

Series: "Church the Way It's Supposed to Be"

Sermon #10

"An Angel For An Alarm Clock!"

Acts 12

Introduction: Imagine having an angel for your alarm clock! That's what happened to Peter when he was in prison for the third time, awaiting trial and certain death. Years later, when he wrote his first epistle, Peter may have had this miraculous experience in mind when he quoted Psalm 34:15–16: "*For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil*" (1 Peter 3:12). That quotation summarizes what God did for Peter, and it shows us three truths to encourage us in the difficult days of life.

1. God Sees Our Problems (12:1–4)

"The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous" (1 Peter 3:12). God watched and noted what Herod Agrippa I was doing to His people. This evil man was the grandson of Herod the Great, who ordered the Bethlehem children to be murdered, and the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded. A scheming and murderous family, the Herod family was despised by the Jews, who resented having Edomites ruling over them. Of course, Herod knew this, so he persecuted the church to convince the Jewish people of his loyalty to the traditions of the fathers. Now that the Gentiles were openly a part of the church, Herod's plan was even more agreeable to the nationalistic Jews who had no place for "pagans." Herod had several believers arrested, among them James, the brother of John, whom he beheaded. Thus James became the first of the apostles to be martyred. When you ponder his death in the light of Matthew 20:20–28, it takes on special significance. James and John, with their mother, had asked for thrones, but Jesus made it clear that there can be no glory apart from suffering. "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" He asked (Matt. 20:22). Their bold reply was, "We are able." Of course, they did not know what they were saying, but they eventually

discovered the high cost of winning a throne of glory: James was arrested and killed, and John became an exile on the Isle of Patmos, a prisoner of Rome (Rev. 1:9). Indeed, they did drink of the cup and share in the baptism of suffering that their Lord had experienced! If it pleased the Jews when James was killed, just think how delighted they would be if Peter were slain! God permitted Herod to arrest Peter and put him under heavy guard in prison. Sixteen soldiers, four for each watch, kept guard over the apostle, with two soldiers chained to the prisoner and two watching the doors. After all, the last time Peter was arrested, he mysteriously got out of jail, and Herod was not about to let that happen again. Why was James allowed to die, while Peter was rescued? After all, both were dedicated servants of God, needed by the church. The only answer is *the sovereign will of God*, the very thing Peter and the church had prayed about after their second experience of persecution (Acts 4:24–30). Herod had "stretched forth" his hand to destroy the church, but God would stretch forth His hand to perform signs and wonders and glorify His Son (Acts 4:28–30). God allowed Herod to kill James, but He kept him from harming Peter. It was the throne in heaven that was in control, not the throne on earth. Please note that the Jerusalem church did not replace James as they had replaced Judas (Acts 1:15–26). As long as the gospel was going "to the Jew first," it was necessary to have the full complement of twelve apostles to witness to the twelve tribes of Israel. The stoning of Stephen ended that special witness to Israel, so the number of official witnesses was no longer important. It is good to know that, no matter how difficult the trials or how disappointing the news, God is still on the throne and has everything under control. We may not always understand His ways, but we know His sovereign will is best.

2. God Hears Our Prayers (12:5–17)

"And his ears are open unto their prayers" (1 Peter 3:12). The phrase "but prayer" is the turning point in the story. Never underestimate the power of a praying church! "The angel fetched Peter out of prison," said the Puritan preacher Thomas Watson, "but it was prayer that fetched the angel." Follow the scenes in this exciting drama in Acts 12.

Peter sleeps (vv. 5–6). If you were chained to two Roman soldiers and facing the possibility of being executed the next day, would you sleep very soundly? Probably not, but Peter did. In fact, Peter was so sound asleep that the angel had to strike him on the side to wake him up! The fact that Peter had been a prisoner twice before is not what gave him his calm heart. For that matter,

this prison experience was different from the other two. This time, he was alone, and the deliverance did not come right away. The other two times, he was able to witness, but this time, no special witnessing opportunities appeared. Peter's previous arrests had taken place after great victories, but this one followed the death of James, his dear friend and colleague. It was a new situation altogether. What gave Peter such confidence and peace? To begin with, many believers were praying for him (Acts 12:12), and kept it up day and night for a week, and this helped to bring him peace (Phil. 4:6–7). Prayer has a way of reminding us of the promises of God's Word, such as, "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep; for thou, Lord, only makest me to dwell in safety" (Ps. 4:8). Or, "Fear thou not, for I am with thee. Be not dismayed, for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Isa. 41:10). But the main cause of Peter's peace was the knowledge that Herod could not kill him. Jesus had promised Peter that he would live to be an old man and end his life crucified on a Roman cross (John 21:18–19). Peter simply laid hold of that promise and committed the entire situation to the Lord, and God gave him peace and rest. He did not know how or when God would deliver him, but he did know that deliverance was coming.

Peter obeys (vv. 7–11). Once again we behold the ministry of angels (Acts 5:19; 8:26; 10:3, 7) and are reminded that the angels care for God's children (Ps. 34:7). The angel brought light and liberty into the prison cell, but the guards had no idea that anything was going on. However, if Peter was going to be delivered, he had to obey what the angel commanded. He probably thought it was a dream or a vision, but he arose and followed the angel out of the prison and into the street. Only then did he come to himself and realize that he had been a part of another miracle. The angel commanded Peter to bind his garments with his girdle, and then to put on his sandals. These were certainly ordinary tasks to do while a miracle is taking place! But God often joins the miraculous with the ordinary just to encourage us to keep in balance. Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes, but then commanded His disciples to gather up the leftovers. He raised Jairus's daughter from the dead, then told her parents to give her something to eat. Even in miracles, God is always practical. God alone can do the extraordinary, but His people must do the ordinary. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but the men had to roll the stone from the tomb. The same angel that removed the chains from Peter's hands could have put the shoes on Peter's feet, but he told Peter to do it. God never wastes miracles. Peter had to stoop before he could walk. It was a good lesson in humility and obedience. In fact, from that night on,

every time Peter put on his shoes, it must have reminded him of the prison miracle and encouraged him to trust the Lord. This deliverance took place at Passover season, the time of year when the Jews celebrated their exodus from Egypt. The word *delivered* in Acts 12:11 is the same word Stephen used when he spoke about the Jewish exodus (Acts 7:34). Peter experienced a new kind of "exodus" in answer to the prayers of God's people.

Peter knocks (vv. 12–16). As Peter followed the angel, God opened the way, and when Peter was free, the angel vanished. His work was done, and now it was up to Peter to trust the Lord and use his common sense in taking the next step. Since it was the prayers of God's people that had helped to set him free, Peter decided that the best place for him would be in that prayer meeting at Mary's house. Furthermore, he wanted to report the good news that God had answered their prayers. So Peter headed for the house of Mary, mother of John Mark. When you remember that (a) many people were praying, (b) they were praying earnestly, (c) they prayed night and day for perhaps as long as a week, and (d) their prayers were centered specifically on Peter's deliverance, then the scene that is described here is almost comical. The answer to their prayers is standing at the door, but they don't have faith enough to open the door and let him in! God could get Peter out of a prison, but Peter can't get himself into a prayer meeting! Of course, the knock at the door might have been that of Herod's soldiers, coming to arrest more believers. It took courage for the maid Rhoda ("rose") to go to the door, but imagine her surprise when she recognized Peter's voice! She was so overcome that she forgot to open the door! Poor Peter had to keep knocking and calling while the "believers" in the prayer meeting decided what to do! And the longer he stood at the gate, the more dangerous his situation became.

The exclamation, "It is his angel" (Acts 12:15) reveals their belief in "guardian angels" (Matt. 18:10; Heb. 1:14). Of course, the logical question is, "Why would an angel bother to knock?" All he had to do was simply walk right in! Sad to say, good theology plus unbelief often leads to fear and confusion. We must face the fact that even in the most fervent prayer meetings there is sometimes a spirit of doubt and unbelief. We are like the father who cried to Jesus, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24). These Jerusalem saints believed that God could answer their prayers, so they kept at it night and day. But, when the answer came right to their door, they refused to believe it. God graciously honors even the weakest faith, but how much more He would do if only we would trust Him. Note the plural pronouns in Acts

12:16: "They ... opened the door and ... they were astonished." I get the impression that, for safety's sake, they decided to open the door *together* and face *together* whatever might be on the other side. Rhoda would have done it by herself, but she was too overcome with joy. It is commendable that a lowly servant girl recognized Peter's voice and rejoiced that he was free. Rhoda surely was a believer who knew Peter as a friend.

Peter declares (v. 17). Apparently everybody began to speak at once, and Peter had to silence them. He quickly gave an account of the miracle of his deliverance and no doubt thanked them for their prayer help. He instructed them to get the word to James, the half-brother of the Lord, who was the leader of the Jerusalem assembly (Matt. 13:55; Acts 15:13ff.; Gal. 1:19). James was also the author of the epistle of James. Where Peter went when he left the meeting, nobody knows to this day! It certainly was a well-kept secret. Except for a brief appearance in Acts 15, Peter walks off the pages of the book of Acts to make room for Paul and the story of his ministry among the Gentiles. First Corinthians 9:5 tells us that Peter traveled in ministry with his wife, and 1 Corinthians 1:12 suggests that he visited Corinth. There is no evidence in Scripture that Peter ever visited Rome. In fact, if Peter had founded the church in Rome, it is unlikely that Paul would have gone there, for his policy was to work where other apostles had not labored (Rom. 15:18–22). Also, he certainly would have said something to or about Peter when he wrote his letter to the Romans. Before we leave this section, it would be profitable to consider how Christians can best pray for those in prison, for even today there are many people in prison only because they are Christians. "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them" commands Hebrews 13:3. In other words, pray for them as you would want them to pray for you if your situations were reversed. We ought to pray that God will give them grace to bear with suffering so that they might have a triumphant witness for the Lord. We should ask the Spirit to minister the Word to them and bring it to their remembrance. It is right to ask God to protect His own and to give them wisdom as they must day after day deal with a difficult enemy. We must ask God that, if it is His will, they be delivered from their bondage and suffering and reunited with their loved ones.

3. God Deals with Our Opponents (12:18–25)

"But the face of the Lord is against them that do evil" (1 Peter 3:12). If the account had ended with Peter's departure, we would find ourselves wondering, "What happened to the prison guards and to Herod?" We do not

know at what time the angel delivered Peter, but when the next quaternion arrived at the cell, imagine their consternation when they discovered that the guards were there but the prisoner was gone! If the new watch awakened the old watch, it was certainly a rude awakening for them! If the old watch was already awake and alert, they must have had a difficult time explaining the situation to the new watch. How could a chained prisoner escape when there were four guards present and the doors were locked? If a guard permitted a prisoner to escape, Roman law required that he receive the same punishment that the prisoner would have received, even if it was death (see Acts 16:27; 27:42). This law did not strictly apply in Herod's jurisdiction, so the king was not forced to kill the guards, but, being a Herod, he did it anyway. Instead of killing one man to please the Jews, he killed four and perhaps hoped it would please them more. "The righteous is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked cometh in his stead" (Prov. 11:8).

This truth is illustrated in the death of Herod. While God does not always bring retribution this quickly, we can be sure that the Judge of all the earth will do what is right (Gen. 18:25; Rev. 6:9–11). The people of Tyre and Sidon, who depended on the Jews for food (see Ezra 3:7), had in some way displeased King Herod and were in danger of losing this assistance. In true political fashion, they bribed Blastus, who was in charge of the king's bed chamber, and thus a trusted official; he in turn convinced the king to meet the delegation. It was an opportunity for the proud king to display his authority and glory, and for the delegates to please him with their flattery. The Jewish historian Josephus said that this scene took place during a festival honoring Claudius Caesar, and that the king wore a beautiful silver garment in honor of the occasion. We do not know what Herod said in his oration, but we do know why he said it: he wanted to impress the people. And he did!

They played on his *Herodian* ego and told him he was a god, and he loved every minute of it. But he did not give the glory to the Lord, so this whole scene was nothing but idolatry. "I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another" (Isa. 42:8; see 48:11). Instead of Peter being killed by Herod, it was Herod who was killed by Peter's God! Perhaps the same angel who delivered Peter also smote the king. Herod contracted some affliction in his bowels and died five days later, according to Josephus. This was in AD 44. This event is more than a slice of ancient history, because it typifies the world and its people today. The citizens of Tyre and Sidon were concerned about one thing only—getting sufficient food to feed their stomachs. To be sure, food is essential to life, but when we pay any price to

get that food, we are doing wrong. By flattering the king and calling him a god, the delegation knew they could get what they wanted. I cannot help but see in King Herod an illustration of the future "man of sin" who will one day rule the world and persecute God's people (2 Thess. 2; Rev. 13). This "man of sin" (or Antichrist) will make himself god and will command the worship of the whole world. But Jesus Christ will return and judge him and those who follow him (Rev. 19:11–21).

Conclusion: What an encouragement to us today! At the beginning of Acts 12, Herod seemed to be in control, and the church was losing the battle. But at the end of the chapter, Herod is dead and the church—very much alive—is growing rapidly! The secret? A praying church! Missionary Isobel Kuhn used to pray when in trouble, "If this obstacle is from thee, Lord, I accept it; but if it is from Satan, I refuse him and all his works in the name of Calvary!" And Dr. Alan Redpath has often said, "Let's keep our chins up and our knees down— we're on the victory side!" God works when churches pray, and Satan still trembles "when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees."