circumstance of adversity with a health problem, a job problem or a family problem. These things may be used by God; they may be the touch of an angel, sent to bring us to our senses, drive us to our knees, seek the Lord and wake up. When Sodom was about to be destroyed, the angels took Lot, his wife and the two daughters by the hand and led them from the city. God allows events in this world to happen to wake us up. Earthquakes, floods, fires and pestilences are His warnings that the end is near. Another deadly earthquake this last week took place in Turkey.

Peter, being "smitten" by the angel, was advised to "Arise *quickly*." The angel didn't say, "It's going to be time to get up. Begin thinking about awakening, but take your time about it." It is a law of human psychology that *if action doesn't follow conviction quickly, conviction fades*. We find excuses for not complying with what God wants. That's dangerous! Procrastination is one of the devil's best tools. Perhaps he whispered to Peter, "It's okay; grab a few more winks. It's the middle of the night! What's the hurry?"

When the Lord speaks to us, now is the time to obey. Waiting for a later time to listen to His voice is very unwise. By putting off conviction, we may find ourselves out of hearing range and quite satisfied that it wasn't His voice after all. When the light shines in your life, when the angel prods, it's time for action. "Arise *quickly*!"

An amazing thing happened when Peter arose, with the assistance of the angel. We're told that "his chains fell off his hands." Peter had been placed in the maximum security cell, with four sets of soldiers guarding him and iron shackles clasped about his wrists. They bound him; they restricted his movements; they defined his imprisonment. But now they "fell off." We're not told that Peter somehow struggled to extract his limbs from the handcuffs or that he chewed his way through the shackles. Houdini was able to

make nearly every joint of his body go "out of joint," and thus he slipped from cuffs easily. That's not what happened here. They "fell off." What can we learn from this?

My friends, when the "light" shines, when we "awaken" and "arise," we will find that the shackles will fall from us just as they did from Peter. Are you bound by habits that are slowing your spiritual walk? Are there circumstances that bind and constrict your soul?

You need the experience of Peter. The Old Testament tells the story of three faithful Hebrews who wouldn't bow to the king's image and so they were cast into a burning fiery furnace. They didn't burn; their clothes didn't burn; their hair was not singed; not even the smell of smoke (think about that!) was on them when they came out. What was the only thing that was touched by the flames? It was the ropes that bound them. The king asked, "Did we not cast three men bound into the furnace? But now I see four men loose, walking in the fire." See Daniel 3:24, 25.

Jesus wants us to be free of those habits and addictions that constrain us in our spiritual growth. If we follow His way and open our minds to His light, we will find that those things we thought we couldn't live without will "fall off." I know this to be true. Have you experienced that? Praise God!

"Then the angel said to him, 'Gird yourself and tie on your sandals.'" What does it mean when the Bible talks about girding yourself? We don't often use the word "gird," but we know what a *girder* (steel beam) is and what a *girdle* is. It's something that provides strength and support; something that "holds together." In the Bible, to "gird yourself," or tie your belt around yourself, is a spiritual metaphor for accepting God's truth and strength into our lives.

David wrote, "It is God Who arms ("girds" KJV) me with strength, and makes my way perfect." Psalm 18:32. Concerning the virtuous woman of Proverbs we read, "She girds herself with strength, and strengthens her arms." Proverbs 31:17. Many times the armies of the Lord "girded" their swords on their sides as they prepared for battle. Peter invites us to "gird up the loins of your mind." I Peter 1:13. The imprisoned Paul, wrote, "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth." Ephesians 6:13, 14.

What does it mean then, for us to "gird ourselves"? It means to receive God's strength and truths. The devil is out to destroy and deceive. But he cannot destroy or deceive the one whose strength is in God and who is grounded in the truths of God's word. Is it important what you believe? Evidently so! It makes all the difference in the world. It is because some receive not the love of the truth that they are left to the wiles of the devil and are lost. Don't let anyone tell you that it doesn't matter what you believe. Jesus came to reveal the truth. He is the Truth. His followers were willing to die for the truth. The truths that God gives us will protect us against the temptations and deceptions of the evil one. Know the truth! Believe the truth! Practice the truth! "Gird" yourself with the strength and power of God's truth. It will be a bulwark against the onslaughts of Satan.

Then the angel told Peter to put on his sandals. They didn't have shoes like we have; they wore sandals with thongs that tied to secure them. In the Bible, "putting on your shoes" is used as a symbol for sharing the Good News of Jesus. Paul continued in his letter to the Ephesians, "having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace." Ephesians 6:15. Paul quoted from Isaiah and Nahum and wrote, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things." Romans 10:15. "Preaching" feet? Why didn't Paul say, "How beautiful are the lips of those who preach"? It doesn't say that, does it.

Putting on your shoes is a symbol for being ready to take action. I can tell you that when I'm at home, I almost never wear shoes. I find it much more comfortable to be without them. When I put shoes on, my wife asks, "Are you going somewhere?" Putting your shoes on, in Bible symbolism, means to get ready for action. When Israel ate their "last supper" before leaving Egypt, how were they dressed? Think of Peter in Acts 12, as we read this passage about Israel eating the Passover meal. "And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand." Exodus 12:11. In other words, their dress was consistent with an attitude of being ready for action; being ready to leave.

It reminds us of the counsel Jesus gave His disciples as He sent them out to proclaim the Good News: "He commanded them to take nothing for the journey except a staff--no bag, no bread, no copper in their money belts--but to wear sandals." Mark 6:8, 9. It spoke to the seriousness of their mission. Do you have your sandals on? Are you ready to share Jesus with someone this week? Are your feet shod with the Gospel of peace?

Peter was then invited to put on his garment and follow the angel. Wherever God would lead, by the means of His angel, Peter would follow. Through the darkness of the night, the safest place for Peter was in following his guide. Locked gates would open. It may not have seemed "real," but it was. Peter probably had to wipe his eyes and pinch himself, but it was real.

The devil pays close attention to us. Did you know that? He listens to our conversations. He observes what we allow to enter our minds by our eyes and ears. He takes note whether we pray or read the Bible. When he sees one who claims to be a Christian but rarely talks about the Lord and His coming; when he sees one who feeds his or her mind with the worthless trivia of the world and has no time for prayer or Bible study, he smiles. He says, "sleep on."

The devil would like us to think that this life will continue on an uninterrupted path forever. Most people on this planet live within that mentality. They live in that reality. And for much of my life, I lived as if that were true. Yes, I "knew" the Bible teaching about Jesus coming back; I sang about it. But I lived as if that day were far off. My choices demonstrated that I believed that life would continue one day following the other; "business as usual."

I no longer believe that. I believe that God is making an effort to bring this to a close, very quickly. Think of it! Everything we've ever heard, everything we've ever learned coming to pass in our day! Whether this generation will continue to slumber, I can't say.

But I know that right now God is saying, "Wake up, Peter. The light is shining. It's time to arise. Watch the chains fall. Get your shoes on and follow Me."

One day soon this story in Acts 12 is going to become very real. Those who "sleep" will arise. The chains of mortality will drop. We will begin to experience God's eternity. At first we may struggle with knowing it's real, just as did Peter on the darkened streets of Jerusalem. But it will be. All of God's promises will come true. May that day come soon!