

Opening the Last Gate

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This message is about spiritual prisons—those that Satan uses to cage us, and those we keep ourselves in. God's Word shows us how to be freed from these prisons, with a powerful example from Peter's life.

In Acts 12, Peter was imprisoned by King Herod. Thousands in Jerusalem were getting saved through the mighty works of God, with reverberations throughout the city—and Herod felt threatened. Of course, whenever God moves supernaturally through his people, it enrages the enemy. Satan had already stirred Herod to kill James, a leader in the church alongside his brother John and Peter.

Now Herod leveled his sights on Peter. "When (Herod) saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread" (Acts 12:3), meaning the Passover. Herod was going to make a point: By executing the boldest believer at Easter, the church's most sacred observance, he would frighten Christians into silence. Already many believers had fled the city after James's death, but that had only spread the gospel farther.

Herod sent squads of soldiers to capture and to guard him—a total of sixteen men, to seize one pastor! From that time on, Peter was under heavy watch. "He put him in prison...intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people" (12:4). The meaning of "bring him out" reveals that Herod was going to martyr Peter in a public display.

Peter's story reveals the kinds of spiritual prisons Satan uses to lock down God's people.

The word "seized" in this passage doesn't just mean "grabbed." It signifies a power far beyond our own. Peter wasn't just under the arrest of a governmental principality. He was locked down by a spiritual power that was manipulating a powerful man for demonic ends.

Are you familiar with this kind of spiritual prison? Maybe you're in one now. You think, "Lord, I've prayed a thousand times, but nothing ever changes. How will I ever get free?" Or maybe you're praying for a loved one who's in the grip of a bondage or addiction. Maybe they're in an emotional or relational prison, locked down by wounds, depression or bitterness.

Many people in Colorado Springs, the city where I pastor, are locked down in just these kinds of prisons. With a population of almost half a million it's estimated that nearly 400,000 people have no connection to active faith in Christ or to church. To me, that is both heartbreaking and unacceptable. No concerned believer can live comfortably while a majority of their neighbors live in hopelessness and despair.

What we read next changes everything. "So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church" (Acts 12:5, emphasis mine). That one little italicized word — "but" — transforms the whole picture. It says, "You think about this situation in one way. But God is up to something different. The enemy is on this scene, roaring like a lion — but the Lion of Judah is also on the move. He's about to reveal himself and change everything."

I love the image of "earnest prayer" in this verse. A small band of humble men and women were holding a prayer meeting. Like many Christians, they probably held no sway or influence in their world. Yet the thickest prison walls didn't stand a chance against their prayers. With one whisper from an angel, the enemies of God were about to fall asleep so deeply they wouldn't hear Peter tiptoeing through the open cell door — which is exactly what happened.

"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. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him" (12:6-7). As Peter looked around, he saw that his chains had fallen off but that the guards were blinded to it. "He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision" (12:9). What happened next is the heart of my message: "When they had passed the first gate 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" (12:10).

Peter passed through three gates, the third one made of iron. As we move toward freedom, Satan often throws in our way even more difficult bars and gates that can seem impenetrable. But nothing is too hard for the Lord. Think of all the prison doors this angel had opened for Peter in order to free him. He had led him past all the guards, through every passageway and out the front gate of the prison. Then, once the massive gate to the city opened, the angel parted ways with Peter, as if to say, "You're on your own now. The Lord has freed you. Walk in faith the rest of the way."

Many Christians never get as far as Peter did here. Once they're delivered from their cell, they get intimidated by all the other barred doors they see in front of them. They grow discouraged and say, "I'm tired of all this. As soon as I get through one door, there's another to take its place. Is there no end to my struggle?" They're tempted to give up again.

Do you see this happening with your bound-up loved ones? God removes all the chains from their lives, but they can't seem to get through the first closed door they face. They become convinced, "I'm not going to make it." Here is the key: One by one, every door that Peter came to was opened for him supernaturally by the angel. Peter's job was to keep moving in faith.

Once the apostle was freed, he went to the house of prayer to report the miracle to those who had been interceding for him. As Peter knocked, the group was still praying fervently inside. They had no idea how effective their prayers for their brother had been. Indeed, Scripture says their prayers were "earnest" — meaning, they were sticking to it, not giving up, holding onto God and not letting go. This is the kind of prayer Christ calls his church to. It is persistent and passionate in its desire to see a loved one, friend or even a city set free.

But an interesting thing happened when these believers learned that their prayers had been answered: They didn't believe it. A servant girl told them Peter was at the gate: "In her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 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!'" (12:14-15). Apparently, they believed Herod had already killed him.

This was the final gate Peter had to get through.

God is in the delivering business. He does the impossible with a single word. And when he sets his people free, they are free indeed. But maybe you've noticed something in your own life that happens when you struggle with a problem. That is, God opens the first few gates for you — and he leaves the last one for you to open by faith. He supernaturally opened gates for Peter, but now this last one required the faith and the action of man. God does the greatest part but always wants our engagement.

Why does the Lord do this? He knows that even with our most fervent prayers, we may still have a tiny corner of unbelief in our hearts. Yes, God is sovereign in his power. But he wants his bride to be involved in his acts of redemption. Every genuine move of God throughout history has required men and women to stand up and say, "I want to be counted for. I might be weak or shy, but God honors those who act in faith." If even a small percentage in Christ's body had this simple commitment, said John Wesley, "The city would come to watch us burn."

Yes, it all begins with prayer. Fervent, effectual prayer moves God to open iron gates and set captives free. Peter's story makes that clear. But this scene also shows that if we don't act in faith to open that last gate, some captives will remain standing outside. So here is the last part of fervent prayer: faithful action. Prayer doesn't end when the meeting closes; it leads to acts of faith.

Whenever you speak to someone about Jesus, God may have already brought that person through several gates. Somewhere a believing loved one may have been praying for him. You don't realize it, but God has given you the power to open the last gate to that person.

I'm a pastor, and my hours are filled with the work of my calling. But lately my heart has been stirred to do the work of an evangelist. I prayed recently for God to open doors to five people during the coming week so that I could witness to them about Jesus. That very day I was sitting with my family in a restaurant when an elderly man walked by, placing his hand on each of our shoulders as he passed. It was a tender gesture, and I reached out to talk to

him.

The man's name was Skip and he was eighty-five years old. He told us his wife had just been disabled by a stroke. "We've been married all these years, and now she's home lying in bed," Skip said. "I'm overwhelmed with the work of caring of her. I just came out to get a little break." When I asked if we could pray for him, Skip's eyes welled up. He had been waiting to hear someone tell him that God cared.

Later that week, I shared the love of Jesus with a homeless teenager. Within days I had had meaningful, powerful encounters with others. Prayer not only opens doors powerfully; it opens our eyes to the needs at our very doorstep— and to God's desire to meet those needs.

Peter's praying friends thought what they asked for was impossible.

Even though these people were faithful to pray, they weren't open to what God could do. "But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed" (12:16). When they finally did open the gate, those praying saints were "amazed." That moment of awe at God's glorious deliverance wouldn't have happened unless they acted on what they believed.

In each of our communities, people are knocking at our door. People are ready to see a faithful church act on its belief that God desires to free people from every prison. They want to know there is hope for their despair. The Lord is ready to move as a result of our prayers; now he needs us to move forward in faith to see his power transform their lives.

Do God's works in your life amaze the world around you? I urge you: Keep praying earnestly—for your loved ones and for everyone you meet. God may have already moved in their lives, even though you don't realize it. So when you hear a knock at your door, be faithful to open it. Jesus is ready to amaze us all with his saving, delivering, transforming love. Amen!

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