

Acts #25
Peter Imprisoned and Freed
Acts 11:27-12:25

The stoning of Stephen, recorded in Acts 7, effectively took Christianity out of Jerusalem and launched it throughout Judea and Samaria. It is interesting that the stoning of Stephen was almost parallel to the time when the church seems to be progressing so rapidly that it needs men to preach the gospel “full time.”

Chapter 12 has a great number of similarities to chapter 7. While a great revival is going on in Antioch, Herod launches a persecution that effectively sees the Judean and Samaritan ministry closed, and the missionary journeys of Paul beginning in chapter 13.

Therefore, look with me as we see a different kind of persecution, as Peter in imprisoned and freed.

Acts 11:27-30 tells us, “And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout the world, which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea; which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”

We need to be careful that we don't miss the picture of what is going on in the world of the early church. A prophet by the name of Agabus told of a coming world famine, and it came to pass. The real problem came when the Christians, because of their love for their brethren, started sharing their goods and food among themselves. This caused a great problem of envy and jealousy among the Jews.

Acts 12:1-4 gives us this information, “Now about that time Herod, the king, stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) 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 (the word here is Passover) to bring him forth to the people.”

We are told in verse 1, “Now about that time Herod stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the church.” The Greek reads like this, “About that time King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church.”

Before we go any further, look with me at this man Herod. He is Herod Agrippa the First, the grandson of Herod the Great who was on the throne when Jesus was born. The herodians had always given complete cooperation. **But with Herod Agrippa, the Herod family for the first time seems to have some degree of popularity among the Jews who hated the Romans.** Seeing the sentiment of the Jews against the church, Herod Agrippa uses the opportunity to make some political roadways for himself. Therefore, based on Jewish hatred for Christians, Herod sees a way that he can make friends with the Jews, while still being friends with Rome.

This is a classic example of two groups who cannot stand each other coming together to fight a common enemy.

Herod's first move was the murder of James, the brother of John. Seeing how delighted the Jews were at the death of James, Herod plots even a bolder plan. He will execute the leader of the Christians, Simon Peter.

Acts 12:5-19 gives us the following events, "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. 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. And, behold, an angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shone in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell from his hands. 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. And he went out, and followed him; and knew not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard, 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 immediately the angel departed from him. 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. 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. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a maid came to hearken, named Rhoda. 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. And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished. 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 show these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place. Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of

Peter. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode.”

It was certainly not God’s plan that the mission begun some 12 or 15 years earlier to become frustrated so easily.

Notice the circumstances of Peter’s deliverance. Peter’s deliverance was in the “**nick of time.**” Have you ever been praying for God to answer some special request, and the closer the time drew to when your prayer needed to be answered the more anxious you became? **Perhaps it seemed that your prayers were just simply hitting the ceiling and rebounding.** Look at what we are told in verse 6, “And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night...an angel of the Lord came upon him.” In other words, just before his trial and conviction, at the very last possible moment Peter was delivered.

Furthermore, this deliverance superceded the laws of nature. There had been a nasty rumor in Palestine, that Jesus had not risen from the dead, but rather His body was stolen away by his disciples. Herod had no doubt heard this rumor, and he was not about to let himself be the victim of a similar hoax. **He did not simply bind Peter and throw him into the dungeon.** Rather, he sent 16 soldiers to arrest this one evangelist, and then he placed him in the dungeon with one soldier chained to his right side, and the other to his left side.

But no matter how extreme the measures, they all proved insufficient in the face of a miraculous delivery, for God once more proves that with Him all things are possible.

When Peter came to himself and realized what had happened he was no doubt overcome with joy. He wanted to hurry to the church there in Jerusalem and tell his fellow Christians, who were praying for his delivery, what had happened. He probably made his way through back alleys and streets until he saw the house where they were meeting. **The early church did not meet in large buildings as we do today, but in homes.** In fact, we are told they were meeting in the home of John Mark’s mother.

As Peter began knocking on the door and was asking them to let him in, a young woman by the name of Rhoda heard and recognized Peter’s voice. She became so excited that she forgot to unlock the door, but instead she ran in to tell everyone that Peter was standing outside. Their response was, “Thou art mad.” In today’s language, “You have lost your mind.”

Peter is still knocking on the front door wondering why they don’t let him in. So, he beats a little harder until the others decide to go to the door and

see what is happening. And the Bible says the when they “saw him, they were astonished.”

It is clear that their praying was an imperfect prayer. They were praying for something and when God gave them the answer their faith was not great enough to accept it as an answer. But we all must confess that there have been times of imperfection in our praying, but thank God, He hears us in spite of the imperfections.

Verses 20-25 tell us, “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. And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and died. But the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.”

We can't close our study without observing how God's vengeance came upon the enemy of his people. Herod, who had played with the lives of Christians, like pawns on a chessboard, had to face the judgment of God. When Herod began to play god, his destiny was settled. Immediately he was smitten with a loathsome disease, eaten by worms, and soon died. **We do not know whether his death was immediate or whether it took place days or weeks after God smote.** But the fact is that his death came as a stroke of divine judgment upon an ungodly life.

There are two great passages of scripture that sum up what we have studied in this portion of the book of Acts. To the Christian we have the assurance of Romans 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” To the unrighteous we have this promise found in Galatians 6:7-8, “Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”

If you are not saved, why not come tonight?