

ACTS LESSON 12

Acts Chapter 12

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Memory verses for this week: *1 Th 5:21 Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. 1 Th 5:22 Abstain from all appearance of evil.*

Introduction: In Chapter 11, we saw Peter coming back to the church and defending his position about preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. He proved that it was of the Lord that caused him to go forth to the house of Cornelius. We saw later in the chapter how that the followers of Christ were first called Christians in Antioch, a name that has forever been passed on to us. What an honor, to be called one following after Jesus Christ.

In Chapter 12, the prayer life of the early church is evident. Peter is arrested, imprisoned, and was to be executed at a time that suited Herod. However, God had other plans and intervened on behalf of Peter. As a result, the churches prayers were answered. God most definitely hears and answers prayers. What a blessing!

I. The Fifth Persecution: The Arrest of Peter

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

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

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.)

The Herod mentioned here is Herod Agrippa I who was the grandson of Herod the Great. He was installed as king after having already been in the political good graces of the Roman Emperor Caligula. Herod was king over Palestine from A.D. 42 thru A.D. 44. The events here occurred toward the end of his reign.

He was a nominal Jew who sought after the political patronage of Rome by currying their favor. He was not well received by the Jews over whom he ruled. To maintain the favor of Rome, he built theaters and held athletic games for the Romans. To pacify his Jewish subjects and gain political points with them, he vexed (persecuted) the church. Every move Herod exacted was always to his political advantage and for his gain.

Herod had James the brother of John executed. Recall that Jesus had called the sons of Zebedee the sons of thunder and had predicted a bloody death for them (Mark 10:38-39).

Mar 10:38 But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?

Mar 10:39 And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized:

James was the first of the apostles to be martyred. John will be the last. Herod, in noting that killing James boosted his political favor with the Jews, “proceeded further to take Peter also.” It was the spring of the year and “the days of unleavened bread,” the eight day days after Passover. It was the preference of the more devout Jews not to execute prisoners during the high holy days of the Passover season though they certainly were not so constrained in the events of our Lord’s passion.

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.

Herod was the grandson of Herod the Great. You may remember him as the King who commanded to put all the children to death during the time that Christ was an infant.

After having Peter arrested, Herod had him jailed in a prison within the city of Jerusalem. Peter was shackled and well-guarded by assigning both interior and exterior guards to ensure that he could not escape. Herod no doubt had heard tales of how Peter had previously escaped prison. (Acts 5:19).

Act 5:19 But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said,

Act 5:20 Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.

Being that it was the Passover season, Herod intended to detain Peter and bring him forth (for execution) before the Jews at Jerusalem afterwards. The fact is that Passover had already taken place. It was the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread which always takes place after Passover. The English word Easter is derived from the Roman word Ishtar which indeed was a pagan Spring holiday observed at about the same time. The King James’ translators were accurate in rendering the word (pasca) pashca as Easter. Passover was already

over for the year. Herod was in a hurry to execute Peter. The Roman holiday of Ishtar (Easter) was just around the corner. That is what the text so refers. To render it as Passover would be wrong.

Mat 2:16 Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.

We see in the first two verses that the persecution was against the church which was at Jerusalem. He first killed James with the sword. James was one of the three disciples who was part of the inner circle of friends of Christ. These three apostles, Peter, James, and John, were there with the Mount of Transfiguration with Christ. These were also the three were in the garden with Christ.

Mat 17:1 And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart,

Mat 17:2 And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.

Mat 17:3 And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.

Mat 17:4 Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.

Mat 17:5 While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.

II. Prayer for Peter's Deliverance

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

As Peter was held in prison, "prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." The word translated without ceasing (ektenhv ektenes) conveys not only the idea of ongoing prayer, but also of fervent prayer. When the situation seemed hopeless, the church went to their knees. As we shall see, here it involved an all-night prayer meeting.

As in the spirit of II Chronicles 20:12 when Jehoshaphat prayed, "neither knew we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee," the spiritual leaders of the church set themselves to effectual fervent prayer. Soon their faith would be shaken when Peter actually showed up at the door, nevertheless, their source of help was

absolute. They turned their eyes to heaven and pled for God's intervention and deliverance and God delivered.

While Peter was in prison, the church did not waste time but spent their time in prayer which was made without ceasing. The church was praying together in harmony, and were praying unto God.

1 Th 5:17 Pray without ceasing.

1 Th 5:18 In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

This is very pleasing to God when the church is working together in prayer, especially in this case asking that Peter might be delivered. The bible says that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. We see this to be the case in Peter's situation.

Mat 17:14 And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a certain man, kneeling down to him, and saying,

Mat 17:15 Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is a lunatic, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.

Mat 17:16 And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.

Mat 17:17 Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.

Mat 17:18 And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.

Mat 17:19 Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?

Mat 17:20 And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.

Mat 17:21 Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

Sometimes we pray and do not receive immediate answers to our prayers. Normally, this means that we did not ask with the proper motive or for the right reason as James recorded in his writings.

James 4:1 From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

James 4:2 Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.

James 4:3 Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

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.

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.

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.

As the festival of Unleavened Bread neared its end, Herod made plans to have Peter brought forth for his intended execution. That “same night,” Peter was sleeping between the two soldiers of the particular quaternion which happened to be on duty. The other two were outside his cell and the cell block of the prison where he was. We are not told what hour of the night it was. However, it was midway through one of the Roman watches (9 pm. to midnight, midnight to 3 am., or 3 am. to 6 am.). In any event, an angel of the Lord arrived, and light shined in the prison, he “smote Peter on the side, and raised him up.” To what degree the angel smote Peter, is not made clear.

The word so translated (patasswpatasso) can range in meaning from a ‘gentle nudge’ to a ‘fatal blow.’ Obviously, it was somewhere in between—enough to waken Peter. At the same moment, the chains binding him to his guards fell from his hands. The angel ordered him to dress and follow him, which he did.

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.

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.

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.

Peter did as he was instructed but thought he was having a dream. The word translated vision (orama horama) is distinctly different from that which he experienced at Joppa in Acts 10. They went through various sections of the prison and eventually, they came to the heavy iron gate leading out onto the street which miraculously opened by itself.

The angel led Peter through the narrow dark streets of Jerusalem and then departed. Peter now fully realizing this was no dream took in what had taken

place. God indeed had sent an angel and delivered him from Herod and the murderous expectations of the authorities.

J. Vernon McGee said this about Peter's deliverance.

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.

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!

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.

We see that the angel of the Lord came to Peter. The deliverance was such that Peter thought it was a vision rather than actually happening. In verse 7, the angel tells Peter to rise up quickly and to follow the angel. I think that it would be good if all of us had an urgency about spreading the Gospel. The time is running out, and Jesus has warned us that the time is short.

John 9:4 I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.

Peter was wise to come out and be saved from the prison. Many today are bidden to rise up and to accept the free gift of salvation that God offers all who will come. But many do not respond to the call, and remain burdened in the prison house of sin. God does not want us chained to sin and bondage, but offers us Christ to give us freedom to really live. When Christ called his apostles, they did not tarry but responded immediately to the call.

Mat 4:21 And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them.

Mat 4:22 And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.

Each day, when you pickup the newspaper, you see dozens of names of people on the obituary page. Many times I wonder how many went out prepared to

meet God. We need to be serious in our efforts to reach the lost for Christ. After we are saved, we are to follow Christ every day of our lives.

Luke 9:23 And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.

Luke 9:24 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.

Luke 9:25 For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?

Luke 9:26 For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels.

III. Peter Comes to House of Mary

Acts 12:12 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.

Acts 12:13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.

Acts 12:14 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.

Acts 12:15 And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.

Acts 12:16 But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.

While considering all that had transpired, Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. She is not to be confused with the other Marys mentioned in the New Testament (Jesus' mother, Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, or Mary of Cleopas.) She well may have been a widow and a Hellenistic Jew (her husband's surname was Marcus which was a Latin name.) She evidently was a woman of some means for her house was adequate to house the other apostles as they had need.

Her home likely was the same place the church had met in Acts 1 prior to Pentecost. Peter was aware of the place and knew he might find leaders of the church there. They were in fact there and still on their knees praying for Peter somehow to be spared or released.

In verse 13, Peter arrived and knocked on the door in the middle of the night. As indicated, the door (which probably refers to the gate to the outer courtyard of the home) bordered the street. The word damsel (paidiskh paidiske) refers to a young female servant. Here, her name was Rhoda which literally means 'Rose.'

Upon answering the knock and inquiring who was there, she immediately, from the sound of Peter's voice, knew it was him. In her excitement and perhaps spooked knowing Peter's fate, she failed to open the gate. She ran back into the house and announced that "Peter stood before the gate." The church leadership were on their knees, begging God to deliver Peter. When Rhoda ran in announcing Peter was here, their first reaction was to tell her she was mad (i.e., crazy). When she insisted, they then decided it was his angel.

This probably was a reference to their thought that Peter's ghost or guardian angel was out there. Peter stood out there and "continued knocking." Finally, they opened the door to the courtyard. Upon seeing Peter standing there, "they were astonished." How typical of God's people. Though they had the good judgement to plead for God's intervention, they were shocked when He in fact did.

Acts 12:17 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 show these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.

Peter told them of how God had delivered him. He then instructed them to bring this good news to James. This was the half-brother of Jesus who in the meantime was now a believer and had become one of the leaders of the church at Jerusalem. Peter departed for his own security to some unnamed place.

Is it not strange how that when God answers our prayers, many times we stand in unbelief and can not believe that God has responded to our requests. It seems almost as if Peter knew the people of the church had gathered to pray for him at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Apparently, this lady had a large home and it was common for the people to come and pray together here. It says when Rhoda came from the gate and told the others that Peter was there, they did not believe her.

She told them that she was not mad, but glad in verse 14. If their hearts had been perfect before the Lord, I believe they would have prayed expecting Peter to be delivered. Many times our motives are good, but our faith is weak. Their response demonstrates their unbelief. Peter asks them to go and tell James and the brethren these things. The James in verse 17 is the brother of the Lord. The James that Herod had killed in verse 2 was the son of Zebedee, the brother to John.

Acts 12:18 Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter.

Acts 12:19 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.

The next morning, “there was no small stir among the soldiers.” There was a great commotion. They had good cause. For when Herod found out Peter was gone, the soldiers were led away, presumably for death, which was the common response for Roman guards whose prisoners escaped. Meanwhile, Herod traveled down to Caesarea, probably for official business and perhaps sporting events he sponsored there to further ingratiate himself with the Romans.

No doubt, Peter’s absence startled the soldier and they wondered how he escaped. Herod was not well pleased, and commanded that the keepers be put to death for letting Peter escape. Apparently, this was the common practice if you were on guard and a prisoner escaped.

Acts 16:27 And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled.

Acts 16:28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here.

IV. The Death of Herod

Acts 12:20 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.

While in Caesarea, an argument within the region of Lebanon was settled. Though Lebanon (Phoenicia), specifically through the port cities of Tyre and Sidon, was a major area of commerce, their food stuffs came from Palestine. In the hostilities which had previously existed, Herod had cut off their supply of food. Emissaries from Tyre and Sidon were present to negotiate. Their people had evidently suffered enough and came to terms with Herod.

Acts 12:21 And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.

Acts 12:22 And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.

Acts 12:23 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.

During this visit, Herod, perhaps at an event, made a political speech to the throngs assembled. Josephus records how his “royal apparel” had profuse silver foil woven into the garment which caused it to glitter in the sunlight. The crowds in seeing this thought Herod possessed deity and praised him as such. Whereupon God “smote him.” Herod, as a nominal Jew and understanding the grave sin of blasphemy accepted the praise of being a god.

The true God of heaven, knowing that this backslidden Jew knew better, smote him with a terrible disease in which worms killed him. Josephus wrote that upon being smitten of God, though alive for five days, his body rotted and was eaten of worms. The word translated as eaten of worms (skwlhkobrwtov skolekobrotos) can refer either to intestinal worms or the type of worms drawn by a dead body. In either event, Herod died a terrible death.

We see that Herod was very upset with the people of Tyre and Sidon. These people desired peace with Herod since their country was nourished by the King’s country. I don’t know what Herod had to say in his speech, but it says the people were well pleased with his oration. They exalted him and broke into rounds of applause as he spoke to them. They claimed he was more than a man, possibly a god. Herod did not deny this, but rather took all the glory to himself. God was not pleased with Herod, and took his life. So few today fear the Lord, when the bible clearly states that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

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

Meanwhile, with Herod’s death and the persecution of Saul no longer in force, the “word of God grew and multiplied.” The tense used for both verbs (grew and multiplied) implies continual or repeated action. In other words, the impact of the gospel just kept growing and multiplying. Meanwhile, Saul and Barnabas returned from their trip from Antioch to Jerusalem with aid for the churches there. In departing from Jerusalem back to Antioch, they took with them John Mark who would before long become a point of controversy.

Matthew Henry in his commentary said this about Herod.

The death of Herod. God reckoned with him, not only for his putting James to death, but for his design and Endeavor to put Peter to death; for sinners will be called to an account, not only for the wickedness of their deeds, but for the wickedness of their endeavors (Ps. 28:4), for the mischief they have done and the mischief they would have done. It was but

a little while that Herod lived after this. Some sinners God makes quick work with.
Observe,

How the measure of his iniquity was filled up: it was *pride* that did it; it is this that commonly goes more immediately *before destruction*, and a *haughty spirit before a fall*. Nebuchadnezzar had been a very bloody man, and a great persecutor; but the word that was in the king's mouth when the judgments of God fell upon him was a proud word: *Is not this great Babylon that I have built?* Dan. 4:30, 31. It is the glory of God to *look on every one that is proud, and bring him low*, Job 40:12. The instance of it here is very remarkable, and shows how God *resists the proud*.

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Prov 4:18 But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

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Practice Random Acts of Kindness. Each act spreads, and many will be blessed.