

# Acts: Chains Loosed and Doors Opened

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer of Illumination

Living God, as you gathered us in the wilderness and led us to a land flowing with milk and honey, gather us before your Word and lead us to your wisdom that we might be nourished and equipped to follow your Son along this Lenten path. Amen.

### Background

King Herod Agrippa stumbled across something very interesting: it was politically expedient for him to put to death Christian leaders in Jerusalem. He turned his eyes first to the disciple James, the brother of John. Herod had him ruthlessly executed by the sword. Herod's approval ratings with the religious leadership went through the roof. Why stop there?

It was time to go to the top of the Most Wanted List—the Apostle Peter. Peter is arrested and it's the night before his execution.

Two all-night vigils are going on simultaneously:

- 4 groups of 4 Roman soldiers are keeping watch over prisoner Peter.
- And the church, praying fervently for the safety and the rescue of Peter.

### Scripture: Acts 12:6-17 (NRSV)

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel." Meanwhile Peter

continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed.

He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, "Tell this to James and to the believers." Then he left and went to another place.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

*read on ...*

## SERMON – Acts: Chains Loosed and Doors Opened

I've had one brush with the law in my life. It was my sophomore year in high school. My parents were out of town at a Christian conference. My youngest sister Karen, a recent college graduate at the time, was entrusted to watch over me while our parents were gone. I begged and pleaded for her to let me go to my friend Mike Berg's house for the evening. She had me promise that I wouldn't get into trouble. I readily assured her—she could trust me.

Karen graciously relented and let me go. After playing nerf basketball for a while, Mike and I got bored. Why don't we steal a street sign? Good idea!

Well, Mike got his "no parking sign" successfully and now it was my turn. I fumbled in the dark with the wrench. Righty-tighty, lefty-loosey. And suddenly there was a bright light.

And it was no angel. It was a police car shining its spotlight on me. Caught red handed with the smoking wrench. I looked over at Mike. He looked at me—and ran.

The officer took me in the back seat of his patrol car and off we went on the "drive of shame" to the police station. It didn't take water-boarding to get me to give up the identity of my partner in crime. Another police car was soon waiting at Mike's home for when he decided to return.

Name? John Tittle. Tittle...that name sounds familiar... You don't happen to you have a sister named Ann, do you? "Yes, officer." I went to high school with your sister. What's she doing these days? "Well officer, she's a missionary in Southeast Asia," I said sheepishly.

As you can imagine, my sister Karen was rather shocked to receive a phone call from the police informing her that she needed to pick up her brother from the police station. On the second "ride of shame" back home in our red Toyota Tercel with stick shift, she was speechless, yet surprisingly gracious to me—considering she had me swear up and down that I wouldn't get into any trouble.

When my parents came home from the Christian conference my dad sat me down for a talk. Dad, I'm sooo sorry. He asked if was going to try anything like that again. No Dad, never again. I've learned my lesson. He smiled, laughed his warm laugh, and hugged me. I was able to escape not only jail time, but being grounded by my parents.

Our story this morning is from Acts, and it should put a smile on your face. No doubt—it's a serious and dangerous time for the church, but there's some comic relief in the midst of it. Peter may have been imprisoned in the [Antonia Roman Fortress](#), pictured here. His right hand, handcuffed to one Roman soldier, and his left handcuffed to a second Roman soldier. Peter slept like a baby the night before his execution. He had a clear conscience and a quiet confidence.

It was the season of Passover—this is important. Passover was a night of deliverance from captivity for God's people. Tonight would be Peter's own personal Passover. An angel of the Lord appeared and the dark, dank prison cell was ablaze in light. It wasn't an angel of death, like on the first Passover night in Egypt—but an angel of life. The angel slipped the Roman guards an Ambien. The soldiers kept "sawing logs" through it all.

Our translation says the angel “tapped” Peter on the soldier, but the Greek actually says he “struck” Peter. The chains fell away. Peter, still groggy from sleep, is ordered like a child by the angel to wake up, put his clothes and shoes on, and follow the leader in their escape from Alcatraz. But the angel’s instructions also sound strikingly familiar to the instructions given at Passover in [Exodus 12:11](#). Have your belt fastened and sandals on your feet.

Peter thinks it’s all a dream—that he’ll wake up in the morning in the same prison cell for his impending execution. But not today. Yes, he would later be executed, but not tonight. Tonight, the angel would miraculously rescue him from King Herod’s clutches. God heard the church’s prayers.

Peter and the angel safely made it past the Roman guards and down the seven steps of the prison. And then the final impenetrable iron gate mysteriously opened on its own. The Greek word used is [“automatos.”](#)

Outside the prison, Peter comes to his senses and the angel disappears. It wasn’t a vision. He’s a free man. But here’s the kicker. Peter miraculously slipped through the chains, the doors, and the Roman guards, but he can’t get through the door to the church’s prayer meeting for him!

The servant girl Rhoda in her excitement forgets to open the door for poor Peter who is out in the cold and knocking in the dark. It’s a hilarious role reversal of St. Peter at the pearly gates! This time, he’s the one not let in! Not only that, the church has been praying for Peter and their prayers have been answered, but they refuse to believe it. It gets even better. The angel is no longer with Peter at the door of the house, yet the church thinks that it’s not Peter, but an angel at the door.

FINALLY, after their debates about hysterical slave girls and if guardian angels really do look like the person they’re supposed to be watching, they actually check the door to see if it’s Peter or not. Surprise! Peter, what are you doing here??!! Peter motioned for them to be quiet—and then he shared about his miraculous prison break.

But it was time to move on. Peter still needed to run from King Herod Agrippa, and so the apostle mysteriously went “somewhere else.” This is the second to last time Peter appears in Acts. He ministers some in Jerusalem, additional surrounding areas, and even Rome—where he is later executed.

James, the brother of Jesus, now takes the mantel of leadership in the Jerusalem church. Following Jesus is a wonderful life, but it’s also a risky one. You won’t always be liked by everyone. You’ll face hardship and opposition in your life. I absolutely love this story in Acts because it shows our humanity, that we, people of faith are still often clueless, we’re kind of fumbling along, muddled, half-believing as to what God is doing in our midst.

And yet, God is still at work.  
God loves us through it all, works despite us.  
God even smiles on us.

Sometimes we need to spiritually pinch ourselves to remember we’re not dreaming, that God is doing amazing things in the real world. Other times we need to be motioned to silence and to be still and to listen. We also on occasion need a divine nudge, maybe even a heavenly two-ba-four

applied to the side of our heads. All to help us pay attention! Watch closely! Follow God's lead in your life. Get out of that open cage of fear. Don't sleepwalk through life. God is on the move and if we don't keep following, don't lag behind.

We're always playing catch up to our Go-Before God. One of the best ways for us to stay spiritually awake, and following in the footsteps of Christ, is to pray. James, the brother of Jesus, says in his letter, "The prayer of the righteous person is powerful and effective." I believe in the power of prayer. "Coincidences" happen more when we pray. Whenever the church is praying in Acts—look out! God is about to work.

It's the same today. When facing hard times—pray. I want to pray more in my life. I want us at Immanuel to pray more. We've got to be a community defined by prayer. The prayers of the saints thwarted Herod's power. Immanuel, let's stay humble too. Learn what not to do from King Herod Agrippa.

Later, we learn from Acts and the historian Josephus that Herod was later at the [amphitheater at Caesarea Maritima](#), pictured here. He brokered peace and was there to ratify the treaty. Josephus said he wore a dazzling silver robe that sparkled in the sun. The crowds declared, "Herod, you are a god, not a man." He accepted their flattery, and right then and there in that theater he was struck with a malady and eventually died. This is a warning for leaders and tyrants everywhere—stay humble. Give glory to God—no matter how great you are, even if you're Herod the Great.

To close, I'd like you to think about your life.

- What do you find most confining, most imprisoning in your life right now?
- What personal Passover do you need?
- A bad habit that's teetering on becoming an addiction?
- An unhealthy relationship?
- Trouble you've gotten into?
- Debt? Trapped in a job situation?
- Are you feeling spiritually stifled?
- Trapped by fear? Confined by a health problem?

I want to tell you this morning: Jesus is the key. He has the power and the desire to loosen your chains and open doors for you. The resurrected Jesus had power not only the apostles, but for us today.

God answers prayer in surprising ways. Sometimes God calms the storm we're in. Other times he calms us in the storm. He's the one who has power over wind and wave. Either way, look to Jesus—he's the key to loosen our chains, to unlock bolted doors, so that we can be free to serve.

**Amen.**

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