

Herod Persecuted the Church

Acts 12

Outline

- 1-5 | Herod (Agrippa I) begins persecuting the church, killing James and arresting Peter
- 6-17 | Peter is led out of the prison by an angel
- 18-19 | Herod executes Peter's guards and travels to Caesarea
- 20-23 | Herod struck down by God for not acknowledging Him after the crowd called him a god
- 24 | Summary statement on the growth of the church
- 25 | Barnabas and Saul (Paul) return to Antioch with John Mark

Reflections

Dictionary.com defines persecution as "a program or campaign to exterminate, drive away, or subjugate people based on their membership in a religious, ethnic, social, or racial group." The persecution of the church had been building as you read through the book of Acts and in this chapter Luke relates the next stage in its progress.

Herod Agrippa I, Herod the Great's grandson, was looking to mistreat some people of the church and had the apostle "James the brother of John put to death with a sword" (Acts 12:2). When he saw that it pleased the Jewish religious leaders, he sought to do the same with Peter and had him arrested "during the days of Unleavened Bread." However, God had different plans for Peter.

One might ask, why did God allow James to be killed but not Peter? We don't really know the answer to that question but it might have to do with Jesus' response to his asking along with John to have the seats on His right and left in the coming kingdom.

Matthew 20:21-23 NASB And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She *said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left." **22** But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They *said to Him, "We are able." **23** He *said to them, "My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father."

Mark 10:35-40 NASB James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, *came up to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." **36** And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" **37** They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory." **38** But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" **39** They said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. **40** "But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

Herod used this to further ingratiate himself to the Jewish people who already loved him because his mother was Jewish and so he was the first truly Jewish "king" ruling over them in a long time.¹

God still had plans for Peter and so we find God sending an angel to lead Peter out of the prison in the middle of the night. Peter initially thinks he is having a dream until he comes to his senses as he is standing in the middle of the street a couple of blocks from the prison.

He quickly rushes to one of the homes of the disciples, Mary the mother of John Mark, where the disciples had gathered there to pray for Peter. Most likely something that had happened a number of

1 Walton, John H. et al. *IVP Bible Background Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 2000.

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times prior to this evening.

When he knocks on the door, a servant girl named Rhoda goes to see who is at the door and upon seeing that it is Peter, she leaves him outside and runs to tell the others. The disciples refuse to believe her until they finally go and let Peter into the house. He then relates the events that had transpired and told them to relate the events to James and the rest of the apostles. Peter then leaves to go to another place for the time being.

This James is the half brother of Jesus who became a disciple of Jesus. We will find later that he becomes one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem after this as Peter and the other apostles will begin moving to other locations to advance the church.

The next morning, upon discovering that Peter is missing and being unable to find him, Herod has the guards executed. He then traveled to Caesarea along the Mediterranean shore.

Then Luke records the death of Herod resulting from pride that swelled up within him one day as he was speaking in the royal chamber and the people kept declaring, "The voice of a god not of a man!" Luke records that he was eaten by worms after being struck by the angel of the Lord for not giving God the glory. Pride can be a great destroyer of men as is evidenced by Herod's death. This took place in a.d. 44.

Luke then offers one of the summary statements regarding the expansion of the church.

Acts 12:24 NASB But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

Often the church grows under persecution. It has a purifying effect on the church as only those who really believe will remain faithful, even to the point of death if necessary. At the same time, as people move out of areas of intense persecution seeking refuge in other places, they share the gospel with the people where they relocate to and thus "the word of the Lord" continues "to grow and be multiplied."

The chapter ends with Barnabas and Saul returning to Antioch, from where they had come to present a financial gift to the church in Jerusalem to help those afflicted by the famine (Acts 11:27-30). They also brought John Mark, from earlier, with them.

So how can this chapter help us as we face difficulties in life? First, prayer is important regardless of the outcome. I'm sure people prayed for James yet he was still killed with the sword. That doesn't mean that God didn't hear their prayers. He just had different plans for James than He did for Peter.

Second, we have to pray that God's will be done and not blame God when we don't get what we pray for. We have to remember that our perspective of life is up close whereas God sees things from a distance, seeing both the beginning and the end at the same time. We need to give God the glory, even when we don't understand until later why things happen the way they do.

Lord God, help us never forget to give God the glory for all that we have been blessed with and especially when it seems like something negative has happened. We don't always see things the way You do and we pray that You will help us to see them from Your perspective. May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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