

An Angel Rescues Peter

Read: Acts 12

Further Reading: Daniel 6

Key Verse:

“My God sent His angel and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me.”

Daniel 6:22

Extra: What demonstrates to you God’s power in our world?

Level 5 lesson 17

In our lesson today, we find Peter again imprisoned for his faith in Christ, this time by King Herod. This wicked man had just had James, John’s brother, killed with the sword and he was determined to kill Peter also - simply to gain the approval of the Jews.

IMPRISONMENT: However, Herod didn’t want to offend those same Jews by doing this during their religious festival, so Peter was to be held in custody, awaiting trial, until after the Passover. Then he would almost certainly be executed. Herod was aware of Peter’s earlier escape from prison, and placed him in a cell deep in the prison, chained to two soldiers. Outside his cell, two more soldiers stood guard and in all, sixteen soldiers were commanded to keep him safely. On the night before his trial, Peter’s friends were earnestly praying to God for him, as they had been since his arrest.

ESCAPE: In the middle of the night, Peter lay fast asleep between the two soldiers. Suddenly, an Angel of the Lord appeared in his cell. “Quick get up!” he instructed Peter, striking him on the side. Peter was unsure if he was awake or dreaming, but looking down he saw his chains had fallen from his arms! “Put on your clothes and sandals, wrap your cloak around you, and follow me!” the angel told him. Peter obeyed, following the angel past all the snoring guards, until they stood before the huge iron gate of the prison. Incredulous, Peter watched as the massive structure opened automatically! Still unsure whether or not he was dreaming, Peter followed the angel into the street and then, when they were well away from the prison, the angel disappeared as suddenly as he’d come!

Realising what had happened, Peter looked around and said to himself, “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.” Yes, God had miraculously answered prayer - Peter was free! Just as the power of the Roman Empire, indeed death itself, could not keep Jesus in the tomb, here too, God over-ruled the plans of wicked men until His purposes for Peter were complete!

FREEDOM: Peter hurried through the dark, silent streets to Mary’s house, where the other believers were praying for him. Cautiously, he knocked at the door, fearful lest he wake someone and be discovered. A young girl, Rhoda, went to the door. “Who’s there?” she asked nervously. “It’s me!” said Peter in hushed tones. Recognising his voice, Rhoda was so happy she rushed back into the room without opening the door and excitedly told everyone that Peter was outside. They didn’t believe her, some even accusing her of having lost her mind! Others said it must be his guardian angel. They couldn’t believe he was truly delivered - even though they had been praying for him so earnestly. It seemed too good to be true! How human they were.

However, she kept insisting that it was true - Peter was really at the door! While they argued, Peter kept on knocking. Finally, someone opened the door and there stood Peter, safe and well! He didn’t have much time with them, simply telling them of his miraculous escape, and leaving instructions to tell James and the other Christians all about it. Then he left quickly to “another place” to escape the inevitable wrath of King Herod when he discovered him gone.

Sure enough, daylight brought a huge uproar in the prison. We can barely imagine Herod’s rage and his treatment of the soldiers who had let Peter escape. Poor soldiers, we can only be sorry for them. However, Herod’s own day of doom was fast approaching; he would not escape!

A short time after this, as he made a public speech to the people, they responded by saying, “It is the voice of a god, and not a man!” Instead of denying this, he accepted their worship and praise. Consequently, this arrogant, murderous man, who killed James and would have killed Peter, was “struck down by the hand of the Lord” and died a horrible death (v23). However, this was not God’s final judgement on him. Hebrews 9:27 is a solemn reminder to us all, that “it is appointed unto man once to die, and after this, the judgement!”

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why did Herod imprison Peter?	.....
2. What did his friends do about it?	.....
3. What was Peter doing when the angel entered?	.....
4. What did Peter exclaim when he found himself outside the prison walls?	.....
5. (a) What happened to Herod? (b) Why?	.....

My Name is Age

Called to the Work

Key Verse:

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for Us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me.’”

Isaiah 6:8

Extra: How can we be missionaries today?

Level 5 Lesson 18

Read Acts 13:1-13

Further Reading: Acts 8:26-40

At this point in the Book of Acts, we leave the life of Peter to follow more closely the life of Saul. Following his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Saul spent time being prepared for the work which God had called him to (Acts 9:15). Now, Saul was soon to embark on those thrilling and eventful missionary journeys which would lead to the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Asia and Europe, and eventually to the whole world!

MISSIONARIES CHOSEN: One day, while certain prophets and teachers at Antioch, including Saul and Barnabas, were worshipping God with prayer and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (v2). It’s worth noting that Saul did not commence these journeys on his own initiative, but in response to God’s very clear call. While we are uncertain as to the exact means of this message being received, it was clearly understood and readily obeyed by those present. After further fasting and praying, they laid hands on them (an act expressing fellowship) commending them to God for His blessing, before sending them on their way.

If you are able, it will be interesting to follow the movements of these ‘men of God’ on a map. So under the Holy Spirit’s leading, Saul and Barnabas, along with John Mark (a young man whom they had brought with them from Jerusalem - see Acts 12:25) sailed to Seleucia and then on to the island of Cyprus. Landing at Salamis, they preached the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues.

ENEMY OPPOSITION: We’re not told the results of their preaching until they arrive in Paphos, where they met with opposition. Of course, preaching the gospel soon attracts the attention of the Devil and we can always expect him to oppose it! Now, Sergius Paulus, the Roman ruler of the country, invited Saul and Barnabas to his palace. And after they arrived Sergius’ attendant, a Jewish sorcerer named Bar-jesus (Elymas in Greek), tried to deter him from listening and responding to Saul’s message.

Observing this, Saul recognised Elymas as a false prophet and servant of Satan that he really was. Saul eye-balled him face to face and sternly declared, “You are a child of the devil, and an enemy of everything that is right! Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?” (v10). Elymas was silent as Saul, full of the Spirit of God, continued, “Now, the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind and for a time unable to see the light of the sun!” Immediately, Elymas was struck blind and “groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand” (v11). What a serious thing it is to hinder someone from hearing the truth, the “Word of Life!” It’s bad enough not to want it yourself, but even worse to try to deprive others of it.

THE GOSPEL TRIUMPHANT: God’s miraculous judgement against Elymas provided a powerful testimony to the truth and authority of the Apostle’s words! Sergius Paulus, we read, “when he saw what was done,” believed, being “amazed at the teaching of the Lord” (v12). It is good for us to always remember that Satan is a defeated foe! Jesus Christ had proclaimed to His disciples that “I will build My Church, and the gates of Hell will never overcome it!” Satan and all his demons know that their time is limited and their terrible fate in the “Lake of Fire” is sealed (Matthew 25:41). However, Satan is increasing his opposition to the plans of God as his final end draws ever closer.

Saul appears to have changed his name to ‘Paul’ while on the island, although no reason is given in Scripture. Also, ‘Saul’ was considered a grand name whereas ‘Paul’ was a humble name, meaning ‘little one.’ Whatever the reason, from this point on the Bible refers to him as Paul, and so we will do the same.

The last verse of our Scripture reading advises us that, after sailing with them from Paphos to Perga, John Mark abandoned the group and returned to his home. We’re not sure why he did this, but it had serious repercussions for Paul and Barnabas later on.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What did the Holy Spirit say to the prophets and teachers in Antioch?	.....
2. Where did the Apostles meet the first opposition and from whom?	.....
3. What wicked thing did Elymas try to do?	.....
4. What was the result as far as Sergius Paulus was concerned?	.....
5. What did John Mark decide to do?	.....

In the Synagogue at Antioch

Read Acts 13:14-41

Further Reading: Romans 5:12-21

Leaving Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas sailed across to Perga and on to the important city of Antioch in Pisidia. This of course, is a different Antioch from the Antioch they set out from, about 750 kilometres away by the route they'd travelled. The two missionaries again, went straight to the Jewish synagogue and sat down to join in the devotions of the Sabbath day.

SABBATH IN THE SYNAGOGUE: As the official finished reading the appointed Scriptures, he gave the two Jewish strangers an invitation to speak. Paul gladly accepted and standing up he motioned for silence. "Men of Israel, and you Gentiles who worship God," he began, "listen to me!" Then he gave a quick overview of God's historical dealings with Israel, right up until the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul was speaking to Jews who knew the Scriptures well and he used them to show that Jesus was truly their Messiah.

He told them how "God chose our fathers and made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, and led them out into the desert where God looked after them for 40 years. Then God brought them to Canaan, the land God gave them after having destroyed the seven nations which lived there. In this favoured land, God raised up judges to look after the people's welfare for about 450 years until Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, but he proved unsatisfactory and God raised up King David, a man after God's own heart."

The mention of King David brought Paul to the heart of his message. He pointed out that God had promised David that one of his descendants would be the Messiah. Paul boldly announced that this promise had been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ; He was Israel's promised Saviour!

PROVING WHO JESUS WAS: Up until his statement concerning Jesus, Paul's hearers no doubt agreed with him wholeheartedly. After all, he was merely reiterating historical facts. But his claim that Jesus is the Messiah would have caused some to dismiss him. However, Paul continued to prove his claim, by reminding them of recent happenings in Jerusalem.

He reminded them that John the Baptist had said that the One to appear immediately after him would be the Messiah. Also, John had publicly acknowledged Jesus as the "Lamb of God." But instead of receiving Him, the Jewish leaders had Him put to death.

Now, far from disproving Paul's claims, this fact only served to prove them! The crucifixion of Jesus was a direct fulfilment of Old Testament scriptures that prophesied this would happen to the Messiah! (e.g. Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22) This was even more amazing because they were made hundreds of years before crucifixion was used as a means of execution! It was a Roman method, while the Jewish method was stoning. If Jesus had not been crucified, then he could not have been their Messiah.

Now, if Jesus had only been crucified and buried He still could not have been their Messiah, as one further great event was necessary to prove the claims of Jesus conclusively. So Paul quoted other O.T. Scriptures to show that the Messiah had to be raised from the dead. Then, with great delight he proclaimed of Jesus, "But God raised Him from the dead! And for many days He was seen by those who had travelled with Him. They are now His witnesses to our people!" (v30) Paul and many others were eye-witnesses to the fact that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and was therefore truly their Messiah.

PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS: Having shown the truth of Jesus' claims from Scripture, Paul continued. "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know, that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through Him, everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses!"

What a wonderful message: forgiveness of sin and justification (being made righteous before God) can be received through faith in Jesus Christ, Who had died and risen for their salvation. However, the message was not to be ignored or rejected. "Look, you scoffers; wonder and perish!" Paul warned them, quoting again from the Old Testament. "Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you!" Make sure that you believe and receive this message, too!

Key Verse:
"How shall we
escape if we
ignore such a
great salvation?"

Hebrews 2:3a

Level 5 Lesson 19

Extra: Try out your ideas from Question 5 and let us know how you get on.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. How did Paul get the opportunity to speak in the synagogue?

2. What great statement is made in verse 30 concerning the Lord Jesus Christ?

3. What did the resurrection of Jesus prove to the Jews?

4. What was the 'good news' Paul made known to them?

5. How can YOU make known the Good News of the Gospel?

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More Opposition

Key Verse:
“They were glad and honoured the word of the Lord.”

Acts 13:48a

Extra: What should we do when confronted by a different teaching or practice?

Level 5 Lesson 20

Read Acts 13:42-52
Further Reading: 1 Peter 2:4-12

Well, it is not hard to imagine that Paul’s message must have caused quite a sensation, not to mention deep concern among his audience! Invited by the rulers of the synagogue to speak, he had clearly shown from their own Scriptures, that Messiah must suffer and be crucified. Not only that, but He would rise again, victorious over death. Paul had gone on to show that Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled all these prophetic statements, by His death and resurrection. As well as that, the very men who had brought about His death had actually fulfilled the Scriptures!

To remain true to their Scriptures, they now had to accept and believe in Jesus as their Messiah. This presented them with a real dilemma! Reports from the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem had been entirely antagonistic to the claims of Jesus. He had simply been branded a blasphemous imposter. Now Paul and his friends had arrived with the truth about Him, and called on them to recognise His claims and receive through Him forgiveness of sin and justification. They even warned them of the dire consequences of ridiculing their message, and ignoring the work God had accomplished through Jesus of Nazareth.

FOR AND AGAINST: As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, they gladly accepted the people’s invitation to speak again about these things the following Sabbath. During the week, it seemed that Paul’s sermon was the talk of the whole town. The Jewish leaders remained vehemently opposed to it, while the Gentiles were more ready to accept it as the Truth. I’m sure Paul and Barnabas had many opportunities to discuss it further with people too, as the days went by.

By the time the Sabbath arrived the town was really buzzing! As Paul arrived to speak, almost the whole city had gathered to hear him! Sadly, most of the Jews had only come to oppose Paul’s preaching of the Gospel, and they loudly contradicted the Apostles and blasphemed the name of Jesus.

This, of course, is what many people do today too, and we can learn an important lesson from the way Paul handled it. He simply kept returning to the Scriptures as the basis of his argument. In the same way, “What does the Bible say?” needs to always be our question concerning any teaching or practice we are confronted with. God’s Word must always be our final authority, not the thoughts and opinions of men. That’s why regular Bible study is so important for all of us - so we know what it says!

GLAD NEWS: Finally, the debate became so heated and the opposition so malicious, that Paul and Barnabas decided it was pointless continuing. “We had to speak the Word of God to you (Jews) first,” they said, “but since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles!” This was great news for the Gentiles, who we read, “were glad and honoured the word of the Lord.” Many of them believed and trusted Christ as Saviour (v48).

We can learn another important lesson from this whole episode. Never count on accepting Jesus as our Saviour “later on” or “perhaps when I’m old.” God warned in Genesis 6 that, “My Spirit will not always strive with man.” Friend, we cannot come to God unless His Spirit calls us (John 6:44), but if people are determined to reject the Saviour, God may turn from them and seek and find converts elsewhere. If you know God is calling you to repent and believe, do not ignore His voice or reject Him. He is ready to receive all contrite, humble sinners who seek to be saved! God will fill Heaven with redeemed sinners from somewhere, so make sure you are among that happy crowd in a coming day!

PERSECUTION DEVELOPS: The good work of preaching the gospel went on throughout the whole district, resulting in many being saved. Sadly though, the Jews continued their fierce opposition, stirring up the chief men and women of Antioch against Paul and Barnabas. This finally led to them being forced to flee for their lives. So in God’s time they moved on to the next needy place, leaving behind a good situation where a company of disciples could carry on the work of telling others about Jesus.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What did the Jewish part of the audience do when Paul had finished speaking?	.....
2. Why did Paul say they would turn to the Gentiles?	.....
3. How did the Gentiles react to the announcement?	.....
4. How should we act if persecuted for Christ?	.....
5. What was the situation the Apostles left behind at Antioch?	.....