

## Bi134 Acts

### ***Lesson Bi134-22 Persecution, Prayer, and Deliverance***

On my television screen I watched as six men with sabers in hand and black hoods over their heads stood before several kneeling Christians. They were about to execute the Christians by chopping off their heads. The Christians' only 'crime' was that they refused to convert to Islam. I prayed for these brave brothers and for their families. In our story today we learn some lessons on how Christians are to respond when they are being persecuted.

As the great missionary church was emerging in Antioch, back in Jerusalem other momentous events were occurring.

Herod, the Roman king, began lashing out at the church, arresting Christians and throwing them into jail. One day he seized James, the apostle and brother of John, and had him beheaded. Noticing how much this pleased the Jewish authorities, Herod arrested Peter and threw him into prison. He no doubt intended to do the same to him in a few days. When the Christians heard this, they began to cry out to God for Peter's deliverance.

The day before Peter was to be brought before Herod, the disciples called a prayer meeting. They prayed into the night. Meanwhile, in his prison cell Peter lay asleep, chained between two guards. Suddenly the prison cell was flooded with light. Peter woke up and before him stood an angel of the Lord. The angel spoke to him, saying, "Quick Peter, get up!"

At that, the chains fell from Peter's wrists and he stood up. The angel led him past the guards to the main gate of the prison. The gate swung open all by itself and they walked through it into the street. The angel then disappeared. Peter was so dazed by all of this that he thought he was seeing a vision.

When he finally came to himself, he realized what had happened. The Lord had sent his angel and had delivered him from Herod's clutches. Peter headed for the house where the saints were still praying for him.

When he arrived, he banged on the outside gate. Hearing the noise outside, a girl named Rhoda went to see what was up. "Wow," she thought, "it's Peter!" She ran back into the house shouting, "Peter is at the door!" The saints, however, thought she had lost her wits and refused to believe her. "You are out of your mind," one said. Another surmised, "Maybe she has seen an angel."

In the meantime, Peter was still banging on the gate. When someone did finally open the door, they were all surprised. In their excitement they were making so much noise that Peter had to quiet them down before he could talk. He then told them how the angel of the Lord had released him from prison. After that, he left and went to another place.

The next morning, there was quite an uproar at the prison when they discovered that Peter was missing. When Herod found out what had happened, he had the guards executed. Some

weeks later, Herod was struck down by the very angel of the Lord that led Peter out of the prison. In spite of all of this, the word of God continued to spread and the number of disciples multiplied.

Persecution is a major theme in Acts. From the beginning to the ending of the book, the church advances in the face of hostility. The persecution comes primarily from two directions, from religious leaders and from political authorities. Whenever either feels threatened, they lash out at Christ's followers.

Luke wrote the book of Acts to show Christians that, even in the midst of such persecution, they can effectively advance God's kingdom. However, they must be empowered by the Holy Spirit and remain committed to God's mission. God's mission is to reach all people of all nations and tribes with the gospel of Christ. God wants everyone to be a part of his eternal kingdom.

This story teaches us important lessons on how we can best participate in advancing God's kingdom in the earth.

First, we learn something about the place of prayer in the work of missions. When the Christians in Jerusalem heard that Peter had been arrested, their first response was to pray. God heard their prayer and delivered Peter from prison.

Someone has said that the army of God best advances on its knees. Of all the weapons in the church's arsenal, none is more powerful than the weapon of prayer. Throughout the Book of Acts we read of the saints praying. They prayed in times of great need, as in today's story. They also prayed when seeking for the empowerment of Spirit, when making important decisions, or when seeking God's guidance in mission. We must never be so foolish as to neglect the great weapon of prayer.

Secondly, in the story of Peter's deliverance, we learn something about how we should respond to persecution. When persecution does come, we should not be surprised. On the contrary, we should be surprised if we are not persecuted. Paul warned Timothy, his son in the faith, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2Tim 3:12). Peter, who was able to sleep peacefully in prison, later wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1Pet 4:12-13).

When persecution comes, we should do as Peter and the early Christians did. We should pray, trust in God, and remain full of the Spirit and committed to God's mission.

Finally, in the story of Peter's deliverance we learn about the role of angels in advancing God's kingdom.. This is the fourth time we encounter angels in Acts and the second time an angel delivers Peter from prison. In the book of Acts, angels never appear simply to help individuals achieve their own selfish goals. They always come to direct and assist disciples in pursuing the work of missions. You will remember the first time the angel appeared to Peter in

prison. He commanded Peter and John to “Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life” (Acts 5:20).

This lesson is **important** because we learn some essential truths about how we should fulfill the mission God has given us. We further learn how we should respond when we face persecution.

The **main truth** we learn from this lesson is that we, as Christ’s witnesses in the world, can expect persecution. However, we can always depend on God to be with us during those times of persecution.

Let’s **review** some important truths we have learned from this lesson.

1. When Luke wrote the book of Acts, what lesson did he want to convey to those who were undergoing persecution?
  - A. [PAUSE] If you answered, “Luke wanted to show Christians that even in the midst of persecution, they can effectively advance God’s kingdom—if they are empowered by the Holy Spirit and remain committed to God’s mission,” you answered correctly.
2. In this lesson, what did we learn about the place of prayer in fulfilling the mission of God in the book of Acts?
  - A. [PAUSE] If you answered that prayer is an essential weapon in advancing the kingdom of God in the earth, you are right.
3. What did we learn about how we should respond when we are persecuted for doing God’s work?
  - A. [PAUSE] If you answered that we should not be surprised when we experience persecution, but we must pray, trust God, and remain full of the Spirit and committed to God’s mission, you answered correctly.
4. In Acts, what role do angels play in fulfilling the mission of God?
  - A [PAUSE] If you answered, “In Acts they always appeared to direct and assist disciples in pursuing the work of missions, you are correct.

Your **assignment** is to listen to this lesson several times until you can accurately share the story of Peter’s deliverance from prison with others. Then organize a prayer meeting to pray for the advancement of the kingdom of God in your area.