

The Acts of the Apostles

LESSON 16

Herod's Violence against the Church (Acts 12:1-4)

Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. 4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

Herod set out to harass the church at Jerusalem.

“This was Herod Agrippa, the son of Aristobulus, and grandson of Herod the Great; he was nephew to Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist, and brother to Herodias. He was made king by the emperor Caligula and was put in possession of all the territories formerly held by his uncle Philip and by Lysanias; viz. Iturea, Trachonitis, Abilene, with Gaulonitis, Batanaea, and Penias. To these the Emperor Claudius afterwards added Judea and Samaria, which were nearly all the dominions possessed by his grandfather, Herod the Great.” –Clark’s Commentary

The word that is used here for “harass” can also be translated “hurt, harm, vex or injure.” This is the first evidence of this type of persecution since the conversion of Saul.

Herod attacked the church by attacking its leadership. He began by taking James the son of Zebedee captive and killing him. This James was the brother of John and a significant member of the apostolic company. He was part of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples along with Peter and John. He would be the first of the Twelve to die as a martyr, but he would not be the last. Most of the apostles would die similar deaths. It is a bit ironical that perhaps the only one of the Twelve who would not die in this manner was his brother John.

Jesus had intimated to James earlier that he would drink the cup of suffering (Mt. 20:23).

So, He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.”

He continued further by arresting Peter with the same goal in mind.

Herod was greatly influenced by a desire to please the Jews. This had been the common practice of all of the Roman officials who had been placed over the Jewish territories. They tried to placate the Jews whenever they could to keep the peace and maintain a favorable posture before them.

“This was the principle on which he acted. It was not from a sense of right; it was not to

do justice, and to protect the innocent; it was not to discharge the appropriate duties of a magistrate and a king, but it was to promote his own popularity. It is probable that Agrippa would have acted in this way in any circumstances. He was ambitious, vain, and fawning; he sought, as his great principle, popularity, and he was willing to sacrifice, like many others, truth and justice to obtain this end. But there was also a particular reason for this in his case. He held his appointment under the Roman emperor. This foreign rule was always unpopular among the Jews. In order, therefore, to secure a peaceful reign, and to prevent insurrection and tumult, it was necessary for him to court their favor; to indulge their wishes, and to fall in with their prejudices.” –Barnes Notes

We will talk more about the vanity of this man toward the end of the chapter.

Peter Miraculously Freed from Prison (Acts 12:5-19)

Peter was held with maximum security (Acts 12:6).

And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.

Peter had been known for escaping from prison (Acts 5:19-21). He was guarded with 16 soldiers who worked in shifts around the clock. He was apparently chained to two soldiers on either side of him with two soldiers outside the prison cell door as added security.

Many of the believers held an all-night prayer meeting in Peter's behalf (Acts 12:5; See: Jam. 5:16b). Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. James 5:16b

The prayer held here does not imply that the believers did not pray in the same manner for James as some have contended.

God sent an angel to deliver Peter from prison (Acts 12:7-11).

Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, “Arise quickly!” And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and tie on your sandals”; and so he did. And he said to him, “Put on your garment and follow me.” 9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.”

Notice several things in this context: Peter was sleeping soundly. This is a perfect picture of peace in the midst of the storm. It reminds one of when Jesus slept in the boat and the disciples were in turmoil (Mt. 8:24-26).

And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" But He said to them, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.

An angel of the Lord accomplished a many-faceted deliverance.

- There was a bright light.
- The guards were put in some sort of trance to miss what was happening.
- The chains fell off from Peter's wrists.
- The angel walked out with Peter through locked doors.
- The iron gates opened automatically when they left the prison enclosure.

Notice that the angel did what Peter could not do, but Peter had to do what he could do (get dressed, put on his sandals, and follow the angel). Peter had to pinch himself to be sure that he was not dreaming (vs. 9-11). Peter came to where the believers were praying (Acts 12:12-17).

So, when he had considered this, 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 girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. 15 But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." 16 Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

Notice how the believers were astonished at their own answer to prayer. Perhaps this was because their prayers for James had not been so effectual. Peter reported what God had done. Peter demonstrated his accountability to the senior pastor and elders of the local church.

This prayer meeting was at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Some have suggested that perhaps there were other such meetings on Peter's behalf including one at the house of James that may have included much of the leadership team.

Peter got out of town (Acts 12:17). Peter did what any of us would do if we had just escaped from prison and a sure death sentence. He got out of town until the heat was off. He did not tell anyone where he was going. He simply went to "another place." (The Udder Place)

The prison guards were killed (Acts 12:18-19).

Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. 19 But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

Peter's absence was only discovered in the morning. Think of the shock of the soldiers who looked to their right and left only to discover empty chains. And what kind of horror was experienced by the guards outside of the cell when the soldiers on the inside told of Peter's escape.

Herod most likely believed the story of the soldiers who were guarding Peter, but in order to save face he ordered them killed. This was the usual penalty for a Roman soldier who fell asleep on the job.

Herod left the city bewildered (Acts 12:19). The only explanation for why Herod did not conduct an extensive manhunt and for why he got out of town himself was because he knew that something supernatural had just happened and, as a superstitious man, he was most likely scared.

Herod's Violent Death (Acts 12:20-24)

Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. 21 So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne, and gave an oration to them. 22 And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" 23 Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. 24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

Herod met a violent end. There is more here than meets the eye. History records that this Herod was a very vain and ambitious man who loved the praise of men. This scene was actually set up by him so that people would worship him as a god and no longer relate to him as a man.

Josephus gives insight into his death in Book 19, Chapter 8 of his epic work as a third century historian (page 412).

Now, when Agrippa had reigned three years over all of Judea, he came to the city of Cesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower; and there he exhibited shows in honour of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival, a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity though his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him:

and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (thought not for his good,) that he was a god: and they added,--“Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.” Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But, as he presently afterwards looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked at his friends, and said, “I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots, as it please god; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner.” When he had said this, his pain was become violent.

Accordingly he was carried into the palace; and the rumour went abroad everywhere, that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king’s recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high changer, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and the seventh year of his reign...

Herod is not the only persecutor of the church to suffer a violent end. Pontius Pilate is believed to have been expelled from office only to commit suicide. Nero who killed thousands of Christians was assisted in suicide by his men because of his lack of courage to do so himself. Domitian was murdered by his own people as was other emperors including Caius, Severus and Heliogabalus. Emperor Claudius was eaten by worms. Decius, Gallus, Aurelian, Maximin, all persecutors of the church, died violent deaths. Maximinus put out the eyes of thousands of Christians soon after which a terrible disease of the eyes broke out among his people. He himself died in great agony. Valens, who caused 80 church leaders to be put on a ship and sent to sea and burned with the ship, was defeated by the Goths and fled to a cottage where he was burned alive.

Herod’s violent death is a study in contrasts. On the one hand you have a man of the world who was characterized by seeking the approval of men and had a desire to be revered as God. On the other hand you have the apostles of God who were characterized by humility and a desire to please and glorify God.

We will look at this more closely in just a minute.

The end result of all of this persecution was positive (vs. 24).

But the word of God grew and multiplied.

Barnabas and Saul Return to Antioch (Acts 12:25)

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.

This verse ties back in with Acts 11:30 and takes us back to the church in Antioch which we will look at more closely in our discussion of Acts 13 in the next lesson.

The apostles in the Book of Acts were men of humility who sought to glorify God and not themselves. It is amazing how in the life and ministry of the apostles whether they were preaching, testifying, working miracles or healing people always glorified God for what was done (Acts 2:47; 3:8, 21; 10:46; 19:17).

They could have been tempted in specific situations to take glory to themselves. In times of overcoming persecution (Acts 4:21).

So, when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done.

In times of special quickening in the word (Acts 13:48).

Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

In times of reporting a great meeting with great results (Acts 11:16-18).

When they heard these things, they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." Acts 11:18

- In times of being used in the miraculous (Acts 4:24ff.).
- In times of experiencing a great deliverance (Acts 12:7, 17).
- In times of success in outreach on the field (Acts 14:27; 21:19-20).

Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Acts 14:27

When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. Acts 21:19-20a

In every situation they resisted the temptation and refused to allow people to worship them (Acts 3:12; 10:25-26; 14:11-15).

As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.

But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I myself am also a man.” Acts 10:25-26

Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” 12 And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 13 Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out 15 and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them...” Acts 14:11-15

They resisted the temptation to publish a magazine with 200 photos with them in the center of each of them. We face many areas where we could also seek our own glory. We can glory in our good heritage (Rom. 2:17-26). We can boast in the men that we follow (I Cor. 1:12-13; 3:21).

Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come--all are yours. And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. I Corinthians 3:21-23

We can boast in our talents and abilities (I Cor. 4:7; Phil. 3:3; I Cor. 9:16).

For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? I Corinthians 4:7

We can boast in our visions and revelations (II Cor. 12:1). We can boast in our works and accomplishments (Eph. 2:8-9).

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

All of this boasting is evil in the eyes of God (Jam. 4:16; I Cor. 5:6).

When we see things clearly from an eternal perspective, we can only glory or boast in God. God has designed salvation and His choosing in such a way that it leaves no room for boasting. It is not of works (Rom. 4:2) and it is contrary to the normal human wisdom (I Cor. 1:26-29; Rom. 3:27).

We can glory in...

- The hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2).
- The Lord (Rom. 5:11; 15:17; I Cor. 1:31; II Cor. 10:17; Phil. 3:3).
- The cross of Christ (Gal. 6:4).
- Tribulation (Rom. 5:3).
- Infirmities (II Cor. 11:30; 12:9).

No one should stop us of this boasting (II Cor. 11:10).