Peter Freed From Prison: The Iron Gate Opened

Bible Stories Anthology — Acts 12

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

The Night Before the Execution

King Herod had already killed one apostle with the sword. It had made him popular, so he arrested another — Peter — and locked him in the city prison under a guard of sixteen soldiers, chained between two of them, with more at the door. As soon as the Passover week was over, Peter would be brought out before the people and put to death.

On the last night, Peter was asleep.

Across the city, the church was awake, praying for him. And in the dark, a light filled the cell, an angel struck Peter on the side, the chains fell off his wrists, and he walked past two sets of guards to an iron gate that swung open by itself. He thought he was dreaming — until he found himself standing alone in a dark street, free.

He went straight to the house where the believers were praying and knocked. The servant girl who came to the gate was so overjoyed to hear his voice that she forgot to open it and ran back inside to tell everyone. They told her she was out of her mind. And Peter, the most wanted man in Jerusalem, kept knocking.

It is one of the most dramatic rescues in the Bible — and one of the few that makes readers smile. It also ends with a king who took God's glory for himself, and paid for it.

The Setting

When. About A.D. 44, around ten years after Pentecost. The church in Jerusalem had grown to many thousands. Peter had recently returned from Caesarea, where the first Gentile household had received

the gift of holy spirit (Acts 10–11), and in Antioch Jews and Gentiles were worshipping together and being called "Christians" for the first time.

Which Herod. Several Herods appear in the New Testament. This one is **Herod Agrippa I**, grandson of Herod the Great (who ordered the killing of the children of Bethlehem) and nephew of Herod Antipas (who beheaded John the Baptist and mocked Jesus). He had grown up in Rome among the imperial family, and his friendship with the emperors Caligula and Claudius had won him a kingdom as large as his grandfather's. He was the first king to rule all of Judaea since Herod the Great. He worked hard to win the favour of the Jewish leaders.

The season. "Then were the days of unleavened bread" — the week of Passover, when Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims. It was a Passover season, some ten years earlier, when Jesus had been arrested and crucified.

The prison. Probably in the Tower of Antonia, the fortress beside the temple, or in Herod's palace. Prisoners were chained, and guards were posted in rotating watches through the night.

The administration. The age of grace. The church was facing its first persecution by a king — and learning that God's deliverance does not always look the same.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Herod Stretched Forth His Hands

> **Acts 12:1** *Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.*
>
> **Acts 12:2** *And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.*
>
> **Acts 12:3** *And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)*
>
> **Acts 12:4** *And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.*

"Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church." "Stretched forth his hands" is an **idiom** for taking action against someone. "Vex" means to harm, to mistreat.

"He killed James the brother of John with the sword." James, son of Zebedee — one of the first four disciples Jesus called, one of the three closest to Him (with Peter and John) on the mount of transfiguration and in Gethsemane. He became the first of the twelve apostles to die for his faith. One verse. No speech, no miracle, no rescue. Years before, James and John had asked to sit beside Jesus in His glory, and Jesus had answered, **"Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of"** (Mark 10:39). James drank it first.

"Because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also." Herod did it for popularity. Killing James had pleased the leaders who hated the church, so he went after its most prominent man.

"Four quaternions of soldiers." A *quaternion* was a squad of four. Four squads — sixteen soldiers — took turns guarding Peter through the four watches of the night. Herod remembered that Peter and the apostles had once walked out of prison before (Acts 5:19). He was taking no chances.

“Intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.” The word translated “Easter” is the Greek *pascha* — **Passover**. Everywhere else in the New Testament the King James translators rendered it “passover”; here they kept an older English word. Herod would not execute a man during the holy week, but meant to put him on trial before the crowds as soon as it ended.

Prayer Without Ceasing

> **Acts 12:5** *Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.*

“Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made.” Two forces stand side by side in this verse: the power of a king, and the prayer of the church. “But” is the hinge of the whole story.

“Without ceasing.” The Greek word (*ektenōs*) means *stretched out* — earnest, intense, straining. It is the word used of Jesus praying in Gethsemane: **“he prayed more earnestly”** (Luke 22:44). The church prayed like that for Peter.

“Of the church unto God for him.” They did not organize a protest or try to bribe the guards. They prayed. James the Lord’s brother later wrote, **“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much”** (James 5:16).

Sleeping Between Two Soldiers

> **Acts 12:6** *And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.*

“The same night.” The last night. Tomorrow was the trial.

“Peter was sleeping.” Not pacing, not weeping — sleeping, chained to a soldier on each side. How could he sleep? **“I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the LORD sustained me”** (Psalm 3:5). There may be another reason. After His resurrection, Jesus had told Peter that he would live to be old: **“when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not”** (John 21:18). As this series understands it, Peter may well have remembered that promise that night — he was not old yet.

“Bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.” Chained to two soldiers, guarded by more at the door, behind locked gates. Every human means of escape was closed.

The Angel of the Lord

> **Acts 12:7** *And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.*
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> **Acts 12:8** *And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.*
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> **Acts 12:9** *And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.*

> **Acts 12:10** *When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him.*

"The angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison." Darkness filled with light. **"The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them"** (Psalm 34:7). Angels are **"ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation"** (Hebrews 1:14).

"He smote Peter on the side." Peter was sleeping so soundly that the angel had to strike him to wake him. The word "smote" (*patassō*) will appear again at the end of this chapter.

"Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands." The soldiers did not stir.

"Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals... Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me." There is something wonderfully ordinary here. The angel did not rush. He told Peter to tie up his tunic, put on his sandals and get his cloak. God's deliverance is complete, down to the shoes.

"And wist not that it was true... but thought he saw a vision." "Wist" means *knew*. Peter had seen visions before — the sheet let down from heaven. He thought this was another one.

"When they were past the first and the second ward." "Ward" means a guard post. They walked past two posts of soldiers, unseen.

"The iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord." The Greek word is *automatē* — "of itself," the word from which we get "automatic." No one touched it. It swung open for them.

"They went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him." The angel stayed only as long as he was needed. Once Peter was free and in the open city, he could find his own way.

"Now I Know of a Surety"

> **Acts 12:11** *And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.*

"When Peter was come to himself." Standing alone in the cool night air, Peter woke up fully and realized it was real.

"The Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod." "The hand of Herod" is a **metonymy** — the hand put for the power it wields. And not only from Herod, but **"from all the expectation of the people of the Jews"** — from everything the crowds had been looking forward to the next morning.

Rhoda at the Gate

> **Acts 12:12** *And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.*
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> **Acts 12:13** *And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.*

> **Acts 12:14** *And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.*
>
> **Acts 12:15** *And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.*

"The house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark." This Mary is otherwise unknown, but her son is not. John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), later travelled with Paul and Barnabas, and by early tradition wrote the Gospel of Mark. Mary's house had a gateway onto the street and room for **"many"** to gather — the home of a well-to-do believer, open to the church for prayer in the middle of the night. It may have been one of the main meeting places of the Jerusalem church.

"Where many were gathered together praying." At this very hour, they were praying for Peter.

"A damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda." A young servant girl. Her name means *Rose*. She came to the gate to listen — in a time of persecution, one did not open the door at night without knowing who was there.

"When she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness." She knew his voice at once — and was so overjoyed that she ran back in to tell everyone, leaving him standing in the street. It is one of the most human moments in the Bible.

"Thou art mad." They were praying for Peter's release, and when the answer knocked at the door, they told the girl who announced it that she was out of her mind. God answered their prayers even when their faith fell short of believing it had happened. That should encourage us.

"But she constantly affirmed that it was even so." Rhoda would not back down. She knew what she had heard.

"Then said they, It is his angel." What did they mean? Many Jews of that time believed that each person had a guardian angel, and Jesus had spoken of little ones whose **"angels do always behold the face of my Father"** (Matthew 18:10). The disciples may have thought that Peter's angel had come in his likeness. The Greek word *angelos* also simply means "messenger," and some think they meant a messenger sent from Peter. Either way, this is what the frightened disciples *said*, not what scripture teaches. They were wrong: it was Peter himself. Scripture records their mistake honestly, and it gives no support to the idea that the dead return as spirits.

Peter Continued Knocking

> **Acts 12:16** *But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.*
>
> **Acts 12:17** *But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.*

"But Peter continued knocking." The most wanted man in Jerusalem, standing in the street at night, knocking and knocking while the believers inside debated whether he was real.

"When they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished." Astonished — at the answer to their own prayers.

“Beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace.” Peter waved them quiet. It was night, and soldiers would soon be searching.

“Declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.” He gave the glory to the Lord.

“Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren.” This James is not the apostle who had just been killed, but **James the Lord’s brother** (Galatians 1:19), who was becoming the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13). Peter made sure the leaders knew.

“And he departed, and went into another place.” Luke does not say where — perhaps wisely, since Herod’s men were looking for him. Peter appears again in Acts only once, at the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15).

No Small Stir

> **Acts 12:18** *Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter.*
>
> **Acts 12:19** *And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode.*

“No small stir.” A figure of speech called **litotes** — saying less in order to mean more, by denying the opposite. “No small stir” means a very great uproar.

“He examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death.” Under Roman practice, a guard who lost his prisoner could suffer the prisoner’s penalty. Herod’s cruelty fell on his own soldiers.

“He went down from Judaea to Caesarea.” Herod left Jerusalem for his capital on the coast. He would never return.

“The Voice of a God”

> **Acts 12:20** *And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king’s chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king’s country.*
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> **Acts 12:21** *And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.*
>
> **Acts 12:22** *And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.*
>
> **Acts 12:23** *And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.*

“Tyre and Sidon.” The Phoenician port cities to the north. Herod was angry with them, and it mattered, because **“their country was nourished by the king’s country”** — they depended on Galilee and Judaea for grain. So they won over **Blastus**, the king’s chamberlain (the official in charge of his private rooms), and asked for peace.

“Upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne.” The Jewish historian Josephus, writing about fifty years later, describes the same day. He says Herod was at Caesarea for games held in honour of Caesar, and on the second day he came into the theatre at dawn in **a robe woven entirely of silver**, which blazed in the rays of the rising sun. His flatterers cried out that he was a god, and Herod did not rebuke them. Then he was seized with violent pains in his belly, and he died five days later, in the

seventh year of his reign (*Antiquities* 19.8.2). The two accounts, one by a Christian physician and one by a Jewish historian, agree remarkably.

"It is the voice of a god, and not of a man." The crowd called him divine — and he accepted it.

"Immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory." Here is the same word, *smote* (*patassō*), that Luke used earlier in the chapter. At the start of the chapter the angel of the Lord *smote* Peter on the side to set him free. At the end the angel of the Lord *smote* Herod to bring him down. The same angel, the same verb: deliverance for the humble, judgment for the proud. Scripture states the reason plainly: **"because he gave not God the glory."** God had said, **"my glory will I not give to another"** (Isaiah 42:8). Herod had killed an apostle and tried to kill another, and God waited; but when the king received worship that belongs to God alone, judgment fell.

Compare Nebuchadnezzar, who boasted, **"Is not this great Babylon, that I have built… by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?"** — and while the word was still in his mouth, the kingdom was taken from him (Daniel 4:30-31). **"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall"** (Proverbs 16:18).

Notice the contrast with the chapters before. When Cornelius bowed before Peter, Peter lifted him up: **"Stand up; I myself also am a man"** (Acts 10:26). When the crowd called Herod a god, he said nothing. One man refused glory that was not his. The other took it.

"He was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." A painful death from an illness of the bowels. "Gave up the ghost" is an old English idiom for dying — "ghost" meaning breath or life.

The Word of God Grew

> **Acts 12:24** *But the word of God grew and multiplied.*
>
> **Acts 12:25** *And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.*

"But the word of God grew and multiplied." Another "but." At the start of the chapter, Herod killed James, imprisoned Peter, and seemed to hold all the power. At the end, Herod is dead, Peter is free — and the word of God is growing. Kings come and go. The word of God goes on.

"Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem… and took with them John, whose surname was Mark." They had brought famine relief from Antioch to the believers in Judaea (Acts 11:27-30). Now they took Mary's son back with them — setting the stage for the great missionary journeys to the Gentiles that begin in the very next chapter.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The Lord delivers. "Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me." Peter's rescue was the work of the risen Lord, who had promised, "upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Herod's iron gate could not stand against Him either.

The glory belongs to God. Herod took the praise meant for God and was struck down. Jesus, who was truly exalted to God's right hand, always gave the glory to His Father.

A Passover deliverance. At Passover Israel was brought out of Egypt; at Passover Jesus died and rose again; at Passover Peter walked out of prison. Each time, God brought His people out when their enemies thought they held them fast.

To the Grace Administration

Pray. The church's first response to persecution was prayer — earnest, united, persistent. "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

God answers even weak faith. The believers could not believe their prayer had been answered, and God answered it anyway. Our prayers do not depend on the strength of our faith alone, but on the faithfulness of the God we pray to.

James died; Peter lived. This is the hardest lesson of the chapter, and scripture does not hide it. In the same chapter, in the same prison system, under the same king, one apostle was killed and another delivered, and Luke gives no reason and assigns no blame. James was not less faithful than Peter. Deliverance is not a reward for greater faith, and martyrdom is not a sign of God's displeasure. Paul, who was delivered many times and at last died for his faith, wrote, "the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:18). Every believer is delivered in the end — whether out of prison, or out of death at the resurrection.

The adversary is real. Behind Herod's rage stood the one Peter later described: "your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). But the word of God grew and multiplied.

To the Topic of Answered Prayer

- **Pray earnestly** — "stretched out" prayer.
- **Pray together.** "Many were gathered together praying."
- **Keep praying** through the last night.
- **Expect God to answer**, and be ready to open the door when He does.
- **Sleep in peace** when you have committed a matter to God.
- **Give God the glory** when He answers — and never take it for yourself.
- **Trust God when the answer is different**, as it was for James.

The Main Takeaway

The same God who let James go home to rest delivered Peter through chains, guards and an iron gate in answer to the church's earnest prayer — and struck down the king who took His glory; kings pass away, but the word of God grows and multiplies.

- **Prayer is the church's first weapon.**
- **God can open any gate.**
- **God answers even when our faith falters.**
- **Deliverance and martyrdom are both in God's hands**, and neither is a verdict on the believer's faithfulness.
- **Never take God's glory.**

- **Pride goes before a fall.**
- **The word of God cannot be chained.**

For Our Learning — The People

- **Herod Agrippa I.** Grandson of Herod the Great, king over Judaea about A.D. 41–44; killed James, imprisoned Peter, and died at Caesarea after accepting worship as a god.
- **James the son of Zebedee.** Brother of John, one of Jesus' three closest disciples; the first of the twelve apostles to die for his faith.
- **Peter.** Imprisoned by Herod and delivered by an angel on the night before his trial.
- **The angel of the Lord.** Who freed Peter — and later struck Herod.
- **The sixteen soldiers.** Four squads of four who guarded Peter; Herod had them put to death.
- **Mary the mother of John Mark.** A believer in Jerusalem whose house was a place of prayer for the church.
- **John Mark.** Her son, cousin of Barnabas, later companion of Paul and Barnabas, and by early tradition the writer of the Gospel of Mark.
- **Rhoda.** A servant girl in Mary's house who recognised Peter's voice and forgot to open the gate.
- **James the Lord's brother.** Leader of the church in Jerusalem, to whom Peter sent word.
- **The people of Tyre and Sidon.** Who sought peace with Herod because they depended on his land for food.
- **Blastus.** Herod's chamberlain, won over by the men of Tyre and Sidon.
- **Barnabas and Saul.** Who returned to Antioch with John Mark.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **The days of unleavened bread.** The week of Passover, when Jerusalem was full of pilgrims; executions were not carried out during the feast.
- **Quaternions.** Squads of four soldiers, each guarding a prisoner through one watch of the night.
- **Chaining prisoners.** A prisoner was often chained by the wrist to one or two guards.
- **Guard posts (wards)** and iron gates secured prisons and fortresses.
- **Girding and sandals.** A man tied up his long tunic with a belt before walking or working, and took off his sandals to sleep.
- **Gateways.** Larger houses had a gate or porch opening onto the street, where a servant would answer.
- **Listening before opening.** At night, and in danger, a servant would ask who was there before opening.
- **Roman guards' responsibility.** A guard who let a prisoner escape could be punished with the prisoner's sentence.
- **Royal robes and flattery.** Kings in the Roman world were sometimes hailed as gods.
- **Chamberlains.** Officials in charge of a king's private rooms, with close access to him.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Idiom** — "stretched forth his hands" (12:1), took action against; "gave up the ghost" (12:23), died; "come to himself" (12:11), came to his senses.
- **Metonymy** — one thing put for another closely related. "The hand of Herod" (12:11), for his power; "the sword" (12:2), for death by beheading.
- **Litotes** — saying less to mean more. "No small stir" (12:18), a great uproar.
- **Antithesis** — setting opposites side by side. "Kept in prison: but prayer was made" (12:5); Herod killed and died, "but the word of God grew and multiplied" (12:24).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **This Herod was Herod Agrippa I**, not the Herod of Jesus' birth or of His trial.
- **James the brother of John was killed** — the first of the twelve to die for his faith.
- **"Easter" in Acts 12:4 is *pascha***, the Passover.
- **Sixteen soldiers** guarded Peter in turns.
- **Peter was asleep** on the night before his trial.
- **The iron gate opened "of his own accord."**
- **Peter thought at first he was seeing a vision.**
- **The church was praying — and did not believe Rhoda.**
- **"It is his angel" is what the disciples said**, not a teaching of scripture; it was Peter himself.
- **The James Peter sent word to was the Lord's brother.**
- **Herod was struck "because he gave not God the glory."**
- **Scripture gives no reason why James died and Peter was delivered.**

God's Will and Intent

- **God hears the prayers of His people** and answers them.
- **God guards His servants** and sends His angels to minister to them.
- **God can open what men have shut.**
- **God will not share His glory** with any man.
- **God is sovereign over both deliverance and martyrdom**, and faithful in both.
- **God's word will grow** no matter who opposes it.
- **God gives His beloved sleep.**