

"The Great Escape"
Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit*
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(Acts 12:1-25)

Introduction.

There is a show on TV right now that is called "Prison Break." It's the story of a structural engineer named Michael Scofield who gets himself locked up in prison so that he can help his brother escape death row. Scofield has the prison blueprints tattooed on his body, and he hatches an elaborate plan to break his brother out of prison and prove he's innocent.

The show is fictional, of course, but history offers plenty of real-life dramas about high-stakes escapes that were remarkable. Do you remember the movie "The Great Escape" starring Steve McQueen? It tells the story of an escape from a concentration camp in World War 2 by allied soldiers. Or perhaps you saw the film "Midnight Express" about an American student who escaped a Turkish prison. Other stories have become legends, like the one about Henry "Box" Brown who as a slave in 1849 actually shipped himself north to freedom in a wooden crate. My favorite movie about an escape from prison is the film "The Shawshank Redemption."

The biggest question at the center of all of these stories is simple: How'd they do it? How did they escape and get away? When it comes to the escape of the apostle Peter from a Roman jail in the city of Jerusalem, the answer is simple. It was a miracle of God. Let's take a closer look.

I. Herod's Persecution.

In Acts 12, the Roman government wasn't particularly friendly to the notion of people becoming Christians, and the religious establishment of Judaism was even more angry and resentful. The Roman Empire was an occupying force in Palestine in the 1st century AD, but they kept religious figures in power and encouraged a policy of collaboration. So the Jewish family of King Herod the Great provided not only opposition to Christ Himself during His earthly ministry, but also to the early church.

There are a number of Herods that are mentioned in the Bible who were all related to each other, and sometimes it's hard to keep them straight. Herod the Great was the one who ordered the slaughter of infants at the time of Jesus' birth. His son, Herod Antipas, is the Herod before whom Jesus appeared during His night of trials prior to the crucifixion. And Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great and the nephew of Herod Antipas, is the one who is mentioned here in this passage. He was the king of Judea and the ruler responsible for the death of James and the imprisonment of Peter.

In the early days of the church, believers were very familiar with prisons. In fact, this was Peter's third time to stay in one (see chapters 4 and 5). Nevertheless, the death of James had to have shaken the community of believers. Herod Agrippa seemed intent on keeping the peace, and if throwing Christians in prison and having a few of them executed was a means to that end, so be it. It appeared the church was a pawn in the hands of the political powers, and the followers of Christ felt helpless in the face of rulers and kings. But was this really the case? The truth of the matter is that kings and rulers are the real pawns in the hands of God, and the Bible says that nations rise and fall at His command.

James was executed, and Peter was a day away from experiencing a similar fate. The only reason he survived this long was because of a custom that didn't allow executions during holy days such as the Jewish Passover. Perhaps fearing some sort of escape, Herod doubled the guard so that a soldier was handcuffed to each of Peter's arms, and two more stood outside his cell. The early church wondered what they could do. They felt so powerless, and they knew that unless God intervened Peter would die the next day. So they prayed.

I have a friend named Murray Gossett. Murray and I were on the staff of a church many years ago, and we've remained friends all these years. Murray is a person of prayer. He prays for me, and he prays for all of you in our church every single week. Once, after someone shared with Murray a problem they were facing, he said to the person, "Well, the least I can do is pray." But then it dawned on him, "No, the truth of the matter is the *most* I can do is pray! God is more powerful than anything I can do, so I'll ask Him to help." So Murray wrote that sentence at the top of his prayer list, and it's still his practice to this day. He reminds himself: "The *most* I can do is pray!" And so he does. The early church did, too.

Are you facing a crisis this morning? Do you find yourself in some type of prison today – a prison of debt, or anger, or sadness? Is your business struggling and you wonder if it's going to make it? Are you at the end of your rope and wonder how you're going to get through the next day? Then pray! The *most* we can do is pray, and God is not helpless among the ruins. The early church began to plead with God on Peter's behalf, much as a child would ask her father for something she is powerless to obtain by herself. The church prayed in dependence on God, and a miracle happened.

II. Peter's Escape.

The church was praying. But what about Peter? He was sound asleep! And I don't mean dozing. I mean one of those deep sleeps from which it's hard to wake a person up. It was the kind of sleep that takes you deep into your mattress and from which when you do awake you're unable to even move! Ever had one of those kinds of sleep?

This is the picture of a person who is at peace and trusting God. I'm blown away by Peter's ability to sleep so securely and trust the Lord with his future. It's the night before his execution. If I were in that situation, I'd be fretful and worried. I'd check the clock multiple times and wonder how many more hours I have to live. I'd spend the time writing letters, making amends, and tying up loose ends. But not Peter. He rests in God, and he sleeps deeply.

Do you have that kind of trust in God? Can you rest in His sovereign care like Peter did? Most of us have spent many sleepless nights worried sick about what might happen the next day. I know I have, and I've got a lot of growing to do to get to that place of trust in my own discipleship. Maybe you do, too.

I thought about this over the weekend, and it got me to thinking about climbing mountains in Colorado. I've climbed six 14ers, as they are called, in Colorado, and it's one of the most exhilarating experiences I've ever had. To climb a 14,000 foot mountain there, you need to get an early start – as in four o'clock in the morning early! You begin hiking on the trail at around 8,000 or 9,000 feet where it begins, and you hike by wending your way through a forest of blue spruce, lodge pole pine, and Douglas fir trees on a trail that feels spongy underneath your feet from fallen needles.

A few hours later, when you get to around 11,000 feet, the trees thin out and give way to lush meadows carpeted by wildflowers. Soon you leave the grass and dirt and begin stepping across a boulder field which is made up of chunks of granite the size of wheelbarrows. Finally, after an

hour of rock-hopping, you reach the ridge, which is a narrow line of ascent that will lead you all the way to the summit.

Looking back over your route, you feel like you've accomplished something pretty special. Down below, you see a tiny dot just at the edge of timberline. No, two dots. One dot moves, and the second dot looks red. It's then you realize they are people, hikers who have just started the climb. And then it hits you. From this vantage point, several hours ago you too were a dot like that, a speck of human life on a huge mountain. You feel small, and you get a glimpse of what God must see all the time. But you also gain insight into why you can trust God. He sees everything, and He's all-powerful. Even when we feel like tiny dots at the mercy of Roman kings and demanding bosses and frustrating children, God is still in control.

Peter was so asleep that the angel who appeared in his cell had to use more than just a bright light to wake him up. He had to kick Peter in the ribs and tell him to get up and put his clothes on! And even after that while Peter was leaving the campfires of the prison, he thought it was all a dream. He didn't know it was real until he was well out into the street. This is the work of God. The church may feel powerless. Peter may be confused with sleep. The governing authorities may be firmly in control. But God makes a way. That's the way it is with the Holy Spirit!

III. The Church's Reaction.

In this passage there's a comical scene of Peter's arrival at Mary's house. Evidently it was a common meeting place for the early church, and some scholars believe it was perhaps at Mary's house where the Last Supper was celebrated. Others believe this is where the Holy Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost. Peter found his way to this house, and he knocked on the door.

Now, picture the scene. Peter arrives, breathless, confused, pinching himself to make sure he's not dreaming, and he knocks urgently but quietly. It's the middle of the night, and he doesn't want to be discovered by the wrong people. He has just broken out of prison! A servant girl named Rhoda comes to the door, and she asks, "Who's there?" It is, after all, nighttime, and Christians are being persecuted. So caution is required.

Peter replies, "It's me!" Rhoda recognizes Peter's voice, but she doesn't think to open the door! In her excitement she runs to the group gathered inside, and tells them the good news. They all think she's crazy. But when she insists, they offer a far more likely explanation – "It must be an angel." Really?!

This is so like you and me, isn't it?! Here they are praying intently for Peter's release, asking God to deliver him, and when Peter shows up they can't believe it. The last thing they expected was Peter at the door, and the last thing they believed would happen was that God would actually answer their prayer!

To be honest with you, their amazement is comforting to me, because in this passage we don't see a group of people who have it all together spiritually. Instead we see a gracious God hearing the feeble and unbelieving cries of His people, and He responds to their weak faith out of the magnitude of His love.

The longer I live, the more I believe that I really don't know very much about prayer, I mean *real*, deep, believing prayer and all the mysteries that surround it. And I want to learn more about cultivating a better understanding of it in my own life. I also realize how confusing answers to prayer are at times.

This passage presents in stark relief the dilemma of unanswered prayer. In one instance the church is praying and Peter is delivered. But in another instance they pray and James is

executed. I'm sure they were praying just as fervently for both James and Peter. Why was one apostle rescued and the other not? It's a mystery to me.

I take comfort in the fact that not even Jesus was exempt from unanswered prayer. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed with both the faith of protest and the faith of acceptance. And on the cross Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"

Why does God answer some prayers "yes" and others "no"? I don't know. But I take comfort in the fact that Jesus asked "why?" too.

How can we reconcile the wonderful promises of the Bible with our actual experience of unanswered prayer? I don't fully understand it, but I do think the key lies in seeing prayer as joining with God in His burden for the world.

C.S. Lewis writes that after thinking about this problem for many years and discussing it with just about every Christian he knew, he finally concluded that the kind of dauntless faith called for by Jesus occurs only when the one who prays does so as God's fellow-worker, demanding only what is needed for their mutual work together. In other words, one who works in close partnership with God grows in the ability to discern what God wants to accomplish on earth, and he prays accordingly. "Not my will, but yours, be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That's the model Jesus gave, isn't it?

There's a book titled *Prayers of the Martyrs*, which reproduces the actual prayers of people who were killed for their faith. It begins in 107 AD and the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch and goes all the way to 1980 and the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador. It's surprising to read that only a few of these martyrs prayed for their own deliverance. More often than not they prayed for their families left behind, for steadfastness of faith, and for strength to endure death without shame. Some even thanked God for the privilege of suffering, surprised that they would be counted worthy. Others forgave their persecutors. Very few asked for a miracle.

I'm reminded of the 21 Coptic Christians from Egypt who were executed in Libya because of their faith by members of ISIS earlier this year. For many of them, as they died the last words on their lips were, "Jesus is Lord!" When I read things like this, I realize I've got a long way to go in developing that kind of faith and that kind of prayer life. Maybe you do too.

Conclusion/Application.

The text begins with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod on the throne. It ends with Peter free, Herod dead, and the Word of God spreading. This passage reminds us that no human force, and certainly no prison cell, can ever impede the progress of the Gospel. The Church of Jesus Christ belongs to God, and the Bible says that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He is not helpless among the ruins of our lives or of the world, and the story isn't finished being written. And you and I have a part to play in the drama of salvation history.

Later on today, when you're trying to decide what you'll order for lunch, or you think about the vacation you're planning to take this summer, remember that there are people around the world today who are wondering if they will be killed by nightfall because of their commitment to Jesus. So let's pray for them, even as the early church prayed for Peter. Who knows, their escape may even depend upon it. Amen.