

Acts 12:7-12: Light Shines In The Darkness!

Last time in our series 'Peter's Walk with Jesus' we looked at Acts 12:1-6 in a sermon I entitled 'Peace, Be Still'. We saw how in v2 Herod Agrippa, (the grandson of Herod the Great), had John's brother James "put to death with the sword"; (V3) "when he saw this pleased the Jews, he preceded to seize Peter also." His plan was to have Peter publicly tried and then to also have him publicly executed. Politically murdered! This Herod was as most modern day politicians: he was a man pleaser and not a God pleaser. And for whatever reason, the allegiance of the Jews meant a lot to him. I made the point that so very little is made of James' death, even though he was significant in Jesus' ministry, being one of the three men who were closest to the Lord. Yet I explained that James' death was indeed significant. Not because of what was recorded, but because of the fact that he lived and died for Jesus.

Psalm 116:15 makes it clear that our lives and deaths are "precious" to God. We are all different and we have different roles to play in Christ's Kingdom and they are all significant and important, just different!

I also explained that the attack upon Jesus' Church at this point becomes two pronged. Prior to this the attack was chiefly from the Jews (the recognised Church of the day), but from this point on it becomes both church and state hand in hand, two allies against one enemy: Christ and His Church! Satan leaves no stone unturned in his hunt for the souls of the Saints. (see Job 1-2 and 1 Peter 5:8)

Then finally the irony: that though this Herod sought to bring terror into Peter's life and have him put to death, the night before his trial and execution, with 16 soldiers on guard and even bound by chains between the two of them, where do we find Peter? Well, as it was with Jesus when the storm raged and the Apostles believing that the boat was about to sink, he was sound asleep!

That is where we pick up the account this morning, Acts 12:7-11 'Light Shines In The Darkness!' V7 "Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell." Brothers and Sisters, this passage really strikes a chord within me. When I think of the situation, (as I have already explained, bound by chains, the darkness of a dungeon prison cell and his certain death which the coming of the dawn will bring), when I look back I can't help but see the parallels within my own life before the Lord took hold of me! Unbeknownst to me, I was on the road to nowhere fast. And certain death and an eternity of hell lay before me. I was bound by the chains of recreation and leisure, and those wonderful freedoms which our affluent, opulent, modern western society offers. I was beholding to no one or no thing. I was living the dream that a single, surfing, dole bludger longs for. But again, unbeknownst to me, I didn't realise the way that those things had ensnared me and the way that those invisible chains were holding me fast!

That empty, meaningless life of supposed freedoms, which brought a 19 year old friend of mine to the point of putting a shotgun to himself and blowing himself away. I didn't know it at the time, but the scripture rings true, that "man is but a mist which appears and is gone."

Yes, that dungeon prison is such a clear picture of the way that sin holds us captive. No hope. Our destiny is certain. Death awaits us unless someone intervenes on our behalf! But brothers and sisters, there is one eternal difference between Peter here, and ourselves when we are apart from Jesus. And it is that Peter sleeps in peace and assurance, because he knows what his future holds! He may well die tomorrow, but he knows that that is not the end, because Jesus Reigns now. The

Lord has defeated death. This life is only fleeting and eternity awaits! Whereas apart from Jesus, the best that we can hope for is the grave. People are encouraged, (and indeed it has even been legislated now), to end our own lives. We are encouraged to die with dignity. It all sounds so civilized and humane, doesn't it? And yet the terrifying reality is that God, judgement and hell awaits!

But Friends, as with Peter's call here to "Quick get up", God sends his angels, the angels of His gospel, to bring light into our lives of darkness through Jesus to set us free! V7 "suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell." Matthew Henry explains that it was the Glory of the Lord. But did you notice? The light did not shine *into the cell* but "*in the cell.*" The light of Jesus' gospel doesn't shine from without like a torch, no. It begins to burn from within through the stirring of God's Word and the pouring into our hearts of His Spirit. Before this we have been sleeping in our ignorance, and self-sufficiency. Until God's Angel, (His gospel Messenger), assaults us with the power of the gospel, and as with Peter here, He wakes us up with the bright light of that Word! Yes he "struck Peter on the side and woke him up. Quick, get up he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists."

Brethren, if you have never read the Christian classic 'The Pilgrims Progress' by John Bunyan, I strongly encourage you to do so. The main character is called Christian and he carries a great load, this great weight upon his back called his burden. He carries this thing step after tortured step until finally he is brought to a place, and also brought to his knees in despair. Finally, he looks up and he sees the Cross, whereupon his great burden falls from his back and rolls away, never to be seen again. Beloved, This is an illustration of what the gospel of the Lord Jesus does. The chains of sin from our wrists and the burden of life's trials apart from Jesus, roll away at the Cross. And He raises us up to our feet as His Light penetrates the deepest recesses of our very soul!

Friends, it is truly miraculous. Far more so than this miracle here before us, because it is for this miracle (the Salvation of the souls of His People), did Jesus die!

"Quick, get up" he said, and the chains fell from Peter's wrists." Brothers and Sisters, is there something that is binding you? As I've asked before: Is there something which is holding you captive? If there is, come back to the Cross of Jesus. It is there and there alone can your "chains be loosened" and your burden rolled away. That is where you can truly "get up" on your feet. And also where you can truly begin to live for Jesus!

Acts 12:8-9: "Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me", the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening, he thought he was seeing a vision." It is that hymn which we sing isn't it? "My chains fell off; my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed Thee". Yes, it is the miraculous deliverance of Jesus light shining in the darkness of our lives!

Peter doesn't even know if all of this is really happening. He thinks he's seeing a vision or having some kind of God-sent dream. And as we have been seeing in this series, notice again how God goes before us and paves the way. V 10: "they passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street suddenly the angel left him." Brothers and sisters, I want you to see that having been awoken from his sleep by the Lord's Messenger, Peter did indeed "get up" and follow him. Here's the thing: when the light of Jesus' gospel comes into our lives and wakes us from our deathly sleep, through His servant messengers (by and through whatever means), the only thing which is going to do us any good is to spiritually "get up" on our feet and follow them to Jesus! Having only

heard of Jesus is not going to do us any good. Only knowing about Him and what He did, is also not to going to do us any good. Hearing His message and coming close to the gate will do us no good. And also hearing His Truth and even coming to Him for a time, however long that period of time may be, but turning our back, will again, do us no good! If Peter had stayed where he was, after being woken up by God's angel then he would surely have been put to death the following day. Yes Beloved, the only thing that does us any good eternally is, if we hear His Word, "get up" on our feet and follow His servants to Jesus!

Our unbelieving family and friends cannot be saved by our faith in Jesus Christ. No, our marriage partners, our children our grandchildren our friends, cannot be saved by our relationship and our trusting in Jesus. They must "get up" on their own two feet as it were, having heard the Truth, followed that light, and come to Him. Otherwise like Peter in this cell, if he didn't heed the Messenger of God by "getting up" on his feet and following that angel out of that place he would have remained in prison. So too, anyone who does not come to Jesus will remain in chains and in the darkness of their sin. And with the coming of a new day, (that day of the judgement of the Lord), their guilt will be made known, and then the sentence of Jesus pronounced.

V 11 "then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." Again brothers and Sisters, I keep seeing in this passage of scripture so much of my own life experience. This "coming to himself" by Peter really strikes yet another chord in me. For him it was the realisation that the whole experience had not been a dream; that Jesus had indeed intervened to deliver him even miraculously so. But for me, the parallels that I see in my life are firstly: how God brought me to Himself, and secondly: how he continues to bring me to myself! Beloved, there is much of my past before I was saved of which I am not proud. Indeed, there is so much in my past, even in my life as a Christian, of which I am also not very proud. But that man who did not know Jesus does not exist today. I'm not that man anymore. That life is foreign to me. And yet at the same time, frighteningly very familiar. So much so, that were it not for Jesus` hold on my soul, I could so easily slip back into those old ways like a hand into a worn out old glove!

There is a famous line in one of those godfather movies by Al Pacino and it goes like this: 'Whenever I think I'm out they pull me back in!' That is what sin can do to us. When we feel we have divested ourselves of whatever particular sin it may be at the time which we have been struggling with, Satan is right there to wave it under our nose at just the right moment of weakness. And then oftentimes, all of our resolve to resist just seems to fade away! You see, in Peter`s "coming to himself", I can see it as God in His Mercy constantly dragging us back to Himself. Just like the prodigal son, we wander away time and time and time again.

In Luke 15:17 we read: "When he came to his senses." For Peter, it was coming to understand it was all real; but for the prodigal son, it was that "coming to his senses", to acknowledge that he had wandered away and turned his back on his father. And this is what I can see of myself here. And perhaps you might also recognise in yourself. You see, we might not do it physically as did the prodigal son, and yet in our heart spiritually, we put some distance between ourselves and our Lord. God`s Word, prayer, fellowship and daily devotions are no longer our close companions. They are merely long distant or long lost friends. Oh, from the outside looking in, all seems well. But the reality is that each step seems to be getting heavier. Perhaps difficulties in some important relationships have arisen. Even your husband or wife seem a long way off. You feel restless and discontented with so much that is going on in your life. Something is off but you can't quite put your finger on it. But then, like Peter being brought out of this state of amazement and the prodigal son with his nose in the pigs trough, God mercifully brings us to ourselves. And then back to himself! Yes

he bursts into our lives with the blessed light of His Glorious Gospel as did that angel in Peter's dark cell, and then time and time and time again in His Great Mercy, He brings us to ourselves and then back to himself. Because God's intention is always for the betterment and blessing of His People, while bringing glory and praise by them back to Himself!

Friends, again notice what v 11 goes on to say: "Now I know without doubt that the Lord sent his angel to deliver me from Herod's clutches." It's an interesting word "clutches." It conveys the picture of a great bird with razor sharp claws or talons, having grabbed hold of its prey in the grasp of death's grip, never to let go. It will take something of extreme skill and power to pry that victim loose from the "clutches" of that great predator. Yes, that victim really is in the grip of death.

Now again dear friends, I can really and so clearly see myself here. I can see in here, just as Herod had designs in store for Peter's life, Satan also had intended for me. I was in the clutches of his grip of death and he was unwilling to let me go. But Jesus tore apart the Devil's hold on me and my life, and his plans for my future.

Look again at the words: "and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." There was a great excitement among the Jewish people concerning Peter's trial and execution. James' death had already pleased them; that is why Herod had taken hold of Peter. Look at the words "from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." But what was it that they "were anticipating"? Well they "were anticipating" a trial, at least the farce of a trial. They "were anticipating" a humiliation and they "were anticipating" another grisly death. But praise be to the Lord, that though man proposes, yes that though men make their plans, it is our God who disposes of the wicked evil designs of mankind.

Beloved, Satan has designs on your life. But because of Jesus, those plans have been overturned. You are no longer in the clutches of the Evil One. You are in the eternal grip of God's Grace!

V 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." Brothers and Sisters, how wonderful, yes how wonderful, how amazing that God used the prayers of His People to deliver Peter out of the prison and out of the executioner's hand. Be not mistaken, (although yes it is all of His Plan, His Power and His Purpose), He incorporates the prayers of His Saints in the bringing about all of that Plan and Purpose!

James 5:16-18 "therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." Again, v 16, the older translation reads: "the prayers of a righteous man availeth much." Yes it is God's Plan and they are His Purposes, but He calls us to pray, and He uses those prayers in this miraculous and mysterious way, as He incorporates our prayers into His Plan!

So at the very moment that God sent his Angel into that prison to shine the Lord's glory in that place to set Peter free, (though Peter was asleep), the brethren were on their knees for him in prayer and the Lord heard their prayers! Have you ever wondered who it was that while you slumbered in your life of sin and ignorance that God had on their knees? So that His gospel light might breakthrough into your life? Perhaps you already know who they are, praise God!

Dear friends, never underestimate the power of your prayers. Satan wants you to. He will dissuade you, he will mock you, but his taunts and jibes conceal a secret. There is nothing more that Satan

fears, than when God's People are on their knees. Yes at the very hour of Peter's greatest need he is asleep. But the brethren are on their knees! Perhaps that's even why he slept so soundly, who knows. Yet it "dawns on him" that he had been delivered out of Satan's snare, he heads straight to that place where, unbeknownst to him, they had been praying for his release!

So how do we bring these things to a close this morning? What do we take home with this? Well perhaps it's simply this: It is clear that the world is becoming increasingly dark. The things of Christ and His Kingdom have never been under more of an attack than they are today. But what we need to remember always, Beloved, is that the darker the days, the brighter the light of the gospel shines in that darkness. Bursting forth into the deepest recesses of the souls of men and women and children! And also, James 5:16 "the prayers of a righteous man or woman or child availeth much."

Let's pray!