

2/21/16

Acts 12:1-17

A Solid Faith

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. ⁶ Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." ⁹ And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. ¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

¹² When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

(Pastor Prays)

Politics is a tough business. People love you. People hate you. People change their minds about you and change them back again. We watch it play out on the national scene in our own country and, truthfully, we can't find much hope, at least not in politics. But it has always been like that for Christians. I mean real Christians.

You can reach all the way back to the 1st Century. Christians have always had a prophetic voice, speaking truth to the politician and it's never been popular.

In the text, we meet a politician yearning for popularity and power. His name is Herod and he is a consummate politician, part of the Hasmonic Dynasty, he would do whatever it took to get the favor of the people. This particular regime was set up by Caligula and, in the story, Herod finds out that the more he harasses and hurts Christians, the more popular he becomes, and that's how we find out what Christians are made of, what Christians like you and me are made of. Isn't that what the Bible says in Proverbs 17:3 *The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the LORD tests hearts.*

Test then. When you consider the Christians in the New Testament, juxtaposed against us today, we look so soft and fragile, easily offended and needy. Or on the other hand, gauche and shallow and fickle. And when I read this story in Acts, I find that I want to be like them, like James who would die bravely or Peter before his execution sleeping soundly, or the church, the church gathering and praying fervently.

Don't you want to live like that, with a deep joy that carries us through real struggles? I think this story speaks to that. Here is what I believe:

A Solid Faith Makes a Real Christian Thrive in a Harsh World

There are a few things I'd like to suggest for you to maybe think about or even do.

We Need to Reject the Fairytale Jesus

The Jesus where every wish is His command, the Facebook Jesus that has a little quip for your every qualm, or the Republican Jesus wrapped in an American flag, or the Democrat Jesus wrapped in a rainbow flag. Let's look at the *Biblical* Jesus and that Jesus means what He says.

The story opens in v. 1 about that time when the church at Antioch has sent help to the church at Jerusalem. About that time (listen to the vivid language): Herod the King laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. This can't be a surprise. Remember Jesus said in John 15:20, ²⁰*Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

Or do you remember what Jesus told a scribe in Matthew 8:20 when a scribe glibly said "Ill follow you anywhere," *And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* Jesus said it again in John 16:33, *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."*

Jesus meant what He said. James was the brother of John; in v. 2 Herod killed James the brother of John with a sword. He was the first apostle besides Judas to die.

Jesus meant what He said. On a sunny day when things were going well for Jesus and the apostles, James and John's mom in Matthew 20 came to Jesus and asked for her two sons to sit on his right and left hands when he becomes king. In Matthew 20:22 Jesus addresses James and John - *Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able."* And in v. 23 Jesus told them, You will drink my cup.

In Acts 12:2, Herod kills James with a sword. He meant what He said. He drank the cup. So I am asking you to put away that fairytale, juice box Jesus and step into Christian maturity, embracing words like *repentance, lordship, forgiveness, surrender, sacrifice* and *trust*.

Let's throw off this yoke of false entitlement and follow our crucified Lord regardless the cost, because a solid faith makes a real Christian thrive in a harsh world. We need to reject the fairytale Jesus.

We Need to get Serious About Prayer

Back to the story. Herod kills James. V. 3 tells us it's good for his poll numbers so he arrests Peter. V. 4 Put him in prison with 4 squads of soldiers, 16 of them – 4 at a time in 4 shifts. V. 6 tells us Peter is bound (chained) to two in the cell and two are posted outside his cell at all times, and there is an essential lesson given in v. 5.

V. 5 is a perfectly balanced verse. Look at it. Peter was kept in prison "but" earnest prayer was made for him to God by the church. You get the context. Herod had James killed. He saw that the Jews loved it, so he arrested Peter to kill him, too, but it was Passover; so to please the Jews even further, he waited until it was over. Meanwhile, the church prayed fervently (ἐκτενω̅ς) to stretch a muscle to the point of pain. All the way to its limits. This is the same word that describes how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion. Luke 22:44, *And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly* (same Greek word); *and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*

John MacArthur says that the word "earnest" or "fervent" describes three essentials of the Christian life: LOVE – SERVICE – PRAYER. And here the church is teaching us to put things that *don't* matter into the background and learn to do the things that *do* matter.

Pray fervently. For What?

1. For intense issues
2. For reconciliation
3. For lost friends and family
4. For mission
5. For personal renewal
6. For churches in our country

7. For God's Glory/God's Will/ God's Mission

A solid faith makes a real Christian thrive in a harsh world. We need to reject the fairytale Jesus and we need to get serious about prayer.

We Need to Learn to Trust God

To trust him when it looks hopeless. Look, when you can say with Paul "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain," you have learned how to trust.

The rest of the story has some comedic value. Peter is in prison; Passover is done. V. 6 is set in the night before the execution. He's chained to two guards and two are posted outside his jail cell. I'd like to read to you from v. 6-10: *6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.*

This was not Peter's *escape* as much as it was his *deliverance*. He didn't mastermind it. He just received it, and in a rudimentary way, this deliverance of Peter from prison is a beautiful picture of how salvation works. In v. 7-8 Peter was asleep. He was struck. He was awakened and told to get up. His chains fell off, and he was told to dress himself and put on his sandals: "Wrap a cloak around you and Come, follow me." In v. 10 Even the gate had to open for him.

I'm not going to deal with the rest – Rhoda and the astonished church. I'm going to ask you to learn to trust Christ. The Christ of the Bible who beckons you to follow him regardless the cost; The Lord who teaches you to pour out your life in prayer; The God who delivers.

See the picture: Like Peter sleeping, you were dead in sin. Like the angel, The Holy Spirit awakens your heart and life to believers to see that you are in a prison of addiction and lust, of bitterness, racism or self-pity. He commands you to repent. He takes the chains off, dresses you in new righteousness like the returned Prodigal Son. He puts sandals on your feet and says to you "Come and follow me."

This morning will you say with Charles Wesley. "My chains are off – my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed thee."

Let's pray.

What does it mean to trust Christ? For some of you it means surrender. Accepting where you are, contentment. For some of you it will mean the abandonment of a lifestyle. And for some of you, to stop the games. For those of you who are not Christian, (it means) seeing God as Holy, yourself a sinner, Christ as Savior and Lord.

Look to the cross and confess, repent and believe. Come forward during the invitation song and talk to a pastor about our membership class, Discover HG.

(Pastor prays)