

## ACTS 12 - Death of James; arrest of Peter

In this chapter persecution strikes through Herod Agrippa I. James is executed and Peter is imprisoned—but is miraculously delivered. Herod dies by a judgment of God. Although persecution comes, the church grows and the Word of God is multiplied. - McGee

### ***James Killed and Peter Imprisoned***

***Act 12:1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.***

“Herod the king” is Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great (who attempted to put the Lord Jesus to death at the time of His birth). There never was a family more at enmity against God. As far as we know, not a single member of the Herod family ever really turned to God.

You will recall that up to this point the persecution against the church had been largely from the religious rulers, the Sadducees in particular. Now it moves into the realm of government. Persecution swings from religion to politics. Perhaps Herod did this to gain favor with certain influential groups. We know that he stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. The word vexed is hardly adequate to describe what he did. He carried on a brutal, unfeeling persecution of the church. – McGee

***Act 12:2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.***

The fact is stated so bluntly—he killed James with the sword. James becomes another martyr in the church. He is the second martyr who is named. I am of the opinion that there had been many others who had already died for the name of the Lord Jesus. – McGee

It was this James who had been with Peter and John on the Mount of Transfiguration with our Lord; and it was his mother who had requested that her two sons might sit beside Christ in His kingdom.

This chapter affords an interesting study of God's ways in connection with His people. James was put to death by the enemy, yet Peter was miraculously delivered. Human reason would ask why such preference should be shown to Peter. Faith rests on the love and wisdom of God, knowing that:

Ill that God blesses is our good,

And unblest good is ill,

And all is right that seems most wrong,

If it be His good will.

—Frederick W. Faber – Believers Bible Commentary

***Act 12:3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread.***

James is slain, but Peter will be miraculously preserved in all of this. Here we find an example of the sovereign will of God moving in the church. I'm sure there were many who asked, “Why in the world was James put to death and Peter permitted to live? Why would God do that?” Many ask that same question today. The answer is that this is the sovereign will of God. He still moves like this in the contemporary church. I have been in the ministry for many years, and I have seen the Lord reach in and take certain wonderful members out of the church by death. And then there are others whom He has left. Why would He do that? If He had asked me, from my viewpoint as the pastor, I would say that He took the

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wrong one and He left the wrong one! But life and death are in the hands of a sovereign God. When you and I rebel against His decision, it is simply too bad for us. This is His universe, not ours. It is God's church, not ours. The hand of a sovereign God moves in the church.

James apparently was one of the heads of the church in Jerusalem. God permits Herod to slay him. Peter must have been a leader too. God permits him to live. – McGee

***Act 12:4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.***

The word Easter should be “Passover.” Actually, they are at the same time because you remember that Jesus ate the meal with His disciples just before He was crucified. However, the Jews in Jerusalem at this time would have been celebrating the Passover and not Easter.

He really put Peter under guard here. The guard is strengthened and enlarged. *Four quaternions* of soldiers to keep this man! Wouldn't you say that he suspected someone would try to deliver Peter- McGee

***Act 12:5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.***

Another translation would be “but prayer was made earnestly of the church unto God for him.” They didn't come before God with a kind of grocery-list prayer. They went before God and earnestly prayed that this man Simon Peter be delivered. Their hearts were in their prayers. - McGee

### ***Peter Is Rescued***

***Act 12:6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.***

How could Simon Peter sleep between two soldiers? Remember that he went to sleep also in the Garden of Gethsemane. I would say that Simon Peter was not troubled with insomnia. He didn't have any difficulty sleeping. It seems he could sleep just about any place and any time. What a wonderful confidence he must have had in God to be able to sleep between these two soldiers! - McGee

***Act 12:7-9 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.***

The angel tells him to do a very reasonable thing—get dressed. There was nothing in the way of alarm, just sensible directions. Peter thought the whole thing was a dream, and he would have walked out of there without his shoes! – McGee

***Act 12:10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.***

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They certainly had enough guards to keep Peter in prison. I really think that they expected something like this. You remember that the Lord Jesus had come forth from the grave. That was a source of real embarrassment to them. They do not intend to let something like that happen to them again. So they more than doubled the guard.

Remember that the church in Jerusalem is praying for Simon Peter while this is happening. As soon as Peter is out of danger, the angel lets Peter go on his own.

Let me call attention to the fact that the translation in verse Act\_12:7 should be an angel of the Lord and not the angel of the Lord. The angel of the Lord in the Old Testament referred to the preincarnate Christ. Jesus Christ is now at God's right hand in His glorified body. It was not the Lord Jesus who came down to deliver Peter. It was an angel whom the Lord Jesus had sent. The prayers of the church are definitely answered. - McGee

***Act 12:11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people."***

That night ... when Herod planned to bring him out, Peter was sleeping soundly, manacled between two soldiers. Someone has called his slumber a triumph of faith. He probably remembered the Lord's promise that he would live to be an old man (Joh\_21:18), and so he knew that Herod could not kill him prematurely. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and the cell was flooded with light. Tapping Peter on the side, the angel ordered him to get up quickly.

Immediately the handcuffs fell off. Then with short, crisp sentences, the angel told Peter to dress, to tie on his sandals, to throw his cloak around him, and to follow. Though in a daze, Peter followed the angel past the first and second guard posts of the prison. When they came to the iron gate, it opened automatically, as if by an electric eye. It was only after they had passed through one street of the city, and the angel had vanished, that Peter came to himself and realized it was not a dream, but that the Lord had miraculously delivered him from the hand of Herod and of the Jews. – Believers Bible Commentary

***Act 12:12 So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.***

The church at this particular time, and for about a hundred and fifty years after this, did not have church buildings. Today, when we talk of a church, we usually mean a building. We say, "The First So-and-So church is on the corner of Main and So-and-So." Actually, that is not a church at all; it is a building in which the church meets. The church is the body of believers. At the beginning the church never met in a public building. They had none. They met in homes.

Now Mary, the mother of John Mark, apparently was a woman of means and had a home large enough for the church to meet there. They were gathered together praying for Simon Peter to be delivered. – MCGee

When he stopped long enough to consider, Peter realized that the disciples would be praying at the house of Mary, the mother of John ... Mark. It must have been an all-night prayer meeting, since Peter's escape from prison probably took place during the early morning hours. – Believers Bible Commentary

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**Act 12:13-15** *And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel."*

Peter knocked at the door of the gate and waited. A girl named Rhoda (Greek, "Rose") came to answer, but was so excited when she heard Peter that she failed to open the gate! She ran back to announce the good news to those who were praying. They thought she was crazy, and did not hesitate to tell her so, yet she kept insisting that the apostle was really at the gate. They said, "It must be his guardian angel," but she stated positively that it was Peter.

These believers have often been chided for their unbelieving prayers; they were actually surprised when their prayers were answered. But any such criticism is probably influenced by our own nervous self-consciousness. Instead of chiding others, we should be greatly comforted that God answers such faithless prayers. We all tend to be unbelieving believers. – Believers Bible Commentary

**Act 12:16** *Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.*

**Act 12:17** *But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.*

They just couldn't believe their eyes. They just couldn't believe that their prayers had been answered.

Now Peter got out of town. Since God had miraculously delivered him, couldn't God have miraculously kept him safe in Jerusalem? Shouldn't Peter have said, "I'm just going to stick around. God has delivered me out of prison, and I know He can keep me"? Of course, God could keep him. But God expects us to use our common sense. Sometimes what looks like a tremendous faith in God is actually tempting God. Even after God has done some wonderful or miraculous thing for you and for me, He still expects us to use our common sense. - McGee

**Act 12:18 -19** *Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there.*

When morning came and Peter was missing, the hapless soldiers were thrown into a state of panic. For Herod, too, it was a traumatic experience to be so outwitted. Nothing that the soldiers could say sounded at all convincing. In fact, the lameness of their testimony probably infuriated the king all the more. So he ordered them to be executed. He then left for Caesarea to nurse his wounded pride. – Believers Bible Commentary

### ***The Death of Herod***

**Act 12:20** *Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country.*

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For some unknown reason, Herod had become very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, two commercial ports on the Mediterranean. The people of these cities took advantage of his holiday in Caesarea to ingratiate themselves with him, because they depended on importing grain from Judea. So they befriended Blastus the king's personal aide, and through him requested restoration of diplomatic relations. – Believers Bible Commentary

**Act 12:21** *So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.*

**Act 12:22** *And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"*

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

One day Herod came forth in all his royal finery to address the people. They shouted deliriously, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" He made no effort to refuse such divine honors, or to give glory to God. Therefore, an angel of the Lord struck Him with a fearful disease and he died. This was in a.d. 44.

Thus, the one who had executed James to please the Jews is himself slain at the hands of Him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell. Herod reaped what he sowed. – Believers Bible Commentary

Friend, God will not share His glory with anyone. "I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images" (Isa\_42:8). Herod refused to glorify God through the miracle of Peter's escape from prison. And now he is willing to let the people deify him! God judges him. God is jealous of His glory. What a lesson we have here!

Now one would think that with all this persecution taking place the poor church would be destroyed and disappear. - McGee

**Act 12:24-25** *But the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.*

Meanwhile, the gospel expands its outreach continually. God makes the wrath of man praise Him, and the remainder of wrath He restrains (Psa\_76:10). He makes the devices of the people of no effect, but the counsel of the Lord stands forever (Psa\_33:10-11). Mark, who was a nephew of Barnabas, and later wrote the Second Gospel accompanied them back to Antioch. – Believers Bible Commentary

John Mark goes back to Antioch with Barnabas and Saul. Remember that they had been down in Jerusalem with the gift to the church there.

We have come now to the end of the second period of the Book of Acts. The gospel has gone into Judea and Samaria. Beginning with the next chapter we will see the movement of the gospel to the uttermost part of the earth. We are still in that movement today. I hope that you and I are both involved in it. – McGee