

The Great Stories of the Early Church
36 - Peter and Herod
Persecution and Deliverance
Acts 12

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- 1 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 to bring him forth to the people.
- 5 Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.
- 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.
- 15 And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.
- 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.
- 18 Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become

- of Peter.
- 19 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.
- 25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark. KJV

Introduction:

The chapter before us today is worthy of note but does not contain direct doctrinal teaching except in the associations and connections within the text. We should not ignore it but we cannot build theology from it directly and we do not want to stretch any of the accounts.

Therefore, we are going to simply survey the chapter together and undertake to make theological applications and we come upon them. I do hope that this will be profitable for us all.

- 1 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.**

Who was this Herod? He was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great and a Jewish wife of Herod name Mariamne. His father was Arostobulus who died while he was a child. His mother sent him to Rome to be educated and while there he became friends with the man who became Emperor Caligula. The emperor granted him the territories on the eastern bank of the Jordan, basically where Jordan is today. After Claudius (about whom we spoke last week) became Caesar, Herod Agrippa asked for and received rulership over Samaria and Judea.

Through his Jewish grandmother, he claimed Jewish ancestry and made much of identifying himself as a Jew. He made it known that he loved living in Jerusalem and, while there, followed Jewish law and worship. He offered daily sacrifices at the temple and was even allowed, at least on one occasion, to read publicly a passage from the Law at the Feast of Tabernacles. He was accepted by the higher ranks of the Jewish nation as one of them and a Jewish King.

Knowing that Christianity was greatly despised by the religious elite in Jerusalem, Herod sought to further ingratiate himself to them by carrying out a persecution against the church, starting with James, the brother of John.

There were several men named James among the Jewish believers. Two of the disciples were named James, the (older?) brother of John and James the son of Alphaeus. Then, one of Jesus' half brothers was also named James.

Matt 13:55

55 Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? KJV

Notice that Luke mentioned several of the church that were arrested by Herod though he only named James. We do not know if the others were executed or not.

This action greatly pleased the Jews since they had not been able to successfully resist the growth of the church. The idea of the king being on their side was much to their satisfaction and they undoubtedly let him know that by their open praise of him and their willingness to let him pretend to be a Jew.

Wanting to further ingratiate himself to them he had Peter arrested as well, no doubt intending to do to him what he had done to James.

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.

You should know that the word 'Easter' here is a pure fabrication of the translators. The word is "Passover" since there was no such thing as 'Easter' at this point in time, at least not among the worshipers of the True God.

It is interesting to note that Herod put 16 soldiers in charge of Peter and put him in prison. We don't know what he was worried about but he certainly was not taking chances, or so he thought, about Peter remaining in custody.

It is also obvious that Herod intended to make a public display of Peter's execution both to 'throw a bone' to the Jews and also, no doubt, to intimidate the Christians. What a blow it would be to have the chief of the apostles publicly killed!

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

I wondered as I reflected on this verse as to how many millions of stories there will be in heaven of the deliverance and rescue of heaven in earthly lives that begin with "but prayer was made without ceasing...."

And, then I tried to frame in my mind a picture of what unceasing prayer would look like. Undoubtedly it would look a lot different than our prayer meetings. As you noticed, in the initial reading, Peter was asleep when the angel came. It was night when he found himself on the street yet when he made his way to the house he found the church gathered.

What would it take for us to find ourselves here, at night, not at a regular service of the church but in a prayer service over some issue? That option is never even on our radar is it? Maybe the reason they saw a miracle and we never have?

Then, I tried to picture how such a thing would work. What about those who had jobs? Little ones? Elderly parents and sick folks to attend to? Or was this just those of the church who had no pressing issues? How would they have decided which issues were pressing enough to exempt them from the prayer meeting and which ones could be handled otherwise while they prayed? Or, were they coming and going, using their free time for prayer and then going about their day otherwise? I finally had to admit that I haven't a clue about how it work but I do know that serious prayer was being offered up to God, serious enough that He sent an angel to answer their petitions.

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.

Get the picture of how fast bound he was. Bound with two chains, between two soldiers, and behind doors and gates which were also guarded. There was no possibility of escape and little possibility of rescue even if the church had considered violent rescue an option, which they obviously did not.

But also notice that Peter is asleep. Somehow he has managed to quiet his heart and mind, accept that he is totally in the hands of God, and settle down for a rest.

Could you sleep in such a situation? I know that I would find it difficult and I can normally sleep anywhere.

But, if the situation runs its' course as Herod is planning, Peter is going to wake up to a public execution. Yet he is at peace.

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.

We learn an interesting fact about real visions here. They seem so much like reality that one has difficulty discerning the difference even if he has had visions before. Now, we might cut Peter a little slack here since he has been wakened from sleep to a brilliant light and things are happening which do not happen in ordinary circumstances. One does not simply get up, shake off prison chains and walk away from this kind of detainment.

- 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.**

It is clear that Peter knew exactly what kind of danger he was in and what it meant that God had delivered him.

So, if I understand this correctly, Peter had been released from his chains and had walked out of his cell which, no doubt, was locked. He and the angel had passed through two more locked doors and finally came to the large gate which led out of the prison into the street. It, too, was locked but opened on its own to the two of them.

It is interesting to note that the Omnipotent God only used such power as was needed to accomplish the task. He certainly could have simply transported Peter out of the prison to whatever safe location He would have desired. Peter and the angel could have walked through the locked doors and the locked gate but they did not. What was needed was to keep the guards asleep, released the chains, and release the doors. Once Peter was in the street the angel left as he was not needed any more.

The Lord has unlimited power but He does not show off, using manifestations of extraordinary power when they are not necessary.

It is always interesting to consider why God would rescue Peter by a miracle and leave James to die. I suppose that there is no explanation this side of eternity that would be completely satisfactory. We simply note that the principle of Sovereignty does not apply only to salvation. God is Sovereign in everything, including the service of His servants. Some suffer greatly and others hardly at all. Some live long and fruitful lives while others, like Stephen and James the elder, are cut off early even though serving faithfully. Some are tolerated through years of unfaithfulness while different ones are cut off swiftly and forcefully for seeming small infractions.

The bottom line is that no one knows the mind of God. He does as He pleases although we are sure that none of His decisions or actions are frivolous, that every one is guided by the most exquisite logic and reasoning.

Peter is released to live out a very long life that will finally be cut short in Rome by the brutal death of an old blind servant of God.

- 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.**

This house is very likely the house that Jesus had selected to be the place where the Last Passover was celebrated and Communion was begun. It was near the temple and easy for those

who came to the temple to pray to stop in. It is probably also the 'upper room' where the 120 gathered for that great prayer meeting that preceded Pentecost. The outpouring of the Spirit may actually have begun here. Now, it serves as the gather spot for another great meeting to pray.

While we are on the topic of the Sovereignty of God we should notice how the early church handled the matter practically. They knew the same things that we know concerning God's absolute Sovereign control over all things. Yet, when Peter is thrown into prison and Herod plans to execute him, they do not passively retreat into acceptance of the thing as the Sovereign Will of God like so many want to do today.

They, as it were, set up camp at Mary's house and besiege the throne of heaven for Peter's safe release. They fervently pray and it has an effect. God is please to release him. Did they not do the same for James? Chances are the thing was done quickly before they could get a prayer meeting organized. The fact that Herod delayed because of Passover gave them time to put the meeting together. Again, this is all within the Purpose of God.

When we hear of a brother or sister, a missionary or a church, that is in trouble and in need of help we should set ourselves to pray and continue to pray until the matter is resolved. The only time that we should bow our heads and say, God's Will be done, is that time when our prayers can no longer make a difference, when the matter is over and God has shown His Will by the events that have transpired.

In many ways we have used the doctrine of God's Sovereignty to rob us of the blessings of answered prayer, "ye have not because ye ask not..."

Next there was one of those rare and genuinely funny events that are rare in scripture.

- 13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.**
- 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.**
- 15 And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.**
- 16 But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.**

The poor girl was truly dumbfounded. They were praying for Peter to be released from prison and now he stood before the outer gate of the house seeking admission. Those to whom she announced it were disbelieving that their prayers may have been answered. Their assumption appeared to be that he had been killed and somehow his ghost had come by.

The lesson, of course, is Pray in Faith and when God sends the answer do not examine it, just receive it and rejoice.

- 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.**

The reason he quieted them is that they were in the city, near the temple, and it would be easy for someone to hear the noise and become curious. Peter explained the situation and then left town. We know that he ended up at Antioch but do not know by what route he went nor how long it took him. He may have moved at night from village to village until he was out from under Herod Agrippa's rule because there is no doubt that he sought for him.

The James that is mentioned here is not to be confused with the James that was executed although Luke was not careful to distinguish. This James is the man who ultimately becomes the chief elder of the Jerusalem church, the half brother of Jesus and one who was treated almost as an equal of the apostles. This is the man who will write the epistle of James that we have in our New Testament.

18 Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter.

19 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 a serious thing in these days to be a soldier and have a prisoner escape. Generally, the presumption was that someone had bribed you to deliberately let him go. These poor men, of course, were at a loss as to how to explain what had happened. They went to sleep with the man in custody and safely bound but awoke to find him gone without any sign as to how he had escaped.

The examination that was done here was usually an examination by torture. These people were convinced that truth could be extracted by causing severe suffering in the one being questioned. I guess at some point it stopped working. At least that is what our modern leaders seem to think. But, they could not be tortured into giving answers they did not have so Herod had them executed. Being a soldier was a tough life.

The final story in the chapter is not really related to the first part of the chapter other than Herod is playing a central role.

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.

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.

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.

The interesting issue here is that since Herod had fancied himself connected to the Jewish religion, had practiced their ceremonies and rituals, had lived (at least while in Jerusalem) as a Jew, and had been treated as if he were a Jewish King, God decided to hold him accountable as if he were what he pretended to be.

There is some irony here. As a Roman leader the shouts of the people would have been entirely appropriate since their 'gods' were mostly human anyway. But for one who had read from the Law at the Feast of Tabernacles it was forbidden to take any honor that in any way was directed toward deity.

Therefore, he was judged by biblical standards and immediately stricken down for failing to defer the honor being bestowed upon him to the God of Heaven, the God of the Jews, the God Whom he pretended to serve.

There is no doubt that his next breath was the same as the rich man who died while ignoring Lazarus, "and in Hell he lift up his eyes, being in torment..."

He had examined the soldiers, found them lacking in dependability and had them executed, but now he, himself, like Belshazzar, had be "weighed in the balances and found wanting." Now, he had to account of himself to the one who not only has power to destroy the body but can destroy both soul and body in Hell.

God cares for His people we learn and demands all honor that is due to Deity.