

Aim of lesson

To see how God rescues Peter from death, and how he can rescue us too.

Bible background

Acts 12:1-19.

Outline of lesson

Ask the class to look at the pictures of Herod, Peter and Rhoda in the workbook. How many differences can they spot between the two drawings of each?

Tell the class to consider, as you read Acts 12:1-19, the differences in feelings and attitude of the three characters from the beginning to the end of the reading. You may like to have different members of the class read the words of the different characters or read it yourself, stopping to ask questions about how the characters must have been feeling.

Herod

This is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. He was a friend of the emperors Caligula and Claudius. In AD 41, Claudius gave Agrippa dominion over Judea and Samaria (he was already tetrarch over Galilee and Peraea). He died in AD 44, so it is possible to say fairly confidently that these events happened at Passover time in AD 44.

Discuss together the character of Herod. Ask the class to consider what thoughts might be appropriate to write in the spaces above the two pictures of him. You may like to note that the chapter begins with Herod as king, plotting to kill members of the church, and ends with his own death. What Herod plans does not happen, but God's decisions are final.

Peter

Discuss how Peter might have felt when thrown into prison. James had been killed; there had been no miraculous escape for him, and Peter had been told by the Lord Jesus that he would be killed for Christ (John 21:18-19). He was sleeping in prison, so it would seem he was not worried; perhaps he had accepted that he would die. It was the Passover. He would have remembered another Passover some years before when he had seen his Lord die. Perhaps Peter thought of Jesus' words in Luke 21:12-19. They are very appropriate. Did Peter think of the church praying for him, and how they would be saddened by his death? He certainly seems surprised by his rescue. He is not expecting it and thinks he is dreaming. Have the class write appropriate thoughts for Peter before and after his rescue.

Rhoda

Discuss together how Rhoda might have felt while Peter was in prison. The first thoughts of Rhoda could be in the form of a prayer. She had probably prayed, along with the rest of the church, when James was arrested. Perhaps she had prayed for a miracle then to release him but she and all the church had had to accept that God's will is not always the easiest way. You may like to bring out here that God always hears and answers our prayers. We may not always like the answer. Accepting God's will, even when it is hard, is an important part of the discipline of a disciple. Rhoda's thoughts on seeing Peter alive and free seem to take her breath away. God's answer to their prayers this time was all that they could wish.

Now that the class have considered how God saved Peter from prison and death, ask them how he saves us. What 'prisons' does he save us from? – prisons of fear, sin and pointlessness. How does he save us from death?

Postscript – Herod's death

The Jewish historian Josephus described the death of Herod ('Antiquities of the Jews' – Book XIX, chapter 8) in a way that remarkably supports the account in Acts.

'Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower; and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature."

'Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. ...

'And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign.'

Digging deeper

The Herods

This section is a study of the Herod family.

Relevance to our lives

Get the class to consider the last question on the worksheet. Would they feel surprise, delight, shock, shame, fear, relief at Jesus' coming? How can they look forward to his coming with pleasure and eagerness? How do they think Jesus feels about coming?

Prayer

The class may like to write a prayer thanking God for offering to rescue us from death.

Other suggestions for activities

- Get the class to go through Acts 12 looking for all the details that would remind Peter and the church of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.
 - It was the Passover, v3.
 - Peter was guarded by soldiers as was the tomb of Jesus, v4.
 - Peter was sleeping as Jesus slept in death, v6.
 - He was struck on the side as Jesus had been by the spear, v7.
 - He was woken by an angel as Jesus had been raised by one, v7.
 - This all happened outside the city walls, v10.
 - He came to see the disciples, v12, and he went away again, v17.

You may be able to find other comparisons. Help the class to appreciate how the foregoing would encourage the church by causing them to understand that they must enter into both the death and the resurrection of Christ. See Romans 6:5, 8,11 and also Philippians 3:10,11.

- The class could write a newspaper report with illustrations of the events that happened at the prison. Articles could include interviews with the governor of the prison, a Christian, a Jewish leader, etc.