

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 12:12-19

As we come to this next set of verses, we find that Peter has been rescued from Herod by an angel. Although it took him some time to realize his deliverance was not a dream – now he knows it is for real.

The first thing Peter does is to go to the home of Mary – John Mark's mother – to tell his friends the great news. Let's pick up at verse 12:

“When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door.”

Now I think there is both irony and humor in what is about to happen. Let's remember that these are just ordinary people, like ourselves. Yet, they are going to encounter what certainly seemed like the impossible.

F.F. Bruce writes this about Peter's movements after his release: “The first thing for Peter to do was to acquaint his fellow-believers in Jerusalem with his escape; the next was to go into hiding, lest Agrippa's police should find him again.” – F.F. Bruce

Let's set the scene. An evidently large contingent from the Jerusalem Church is at Mary's home – praying fervently that God will somehow rescue Peter from the same fate that James the Elder had experienced only

weeks before. Considering what happened to James, their prayers must have had a real sense of urgency, mixed with the fear that history would repeat itself.

So now, Peter is standing at the courtyard knocking on the door to try to tell the very people who are fervently praying for him that God has done a miracle. As others have pointed out, as Peter was knocking the house probably went silent. Given the season of persecution the Church was experiencing, the prayer group might well have become silent – fearing that Herod's police were at the door.

Luke tells us that a young servant girl named Rhoda answered the door. By the way, in Greek the name Rhoda means a rose. It's interesting that although Rhoda is a big part of this unfolding story, we don't know anything else about her. Luke does her the honor of stating her name, but nothing else about her is related.

Peter is knocking at the door, wanting to get off the street. That makes sense, right? Once his escape is known to the authorities, they are going to start looking for him.

Look at verse 14:

“When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”

We can infer a couple of things from that verse. One, Rhoda knew Peter. She couldn't see him because she hadn't opened the door, but she recognized his voice. We can also infer by this that it wasn't Peter's first time at Mary's home. Due to the size of Mary's home and her

financial means, it was probably one of the more prominent house churches in Jerusalem.

Just the same, while Rhoda recognized Peter's voice, she didn't open the door! Luke says she was so overjoyed, that she left Peter at the door and ran back to the prayer meeting!

Now, let's give her some credit. She was overjoyed because she believed that a miracle had taken place! She didn't stand on the inside of the door and say to Peter, "Let's see some credentials". She didn't say, "How do we know it's really you? What's the password?"

No, she immediately recognized Peter's voice and was so excited she left him there while she went to tell those earnestly praying for his release that God has already answered their prayers.

If you want to see the exact opposite of Rhoda's excitement, look at verse 15: "You're out of your mind," they told her."

I think we can all see the irony of the situation. Rhoda is overjoyed as she tells the group they can quit praying for Peter's release. As Romans 8:24 says, "Who hopes for what they already see?" The group, however, tells her she must be crazy!

After all, they know exactly where Peter was. He's at the Fort of Antonia, awaiting execution. He's in the inner prison, bound to two smelly soldiers. He's locked up tight inside that fortress.

There is absolutely no evidence that they believed for the very miracle they were praying for.

It reminds me of an old story. A small farm area was suffering from a prolonged drought. Without rain, the crops would not survive – and everyone was worried about it.

Well, the pastor of the local church got up on a Sunday morning and said, “Now things look bad, but we know God can turn this situation around. Tonight, let’s have a prayer meeting instead of our usual church service. We are going to pray for rain.”

That night a large group arrived at the scheduled time. When the pastor came to the platform he said, “You may as well all go home.” One of the deacons said, “Why, pastor? We’ve come to pray for rain.”

The pastor looked over the crowd and said, “Yes, but not one of you brought an umbrella.”

Here again we must admire Rhoda. She doesn’t back down. She doesn’t say, “Well, maybe it was just my imagination.” John Stott says this about Rhoda’s faith: “Rhoda’s simple joy shines brightly against the dark background of the church’s incredulity.” – John Stott

Luke tells us, “When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

Well, that’s a little progress, maybe. I don’t know if you realize this, but the Jews commonly believed that each person either had a representative angel – or that a person’s spirit/ghost would appear right before or after they had died.

As F.F. Bruce points out, “The angel is here conceived of as a man’s spiritual counterpart, capable of assuming his appearance and being mistaken for him.”

If you want to see another instance of this unusual theology at work look at Matthew 14. Jesus had ordered his disciples to get in a boat and row to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Well, it was nighttime, and they knew it was a bad idea because squalls can come up at any moment.

Sure enough, the wind picked up and the boat was being tossed about. At the peak of the squall, the disciples looked up and there was Jesus walking on the water. Only, people don’t walk on water, so listen to what happened next:

“When they saw him, they thought he was a ghost. They were terrified and started screaming.” - Matthew 14:26

According to Jewish legend, mariners often saw the ghost of someone they knew well right before they drowned. Here are the disciples in a squall, screaming like schoolgirls when they see what they believe is Jesus’ representative angel or ghost!

That’s what’s happening at Mary’s prayer meeting! The group gathered meets Rhoda’s joy with a “half-belief” by saying, “Well, it might be his angel, but he’s definitely in Herod’s prison.”

Look at verses 16-17:

“But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and

described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.”

While Peter was still knocking at the door, very much wanting to get off the street, where he is so noticeable, Rhoda and those gathered for prayer are discussing his situation. That’s humorous, isn’t it?

If we need further evidence of the group’s assumption that their prayers weren’t going to be effective, look at their response when they finally opened the door and saw none other than the subject of their prayers standing outside: “They were astonished.”

The simplified Greek word is “existemi”.

Luke uses a variation of this word some eight times in the Book of Acts. He uses it three times in his Gospel.

- In Luke 2:47, he uses existemi to describe the reaction of the teachers of the Law to the very young Jesus’ knowledge of the Torah. He writes, “Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.”
- In Luke 8:46 Luke uses existemi to describe the utter surprise at Jesus raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead. Luke records, “Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.”
- In Luke 24:22-23 Luke uses the same word to describe the astonishment of the Emmaus disciples when they heard Jesus’ tomb was empty. Luke records their statement to the Risen Christ as: “In addition, some of

our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body.

I'm pointing to these references because they show us that the group praying at Mary's house was utterly astonished that it was really Peter who was standing at the door, trying to get in to see them. Perhaps, we shouldn't be too hard on them. How many times have we been surprised when our prayers resulted in what we hoped for?

When they saw Peter the mood of the group changed completely. We can imagine the excited chatter that broke out when they saw the object of their prayers quite alive. It wasn't his angel or ghost after all. It was really Peter.

Luke says that Peter motioned with his hand to get them quiet down. He was probably concerned that the tumult was going to alert the neighbors that something was happening at Mary's house.

Peter quickly told them the story of his release. Certainly he gave them the abbreviated version. And then, he gave them this instruction: "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this."

Now this is interesting. Peter wants James, that is, the Lord's brother, to be informed first that he has been rescued. As many scholars have indicated, by this point in the Jerusalem Church, it's James who is recognized as one of the primary leaders, it not the primary leader.

I think this is worth exploring a bit. Let's look at some parallel passages that indicate this:

In Acts 15 we have what is commonly called “The Jerusalem Council.” As we will see later, it came about after Peter, Barnabas, and Saul had a great deal of success in winning Gentiles to Christ.

Some of those present at the meeting were insisting that these recent converts needed to be circumcised (here we go again) and keep the Old Testament Law.

I’m going to truncate the passage a bit to keep James’ part in focus. Here’s what we read:

James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.”

I want you to pay attention to James’ words in verse 19: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

That has a very authoritative tone, doesn’t it? “It is my judgment”.

In Acts 21, Paul and Luke return to Jerusalem after a season of missions’ work and want to give a report on their efforts. Here’s what Luke records:

“When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had

done among the Gentiles through his ministry.” – Acts 21:17-19

Again, we note the primary leadership of the Lord's brother in the Jerusalem Church. Let's look at two more references found in Galatians 2:9, 11-12

As Paul is recounting his apostleship qualifications he notes, “James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.”

“When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles.”

First, Paul notes that James (the Lord's brother) was recognized as one of the pillars of the Jerusalem Church. In the next reference, Paul is scolding Peter for an apparent hypocrisy, and notes that when “certain men came from James”, Peter left off eating with some Gentile brothers and moved to where the Jewish contingent was eating.

I think these references show that James had risen through the ranks to become either one of the primary leaders of the Jerusalem Church, if not the leader. I tend to believe it was the latter – as Peter's ministry was subject to changes and James' was not.

What a dramatic change for Jesus' half-brother, who at one point didn't even believe that Jesus was the Messiah? James had come a long way in his faith.

Next, Luke tells us that when Peter had explained how God had rescued him, “and then he left for another place.”

The apocryphal book, *The Acts of Peter*, suggest that, at this point, Peter left for Rome. For decades, Roman Catholic commentators used this statement to argue that Peter stayed there for twenty-five years as the first pope.

Luke, however, is simply indicating that Peter went into temporary hiding. Perhaps Peter didn't want to give Herod a second opportunity at arresting and executing him. Unlike his prior experience in Acts 5, the angel who released him did not say, “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.” – Acts 5:20

While we don't know exactly where Peter went after he left Mary's home in Jerusalem, we do know that a year or two later he was in Antioch and then returned for a meeting with the Council. (See: Acts 15)

Let's look at verses 18-19:

“In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while.”

The next morning after Peter's escape, chaos had ensued at the Tower of Antonia. Herod Agrippa I's prize prisoner was missing – and no one seemed to know where he was.

Now we have to remember why Herod had chosen The Tower for Peter's temporary prison. Here, he could employ maximum security to ensure Peter would face trial after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As you recall, Herod had Peter guarded by four squads of soldiers. Two were chained to him and two stood outside the cell.

But now, none of the soldiers could explain how Peter had escaped such a secure confinement. Agrippa wasted no time in having the Tower searched, but it was to no avail. His quarry had escaped. Herod then cross-examined the guards.

As various commentators have suggested, Agrippa no doubt suspected that the soldiers responsible for guarding Peter had been bribed, or that they were part of a conspiracy to save him from execution.

Under Roman law, jailors or guards were held strictly accountable for their prisoners. The Justinian code noted:

“The custody and care of imprisoned persons devolves upon the jailer, who must not think that some abject and vile dependent will be responsible, if a prisoner should, in any way escape, for We desire that he himself shall suffer the same penalty to which the prisoner who escaped is shown to have been liable. When, however, the jailer is necessarily absent from his post, We order that his assistant shall be bound to exercise the same vigilance and shall be punished with the same severity.” – Justinian Law, Title 4, “Concerning the custody of accused persons.”

You may recall what happened at Philippi when a sudden, supernatural earthquake released Paul, Silas, and the rest of prisoners from their confinement. Luke records:

“The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” – Luke 16:27-28

The Philippian jailer knew that when he explained how he was asleep at the time all his prisoners escaped, that he would be summarily executed. His planned response was to forego an examination and take his own life.

In the Acts 12 story, Herod, of course, was not bound by Justinian Law, He still chose to have the guards executed – probably because he did believe they had been bribed.

In simple, but horrific math, Peter was slated for execution, so those guarding him were executed in his place. If indeed there were four squads of four soldiers, that means sixteen men died.

For Peter, it was a miraculous escape. For the guards it was a terrible tragedy.

Okay. Let’s round out this study with the last statement in verse 19: “Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while.”

With the loss of his prize prisoner – as well as his opportunity to further secure the favor of the Jewish populace Agrippa left Jerusalem and went to Caesarea

Maritima, the capital of the Roman government in the region.

Although Agrippa made his home in Jerusalem, near the Jewish leadership, he decided to go to Maritima. Josephus notes that the distance between Caesarea Maritima and Jerusalem was 600 hundred furlongs – the equivalent of seventy-five miles.

It appears that while in Maritima, Herod made no further attempts to find Peter, or for that matter, to continue his campaign against the Church at Jerusalem.

In retrospect, he probably should have stayed at his palace in Jerusalem. According to ancient historians, while in Maritima he chose to hold a series of Gladiatorial games in Caesar's honor. It was on the second day of the games that something happened that Luke touches on in our next installment.

Through Peter's deliverance God demonstrated that, He was more powerful than Herod, his Tower, his guards, or his plans. While for some reason God allowed James the Elder to be martyred, his plans included a much longer ministry for Peter.

Next time: A Bad King Gets His Reward