

David Wittbrodt - The Great Escape

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My subject today is the great escape. The Bible has many great escape stories, like the Exodus, Elijah from Jezebel, the Israelites escape from Haman, but were saved by Queen Esther. Jesus escape to Egypt as a baby Paul lowered down in a basket, and many, many more. But I'd like to focus on one in particular. So let's get started.

We're going to spend most of our time in the 12th chapter of Acts. You are familiar with these events, Peter's escape from prison. These events occurred in 44 AD, 11 years after Jesus crucified crucifixion. We know this because history records Herod's death in that year, which we'll read about toward the end of this chapter. So starting in Acts 12:1 we read now about that time, Herod the king stretched forth his hand to vex the church and he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword.

Now this king Herod was Herod Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great who killed all the male babies after Jesus birth. He was the nephew of Herod Antipas who killed John the Baptist. Incidentally, Herod the Great killed his own son out of fear the that he might try to overthrow him. Also, Herod Agrippa's the first son, Herod Agrippa II later was the one who tried Paul and was willing to release him, except that Paul appealed to Caesar.

Now back to Agrippa I. Like his grandfather who killed all the male babies under two years old, Herod Agrippa was an equal evil person willing to kill people for sport, especially Christians. He was a Jew, diligently following the Jewish rites and customs and ceremonies to the point of being a zealot. He was eager to appease the Jews. Verse one says he stretched forth his hand to vex the church, but.

But it was really much worse than that. Commentator Matthew Henry says he afflicted, imprisoned and fined them, spoiled their homes, abused them and then proceeded to greater instances of cruelty. At Robertson says he built theaters and held games for the Romans and Greeks and slew the Christians to please the Jews. The gradual increase in abuse reached a peak when Herod murdered one of the church leaders in Jerusalem. As we read in verse 2, the apostle James was killed by the sword.

That's a slightly nicer way of saying he was beheaded. The Jews considered this a shameful death. We might not know entirely why God would allow James to be killed seemingly prematurely. But one of the effects was that the opportunity to witness in Jerusalem declined because of this persecution and the witnessing efforts broadened greatly away from Jerusalem, and we see that in the very next chapter of acts, in chapter 13, the the missionary journeys of Paul begin and the spread of the gospel goes out far and wide.

James was a part of Jesus inner circle along with his brother John and Peter. It seems a little ironic that James was the first apostle to die and his brother John, the last verse 3 says because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. Then were the days of unleavened bread. This verse shows the growing divide between the Christians and Jews. It says it pleased the Jews.

The Christians were a growing and threatening group to the Jews. The the Jews didn't like this new Christian movement, especially since it was being led by former Jews themselves. These Christians had access to the Temple, their holy place, and now they were accepting Gentiles among them. To the Jews, the Christians were desecrating Judaism. The Christians were

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becoming despised and even hated by the Jews.

This murderous disposition was the same mentality they had since Jesus crucifixion. This third verse also shows us a little more about Herod Agrippa I and his desire to be loved by the people. Commentator Stephen Gurr says that history remembers him as a real crowd pleaser and he achieved a great level of popularity with his Jewish subjects. This clearly agrees with Scripture. In today's language we would say that his approval ratings went up.

The king saw that killing James pleased the Jews. Looking for even more love, he captured the apostle Peter. Now this took place at the time of the Passover when it was unlawful for the Jews to execute any. Anyone. So this was the environment in which Peter was seized.

Verse 4 and 5 reads, and when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him intending after the Passover to bring him to the people. Verse 5. Peter therefore was kept in prison, but but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. Now clearly it was the King's full intent to kill Peter, as was done to James. Now I think that while the apostle James was a top leader in the church, Peter was an even bigger prize for King Herod, probably much bigger in the eyes of the people.

If you recall back In Acts chapter 5, Peter escaped from prison the first time. Acts 5:12 In Acts 5:12 the apostles were making many signs and wonders among the people, but only Peter is named among them. In verse 15 and 16 it says they came from all around Jerusalem to be healed, hoping that the very shadow of Peter would overshadow and heal them later. After this first prison break, it was Peter and the other apostles, Peter being named, that spoke in the temple. So now back to chapter 12.

The king must have thought that by capturing and killing Peter, this would surely bring the highest level of praise to himself and endearment from the Jews. Perhaps King Herod remembered his previous breakout and put Peter under maximum security, taking no chances. The prison was probably the fortress Antonia, located in the northwest corner of the Temple in Jerusalem. The four quaternions were four groups of four soldiers, 616 men total. Each group of four guarded Peter in three hour shifts, twice per day.

Two soldiers were shackled directly to Peter. The other two were outside of the cell at the first and Second Ward. I think this would be one at the cell door and another at an inner gate of the prison. Usually a dangerous prison was chained to one guard, but for Peter it was two. This was an absurd amount of security.

Stephen Gurr states that the king hoped this would be the crowning spectacle of the holiday season and the death blow to the Nazarene movement. That the church prayed without ceasing for Peter is a wonderful example for us. I don't suppose they were praying for his deliverance, but rather that the will of God be done, that God would put the right words in his mouth and that he would be comforted in his mind, and that he would remain strong and courageous and faithful to the end. Verse six is pretty straightforward. It says, 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. But something I think is quite remarkable. Peter is sleeping. The feast is over.

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And on his final night, before his certain execution, he's sleeping. Peter peaceful, calm, resting easy. I think this tells us something very important about Peter. When we look at Peter's life, we usually think of the three denials of our Lord, and we often connect the scripture in John 21, where Jesus asks three times, do you love me?

The connection is clear. Peter is first overconfident, confident in himself, sure that he was willing to die for our Lord, but then denied him three times that night. Peter was heartbroken and he wept bitterly. Then he was reinstated, so to speak, and given a lesson as to what it would take to really be a disciple of Jesus. But what happens to Peter after that?

Does he learn the lesson? Of course we can say yes. After all, it's Peter. But this scripture, I think proves it. Peter is confident in a good way of his walk and his love for the Lord.

And he is fully ready to give his final witness to the point that he can rest without worry or anxiety. In just 11 years, Peter has gone from not ready, I think, to making his calling and election sure. This time Peter is really ready to die for our Lord. Continuing in verse seven, while Peter was sleeping, we read 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, and verse eight, the angel said unto him, gird thyself and bind thy sandals, and so he did, and he saith unto him, cast thy garment about thee and follow me.

In these verses, an angel personally comes to the prison for Peter's release. Then the light appeared. The Greek seems to show that the light illuminated his dwelling place, or just his own cell. I suppose that it shone as they made their way through the passages and out of the prison. But an entire environment was created by this supernatural light in which Peter awoke.

Imagine his surprise when he awoke. But it wasn't the light that woke him up. The angel himself had to smite Peter on his side in order to literally break him from his sleep. Then it was the angel who physically raised him up, perhaps to a seated position, to fully bring him to his awakened senses. Only then did he tell him to arise up quickly.

In other words, stand up on your own two feet. Then his chains dropped away from his hands. After he obeyed and rose, neither did the angel remove the shackles, nor did Peter take them off. Next, Peter was instructed to prepare himself for a journey. Gird yourself.

In this context, he probably had a long, flowing, loose undergarment to sleep in, to which a belt was added and fastened up during during the day. Then he put sandals on his feet and wrapped his outer garment around himself. These things he did himself. Now he was ready to go. We don't know if the guards were sleeping through all this, but in any event they were powerless to do anything.

In verse nine we read, and he went out and followed him, and and wist not that it was true, which was done by the angel, but thought he saw a vision. Note here that Peter is not leading, but he follows the angel in haste. He's so mesmerized by the whole thing that he isn't even sure that it's real. In verse 10, when they were past the first and second ward, they they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city, which opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and passed through one street and forthwith the angel departed from him.

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It seems to me that the doors to the first and the second ward needed to be opened simply because it's particularly pointed out that the last iron gate opens on its own, and finally they travel down one street and the angel departs. Verse 11 says, and when Peter was come to himself, he said, now I know of surety that the Lord has sent his angel and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod and from all the expectations of, of the people of the Jews. Peter did not realize if this was actual reality or vision until the angel left. A vision is so real that it is as if you are transported into a three dimensional environment and you are moving in that world.

Everything seems completely real. It wasn't until this supposed vision was over and he found himself outside the prison that he realized it was not a vision. If it had been a vision, he would have found himself back where he started. In prison. Peter is quick to give God all the credit.

It was God who sent his angel and he completely recognizes from whom he was delivered. It wasn't from prison or from the soldiers. He knows he he was delivered from Herod and the Jews who puffed up Herod's ego. Now I'm going to paraphrase a little bit. In verses 12 through 19, Peter considers what has happened and decides to go to the house of Mary where the church is praying for him.

Peter knocks at the gate and Rhoda comes to answer, and after hearing Peter's voice, she's so shocked and, and surprised and excited and happy that she runs to tell the others, leaving Peter outside the gate. He continues to knock and the others in the household come to the gate and are astonished to see Peter. Peter tells them about his escape and then quickly moves on to a new location. When day breaks, Peter was nowhere to be found and the soldiers were in a panic.

This is their worst nightmare. Their lives were on the line. Well, it wasn't long before Herod was searching for Peter, and when he wasn't found, he had the guards who were watching Peter executed, and finally, after all this, on a second day, Herod put on his royal apparel, sat on his throne and spoke to the people in such a way that the people exclaimed, it is the voice of a God.

And because Herod did not give God the glory, an angel of the Lord smote him and he was eaten of worms and died, and as we said earlier, this is very important. The word of God grew and multiplied. That's in verse 24. Well, that's a great escape story, but I think there's something more to the story.

So I'd like to go Back to verse seven and take an even closer look. There. Acts 12:7 says, and behold, an angel of the Lord came upon him, Peter, and a light shined in the prison, and he smote Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, arise up quickly. This verse reminds me of another that I'd like to read.

It's in Isaiah, chapter 42, verse 7, and it's one that you know. It also refers to a prison. Isaiah 42, 7 to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house. Now you know that these scriptures here in Isaiah apply to the kingdom when the eyes of the blind shall be opened. This prison here in Isaiah pictures death.

And the whole world of mankind is in this prison house of death. Unable to free themselves, they need some outside help in order to be free and to remove the darkness. Isaiah here speaks of freeing the prisoners from this prison house of death. Peter is in a prison house, but he's not dead. He's sleeping.

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But considering his situation, he's as good as dead. Herod is coming in the morning. Peter is sleeping, and we know also that sleep is a picture of death because of the ransom price paid by Jesus which will release the prisoners from the prison house. Remember when our Lord referred to Lazarus as sleeping when he was really dead?

Sleeping is a good picture of death because there is an awakening from death. The whole world needs to be awakened from the prison house of death, just like Peter. But who is it that will awaken mankind from this prison house? An angel from the Lord? Perhaps from God.

When Peter was awoken in the prison, there was a light all around, just as it will be in the kingdom when the world of mankind is awakened. Our verse in Isaiah 42 speaks of bringing those who sit in darkness out of the prison house. Remember, the knowledge or light of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea during the kingdom. In fact, Jesus is pictured as the light of the world in John 1. An allegory is a story or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.

And that's what I think we have here. Peter's escape from prison is an allegory of the world's escape from the prison house of death and their awakening in the kingdom. Peter here represents the world of mankind in need of a Savior and deliverer they've been in darkness these 6,000 years, blinded by Satan. Here pictured by Herod, the angel of the Lord represents our Lord Jesus, who was sent by God to free the world from this prison house. He paid the ransom price for Adam, and through Adam, the whole world of mankind.

As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. That's First Corinthians 15. Notice also that Peter does not wake up on his own. He is entirely jolted awake by the angel. It is entirely the angel that awakens him.

This is shown by the angel smiting him. That the angel smote him also shows that Peter was completely asleep. So it is with mankind. They have no power to resurrect themselves or awaken themselves. They are solely dependent on Jesus.

Then it says that the angel raised him up, picturing the resurrection by Jesus. Then the angel speaks to Peter, saying, arise up quickly. That sounds like a repeat of the previous action by the angel. But here the angel tells Peter to arise quickly. This is Peter's work, not the angel's angel.

This is indicative of the kingdom. Mankind, once awakened from death, must walk under their own power up the highway of holiness. As they walk up this highway in the kingdom, they go metaphorically from a sitting position to an upright position. Standing, he says, arise up quickly. Eventually to stand upright before God.

Now we're still in verse seven. Once the world as individuals, chooses this upward course, the highway of holiness as described in Isaiah 35, the chains that have encumbered them in this life will fall off, as it were. The wiles of the devil will no longer control or hinder them. No lion or ravenous beast shall be there. They will be free to follow this angel from God.

The fact that the soldiers were completely powerless to stop the angel, and Peter pictures Satan and the fallen angels being bound, unable to influence mankind. Now in verse 8, Peter is instructed to gird the thyself and put on thy sandals. Girding oneself is to prepare for hard work or a battle. It is this mindset that the world must have during their kingdom journey. Lastly, an outer garment is put on.

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I think this is to show a recognition of the sacrifice that Christ provides and that they will need his covering until the end of the millennium. Now notice here that while Peter has been awakened and preparing for his journey, he's still within the confines of the prison, and the angel says, follow me. Notice that Peter is not leading the way. Just so.

The world of mankind must follow their new leader, the Christ, out of this prison if they are to find Life. Just as the angel led Peter to life in verse nine. This is so unbelievable to Peter. He's not even sure that it's true. He's had visions before.

He knows how real they can be. Is this too good to be true or just a vision? I think when the world of mankind is awakened in the kingdom, they too will think that this is too good to be true. But the kingdom is not a vision or a dream, but a reality backed by the one true God. In verse 10, Peter follows the angel out of the prison past two inner gates and an outer gate that opens on its own and leads to the city.

I think this last gate out of the prison pictures the end of the millennium. Once mankind reaches perfection, they will no longer be bound by what the prison death. They'll have reached the perfect human condition that Adam lost and can walk fully upright before God. This last gate opens on its own, picturing that they have earned eternal life and may go forth freely. This gate leads to the city, representing the eternal home for the world.

The inner gates seem to represent some steps or requirements along the path to recovery during the kingdom. This progression of three gates reminds me of the three entrances of the tabernacle. Only here, during the kingdom, the gates would picture an earthly pathway. Then, after leaving the prison and walking into the city, the angel departs from Peter and he stands by himself. This would picture the world led by the Christ to the promised land, now standing on their own, as Peter is doing.

In the end, Herod dies, and I'd like to read verses 21 through 23. It's talking about Herod, but in your mind I want you to picture this as Satan after the thousand year kingdom, when he is loosed to deceive the people during the little season. So verse 21, and upon a set day, Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and made an oration to them, and the people gave a shout saying it is the voice of a God and not of a man.

And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him because he gave God not the glory, gave not God the glory, and he was eaten of worms and gave up the spirit. Doesn't that actually picture Satan during the little season? Satan is a very beautiful angel on the outside, but there's no good in him. He has an evil heart and mind. He's rotten to the core, just as Herod is.

In our story, to be eaten of worms is really eaten from the inside out, showing that Satan's death originates from the inside, his real being, not the Outward beauty. Listen to what Isaiah chapter 14 says about Lucifer after Lucifer says that he will ascend to the heaven, exalt his throne above the stars of God and be like the Most High. Isaiah says of Lucifer, you will be brought down to Sheol, and those that see him will despise him because. Because he made the earth tremble, and in verse 17 it says, Listen to this.

He opened not the house of his prisoners. Verse 17 says that Satan opened not the house of his prisoners. Just like Herod kept Peter in his prison awaiting death. Satan. Satan has kept the world in his prison of death.

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But fortunately an angel of God came to save Peter. An angel of God. Jesus will come to save the world. Here are a few more examples that show death as a prison and mankind its prisoners. Job, chapter three.

After wishing he would have died at birth, in verse 13, he likens death to sleep. That's very fitting for our story. Then in verse 18 he says concerning the dead. There the prisoners rest together. Here the dead are prisoners in a prison, like Peter.

Also in Isaiah 49:9 speaking about the resurrection during the kingdom, it speaks of prisoners in darkness going forth, being released from the prison of death.

Now I want to go back to the beginning and ask the question, what about James? He was killed with the sword prior to Peter being captured by Herod. We know this resulted in a greater spread of the gospel away from Jerusalem. But is James a part of this allegory of Peter's escape? I think he is.

James in this story is a fitting picture of the church. They are beheaded, as it were, for the witness of Christ. An appropriate picture of the church faithful unto death. James leaves the scene before Peter's escape, just as the church is completed and gone before the kingdom and resurrection of the world. Also, James no longer walks on this earth, just as the church goes beyond the veil and doesn't walk in this world anymore.

In fact, James is the only apostle that the Bible records his death. By contrast, Peter, after being miraculously freed from this prison, continues his life on earth, still an apostle guiding the church and witnessing to the world. The Bible also does not record his actual death. I think this is to show that the world of mankind can continue on and receive everlasting life in the ages to come. No longer in prison.

All this occurs at the time of the Passover. Briefly, Peter's deliverance from prison or bondage took place at the same time the Jews were celebrating their deliverance from Egyptian bondage. There's more on the Passover, but we'll let that go for now. But it all fits really well. Consider this.

If Peter wasn't sleeping, this picture of the kingdom wouldn't work. If Peter aroused himself or woke up on his own, this allegory wouldn't work. If Peter was leading the way out of the prison, it wouldn't fit. Then there's King Herod and James that fit so well. These stories in the Bible can only be understood because God has opened our eyes and shown to us the riches of his grand plan.

It's comforting to know that there's an escape plan for the whole world of mankind, that they'll be resurrected and have an opportunity for life, whether they know it or not, during a time that the Bible calls the kingdom. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. This story of Peter's escape is a great escape. But the picture that it shows of mankind's escape is an even greater escape. When morning broke and Peter was free, I can't help but think that he was praising God and that his heart was full of joy.

When the morning breaks for the world, I can't help but think that it will be the same for mankind. As it says in Psalms 30, verse 5, weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. Amen.