

## **The Acts of the Apostles**

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

### **King Herod Tries to Stop the Church Growth**

#### **Chapter Twelve**

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**Acts 12:1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them.**

**Acts 12:2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.**

**Acts 12:3 And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread.**

**Acts 12:4 And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people.**

**Acts 12:5 So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.**

The Jews were not the only ones paying attention to what was happening in this early church period. Herod also saw The Way spreading into all the areas of the land including a place where people had been free to go practice their sin in the open.

There were five men named Herod in this dynasty. One was Herod the Great (34 to 4 BC) who controlled Jerusalem at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ. Herod Archelous (4 BC to AD 6) was so awful that the Jews complained and he was removed from his office in AD 6. Herod Antipas (6 to 39) was the man who executed John the Baptist and had a slight role in the trial of Jesus. Herod Agrippa I (39 to 44) was the king mentioned in this chapter by Luke. The territory ruled by Herod included Galilee, Peraea, and Judaea and we are indebted to Josephus for considerable information about him. The fifth Herod was Herod Agrippa II who ruled over various territories from 50 to 100. This latter Herod was the one before whom Paul appeared as told in Acts chapters 25 and 26. King Herod Agrippa I knew what had happened during the time of Jesus and he did not want a repeat. This current situation seemed even worse to him because of its rapid spread with Jesus lifted up as God and Messiah so he saw a huge possible threat. It seems as if he decided to “test the waters” by a horrible act but an act only against one person. He chose one of the leaders, James the son of Zebedee. Peter, James and John were three leaders of the new movement so an execution of one of them seemed like an appropriate test. James is mentioned in the Bible among the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. He is also mentioned along with John, his brother, when they both wanted to sit at the right hand of the Lord in His glory.

*Mark 10:36 “And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?”*

*Mark 10:37 And they said to Him, “Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on Your left.”*

*Mark 10:38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"*

*Mark 10:39 And they said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.*

*Mark 10:40 "But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."*

*Mark 10:41 And hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John."*

We know that James was the first Apostle executed and that the Apostle John lived longer than any of the other Apostles so God's will is usually not predictable. It seems that James received his death baptism as stated by Jesus early in church history and his brother John received his death later. The result of the murder of James was immediate in that the Jews were very pleased. Seeing that his first movement brought about favorable results he imprisoned Peter with the apparent motive to execute him also.

Now we see that wonderful word again: "but". Luke tells us that in spite of the terror invoked by the execution of John and the imprisonment of Peter, the church prayed fervently to God. Before doing harm to Peter, Herod wanted the Jews totally on his side so he postponed any action until after a Jewish holy time. The plan and actions of Herod seem very well done from a human perspective. But God had other plans!

**Acts 12:6 "And on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.**

**Acts 12:7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and roused him, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands.**

**Acts 12:8 And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."**

**Acts 12:9 And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision."**

Was Peter cool or what? Here he was in a situation following the execution of John and he was waiting in prison for his probably execution. Four squads of soldiers were assigned to guard this "dangerous" prisoner. He was chained to two soldiers, one on each side and other guards were in front of the door guarding the prison. Certainly his situation seemed hopeless. What was Peter doing? Was he anxiously weeping and wailing over his situation? Was he having a "pity party"? No, he was sleeping. He was sleeping so soundly that the angel had to hit him in the side and yell at him to wake up! He was living what he preached.

*1Peter 5:6 "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,*

*1Peter 5:7 casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you."*

The resulting situation seemed so surreal to him that he thought that he must be dreaming. He certainly then was not expecting such an intervention by God. He was just totally trusting in God for his situation. What a lesson for us! Most of us have never been in a situation so dire as this one in which Peter found himself. But in our situations that seemed pretty bad to us I am afraid that most will not react in such a trusting manner as Luke tells us about Peter. This is the same man who reacted emotionally to deny his Lord three times. What a change has occurred to this man when he was indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He could rest and trust totally in his Lord now. We can do the same by exercising our faith.

**Acts 12:10 “And when they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street; and immediately the angel departed from him.**

**Acts 12:11 And when Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."**

**Acts 12:12 And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.”**

Peter and the angel went past two guards before coming to the iron gate leading into the city and they were not seen. Then the gate opened by itself so that they could walk out into freedom and along a particular street. Once clear of all immediate danger the angel disappeared. After all of these miracles Peter now was convinced that he indeed was awake and he knew that the Lord had saved him from the death that had been waiting for him. When he realized what had actually happened to him he went to the house of Mary where many of the disciples were gathered in a prayer meeting for him. Having just left a place of great danger he immediately went to a “safe house”.

At this point in his commentary on Acts, Jim Boice pauses to reflect on some recounts he has heard and read about concerning missionaries in dangerous areas of the world. I also have read of many such miraculous events and I just have not known what to think. One book especially comes to my mind concerning such miraculous events. I cannot find the book now. I remember thinking that I just did not know whether such events could possibly be true now. But like Dr. Boice, I have to admit that such could be happening today in places where the spirit of evil is so strong like in Haiti. This book was about a missionary to places where evil was “strong” and some miraculous events when he and others were saved by angels. As I am sure you have also, I have read about other people telling how they were saved by a person who then just vanished. Another book that I did find is titled: “Angels on Assignment” and it seems rather far fetched still to me. But we need to be careful about quickly dismissing stories about angels saving people and even people being brought back from terrible illness to good health. I tend to be very suspicious probably because of my scientific background. But I am certainly willing to let God be God!

**Acts 12:13 “And when he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer.**

**Acts 12:14 And when she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate.”**

This is a hilarious event! Picture Peter knocking on the door and telling Rhoda who he was and then picture Peter being left standing outside the gate as the girl went running inside to tell everyone that Peter was there. He had been miraculously rescued from being chained to two guards, walked past two guards without being seen, saw one gate miraculously open, walked into the city and down a street, and then the angel disappeared. Now he was left standing outside the gate to the house of his fellow disciples because Rhoda was so surprised to find him standing outside! I have a mental image of his face as he is flabbergasted at being left standing outside the house of his friends. I can remember some worldly comedy scenes of such an event and it is really funny. Luke is wielding quite a story that should be even entertaining reading for worldly people! Why run to read the Da Vinci Code when we have this great reading? And it just gets better!

**Acts 12:15 “And they said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. And they kept saying, "It is his angel."**

**Acts 12:16 But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed.**

**Acts 12:17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.”**

Even though these fellow believers had been praying to God for His help, when He actually worked a miracle they did not immediately accept it. They told the girl that she was crazy for Peter was locked under guard in a prison. They were even more willing to believe that the visitor was Peter's angel than to believe that it was Peter. So poor Peter had to keep knocking at the door! Finally they opened the door and were amazed to see that the person was indeed Peter. Luke does not even tell us if Peter actually went into the house. He told them to quiet down as she told them how the Lord rescued him from the prison. He told them to tell James (the brother of Jesus) and other brethren and then he left and went to some other place. He specifically told them to tell James because he was one of the leaders of the early Church. He also wanted the other disciples to know how God really works to protect His people who are called according to His purposes.

*Rom 8:28 “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”*

God is always in plan A and there is no plan B with Him.

**Acts 12:18 “Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.**

**Acts 12:19 And when Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.”**

What fun we can have filling in the blanks here. There was bound to be extreme commotion and reprisals for the events involving Peter that night. Two of the guards had been chained to Peter and it was not until the light of day that they realized that their prisoner was gone! The guards at the gate also did not know until day came that an angel and Peter had walked past them, that the gate had opened on its own, and that the two had walked out of the prison area and into the town. But then they could not find him anywhere! No cover-up story was developed. Herod just had the guards executed and then he “went out of Dodge”! He needed some serious rest and relaxation! He left Judea and went to Caesarea, the government headquarters of Judea under the Romans. This seems like a statement: “I am still in charge”.

**Acts 12:20 “Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country.**

**Acts 12:21 And on an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them.**

**Acts 12:22 And the people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"**

**Acts 12:23 And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.”**

We are not told what the people of Tyre and Sidon had done to offend King Herod. Perhaps the events were trivial but this was just a way for Herod to put behind him the events with Peter and to stress his continual control of the area. Tyre and Sidon depended upon Galilee for their food supply so this anger of Herod must be assuaged. They bribed Blastus so that they could have an audience with Herod to try to change his mind. Josephus helps us in the history of this event. Josephus records that Herod set aside a time for the people to come see him and he appeared in his glorious robes made of silver woven in a fine manner so that when the sun reflected off of his garment it looked as though he glowed. The people proclaimed him as more than mortal and he blasphemed God by taking their praise with no rebuttal. So it seems that Herod may have tried to make himself out as greater than God to make up for the incident with Peter. But his acts did blaspheme God and God then struck him down. Josephus reports a sickness and severe abdominal pain that lasted about five days until he died at the age of 54 and in his seventh year as king (A.D. 37 to A.D. 44). The Greek phrase “eaten by worms” implies to us that his death was by the tapeworm. Since you may be eating while you read this I will not elaborate.

**Acts 12:24 “But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.**

**Acts 12:25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.”**

At this point I want to say “and the beat went on”. The rest of the writings of Luke are primarily concerned with the role of Paul in the early church.

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