

Christ in all of Scripture

Peter Released from Prison

Acts 12:1-17

Read the Passage



"Peter Released from Prison"

¹Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. ²Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. ³And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

⁵Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. ⁶And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. ⁷Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. ⁸Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." ⁹So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

¹¹And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel,

and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people."

¹²So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. ¹³And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. ¹⁵But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel."

¹⁶Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

¹⁷But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.



Gospel Preview in the Text

The Gospel writers are aware that the Greek word “graphein” means both “to write” and “to draw.” The evangelists recognize that words can be used to draw vivid (graphic) pictures that can tell a “story within a story.” By recognizing a passage as iconic, we are alerted to a foreshowing as well as a foretelling of the gospel account of the suffering (cross) and glory (resurrection) of Jesus.

JESUS' SUFFERING & GLORY	PETER'S SUFFERING & GLORY
1. Herod (Antipas) killed John with a sword (cf. Mark 6:21-28).	1. Herod (Agrippa) kills James with a sword (Acts 12:1-2).
2. During Passover, Jesus was arrested (Luke 22:7-8).	2. During Passover, Peter is arrested (Acts 12:3).
3. Jesus was naked and crucified between two thieves (Luke 23:32-33).	3. Peter was naked (cf. Acts 12:8) and chained between two soldiers (Acts 12:6).
4. Jesus was struck in the side (stigmaton) by a spear (cf. John 19:34).	4. Peter is struck in the side (stigmaton) by an angel (Acts 12:7).
5. Angels came to Jesus in the tomb and he arose in resurrection (Luke 24:4).	5. An angel comes to Peter in prison, and tells him to 'Arise!' from his sleep (Acts 12:7).
6. Jesus appeared to Mary (Magdalene) and the women, but they were not believed when they reported Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24:10-11).	6. Peter appears at Mary's (mother of John Mark) house, but Rhoda was not believed when she reported Peter's deliverance (Acts 12:12-15).
7. Jesus told the women to tell the brothers (cf. Matt 28:10).	7. Peter asks the witnesses to tell the brothers (Acts 12:17).

Prophetic Narrative of the Gospel in the Text

1-2. The Herod named in each account is a different king from the same family. But the ancient principle of *nomen est omen* gives significance to the parallel that most moderns would dismiss as random. Both accounts describe the lethal opposition of the Herodians to the kingdom of God. Luke juxtaposes the two murders of John the Baptist and James, both by the sword. These circumstances are set against the Passover Feast to set the stage for a recapitulation of the passion narrative of Jesus in the prison narrative of Peter.



3. Peter is in a dungeon awaiting death, emblematically in the realm of "Sheol." We may reasonably deduce from the angel instructing him to dress (Acts 12:8) that he was naked. He is bound by chains between two soldiers (Acts 12:6).¹ The image Luke is carefully drawing is cruciform, recalling the naked Savior pinned to a cross between two thieves.
- 4-5. The angel who comes to rescue Peter does not simply speak the command for him to "arise!" He strikes Peter in the side. The "strike" is noteworthy. Later in the chapter, the angel "strikes" Herod and he dies.² With Peter, the striking of the angel in his side recalls the image of Jesus wounded in the side by the spear of the Roman soldier (cf. John 19:34). Luke uses the image as a *stigmaton*, a wounding that specifically refers to a wounding of Jesus in his passion.³ In this context the angel commands Peter to "Arise!," using the most common verb in the New Testament for resurrection.⁴
6. After Peter passes three impassible barriers (two gate posts and the iron gate),⁵ he is set free and heads toward a meeting with "Mary," the mother of John Mark. Jesus too had a meeting after his deliverance with "Mary" Magdalene. Once again we observe the *nomen est omen* principle. Resurrection narrative is always classical comedy. Here Luke contrasts the earnest prayer by the church for Peter's release with their incredulity when God in fact releases him (Acts 12:5, 14-15). The correspondence with the passion narrative, however, is the rejection of the testimony of the woman (Rhoda) that Peter has in fact been released. Rhoda's own role is colored with comedy: her overwhelming joy at hearing Peter's voice such that she forgets to open the door for Peter, who is left in the street knocking at the door, and the incredulity at her message whereby the disciples suggest she is manic or perhaps saw an angel!
7. Peter's restoration to the disciples is like receiving him back from the dead! He brings word of his deliverance from the Lord, and like Jesus, asks that the good news of his salvation be reported to the brethren (Acts 12:17, cf. Matt 28:10).

Gospel Takeaways from the Text

1. The cross and the open tomb represent the rhythm of life itself. Its ever-recurring presence demonstrates the sovereign design of Father God to bring light out of darkness and life out of death as the display of his glory and grace! How ever great our suffering, just so much greater will

¹ The detail that Peter is bound by two chains is not surplus description. Luke similarly describes a cruciform Paul in Acts 21:33.

² Luke is contrasting Peter, naked and in prison, with Herod, sumptuously dressed and receiving the accolades of his public supplicants (Acts 12:21-23). The genre of the chapter is comedy, with Peter as the *eiron* and Herod as the *alazon*. Peter's "wounding" leads to life, while that of Herod leads to death.

³ Luke similarly describes Paul with a *stigmaton* when the poisonous viper bites the apostle's hand (Acts 28:3).

⁴ The rendering of this word by the mundane "Get up!," found in so many modern translations is especially tone deaf!

⁵ Once again we have the Petrine triplex. In this case the three barriers to liberty recall the three days of death.



be our glory. For the believer, how ever deeply we may be sealed away in a dungeon, God will send his angel to deliver us from bondage to liberty—all at his perfect time!

2. Our wounds in this world only reflect the deeper wounds of our Savior. But the pattern of our scars conform us to the image of our Savior. Whether Peter's wounded side or Paul's serpent bitten hand, when we die with Jesus, we are certain to rise with him!
3. The end of our story is not tragedy but comedy. Luke colors his Gospel's Emmaus narrative on resurrection afternoon in comic terms. Jesus' identity is disguised, and masquerade is a traditional comic device anticipating a glorious reveal. The disciples are sorrowing on the Lord's great eschatological day of victory over death and sin. They express surprise at Jesus not seeming to know all that had transpired in Jerusalem in the last three days, culminating in Jesus' death. They even ask Jesus in deep irony, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem not knowing all that has happened in Jerusalem?" Most comedic of all, Jesus replies to their perplexed question by saying, "What things?"

Similarly, Peter's rehearsal of Christ's resurrection in his deliverance from prison expresses a similar comedic genre. The hilarious irony of the disciples' inability to believe that Peter has been delivered when that is precisely what they have been fervently praying for, the laughable whimsy of Peter knocking on the door of Mary's house that refuses to open to him, the apostle who has just escaped the three gates of the prison, and the disciples' thinking Rhoda is crazy and that Peter's angel must be standing at the door all show the serendipity that is the joy of the believer who is serving the singularly sovereign Lord of life! For the Christian, all our tragedy is made comedy in the gospel!

