

Acts 12**Lesson 12
Herod Persecutes the Church****Outline****I. James is Killed** (vv. 1-3a)

- A. *With a sword* (vv. 1-2)
- B. *This pleased the Jews* (v. 3a)

II. Peter is Imprisoned – But is Delivered (vv. 3b-19)

- A. *Imprisoned* (vv. 3b-4)
 - 1. Seized (v. 3b)
 - 2. Guarded by four squads of soldiers (v. 4)
 - 3. Being held to be brought before the people (v. 4)
- B. *Delivered* (vv. 5-19)
 - 1. Prayer was being offered (vv. 5, 12)
 - 2. An angel of the Lord brought out Peter (vv. 6-11)
 - 3. Peter went to Mary's house (vv. 12-17)
 - 4. Created a stir with Herod and his soldiers (vv. 18-19)

III. The Death of Herod (vv. 20-24)

- A. *Herod received praise and glory as a god* (vv. 20-22)
- B. *Struck dead by an angel and eaten with worms* (v. 23)
- C. *Word of God grew – people obeyed* (v. 24)

IV. The Return of Barnabas and Saul with John Mark (v. 25)**Key Verse that Summarizes the Chapter****Acts 12:1**

Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.

In this chapter the pressure is turned up on persecution.¹ Around the time of the famine (cf. 11:27-30) Herod persecutes the church. The events of this chapter occur around 44 A.D.²

- 1 This is a second wave of persecution. It has been at least eight years since Stephen was stoned.
- 2 Dated from the death of Herod (vv. 20-23).

James is Killed (vv. 1-3a)

With a sword (vv. 1- 2). Herod³ “laid violent hands”⁴ on some in the church. “Perhaps the persecution of the church by Herod Agrippa I was part of his attempt to win the favor of his new subjects in Judea...We can imagine how it seemed politic to Agrippa to gain the favor of both Sadducees and Pharisees by making himself the instrument of their opposition to what the Christians were doing and believing.”⁵

He killed James with a sword and he was most likely beheaded. This James is the brother of John and son of Zebedee. He was the first of the apostles to be martyred.⁶

This pleased the Jews (v. 3a). Here Luke tells us that Herod’s motives were political. He really didn’t have a problem with James or his teaching. Nor was he seeking justice for some great wrong. He was merely trying to gain the favor of the Jews.

Peter Imprisoned – But is Delivered (vv. 3b-19)

Imprisoned (vv. 3-4). Since killing James pleased the Jews, Herod thought he would go further and arrest Peter (v. 3b). This was in the days of Unleavened Bread (v. 3b).⁷ The timing of Peter’s arrest fit Herod’s political goal. A greater number of Jews would be present in Jerusalem and would see Herod’s hand in helping them with their enemy, thereby boosting his popularity.

Peter was secured in prison by four squads⁸ and perhaps this was because he had escaped before (Acts 5:18-19). Herod’s intent was to bring Peter out before the people (no doubt to execute him) after the Passover (v. 4).

Delivered (vv. 5-19). While Peter was in prison the brethren were offering constant⁹ prayer to God for Peter (v. 5).¹⁰ When the time was drawing close for Herod to bring him out, Peter was sleeping (v. 6). He demonstrated a calmness and confidence that few could have. He had a peace that only comes from real faith.

3 This is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great (who was ruling at the time of the birth of Jesus). He ruled in Palestine from 42 A.D. to 44 A. D.. This is the only reference to him in the New Testament.

4 ESV

5 Gareth L. Reese, *Acts*, 427.

6 “Luke has told us nothing of James’ work; but we may suppose he was doing significant evangelization, for otherwise it is hard to think of a reason for Herod or the Jews to make him a prime target of this persecution” (Reese, *ibid.* 428).

7 The Feast of Unleavened Bread followed the Passover and continued for seven days (Exo. 12:12, 13, 29, 30; Lev. 23:5-8; Deut. 16:7-8). The Passover was on the 14th day of the first month (Nisan – first part of April). The term Passover (v. 4) seems to be used to include the entire feast.

8 A squad is four soldiers, making a total of sixteen soldiers.

9 Not only continual prayer, but earnest, fervent prayer. The word means to strain or stretch (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*.)

10 It is possible that they were praying for Peter’s release. If they were, why were they so surprised at his release (vv. 12-17)? It seems more likely that they think he faces certain death. Thus, they may have been praying for Peter’s faith and courage as he faced death or even that he might not die.

An angel of the Lord woke Peter and told him to get up quickly (v. 7). The chains, holding him to two soldiers, miraculously fell off. Peter put on his sandals and outer garment, as the angel instructed, and followed the angel out of the prison (vv. 8-10). Like the chains, the gate that secured the prison opened miraculously (v. 10). Peter thought this was a vision, but came to realize that he had been delivered from the hand of Herod and the Jews (v. 11).¹¹

Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark¹², where brethren had gathered for prayer (v. 12).¹³ When Peter knocked at the door, a girl named Rhoda answered the door and was so excited to see Peter that she didn't open the gate (vv. 13-14). When she told the others, they thought she was beside herself or that she had seen his angel (v. 15).¹⁴ When they came to realize that this was really Peter, they were all amazed (v. 16). They were so excited that Peter had to motion for them to quieten down so he could speak (v. 17). He told them to go tell James¹⁵ and the other brethren (v. 17). He then left to go elsewhere before it was discovered that he had escaped prison again.

When it was discovered that Peter was gone, it created a stir with Herod and his soldiers (vv. 18-19). Herod commanded that his soldiers, who were supposed to be guarding Peter, be put to death. Herod then left Jerusalem and went to Caesarea (v. 19).

The Death of Herod (vv. 20-24)

Herod received praise and glory as a god (vv. 20-22). Herod was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon (v. 20). For what reason we are not told. Though neither of these were under the rule of Herod, they were dependent upon him for a good part of their food supply. Consequently, they came to him with one accord (v. 20).¹⁶ Working through Blastus, a personal aide to the king, they gained an audience before the king (v. 20). Since we don't know the issue at hand, we don't know what these ambassadors said. From the joyous response to his oration, they may have caved in to his pressure so they could eat.

Josephus (the Jewish historian) documented this day as a feast in honor of Caesar. As Herod was dressed in royal apparel, he sat on his throne and addressed the people of Tyre and Sidon (v. 21). They so rejoiced over what he was saying that they praised him as a god and not a man (v. 22).

11 "We are left to wonder why God chose to deliver one apostle but not the other. Today in his providential activity, God may – for reasons our finite minds cannot imagine – choose to deliver one Christian from some undesirable fate but not deliver another from such a fate. As we pray for those in trouble, we must realize that God does what we ask *only* if our requests are in accordance with his will (1 John 5:14); and sometimes deliverance fits into his will, while other times it does not" (Johnny Stringer, *Acts*, Guardian of Truth Foundation, 244).

12 John Mark is the author of the gospel of Mark and a travel companion of Paul (cf. v. 25; 15:37-39; Col. 4:10).

13 This was a "prayer meeting" where they had gathered for the purpose of prayer. "The implication may be that this was but one of several 'cottage prayer meetings' in and around Jerusalem. There may have been other groups all over Jerusalem meeting for prayer, for James and others were not present" (Gareth L. Reese, *Acts*, 435). See verses 5, 12, 17.

14 This is based upon the false concept that each person has a guardian angel.

15 This James is most likely the Lord's brother.

16 They came together and chose ambassadors to approach the king.

Herod was struck dead by an angel and eaten by worms (v. 23). A righteous man would have refused such worship (cf. Acts 10:25-26). Because he did not give glory to God, he was struck by an angel, eaten by worms and died.

The word of God grew – people obeyed (v. 24). Here is another progress report. The word of God was being received and people were obeying the gospel. Herod's efforts had just the opposite effect. What he thought would bring an end to Christianity brought his own demise and fanned the flame of the cause of Christ.

The Return of Barnabas and Saul with John Mark (v. 25)

Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem where they delivered the benevolence from Antioch (cf. 11:27-30). They brought John Mark back with them to Antioch. This will serve as home base from which Saul will go out on his missionary journeys.

With this we conclude the first section of the book – The Gospel in Palestine (1-12). Look back at the outline of the book in the introduction. We are now ready to launch into the second section – The Gospel to the Uttermost Parts of the World (13-28).

Questions

1. What do we know about Herod? _____

2. What did Herod have to gain by killing James? _____

3. List the political moves you see in this chapter (by Herod or anyone else). _____

4. What do we learn about prayer in this chapter (vv. 5, 12)? _____

5. Thought question: How could Peter be so calm and sleep under these circumstances (v. 6)? _____

6. How did Peter escape from prison? _____

7. How would you answer the question of why would God spare Peter but not James? ____

8. Does the fact that those in Mary's house were surprised mean that they really didn't believe in the power of prayer? _____

9. For class discussion: What value is there in having a prayer meeting like they had in verses 5, 12? _____

10. What happened to Herod and why? _____

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