

Title: Jail-break!  
Text: Acts 12  
Theme: the cost and thrill of following Jesus  
Series: Acts  
Prop Stmtnt: You ought to follow Jesus because he cannot be stopped

This week I stopped at one of my favorite little Chinese restaurants for lunch and at the end opened my fortune cookie. For the first time that I can ever remember, there was no fortune in my fortune cookie. Do you know what that means? Nothing! Absolutely nothing. Even if there was a fortune in my cookie, it would still mean, absolutely nothing because it is not God's Word. Well, we are about to open God's Word and we are about to read what he says about our world and about our lives and this means everything. Let's read and listen as if our souls depended on it, because they do.

Read Text:

When I was a boy, my family had a French poodle that my dad named Louie. Since many of the kings in France were named Louie, it fit. Well, during this era, it seems that all of the kings in Israel are called Herod. Well, it didn't last as long as Louie the XVIII, but there were 4 generations of Herods who ruled and during the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, there were two Herods who were half-brothers who ruled different regions in the area at the same time. When you are reading the NT and it seems that there is always a king named Herod who is killing somebody or trying to kill somebody, you are right. This Herod is Herod Agrippa I, which means that there is a Herod Agrippa II who we will meet later on.

The chapter begins with the death of James at the hand of Herod and ends with the death of Herod at the hand of God. At the beginning the preachers of God's Word are bound and at the end the Word is obviously unbound. In the beginning, it appears to be dangerous to be a Christian. In the end it is obvious that you are only safe if you are one and it is eternally dangerous not to be one. But why? Why this story and why did Luke include it here? Yes, this is an amazing story of the rescue of Peter, the power of prayer and the hand of God in deposing a wicked ruler. If I am teaching our elementary kids and I get to teach this lesson, I am really excited because this is a lot of fun.

But, there is a reason why Luke is telling us this account at this point in this book. Before Jesus ascended he commissioned his disciples to take the gospel and plant churches in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. Luke follows that story line. He begins with Peter and Jerusalem, and then gets into Judea, and Samaria. But, now the focus is shifting from Jews to Gentiles and from Jerusalem to Antioch and from Peter to Paul. And this is more than an amazing story about a jailbreak. This chapter tells us why Peter had to leave Jerusalem and it also includes two other interesting pieces that will factor in the rest of the book, such as, the famine relief mission of Paul and the recruiting of Mark. The Spirit of God is taking the message of Christ and the mission of the church to the ends of the world because he is calling people from every tribe, language and nation to be one people, one nation and one kingdom. Every local church is supposed to point to this, represent this and pursue this goal.

This story all by itself is a reminder that you ought to follow Jesus because he cannot be stopped. But, when you see this chapter in the flow of history, that truth is only louder. The death of James had to seem like a devastating blow that the early church would never recover from. But, that it is not the case. James is fine. Herod? Not so much.

### 1. **Following Jesus carries a cost.** (1-17)

Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great reigned from 37 – 44 AD. Some say from 41-44 AD. There is not that much recorded about his reign as it was not very long. He was politically connected because he was boyhood playmates with some of the men who became Emperors of Rome and because of that, he was able to basically piece together his grandfather's kingdom, which he ruled for a short time. You may remember that Herod the Great was not a Jew. Neither was Herod Agrippa I. It is very difficult for anyone, even a king to stay in power if the people turn against you. The early church had enjoyed a season of rest after the initial outbreak of persecution following Stephen's death, but that all changed when Herod Agrippa I came into town. V.2 links his persecution to the pleased response of the Jewish officials, so I think we can assume that Herod was politically motivated to do some things to get the favor of the people on his side. He arrests James and executes him, probably by having him beheaded.

#### A. **Your life is not your own, yet you are free.** - James

James is executed and Peter is delivered, in fact this is the second time Peter is delivered from prison by an angel. So, what gives? This James was the brother of John, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus and part of the three (Peter, James and John) who were very close to Jesus. Now, let's go back for a second to something I said earlier. Contemporary Christianity (much of which is not Christianity) presents God and the church as being here to help life go right. So, when you are considering whether or not to follow Jesus, you ask the question, what's in it for me? How does this help me? Well, James and his brother John were asking that question too and they asked Jesus if he could help them get their best life now. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left." Do you remember what Jesus said? "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" They assured him that they were, though they had no idea of what was going to happen. They had no idea that Jesus was talking about his suffering and his death and that everyone who follows Jesus needs to realize that following Jesus means to be willing to lay down your life for him if need be. Following Jesus means that you follow Jesus. Your life is not your own. If your death advances the cause of the gospel, so be it. The gospel is bigger than your life. In that conversation in Mark 10, Jesus told James and John that they would suffer for him. They did not seem to grasp that in the moment, but James probably reflected on that conversation later. His execution was at the hand of a wicked man, yet as we will see, permitted by a Sovereign God for purposes that were probably not fully understood.

What I have just described to you is considered by some to be abusive. God allows, even ordains suffering for the advancement of his kingdom. I say that it does because that is how the Bible presents it. We know this because the suffering of Jesus produced the glory of our salvation. Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him. Do you know what that joy was? It was seeing you and you and you come to faith in him and made members of his family. The

death of Christ paid the penalty for our sin. Suffering is real, but so is the joy and in fact the joy is bigger than the suffering. Romans 8 says, I do not consider the sufferings of this present age to be able to be compared to the glory that will follow. The suffering of James was real. We do not minimize suffering. I do not say that without feeling nor does God present it that way. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He feels our infirmities. He knows our sorrows. He carried our griefs. But, he also does something with and through the tragedies in our lives. Just as the tragedy of the death of Christ was full of meaning, our tragedies are not meaningless. Our tragedies have eternal value because God uses them to carry out his plan. Some, like James are arrested and executed. Some, like Peter are arrested and set free.

### **B. Your life is not your own, yet you are responsible. - Peter**

Herod got some good political mileage out of James' execution so he goes after Peter. Herod also had an army commander named Silas, who, for whatever reason, was arrested by Herod and thrown into prison. We know from Silas that the condition of the prison was bad. It was probably located in the bowels of Herod's palace on the west side of the city. But, wherever it was, Peter was held captive, in chains, and well-guarded. Verse 4 leads us to conclude that Peter was in prison for 7 days during which time he was guarded by 4 rotating groups of 4 soldiers, 16 in all. At night, Peter is shackled to two soldiers. Peter is sleeping in between 2 soldiers. Peter is sleeping!! He is supposed to die the next day and he is sleeping. But, don't forget that back in Acts 5, Peter and John had been thrown into prison before and were set free by an angel. So, Peter has some experience with this and is obviously not too concerned. There are 2 more soldiers guarding the door of the prison. If someone tried to rescue Peter, they would kill him. There is no way out. Well, unless of course an angel of the Lord shows up again. The dark prison is now full of light. Peter, however is sleeping so hard, the angel has to slug him. Seriously, the word does not mean gently arouse, it means to get popped a good one. Notice that the angel does what Peter cannot do, but the angel does not do what Peter can do. Peter could get up, but he couldn't make the chains fall off. The angel took care of that. Peter could get dressed and get his sandals on, but he couldn't get past the guards and through the gate on his own. The angel took care of that too. But, once in the city and out of the prison, the angel disappeared. Now what? Peter heads for Mary's house. He assumes that Christians are there, and they are. They are praying for Peter's release. He is supposed to be executed in a few hours and they are praying.

So, here these believers were doing what they could do, which was pray, and trusting God to do what they could not, which was get Peter out of jail. Did they pray for James? Probably. Did it work? Not how they wanted, but that decision is not up to them. Prayer is our humble response to God's command to trust him no matter what.

What happens next is a bit comical, but totally understandable. There are times when God does not answer our prayers the way we want, and we surrender to that. There are other times when God does, and we act as if it is impossible. Peter is knocking at the gate, which means he is outside and feeling a little exposed. The guy just broke out of Alcatraz. Who knows how long before the guards start freaking out – right? The servant girl, Rhoda hears the knocking, recognizes Peter's voice and instead of letting him in, she is so excited she runs back into the prayer meeting to let them know that Peter is there. They, of course, do not believe her. Look girl, Peter is in prison, that's why we are praying. She kept insisting that it was Peter, and Peter

kept knocking (the gate was obviously locked). I know that Rhoda is an easy target, but in her defense, as the servant girl, she may have been under orders NOT to let anyone in, for fear for their lives. Well, like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn showing up at their own funeral, here is one way to break up a prayer meeting. And they would never forget this.

## 2. **Following Jesus is amazing.** (7-17)

It is not always amazing like this. But God has done enough of these things to let us know that He can. It is never an issue of God's ability or availability. It is an issue of God's purposes. Our response is to trust. Peter would never forget this.

When Bobby was 16 he wanted to get his driver's license, but he wasn't ready. He had not learned out to parallel park and we didn't have those self-parking cars (we had a van), and this was back when proficiency at parallel parking was a requirement for your license. I had tried to teach him, but he really didn't want to learn and I was tired of forcing the issue. If you don't want to listen you can find out the hard way. If he failed, which he was going to, he could simply pay for the next one. This would be a good life lesson. We arrived at the location for the test and the instructor came over to the van and said to Bobby, "Look, it's so windy today, I can't get the poles for the parallel parking to stay up. What if we just skip that part and I will give you credit for it? Is that ok with you?" I'm like, hey, I can hold pole, you can hold a pole, that's alright." I didn't do that. Bobby just said with a very straight face, "That would fine sir." Then he looked at me and smirked. And I said, "Look, if you ever doubt the existence of God, remember this moment, because this is all Him."

I have a list of stories that I want to hear Peter tell when I get to heaven and this one is at the top. In the years to come, Peter would see more things and eventually would be arrested and not released. But, no matter what he would ever face, he could remember this night, along with walking on the water, catching all those fish, seeing the empty tomb and then seeing Jesus, and know. It's really worth it. Whatever Jesus calls you to do it, it is worth it.

But, what is true for Peter is true for Rhoda and for the other believers. Here is a servant girl. Rhoda. I wonder what her story is. Rhoda is in the Bible! She got a front row seat on what God was doing. Isn't that beautiful? That is what we get to witness and be part of. Imagine after the death of James, you hear that Peter has now been arrested and the date for his execution is set and you get word that there is a prayer meeting at Mary's house and you wonder, what's the use. It didn't work for James. You'd be grateful that you went, wouldn't you? You cannot predict what God is going to do, but you are invited to participate in it. And when you see it first hand, it is just amazing.

## 3. **Not following Jesus carries a cost.** (18-23)

There are a number of stories in the NT that involve soldiers who think they are in charge, but really aren't. Soldiers arrest Jesus in the Garden. Soldiers beat Jesus and crucify him. Soldiers guard the tomb. An angel freaks them out. Now soldiers are guarding a prison and have no clue (and no explanation) as to what happened. Later on, soldiers will arrest Paul and Silas and an earthquake about destroys the jail. You start to see a little theme don't you? Be careful who you

are trying to guard. This is, however, a major embarrassment for Herod. He was counting on this to get some favor with the Jews and now there is simply no explanation. He orders them to be executed. But, the story is not done.

There are plenty of stories of kings in the Bible who think they are in charge, but are not. Even when you are “in charge” you are not really in charge, therefore your sense of freedom is not for long. The people of Tyre and Sidon were on his bad side and through some back door diplomacy, they were trying to make amends with Herod. So, Herod, decides to pump up his fragile little ego by giving a speech that the audience goes over the top about declaring that he sounds like a god and not a man. Herod is eating up. But Herod is on a leash and God yanked it and said, “That’s enough.” Now something else is eating him up. The description is graphic in order to reinforce the point that Herod, is just a man. Isaiah the prophet said, “*Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?*” (Isaiah 2.22) Later in Isaiah 14.11, Isaiah taunts the ruler of Babylon with even more graphic language. What is the point? No one can stop death. Herod is not worth being afraid of, nor any other ruler or authority. They do not last. Jesus does. If you don’t follow Jesus, you will follow yourself or someone else who cannot save nor stop death. Follow the one who overcame death.

#### 4. **The Word wins.** (17, 24-25)

His Word will always win. James died, but gospel kept going. If you are going to live, live for something. And if you are going to live for something, live for what matters. Everything else is a waste.