

Sunday, Nov. 9, 2025 | Martyrs

Week 13 | Acts 12:1-25 | "Prison Break"

**READ:** Acts 12:1-25 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. <sup>2</sup> He killed James the brother of John with the sword, <sup>3</sup> and when he saw that it **pleased the Jews**, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but **earnest prayer** for him was made to God by the church.

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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**. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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."

<sup>12</sup> 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**. <sup>13</sup> And when he **knocked** at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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!" <sup>16</sup> But Peter **continued knocking**, and when they opened, they saw him and were **amazed**. <sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

<sup>20</sup> Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. <sup>21</sup> On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. <sup>22</sup> And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!"

<sup>23</sup> Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

<sup>24</sup> But the word of God increased and multiplied. <sup>25</sup> And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

There are numerous well-known stories of individuals being rescued or escaping from prison. In the realm of literature, there's Edmond Dantès' flight from Château d'If in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. *A Tale of Two Cities* tells the story of how Sydney Carton takes the place of Charles Darnay, dying in his place. My personal favorite is *The Shawshank Redemption*, where Andy Dufresne frees himself by tunneling through his cell wall.

But such fictional depictions have many historical parallels. In 1568, Mary, Queen of Scots, escaped her island prison disguised as a servant girl. After being exiled for ten months on the island of Elba, Napoleon Bonaparte returned to France and regained power in March of 1815, holding on to it for little over 100 days. Frank Morris and brothers, John and Clarence Anglin, escaped Alcatraz in 1962, allegedly using dummy heads and a raft made of raincoats.

Coincidentally, prisons feature prominently throughout the Scriptures. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, imprisoned by his boss, but then became the Prime Minister of Egypt (cf. Gen. 39-41). The Prophet Daniel survived a night in a den of hungry lions, leading to a pagan king glorifying God (cf. Dan. 6). The Book of Acts alone has *three* prison break stories. The first is in Acts 5, where the apostles were freed by an angel who told them, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." The third is in Acts 16, where Paul and Silas lead the Philippian jailer to the Lord, resulting in their own release. Today's passage is

the second and, as we'll see, no matter how dark a cell may be or how sturdy its bars, no prison can dim the light of the Lord or inhibit his plans.

**Vs. 1-3** – The “Herod” Luke refers to here is Herod Agrippa (37-44). The notorious Caligula put him in power. He amassed the same territory that his grandfather, Herod the Great, ruled.

Luke says, “The king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church,” killing “James the brother of John with the sword.” This is the first of the apostles to be martyred.

This persecution was motivated by a desire to please “the Jews.” Pleasing the Jews gave Herod’s throne stability in the region, which, in turn, pleased Rome. So, to curry even more favor with his Jewish constituents, Herod “proceeded to arrest Peter also.”

Luke says, “This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.” This was a feast held in conjunction with Passover; it lasted a week and took place during the first month of the Jewish calendar, Nissan (April). This was the same time that Jesus was crucified.

Leaven was a symbol of sin, so by eating unleavened bread, Jews were reminding themselves of the infectious nature of wickedness. It also reminded them of their hasty exit from Egypt during the Exodus, as the Jews didn't have enough time for their bread to rise before leaving.

**Vs. 4** – Herod put Peter “in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.” A “squad” consisted of four soldiers.<sup>1</sup> Since there were four watches in the night, the “four squads” assigned to guard Peter meant he was under strict, round-the-clock surveillance.<sup>2</sup> Peter is being heavily guarded. So much so, he’ll even be shackled “between two soldiers” (vs. 6).

Removing key leaders from a movement can destabilize it, ultimately leading to its demise—e.g., Che Guevara. Doubtless, this was Herod's aim. He hoped that killing the apostles would cripple Christianity.

**Vs. 5** – Luke says, “So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” Interestingly, “earnest” translates the Greek word *ektenōs*, and the only other time Luke uses this term is when he describes Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane. There, Luke says the Lord prayed so earnestly that “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Lu. 22:44).

**So, what’s the takeaway?**

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<sup>1</sup> Louw-Nida (1996), 549.

<sup>2</sup> DBAG (2000), 1001.

**Perilous** times call for times of **prayer**.

The most powerful tool at a Christian's disposal is **prayer**. The writer of Hebrews says, "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body" (Heb. 13:3).

**Vs. 6-7** – Luke says, the "very night" before Herod was about to execute Peter, something miraculous happened. He says, "Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison," when, suddenly, an angel appears. And though "a light shone in the cell," Peter didn't wake up. The angel had to strike Peter on the side, telling him to "Get up quickly." The Greek word translated as "struck" is *patassō*, and its usage elsewhere implies this was a rather forceful hit (cf. Lu. 22:50; Ac. 7:24; 12:23).

**So, what's the takeaway?**

Those who rest **in the Lord** can rest **anywhere**, even in a prison cell.

Isaiah 26:3, "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." David said, "I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me" (Psa. 3:5). And, again, in Psalm 4:8, he said, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety" (cf. Psa. 127:2; Pro. 3:21-26).

**Vs. 8-9** – From that point, things move at a rapid pace. Peter's "chains fell off his hands," and the angel tells him to get dressed and follow him out of the prison. But then comes an amazing revelation. Luke says, "He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision." Peter thought he was dreaming!

**Vs. 10** – Luke says they walked right by "the first and the second guard" and, when they came to the main gate of the prison, "It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street." Luke calls this an "iron gate," emphasizing the sturdiness of the door.

What of the guards? We're not told. Given the fact that Peter was asleep, perhaps they were too. But given the four squads, it is unlikely that all the men would've been sleeping.

Once outside the prison's walls, the angel left Peter. And it was only then that "Peter came to himself." Peter even spoke to himself, saying, "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."

**So, what's the takeaway?**

Whether they live a life of faith or die trying, both **profit** the Christian as much as **please** the Lord.

Paul said, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (Phil. 1:21-24). So, though James dies and Peter lives, both men glorified the Lord.

**Vs. 12-14** – Peter went to a familiar hangout for Christians. Given that Mary's home was could accommodate a church gathering, it implies that it was a large estate. If so, this means Mary and her son John Mark were quite wealthy. **The fact that they still owned property meant that, while the Jerusalem church was generous (cf. Ac. 4), they weren't communists.** Property and money were given as needed and willingly, without compulsion. Unlike Barnabas, not everyone felt compelled to liquidate their assets, and they were fully justified in doing so.

When Peter arrived, he found that his Christian brothers and sisters were “gathered together and were praying.” Peter knocked at the door. A servant girl named Rhoda came to the door; her name means “little Rose.”<sup>3</sup> She recognized Peter’s voice. But rather than let Peter in, she left him “standing at the gate.” **Luke says she did this because her “joy” overwhelmed her mental faculties.** We shouldn’t ridicule this girl. Ironically, her mistake is a testament to her concern for Peter.

**Vs. 15-16** – Rhoda told the other believers, but, ironically, they didn't believe her. **Something similar happened when the women returned from the empty tomb (cf. Lu. 24:10-11).** Despite her insistence, they said to her things like, “You are out of your mind,” and, “It is his angel,” all the while, “Peter continued knocking.” **It is hard not to see some humor in this moment.** The very answer to their prayers was standing right outside the door, but no one would stop arguing long enough to see if what Rhoda said was true. Eventually, someone saw that the only way to resolve this was to check for themselves, and “when they opened [the gate], they saw him and were amazed.”

**Vs. 17** – It goes without saying that there was quite the commotion when everyone saw Peter. Luke says, “But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, [Peter] described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Tell these things to James and to the

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<sup>3</sup> Bock, Darrell L., *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 428.

brothers.” Considering the Apostle James had been martyred, this is most likely James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, who was the head of the church in Jerusalem.

After he filled everyone in, Luke says, “Then he departed and went to another place.” Given that Herod would likely be looking for him, it would’ve been unwise for him to stay. He could’ve gone to any number of locations, from Rome to Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12; 9:5) to Antioch (cf. Gal. 2:14), or, given that he would be in Jerusalem in Acts 15, he might’ve kept a low profile in one of the neighboring regions.

Given Rhoda's surprise, the others' disbelief, and their eventual amazement, it is evident that these dear Christians did not believe Peter would survive. If they had, they wouldn’t have reacted this way. So, if they weren’t praying for Peter’s survival, what were they praying for? Perhaps that Peter wouldn’t suffer, or, as before, they prayed for boldness (cf. Ac. 4:29). In the wake of both James’ and Peter’s martyrdom, they’d need courage to carry on the cause of Christ. Doubtless, they prayed, as the Lord himself instructed (cf. Matt. 6:10) and exhibited (cf. Matt. 26:39, 42, 44), that God’s will would be done. Always, when we pray, “Your will be done,” we aren’t resigning ourselves to something less than what we desire. The will of God is no conciliation prize; it is the best thing we could ever hope for.

### So, what’s the takeaway?

Prayer yields most when it yields to God.

Robert Law wrote, “Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man’s will done in heaven, but for getting God’s will done on earth.”<sup>4</sup> When our prayers are subject to the plans of God, we should not be surprised when the Lord exceeds our expectations. After speaking on the topic of prayer, Paul says in Eph. 3:20-21, “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

**Vs. 18-19** – How does Herod react? He put the sentries to death and then returned to Caesarea. To avoid being killed themselves, jailers would kill prisoners to prevent their escape (cf. Ac. 27:42), or, if a prisoner did escape, they’d kill themselves (cf. Ac. 16:27) to avoid being tortured for dereliction of duty.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quote found in Wiersbe, Warren W., *Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol 1 (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 2001) 26.

<sup>5</sup> Bock (2007), 430.

**Vs. 20-23** – Luke then relays Herod’s demise. As with Peter’s escape from prison, an angel is involved. But here we see Luke’s affinity for historical details. He recounts a dispute between the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. He even mentions Blastus, Herod’s “chamberlain,” aka the king’s chief of staff, who was involved in trying to smooth things over. **Luke is a top-notch historian.**

The reason for the conflict between Tyre and Sidon is unknown. What is known is that it angered Herod, and since the king controlled the food in the region, it was in the best interests of both cities to resolve this conflict by any means necessary.

Luke says, shortly after this, “On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them.” This commemorated the new arrangement.<sup>6</sup> After Herod got done speaking, the people began “shouting, ‘The voice of a god, and not of a man.’” Given that Herod had recently been furious with them, the people of Tyre and Sidon were **eager to placate the king**. But spurred on by the praise, Herod became proud and, because of that, “an angel of the Lord” struck him down.

Notice, Herod wasn’t killed because he persecuted Christians, murdered the Apostle James, or imprisoned Peter. No. **Herod died because he accepted praise that was owed to God.** Luke says, “because he did not give God the glory.” Violating God’s honor is a **serious** offense. Herod “was eaten by worms and breathed his last” because he did not magnify the Lord.

**So, what’s the takeaway?**

**Glory is for God alone.**

At the height of Beatlemania, John Lennon famously said, “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I will be proved right. **We’re more popular than Jesus now**. I don’t know which will go first, rock ‘n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It’s them twisting it that ruins it for me.”<sup>7</sup> Eventually, these words reached the United States, leading to a boycott. Seeing the uproar, Lennon gave a half-hearted apology, saying, “I never meant it to be a lousy anti-religious thing. I apologize if that will make you happy. I still don’t know quite what I’ve done. I’ve tried to tell you what I did do, but if you want me to apologize, if that will make you happy, then—okay, I’m sorry.” And though this

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<sup>6</sup> Bock (2007), 431.

<sup>7</sup> Cleave, Maureen, “How Does A Beatle Live?” Mar. 4, 1966, *London Evening Standard*, <http://www.beatlesinterviews.org/db1966.0304-beatles-john-lennon-were-more-popular-than-jesus-now-maureen-cleave.html>, [accessed Nov. 7, 2025].

diffused the situation, keeping the Beatles' tour on track, they never again toured the US.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Johann Sebastian Bach, the famed composer of Toccata and Fugue in D Minor (aka the vampire theme), was quite different than John Lennon when it came to his opinion of Christ. Bach knew all too well the importance of giving God glory. Before he began writing a piece of music, he would write the letters “JJ” (*Jesus juva* lat. for “Jesus help”) at the top of his first page, and, upon completion, he’d write “SDG” (*solī Deo gloria* lat. for “alone God’s glory”) at the bottom of his last page. For Bach, music was a means of glorifying the Lord.

Paul said, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). And, in Psa. 34:1-3, David said, “I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!” Any time we exalt anyone or anything above God, we're diminishing God. He alone is worthy. **Be warned. It is a dangerous thing to take credit.**

**Vs. 24-25** – Though Herod’s life ended abruptly, the kingdom of God continued to expand. Luke says, “But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.”

**So, what’s the takeaway?**

**Tyrannical regimes, be they of men or devils, *all* fall victim to God’s eternal kingdom.**

Isaiah 40:21-24 says, “Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are

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<sup>8</sup> Matthias, Meg, “Did the Beatles Really Say They Were More Popular than Jesus?” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Jun. 13 13, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/story/did-the-beatles-really-say-they-were-more-popular-than-jesus>, [accessed Nov. 7, 2025], “The realization that even a beloved band could be met with controversy and violence, combined with the band’s fatigue after three years of Beatlemania, signaled a turning point. With the exception of a few live performances, the Beatles were a studio unit only from then on.”

they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.”

The Lord's rule is absolute. The longest-reigning monarch in history was Louis XIV of France, who ascended the throne at the age of four and reigned for 72 years and 110 days, from May 14, 1643, to Sept. 1, 1715. He was known as "The Sun King." Yet, even he is nothing compared to the Eternal God who has reigned since before the dawn of time.

*soli Deo gloria*

## **Video Description:**

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Coincidentally, prisons feature prominently throughout the Scriptures. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, imprisoned by his boss, but then became the Prime Minister of Egypt (cf. Gen. 39-41). The Prophet Daniel survived a night in a den of hungry lions, leading to a pagan king glorifying God (cf. Dan. 6). The Book of Acts alone has *three* prison break stories. The first is in Acts 5, where the apostles were freed by an angel who told them, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” The third is in Acts 16, where Paul and Silas lead the Philippian jailer to the Lord, resulting in their own release. Today’s passage is the second and, as we’ll see, no matter how dark a cell may be or how sturdy its bars, no prison can dim the light of the Lord or inhibit his plans.

## **Sermon Manuscript:**

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