

An Angel Rescues Peter from Prison (Acts 12:1-11)^a

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Passage (Acts 12:1-11)

[1] Now about that time Herod the king stretched out [his] hand to harass some from the church. **[2]** Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. **[3]** 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. **[4]** So 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. **[5]** Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. **[6]** 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. **[7]** 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. **[8]** 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." **[9]** 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. **[10]** 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. **[11]** 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."¹

- Here we have record of an amazing, miraculous deliverance of Peter from prison
- Similar to the miraculous rescue of Paul and Silas from the prison in Philippi, found in Acts chapter 16
- Numerous aspects could be highlighted, such as the effectiveness of prayer by the church on Peter's behalf
- I would like to focus on Peter's behavior within the passage and what it reveals concerning his spiritual growth from earlier days
- A brief examination of the "stages" of Peter's growth as a believer

Stage 1 - "I will lay down my life for Your sake [Jesus]!"

1. Upper-room on the night of Jesus' betrayal
2. Judas departs, a time of intimacy with His true followers
3. John **13:33**, "*Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come,' so now I say to you.*

A. One thing for Jesus to say this to His opposition: the Jewish religious leaders and Pharisees (John [8:21-22](#)), but now He says it to His apostles

4. **John [13:36-38](#), *Simon Peter said to [Jesus], “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward.” Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake.” Jesus answered him, “Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times.”***

5. **“You cannot follow Me now”**

A. Not God’s purpose yet - Peter’s role establishing the Church after the departure of Jesus

B. Unable to — too fearful to be a martyr

C. “Why can I not follow You now?”

I. Clueless regarding his inability, weakness, lack of maturity

6. **Akin to the new believer who is immediately fired up to go out and “make things happen” for the Lord**

A. Hasn’t taken the time to wait on the Lord

B. Not even aware of one’s gifting

C. Uninformed zeal, often making a mess

D. Fortunately, God has tremendous grace for the many foibles which characterize our early walk

7. **Stage 1 of Christian growth**

A. Lacking self-awareness

I. Inability to see ourselves accurately—as God sees us

II. A belief we are “ready for service” when major work still needs to be done

B. Generally clueless regarding God’s sovereign purpose

I. Our interests and involvements are driven by our own agenda

II. Baptizing our own ideas as “God’s will”

III. Lots of God-talk: “God showed me . . . ,” the Lord told me”

- C. Ignorant of important elements of God’s character and ways
- D. See things that Scripture says, but not yet experiencing them
 - I. Victory over sin
 - II. The peace of God
 - III. A life characterized by spiritual fruit

Stage 2 - “But Lord, what about this man?”

1. The restoration of Peter following his denial of Jesus

- A. “Peter, do you Love Me?” - three times, once for each of Peter’s previous denials
- B. Peter has learned important lessons about himself resulting in a more accurate assessment of his inability and uneven commitment
- C. Then, John [21:18-22](#), *“Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry [you] where you do not wish.” This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.” Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?” Peter, seeing [John], said to Jesus, “But Lord, what [about] this man?” Jesus said to him, “If I will that he remain till I come, what [is that] to you? You follow Me.”*
- D. Jesus has just prophesied Peter’s death and Peter is distracted by how his role in God’s plan might differ from that of John!

2. “If I will that he remain”

- A. Peter isn’t looking at the ministry/role of others from the perspective of God’s will
- B. “You follow Me...”
 - I. Get your eyes off of my other servants
 - a. Peter will be martyred in A.D. 67 or 68².

- b. John lived at least a quarter of a century longer to record the book of Revelation in approximately A.D. 95
 - i. John and Peter had different jobs in God's plan
 - ii. The need for Revelation to be written much later
 - After the destruction of the 2nd temple (A.D. 70)
 - After the death of Nero (A.D. 68)
 - iii. The need for time to elapse for a suitable critique of the seven churches

II. Put your eyes on Me, on My sovereign will for your life and ministry

- a. Much like a horse: we are to wear "spiritual blinders"
 - i. Minimize distractions
 - ii. Greater ability to remain on the intended path
 - iii. Less likely to "spook"

C. There is no place for comparison once we grasp (and accept!) the sovereign will of God in our life

3. Stage 2 of Christian growth

A. Growing self-awareness of our weakness and inability

I. Greater dependency upon God

B. Growing desire to truly wait on God rather than run ahead

C. Greater reluctance to "make things happen" which often results in getting ahead of God

D. Less likely to attribute our own ideas as being from God

E. It matters less where you are, how long you'll be there, or where you may go next—just stay in close fellowship with God

F. The rest will take care of itself

G. Beginning to experience the peace of God - in the midst of uncertainty

H. Still struggling, at times, to wrest control away from God back into our own hands

Stage 3 - "Shortly, I must put off my tent"

1. By all appearances, Peter is on his way to martyrdom

A. Herod's motivation

- I. Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great (who tried to kill the young Jesus)
- II. Partly Jewish, of Hasmonean descent (related to the Maccabean family line) - tended to curry favor with the Jews
- III. Herod saw "that [killing James] pleased the Jews"
- IV. Feast time, similar to the time of Jesus crucifixion
- V. Large Jewish crowds, an "expectation of the Jewish people"
- VI. Likelihood of a "mob mentality" - whatever actions Herod took to gain Jewish favor would be "amplified"

B. Peter chained between two guards

C. Guards also outside the locked cell

D. "Peter was therefore kept in prison" (no kidding!)

E. It looked like a box canyon

2. God has allowed other "important people" in the church to be killed

A. First, Stephen, a prominent deacon, 4 years earlier, in A.D. 36³

B. Now, James, the brother of John, one of the original twelve Apostles, in A.D. 40⁴

- I. In fulfillment of the prediction of Jesus that the sons of Zebedee "will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with" (Mat. [20:23](#))
- II. A member of the "inner circle" of "Peter, James, and John" who witnessed events with Jesus that none of the others saw—such as the Transfiguration (Mat. [17:1](#); Mark. [9:2](#); Luke [9:28](#))

3. Peter undoubtedly remembered the earlier words of Jesus

- A. John [21:18-19a](#), "*Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will*

stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry [you] where you do not wish.” This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God.

4. Peter’s response

- A. Sleeping!⁶
- B. It seems he did not expect a miraculous rescue
 - I. Thought he was seeing a vision
 - II. Only after Peter had “come to himself” did he realize that it was God’s sovereign purpose to keep him alive
 - III. God’s purpose for Peter differed from that of Stephen and James who had already been killed
- C. Peter appears to have reached a place where he was fully accepting of whatever God might do
 - I. Peter was in the same place as Daniel’s companions who refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image at the risk of being thrown into a furnace
 - a. Dan. [3:16-18](#), *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that [is the case], our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver [us] from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”*

5. The letters of 1st and 2nd Peter, circa A.D. 64

- A. Prior to Peter’s martyrdom during the reign of Nero
- B. Christian persecution under Nero was ramping up
- C. 1 Peter - A key purpose of the letter is to encourage Christians to face persecution with grace.⁷
 - I. 1Pe. [4:12-14](#), *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are*

reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.

- II. 1Pe. 4:19, *Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.*
- III. 1Pe. 5:9-10, *Resist [the devil], steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.*
- IV. Notice his settled acceptance that persecution of the Christian falls well within God's sovereignty and purpose for the believer.

D. 2 Peter - His time of martyrdom draws near

- I. 2Pe. 1:13-15, *Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding [you], knowing that shortly I [must] put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.*
 - a. Like Paul, he describes his physical body as a “tent” — emphasizing the temporary, transitory nature of the Christian life
 - b. His life: the very thing he once tried to preserve—even at the cost of denying Christ—he now views as a weak, temporary, structure which will be put off soon enough
 - c. As when imprisoned in Acts 12, approximately 2 decades earlier, he is ready to pay the ultimate cost if it be the will of God

E. The apocryphal work, *The Acts of Peter*⁸ indicates that Peter was martyred during the reign of Nero, asking to be crucified upside down.⁹

F. What a different man this is from the earlier Peter who vehemently denied Christ—so as to avoid the possibility of persecution!

6. Stage 3 of Christian growth

A. A settled acceptance that we are owned by God

I. No longer pushing to go where we wish

II. Another may gird us and carry us—and, in the sovereignty of God, it

probably will not be where we would choose

- B. An acceptance of God's sovereignty, regardless of whether it is understood
 - I. God doesn't owe us an explanation of His secret will concerning our life
 - II. A willingness to live with things we don't understand—and probably won't this side of heaven
- C. Greater focus on relationship, less on accomplishment
 - I. What we "do" for God diminishes in importance in comparison with our fellowship with Him
 - II. An awareness of our weakness and inability—coupled with the impossibility of accomplishing spiritual work by means of the flesh—leads to an ever-increasing focus and reliance upon prayer
 - III. John [15:4-5](#), *Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you [are] the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."*
 - a. Yeah, we all read it, even as babes in Christ
 - b. But: do we live it, do we trust it, does it characterize our life?
 - IV. Peter was "abiding in Christ" while chained between the prison guards
 - V. He was more fruitful there than if he had been outside the prison, busy in ministry activities, but failing to abide in Christ

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Endnotes:

1. [NKJV](#), Acts [12:1-11](#)

2. [Ref-1307](#), 345
3. [Ref-1307](#), 342
4. [Ref-1307](#), 343
5. [Ref-0100](#), Tape 12:A
6. Was Peter able to sleep because he knew he was not yet “old”? “Peter may have been able to sleep in Acts [12:6](#) without worry because he was not yet old enough to fulfill John [21:18](#).”⁵ Or was it a matter of perspective: he was able to rest in God’s sovereignty over his life?
7. “The purpose then of 1 Peter was to encourage Christians to face persecution so that the true grace of Jesus Christ would be evidenced in them (5:12).” [Ref-0038](#), 2:838
8. “The story of his death in the apocryphal Acts of Peter cannot be credited: we are told that he was martyred under Nero, but asked to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy of suffering death on the cross in an upright position as his Master had done.” [Ref-0062](#), 18
9. “Peter is supposed to have suffered martyrdom at Rome, during the reign of the emperor Nero, being crucified with his head downward, at his own request. [It is, however, very uncertain, whether Peter ever visited Rome at all. The evidence rather favouring the supposition that he ended his days in some other country.—Ed.]” [Ref-1306](#), para. 290

Sources:

- NKJV** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0038** John Walvoord and Roy. B. Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1983).
- Ref-0062** John D. Woodbridge, ed., *Great Leaders of the Christian Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).
- Ref-0100** Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Book of Acts (GB-325)* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Theological Seminary, n.d.). [www.tyndale.edu].
- Ref-1306** John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (1563).
- Ref-1307** Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2011). ISBN:[978-0-7586-2799-5](#)^d.

Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/37_Acts_11_1-11/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- d - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?978-0-7586-2799-5>.