

St Luke's Vermont with St Alfred's Blackburn North
Worship at Home
Sunday 15 August 2021

You are encouraged to use the following Bible readings, prayers and notes to support you worshipping at home this week.

1. Opening Verse of Scripture – Psalm 40:1-3

I waited patiently for the Lord;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
² He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
³ He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord
and put their trust in him.

2. Worship with song – *And Can It Be*

Charles Wesley, Public domain <https://youtu.be/Sbx6RNev-o0>

1 And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?

Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me?

Refrain:

*Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me!*

2 'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine!
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more. [Refrain]

3 He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race;
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me. [Refrain]

4 Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed Thee. [Refrain]

5 No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own. [Refrain]

3. Bible Reading – Acts 12:1-24 (NIV)

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ 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.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.”

¹² 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. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”

¹⁵ “You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ 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 other brothers and sisters about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

²⁰ He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king’s country for their food supply.

²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people.

²² They shouted, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.”

²³ Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

²⁴ But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

Reflection – from David Cook Teaching Acts
(Proclamation Trust, 2007)

Things look dark: James is dead, Peter is under arrest. However, Luke provides a ray of hope in verse 5: ‘... but the church was earnestly praying to God for him’. Here Luke is contrasting the political authority of Herod with God’s sovereign control. The chapter begins well for Herod, with the Jews onside and the Christian leadership contained, but the church was praying! Luke emphasises the extent of Herod’s security arrangements to guard Peter: squads of soldiers (v. 4); soldiers, chains and sentries (v. 6); two lines of guards and an iron gate (v. 10). But the church was praying.

What happens? Peter is asleep and is told by an angel to ‘get up’ (verse 7, with the same words Peter used in 10:13). He is told to get dressed, and as he passes by the guards, he does not realise what is happening. The power of prayer has contributed to his remarkable liberation.

Again Luke doesn’t paint an idealistic picture of the church. He shows us that their prayer was effective, but imperfect. Peter goes to the house of Mary where the church is meeting to pray for him (verse 12). When the servant girl, Rhoda, recognises his voice at the gate, she excitedly runs inside to tell everyone of Peter’s release. These are the people who have been praying earnestly for Peter. Did they believe God would release him? Evidently not, for they say she’s either

out of her mind, or has seen Peter's angel (verse 15). Meanwhile, Peter keeps knocking! They open the door and are astonished to see him (verse 16). Their prayers are answered, but the prayers themselves find it unbelievable. Apparently, God has answered unbelieving prayer!

Herod's ruthlessness is shown in his summary execution of the soldiers who had guarded Peter (verse 19). He had fallen out of relationship with the people of Tyre and Sidon and had cut off their food supplies. This accounts for their response to his speech in verse 22. Why else would seemingly rational people respond to a political speech by proclaiming: "This is the voice of a god, not of a man"? Herod accepted praise due to God, and immediately the angel who struck Peter awake, strikes Herod down (v. 23). Herod, who had denied food to Tyre and Sidon, himself becomes food for worms and dies. And the result of God's removal of this arch-protagonist who opposed the gospel? 'But the Word of God continued to increase and spread' (v. 24).

A chapter which had begun so well for Herod, and looked so dark for the church (the death of the apostle James and the imprisonment of the apostle Peter), ends with the deliverance of Peter, the death of Herod, the triumph of the Word, and the beginning of a mission to the Gentiles, ready to press out beyond the fringe to the ends of the earth (verse 25). Such radical reversal is indicative of the unstoppable progress of the gospel and a great encouragement!

There is a strong contrast between the political power wielded by Herod and the sovereign supernatural power of God. It may look and feel like Herod is calling the shots, but in reality God is absolutely in control. The contrast between human and divine power is seen most powerfully in Herod's wormy death, contrasted with the vitality of the Word of God and its messengers.

Application

God is to be trusted, no matter how dark things appear. God will always act to glorify his name and advance his gospel. Calm, secure trust in him must be our response in all situations. His 'hidden hand' is at work.

When facing difficulty and opposition, the church's response must be to pray.

We are safe and secure until our work on earth for the gospel is complete. Paul is assured of this by God in Acts 18:10. God still had work for Peter to do. He was to be a vital witness before the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15. James' ministry is over, so God takes him home. 'God buries his messengers, but not his message'. God's greater purpose than our safety on earth is his glory through the fulfilment of his plans. His messengers come and go, and then enter into their eternal reward, but God's gospel moves on beyond the fringe.

God's providence is perfect; he is a careful shepherd of his sheep.

Reflecting on Psalm 116:15: ‘Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints’, Spurgeon writes: ‘They shall not die prematurely, they shall be immortal till the work is done; and when their time comes to die then their deaths shall be precious. The Lord watches over their dying beds, smoothes their pillows, sustains their hearts, receives their soul’.

Do I treat prayer as a technique for getting what I want? Prayer is about relationship, and God is not bound by our imperfections. We may say things wrongly or say things without sufficient belief, but God loves to hear his people pray and is well able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

7. Confession

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
you are merciful and kind,
but we have gone our own way,
not loving you as we ought,
nor loving our neighbours as ourselves.
We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed
and in what we have failed to do.
We deserve your condemnation.
Father, forgive us.
Help us to love you and our neighbour,
and to live for your honour and glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

God is slow to anger and full of compassion.

He forgives all who humbly repent and trust in his Son as Saviour and Lord.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

8. Prayers for the world, the church and each other

We ask you, faithful Father, through Your Son our Savior, for our Prime Minister (Scott Morrison), Ministers and Federal legislators, for our Premier (Daniel Andrews), and for all who hold office in this land. Give them wisdom and wise counsel, that they may lead our communities in justice and empathy for all Australians. Help those who are suffering from coronavirus (both here and around the world). Help those who are suffering from lockdown measures to contain the virus. Grant us all the victory of trust and hope, in the cross and the empty tomb of Christ, that we may never lose their faith in your loving purposes.

Let us pray for the Church and its mission. We recognise that just as Peter and the early apostles experienced persecution, in the world today, millions of Christians face persecution daily. We pray that persecuted believers would know the hope God gives; that they would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit; that they would know God's great love for them. We pray for persecuted believers to fearlessly share the good news about Jesus and stay faithful in prayer. Help us to tell of your rescue and kindness in our lives.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

9. Song – The Lord is My Salvation

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<https://youtu.be/L1Hi-Wbjf9k>

1. The grace of God has reached for me
And pulled me from the raging sea
And I am safe on this solid ground
The Lord is my salvation

2. I will not fear when darkness falls
His strength will help me scale these walls
I'll see the dawn of the rising sun
The Lord is my salvation

Chorus Who is like the Lord our God
Strong to save faithful in love
My debt is paid and the victory won
The Lord is my salvation

3. My hope is hidden in the Lord
He fulfills each promise of His Word
When winter fades I know spring will come
The Lord is my salvation

4. In times of waiting times of need
When I know loss when I am weak

I know His grace will renew these days
 The Lord is my salvation
 5. And when I reach the final day
 He will not leave me in the grave
 But I will rise He will call me home
 The Lord is my salvation

Glory be to God the Father
 Glory be to God the Son
 Glory be to God the Spirit
 The Lord is our salvation

10. Closing Prayer

Lord God,
 we rejoice in your greatness and power,
 your gentleness and love,
 your mercy and justice.
 Enable us by your Spirit
 to honour you in our thoughts,
 and words and actions,
 and to serve you in every aspect of our lives;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

11. Notices

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