

Acts 12

What was happening in verses 1-2? A new wave of persecution was breaking over the Jerusalem church initiated by Herod. This was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great who ruled in the days of Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:1-16). **When was the first wave of persecution?** Chapter 8 in association with Stephen's death.

Up until now, the church had been on a real winning streak, experiencing one exciting conversion after another. First there were the Samaritans, then Saul of Tarsus, then the Gentile centurion Cornelius, then the highly successful work among Gentiles (and Jews) in Antioch. But in Acts 12, the ugly opposition inspired by Satan once again raised its head.....a predictable response whenever a work of God going on.

Who were the chief targets this time (vv. 2-3)? The apostles, specifically James—whom Herod killed with the sword—and Peter. In chapter 8, the persecution centered mainly on Greek Jews like Stephen. Hebraic Jews, who were Jerusalem natives/locals, were not as threatening.

Why the apostles? They were the leaders of the Jerusalem church. No doubt this was purely a politically motivated move for Herod. And it pleased many of his citizens who didn't like Christians. Political figures are often ready to persecute Christians if it will make them popular.

Of the twelve who followed Jesus, James was the first to be martyred. The death of James shattered any illusion that somehow, the twelve enjoyed a unique divine protection. Eusebius, a Greek historian of Christianity, relates a story from Clement of Alexandria about the soldier guarding James as he stood before the judge to be condemned. The soldier was so affected by his witness that he declared himself a Christian and was willingly executed alongside James for Jesus (Eusebius, *Church History* 2.9.2-3).

It is noteworthy that the Christians evidently did not seek to perpetuate "the Twelve" by selecting a replacement for James as they had for Judas.¹

Why did Herod apprehend Peter (v. 3)? To further please the Jews. The execution of James pleased them and further emboldened Herod. He knew Peter was the leading apostle among the Christians and he was no doubt intending to kill him after the Passover. This was the third arrest of Peter that Luke recorded (4:3; 5:18). Note that this persecution of the Christians did not arise from anything they had done but simply because Herod wanted to gain popularity with the Jews.²

Application: Can you foresee a day when we may be persecuted for who we are—not for anything we have done but rather for political purposes?

Why did they bind Peter so securely (vv. 4, 6)? Earlier (5:17-21), he had escaped from jail. Normally it was considered enough for a prisoner to be handcuffed to one soldier, but as a special precaution, Peter had a soldier on each side of him and both his wrists were manacled.

Peter, awaiting execution the following day, was apparently in a sound sleep when the angel woke him up (v. 7).

What does that say about Peter? He had a big God and trusted him totally. Peter knew he was immortal until the Lord was finished with him—until his job on this earth was done. He knew the reality of the peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

What was the key to Peter's release (v. 5)? The believers were praying earnestly. They had no options available to effect Peter's release other than prayer. Thomas Watson, the Puritan preacher, reportedly said, "The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel." This is a clear example of the Biblical truth that prayer works (James 5:16). C. S. Lewis reportedly said, "God could have chosen to do His work on this earth any way He wanted but He chose to do it largely in response to prayer."

Why was Herod permitted to execute James but not allowed by God to do the same with Peter? Simply, it wasn't time for Peter to go to his heavenly home yet. Until it was time, he was immortal; he couldn't be killed. It was time for James; it was not time for Peter.

Application: Leadership is not exempt from persecution. If you're in a leadership role, doing God's work, you can expect persecution. The story of Nehemiah is a classic Old Testament example.

How did Peter react to the angel's directions (vv. 7-10)? Peter obeyed without really knowing what was happening. He probably knew enough to sense that God was doing something and the explanation could come later. He didn't worry about the iron gate (v. 10) that lay ahead.

Application: Many of us worry about the "iron gate" before we ever get to it. A month beforehand, and we are anxious about the iron gate! But God will take care of that obstacle when we come to it.

Why did Peter go to the "house of Mary," the mother of John Mark (v. 12)? Peter naturally went to where he knew Christians would be hanging out and praying.

What was their response when they were told Peter was at the door (v. 15)? Skepticism. "You're crazy, Rhoda!" **What was their response when they opened the door to see him (v. 16)?** Astonishment!

What do these two responses say about the people? They were praying but not expecting God to answer—at least not so soon. Their prayer was earnest (v. 5), but their faith was not overwhelming. **How can we apply their actions to our prayer life?**

What were the differences after Peter was released from jail between chapter 5 and 12? Previously, Peter had returned to the temple courts to continue preaching as the angel of the Lord had instructed him (5:19-21). However, at this point the hostility levels of the Jews had ratcheted up, especially after the execution of James (v. 2). Following the example of Saul (9:29-30), Peter left Jerusalem for his own well-being. Without a clear message from God, to remain behind and preach like he did in chapter 5 would be to test God. Except for a brief mention in Acts 15, this is the last Luke speaks of Peter.

Since the martyrdom of James (the apostle and brother of John) was recorded in verse 2, who is the James of verse 17? It is Jesus' half-brother James, a leader in the Jerusalem church.

What was Herod's primary character defect (vv. 21-22)? Pride. He took all the glory for himself instead of rightly praising God: *And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory (vv. 22-23).* Of all the sins described in the Bible, Pride is the one most frequently condemned. It is the father of all sin. The #1 sin on God's hate list.

What lessons can we learn from Herod's death?

Why did the word of God continue to spread (v. 24) in the midst of all this persecution? Typically when Christianity is persecuted, it flourishes. Nothing seemed capable of stopping the expansion of the church. Corruption and contention in its ranks did not kill it (5:1-11; 6:1-7). Its religious enemies could not contain it (4:1; 8:1, 3; 11:19). Even Roman officials could not control it (vv. 1-23). Jesus' prediction that even the gates of Hades could not overpower it was proving true (Matthew 16:18). God's purposes will prevail!³

Note that coming back from their relief effort to Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul brought John Mark with them back to the church at Antioch. From there they would launch out on Paul's first missionary journey. Acts 13-28 detail Paul's missionary journeys.

¹ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Acts, 2017 Edition, (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>) p. 192

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p. 196