

Our “Iron Gates”

*“They came unto
the iron gate that
leadeth unto the
city; which opened
to them of his own
accord.”*

—Acts 12:10

WHEN JESUS, IN GETHSE-mane, faced the mob that had come out from Jerusalem to arrest him, Peter drew his sword and, in an effort to rescue the Master from his enemies, cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest.

Jesus commanded Peter to put up his sword. He healed the injured man’s ear, and then indicated that he had merely to ask the Father and twelve legions of angels would be sent to protect and deliver him.—Matt. 26:51-53; Luke 22:50,51; John 18:10,11

Later, when Jesus was before Pilate, charged with claiming to be a king, this Roman governor was somewhat irritated because the Master was so uncommunicative. He asked Jesus if he did not realize the authority of his position and what it would mean to get a favorable decision from him. However, Jesus answered, “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above.”—John 19:11

These two statements, by which Jesus affirmed his complete conviction of his Heavenly Father’s overruling providence in his life, should be a great source of confidence to us who are following in his

steps and striving to develop the “mind of Christ.” While Jesus did not expect that his Heavenly Father would deliver him from all trouble, he had no doubt of divine ability to do this. He knew that he was to die for the sins of the world. If he should be spared from suffering and death, “How then,” he asked, would “the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?”—Matt. 26:54

Shortly after Jesus commenced his ministry, the religious rulers of Israel began to show their opposition. They would have liked to do away with him long before they did. Jesus knew this and avoided situations that would give them their coveted opportunity. His Heavenly Father cooperated with him in this. We may be sure that all the powers of the Roman Empire enlisted on the side of the Master’s jealous enemies could not have touched so much as a hair of his head until the “due time” came.

There was in God’s plan, however, a due time for the Redeemer to give his life for the sins of the world. Jesus knew when that time was to come. He told his disciples, even before he went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with them for the last time, that he would afterward be arrested and put to death. He knew that this was God’s will for him.

Twelve legions of angels were ready to protect him from harm. These were more powerful than all the armies of Rome. Pilate would have been helpless to do anything against the Master had it not been permitted by God. However, Jesus knew that it was the Father’s will that he should die, so he did not ask for the host of angels to protect him from his enemies. His only way of escape from trial, now that his hour had come, was through death.

WE WALK IN HIS STEPS

As Jesus was, so are we in this world. We have covenanted to walk in his steps, develop his mind, and be “crucified” with him. (Gal. 2:20) This is a difficult thought to fathom. We know what it meant for Jesus to be crucified, and the Scriptures use this word to describe our own experiences as we endeavor to walk in his steps. Yet, at the same time we may wonder why we have such severe trials—why God does not deliver us from “fiery furnace” experiences and allow us to enjoy the apparent joy and peace that seemingly fill the lives of other Christians.

There are many promises in the Bible which assure us of God’s ability and of his willingness to protect us from harm. “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High,” says David, “shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” (Ps. 91:1) Indeed, the Almighty is just as capable today of sending those twelve legions of angels to protect us as he was when Jesus was delivered into the hands of his enemies.

With us, however, as with Jesus, there is a due time as well as a proper way of deliverance. The lesson we need to learn is that of simple trust in our God and humble submission to his will. Jesus prayed, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.” (Matt. 26:39) Jesus desired that his Heavenly Father’s will be done more than he desired release from suffering. This should be our attitude in every trial, hardship, perplexity, disappointment, and faith-trying experience with which we are confronted.

GOD'S WILL FOR PETER

Our opening text brings before us a marvelous providence of God in the life of the Apostle Peter. The miraculous power of God was employed through an angel to deliver the apostle from prison and certain death at the hands of Herod. This deliverance was accomplished, not because it was the general plan of God to protect all his consecrated people from bodily harm, but because he had further service for Peter to perform and further lessons for him to learn.

In the beginning of the chapter, we are informed that Herod “stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” (Acts 12:1,2) No angel was sent to prevent this killing. We cannot believe that this was because James was not faithful to the Lord. It was simply that God had another way for him to “escape”—in the sleep of death. Thus, we understand that God’s providential care for his people is not always manifested in the same way.

As Herod “stretched forth his hands” further, Peter was caught and imprisoned. In doing this, Herod was seeking to please the Jews, over whom he ruled as the representative of Caesar. It was the Passover season, and he was sufficiently acquainted with Jewish customs to realize that until these special days were ended, the interests of the Jews would be well taken up. Therefore, he decided to hold Peter in prison until afterward and then bring him forth to make a public demonstration of his killing.—vss. 3-5

Meanwhile, however, the brethren prayed. We cannot imagine that these consecrated followers of Christ “demanded” of God that he use his power to

protect Peter. They no doubt had earlier prayed on behalf of James, who was “killed . . . with the sword,” in a similar manner as Jesus had prayed while in Gethsemane: “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” In Jesus’ case it was not possible—it was not God’s will for him—nor was it his will that James be spared from death at the hands of Herod.

The disciples did not lose their faith. They prayed for Peter also. It was the Father’s will that Peter should also die as his Master did. Jesus had prophesied this. (John 21:18,19) However, as with Jesus, so with Peter, and so with every one of us, there is a due time for all our experiences, and this was not the due time for Peter to finish his course in death.

Peter was “kept in prison,” we read, “but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” (Acts 12:5,12) What a beautiful picture this portrays in our minds—Peter in prison, the brethren gathered in the home of Mary, the mother of Mark, praying. These devoted disciples had no assurance that the hands of Herod would not soon reach them also, but they prayed for Peter.

Meanwhile Peter, chained between two soldiers, was “sleeping.” (vs. 6) What an example of faith we see in this. Chained between two guards and held in prison with a threat of execution hanging over him—yet Peter slept. He had such confidence in the Lord that he was able to leave everything completely in his hands, knowing that whatever his will might be for him, it would be the best.

Peter, who was so greatly disturbed when Jesus was arrested and attempted to use his sword to deliver the Master from his enemies, had learned his lesson. He had learned it so completely that now,

when similarly held in custody and threatened with death, he could lie down and sleep, leaving the outcome of his experience wholly with the Heavenly Father. This circumstance reminds us of David's attitude. When his enemies were pressing hard against him, he wrote: "LORD, how are they increased that trouble me! many are they that rise up against me. Many there be which say of my soul, There is no help for him in God. But thou, O LORD, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head. I cried unto the LORD with my voice, and he heard me out of his holy hill. I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the LORD sustained me."—Ps. 3:1-5

Thus it was also with Peter. He knew that the Lord was his shield and his salvation, so he "slept." Peter also "awaked" because God sustained him. An "angel of the Lord" appeared before him and "smote Peter on the side, and raised him up." The angel then said to him, "Arise up quickly."—Acts 12:7

What a startling, and at the same time, happy awakening this must have been. When, in faith, Peter fell asleep chained between the two guards, there may have been a fleeting thought passing through his mind that possibly he would be smitten by them, awakened, and hurried to his execution. Little did he perhaps realize that he would be awakened by an angel. Not only was he awakened, but his chains also fell off, and he was bidden to arise. He was told to gird himself, put on his sandals, and follow the angel. Peter obeyed, and followed him. (vss. 8,9) This indicated that he was to leave the prison—but how? True, he was no longer bound to his guards by chains, but he was still locked up within the prison. He would surely be soon apprehended by other

guards, and appeared to have no realistic hope of getting through the doors of the prison to freedom on the outside.

These thoughts may have occurred to Peter, but the account does not record them. We know only that Peter followed the angel, being unaware of exactly what was happening. He was, in fact, not sure that he was actually awake, thinking that perhaps he was having a dream or seeing a vision. The important thing, however, is that he followed, doing exactly as he was instructed. There is a lesson in this for all the Lord's people when passing through severe trials. The Heavenly Father always sends an angel to conduct us through them. As "ministering spirits," they are always near to help and direct us, if we obediently "follow."—Heb. 1:14

These angels do not now speak to us audibly, nor do they appear in visible form, but they are able to overrule our experiences in such a manner as to be a positive and directing influence in our lives. We often speak of the providences of God, but we should also realize that our ministering spirits are helping to shape those providences. They may not always lead in the direction of lighter burdens or less fiery trials. However, if we follow them, they are sure to lead us finally to victory and glory.

IRON GATE "OPENED BY ITSELF"

Peter followed the angel "past the first and the second ward." (Acts 12:10) Thus far there was no interference. Who or what could interfere with the angel of the Lord? Then they came to the iron gate that led to the city. This apparently was the last barrier, but it was a formidable one. Whether Peter

was thoroughly awake by now and fully understood what was taking place is uncertain. Although we are not told, perhaps he wondered how, or by whom, that iron gate would be opened.

The account simply tells us that the gate “opened by itself.” (*Contemporary English Version*) In this day of modern technology, gates and doors are opened automatically by various man-made devices. In many cases, the person or vehicle approaching is electronically identified and sets a mechanism into motion which opens the gate for their passage, and then closes it afterward. No such apparatus opened the iron gate of the Roman prison in which Peter was incarcerated. It was the Lord’s angel who went into action, as Peter approached, and swung the gate wide open. Indeed, it was a miracle, but only by a miracle could God deliver his servant and make him available to render further service to his people.

Peter passed through the iron gate to freedom, and then “the angel departed” (vs. 10), leaving Peter to find his way to the home of Mary and to his friends and brethren who were praying for him. The direct services of the angel were no longer needed, reminding us that the Lord gives us help only to the extent actually necessary. He furnishes us with our “daily bread” one day at a time, not for a year in advance.

Past the iron gate and out of prison, now fully awake, Peter meditated on the meaning of what had happened. He came to the definite conclusion that there was no other explanation than that God had sent an angel to deliver him. Fortified by this knowledge, he sought out the house of Mary, the mother of Mark. It was here that the brethren were praying for him.—vss. 11,12

Peter knocked at the door, attracting the attention at first of only a “damsel”—a young maidservant. She recognized Peter and quickly reported to the others that he was at “the door of the gate,” but was evidently too excited and did not think of opening the gate to permit him to enter. When she told the brethren that Peter was outside, they said to her, “Thou art mad.” (Acts 12:13-15) This does not necessarily indicate that these brethren lacked faith in the efficacy of their prayers. James had already been killed by Herod. Perhaps they had concluded from this that Peter would also be killed.

Most likely, their prayers for Peter had been in the nature of the one offered by Jesus, “If it be possible, let this cup pass” The main burden of their prayers was probably that Peter be given grace and strength to meet this severe test. These prayers were wonderfully answered, not only by his deliverance, but also by the fact that while in prison Peter was able to lie down and sleep while chained to the two guards.

God’s providences are not always the same for all his people. James was killed, but Peter was saved from death at that time—saved for further service, to continue feeding the Lord’s sheep, as he had been commissioned by Jesus. He was saved in order that through his continued faithful ministry he might further “strengthen” the “brethren,” as Jesus had also told him he would have the special privilege of doing.—John 21:15-17; Luke 22:32

OUR “IRON GATES”

We look back upon the experiences of Jesus and the apostles, and note the miraculous manner in

which God dealt with and blessed them. In doing so, we perhaps wish we could have been there and shared in some of those thrilling episodes. Sometimes our walk with the Lord may seem void of outstanding evidences that he is actually by our side, that his angels are encamped round about us, that every detail of our lives is being supervised by his wisdom, and that we are protected by his power and enriched by the abundance of his grace and love.

It should occur to us, however, that it requires greater faith to trust in the Lord when the outward manifestations of his keeping power are difficult to discover. Peter could always look back upon his experience of being delivered from Herod's prison as a proof of God's overruling providences in his life. It was so definite, so outstanding, that there could be no mistaking its blessed and reassuring implications. The opening of his iron gate was a lasting memorial of God's power to deliver him from evil.

We all have our iron gates to pass. If we are following the Lord's leadings, putting our trust fully in him, these may also open as we approach them. When they do, they will seemingly open of their own accord. We do not need to force the opening of these gates in an attempt to escape from trials which God in his wisdom sees that we need.

"IN PLEASANT PLACES"

Of Jesus it was prophetically written, "Lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." (Ps. 16:6) The word "lines" as used here means a "measured portion" of action or experience. Jesus had a measured course in which to walk, and to be pleasing to his Heavenly

Father, it was necessary for him to keep within those boundaries.

So it was with Peter, and so it is with us. This is well illustrated by the manner in which Peter was led out of the prison. He followed the angel, who led him past the first and second wards, and then to the iron gate, which opened of its own accord. Had Peter decided that he knew a better way out of that prison, and had he not followed the angel, he would not have been delivered. Let us suppose that Peter knew the location of the iron gate and, realizing that the angel was leading directly to it, decided to take another route, hoping to find an exit not so firmly closed. We know what the result would have been.

The short journey from the prison dungeon, past the wards, and through the iron gate to freedom, might well illustrate our entire walk in the narrow way. Our "lines" of direction are God's "measured portion" for us. They are the lines contained in our covenant by sacrifice. With Jesus, these lines had "fallen . . . in pleasant places," because he delighted to do his Father's will. God's will was not in itself always pleasant, but the "cup" of experiences Jesus passed through became pleasant in the certain knowledge that it was what the Heavenly Father had outlined for him.

It should be the same with us. We begin our consecrated life with the determination that we want only the Lord's will to be done. The lines which mark out his will are clearly traceable in his Word. We claim his promises to lead us and to give strength for every time of need. We are conscious of the fact that his angel is by our side, so we have no need to fear.

We may often wonder about the trials that loom up before us. Frequently, when we awaken in the morning we perhaps are unsure, or even fear, how we will get through certain experiences which we know we will have to face that day. They are sometimes only little things, yet nevertheless, they are our iron gates. If, however, we follow the “angel” and do not attempt to go in some other direction, which for the time may seem better to us, those gates will frequently open of their “own accord” as we approach them.

If we are noting well all the little experiences of our lives, we will find that many iron gates open for us every day. As followers of Christ we should be able each night to look back and praise the way God has led us that day. We should be able to discern the opening of the iron gates and give thanks for the abundance of the Lord’s strength, wisdom, mercy, and love.

In the case of Peter, the iron gate stood between him and freedom. Even more importantly, it stood between him and continued service to the Lord and the brethren. We, also, have this type of iron gate. No consecrated follower of the Master should be contented when not doing everything possible in the service of the Lord. Yet, with all of us there are hindrances—iron gates—that may at times hold us back from doing as much as we would like.

With some it may be job or family responsibilities, limitations due to age or health, or other hindrances which the Lord in his wisdom does not deem best to change. We may try, as it were, to peer beyond this iron gate and think how wonderful it would be if it would only open and permit us to go out into

the service of the Lord as Peter did. However, evidently the Lord's "lines" have not thus fallen for us—not yet, at least.

On the other hand, there may be a service we can render within the confines kept closed by our present iron gate. Let us remember the case of Paul. From the time he was taken into protective custody in Jerusalem by the Romans, throughout his long and tedious experiences en route to Rome, and then for years as a prisoner in Rome, he was inside his iron gate. The angel of the Lord did not lead him immediately to freedom as was the case with Peter.

Nevertheless, Paul found service. He witnessed to princes, rulers, prison guards, and many who called on him. From behind the iron gate in Rome, he sent letters to the brethren to comfort and strengthen them. We may be able to do likewise. Whatever the iron gate may be that is preventing us from serving as freely as we would like, we should look for opportunities that may exist within the confines of our present situation. Where none may immediately present themselves, we should always leave the matter in the Lord's hands.

This is what Peter did. Chained between two guards, he fell asleep. We can "sleep" also—that is, rest in the Lord, even though we may feel that we are chained and restrained. It would have done Peter no good that night to lie awake and worry about the chains that were binding him or about the iron gate that stood between him and freedom.

Similarly, when Paul and Silas were in prison at Philippi, they sang hymns. In his own way, the Lord delivered them, and in connection with their

incarceration, the jailer received the Truth. (Acts 16:23-33) Thus, let us endeavor to rest in faith and to rejoice in the Lord, no matter on which side of the iron gate our lines may have fallen.

We may be striving for victory over some imperfection of the flesh, a weakness that may be keeping us bound or hindering our progress in the narrow way. The Lord can open this iron gate for us also, if and when it is his will. The lesson he wants us to learn in all these experiences is that he knows what is best for us as New Creatures in Christ Jesus. We will rejoice in the Lord as we learn this and never try to force open our iron gates by our own strength.

As Peter looked back upon his deliverance from prison, one of the blessed assurances that it was only by the Lord's overruling providence was the fact that the iron gate opened of its own accord. May we look for similar providences of the Lord in our lives. Whether the Lord opens our iron gates or keeps them closed, let us so delight in his will that we will never be tempted to tamper with the gates ourselves, or redirect our path in "lines" not marked out by God.

We might, perhaps, force open an iron gate that is standing between us and what we would like to do. If we did, however, how could we know that it was of the Lord? This does not mean that we should go through life in a spiritually listless manner, taking little or no interest in God's providences. If we are fully consecrated to him, watching and praying for his guidance and blessing, we will want to be serving him. If an iron gate is standing between us and his service, we will sincerely desire to be on the other side of it, but only if it is his will. If it opens

of its own accord, we will rejoice and with diligence enter into a wider field of service thus made possible. However, if the gate remains closed, we will gladly do what we can on the “inside.”

There is an iron gate that stands between all the Lord’s people and that glorious liberty of the sons of God beyond the veil. While we are on this side of that gate, we are all bound and hindered by the flesh and other circumstances from doing the things that we would. In the Lord’s due time, and if we are “faithful unto death,” this last iron gate also will open of its own accord. Then we will be truly free and in the presence of our God, where there are “pleasures for evermore.”—Ps. 16:11

*“They that trust in the Lord shall be as
mount Zion, which cannot be removed,
but abideth for ever.*

*“As the mountains are round about Jerusalem,
so the Lord is round about his people
from henceforth even forever.”
—Psalm 125:1,2*