

**Freedom for Captives**  
**Miracles Sermon 5**  
Acts 12:1-18 & Col 4:2-4

I began his series of messages on the miracles in Acts with a reminder that many people, these days, scoff at the idea of miracles. Yet when something happens that exceeds human knowledge and human expectations they may well exclaim “It’s a miracle!” When’s the last time you exclaimed after some event, “It’s a miracle!”?

Do miracles still happen? I for one, do not believe that miracles, extraordinary, unexplainable acts of God, are limited to the time of the Apostles. They do indeed still happen. God intervenes at key points in lives and history; God uses what we call miracles – when necessary - to further His purposes. Miracles are often the introduction to a proclamation of the saving grace in Jesus Christ.

If you ponder it a minute, God's creation is a miracle. Science has done much to help us understand our natural world, and yet from the endless expanse of space to the tiniest subatomic particle there remains much that is unexplained. Each new-born baby is a miracle.

### Release of the Captives

Today I am talking about Peter's miraculous release from prison, found in Acts 12. Now this was the second time Peter had miraculously been freed from prison. We read earlier, in Acts 5 (Act 5:17-25), how Peter, John, and the other apostles had been arrested before. They were repeat offenders. It says the high priest was filled with jealousy and put them in a public jail. The religious leaders badly wanted to silence these preachers and stamp out the Christian heresy. But it didn't work.

*... during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life,"* Acts 5:19-20. The very next day Peter and others were back at the Temple teaching the people. Again, they were arrested and brought before the Council. The High Priest said, "*We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in his name...*" But Peter and the apostles answered, "*We must obey God rather than men,*" Acts 5:28-29. The High Priest really wanted to kill them but was afraid of the people, so Peter and the others were flogged and released with orders to be quiet. *They went out rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name,* Acts 5:41. They just went on teaching.

The proclamation of the gospel could not be stopped ... God performed a miracle to ensure that the apostles could share salvation in Jesus with all of Jerusalem. God has made us for freedom ... to speak freely of the truth we have and know in Him.

Had not Jesus Himself proclaimed, *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,* Luke 4:18? (See Isaiah 61:1.)

Sometime later Peter was arrested again! It was King Herod this time who was intent on stamping out the Christian movement. This King Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great - the one who ordered the killing of the children in Bethlehem shortly after Jesus was born. The Herod's were a ruthless and cruel family of rulers.

A lot had happened since Peter's previous arrest. He had traveled outside Jerusalem to preach salvation in Jesus, Stephen had become the first Christian martyr, Saul had been transformed from persecutor to supporter of the Christians, and James, the brother of John,

had just been put to death by Herod's order. Herod now intends to make a public spectacle of Peter, the primary Christian leader, and then, after the Passover holiday, to execute him.

*So, Peter was kept in prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God,* Acts 12:4. The fledgling Christian church was in a firestorm of persecution and trouble. A time of crisis for the church became a time of prayer. Could we say the church is in a time of crisis today? The once influential position of churches in America seems to be tumbling down. Many of the activists who are leading the charge in the streets these days are Marxists with anti-Christian intentions. Should the church be on its knees in prayer? How about you, have you spent more time in prayer lately?

### The Power of Prayer

Prayer opens doors ... doors of our faith and doors of prisons. Though we may doubt it, God nonetheless hears us and acts on our prayers in His wisdom and in His time. God is answering prayers at this moment. Some were prayed long ago, some seconds ago. Some answers we will never see, some will surprise us.

That's what the church in Jerusalem was doing ... they were "earnestly praying." The Church in crisis gathered to pray and God began to answer their prayers. Peter, asleep in prison, was awakened by an angel who led him through all the guards and gates to freedom. He decided to go to the house of Mary ... *where many people had gathered and were praying*, Acts 12:12.

Prayer can open doors in situations where we have no control ... but God does. We can intercede on behalf of others... those beyond our care or those who refuse our care. What doors need to open in the lives of our loved ones? Of other people? Doors of addiction, poverty, fear, doubt, or distress? Of our country? Are you praying for doors to open?

There are times when evil seems to be winning the day. Widespread riots and chaos in city streets just as people are coming out of months of fear over the COVID virus ... and now a renewed fear of the virus ... none of this inspires optimism. It sure doesn't look like good and virtuous behavior is on the rise. When wicked men and women get away with crimes, from petty theft to gross violations of the Constitution by politicians and unelected government bureaucrats, and their popularity goes up, not down, then something is terribly wrong. All people suffer in such a state of affairs. It's easy at such times to wonder, "Where is God in all of this? Why did He allow this to happen? How can any good come out of such an awful mess?" Take it to God in prayer.

Prayer opens doors when we do not understand the answers. God knows what is best, even when we do not understand, even as Peter was imprisoned and the disciple James was executed. It's nearly impossible to explain the workings of God so we must continue to pray through them as we trust Him.

Sometimes prayer opens doors that we did not even know were there. Sometimes God answers prayers in ways we could not have predicted and can only see later. Kind of like when God led Peter out of a prison cell to Mary's house, and no one there expected it! They were surprised to see Peter! But Peter knew the Lord had strengthened him through their prayers, and he was not intimidated by Herod. Walking into the home of fellow believers Peter ...described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. And then, it says, he left for another place. Yes, Peter had been miraculously freed from prison more than once, but he was no fool for he prudently went to a place where he could hide.

How ironic, yet perhaps understandable, that though they had prayed for Peter they could scarcely believe their prayers had been answered. Isn't the way? We pray and pray, and do we expect God to answer our prayers? Is that because we pray so often for our own needs and desires, that may or may not be part of God's plans? Here they prayed for Peter

and God answered because God had His plans ... plans for Peter to continue to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ. Prayers for God's purposes to be fulfilled are always answered.

Here's Paul: ... *pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains...* Colossians 4:2-4

### Freedom Is Precious

Emerging from a time of crisis is always fraught with uncertainties and risks. Even after the doors of prison were opened Peter still faced danger. We have opened the doors of our churches, businesses, and schools after being closed due to COVID balancing our safety with our freedom. In times like these we give up small bits of our liberty in order to ensure safety for ourselves and others (wearing a mask and social distancing). But that does not prevent us from opening other doors with prayer. We are still a free people and free to worship God as He directs us.

Freedom was the reason the Pilgrim colony was established at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Those hardy colonists sought a place where they could worship God free from government interference from the king of England. From those roots grew a nation that enshrined freedom under God for all people. Despite imperfections in our history with regard to ensuring freedom for all, this country continues to be a beacon of hope for those around the world seeking freedom. Because of the wisdom contained in the Constitution, backed by a civil society undergirded by Christian faith, we have enjoyed a freedom and prosperity unprecedented in human history. Has the broad populous of America forgotten what July 4 really celebrates? "Endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights..."

We have been free to proclaim the gospel just like those who first emigrated here for religious freedom. We must continue to proclaim the great grace of God we know in Jesus Christ. I read and saw a report of an incident in that autonomous zone (so called) in Seattle, that illustrates the forces arrayed against freedom and Christianity. It was of a street preacher being beaten and forcibly removed by the "security" in the zone. Now some activist is demanding that statues pictures of a white Jesus must be torn down. These are not the actions of people who believe in freedom, or God for that matter.

I believe in the moral superiority of liberty. I believe that God has designed us to be free, and that includes even the freedom to reject Him – as mean, old King Herod did. But when humans reject Him our God- given freedom quickly disappears. And, so do the protections for all people regardless of race or creed. Whether they come for statues today or people tomorrow the goal of this current extremist movement isn't just to level racial injustice; it's to level America. We have a better narrative to tell: God is alive, God cares about justice and what happens to people and God wants people – regardless of race or language – to know Him through His great grace to us in Jesus Christ. America has given us the most freedom in history to proclaim this message.

Under the heading, "Do miracles still happen?" let me share the story of Gerhard ... escape from communist concentration camp in Romania, after WWII ... miraculous events that allowed he and his two siblings to make it to Hungary.

Yes, it was a miracle that God led Peter out of jail on the eve of his execution. God intended him to be free to preach salvation in Christ Jesus. God still leads people, like you and me, to freedom from bondage to sin so that in freedom we may proclaim His great glory and grace. What are you doing with your freedom? God gives life. God gives freedom. God performs miracles. God Is Good. God is alive. Pray for God's purposes ... He says:

*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me,* Revelation 3:20.