

International Bible Lessons Commentary

Acts 12:1-11

New International Version

International Bible Lessons

Sunday, November 1, 2015

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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, November 1, 2015**, is from **Acts 12:1-11**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** discusses *Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further* to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. If you are a Bible student or teacher, you can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Acts 12:1-11

(Acts 12:1) It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

King Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great. He sought the praise of people and popularity with the Jews, especially the religious authorities. After he began to notice the growing popularity of the apostles and the increase in the number of Christians, he began to persecute the Church. When he accepted the people's worship as a god, an angel struck him and he was eaten by worms and died in 44 AD.

(Acts 12:2) He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

King Herod had the opportunity to hear and believe the good news of Jesus Christ from many people. However, he chose to persecute Christians and even behead James the son of Zebedee, whose brother was John. Eventually, all of the apostles died a martyr's death except for James brother, John, who did suffer exile and wrote the Gospel of John, three letters in the Bible, and the Book of Revelation.

(Acts 12:3) When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

The Festival of Unleavened Bread was during the Passover, when Jesus was crucified some years earlier. Just as the Jewish leaders approved Jesus' death, so they approved James' death and the persecution of Christians. The political and religious leaders of the time conspired and united to stamp out Christianity, but the number of true Christian believers continued to increase.

(Acts 12:4) After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

Peter had escaped from prison before, so King Herod placed Peter under a heavy guard in prison. When the angel rescued Peter in a way in which the guards were completely unaware (probably by putting them into a deep sleep), Herod examined them and then executed the guards. Just as the high priests intended to murder Jesus after the Passover (until Judas offered to betray Jesus), so Peter was to be tried publicly and beheaded after the Passover (with the approval of the Jewish leaders).

(Acts 12:5) So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

The prayers of the Church made a difference in Peter's rescue and the Lord's plan for Peter's life meant Peter's martyrdom would be delayed until his work was done. Luke does not explain the complex relationship between the prayers of the Church and the plans of God. The Bible commands believers to pray for others, and Jesus expects believers to obey His commands. Later, tradition says Peter was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die as his Lord had been crucified.

(Acts 12:6) The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

God seemed to wait until the last moment before freeing Peter from prison, which gave Peter the opportunity to witness to the guards who would soon be executed. Two guards protected Peter from escape by being chained to him (one on each side). Two others guarded the door and gate to the prison. To remain alert, these guards worked in shifts of four at a time. All four guarding Peter would not have slept at the same time; so the angel must have made the guards unaware of what he was doing in helping Peter escape the prison. In later days, when Paul was in prison, he too was chained to guards so as not to escape custody. Peter prayed and remained unworried, so perhaps that is why he slept soundly between his two guards, even as the Church remained in prayer for him. Peter entrusted his life totally to Jesus and His will for his life.

(Acts 12:7) Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

The angel freed Peter from his physical chains; whereas, Jesus can free people from their spiritual chains to the devil and sin. The guards may have been put into a trance, but the angel also needed to contend with demons who wanted Peter beheaded (though Luke did not mention demons, demons can be real opponents), so speed may have been essential to avoid demonic interference. Demons can detain or interfere with the work of angels; for example, consider Daniel's experience: "Then he continued, 'Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia'" (Daniel 10:12-13). Peter was sleeping so soundly that it was difficult for him to wake up, and the angel had to tell him step-by-step what to do to escape. Peter's chains fell off his wrists without needing a key to unlock them, because the supernatural is greater than the natural as created by God.

(Acts 12:8) Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him.

Later, Peter realized he was not dreaming but was actually escaping with the help of an angel. Perhaps for this reason and others, the angel needed to give Peter step-by-step orders for dressing to escape quickly. The angel gave Peter specific, practical instructions to dress for an escape from prison, taking all of his possessions with him. Peter did not design or plan his escape; his escape was totally in the hands of God and the angel God sent to release him.

(Acts 12:9) Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.

Luke emphasized that Peter's escape was totally in the hands of God; Peter was not actually aware that he was escaping until afterwards. Even as we remember some of our dreams, so Peter with the Holy Spirit's help remembered the details of his "vision" that was actual "reality." Peter simply did what the angel said and followed him. If he had refused to obey in any detail, he would not have escaped or the angel may have needed to force him to escape and do what he said, even as the angels had to forcibly lead Lot and his family out of Sodom because they kept delaying. Blessedly, Peter cooperated with his angelic visitor. Certainly, God's kingdom is greater than any human government, and God's will, purposes, and power can overrule any human authority.

(Acts 12:10) They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Peter's story accounted for the placement of all four guards who worked in shifts. The gate to the city opened by itself and Peter walked the length of one street before the

angel disappeared without a word. The Holy Spirit remained within Peter as a guide and the angel may have remained invisible but near Peter in order to protect Peter from both seen and unseen enemies.

(Acts 12:11) Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.”

The Jewish leaders and King Herod had hoped to do evil, but the Lord prevented them from fulfilling their evil plans, which the Lord can still do today. The Lord may prevent evils greater than believers can conceive, even in their own actions and lives. What was impossible physically for Peter or the Church to do, God did physically through an angel in answer to many prayers, prayers that might have made possible the timely release of the angel to save Peter (similar to the case of Daniel noted above). Prayers can achieve the physically impossible and what is impossible for us to do ourselves. Sometimes our prayers can prevent others from doing evil, and help us overcome our temptations.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why do you think James was executed by Herod?
2. Why do you think Peter escaped execution by Herod?
3. When something seems impossible, why do you think it is important for the Church to pray anyway? Give a reason for your answer.
4. What are some opportunities Peter would have had while in prison?
5. What are some specific requests of the Church in prayers that may have helped Peter see and take advantage of his opportunities while in prison?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.
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