

OUR *Guide* FOR USE IN *the Protestant Reformed Sunday School*

Lesson 69

Peter Delivered from Prison

The Scripture Lesson *Acts 12:1-19*

For several years the church of Christ had not been persecuted. When another Herod became king in Jerusalem, however, that peace came to an end for the Christians. Some of them Herod put in prison. Some of them he scourged. Then he arrested James, the brother of John, and had him beheaded. The Jews were especially pleased about that because James was a *leader* in the church. So Herod, in order to become still more popular, took Peter also, and put *him* in prison.

It happened that this was the time of the Passover, when the Jews preferred not to put anyone to death. Peter, therefore, was kept in prison for awhile. And Herod made sure that he would not escape. He assigned four soldiers to Peter, day and night. Two of them stood guard at the door. The other two were actually *chained* to Peter, so that he could not escape without taking two Roman soldiers along with him. Besides, the gate of the prison was made of iron so heavy that it took more than one man to open it. Escape, Herod thought, was impossible.

Peter must have thought so too. But he was not afraid. The very night before his trial, he was not lying awake, worrying. He was sound asleep. He was prepared to die. But in the middle of the

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night the prison was suddenly lit up by the coming of an angel of the Lord.

The angel awakened Peter and told him to get up quickly. Peter did that, and, to his amazement, the chains that bound him to the sleeping soldiers fell silently to the floor. Peter followed the angel past the guards who, by the power of God, did not see or hear anything. They came, next, to the big iron gate ... and it swung open before them by itself. The angel led Peter down one of the streets of the city, and then he disappeared.

Peter knew that he would have to flee, for Herod would surely try to find him in the morning. But first he hurried to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, so that the Christians in Jerusalem might know what had become of him.

In the house of Mary, many of those Christians had been praying through the night for Peter. And then Peter himself came and knocked on the door. When Rhoda, a young maid, came and told them that she recognized Peter's voice at the door, they refused to believe her. The Lord had answered their prayer in a way so much more wonderful than they had ever hoped, that they actually thought now that Rhoda was out of her mind. But when they at last opened the door, there stood Peter. It was all too good to be true! Peter quickly told them about the miraculous

escape, and then he hurried away.

In the morning the guards discovered that Peter was missing. He had simply disappeared. The soldiers were very much afraid because they knew that Herod would hold them responsible for Peter's escape. And they were right. Herod could tell that the hand of God must have delivered Peter; but he did not want to admit that. He therefore ordered that the guards be killed, so that it would seem as if *they* were to blame. Herod, however, did not dare anymore to persecute the Christians. Thus did God not only save Peter, but also bring an end to the persecution under Herod.

The Sending of Barnabas and Saul

Acts 12:20 - 13:12

King Herod was a very proud man. More than anything else, he wanted other people to think of him as a great man. One day he gave a speech before many important people in the land. Dressed in glittering royal apparel, sitting on his throne, he gave an oration, trying to dazzle the crowd with his own greatness. And the people shouted, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man."

Herod was the king of the *Jews*. He was supposed to be the defender of the honor of *God*. What the people were saying was blasphemy against God. Herod should have stopped them. But he was happy to take for himself the praise that belongs to God.

We read that "immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory." His punishment was that worms began to eat away his body ... while he was still alive! That terrible punishment began right there while he was sitting on a throne. The pain was so great that Herod had to be carried to the palace where, soon after, he died.

But the church continued to grow. Herod had hoped to destroy the church. But instead it is the enemies of Christ who perish. God causes His people to triumph.

Barnabas and Saul meanwhile were still working in Antioch. Long ago the Lord had told Saul that he would be an apostle to the Gentiles. Now at last the time is come when the Lord will send

him out as a missionary to the pagan, or unbelieving, world. The Holy Spirit said to the church in Antioch, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." And the church did that. The congregation came together, and the leaders put their hands on the heads of Barnabas and Saul and prayed that the Lord would bless their work among those who knew not God. They then sent them on their way. And Barnabas and Saul, with John Mark as their helper, left Antioch for the island of Cyprus.

Soon the governor of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, heard about their preaching, and he sent for them, to hear what they had to say. So the missionaries went to tell the governor about Jesus.

But there was with the governor a wicked Jew, a sorcerer by the name of Bar-jesus. For a long time he had fooled Sergius Paulus with his sorceries. And he knew that, if the governor now became a Christian, he would want nothing to do anymore with a sorcerer. So Bar-jesus began to tell him that what Barnabas and Saul were saying was not true.

Saul rebuked Bar-jesus for opposing the gospel and for trying to keep others from believing in Jesus. Then he told him that, because of his sin, he would be blind for a season. Darkness immediately fell on Bar-jesus, so that he had to grope for someone to lead him by the hand.

Sergius Paulus was astonished by that power of God and he believed that surely the gospel preached by the missionaries was the truth. The Lord thus used even the wickedness of the sorcerer to work for the good of His church.

MEMORY WORK

Group A

Acts 13:2 "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them."

Group B

Acts 12:5 "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- ___ 1. Herod was a Roman emperor who, in order to please the Jews, began to persecute the Christians.
- ___ 2. James, the brother of John, was the first of the apostles to die for the sake of Jesus.
- ___ 3. When Herod saw how his killing of James pleased the Jews, he had Peter seized also and put in prison.
- ___ 4. Peter was not afraid in prison because he was sure that God would help him escape.
- ___ 5. During the night before Peter was to be tried before Herod, an angel came and led Peter out of the prison.
- ___ 6. The guards were so terrified by the sight of the angel that they did not dare interfere with Peter's escape.
- ___ 7. When Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, he found everyone asleep at this hour of the night.
- ___ 8. When Herod, dressed in royal apparel, gave a great oration, the people all shouted that his voice was that of a god, not of a mere man.
- ___ 9. Because in his wicked pride Herod gave not God the glory, he was eaten of worms and died.
- ___ 10. The church in Jerusalem appointed Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries.
- ___ 11. Barnabas and Saul went first to the island of Cyprus, where they preached the Word in the synagogues of the Jews.
- ___ 12. When the governor of the island heard about the preaching of the two missionaries, he asked them to come and teach him also.

- ___ 13. In the court of Sergius Paulus there was a Jewish sorcerer who tried to turn the governor from the faith.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. Who was the first apostle to die for the sake of Jesus?
2. Why did Herod put Peter in prison? What did Herod do to make sure that Peter could not escape?
3. How did the angel make it possible for Peter to escape from his chains and from the well guarded prison?
4. When Rhoda recognized the voice of Peter at the door, why did she not right away unlock the door? What did the other Christians in the house say to Rhoda?
5. Why were the soldiers afraid when they discovered that Peter was gone? Why did Herod order that the soldiers be killed?
6. What did Herod do to impress the men from Tyre and Sidon — that is, to make them think that he was a great man? How did God punish Herod?
7. What did the Lord tell the church in Antioch to do?
8. Where did Barnabas and Saul first go to preach the gospel? Who was the governor of that island? Why did that man send for Barnabas and Saul?
9. Who was Bar-jesus? Why did he not want the governor to believe the gospel?
10. How was Bar-jesus punished for trying to persuade the governor not to believe the missionaries? What did Sergius Paulus think of that?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. As king, Herod tried hard to be popular with the Jews. He soon saw that he could win the favor of the Jewish Sanhedrin and of the largest part of the population by persecuting the Christians. We read therefore that he “stretched forth his hands to _____ certain of the _____” (Acts 12:1). Perhaps he started by having Christians imprisoned and beaten. But then he went still further. He _____ James the brother of John with the _____ (Acts 12:2). And, when he saw how the beheading of this apostle _____ the Jews, he proceeded to take _____ also (Acts 12:3).

2. The seizing of Peter, however, happened during the days of _____ bread (Acts 12:3) — that is, during the time of the Passover Feast, when the Jews preferred not to conduct public trials. Herod therefore decided to wait till after Easter to bring Peter _____ to the people (Acts 12:4).

3. Herod was determined, too, that Peter not escape, as had happened once before when apostles were imprisoned. So he delivered Peter to four _____ of _____ to keep him secure (Acts 12:4).

4. Meanwhile, _____ was made without _____ by the church unto God for Peter. And those prayers for Peter were heard; for, on the very night before he was to be tried, Peter was not lying awake worrying what the day would bring, but rather was fast asleep between the two _____ to whom he was bound with two _____ (Acts 12:6).

5. Suddenly, however, the _____ of the Lord came upon Peter and a bright light _____ in the prison. The angel _____ Peter on the side and said, Arise up _____. Peter arose, and as he did so he found that the _____ by which he was bound to the soldiers fell off from his _____. At the instruction of the angel, Peter then tied his _____ on his feet, wrapped his cloak around him, and

_____ the angel out of the prison, thinking all the while that he was seeing a _____ (Acts 12:7-9).

6. Peter followed the angel past two other guarded doors, the soldiers seeing nothing of what was happening. Peter then, still following the angel, reached the massive iron _____ that led out of the prison and into the city — and he saw the gate swing open of its own _____. Very likely the gate swung shut after they had gone out; and then the angel, after leading Peter through one street, forthwith _____ from him (Acts 12:10).

7. Peter understood that he must quickly go into hiding; but, in order to inform his Christian friends of his deliverance, he made his way first to the house of _____, the mother of John, whose surname was _____. He found that, even at this hour of the night, there were _____ gathered together _____ (Acts 12:11, 12).

8. In response to Peter’s knocking on the door, a damsel by the name of _____ went to _____ — that is, not to *open* the door so late at night, but to ask who was there. And when she knew Peter’s _____, she opened not the gate for _____, but ran in and told the others. The others, not ready for so wonderful an answer to their prayers, said to Rhoda, “Thou art _____.” And when Rhoda continued to insist that it was true, they said “It is his _____” — thinking, that is, that Peter must already have been killed (Acts 12:13-15).

9. Peter, meanwhile, knowing that he had to hurry, continued _____. And when they finally opened the door and saw him, they were _____. So excited were they, that they must have all started talking at once, making it necessary for Peter to beckon to them with his _____ to hold their _____. Then after relating to them the story of his deliverance, and telling them to inform _____ and the other _____,

Peter _____ and went into another _____, probably away from Jerusalem (Acts 12:16, 17).

10. As soon as it was day, very likely at the time of the changing of the guard, there was no small _____ among the _____, what was become of _____. From the extra precautions that had been taken for this prisoner, they knew how important it was to Herod that Peter not escape. They knew that they would be held accountable. And so it was. After demanding that a search be made, and then questioning the soldiers (who were able to tell him nothing), Herod commanded that they be put to _____. More than likely, however, Herod knew that it was not the keepers but *God* with whom he had to do. For he abandoned his vexing of the church, and soon left Jerusalem and went down to _____, making that his place of residence (Acts 12:19).

11. Things did not go well for Herod in Caesarea. It seems first that the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon did something to offend Herod. The two cities however desired peace with Herod. They therefore made _____, the king's chamberlain, their friend (probably by a bribe) and through him hoped to get back in the proud king's favor (Acts 12:20).

12. Through Blastus the men of Tyre and Sidon were able to arrange a time when they could make their humble appeal to the king. According to other records we learn that it was on the second day of a great festival, which gave Herod opportunity to put on a display of his majesty. Arrayed in his _____ apparel, he sat upon his _____, and made an _____ unto all the admiring people. And, to flatter the king, the people all shouted, "It is the voice of a _____, and not of a man" (Acts 12:21, 22).

13. Most of those present were pagans, who were accustomed to treating emperors like gods. Herod, however, was the king of the Jews, and he well understood the blasphemy of such praise. Far

from discouraging it, he enjoyed it. Immediately therefore the angel of the Lord _____ him, because he gave not _____ the _____. And he was eaten of _____, which began at once to attack his body, and, as we learn from other historical records, after five days of excruciating pain, he gave up the _____ (Acts 12:23).

14. By contrast, the Word of God _____ and _____. While the enemies of the church perish, the church thrives (Acts 12:24).

15. It was about this time that the Holy Spirit instructed the church in Antioch to _____ Barnabas and Saul for the special _____ whereunto I have _____ them. The work to which the Spirit referred was a mission to the Gentiles. Antioch is therefore the first church to send out missionaries with the definite purpose of spreading Christianity among the unconverted and establishing churches. Called thus by the Holy Spirit, Barnabas and Saul were publicly ordained by the church, in a service during which the leaders _____ and laid their _____ on the two men (as the church's official ordination of them to the office assigned to them by the Spirit). How seriously this was all taken by the church is evident from the fact that the service was preceded by a public fast (Acts 13:2, 3).

16. Barnabas and Saul (with John Mark to their _____) then walked the 15 miles to _____ (Antioch's port, near the mouth of the Orontes River), and there they boarded a ship and sailed to the island of _____. They preached the Word in the Jewish synagogues at _____, the eastern port city, and then made their way through the isle to _____, the Roman capital, on the western side of the island (Acts 13:4-6).

17. In Paphos, none other than _____, the deputy (or governor) of the country, called for Barnabas and Saul and _____ to hear the Word of God. In the court of the governor,

however, was a certain _____, a false prophet, a _____, whose name was Bar-jesus. Combining religious doctrine and psychological trickery, this sorcerer had been able to establish himself in the court of the governor. Fearing that the conversion of the governor would result in the loss of his own influence in the court, Bar-jesus began to contradict the missionaries, in order if possible to _____ the deputy from the _____ (Acts 13:6-8).

18. Recognizing the work of Satan himself in this attempt of Bar-jesus to thwart the progress of the gospel, Saul, being filled with the _____, proceeded to denounce the sorcerer, addressing him as a child of the _____, and an enemy of _____. Saul then pronounced against him the judgment of God, that he would be _____, not seeing the sun for a season. The word of Saul was made immediately effective, so that the sorcerer had to look for someone to _____ him by the hand. And the miracle was used of the Lord to confirm the word of the missionaries, thus strengthening the faith of the governor, who, when he saw what was done, _____, being _____ at the doctrine of the Lord (Acts 13:9-12).

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. Herod Agrippa surely had no more appreciation for Judaism than he did for Christianity. Why then did he decide to favor the Jews and persecute Christians?
2. Read Mark 10:35-39. Do you see the connection between the prophetic word of Jesus in verse 39 and the deed of Herod recorded in Acts 12:2?
3. It is not at all likely that Herod expected Peter to try to break out of jail, or a mob of Christians to storm the prison and fetch him out. Why then did he take so many precautions to prevent the escape of this prisoner? In this connection, do you think that Herod really believed that Peter's escape was the fault of the guards? Why then did he command that the guards be executed?

4. How can you account for Peter's apparent peace of mind during the night before his trial by Herod?

5. How do you account for the fact that, with so many guards stationed in and around the prison, there was no interference with Peter's departure?

6. Read Acts 12:4 and 18. If we assume that each quaternion was assigned to guard-duty for a quarter of the night, can you guess at what time the angel must have delivered Peter from the prison?

7. The last time apostles were miraculously delivered from prison they went right back to preaching in the temple (see Acts 5:17-21). Why was it right, this time, for Peter to go into hiding?

8. Many Roman emperors insisted that they be treated like gods. Why was King Herod smitten on the spot, for failing to give God the glory, while the emperors appeared to escape punishment, for doing the same thing?

9. Saul had known for a long time that he was appointed of the Lord to a special mission to the Gentiles. Read Acts 13:2, 3. Do you see, now, why he could not, earlier, have begun working as a missionary, simply on the basis of that appointment?

10. When Barnabas and Saul went to Cyprus, they began their work by preaching in Jewish synagogues. We will find that this in fact became their method of labor in every area where there were Jewish inhabitants. Do you see what practical advantages there were in going first to the synagogues? (That is, how could the native Jews *help* the missionaries?)

11. Saul called Bar-jesus a "child of the devil" (Acts 13:10). Was that language too harsh for a missionary of the gospel, or did it fit the circumstances? How did God use the opposition of the sorcerer for the advance of the gospel?