

The Chains of Sin

by H. A. Ironside

"And he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands" (Acts 12:7).

LET me draw your attention to a most interesting incident, recorded in Acts 12:1-19. However, I do not intend to consider it from a merely historical standpoint, but as a remarkable illustration of man's lost condition, and God's marvelous salvation. I want you to think of Peter, not as an apostle, nor as an eminent servant of Christ, but as a picture of any poor lost sinner. We notice six things predicated of Peter which are true of every unconverted man.

First, we see him in *bondage*. He is captive to a tyrant, determined upon his destruction. Are you out of Christ, and do you think that you are free, and sometimes look with pity upon Christians because you imagine they are in bondage to certain ancient ideas which keep them from enjoying themselves in the world, the way you fancy you are enjoying yourself? The Jews of Christ's day boldly declared that they were never in bondage to any man, but Jesus said, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:34). They were in bondage to sin and Satan, and that is true of every unconverted person. The unbeliever is deceived by the devil; he is captive to his will. You may say, "I am not going to give up my will to some one else," but you have already done that very thing. If you are unsaved, you are a captive to the god and prince of this world, and what is more you cannot deliver yourself, you cannot set yourself free.

In the second place, Peter was *guarded*. Herod had guards stationed to watch and see that he did not get away. He was delivered to four quaternions of soldiers. I do not know the actual names of those soldiers, but I have an idea of what they suggest. One of them might suggest pride, another procrastination, a third, sinful pleasure, and the last, the love of the world; for I know that these are the means that Satan uses to guard men, and keep them in their sins, And hinder them from getting deliverance. How many there are who would have come to Christ years ago but for the pride of the human heart—too proud to acknowledge their lost condition, to confess their sins, to admit their wrong. "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."

The Indian Prince

I heard a story years ago which illustrates the folly of pride.

There were two Hindu princes in conflict one with another. One had been defeated, and his son taken captive. The victorious Rajah was going to march into the city in triumph, with a great string of captives walking barefoot before the great elephant upon which he was mounted. This young prince was brought before him, and told that he was to strip off his royal garments and walk barefoot with the other captives. He was very indignant, and exclaimed, "What kind of faces will the people make when they see me, a prince, walking like that?"

"You have not yet heard it all," said the Rajah, "you shall not only walk barefoot in this procession, but you will carry a bowl of milk that will be filled almost to the brim, and if you spill one drop of it, off comes your head. I shall have guards to see whether you spill any or not."

The prince turned deadly pale as he heard that. As the procession was arranged, they handed him the bowl of milk. You can imagine his predicament. The procession started. How carefully this young prince walked! But in some way or another he managed to get through without spilling a drop. When he was brought before the Rajah, he was sternly asked: "Well, what kind of faces did the people make?"

"O sire," said the poor prince, "I saw no one's face; I saw only my life that I held in my hands, and I knew that if I dared to look to the right or to the left, it would be forfeited."

O friend, you are a poor sinner exposed to the judgment of God, but now offered a free and full salvation through infinite grace. Are you too proud to be saved on God's terms, too proud to humble yourself and admit your lost condition? Are you more concerned about what men think than what God thinks? How well the devil knows how to guard his subjects!

Other Prison Guards

Then there is that other guard, *procrastination*. "The road of By-and-By leads to the town of Never." A great many people are not saved, because they are always saying, "There is plenty of time," and the devil puts old Captain Procrastination on duty to guard them, and if they get exercised, he says to the young, "There is plenty of time; you are young yet." To those in middle life, he says, "Go on and make your fortune, then you can think about your soul." But old age comes and they are still in their sins. The time for them is gone, and they pass into

eternity—lost. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (Jeremiah 8:20).

How well Satan knows how to use the third and fourth guards—*the pleasures of sin* and *the love of the world*—to keep people from coming to Christ. If they bestir themselves and are anxious to be saved, these guards are there to say, "You will lose all your good times, if you become a Christian; you will have to be long-faced and you will be terrible and wretched. You won't be able to go to this, or do that; you won't be able to enjoy this or that; put it off; Wait until the world has lost its charm." And so, because men love the world and think more of the pleasures of sin than they do of their eternal salvation, they remain in bondage—some of them until it is too late to be saved.

Peter's Dire Condition

Then notice the third thing: Peter was in *darkness*. That is the condition of every one by nature: "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart" (Ephesians 4:18). You cannot see in the dark. How often you will hear this said, "I have heard of this salvation for years, but I cannot see how God can love a sinner through the death of His Son; I cannot see how the blood of Christ can wash away my guilt; I cannot understand how I can be sure that the Bible is the Word of God?" Of course you cannot! You are in darkness, and what you need is light. The great apostle to the Gentiles declares, "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost; in whom the God of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (II Corinthians 4:3, 4). If you make the confession, "I cannot see; I cannot understand how the blood of Jesus can wash away my sin," that is all that is needed to tell the true condition of your soul. You are in the dark, away from God, and in dire need of a Saviour.

Then notice something else: Peter was not only in bondage, guarded, and in darkness, but he was *sound asleep*. That is the condition of men in their sins today. But the voice of God sounds forth: "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Ephesians 5:14). The business of the evangelist is to go to men, asleep in their sins, and awaken them. Real hard sleepers do not like to be awakened. I have two boys, and both of them, when they were at a certain growing age, did like to stay up late at night; but oh, how hard it was to get them up in the morning! What a job it was to awaken them. Listen to the sleeper in Proverbs, "Yet a little sleep, a little

slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep" (Proverbs 6:10). My friend, a little more sleep and you will awaken in hell to sleep no more for all eternity! It is only the omnipotent power of God that can awaken poor sleeping sinners.

Then there is something else: Peter was *bound* with two chains. Are you bound with the chains of your sin? You may remember the story of the Grecian tyrant, who looked with suspicion upon a certain metal worker, who was able to make the finest chains of any man in his dominions. This tyrant had an idea that the man was a traitor against his government. One day he sent for him, and after flattering him, said, "I understand there is no one in my kingdom that can make as fine or as strong a chain as you can. Let me see you make one." With the tyrant looking on, the smith made a magnificent chain. He finished it, and as he handed it over to the tyrant, he said, "If you were to take two elephants, and fasten one to each end of this chain, they could not tear it apart."

The tyrant said, "Are you certain of that?"

"Absolutely," the man replied.

Then, turning to two of his officers, the tyrant said, "Take him and bind him with it, and cast him into prison." He was bound with the very chain he had made.

Sinner, you have been forging a chain, the chain of your sins, link by link throughout the years, and if you are not saved soon, you are going to be bound with that chain, and be cast into that awful place "prepared for the devil and his angels." You will have no one to blame but yourself. You will remember how you forged that chain, link by link; how you fell into this or that particular sin, and then said to yourself, "Oh, well, I will not repeat it; I will do it just once." Then in some way there was an unaccountable urge to commit the same sin again and again and again, and you found out at last that you were forging the links in the chain that has bound your soul. You have tried and tried to break it, but you are not able to do it.

Chains that Bind

You know what chains are binding your *soul* today. The awful chains of lust, untruthfulness, pride, infidelity, dishonesty, greed, and unbelief. These are the things that are going to bind men's souls for eternity, and sink them down into outer darkness. It is said of the fallen angels that they are bound in "everlasting chains under darkness"; and

that will be true also of men and women who reject Christ.

The chains of sin! You remember how you tried to break them! On New Year's Day, you said, "Now I am going to swear off; I am not going to commit this sin or that sin any more. I am losing my will-power; these things have robbed me of my self respect; I am ashamed to think of the habits of which no one knows, but myself and God; I will surely break loose." And you tried and tried, and then fell back into the same old ways.

Or, you may have said, "It is of no use to try; I cannot free myself; I am bound with chains that I cannot break." And so far as your own strength is concerned, that is perfectly true. But that is not the whole story. What have we seen of Peter? We have seen that he was a captive; he was guarded by Satan's soldiers; he was wrapped in darkness; he was sound asleep; he was bound with chains; and there is one other word to complete the vivid description, he was under sentence of *death*, condemned already. There he lies in that prison, a picture of any poor sinner.

Why was the sentence against Peter not carried out? Herod was waiting until a more propitious time, when he was going to bring him before the people and put him to death. That suggests what God says about you, if you are still rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ. "He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18).

Notice, that you are not merely in danger of being condemned in the day of judgment; not only in danger of condemnation, if you die rejecting Christ; but you are *condemned already*. And why? Because you are even now a Christ-rejecter. "He that believeth not is condemned already." Again in John 3:36, we read, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." Just as the wrath of Herod was abiding on Peter, and he was waiting the time for the sentence to be carried out, so the wrath of a righteous God abides upon the Christ-rejecter, and soon the sentence will be carried out.

Deliverance Through Prayer

But now a word to Christians: You are interested in sinners, you know they are in the darkness, you understand that they are captives of Satan, bound by the chains of their sins, guarded, and under condemnation, and yet you have a resource, have you not? The people

of God offered prayer to God continually for Peter's deliverance. O Christian, be encouraged when you pray for those in bondage. The ear of God is open to your cry. There are dear boys and girls who are still unsaved, and you realize they are in the dark; you long that they should be brought to the light. Keep on praying for them! As the saints prayed for Peter, God wrought; as we pray for sinners, God saves today!

What happened as they prayed for Peter? Seven things took place.

First, as they were praying, a messenger from God came to Peter. You know how often God does just that very thing. Sometimes he sends a human messenger, sometimes a word from the Book, sometimes conviction by the Holy Spirit. Peter was sound asleep, and suddenly there appeared a messenger. The angel of the Lord is able to awaken, to arouse, to give deliverance to those who desire to be delivered.

Second, a light shone in the prison. It is the truth of God that dispels the darkness. "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple" (Psalm 119:130). The messenger came, and the light shone! O unsaved sinner, have you heard the gospel message, the message of light? You say in your darkness, "I cannot see; I cannot understand." Listen! "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). Does that not give you a little light? "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24). This is God's own Word. May it bring light to your darkened mind.

Third, the angel smote Peter on the side. He was a real "Billy" Sunday. Some folk do not like "Billy's" abrupt way, but in this case the situation was desperate, and the angel said, "Wake up," as he smote him, and Peter wakened to find the angel pounding him. Some of us remember how the Spirit laid hold on us, and aroused us from our deathlike sleep. The Word came home with convicting power, and we were saved. I would to God that you, unsaved one, might be smitten by the convicting power of the Spirit of God, that you might realize your lost condition, and your need of a Saviour; and that you would turn to Him who awakens, and be delivered.

Fourth, there was no resistance on Peter's part. The message came, "Arise up!" and Peter obeyed immediately. Why, you know, a little while before, that word would have meant nothing to him; but now he

is awake. When men and women are awakened, the message comes: "Believe the Word; arise, He calleth thee."

Fifth, then his chains fell off. Do you want to be delivered from your chains? Believe the Word! I have a friend who years ago was a victim of that dreadful habit of smoking and eating opium. He had fallen into that vice when very young, and the thing had gotten such a grip on him that he could not break it. At last, at twenty-two years of age, he was such a wreck that he had made up his mind that he might as well end it all by suicide, for there was no hope for him. But one night in Fresno, California, he was going down the street, crying out, "What a fool I have been to form a habit like this that I cannot free myself from," when he heard a little group of Salvation Army folk singing,

"He breaks the power of canceled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the vilest clean,
His blood avails for me."

He said, "What's that?" They sang it again. That poor young fellow stood there trembling, for he had hardly strength enough to stand erect. "I wonder if it is true?—'the vilest'—that's me!" and he followed them into their hall. When they invited sinners to come to Christ, he went forward and knelt at the penitent bench, but he was so loathsome that they said, "Oh, he is too far gone." However, they were faithful, and knelt with him and pointed him to Christ. By and by, as he arose, he said, "I will trust Him," and went away. One of them said to another, "You better go and see if he has any lodging tonight; he has no will power, there is no hope for him, if he gets away." Somebody did take an interest in him; he got him a lodging, and helped him in other ways. When he put his trust in Christ, he was delivered, and he has often testified since, "I am free; Christ has delivered me; I never even had a struggle to get rid of that habit." In two weeks you would not have known him. He was a new creature, physically, mentally, and every way. Whatever your sins are, come to Christ, trust in Him, and find deliverance. Peter's bonds fell off; he was freed from his chains—you too may be free.

Sixth, "Get your things on," the angel said, and he dressed him up. That is what the Lord does. Off with the prison garments, on with the new garments. Then they went through one door and another, and finally through the great iron door. If Peter had gone through that great iron door in his chains, he would have gone through to die. If he were taken through in his fetters, he would go out to be executed. And if you go through the door of death in your sins, you go through to your

doom. Peter might well have trembled as he passed through that door, if he still had his chains on; but as he drew near, the door opened of its own accord, and he went through as a free man. A believer in the Lord Jesus can say, "I have died already; I am free!" You may ask, "How can you say that?" "Well, we have been crucified with Christ; we went through death with Him!"

Seventh, then Peter said, "I must hunt up some place where I can find some Christians who are interested in me." They were all having a prayer meeting in Mary's house, praying for Peter's deliverance. The Lord had answered and he was delivered, but they were still praying. A little girl came out in response to Peter's knock, and she got so excited when she heard his voice, that she forgot to open the door. She rushed back, and said, "You don't need to pray any more; Peter is outside, he is at the door!"

"Nonsense," they practically said, "God doesn't do anything as quickly as that."

Is that not just like us? Sometimes we pray and pray, and when God answers, we can hardly believe it. But she insisted, "I know he is there."

"It is his ghost," they said, "he has gone through in his chains, and that is his ghost."

"Well," she replied, "there is no use arguing; come and see!" And to the door they went where Peter continued knocking!

What an illustration this is, dear unsaved one, of God's salvation. Have you seen your own picture? Have you been asleep in your sins? Are you in darkness and guarded by Satan? Do you want to be delivered? Listen to the Word of God, and do not be angry if the Spirit of God has to smite you. Believe the Word, act upon it, and you will enter into the fullness of blessing. You will be delivered from the chains of your sins.

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