

The Book of Acts Chapter 12

Acts 12:1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.

Acts 12:24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

I. Review of Acts 11

1. We had talked about how God promised Abraham that all families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's seed.
2. Yet the Jews, and even the Jewish Christians, were still content to keep the truth to themselves, and questioned Peter about visiting the home of a Gentile.
3. Peter retold the story to the elders about what had occurred in chapter 10, and reported that it was God who gave them the like gift so who could withstand God?
4. Next, we read of a church plant that got started in the city of Antioch, that included some Gentile believers.
5. The elders in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to check it out. Growth continued so Barnabas brought Saul in to assist him. Revival continued.
6. The chapter ended with the prophecy of a famine that would impact the Jerusalem church, so financial support was raised and Barnabus and Saul took it to Jerusalem.

II. The Apostles Persecuted by Herod (Verses 1-4)

A. The Herod family

1. Chapter 12 begins with a return to the theme of persecution. If you remember in an earlier lesson, we spoke of the two dominant themes in the Book of Acts, one always following the other: Revival, Persecution, Revival, Persecution.
2. We had seen in Acts 9, following the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, that persecution had slowed down for a while:
Acts 9:31 Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.
3. Acts 10-11 had recorded that multiplication and revival took place among Gentiles, yet now persecution returns.

Acts 12:1-4

12 Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.

2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

4 And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter [Passover] to bring him forth to the people.

4. King Herod, of this chapter, was Herod Agrippa I.
 5. Because there are so many Herods mentioned in the gospels, Acts, and epistles, it is helpful to take a quick glimpse of how they connect.
 6. **[Herod Family graphic]** The first was **(1) Herod the Great** who we read of in Matthew 2 who tried to kill the infant Jesus when he slaughtered the babies in Bethlehem.
 7. Then there was Herod the Great's son, **(2) Herod Antipas**, who got rebuked by John the Baptist for taking and marrying his brother Phillip's wife, Herodias, which led to the execution of John. We read that Herodias' daughter, Salome, danced for Herod and pleased him, causing him to ask Salome for any gift she would name. And with her mother's advice, asked for the head of John.
 8. It is this same Herod Antipas who was in Jerusalem during Pilate's trial of Jesus. Jesus stood briefly before Herod Antipas in a trial, but he sent him back to Pilate.
 9. Herod Antipas had a brother named **(3) Aristobulus IV**, not named in the Bible, who had a son named **(4) Herod Agrippa I**.
 10. That is the **Herod Agrippa I** of Acts 12 who killed James, the brother of John, and had Peter arrested. He was the grandson of Herod the Great.
 11. And it was Herod Agrippa I's son, **(5) Herod Agrippa II**, who later listened to the testimony of the Apostle Paul.
 12. He was made king over all Palestine by the Roman emperor, but he reigned only about three years in this capacity, from 41 AD to 44 AD.
 13. Herod was ambitious to make a name for himself and undertook to obtain favor with the Jews by persecuting the Christians. He ordered James, the brother of John (sons of Zebedee), to be slain with the sword.
- B. Jesus' inner circle

1. If you remember, Jesus had a an inner circle of Peter, the brother Andrew, and the brothers James, and John. All four had been fishermen working together prior to Jesus calling them to follow him.
 2. In the gospels, we read about **Peter, James, and John whom:**
 - a. **Jesus took with Him to the top of the mount and saw Jesus transfigured.**
 - b. **Jesus took with Him inside the house when He raised Jairus' dead daughter**
 - c. **Jesus took them deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Him**
 3. We continue to read about **Peter and John in Acts:**
 - a. **At the temple healing the lame man**
 - b. **Preaching in Jerusalem and getting arrested and jailed and boldly speaking to the Sanhedrin, twice**
 - c. **Praying for the Samaritans and them receiving the Holy Ghost**
 4. Acts 12 is the first mention of James by name since he was listed along with all the other apostles who were in the upper room in Acts 1.
 5. We had seen how that the Jewish leadership had tried to kill Saul after he was converted, and had already arrested some of the apostles at least two or three times, had them beaten, and further threatened them.
 6. But that was only the Jewish elders who were responsible for that aggressive persecution. Then came Herod.
 - C. Herod the killer
 1. Now the Jews had the help of King Herod Agrippa I. Herod's friendship with the Roman emperors got him a territory even larger than his grandfather Herod the Great had ruled.¹
 2. Herod imprisoned Peter with four quaternions of soldiers assigned to guard him. A quaternion consisted of four soldiers, so sixteen soldiers in all were part of his guard.
 3. So, with their family history of killing behind them, Herod Agrippa I had James beheaded, and placed Peter on death row waiting the same fate following Passover. Perhaps John and other leaders were going to be next.
 4. But that is not what God intended for the church.
- III. Peter's Deliverance (Verses 5-19)

¹ Archeology Study Bible, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2017, p. 1619.

- A. Peter awakened by the angel
1. *Acts 12:5 Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.*
 2. With the execution of James, and now Peter in prison, the church got busy doing what the church does best—they prayed.
 3. The secret of victorious Christianity is that we have access to the highest power available.
 4. And certainly, the church and Peter had a higher power higher Herod working on their behalf.
 5. Peter was chained to two soldiers, one on either side, and other soldiers, perhaps two, stood outside to guard the door of his prison cell.
Acts 12:6 And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.
 6. Peter did not appear to be concerned, as he slept soundly between the two soldiers, and had to be awakened.
 7. In the night, only a few hours before he was to have been brought out for execution, God sent His angel to lead Peter out to safety.
Acts 12:7-9
7 And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.
8 And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.
9 And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.
 8. Peter followed the angel, but thought he was having a vision or dream.
 9. Only he wasn't dreaming. But obviously, the guards who had been chained to him, were dreaming and sleeping soundly, as were all the other guards who had been positioned in front of his cell and around the prison.
Acts 12:10-11
10 When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him.
11 And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety,

that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.

10. This is not the first time the angel of the Lord had delivered Peter from jail. Acts 5 recorded a similar event, only then, the angel told him to return to the temple and preach, which he did.
 11. But this time was different and after the angel delivered him from death, but just left him in the street. But the man of God knew where to go.
- B. Peter interrupts his prayer meeting
1. He headed to a safe place, where the church was praying, the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark and sister to Barnabas (Col. 4:10.)
Acts 12:12 And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.
 2. Peter knew, that with King Herod now working on behalf of the Jews, he would have to get out of Jerusalem quickly, but decided he should first give his testimony to the prayer meeting.
 3. There was likely a tall wooden fence surrounding a courtyard around Mary's home, with a locked gate.
 4. So Peter had to knock at the gate to attract the attention of those within the house.
 5. A young girl named Rhoda heard the knock and went out to answer, but in her excitement, didn't open the gate:
Acts 12:14 And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.
 6. The church didn't believe her, thinking she had lost her mind, but after she insisted it was Peter, someone suggested it was his angel.
 7. When Peter continued knocking, they eventually opened the gate, and to their astonishment, found Peter standing there just as the girl had said.
Acts 12:16-17
16 But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.
17 But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.
 8. I like how the preacher had to quiet down the church so he could speak! Their excitement was high!

9. He asked them to take the news to James, most likely the brother of Jesus, who by Acts 15, was recognized as the leader of the church in Jerusalem.
10. So, obviously, James was not in this prayer meeting. It is probable that Barnabas and Saul had been in meetings with James on this trip because they were in Jerusalem at this time (see Acts 11:30 and Acts 12:25).
11. Then Peter quietly left Jerusalem for a secret location as the soldiers of Herod would soon begin their search for him.
12. Verses 18-19 tell us that at daylight, when Peter's absence was learned, Herod commanded the execution of all the guards as he held them responsible for permitting the prisoner to escape. But you can't stop God!

IV. Herod's Death (Verses 20-23)

A. Herod's quarrel with Tyre and Sidon

1. Herod then left Jerusalem for Caesarea, his capital city.
2. **[map: Caesarea, Tyre, Sidon]**
3. Herod, for some unknown reason, had become displeased with the government of the cities of Tyre and Sidon, and had broken off trade relations with them. Tyre and Sidon, the two principal cities of Phoenicia, were important seaports and centers of world commerce.
Acts 12:20 And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's country.
4. The government officials from Tyre and Sidon realized the inconvenience of trade sanctions that came from falling out of favor with the king.
5. So when they learned that Herod had returned to Caesarea, another coastal city just fifty or sixty miles to the south, they sent a delegation to Caesarea.
6. They first met with Blastus, King Herod's personal attendant, and struck up a good friendship with him.
7. Perhaps by Blastus' influence, King Herod agreed to meet with these representatives. And perhaps in an effort to impress them with his power, he dressed in formal royal apparel:
Acts 12:21-22
21 And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.

22 And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.

B. Struck by vanity

1. The officials from Tyre and Sidon, probably hoping to flatter and win Herod's favor, shouted that his voice was that of a god and not of a man.
2. For arrogant men, vanity is often their weakness, and these officials must have realized that.
3. Roman emperors were called "god" by their subjects, so it did not take much buttering up for Herod to start believing their words.
4. But this brought the judgment of the Lord on Herod who knew better: *Acts 12:23 And immediately **the angel of the Lord smote him**, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.*
5. Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived and wrote in this period, also wrote in great detail of Herod's death, and his account coincides with Acts.
6. Josephus said when Herod made his appearance, his royal robes sparkled in the sun, and that is when the people cried out flatteries and declared him to be a god.
7. But at that moment, Herod saw an owl sitting on a nearby rope, and seeing it as an omen of death, he was immediately struck with stomach pains.
8. He died a painful and gruesome death five days later.
9. What is interesting is the comparison between verse 7 and verse 23: *Acts 12:7 And, behold, **the angel of the Lord came upon him** [Peter], and a light shined in the prison: and he **smote Peter on the side**, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.*
10. The angel of the Lord smote Peter to wake him and deliver him.
11. The angel of the Lord smote Herod and he died.

V. The Triumph of God's Word (Verse 24)

1. Once again, the cause of their persecution was ended, and at the conclusion of Luke's account of Herod's death, he added: *Acts 12:24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.*
2. This form of writing is called a metonymy, where a part of the thing is used as a substitution for the whole thing.
3. For instance, I may tell Sis. Warner, "My dear, you have my heart!"
4. She doesn't say, "Ooh, gross, I don't want that bloody thing!" She understands that stands for me. It is a metonymy, the substitute of a part for the whole.

5. If she asks me, “Honey, would you give me a hand?”
 6. She really is asking for more than this wrist and five fingers. She wants me. That is a metonymy, the substitute of a part for the whole.
 7. And a watchman may shout to the commander, “The sword is coming!” but is referring to an approaching army.
 8. That is what is meant when the Word grew—in other words, God’s Sword had come! The places where the Word could go freely had grown, and the number of disciples were multiplied.
 9. So, as we see once again, revival is followed by persecution which is followed by revival.
- VI. The Story of Barnabas and Saul Resumed (Verse 25)
1. In our last lesson, we found Barnabas and Saul traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem to deliver an offering.
 2. So while the events we just described happened in Jerusalem, it is likely that Barnabas and Saul were there at the same time.
Acts 12:25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.
 3. As we mentioned before, they could have been in a separate location with James the brother of Jesus.
 4. Or, since the church had been meeting in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, perhaps Barnabas and Saul had also been in the church prayer meeting when Peter arrived.
 5. I believe that was likely the case.
 6. We learn from Colossians 4:10 that Barnabas and John Mark’s mother were brother and sister, so it is highly likely that he paid a visit to Mary’s home.
 7. And while there, he picked up his nephew, John Mark, also called Marcus, and takes him with him to Antioch, and as we learn in the next chapter, John Mark traveled with Barnabas and Saul on a portion of their first missionary journey.
 8. What is interesting is that this nephew, who was at the heart of the ministry of the early church, later became a companion of Peter when he traveled to Rome, and with Peter’s help, he wrote what is believed to be the first written history of the life of Jesus, which is the second book of the New Testament, bearing his name: the Gospel according to Saint Mark.