

Bibles???

The Word of God is the Absolute Truth and the Final Authority

Turn your bibles with me to the book of Acts 12

For the past couple of weeks we have seen a new chapter in the history of the church – and that is the gospel of salvation reaching the gentiles for the first time and we have seen the Holy Spirit work among the hearts of the gentiles as they responded to the gospel message.

It started with Cornelius and then we saw last week, the Holy Spirit move in Antioch – Not only were new followers added to the church in Antioch, there was also spiritual growth – the new believers in Antioch were beginning to identify and act like Christians – and we saw this toward the end of the chapter as they send relief to the church back in Judea – a church that they had nothing in common with, except the love for the Lord. Our study this evening in chapter 12, will take us back to the Jerusalem – where we will see a new persecution from a different source – and we will see how the church responds – which will give us application but most importantly, we will see how God responds at the end of the chapter.

Let's pray...

[Act 12:1-25 NKJV] 1 Now **about that time Herod** the king stretched out [his] hand to **harass** some from the church.

I had you make a note of about that time – Luke wants us to know that this was happening during the time of famine in the land that he spoke of in the previous chapter.

And we see that it was during this time that the church in Jerusalem was being harassed by Herod.

Now, I had you make a note of the name Herod – because there are few Herod's in the NT.

This is Herod Agrippa I, he is the grandson of Herod the Great – the one who remodeled the temple and killed the babies at the time of Jesus' birth.

There was another Herod which we will learn about in a few weeks in our study through the gospel of John – that Herod, Herod Antipas is the one who gives the order to put John the Baptist to death and he is also the one that shows up when Jesus is being tried.

We are going to see another Herod Agrippa by the end of the book of Acts (II)

So, Herod Agrippa I was appointed king over Judea by Rome.

And because he was only half Jewish, he sought to win over the hearts of the Jews in the land.

He knew that the Jewish religious rulers were having trouble with the early church.

So in a political move, he makes the decision to persecute the early church.

The word that is used here for harass – it means to oppress, it is the word that is used when someone does something evil to another person.

Turn your bibles to 1 Peter 3

Peter was one of the individuals who was harassed / who had evil done to him by Herod, look what he writes in one of his epistles about twenty years later.

[1Pe 3:13-16 NKJV] 13 And who [is] he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, [you are] blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." 15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always [be] ready to [give] a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; 16 having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.

Pay attention to what Peter says.

He's lived what he teaches.

The word that is used for harm – is the same word that Luke uses to describe what Herod was doing to the early church.

Church, from the time of the fall of man, to the time of the early church and even to this day, the lost have opposed the godly.

And yet, the Church grows, people still come to faith in Christ.

It is what we saw as a result of the persecution from Saul and we will see the same here.

2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

Herod arrests James and has him killed – church tradition states that he is beheaded.

Now, there were two men named James who were important in the early church.

You had the half-brother of Jesus – the one who would be recognized as the leader of the church in Jerusalem and would go on to write the epistle of James. This is not that guy.

This James was one of the sons of Zebedee. His brother was John.

He was one of the three that we find in the inner circle with Jesus.

Peter, John and James.

He was one there when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter.

He was there at the transfiguration of Jesus Christ

He was there at the Garden of Gethsemane

And now, Herod has put James to death.

Can you imagine how devastating this was for the early church, one of the apostles is dead.

James is the first of the apostles to die for his faith.

And, he won't be the last – as church history tells us that every one of them would die for their faith except John.

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.

After killing James – Herod's approval numbers go up.

The Jews like what he is doing –

Herod sees this – “How can I keep this going?”

And he goes after Peter. So now, Peter is arrested.

However, he is not executed because the Jews are still observing the Passover.

If he would have put Peter to death, the Jews would have accused him of not being a loyal Jew.

So he waits for the opportune time.

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.

Peter is thrown in prison –

I had you make a note that this time he was delivered to four squads of soldiers.

Each squad was four soldiers – two of them would chain themselves to Peter while two would watch outside – and every 6 hours, their shift would end and be replaced by a new set of four.

This was the kind of guard that was given only to the most dangerous prisoners who it was suspected would attempt an escape.

Now, why the high security?

Because last time Peter was placed in prison – back in Acts 5, an angel came during the middle of the night and opened the door allowing him and John to escape.

This time they are taking no chances.

5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

The church knew exactly how this was going to end –

They trial would be a sham and Peter would be executed.

They had already seen it with Stephen, so they pray.

Luke mentions prayer in the church in Acts 17 times.

It is one of the most consistent things that they did.

And the reason is that they understood prayer was a central part of what it means to be in fellowship with God.

The phrase constant prayers was offered – speaks of the intensity of the prayers being offered.

The church didn't simply send out an email with a prayer request "Please add Peter to your prayers – he is back in jail"

No – the church prayed fervent prayers – earnest prayers – forceful prayers.

[Jas 5:16 NKJV] 16 Confess [your] trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

In fact, Luke uses the same word to describe the church's prayers that he used to describe Jesus' agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

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.

I find it encouraging that on the eve of when he was going to go to trial and most likely put to death – we find Peter sleeping.

We would expect Peter to be wide awake – going over his options.

Am I going to be rescued?

What am I going to tell Herod?

Should I recant – should I deny Jesus - no I can't because I already did that once.

He did none of this – he was at perfect peace, so he went to sleep!

You see, Peter knew how all this would end – He'd soon be following James.

If something unusual happened, he'd be released & that'd be good because it would mean more time to minister to others.

But if he died, well, that was even better because it meant he'd get to go home & see Jesus.

Here is a question for each of us -

If we knew tomorrow would be our last day on earth – how would we spend tonight?

Would we have a sleepless night or would we be at peace?

Think about how much Peter changed –

In the gospels, he was the one that was freaking out on the boat during the storm while Jesus slept in the boat.

Now, Peter is the one who is sleeping in the midst of chaos.

He's a disciple who's become like his Master.

7 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.**

Here we see how God rescued Peter.

God used an angel –

Were the soldiers sleeping in the job? Highly unlikely – because allowing a prisoner to escape would be punishable by death. Especially a prisoner that was about to be sentenced to death.

However, I want to draw your attention to the urgency of the angel.

He pokes Peter to wake him up, he tells him to get up and get dressed and follow him and when they get pass the iron gate that opened up on its own, the angel takes off.

Now, think about other angelic encounters in Scripture – many of them carry a similar sense of urgency.

An angel appears, speaks its piece, then takes off.

There is a reason for this angelic urgency.

You see, Hebrews 1:14 says, they're servants, whose mission is to minister to God's people.

We're not to have a relationship with them; they exist to facilitate our relationship with God & one another.

What do humans typically do when confronted with an angel? We tend to worship them.

But whenever a human does fall before an angel in Scripture, the angel always forbids it vehemently!

They forbid it because worship belongs to God alone.

They want to be behind the scenes –

Again, they exist to facilitate our relationship with God & one another – anything else presents a distraction & danger.

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."

The word that is used here for delivered – is the word that means to pluck out, to rescue

Question?

Couldn't have God plucked out / delivered Stephen or James???

Couldn't He have sent an angel to them the same way He sent an angel to Peter –

The answer is of course.

However, the reason that He didn't is hidden in His sovereignty.

You see church, God has placed us here in Southern Arizona to accomplish certain things for His glory, and when He decides that our days are finished, then they are finished.

Evidently Stephen and James ministry was fulfilled. Peter's was not.

So God preserved him from Herod so that he might finish the course that God had laid out for his life.

And it works the same way for us today.

God has preserved us to do His word for His glory.

So we need to be focused on accomplishing the work that He has called us to do.

12 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.

So here Peter goes to the house of Mary.

He knocks on the door of the gate – this was the door that opened up to the courtyard – the place where they were meeting was usually in the back.

Rhoda recognizes the voice of Peter but I want you to notice the unbelief of the believers.

They were praying fervent prayers as we saw in verse 5 – but they really didn't believe what they were praying.

They were praying for God to do something about but, they had come to the conclusion that Peter was most likely going to die the next day.

Rhoda comes in – “Peter is at the front”

Their reaction – “Go away, we are praying for Peter to be released”

They had been praying for Peter, but when an angel releases him, they don't believe it.

Their prayer may have been in earnest but their faith was lacking.

Sometimes it seems that God answers despite our faith.

Little faith can accomplish great things if that faith is placed in our great God.

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.

This James is the half-brother of Jesus.

18 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].

Here is daylight – Herod comes looking for Peter – And the guards don't know his whereabouts.

So Herod orders the guards to be executed.

20 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].

We don't know the reason why – but Herod was punishing these two cities with an economic embargo.

Remember, there was a famine taking place and Herod would not allow the grain from Galilee to be imported into these two cities.

So the cities hire this guy Blastus to act as a lobbyist – to persuade Herod to allow them to buy grain from the farmers under his authority.

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!"

The Jewish historian Josephus gives us a little more detail on what happened here.

Apparently Herod, he dresses up in a garment made of silver.

He is giving a political speech and rambling on

The people of Tyre and Sidon, they want food – so they begin to flatter him.

They begin to shout out that Herod was a god.

And they began asking for mercy.

Herod is enjoying what he hears from the people.

He is not rebuking them or correcting them –

Remember, back in Jerusalem – he was pretending to be a practicing Jew so the people would like him.

But up here, he doesn't have to pretend to be a Jew.

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.

Again, Josephus tells us that for five days, Herod suffered violent pains in his bowels until he died.

This judgment was simply a manifestation in his body of what had taken place in his him spiritually.

Herod thought that he was powerful enough to put James to death and get away with it.

Here God punished him for messing with the church.

24 But the word of God grew and multiplied. 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.

Despite all Herod's attempts to assist the Jewish rulers in eradicating the Church, it just kept growing.

Jesus told Peter in the gospel of Matthew that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church – Matt 16:18

Here Luke presents evidence to that end.

In spite of everything that happened to the church and to Peter, the word of God grew and multiplied.

Next week we will pick up the story up in Antioch...as Paul and Barnabas take John Mark with them.

Let's pray...

To Receive Christ do the following:

Admit, "I am a sinner."

Confess and be willing to turn from your sin.

Believe, by faith that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross.

Receive, through prayer, Jesus Christ into your heart and receive eternal life.

Dear Lord Jesus,

I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins. Please forgive me for my sins and cleanse me by Your blood. I accept You by faith as my personal Lord and Savior. Give me a thirst for Your Word and Help me to follow You all of my days. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

[Num 6:24-26 NLT] 24 'May the LORD bless you and protect you. 25 May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you. 26 May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace.'

