

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Sunday 18th September 2022.

Scripture: Acts 12:1-19

Last week we looked at how the Apostles dealt with conflict in the church. This week, there is much more suspense, drama, excitement, a miracle and an angel.



It reminds me of those prison movies like

Alcatraz where a prisoner escaped by swimming in a bay of frigid cold water and sharks and who can forget the Shawshank Redemption where an innocent man spent 20+ years for a crime he did not commit, digging a way out with a spoon and a pick.

At the time the church was continuing to grow and expand and Herod Antipas, part Jew, wanted to be popular amongst the Jewish people who rejected the belief in Jesus. So he beheaded James, and, as he saw the people supported this, he arrested Peter to hold a mock trial and execute him also.

Because Peter had previously escaped from prison, Herod Antipas didn't want it to happen again – so he stationed sixteen soldiers altogether to watch over this one man. Peter was under the guard of 4 soldiers at all times and 2 were chained to his wrists and 2 were standing guard at the door of his cell. Herod Antipas thought – he won't escape this time.

Think about it. James the brother of John had been beheaded with a sword. Even if the church members did not witness it as a public execution, they certainly would have heard about it. And the word spread quickly that Peter had also been arrested.

I wonder how you would be feeling if you were in Peter's situation. Innocent, knowing that you were facing execution the next day. If it was me, I think I would have sent out for heaps of Valium to put me to sleep. But not so for Peter – he was asleep resting in the fact that God was in control. He had done what he was supposed to do, and this was where he was at. He was trusting God in a bad situation to intervene in whatever way God saw fit, including the possibility that he would die for his faith.

The church responded instantly and overwhelmingly – not in panic – but in prayer. Many had gathered at one of their homes and were praying all night.

We read that suddenly there was an angel of the Lord and a light shone in the cell. Peter was so sound asleep that the angel had to thump him once on the side and get his attention. It was then the chains were released and Peter stood free.

When you pray for God's strength in the face of extreme challenges the first sign of God's answer is often a "light." There is something so incredibly powerful in light – especially in a place of darkness. A candle in daylight has little effect but a candle in a cave gives hope. God always starts to work in us with hope. It stirs first deeply inside and it comes through His presence.

Peter was not sure if he was dreaming or if it was really happening. The angel had to tell him - get dressed and put on your sandals. And Peter did. Then the angel said, put on your coat and follow me. They went past the first and second guards and came to the iron gate that separated them from the city. Peter followed him out, but he still did not know if what the angel was doing was real; he thought he might be seeing a vision.

After we are released from the chains of bondage we are enabled and prepared to follow wherever God leads – but notice this – see it clearly – God doesn't do for us,

what we can do for ourselves. Peter had to put on his sandals and then get his coat on and then he was to follow the angel. We are directed to follow God. Following God's lead requires us to go without understanding all there is to understand.

God conceals us in danger. Peter simply walked past the guards, and all was well. When God is with us and when we are walking in His light He will conceal and protect us from all that prevents us from His work. God does what we can't do. God opened the iron gate, and the release was complete. Now Peter was free to go back to the church family and to take up the work of God again.

When Peter gets to Mary's house, the mother of John-Mark, he knocks on the door. But instead of being let inside, Rhoda, a maid was so amazed that it was Peter she shut the door and rushed to tell the people inside. They didn't believe her at first.

Meanwhile, there is Peter, waiting for the door to be unlocked. They opened the door and were surprised that God would actually answer prayer. The church should have realised that they went from hopeless to hopeful because God had answered their prayer right while they were praying it. It is strange how weak our faith can be sometimes.

Prayer is a communication with God and none of us will have a good prayer life if we are not in an active relationship with God. Peter didn't find himself in trouble and then start praying, desperately asking God to save him. He was in an active relationship with God and when he found himself in times of trouble was already trusting that God had everything under control.

Imagine it – 16 guards around Peter and it was the power of God that: provided Peter's escape; sent an angel; loosed the chains and opened the gate.

If you do not believe God answers prayer – why do you pray?

If you are not praying, why be mad at God for not answering prayers that you are not offering up?

If you are double-minded, it could be why you are tossed all over the place when you are in a rough situation.

If you are a Spirit-filled believer, filled with the Holy Spirit, why would you not believe that Christ could provide a miracle for you?

There is no magic formula for prayer. It is you communicating with God and allowing Him to do what is His will for you at the time. Pray until something happens, or God tells you to stop praying about it.

The two greatest challenges Christians face today are relativism and apathy.

The first challenge is that we live in a world that no longer recognizes sin. We've lost the world our parents and grandparents left us, where right was clear and wrong was condemned by all. Relativism means we live in a world where right is right for you but not for me and wrong is dependent on a bucket load of other factors such as victimization, racism, political correctness and instant gratification. People in our world have moved away from sin towards a view of life that is essentially Godless and self-absorbed.

The second challenge is apathy. The opposite of love is not hate. Love and hatred are very much alike as both are consumed with another person. Love desires what is best for the object of another's affection while hate hungers for what is worst. The opposite of love is apathy. We live in a world that has become dulled to the presence of God.

We must be driven to our knees where we can ask God for His help. If the challenges we face in connecting with our world drive us to our knees in prayer this is a good thing.

Are you ready for this? It doesn't matter if you are ready or not.....just pray with me and if you aren't ready that's fine. You won't be any different than Peter standing dazed in the middle of an empty street at 2am. You will be exactly like Rhoda who answered the door and was so stunned with the release of Peter she left him standing outside...still knocking to get it.

It doesn't matter when we pray, God works in us and through us in powerful ways.

Closing prayer:

Heavenly Father, we ask that you will teach us how to pray in these days when the world seems so chaotic.

We don't always need to know what to pray for, but we do so desperately need to pray.

We need to pray for each other, to pray for our friends, to pray about the dangers that beset us as a nation, as a world and as a people.

Lord, help us just to open our hearts and be honest before You, for we know that in the mystery of prayer, a mystery that none of us can fathom, something is happening that makes possible the activity of Your Spirit to work in unusual ways, ways that otherwise would never happen.

Make us that kind of dependent people – we are in Jesus' name. Amen.