

## Acts 12

- In chapter 12 we move to the next phase of persecution among the early Christians
  - Earlier in the book we found the church reaching out to the Jews
    - While being persecuted by the Jewish authorities
  - Now we have the church actively reaching out to Gentiles
    - And predictably, a new antagonist rises up from among the Gentile authorities
    - Herod Agrippa I was content to leave this new Jewish movement alone so long as it involved only the Jews
    - But as it begins to attract the interest and response of the Gentiles in the Roman empire, it now poses a threat to him

[Acts 12:1](#) ¶ Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them.

[Acts 12:2](#) And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.

[Acts 12:3](#) When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread.

[Acts 12:4](#) When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people.

[Acts 12:5](#) So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

- The timing for the events of Chapter 12 are tied to the events at the end of chapter 11
  - Luke records at the end of 11 that Saul and Barnabas are sent to the elders of Jerusalem with the financial gift for the church in the city
    - This is happening at the time of the great famine that impacted the entire world
    - So Saul and Barnabas may have been in town during this time or have just left
  - Herod lays hands on some of the church
    - The phrase in Greek really means he attacked or targeted

- And unlike the general persecution by the Jewish authorities, Herod is going after a selective group within the church
  - The leadership of the church
- The earlier Jewish persecution drove many believers out of the city but the Apostles themselves remained in the city
  - But Herod goes after the leaders
- A little background on Herod would probably be helpful at this point
  - Herod Antipas was the grandson of Herod the Great
    - Herod the Great was the descendant of Edomites who was made King over Judea by the Roman Senate
    - He was born in 11 B.C.
      - His father, Aristobulus, was murdered by his grandfather, Herod the Great, in 7 B.C.
        - Because Herod the Great was suspicious that his son would try to take his throne
      - After having his father killed, Herod the Great sent the four-year old Agrippa to Rome for an education
  - While Agrippa was in Rome, he became close friends with the grand nephew of the emperor Tiberius
    - That grand nephew was a boy named Gaius, who later took the name Caligula after he became emperor in AD 37
    - At that time, he appointed Agrippa as tetrarch of the present day Golan Heights, Southern Syria
    - Later he gave Agrippa the title King of the Jews and the territories of Galilee and Perea
    - Finally, Caligula was succeeded by Claudius, who gave Herod Agrippa Judea and Samaria
  - As king of Israel, Herod Agrippa ruled for four more years until his death in AD 44 at the age of 55
    - His son Agrippa II appears later in Acts in the story Paul

- First, Herod moves against James and puts him to death
  - This isn't James, the half-brother of Jesus who wrote the letter of James
    - This is James the Apostle
  - The phrase "with a sword" probably means a legal execution by beheading
  - Up until now, there have been martyrs in the church, but none of the leaders have been killed
    - Now we have the first of the twelve Apostles dying for their faith
    - James won't be the last of course
  - Interestingly, James and John both made a bold request of Jesus in Mark 10:39

[Mark 10:36](#) And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

[Mark 10:37](#) They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory."

[Mark 10:38](#) But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

[Mark 10:39](#) They said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized."

- Jesus asked the two Apostles if they could follow in Jesus' footsteps
  - It's doubtful they fully understood what He was saying
  - Jesus asked if they could die a martyrs death as He would
    - Both said they could
    - So Jesus said they would
  - James dies here
  - John dies in captivity on Patmos
    - James is the first to experience martyrdom, to sit on the left of Jesus
    - John is called to live out his life the longest in captivity, alone, and will sit on Jesus' right

- Every other Apostle dies in between
- Herod and his family of Kings were not Jews
  - They were semites descended from Esau, not Jacob
    - They were made Kings of Israel by Roman decree and might, not by Jewish law or acceptance by the people
    - But they forever retained a kind of insecurity complex among the Jewish people
      - They wanted to be accepted as the Jewish King by the people
  - So when Herod sees how much it pleased the Jews that he killed James, it caused him to go further
    - He found Peter and took him to prison as well
    - And certainly, Peter would have been quickly executed as well, but God ensured that circumstances would come to Peter's aid
  - It was the week of Unleavened Bread, the 8-day period that includes the day of Passover
    - Herod couldn't perform the execution of Peter during this time until the day of Passover itself
      - He planned to present Peter to the people as Pilate did for Jesus
      - Herod assumed the crowd would call for Peter to be crucified like Jesus was
- So for the third time Peter sits in a prison for his faith waiting for his execution
  - And Herod takes no chances that Peter would be freed by his followers
    - So he assigns four squads to guard Peter day and night
      - A squad was four soldiers
      - So we have 16 soldiers standing guard in 6-hour shifts
    - This was very rare and likely reserved for very dangerous characters

- Remember that the last time Peter was in prison, he was free miraculously
  - So in this delay, the church has opportunity to pray for Peter's release
- And what follows is so detailed and so comical at times that it immediately strikes us as both authentic and genuinely believable
  - We can even see ourselves reacting to the supernatural work of God in much the same way

[Acts 12:6](#) ¶ On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.

[Acts 12:7](#) And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands.

[Acts 12:8](#) And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."

[Acts 12:9](#) And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

[Acts 12:10](#) When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

[Acts 12:11](#) When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

[Acts 12:12](#) And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

[Acts 12:13](#) When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer.

[Acts 12:14](#) When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate.

[Acts 12:15](#) They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel."

[Acts 12:16](#) But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed.

[Acts 12:17](#) But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place.

- Before we look at that account, take note of Luke's careful contrast of Peter and James
  - Both were leaders of the church in that day

- When Herod begins to persecute the church, both men become targets
- James is taken and almost immediately meets his end
  - It probably happened so fast, the church didn't know how to react
- And then Peter is taken, but God clearly prevent Herod from succeeding in killing Peter
- Passages like this go a long way to correcting any simplex notions we may harbor for how God may be predisposed to conduct our lives or answer our prayers for deliverance
  - No doubt there were prayers for James as well
  - No doubt James hoped for a miracle release
    - None came
  - Similarly, no doubt Peter didn't believe himself any more worthy of rescue than James had been
  - The answer is simple
    - We all die...sooner or later
    - Therefore, the day of our death, having been appointed by God for His own purposes, cannot be a measure of God's pleasure
    - Not only do the good die young, they also die old too (and the same is true for the bad)
- So God's decisions aren't necessarily a reflection of our "goodness" or of His displeasure
  - In this case, He determined that James' work was finished
    - But He didn't want to leave the church in Jerusalem without any leader in the city
    - So He spares Peter for now
    - But we know in the end Peter will meet an even worse fate
  - James' fate turns out to be the more merciful

- Looking at the passage, let's highlight a few details of this humorous account
  - First, notice Peter's disposition
    - He's sleeping
      - This is likely his last night alive and he would have known or at least suspected as much
      - Perhaps Peter understood what Jesus meant when He told Peter:

[John 21:18](#) "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go."

[John 21:19](#) Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!"

- On the hand, Peter has a habit of sleeping when he should be praying (remember the garden)
- The squad of guards assigned to Peter included two chained to him and two more guarding the door of the cell
  - Then an angel appeared and lit the room, and commanded Peter to walk out
    - The chains fell from his wrists
    - The angel commands Peter to dress
      - Apparently, Peter wasn't even thinking clearly enough in the moment to recognize he needed to dress
  - And then the angel escorts him out of the prison
    - The main gate opens by itself
    - And all the while the various guards either sleep through it all or are prevented from seeing it happening
  - Once Peter was free, the angel departs
    - Reminds us of Lot being escorted from Sodom
    - The whole time Peter is thinking this is just a dream or vision

- I've had dreams I thought were so real that I didn't realize they were dreams until I awoke
    - I can't image having a dream but then finding out it was actually reality
- Once released, Peter comes to his senses and realizes that his escape isn't assured yet
  - The Romans will come looking for him by daybreak
    - So Peter looks for the closest home with Christians gathered
      - His desire is to pass information back to the other Apostles that he is no longer in prison
  - He goes to the home of John Mark
    - John is the Jewish name, Mark is the Greek name
    - John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and he accompanied both Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey
      - When Paul and Barnabas split, John Mark went with Barnabas
    - He later rejoined Paul and also traveled with Peter
      - He wrote the Gospel of Mark
        - He was also Peter's interpreter when Peter traveled to Rome
        - Just as we say that Luke's gospel was heavily influenced by his traveling companion, Paul
        - Similarly, Mark's Gospel was Peter's transcribed Gospel
      - Church tradition says Mark founded the church in Alexandria, Egypt
- Then we see the most amusing part of the story
  - And it's so true to life in that we can see and feel the actors' excitement and doubt
    - Rhonda the servant comes to the door

- She's so excited at seeing Peter, she leaves him there to tell the others
    - Classic sitcom fodder
- The rest of the brethren are equally surprised and don't believe her at first
  - They say it must be an angel because Jewish belief at the time held that every person had a guardian angel
    - And that the angel resembled the person
    - So they assume she saw Peter's angel rather than Peter himself
      - I wonder which view requires more faith: that Rhonda really saw Peter or an angel that looked like Peter?
  - The fact that so many are gathered here and the fact that Peter knew to expect people here suggests it was a regular gathering place for the church
    - John Mark's mother must have been wealthy
- This scene also reveals that the church had moved into the house church phase
  - The church itself had grown much larger than one meeting place could accommodate
    - Plus persecution had driven the church to become more careful about it's activities in public
  - So it had changed to meeting in smaller groups in houses throughout the city
    - Peter as the leader would have known where these churches existed and probably visited them all regularly
- Peter has no intention of staying here and endangering the church, so he tells them simply to spread the news
  - And in particular, tell James (the half-brother)
    - James will now rise to a prominent position in the Jerusalem church after Peter's departure from the city

- With that, Peter leaves Jerusalem
- Scripture doesn't give us a clear understanding of where Peter went after this
  - Perhaps Luke kept that information to himself to protect those who helped Peter escape
    - Many of them might have still been alive when Luke wrote his account
  - Early church fathers wrote that Peter left Judea altogether and ministered to churches in the Diaspora
    - Paul says Peter had an itinerant ministry in 1Cor 9:5
    - And he spent time in Corinth according to Gal 2 and Antioch and Asia Minor according to 1 Peter 5:13
  - At one point he returned to Jerusalem at least once more for the Jerusalem council, which we'll study in chapter 15
- This account will end the story of Peter for the most part and with him the first part of the book of Acts
- Herod Agrippa discovers the escape

[Acts 12:18](#) ¶ Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.

[Acts 12:19](#) When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

- Luke in typical understatement says there was no small disturbance at Peter's disappearance
  - Herod searches the city and then examines the guards
    - Examine means questions like in a trial, probably courtmartialed
    - He can only conclude they conspired to set Peter free
    - They were executed for their apparent failure
  - After Passover, Herod goes to his headquarters in Caesarea which would have been his procedure

[Acts 12:20](#) ¶ Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country.

[Acts 12:21](#) On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them.

[Acts 12:22](#) The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"

[Acts 12:23](#) And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.

[Acts 12:24](#) ¶ But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

[Acts 12:25](#) ¶ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.

- An interesting footnote on Herod's life
  - A political dispute broke out between Herod and his subjects in the Phoenician city states of Tyre and Sidon
    - These city states received their produce from the Galilee, which was also under Herod's authority
    - So in the course of his dispute with these cities, he restricted the food supply from Galilee as retribution
  - In response, they won over or bribed his chambermaid, the servant responsible for Herod's bedroom, to help them in their cause
    - This means the servant was probably lobbying on behalf of these cities for Herod to change his policy over restricting the food
- Then we hear of Herod's supernatural death
  - It happens during an address begin delivered to representatives from the cities
    - Josephus gives a much more detailed explanation of what happened on that day
  - The address Herod gives is an oration, which in the Greek means a long, scolding speech directed at the people of Tyre and Sidon
    - He's dressed in his finest apparel and is seated in his throne
    - The response of the people is to declare this is the voice of a god and not a man

- Whether they were saying this in sincerity or merely out of obligation doesn't matter

- What matters is how it enflamed Herod's pride and vanity

Clad in a garment woven completely of silver so that its texture was indeed wondrous, when he entered the theater at daybreak, there the silver illuminated by the touch of the first rays of the sun was wondrously radiant, and by its glitter inspired fear and awe in those who gazed intently upon it. Straightaway his followers raised their voices from various directions, addressing him as god."

-Josephus

- As he was speaking, God strikes Herod down for his pride in accepting the praise of the people as god
- Josephus says:

The king was struck with a deadly malady after being hailed divine. He was smitten one day and died five days later, and the rotting of his flesh produced worms."

- Whatever intestinal disorder killed Herod, it could have been something common in that day
  - But the point is the same: God would not have Herod's reign last a day longer
  - And his death opens the door for Peter to return to Jerusalem when the council of Jerusalem meets in a chapter 15
  - And to mark another division in his book, Luke inserts his characteristic line
    - The word of the Lord continued to grow and be multiplied
      - Not the church per se
      - But the word of God
      - The instrument of all God's work
- And curiously, the chapter ends as it began
  - Paul and Barnabas on the road again, this time leaving Jerusalem
    - Their arrival gave Luke the chance to move the story's focus back to Peter for a while
    - Their departure brings our attention back to Saul