



PRISON BREAK

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I need a volunteer who has never seen one of these little tubes before. Aren't they fun? They're really lightweight and colorful. Go ahead and stick your fingers in the ends and see if you can make them touch each other. This is called a finger trap. Some people call them finger handcuffs. If you want to know why, go ahead and pull your fingers back out.

Are you stuck? Pull a little harder. No luck? Hmm. Well, keep working at it and I'll tell you how to get out after church is over. Just kidding! Here's the trick: You just push instead of pull. It seems like it is impossible to escape these things, but in reality, it's very easy.

Kids, if you hang with me through the sermon this morning and fill in all the blanks in your bulletin, you can go home with your very own finger trap. It's a little way to remind you of the story we're going to talk about today. It's an escape story that looks impossible, but ended up being incredibly easy, because God is the one who did it.

Acts 12:1-17

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

That's a lot of information in just a couple verses, so before we go any further, let's stop and talk about that for a minute.

Imagine it being a hundred years from now, taking a quiz in school where you're asked which Bush was in the White House 100 years ago. You wouldn't be sure which President George Bush they were talking about, since there's been more than one. It's kind of like that in the politics of Jerusalem when it came to Herods. You read about several different Herods in the Bible. This King Herod is the grandson of the King Herod who was ruling when Jesus was born. He was only in power for about three years, and he was very politically ambitious. He would work any angle to his own advantage.

He definitely wanted to stay in the good graces of the Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees. So when they were unhappy with Christians, Herod saw an opportunity to earn some brownie points. He began arresting Christian leaders.

He even killed the first of the twelve disciples to be killed – James the brother of John. James had been one of the first disciples Jesus asked to follow him. He and John had been recruited right after Peter and his brother Andrew. They were like the fantastic four. Jesus had even nicknamed James and John the “Thunder Twins.” But Jesus had also predicted that they would be killed:

Mark 10:39

You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with.

James was definitely one of the key personalities in that early church, so his death would have been devastating to morale. When Peter was arrested after that, everyone feared the same thing would happen to him. It seems Herod gave them good reason to be afraid.

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.

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Look at this building. Do you know what it is? Would you guess that's a prison? Believe it or not, that's where they keep some of the criminals in Australia. That's nicer than some people's apartments! It's a far cry from what prison was like for Peter. Here are some pictures of prisons from that time. They were dark, damp places made of cold stone. You were cut off from the world. Peter hadn't even had a trial yet, so he had no idea how long he would be in there.

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.

Herod was taking no chances with his prize prisoner. Peter was a real catch. If killing James had been a popular move, killing Peter would be even more so, because Peter was the clear leader of the Christians in Jerusalem.

I need another volunteer to come up here. [Put shackles on feet] Great. Oh – wait. Ed's got the other piece we need. Would you mind walking over there and getting that bag from him? Could you bring it back here? Perfect. [Put handcuffs on] How does that feel? Should we go out and play some catch?

What are chains for? To slow you down and keep you in one place. They're heavy. They're uncomfortable. They remind you that you're not really free.

You can go sit down. Does anybody have a key?

Peter is not going anywhere anytime soon. He's not only chained – He has a guard on either side of him to make sure he doesn't try anything. Talk about stressful. The next day he will be tried and probably executed. I'm sure he was thinking about what they had done to his friend. My stomach would be in knots. But what's Peter doing? He's sleeping like a baby! In the middle of his worst crisis, Peter has enough peace in his heart and mind that he can actually rest without being worried. **God breaks the power of our stress.**

Philippians 4:6-7

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs, and don't forget to thank him for his answers. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will keep your thoughts and your hearts quiet and at rest as you trust in Christ Jesus.

God takes the stress out of stress. That doesn't mean he always changes the situation. Scott has a song that says "Sometimes he calms the storm, other times he calms the child." Sometimes he brings peace in the middle of the stress, even when the circumstances haven't changed at all.

What makes you stressed out? Tests at school? Being sick? When there's fighting in your family? When somebody intimidates you? When you're trying something new? God is right there with you in the middle of whatever you're going through. We forget that sometimes. But to invite Jesus into your life means you have him with you all the time. And he said in the Bible "I will be with you always." That includes the hard times. Especially the hard times. God said this in the book of Isaiah:

Isaiah 43:1-3

*Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you.
I've called your name. You're mine.
When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you.
When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
it won't be a dead end —
Because I am GOD, your personal God,
The Holy of Israel, your Savior.*

We can have peace like Peter when we remember that God is sitting right there with us in whatever dark place we find ourselves. He will never abandon us. He is the God who takes stress out of stress.

Peter didn't have to stay there forever.

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.

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. 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. 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.

God breaks the chains that hold us back. Isn't that amazing? In fact, some people might think it's a little too amazing. Could that REALLY have happened, or did somebody make up this story? Even Peter had a hard time believing it. He thought it was all a dream and that he'd wake up soon. But it was real.

The man you see in this video goes by the name Brother Yun. He used to be a leader in a house church in China. It's very hard to be a Christian in China. The government has put thousands of Christians in prison for believing in Jesus, just like authorities did back in Bible times. Brother Yun was put in jail several times and even tortured. Then in 1997, he was put in jail for what looked like would be the rest of his life. But the church was praying, just like the church was praying for Peter. In fact, they were praying, "God, do something like you did in the book of Acts."

On May 5, 1997, Brother Yun was reading his Bible in his cell and came across this verse in Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 15:21

I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel.

Immediately, he had a clear vision of his wife, and she was saying to him, "Why don't you open the iron door?"

So Brother Yun knocked on the cell wall to signal another pastor who was in the cell next to his. Then he asked the guard if he could go to the bathroom. The other pastor normally helped him get to the bathroom, since Brother Yun had been tortured and had a hard time walking. As soon as he came out of his cell, he whispered to Brother Yun, "You must escape!"

That was enough confirmation to Brother Yun, so he prayed, "Lord, you have shown me you want me to try to escape. So I will obey. But when the guards shoot me, please receive my spirit into your heavenly dwelling."

The Lord told him, "Yun, your prison is real. But I am the truth, and the truth will set you free."

He shuffled toward the first door on his floor, wondering how he would open it. Just as he got to it, another Christian prisoner was being brought back through. The guard with him got a telephone call right then, so Brother Yun kept walking straight through. He grabbed a broom that was standing there and began walking down to the next floor like

he was going to sweep the courtyard. There was a guard at the next gate, but Brother Yun heard the Holy Spirit say to him, “Go now! The God of Peter is your God!” And it was as if the guard didn’t see him at all.

He got down to the gate into the courtyard, which was normally the most secure, and it was standing open. Brother Yun abandoned his broom and strolled across the courtyard, expecting to be shot in the back. The main gate of the prison was standing wide open when he got there, so he walked right through.

Immediately a taxi pulled up, so he got in and sped off to the home of some Christian friends who hid him. Other prisoners ran to their windows and witnessed the entire escape. The author of Brother Yun’s biography confirmed the details with them before writing the book.

I share that story because I think it helps make Peter’s story seem more real. The God of Peter is our God. Can I get an Amen? Luke wasn’t just making up a legend. He was recording what really happened.

Most of us will never find ourselves in a prison like Peter’s. But all of us have been in a spiritual prison. Sin is like those shackles we looked at. Heavy. Uncomfortable. Keeping us from being free. The sin prison has a few different bars that make it hard to escape. Our bad habits we can’t seem to stop act like a prison. Maybe every time someone pushes your buttons you get angry and say things you regret. Afterwards you go, “Why did I do that again?” You fall into the same pattern again and again. The habits of sin can chain you to one spot.

Sometimes it’s the guilt and shame of sin that weighs us down like chains. We are trapped in our own past, living with sins like a guard on either side of us that remind us all the time we’ve done terrible things. They want us to believe there’s no way out and that God can’t really forgive us completely.

We can also feel trapped by fear and hopelessness. Maybe we’ve been hurt so bad by the sins of other people that we’re totally overwhelmed. But our God is the God of Peter. Can I get another Amen? He can set us free.

Peter had to live like what the angel said was true. He had to get up, get dressed and follow him out of the jail. Truth had to be lived to be appreciated.

That’s true for us as well. We have to live like what Jesus has done for us is true. He is saying to you this morning, “Get up. I’m getting you out of here. You are released by my power. Walk out of this dark place. Walk away from shame. Walk away from guilt and addiction and pain. Walk into new life and forgiveness and freedom. The chains that have held you down no longer have power.”

Galatians 5:1

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Jesus is the great chain breaker. We don't have to keep sinning. We don't have to keep feeling ashamed or trapped.

Peter walked right out the door of the jail, hardly even knowing if it was real.

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

If anyone ever thinks God has no sense of humor, they need to read this section of the Bible. Can't you just see Peter standing there knocking. Rhoda says, "Who is it?" "It's me Peter?" "No way!" "Yes, it's me." "WOOHOO! Hey everyone..." "No Rhoda – Rhoda...let me in. Rhoda?!" You know she never lived that one down. How ironic that Peter had no trouble getting through the doors of the prison, but he's locked out of his friends' house!

Rhoda wasn't very old. The word Luke uses to describe her is the word for a young girl. She was so excited about Peter being there, but nobody else believed her. Maybe they thought she was too young to really know what she was talking about. Whatever the case was they didn't take her seriously.

But Rhoda knew the truth. She had heard Peter for herself. There was no doubt in her mind. And she didn't just give up and go along with what everyone else was saying, even though that would have been easier. **God breaks the fears that shut us down.**

Have you ever been in a situation like that? One time when I was 18, I went to the ocean with some friends. No parents around, which meant we were feeling pretty free. One of my friends rented a really bad movie that I knew was wrong to watch. I also knew my friends wouldn't really care that it was wrong. That's kind of why they wanted to watch it in the first place. It's usually really hard for me to stand up to a crowd, but this was one time when I knew I had to follow my conscience, so I got up and walked into the

other room and shut the door. Choosing between truth and making other people happy was harder than I ever thought. My friends were so mad! But you know what? God gave me strength. And not very much time went by before my shut off the movie. Deep down, they knew what was right, too. They just needed somebody to be a little resistance.

Whether you're a kid or an adult, it's never fun to be the one to go against your friends. Sometimes being a Christian means taking a stand for something when nobody else believes you. But like we said earlier, God stays right with you in those moments. And it doesn't matter how old you are – God can communicate truth through you. Paul wrote to a young guy named Timothy and told him this:

1 Timothy 4:12

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

Rhoda stood her ground and won the group over in the end. She knew the truth and she stuck by it. God gave her courage, and he'll give you courage, too.

It's funny, isn't it? Here is this group of sincere Christians. They are praying their hearts out that God will help Peter. But when he did, they couldn't believe it. They never expected the kind of answer they got from God.

Sometimes we imagine that the first Christians in the Bible were somehow super believers. All these amazing things happened in their lifetime – miracles, healings, escapes. But they were just like us. I'm glad Luke records this incident, because we can see that they were human. They prayed like we do, desperate but not always daring to hope God will answer. Fortunately, **God breaks the limits we put on him.**

Isn't that good to know? I've read some authors who say the lesson here is that we should believe more and have greater faith in God. But I don't think this story is really about the church's lack of faith. I think it's about a God who did something amazing in spite of the fact that nobody was believing he could do it. It didn't depend on Peter being awake. It didn't depend on the church praying hard enough with just the right attitude. It depended on the awesome mercy and will of God. And if he wanted Peter out of that jail, it was going to happen and nobody could stop him. God answered beyond the expectations. And our God is the God of Peter. Amen!

God is just the same way with us. He is not limited by the fact that our prayers are pretty pathetic most of the time. Do you worry about saying just the right words or feeling a certain way when you pray. God answers out of his own grace and goodness, and he does so in a way that is over the top.

Ephesians 3:20

God can do anything, you know -- far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams!

I don't believe there are many coincidences recorded for us in the Bible. Every piece of Scripture has a purpose. So I don't think it's an accident that at the beginning of the story Luke tells us Herod had arrested Peter during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. That was another name for Passover. Unleavened bread is bread without yeast in it to make it rise. Back in Egypt, when God was about to rescue the Israelites from slavery, they had to eat in a hurry before they left, so there was no time to wait for bread dough to rise. It was such an incredible rescue that every year the Israelites remembered it by eating this feast where they had the same kind of bread – unleavened. God had instructed them saying:

Exodus 13:7-10

"Tell your child on that day: 'This is because of what GOD did for me when I came out of Egypt.'

"The day of observance will be like a sign on your hand, a memorial between your eyes, and the teaching of GOD in your mouth. It was with a powerful hand that GOD brought you out of Egypt. Follow these instructions at the set time, year after year after year."

So here is Israel, in the middle of another feast, celebrating God's power to save them. Here's King Herod, acting like Pharaoh, trying to keep one of God's people in chains. And God says, "I'm in charge. Not you. I am still able to rescue. Watch me." And right in the middle of a celebration of God's rescue back in Egypt comes a brand new show of his strength where he does the same thing all over again.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread marked another anniversary as well. It was the last meal Jesus ever had with his disciples. And he changed the meaning of it. He said it wasn't just for remember the Passover in Egypt – it was for remembering what he was about to do. When Jesus died on the cross, it was God's biggest rescue operation ever. Jesus was now the one who was going to set people free.

One time when Jesus was in a synagogue, he read these words:

Luke 4:18-19

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

We're about to celebrate the Lord's Supper together – our own version of the same Feast. We're saying "This is because of what God did for me."

What is it that you're needing God to do for you? Do you need him to break the power of your stressful situation, to give you calm in the storm? Do you need to be taken out of a

prison you're in? Do you need him to give you courage to stand up for him and do what's right? Or do you need him to answer a prayer that's too big for you to even pray right now?

Everyone should have found a paper shackle on their chair this morning. Go ahead and break it open. It's paper. Probably the easiest shackle ever to open. Now look at the back and read the verse:

Psalm 107:14-16

He led you out of your dark, dark cell, broke open the jail and led you out. So thank GOD for his marvelous love, for his miracle mercy to the children he loves; He shattered the heavy jailhouse doors, he snapped the prison bars like matchsticks!

Like matchsticks! The shackles you've been living with are no harder for God to break than it is for you to tear this paper.

In just a few minutes we're going to come and take communion, and when you come, I'd like you to bring your broken shackle up with you. There's a basket next to each station. As you come, I'd like you to have one of two statements in mind in your head.

Maybe you're needing God to bust you out of a trap you're in. As you take the bread and dip it in the cup, pray to him: "God, I need you to set me free from _____"
And fill in the blank.

Maybe you're not in that place. Then you can come in thankfulness and just say, "God, thank you for setting me free from _____" whatever it is, and celebrate your freedom in Christ.