

Acts Chapter 12

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

“Herod the king”: Herod Agrippa I reigned from A.D. 37-44 and was the grandson of Herod the Great. He ran up numerous debts in Rome and fled to Palestine. Imprisoned by Emperor Tiberius after some careless comments, he eventually was released following Tiberius’ death, and was made ruler of northern Palestine, to which Judea and Samaria were added in A.D. 41.

As a hedge against his shaky relationship with Rome, he curried favor with the Jews by persecuting Christians.

“Herod Agrippa”, referred to only as Herod, nephew of Herod Antipas, and brother of Herodias (Matt. 14:1-11). Agrippa was schooled in Rome but lived as a prodigal both in Rome and Palestine. When his friend Caligula became emperor in A.D. 37, Agrippa received the title of king and part of Palestine to rule.

When Antipas requested the same honor, he was deposed and Agrippa received his realm. Shortly afterward he was given all of Palestine. He is mentioned only in Acts 12 when he beheaded James and intended to do the same to Peter. But God intervened and it was Herod Agrippa who died violently under God’s judgment.

Three of Agrippa’s children are mentioned in Scripture: Drusilla (24:24), Bernice, and Agrippa II (who alone is referred to as Agrippa in Scripture – 25:13).

“About that time”, during which the famine occurred, “Herod” Agrippa I, king of Palestine, and grandson of Herod the Great, began persecuting the “church.” According to Josephus’s reckoning, this was shortly before the closing events of (chapter 11), because Agrippa died in A.D. 44 (see the note on 25:13).

We see here, that the opposition to the church has gone violent. About that time means about the time Saul and Barnabas were preaching together, and about the time the followers of Jesus started to be called Christians. This Herod is Herod Agrippa probably. He ruled over Judea and Samaria at the time this happened.

Verses 2-4: James’s death is the first and only apostolic martyrdom recorded in Scripture. Herod intended to make “Peter” the second martyr and took extreme measures to secure his imprisonment, leaving four soldiers to guard him at all times. Though “Easter” does communicate correctly the time of year, the Greek word must be translated “Passover.”

Acts 12:2 "And he killed James the brother of John with the sword."

“James”: The first of the apostles to be martyred (see note on Matt. 10:2).

“With the sword”: The manner of his execution indicates James was accused of leading people to follow false gods (Deut. 13:12-15).

This James, brother of John, was a son of Zebedee and was known along with his brother as sons of thunder. He is not to be confused with the James (half-brother of Jesus), who wrote the Book of James. Jesus had predicted that James would die a violent death for the gospel. History (not the Bible), says that James and his accuser were beheaded together.

Acts 12:3 "And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)"

“Days of unleavened bread”: The weekly feast following Passover (see notes on Exodus 23:14-19; Matt. 26:17).

This Herod liked the Jews. He wanted very much to please them. Their greatest ambition at this time, was to stamp out Christianity any way they could. Peter, James, and John had been very close to the Lord and were doing a lot to further Christianity. The Jews felt, if they could get rid of them, they could possibly stamp out this movement.

This happened very close to Passover, because Passover and Unleavened Bread are just about the same time. In fact, they overlap. Unleavened Bread Feast lasted from the 14th of Nisan, or Abib, through the 21st. Passover was on the 14th.

Abib or Nisan is approximately our April. It fluctuates on our calendar (which is different to the Jewish calendar), because they count a month on the change of the moon.

Acts 12:4 "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 to bring him forth to the people."

“Four quaternions”: Each squad contained four soldiers and rotated the watch on Peter. At all times two guards were chained to him in his cell, while the other two stood guard outside the cell door (verse 6).

Apprehended means seize or officially arrest. This means that they had 16 soldiers constantly watching Peter to keep him from escaping. Herod did not want another happening like Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection to happen, so he purposely does nothing about Peter until after Easter.

The Strong's Concordance gives Easter as meaning Passover.

Acts 12:5 "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."

This means that twenty-four hours a day someone in the group of disciples was praying for the release of Peter unharmed. Herod did not want to bring this to a head during Passover, so he just kept Peter in jail under heavy guard until this time passed.

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."

They were treating Peter as if he were a hardened criminal. They not only had his hands in chains, but had two soldiers, one on each side to even sleep next to him to keep him from escaping.

These two soldiers were probably chained to Peter, but the Scripture does not say. This was not even enough restraints, so they positioned soldiers at the door to watch as well. It is just like the Lord to wait until just before Peter was to be brought before Herod for sentencing to save him.

Acts 12:7 "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."

This angel of the Lord had been close to the Lord Jesus, because of the light that shined around him and in the prison. Jesus is the Light. This was a light, so this was probably an angel whom Jesus had given this power, to help Peter. The chains fell from Peter's hands, but did not awaken the soldiers, because they probably still had chains attached to their hands.

This "smote Peter on the side", just means that he quietly awakened Peter and gave him these instructions. Peter would know that this angel was sent of God and not Herod, because of the light and the miracle of the chains falling off.

Acts 12:8 "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."

This angel is telling Peter that he has time to put on his sandals and outer coat and get ready to leave this prison. The guards are as if they are in a deep sleep. The angel will lead the way and open any and all closed doors. Any opposition to Peter leaving the prison would be taken care of by this angel.

Acts 12:9 "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."

Peter believed that he was dreaming, or had a vision, and had no idea that this angel was releasing him from this prison. God cares for his own. When there seems no way out of a problem, God makes a way for us.

Acts 12:10 "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."

The text implies that the guards themselves unwittingly opened the first two gates for Peter, and then through the miraculous hand of God the last gate opened of its "own accord" (Greek automate) or "automatically."

This ward here is the prison guard. It is as if everyone in this prison is in a state of deep sleep. These guards do not even notice as they pass by. This angel has the power of God operating in him so strongly that the door opens automatically and lets them pass. We see in this, that where God sends us, God opens the way for us.

After Peter is safely out of prison and away from the prison, the angel leaves him to make his own way. Always, when we work for Jesus, He walks with us and leads us until we are established to walk on our own. We ourselves must not start on a road that the Lord has not opened to us.

The Lord heads us out in the direction we should go. Our job is to continue following that path to our destination.

Acts 12:11 "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."

Herod had done this terrible thing just to please these Jews. You see, Peter had not committed a crime. We see here the ruling power not judging justly, but to please some of his people. A ruler should always be above this sort of thing. He should judge justly.

Peter realizes suddenly, that this is not a dream at all, but that the Lord has sent His angel and freed him from prison. We see in this, that those whom the Lord sends cannot be stopped by government officials, nor can they be stopped just because they are imprisoned. God's truth will go forth. No force on earth can stop it.

We must remember in this, that the other apostles and followers of Jesus have been praying for the release of Peter. The prayers of the Saints do not go unnoticed. The Lord knew when Peter was imprisoned and also knew how his release would build up the faith of all the followers of Jesus.

Acts Chapter 12 Questions

1. What king stretched forth his hand to vex the Christians?
2. What did he do to James the brother of John?

3. Which Herod is this?
4. Where did he rule?
5. What does history teach about James' death?
6. Why did Herod seize Peter?
7. What Jewish feast was going on at this time?
8. What was the Jews' greatest ambition at this time?
9. What month did Feast of Passover occur?
10. What month did Feast of Unleavened Bread occur?
11. How do the Jews note a passing month?
12. How many soldiers were to guard Peter?
13. What is a quaternion?
14. When did Herod plan to bring Peter before the people?
15. Who prayed for Peter?
16. How fervent was the prayer?
17. In verse 6, how did they secure Peter so he would not escape?
18. How were the soldiers treating Peter?
19. What two things happened to Peter in the prison that were definitely of God?
20. When the angel smote Peter, what happened?
21. Why would Peter know this angel was from God?
22. In verse 8, what did the angel tell Peter to do?
23. What did Peter think was happening?
24. What happened to the gate?
25. What did the angel do as soon as Peter was safe?

26. When Peter came to himself, what did he realize?

27. What did the Lord know from the beginning that the release of Peter would do?