

Un-Believing Prayer



There is a part of World War II history that is largely unknown but was vital to the allied victory.

Early in the war, through an incredible chain of circumstances, the Allied Commanders obtained an exact replica of a German Encryption machine along with the codes to read them.

This system was extremely complicated and secure. It never crossed the minds of German Commanders that it could be compromised.

From fairly early in the war, the Allied Commanders were able to intercept and decipher enough of the messages coming out of Berlin to have a good idea of what the German Armed Forces were up to.

This led to some extremely difficult decisions. For instance, most of the time German bombers were attacking England, Winston Churchill knew in advance what the targets were. Many lives could have been saved if people had been evacuated from those areas prior to the bombing runs.

However, this would ultimately reveal to the Germans that their system had been compromised. It would lead to a change in communication methods and stopped the flow of information to the Allies. It would have prolonged the war leading to many more deaths.

There was no good option – either way lots of people would lose their lives. The choice was made to sacrifice people short term, in hopes of bringing the war to an end sooner.

James

Our story in Acts for today takes place during the brief reign of Herod Agrippa, around 43 AD – 10 years or so after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

The story begins in Acts 12:

About that time King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church. He had the apostle James (John's brother) killed with a sword. When Herod saw how much this pleased the Jewish people, he also arrested Peter. (This took place during the Passover celebration.) Then he imprisoned him, placing him under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover. But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him. (Acts 12:1-5, NLT)

Peter's Rescue

As we read on, we find an incredible rescue story that took place the night before his scheduled trial and presumed execution.

An angel appeared to Peter in the middle of the night. He had to tap him on the side to wake him up. He told him to get up, get dressed and to follow him. As Peter obeyed the angel, the chains fell off. He followed the angel – thinking he is dreaming. They went right past all the guards and then to the main gate, which opened as they came up to it. As they were walking down the street, the angel vanished. Continuing the story in Acts 12:



Peter finally came to his senses. "It's really true!" he said. "The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jewish leaders had planned to do to me!"

When he realized this, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered for prayer. He knocked at the door in the gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to open it. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the door, she ran back inside and told everyone, "Peter is standing at the door!"

"You're out of your mind!" they said. When she insisted, they decided, "It must be his angel."

Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking. When they finally opened the door and saw him, they were amazed. He motioned for them to quiet down and told them how the Lord had led him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers what happened," he said. And then he went to another place. (Acts 12:11-17, NLT)

What About the Questions?

This is a great story – one we should be telling and celebrating, but it leaves us with some important questions.

- What about the prison guards – those four squads of four? Peter's rescue meant their death? How is that an expression of God's love? Didn't He love them too?
- Why did God rescue Peter, but not James?

Why ask these questions at all? Why not just celebrate this dramatic answer to prayer and ignore the questions?

We must consider the questions because there are people who look at stories like this and grapple with the idea of fairness and justice – and because they can't find a good answer they dismiss God as a whimsical tyrant who makes snap discussions that have no rhyme or reason.

Just focusing on the good and ignoring what is difficult in Scripture causes people to dismiss Christians as people ungrounded in reality who simply believe a myth.

So, let's see what we can learn from the tough questions as well as the incredible rescue.

An Imperfect World

What about those 16 guards – the tradeoff of one life saved versus 16 lives lost.

This is really the same question we ask when a good person, with a family to support, is senselessly killed by a drunk driver.

It's the same question we ask when a small child suffers and dies from cancer, or worse yet, from abuse. Doesn't God care about children suffering?

It's the same question we ask when bad things happen to good people.

Where was God? Couldn't He have prevented it? And, why didn't He?

It's a fair question, but a tough one.

We understand from Scripture that God is the source of life and energy. Separating from God is like being a lamp trying to function apart from being plugged into a source of power. No power, no light!

It's not that God is trying to make it difficult. It wasn't an arbitrary decision to make it that way to trip people up. It's just that He is the only source of life – separating from Him means death.

We are in the midst of a war that Satan started back in Heaven when he questioned God's love and fairness and claimed he had a better way – a way of freedom from God and His "unjust" rules.

He declared himself the ruler of this earth after Adam and Eve sinned. He pointed to their failure as evidence that no one could live up to God's expectations.

The natural result of Satan's separation from God should have been his immediate death. However, if God had allowed that to happen, many of the angels – along with other created beings – would serve God out of fear rather than trust and love.

It would appear that God was vindictive and killed Satan as punishment rather than his death being the result of his own choice to no longer stay plugged in.

So, in wisdom – to ensure that sin will never need to be dealt with again – God is allowing sin to play all the way out to its natural conclusion. The universe needs to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that sin is not a good option and only leads to death and suffering.

This whole experience would be invalid if God meddled very often with the results. This leaves God having to make some difficult decisions.

The other issue is freedom of choice.

God's government is based on love – and you cannot have love without freedom of choice.

We all value it when it comes to our lives, don't we? But, we often secretly wish God would limit other people's freedom of choice – especially as it interferes with ours.

But it doesn't work that way. Either everyone has freedom of choice, or no one does – you can't have it both ways. And you cannot have freedom of choice without the freedom to experience the consequences of your choices – good or bad.

However, our choices do not only affect ourselves. If I decide to burn something in my firepit, my neighbor will experience the smoke.

We are quick to cry "unfair" when another person's free choice impacts our lives in a negative way – such as an accident caused by a drunk driver, innocent children dying because someone chose to enter their school and start shooting, or the rape and pillage so often accompanying war.

Rather than blame God for all this senseless suffering, we need to recognize it for what it is – the result of living in a sinful world caused by Satan's rebellion perpetrated by people who have generally ditched God.

Somehow, many have this picture of God up in Heaven, sitting back and viewing it all – perhaps even smirking a bit – as He lets us know that we are getting what we deserve.

No picture could be further from the truth – this is Satan's attempt to change the story, to distract us from the real picture, and to keep us from seeing the truth.

Jesus' life here on earth is the most accurate picture of who God is. On several occasions, in various ways He said:

"... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! ..." (John 14:9, NLT)

And the fact that Jesus call Him "Father" is significant. We have several fathers here in the congregation. Are any of us actually happy when our kids suffer pain by "getting what they deserve"?

No, their pain becomes our pain – and if they are made to suffer unjustly we not only feel pain, but anger.

Imagine what this demonstration of sin is costing God. He gave His son to ransom us back from Satan's grasp. He does not only feel the pain of your life and mine; He is intimately acquainted with every person living, loves them deeply, and feels their pain.

He feels the pain of every person alive. I don't know how He can manage it. I'm sure He is looking forward to the end of it way more than we are.

When Peter was rescued, 16 soldiers were trapped in the consequences of Herod's free choice and they suffered for it. God, who loved them as much as He loved Peter; suffered along with them.

The fact that God has made the difficult choice to allow sin to play all the way out, creating thousands of years of personal pain and suffering for Himself – just so sin could be exposed for what it really is – should help us understand the depth of His love for us.

He was willing to put His feelings on the back burner and embraced the pain of sin, so He could embrace you and I without sin for the remainder of eternity!

We can trust a God who loves us like this!

Peter, but not James?

So, why did God rescue Peter, but not James? I don't know.

But I do know that God views death differently than we do. He sees death in this life as temporary. Jesus and Paul both called it sleep – because it was something they expected to “wake up” from. (See **Mark 5:35-43, John 11:9-15, 1 Corinthians 15:50-57, & 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.**)

From God's perspective, it is not a tragedy for a person who loves Him to die here on this earth – it's a victory. That person is now beyond Satan's reach! His or her place with God for eternity is beyond dispute. He (or she) is no longer suffering under the attacks of the enemy.

Both Peter and James were committed to Jesus. They both reflected the attitude that the three Hebrews had articulated to King Nebuchadnezzar many years before when they expressed their trust in God's decision – whether He would save them or not (see **Daniel 3:16-18**).

Peter was relaxed enough to be sound asleep when the angel came to rescue him. You cannot do that in difficult situations unless you are at peace.

They trusted God explicitly. We don't know exactly why God let James be killed, but rescued Peter. We do know that down through the history of the church, most of the time God chose not to intervene. Peter was an exception, not the rule.

But for Peter it was only temporary, He did die a martyr – he was crucified upside down many years later. Both James and Peter died victorious. We'll see them both again!

What About Us?

What can we learn from all this that will help us live our lives right now?

It struck me that everyone was surprised when Peter showed up at Mary's home, it seems they were not expecting God to rescue him.

But, they had been praying anyway. They were still putting Peter's situation before God, asking Him to intercede in some way. And, they had been praying for a while – it was late by the time he got there.

Perhaps they were not even praying for his deliverance, but were praying for him to be bold as he stood up for Jesus during his trial, similar to what they had prayed after their first run-in with the Jewish Council (See **Acts 4:23-31**).

Maybe God honors prayer even when our belief is a bit shaky. Perhaps you and I need to stop focusing on our weaknesses – stop making it all about you and me – and just pray.

I'm sure they prayed for James when he was taken away too. Maybe because he had not been rescued, they didn't think Peter would be either.

It is evident that James and Peter had something many of us are missing – complete confidence and trust in God. Because they had given themselves completely to Jesus, they had no worries for their future.

They knew they were secure in Jesus if they died. And, they knew if they lived, He would continue to take care of them.

And how can we have this peace? Jesus said:

"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."
(**Matthew 11:28**, NLT)

And Paul wrote:

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.
(**Philippians 4:6-7**, NLT)

This peace is only found in trusting God with your life. Don't live without it anymore.

Dear Lord, please draw us to you. Please help us to trust you enough to share all of our life with you. And please fill us with your Holy Spirit to keep us close to you and to make Yourself attractive through our live! Amen.

Notes

Text you find in **this color** is a link to more information. It may take you to the Bible verse in context and/or in several different translations utilizing BibleGateway.com. In some cases, it may take you to a website where there is additional information. And, it may take you to a PDF copy of previous sermons in this series.

Previous Sermons in this Series – click on the title to access it.

1. January 6, 2018: **The End - The Beginning**
2. January 20, 2018: **Holy Fire**
3. January 27, 2018: **Holy Love**
4. February 17, 2018: **Holy Boldness**
5. February 24, 2018: **Un-Holy Deception**
6. March 31, 2018: **Holy Gift**
7. April 7, 2018: **Holy Response**
8. April 21, 2018: **Holy Rescue**
9. May 5, 2018: **Holy Martyr**
10. June 30, 2018: **Holy Appointment**
11. July 14, 2018: **Holy Encounter**
12. August 25, 2018: **Holy Gentiles**

Scripture References

Daniel 3:16-18 (NLT): *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. ¹⁸ But even if he doesn’t, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.”* (**Daniel 3:16-18**, NLT)

Matthew 11:28-30 (NLT): *Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”* (**Matthew 11:28-30**, NLT)

John 14:9-11 (NLT): *Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you? ¹⁰ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I speak are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me. ¹¹ Just believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or at least believe because of the work you have seen me do.* (**John 14:9-11**, NLT)

Acts 4:23-31 (NLT): As soon as they were freed, Peter and John returned to the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. ²⁴ When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God: “O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them – ²⁵ you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying,

‘Why were the nations so angry? Why did they waste their time with futile plans?
²⁶ The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the LORD and against his Messiah.’ (Psalm 2:1-2)

²⁷ “In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. ²⁸ But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will. ²⁹ And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

³¹ After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:23-31, NLT)

Acts 12:1-24 (NLT): About that time King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church. ² He had the apostle James (John’s brother) killed with a sword. ³ When Herod saw how much this pleased the Jewish people, he also arrested Peter. (This took place during the Passover celebration.) ⁴ Then he imprisoned him, placing him under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover. ⁵ But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him.

Peter’s Miraculous Escape from Prison

⁶ The night before Peter was to be placed on trial, he was asleep, fastened with two chains between two soldiers. Others stood guard at the prison gate. ⁷ Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter. The angel struck him on the side to awaken him and said, “Quick! Get up!” And the chains fell off his wrists. ⁸ Then the angel told him, “Get dressed and put on your sandals.” And he did. “Now put on your coat and follow me,” the angel ordered.

⁹ So Peter left the cell, following the angel. But all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn’t realize it was actually happening. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guard posts and came to the iron gate leading to the city, and this opened for them all by itself. So they passed through and started walking down the street, and then the angel suddenly left him.

¹¹ Peter finally came to his senses. “It’s really true!” he said. “The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jewish leaders had planned to do to me!”

¹² When he realized this, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered for prayer. ¹³ He knocked at the door in the gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to open it. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the door, she ran back inside and told everyone, "Peter is standing at the door!"

¹⁵ "You're out of your mind!" they said. When she insisted, they decided, "It must be his angel."

¹⁶ Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking. When they finally opened the door and saw him, they were amazed. ¹⁷ He motioned for them to quiet down and told them how the Lord had led him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers what happened," he said. And then he went to another place.

¹⁸ At dawn there was a great commotion among the soldiers about what had happened to Peter.

¹⁹ Herod Agrippa ordered a thorough search for him. When he couldn't be found, Herod interrogated the guards and sentenced them to death. Afterward Herod left Judea to stay in Caesarea for a while.

The Death of Herod Agrippa

²⁰ Now Herod was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they sent a delegation to make peace with him because their cities were dependent upon Herod's country for food. The delegates won the support of Blastus, Herod's personal assistant, ²¹ and an appointment with Herod was granted. When the day arrived, Herod put on his royal robes, sat on his throne, and made a speech to them. ²² The people gave him a great ovation, shouting, "It's the voice of a god, not of a man!"

²³ Instantly, an angel of the Lord struck Herod with a sickness, because he accepted the people's worship instead of giving the glory to God. So he was consumed with worms and died.

²⁴ Meanwhile, the word of God continued to spread, and there were many new believers.

(Acts 12:1-24, NLT)

Philippians 4:4-7 (NLT): Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice! ⁵ Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:4-7, NLT)

Philippians 4:4-7 (the Message): Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

⁶⁻⁷ Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness,

everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. (Philippians 4:4-7, the Message)

E.G. White Quotations

The Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 15, Delivered from Prison, pages 143-154: *"Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church." The government of Judea was then in the hands of Herod Agrippa, subject to Claudius, the Roman emperor. Herod also held the position of tetrarch of Galilee. He was professedly a proselyte to the Jewish faith, and apparently very zealous in carrying out the ceremonies of the Jewish law. Desirous of obtaining the favor of the Jews, hoping thus to make secure his offices and honors, he proceeded to carry out their desires by persecuting the church of Christ, spoiling the houses and goods of the believers, and imprisoning the leading members of the church. He cast James, the brother of John, into prison, and sent an executioner to kill him with the sword, as another Herod had caused the prophet John to be beheaded. Seeing that the Jews were well pleased with these efforts, he imprisoned Peter also. (Page 144)*

It was during the Passover that these cruelties were practiced. While the Jews were celebrating their deliverance from Egypt and pretending great zeal for the law of God, they were at the same time transgressing every principle of that law by persecuting and murdering the believers in Christ.

The death of James caused great grief and consternation among the believers. When Peter also was imprisoned, the entire church engaged in fasting and prayer.

Herod's act in putting James to death was applauded by the Jews, though some complained of the private manner in which it was accomplished, maintaining that a public execution would have more thoroughly intimidated the believers and those sympathizing with them. Herod therefore held Peter in custody, meaning still further to gratify the Jews by the public spectacle of his death. But it was suggested that it would not be safe to bring the veteran apostle out for execution before all the people then assembled in Jerusalem. It was feared that the sight of him being led out to die might excite the pity of the multitude.

The priests and elders also feared lest Peter might make one of those powerful appeals which had frequently aroused the people to study the life and character of Jesus – appeals which they, with all their arguments, had been unable to controvert. Peter's zeal in advocating the cause of Christ had led many to take their stand for the gospel, and the rulers feared that should he be given an opportunity to defend his faith in the presence of the multitude who had come to (Page 145) the city to worship, his release would be demanded at the hands of the king.

While, upon various pretexts, the execution of Peter was being delayed until after the Passover, the members of the church had time for deep searching of heart and earnest prayer. They prayed without ceasing for Peter, for they felt that he could not be spared from the cause. They realized that they had reached a place where, without the special help of God, the church of Christ would be destroyed.

Meanwhile worshipers from every nation sought the temple which had been dedicated to the worship of God. Glittering with gold and precious stones, it was a vision of beauty and grandeur. But Jehovah was no longer to be found in that palace of loveliness. Israel as a nation had divorced herself from God. When Christ, near the close of His earthly ministry, looked for the last time upon the interior of the temple, He said, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." Matthew 23:38. Hitherto He had called the temple His Father's house; but as the Son of God passed our from those walls, God's presence was withdrawn forever from the temple built to His glory.

The day of Peter's execution was at last appointed, but still the prayers of the believers ascended to heaven; and while all their energies and sympathies were called out in fervent appeals for help, angels of God were watching over the imprisoned apostle.

Remembering the former escape of the apostles from prison, Herod on this occasion had taken double precautions. (Page 146) To prevent all possibility of release, Peter had been put under the charge of sixteen soldiers, who, in different watches, guarded him day and night. In his cell he was placed between two soldiers and was bound by two chains, each chain being fastened to the wrist of one of the soldiers. He was unable to move without their knowledge. With the prison doors securely fastened, and a strong guard before them, all chance of rescue or escape through human means was cut off. But man's extremity is God's opportunity.

Peter was confined in a rock-hewn cell, the doors of which were strongly bolted and barred; and the soldiers on guard were made answerable for the safekeeping of the prisoner. But the bolts and bars and the Roman guard, which effectually cut off all possibility of human aid, were but to make more complete the triumph of God in the deliverance of Peter. Herod was lifting his hand against Omnipotence, and he was to be utterly defeated. By the putting forth of His might, God was about to save the precious life that the Jews were plotting to destroy.

It is the last night before the proposed execution. A mighty angel is sent from heaven to rescue Peter. The strong gates that shut in the saint of God open without the aid of human hands. The angel of the Most High passes through, and the gates close noiselessly behind him. He enters the cell, and there lies Peter, sleeping the peaceful sleep of perfect trust.

The light that surrounds the angel fills the cell, but does not rouse the apostle. Not until he feels the touch of the angel's hand and hears a voice saying, "Arise up quickly," (Page 147) does he awaken sufficiently to see his cell illuminated by the light of heaven, and an angel of great glory standing before him. Mechanically he obeys the word spoken to him, and as in rising he lifts his hands he is dimly conscious that the chains have fallen from his wrists.

Again the voice of the heavenly messenger bids him, "Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals," and again Peter mechanically obeys, keeping his wondering gaze riveted upon his visitor and believing himself to be dreaming or in a vision. Once more the angel commands, "Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me." He moves toward the door, followed by the usually talkative Peter, now dumb from amazement. They step over the guard and reach the heavily bolted door, which of its own accord swings open and closes again immediately, while the guards within and without are motionless at their post.

The second door, also guarded within and without, is reached. It opens as did the first, with no creaking of hinges or rattling of iron bolts. They pass through, and it closes again as noiselessly. In the same way they pass through the third gateway and find themselves in the open street. No word is spoken; there is no sound of footsteps. The angel glides on in front, encircled by a light of dazzling brightness, and Peter, bewildered, and still believing himself to be in a dream, follows his deliverer. Thus they pass on through one street, and then, the mission of the angel being accomplished, he suddenly disappears.

The heavenly light faded away, and Peter felt himself to be in profound darkness; but as his eyes became accustomed (Page 148) to the darkness, it gradually seemed to lessen, and he found himself alone in the silent street, with the cool night air blowing upon his brow. He now realized that he was free, in a familiar part of the city; he recognized the place as one that he had often frequented and had expected to pass on the morrow for the last time.

He tried to recall the events of the past few moments. He remembered falling asleep, bound between two soldiers, with his sandals and outer garments removed. He examined his person and found himself fully dressed and girded. His wrists, swollen from wearing the cruel irons, were free from the manacles. He realized that his freedom was no delusion, no dream or vision, but a blessed reality. On the morrow he was to have been led forth to die; but, lo, an angel had delivered him from prison and from death. "And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent His angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews."

The apostle made his way at once to the house where his brethren were assembled and where they were at that moment engaged in earnest prayer for him. "As Peter knocked

at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate. And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.

"But Peter continued knocking: and when they had (Page 149) opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished. But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison." And Peter "departed, and went into another place." Joy and praise filled the hearts of the believers, because God had heard and answered their prayers and had delivered Peter from the hands of Herod.

In the morning a large concourse of people gathered to witness the execution of the apostle. Herod sent officers to the prison for Peter, who was to be brought with a great display of arms and guards in order not only to ensure against his escape, but to intimidate all sympathizers and to show the power of the king.

When the keepers before the door found that Peter had escaped, they were seized with terror. It had been expressly stated that their lives would be required for the life of their charge, and because of this they had been especially vigilant. When the officers came for Peter, the soldiers were still at the door of the prison, the bolts and bars were still fast, the chains were still secured to the wrists of the two soldiers; but the prisoner was gone.

When the report of Peter's escape was brought to Herod, he was exasperated and enraged. Charging the prison guard with unfaithfulness, he ordered them to be put to death. Herod knew that no human power had rescued Peter, but he was determined not to acknowledge that a divine power had frustrated his design, and he set himself in bold defiance against God.

Not long after Peter's deliverance from prison, Herod (Page 150) went to Caesarea. While there he made a great festival designed to excite the admiration and gain the applause of the people. This festival was attended by pleasure lovers from all quarters, and there was much feasting and wine drinking. With great pomp and ceremony Herod appeared before the people and addressed them in an eloquent oration. Clad in a robe sparkling with silver and gold, which caught the rays of the sun in its glittering folds and dazzled the eyes of the beholders, he was a gorgeous figure. The majesty of his appearance and the force of his well-chosen language swayed the assembly with a mighty power. Their senses already perverted by feasting and wine drinking, they were dazzled by Herod's decorations and charmed by his deportment and oratory; and wild with enthusiasm they showered adulation upon him, declaring that no mortal could present such an appearance or command such startling eloquence. They further declared that while they had ever respected him as a ruler, henceforth they should worship him as a god.

Some of those whose voices were now heard glorifying a vile sinner had but a few years before raised the frenzied cry, Away with Jesus! Crucify Him, crucify Him! The Jews had refused to receive Christ, whose garments, coarse and often travel-stained, covered a heart of divine love. Their eyes could not discern, under the humble exterior, the Lord of life and glory, even though Christ's power was revealed before them in works that no mere man could do. But they were ready to worship as a god the haughty king whose splendid garments of silver and gold covered a corrupt, cruel heart. (Page 151)

Herod knew that he deserved none of the praise and homage offered him, yet he accepted the idolatry of the people as his due. His heart bounded with triumph, and a glow of gratified pride overspread his countenance as he heard the shout ascend, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man."

But suddenly a terrible change came over him. His face became pallid as death and distorted with agony. Great drops of sweat started from his pores. He stood for a moment as if transfixed with pain and terror; then turning his blanched and livid face to his horror-stricken friends, he cried in hollow, despairing tones, He whom you have exalted as a god is stricken with death.

Suffering the most excruciating anguish, he was borne from the scene of revelry and display. A moment before he had been the proud recipient of the praise and worship of that vast throng; now he realized that he was in the hands of a Ruler mightier than himself. Remorse seized him; he remembered his relentless persecution of the followers of Christ; he remembered his cruel command to slay the innocent James, and his design to put to death the apostle Peter; he remembered how in his mortification and disappointed rage he had wreaked an unreasoning vengeance upon the prison guards. He felt that God was now dealing with him, the relentless persecutor. He found no relief from pain of body or anguish of mind, and he expected none.

Herod was acquainted with the law of God, which says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3); and he knew that in accepting the worship of the people (Page 152) he had filled up the measure of his iniquity and brought upon himself the just wrath of Jehovah.

The same angel who had come from the royal courts to rescue Peter, had been the messenger of wrath and judgment to Herod. The angel smote Peter to arouse him from slumber; it was with a different stroke that he smote the wicked king, laying low his pride and bringing upon him the punishment of the Almighty. Herod died in great agony of mind and body, under the retributive judgment of God.

This demonstration of divine justice had a powerful influence upon the people. The tidings that the apostle of Christ had been miraculously delivered from prison and death,

while his persecutor had been stricken down by the curse of God, were borne to all lands and became the means of leading many to a belief in Christ.

The experience of Philip, directed by an angel from heaven to go to the place where he met one seeking for truth; of Cornelius, visited by an angel with a message from God; of Peter, in prison and condemned to death, led by an angel forth to safety – all show the closeness of the connection between heaven and earth.

To the worker for God the record of these angel visits should bring strength and courage. Today, as verily as in the days of the apostles, heavenly messengers are passing through the length and breadth of the land, seeking to comfort the sorrowing, to protect the impenitent, to win the hearts of men to Christ. We cannot see them personally; (Page 153) nevertheless they are with us, guiding, directing, protecting.

Heaven is brought near to earth by that mystic ladder, the base of which is firmly planted on the earth, while the topmost round reaches the throne of the Infinite. Angels are constantly ascending and descending this ladder of shining brightness, bearing the prayers of the needy and distressed to the Father above, and bringing blessing and hope, courage and help, to the children of men. These angels of light create a heavenly atmosphere about the soul, lifting us toward the unseen and the eternal. We cannot behold their forms with our natural sight; only by spiritual vision can we discern heavenly things. The spiritual ear alone can hear the harmony of heavenly voices.

"The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them." Psalm 34:7. God commissions His angels to save His chosen ones from calamity, to guard them from "the pestilence that walketh in darkness" and "the destruction that wasteth at noonday." Psalm 91:6. Again and again have angels talked with men as a man speaketh with a friend, and led them to places of security. Again and again have the encouraging words of angels renewed the drooping spirits of the faithful and, carrying their minds above the things of earth, caused them to behold by faith the white robes, the crowns, the palm branches of victory, which overcomers will receive when they surround the great white throne.

It is the work of the angels to come close to the tried, the suffering, the tempted. They labor untiringly in behalf (Page 154) of those for whom Christ died. When sinners are led to give themselves to the Saviour, angels bear the tidings heavenward, and there is great rejoicing among the heavenly host. "Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." Luke 15:7. A report is borne to heaven of every successful effort on our part to dispel the darkness and to spread abroad the knowledge of Christ. As the deed is recounted before the Father, joy thrills through all the heavenly host.

The principalities and powers of heaven are watching the warfare which, under apparently discouraging circumstances, God's servants are carrying on. New conquests are being achieved, new honors won, as the Christians, rallying round the banner of their Redeemer, go forth to fight the good fight of faith. All the heavenly angels are at the service of the humble, believing people of God; and as the Lord's army of workers here below sing their songs of praise, the choir above join with them in ascribing praise to God and to His Son.

We need to understand better than we do the mission of the angels. It would be well to remember that every true child of God has the co-operation of heavenly beings. Invisible armies of light and power attend the meek and lowly ones who believe and claim the promises of God. Cherubim and seraphim, and angels that excel in strength, stand at God's right hand, "all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation." Hebrews 1:14. (The Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 15, Delivered from Prison, pages 143-154)