

19. Herod Brings Persecution against the Church: Acts 12

In the last lesson, Agabus had prophesied a worldwide famine. The church in Antioch, composed mostly of Gentile Christians, determined to help the churches of Judea. Appropriately, the Antioch church sent their financial help to the elders of the churches of Judea. They chose Barnabas and Saul to carry out this task. Chapter 12 begins with simultaneous events affecting the churches of Judea and the church in Jerusalem. These startling events begin with King Herod bringing persecution against those who belonged to the church.

Herod Brings Persecution to the Church

Acts 12:1-5

12 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 pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast 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.

The King Herod spoken of here is the second of two Herods reigning during the life of Jesus and the time of the early church. They were tetrarchs appointed by Rome to govern Judea. The New Testament only mentions them in relation to the terrible acts against Christ and his church. Since the Romans appointed the first Herod, the Jews always took him to be an interloper and not a Jew and certainly not of the house of David. That Jesus was born king of the Jews threatened Herod the father (Matt 2:1-3). Since an angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt, Herod was unsuccessful in finding the child. He was furious (Matt 2:16-18): “. . . he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.”

The King Herod in Acts 12 was himself associated with the worst of acts against Christ and the church. Mark 6:24-29 records how he killed John the Baptist. According to Acts 4:27 he conspired with Pilate to kill the Lord Jesus: “27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.” Herod continues his sneaky ways now in chapter 12.

His aim here is to persecute the church by seizing Christians. The worst of his deeds was to kill James the apostle with the sword. Encouraged by the effect this had on the Jews, he seized Peter. While they waited for public trial after the Passover, sixteen soldiers guarded Peter, making escape impossible without divine intervention. Clearly, Herod was expecting to make a public display and further please the Jews.

In the meantime, the church was earnestly praying for Peter.

Peter Delivered by an Angel

Acts 12:6-7

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.

Peter is securely bound to two soldiers and others are standing guard. To free him will take intervention by God's angel, which happens for the second time, according to Luke's record. The first happened in Acts 5:19-20, when the Jews arrested Peter for defying their order not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus:

19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. 20 "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."

Miraculously, the chains fell off.

Acts 12:8-10

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.

The miraculous intervention by the angel is so great that Peter thought he was seeing a vision. Suddenly the angel was gone. To those who will later learn of this miracle, there is no doubt about the angel's miraculous intervention.

Acts 12:11

11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

Peter was certain that an angel of the Lord had rescued him.

Peter Returns to the Disciples

Acts 12:12-14

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 girl 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!"

A great lesson is available to the church today. These early Christians had gathered together and were praying, knowing that Peter was in an extreme situation. Today, Christians should meet adversity in the same manner. These examples and the explicit teaching of the Spirit demand it of us. James summarized the power of prayer in James 5:16, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Peter quoted Ps 34:12-16 in 1 Peter 3:12:

12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,

Acts 12:15-17

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 brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

When Peter told his story, he credited the Lord with his escape, showing that the Lord had used the angel. James here is most likely James the brother of Jesus, who played a prominent role in the early church. Of course, Herod had killed James the brother of John with the sword in the first of the chapter.

The lesson to those listening to Peter and to us today is that the angels of God can aid us in seemingly impossible situations. The Hebrew writer taught that the angels serve the believers in Heb 1:14: "14 Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"

Herod's Response and Fate

Acts 12:18-19a

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.

The execution of the guards who lost a prisoner was common in that day. That the guards were in such jeopardy testifies to the authenticity of this miracle. With their very lives at risk, the guards would not have conspired to free Peter.

Acts 12:19b-20

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. 20 He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured 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.

Historically, the Herods were weak rulers prone to do evil more than good. Here is a good example, reaching even beyond the killing of James to allow subjects to worship him as a god. The people of Tyre and Sidon sued for peace because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

Acts 12:21-23

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.

They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Herod let them praise him as if he were God, and he did not praise God himself. His fate was as final as it was shocking: God struck him down, worms ate him, and he died. The structure of the sentence indicates that Herod dies because he was eaten by worms—a sordid death. Jesus uses the same metaphor for life after death for the wicked in Mark 9:47-49:

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 48 where

“their worm does not die,
and the fire is not quenched.”

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

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

Regardless of the difficulties, trials, and persecutions, the word will always increase and spread.

Barnabas and Paul Return to Antioch

Acts 12:25

25 When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

In meantime, Barnabas and Paul completed their mission and returned to Antioch. John Mark, whom they took with them, will become important as Paul begins his missionary journeys. The story of Mark becomes an important subplot in the life of Paul. He went with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. In Acts 13:5, Mark is described as their helper: “5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.” However, in Acts 13:13, he turned back: “13 From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.” Because he turned back, Paul refused to take him on the second journey in Acts 15:37-40:

37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

However, Mark returned to be a great helper while Paul was in prison in Col 4:10: “My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)” Finally, Paul makes a special request that Timothy bring Mark to Paul, for he is useful in Paul’s ministry. 2 Tim 4:11 teaches: “Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.”

Their mission had been to take aid to the churches of Judea, as ordered by the church at Antioch. The previous chapter closed as they departed on this mission. Acts 11:27-30 gives the details:

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.