

The Gospel to Antioch; an Angel Rescues Peter (Acts 11:19-12:25)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Review from Prior Lesson

- a. In the most recent lessons, we studied the account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and then shifted back to the ministry of Peter.
- b. We saw Peter raising Tabitha from the dead, and then preaching the gospel to the household of Cornelius, a Gentile Roman soldier.

II. The Message Spreads Throughout the Region; to Antioch

- a. Read **Acts 11:19-26**.
- b. Persecution that arose after Stephen's stoning in Jerusalem scatters the Christians throughout the region. This spreads the gospel to other areas.
 - i. Read **Acts 8:1-4**.
 1. After Stephen was killed, the disciples were scattered throughout the region "were scattered everywhere, and preached the word".
 2. Even martyrdom and persecution, as bad as they are, can be used by God to spread the kingdom message.
 - ii. Recall that Paul was traveling to Damascus (southern Syria) to persecute Christians there, when he had an encounter with Jesus.
 - iii. Gospel now spreads to
 1. Phoenicia, which is westward, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea;
 2. Cyprus, a large island in the sea, off the coast, where Barnabas was from (**Acts 4:36**); and
 3. Antioch.
- c. Significance of Antioch.
 - i. In northern Syria, on the Orontes River, about 15 miles (24 km) inland from the Mediterranean Sea.
 - ii. There were other places (such as Antioch in Pisidia, which we will encounter in the next lesson) that bear the name "Antioch", which also is the name of several rulers.

1. This Antioch is sometimes referred to as 'Antioch of Syria' or 'Antioch on the Orontes' to distinguish it from other cities bearing the same name.
- iii. Antioch was the capital of the Roman imperial province of Syria. Syria was the richest province in Roman Asia. Antioch was the third most important city in the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria) and had a large Jewish population.
- iv. Antioch was a large cosmopolitan city with people from many different nations represented. It was a major center for Christian missionary activity.
 1. All three of Paul's missionary journeys recorded in **Acts** (all going to the north and west) started from Antioch.
 2. Antioch also was a gateway to the east, being the western terminus of the old Silk Road network of land-based trading routes.
 - a. The Silk Road was the inland route to Persia, Armenia, India, Afghanistan, China and other parts of east and south Asia.
- v. Note that Ignatius (c. 35-105 AD), one of the earliest Christian writers outside of the New Testament, was bishop of the church in Antioch. He was condemned to death, sent to Rome by the emperor Trajan to be devoured by wild beasts in the arena, for refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods (and for teaching the same to others). Ignatius also had been a personal disciple of the apostle John.
 1. We have several short letters from Ignatius to various churches, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1.
- d. Note that Barnabas goes to Tarsus (hometown of Saul, in southeast Turkey) to bring Saul to Antioch. They then spend an entire year there teaching people in the church.
- e. The disciples are first called by the name "Christians" in Antioch.
 - i. "...And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." (**Acts 11:26**, NKJV)
 - ii. Ignatius, who was bishop of the church in Antioch, said that this designation was in fulfillment of a prophecy in Isaiah.
 1. "Let us therefore prove ourselves worthy of that name which we have received. For whosoever is called by any other name

besides this, he is not of God; for he has not received the prophecy which speaks thus concerning us: 'The people shall be called by a new name, which the Lord shall name them, and shall be a holy people.' (**Isaiah 62:2, 12**) This was first fulfilled in Syria; for 'the disciples were called Christians at Antioch,' (**Acts 11:26**) when Paul and Peter were laying the foundations of the Church."

- a. (Source: Ignatius of Antioch, *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, chapter 10; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 63)
2. Read **Isaiah 6:1-3** and **6:11-12**, which Ignatius referred to as prophecies that God's holy people would receive a new name (= *Christians*).

III. Christians in Antioch Give Aid to Jerusalem Christians

- a. Read **Acts 11:27-30**.
 - b. Agabus the prophet says there will be famine.
 - i. 'Worldwide' famine predicted.
 1. The people respond generously with a heart to help those in greater need.
 2. This response reminds me of several passages of Scripture:
 - a. Read **Matthew 24:45-51**.
 - i. The master departs and gives his servant instructions to feed his fellow servants while the master is away.
 - ii. The three parables that follow in **Matthew 25** (Ten Virgins, Talents, and Sheep/Goats) further illustrate this teaching.
 - iii. From the third story Jesus presents (the Sheep and the Goats), read **Matthew 25:31-46**.
 1. Jesus is looking for his followers to be looking out for the physical needs of "the least of my brothers".
- b. Read **James 2:8-26**.

- i. This teaching regarding “faith without works” specifically addresses loving others as we love ourselves, by helping brothers and sisters in need.
 - ii. James said, “I will show you my faith by my works”. (**James 2:18**)
 - c. Let us use this opportunity to take an inventory of our own lives.
 - i. **Question:** What can I do in my life to care for the needs of others?
 - ii. For us today in the US, we face food and energy prices rising, shortages, severe inflation and perhaps even a potential economic collapse.
 - 1. While we do not have someone like Agabus to tell us what is going to happen in advance, we need to have the same heart for others that the Christians of Antioch had.
 - 2. When challenging times come, we need to be especially attentive to the needs of others who are facing more challenging situations. That includes people in poorer parts of the world.

IV. Herod vs. Peter

- a. Read **Acts 12:1-4**.
 - i. Let us try to keep straight the various men in the New Testament named ‘Herod’. All were wicked men.
 - 1. *Herod the Great*, d. 4 AD (**Matthew 2**, tried to kill infant Jesus.)
 - 2. *Herod Antipas*, son of Herod the Great (married to Herodias, killed John the Baptist in **Matthew 14**; Jesus brought before him prior to crucifixion in Jerusalem, in **Luke 23**.)
 - 3. *Herod Agrippa I*, d. 44 AD (kills the apostle James and imprisons Peter, here in **Acts 12**)
 - ii. *James the brother of John* was killed by this Herod.
 - 1. This ‘James’ is one of the 12 apostles (**Matthew 10:2**). We will encounter the other famous New Testament ‘James’ later, the brother of Jesus.

- iii. Since Herod Agrippa's act of killing James pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter. It is not hard to imagine that Herod intended to kill him as well.
 - iv. Peter is put under extreme protective guard, involving four squads of soldiers.
- b. Read **Acts 12:5-19**.
- i. The storyline:
 - 1. Peter is under guard in prison.
 - 2. The church is concerned, and the Christians are praying constantly for Peter.
 - 3. Right before Peter is to be brought before Herod, Peter is asleep, chained between two guards.
 - 4. An angel appears, wakes Peter up and leads him out of the prison.
 - a. Peter thinks he must be dreaming.
 - b. Multiple extraordinary miracles are performed through this angelic appearance (light appearing in the prison, chains dropping, getting past guards, prison doors opening by themselves).
 - 5. Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where disciples are gathered praying. He knocks on the door of the gate.
 - a. This is the same John Mark who was closely associated with Peter. Later, he would write the **Gospel According to Mark**.
 - 6. A servant girl Rhoda comes to the door, excited to hear Peter's voice and announces to those inside that it is Peter.
 - a. They don't believe her.
 - b. This is even though they had been gathered together *praying for Peter's deliverance!*
 - 7. The next morning, when Herod discovers that Peter escaped, he has the guard questioned and orders that they be put to death.
 - ii. This account illustrates the power of prayer.

1. Notice that the entire church is constantly in prayer for Peter (**Acts 12:5**), and he finds them gathered praying. (**Acts 12:12**)
2. Recall the importance of prayer to the apostles.
 - a. It says in **Acts 6:4**, that the apostles delegated the business of waiting on tables to others, in order to devote themselves to “prayer and ministry of the word”.
 - i. Prayer was a top priority for the apostles!
 - b. The first description of the church includes devotion to prayer.
 - i. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (**Acts 2:42**, NKJV)
3. Read **James 5:16-18**.
 - a. This speaks of the power of the prayer of a *righteous* man.
4. **Challenge:** How intense is your own prayer life and your reliance on prayer and the power of God to intervene in a situation that appears hopeless?
 - iii. Appreciating the important role of angels.
 1. **Questions:** How important are angels in Scripture? How frequently are they mentioned in the Bible? How often do we think or speak about them? Why should *the angels* matter to us?
 2. **Question:** How far must one go into any of the gospels before angels are mentioned?
 - a. They are mentioned *in the first chapter* of each of the four gospels!
 - i. In **Matthew 1** and **Luke 1**, we see angels appearing to Joseph, Zechariah and Mary prior to the birth of Jesus.
 - ii. **Mark 1:13** says that while Jesus was in the Wilderness for 40 days, angels ministered to him.

- iii. In **John 1:51**, Jesus tells Nathaniel that he will see “the angels of God ascending and descending upon Son of Man”.
3. **Question:** What is the first mention of an angel in the Bible?
- a. In **Genesis 3:24**, after the Fall of Adam and Eve, it says that the Lord placed cherubim (members of an order of angels) with a flaming sword to guard the way to the Tree of Life.
 - b. Also, consider the book of Job, which many believe was the first book of the Bible written.
 - i. In **Job 1:6**, in the Hebrew text we have, it says that “the sons of God” (referring to the angels) came to present themselves before God, with Satan among them. In the Greek of the Septuagint text, it says “the *angels* of God” in that passage.
 - ii. In **Job 38:4-7**, in the LXX, it says that these same beings (angels / “sons of God”) were present and rejoicing *when the Lord made the stars* (pointing back to the events of the Creation account of **Genesis 1**).
4. **Question:** Where in the gospel story of the life and ministry of Jesus do we see angels involved? (**Answer:** *Practically everywhere*, from prior to His birth until after He ascends to heaven.) Places where angels appear or are spoken of include:
- a. To Zechariah, announcing the birth of John the Baptist. (**Luke 1**)
 - b. To Mary and to Joseph, announcing in advance the birth of Jesus. (**Matthew 1, Luke 1**)
 - c. To the shepherds in the field, announcing that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem. (**Luke 2**)
 - d. In the account of the temptation of Jesus, by Satan. (**Matthew 4:6, 4:11**)
 - e. In the teaching of Jesus, including in some of His parables.

- i. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, where after death, the souls of the departed are escorted by angels to Hades. (**Luke 16**)
 - ii. In the description of sorting out the righteous from the wicked in the kingdom, at the Day of Judgment, in the parable of the Wheat and Tares, and in the parable of the Dragnet. (**Matthew 13**)
 - iii. In explaining what it will be like at the resurrection of the dead, regarding marriage.
 - 1. “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are *like angels of God in heaven.*” (**Matthew 22:30**, NKJV)
 - iv. Regarding when the Second Coming will happen.
 - 1. “But of that day and hour no one knows, *not even the angels of heaven*, but My Father only.” (**Matthew 24:36**, NKJV)
 - f. Jesus tells Pilate that “more than 12 legions of angels” could have been provided by the Father, to rescue Him from the Romans. (**Matthew 26:53**)
 - g. When Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.
 - i. “Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him.” (**Luke 22:43**, NKJV)
 - h. After the resurrection of Jesus, at the tomb. (**Matthew 28:2-5, Luke 24:23, John 20:12**)
 - i. When Jesus ascends to heaven. (**Acts 1:10**)
5. **Question:** What is the significance of angels in the Old Testament? Do we find significant involvement of angels there, as well? Consider the following examples:
- a. In the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the rescue of Lot’s family. (**Genesis 19**)
 - i. Here we see angels involved in reconnaissance (spying), and bringing judgment from God.
 - b. In the story of Job, where they are described as “sons of God” who appear before the Lord. (**Job 1**)

- c. Angels represented in chariots of fire.
 - i. Elijah taken up to heaven (**2 Kings 2**)
 - ii. Elisha asks that God open his servant's eyes, to see the "horses and chariots of fire" surrounding them. (Read **2 Kings 6:8-18**)
 - 1. I find this an especially encouraging passage when I feel outnumbered by enemies. There are numerous spiritual forces arrayed around us, ready to join the battle on behalf of those who are righteous!
 - d. Hezekiah is in Jerusalem, which is surrounded and under siege by the Assyrians, and prays. God hears his prayer, encourages him through the words of the prophet Isaiah, and sends an angel to destroy the army of the Assyrians. (Read **2 Kings 19:14-36**)
 - e. In the account of Daniel warning Nebuchadnezzar, where an angel is described as "a watcher, a holy one from heaven". (**Daniel 4:13**)
 - f. In **Daniel 10:12-20**, an angel describes to the prophet how he has been engaged in warfare against the rulers of other lands and was aided by "Michael", another angel.
 - g. King David, the mighty warrior who "slew his tens of thousands" did not fear the lion nor the bear nor even the giant Goliath (**1 Samuel 1-18**). However, he was *stopped in fear at the sight of one angel* after David sinned by numbering the men of Israel. (Read **1 Chronicles 21:14-16**)
6. Some other places where angels are referred to in Scripture include:
- a. In **Jude**, the angels are referred to as the "holy ones" of the Lord.
 - i. "It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his *holy ones*....'" (**Jude 14**, ESV)

- ii. While some translations such as NKJV render this term “saints” (which makes us think of humans), it actually says “holy ones”, and in context (Jude quoting from the first chapter of the Book of Enoch), it is referring to the Lord coming with thousands of angels with Him.
 - b. In **1 Corinthians 11:10**, one of the reasons given for women covering their heads when they pray or prophesy is “because of angels”. (A remark that seems to make it clear Paul’s directive was not limited to that culture.)
 - c. In **Hebrews 12:18-28**, in describing the kingdom of God, it mentions the angels being present and an important part of that.
- iv. How we should view angels.
 - 1. While many today think of angels as cute and gentle figures with wings, that is not how men like Lot, Hezekiah and David saw them. Angels are mighty spiritual warriors with great power, to be feared by their opponents.
 - 2. As the US President has bodyguards (the Secret Service) and mafia leaders have personal bodyguards to protect them, I want to have angels as bodyguards on either side of me, offering spiritual protection!
 - 3. **Question:** What do we need to do in order to have angels protecting us in this way?
 - 4. Read **Psalms 34:7-8** (designated **Psalms 33:7-8** in the LXX):
 - a. “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him from his afflictions. The Angel of the Lord shall encamp around those who fear Him, and He will deliver them.” (**Psalms 33:7-8**, LXX, OSB)
 - b. Note that the expression “*the* angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament sometimes refers to the Son of God. In the LXX, there is no equivalent to our English “the” (the definite article) found here. It just says “angel of the Lord” in Greek. The translators have to decide whether to render this expression, in English, “*the* angel of the Lord” (suggesting that it might refer to the Son of God), versus “*an* angel of the Lord” (which could refer to an unspecified angel).

- c. The protection of God's spiritual forces is available to those who fear God!
 - i. Later in the same psalm, it further explains what it means to be living in the *fear of God*.
 - ii. (That includes keeping our tongues from evil, keeping our lips from deceit, seeking peace, shunning evil, doing good and living according to righteousness.)
 - d. Recall how Jesus and Peter admonished the disciples to fear God.
 - i. Jesus said: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather *fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*" (**Matthew 10:28**, NKJV)
 - ii. "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king." (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
 - e. Fear of God keeps people from sin, as the Lord said on Mount Sinai right after speaking the 10 Commandments. (**Deuteronomy 5:23-33**)
 - f. **Personal Observation:** One of the most disturbing things I have seen is when Christians who have been in the faith for many years lose their fear of God. As a result:
 - i. They become prideful and spiritually complacent.
 - ii. They drift into all kinds of sin.
 - iii. Their hearts become hardened.
 - iv. They also lose the spiritual protection of God's angels.
5. In the psalm that follows, we find another interesting insight regarding angels. Read **Psalm 35:1-6** (designated **Psalm 34:1-6** in the LXX).
- a. "Let those who seek my soul be dishonored and shamed; Let those who plot evil against me be turned backward and disappointed. Let them be like dust in the wind's face. And let the Angel of the Lord afflict

them. Let their way be dark and slippery, And let the Angel of the Lord pursue them.” (Psalm 34:4–6, LXX, OSB; corresponding to **Psalm 35:4-6** in Bibles based where Old Testament is based on the MT)

- b. Here we see David calling upon the Lord to send his angel to pursue and punish David’s enemies.
 - c. An old friend who was a Christian preacher remarked that his favorite curse against his enemies was based on this passage.
 - i. That was: “May the angel of the Lord pursue you down a dark and slippery path!”
 - d. In this passage, we see the angel called to go on *offense* in the spiritual war against our enemies, whereas in the prior psalm the angel was on *defense* (protecting the righteous person from harm).
6. **Hebrews 1** describes how much greater the Son of God is than the angels. In the midst of that discussion, we find a very encouraging statement about the role of angels in assisting us.
- a. [Referring to angels] “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth *to minister for those who will inherit salvation?*” (**Hebrews 1:14**, NKJV)
 - b. The angels are available *to help us* in the spiritual battles we are facing. I find that to be so encouraging!
 - c. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (**Ephesians 6:12**)
- v. Consider the statement about ‘*Peter’s angel*’.
1. “But they said to her [*referring to Rhoda, the servant girl*], ‘You are beside yourself!’ Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, ‘It is his angel.’” (**Acts 12:15**, NKJV)
 2. **Questions:** Are angels specifically assigned to each person? Are there really such things as ‘guardian angels’?
 - a. Consider also consider the following statement by Jesus:

- i. "Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven *their angels* always see the face of My Father who is in heaven." (**Matthew 18:10**, NKJV)
- b. From early Christian writer Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 195 AD:
 - i. "For regiments of angels are distributed over the nations and cities. And *perhaps some are assigned to individuals.*"
 - ii. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, book 6, chapter 17; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 517)
- c. From Origen, writing c. 225 AD:
 - i. "...to one angel the church of the Ephesians was to be entrusted; to another, that of the Smyrnaeans; one angel was to be Peter's, another Paul's; and so on through every one of the little ones that are in the church, for such and such angels as even daily behold the face of God must be assigned to each one of them; and there must also be some angel that encamps around about those who fear God."
 - ii. (Source: Origen, *De Principiis*, book 1, chapter 8; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 265)
- d. For more quotes from early Christian writers on this topic, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Angels / II. Guardian Angels'.

V. In the End, Justice is Served upon Herod

- a. Read **Acts 12:20-25**.
- b. An angel of the Lord strikes Herod dead, and he is "eaten by worms".
 - i. What a horrible and graphic way for this wicked man to die!