

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #27

Acts 12:1-25

When we come to Acts 12, we come to another major moment in the history of Christianity. This time the hostility is being orchestrated by religious Jews who hate the truth that God's Grace and God's program was branching out to Gentiles.

The entire book of Acts covers about a thirty year span of time and Acts 12 is about year fifteen, the half way point. For the first fifteen years, things had been focused on Israel and those in Jerusalem. Stephen had been martyred and many of the Jews had scattered and moved out, but in the aftermath of that, things in Jerusalem seemed to somewhat quiet down. But now that the Gospel was exploding in the Gentile world, the religious Jews did not like that.

A new wave of persecution broke out. This persecution pleased the pharisaical religious Jews in Jerusalem. It would appear that their new target was the apostles. Apparently, Herod knew it would please the Jews and give him more political clout if he were to get rid of the apostles who were preaching grace to the whole world. So that is exactly what he decided to do.

THE GRACE GOSPEL WAS HATED BY MOST POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND THEY WANTED TO DESTROY THE APOSTLES WHO WERE LEADING THE GRACE MOVEMENT; BUT THEY COULD NOT STOP GOD.

The political and religious leaders did not like the grace message because it diverted attention away from them and pointed all the attention to Jesus Christ. Obviously, they had already killed Jesus Christ but He came back to life and then ascended into heaven. So they could not touch Him, but they could go after those who were leading the grace movement.

Notice how **verse 1** begins, "about that time". The timing of this was when a new powerful church had been established outside of Jerusalem in Antioch. Saul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem as were the rest of the apostles (11:30).

The program of God was making a major change and move and the religious leaders of Jerusalem were threatened because they were losing their grip over the people. So Herod, being the political snake that he was, decided to take advantage of the moment and he made two apostolic arrests:

APOSTOLIC ARREST #1 - Herod arrests and kills James . 12:1-2

Now the Herod that is mentioned in these verses is Herod Agrippa I. He was the son of Aristobulus and the grandson of Herod the Great, the one who had killed the baby boys in Bethlehem when Jesus was born (Matt. 2:1-17). This Herod Agrippa I was King over Palestine from A.D. 37-44. He was in cahoots with both Caligula and Claudius. He received some of his power from Caligula and the rest of it from Claudius. He pretty much controlled Palestine and he could make "life and death" decisions. He was in charge of everything in the name of Rome. He had absolute power.

Verse 1 tells us that Herod “laid hands” on some in the church with the idea of “mistreating” them. That word “mistreat” (κακοῶ) means he was grabbing these Christians and physically afflicting them and making their lives miserable (G. Abbott Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 227).

It was at this time he decided to kill James.

There are different men named James in the Bible. This is not the James who is the Lord’s brother who writes the book of James (Mt. 13:55).

This James was a son of Zebedee and the older brother of the Apostle John (Matt. 4:21; 10:2; Mk. 1:19). He and his brother had been in the fishing business. We may remember from our journey through Matthew that the mother of James and John had asked Jesus if her two boys could sit on His right and left hand when He reigned on earth (Matt. 20:20-28). Jesus said that those appointments would be made by God the Father. James was a very faithful apostle. In fact, we may remember that three apostles were very close to Jesus Christ; Peter, James and John, and this is the James who is arrested.

Herod arrested him and had him killed with a sword, which according to Eusebius, meant he was beheaded. **James was the first apostle to suffer martyrdom.**

Eusebius records an interesting story, which he claimed he got from Clements’ writings (Outlines Book 7) of Rome, which was verified as authentic. Clement (A.D. 30-100) was the first pastor of the church that was in Rome. In fact, Paul names him in Philippians 4:3. At the time James was killed, Clement would have been about fifteen years old. Clement said the man who originally arrested James and brought him into the court was so convicted by the testimony James gave about Jesus Christ, that he believed on Jesus Christ, asked for James forgiveness and was also beheaded by Herod (*Eusebius, The History of the Church*, pp. 82-83).

Luke’s point here is to show that Herod wanted to kill apostles and he had the power to do it.

APOSTOLIC ARREST #2 - Herod arrests and tries to kill Peter . 12:3-25

As soon as Herod saw that the killing of James pleased the Jews (verse 3), he arrested Peter with the idea of killing him too.

Now I don’t know why God determines that one apostle dies and the other lives, but that is exactly what God did here. We tend to look at death differently. If you would ask James, who was already with the Lord, who got the worst end of the stick, he would say Peter. James’ work was over and he was in heaven. But Peter still had to slug it out in the world. That is exactly why the Apostle Paul would later say for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

According to **verses 3-4**, during the legal Jewish day of the Unleavened Bread, which was the Passover, they seized Peter and put him in prison and turned him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him. Probably they remembered what happened another time they had Peter in jail. An angel got him out so this time they were taking no chances (Acts 5:18-20). They had four squads of soldiers guarding him. The plan was this: after the Passover we will bring him out and kill him. Huge numbers of Jews would be there to witness it.

Now a squad of soldiers consisted of four men. So an incredible number of sixteen guards were assigned to this responsibility of guarding one apostle. They would rotate their shifts to make sure the prisoner would not escape. Peter was chained up to two guards inside the prison and two more guarded the outside door. This was a 24 hour watch. This is high level security.

But no matter how high the security is, no one can stop God from doing what He wants to do and He wanted to deliver the Apostle Peter and there are six divine deliverance facts that tell us how He did it.

Divine Deliverance Fact #1 - God's church was praying for Peter. **12:5**

According to **verse 5**, as Peter was in prison the church was in “fervent prayer”. The word used for prayer is one that means the church was reverently praying and taking this to God. The adverb “fervently” (εκενωσ) means that this prayer was being made by the church with a very earnest and intense focus (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p.142). As I understand the Greek language, this church specifically held this prayer meeting for the sole purpose of reverently and fervently praying to God in behalf of the Apostle Peter. This is something that we see over and over again in the book of Acts. The early church believed a key to having the power of God was by praying to God. Not one time do we find them having club meetings, but often in Acts we find them having prayer meetings. **When we find ourselves in a crisis the best thing we can do is pray.**

I think one of the most powerful things we have in this church is our Thursday women's prayer group. They meet specifically to pray for the ministry of the church. It is very focused and it is powerful. This is exactly the kind of thing that was done in the book of Acts.

Divine Deliverance Fact #2 - God's angel was sent to deliver Peter. **12:6-11**

According to **verse 6**, on the very night before Herod was going to kill him, Peter was sound asleep. He was chained to two guards and two more stood at the door. Peter apparently is not afraid to die. He is not worried.

I heard that the hours before Ted Bundy was to be executed he couldn't eat, he couldn't sleep, and when they took him to his execution he couldn't even walk; his legs were buckling and the guards had to carry him.

Peter was as calm as he could be, and as far as he knew he was to be executed the next day. It is possible that he may have remembered that Jesus told him he would live to an old age (John 21:18). **But here is the truth; when you know you are in the hands of God and that you have a relationship with Jesus Christ, death is really no threat at all.**

But God decided this wasn't the time for Peter to die. **God's timing is always perfect. He intervenes exactly when He needs to intervene and He decided it was time to rescue Peter.**

Verse 7 says Peter was sleeping so soundly that the angel had to wake him up. An angel of the Lord appeared, and a bright light shined right in the prison cell. Don't you hate a bright light when you are sound asleep? Light sleepers wake up with any light, but this one was a very bright light and notice Peter is still sleeping. He is so at ease the night before his death that even a bright light does not wake him up. In fact, carefully notice the angel has to punch him and jab him in the side and tell him to wake up and get up.

At that moment when the angel told him to get up his chains fell off. Peter was not praying for an angel to show up here. The angel just did because this was God's plan. This is the second time in Peter's life when an angel showed up to bust him out of jail (Acts 5:18-20).

According to **verse 8**, the angel had to tell Peter put on your coat and your sandals and wrap your coat around you and follow me. This is interesting because on the one hand the angel is not rushed because he tells him to take the time to put on his clothes and sandals, but on the other hand, he says grab your coat and wrap it around you and follow me. Basically the angel is saying to Peter "let's go", "we need to get going." There does appear to be a time element to this escape. This angel apparently has a certain amount of time to get Peter out of jail and then he will disappear.

According to **verse 9**, as Peter was following this angel, he couldn't tell if this were really happening or if it were some revelatory vision like the one he received concerning the clean and unclean animals. But he kept following, and they walked past the first and second guard and they came to an iron gate that leads into the city and the gate opened by itself.

It is interesting that the Greek word "open itself" (αὐτομάτη) is the word from which we get our English word "automatic". The gate opened itself of its own accord and they went out on the street and the angel was gone (**verse 10**). This is like one of those automatic doors, only there was no electricity or electronic eye to send some signal. It automatically opened by the power of God.

Verse 11 says that Peter all of a sudden realized, with certainty, that he was standing in the street and he knew an angel of God had rescued him from death.

Divine Deliverance Fact #3 - God's church receives a visit by Peter. **12:12-17**

Now when you have just escaped from prison and are on the run, you need a place to hide. Both religious and civil authorities would be tracking him, so he needed to go to some hideout and he decided to head for a home where the church was meeting. He went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark (**verse 12**), which is the very place the church had gathered to pray.

What happens next is comical and moving at the same time. Peter knocks on the door and a servant girl whose name is Rhoda looks out and sees Peter and is so excited that she does not unlock the door to let him in. Instead, she runs into the middle of the prayer meeting and tells them Peter is at the gate (**verses 13-14**). She leaves Peter standing outside exposed to arrest.

The church didn't believe her and they actually called her a maniac and told her she was just seeing his angel (**verse 15**). Now think about that for a moment. If in fact you do have an angel at the door, wouldn't you think this group would run to the door to see it? They think Rhoda is off her rocker.

But according to **verse 16**, Peter is still pounding on the door, trying to get someone to let him in. Finally, they apparently got up and looked and saw it was Peter and they opened the door and let him in. Peter had to tell them to keep quiet because he is trying to hide out (**verses 16-17**).

Now according to **verse 17**, Peter wanted this group to tell James, the brother of Jesus, and then he took off and went to "another" place. The Greek pronoun "another" (ετερος) place means another of a different kind. This would seem to me to suggest that Peter is getting out of the Jewish area. It is very contextually possible as a fugitive Peter headed to Antioch, a Gentile area, some 300 miles straight north of Jerusalem. We know from Galatians 2:11 that Peter eventually did get to Antioch.

There is something to observe here that we must never forget – **it is not prayer that changes things, it is God who changes things and it is prayer that moves God to change things.**

Divine Deliverance Fact #4 - God's deliverance of Peter causes problems with Herod and the soldiers. **12:18-19**

The next day things at the prison were in an uproar. That word "disturbance" (ταραχος) means there was major trouble and things were stirred up (Ibid., p. 440). That is exactly what God's power and God's Grace does; it stirs things up. God's Word is living and active and it is designed to cause major commotion. God's Word is not given to tickle ears, but cut open hearts.

No one could figure out what happened to Peter. They searched and searched and couldn't find him. Herod was so upset by this that he ordered the execution of all sixteen soldiers who were responsible for guarding Peter.

After their execution Herod headed to Caesarea. According to Josephus, the reason he went was to preside over the public games that were being held in honor of the Roman Emperor Claudius.

Divine Deliverance Fact #5 - God executes Herod. **12:20-23**

Eusebius claims that the moment Herod decided to kill the apostles, God decided to kill him (Ibid., p. 82).

Food was at a premium because of the famine (**11:28**), and the people of Tyre and Sidon sent some of their representatives to get some food from Herod while he was in Caesarea. Herod was not happy with the people of Tyre and Sidon, so they sent representatives to try to smooth things out.

Blastus was the key man to Herod. The text says that he was the “king’s chamberlain”, which means he was very close to Herod. He was in charge of guarding him and carrying out his commands.

The men of Tyre and Sidon wine and dine Blastus, and convince him to help them repair the breach in the relationship. There was a day in which Herod put on all of his royal clothes and gave an address to the crowd. As Herod delivered his public address, the people cried out that Herod was “the voice of a god and not the voice of a man.”

Now in **verse 22**, there is an article “the” before the noun “people”, which means Luke has specific people in mind. The word for “people” (δημος) is not the normal word for “people” (λαος). This word used here is one that specifically refers to a group that has political overtones (Ibid., p. 104). So what I understand the Greek to mean is that those people from Tyre and Sidon, who wanted to get back into the good graces of Herod, started yelling that he was the voice of a god and not a man. They kept crying out and Herod loved it. He loved the acclaim; and when he didn’t deny that he wasn’t a god, and because this Herod who was from Jerusalem did not give glory to God, God sent His angel and he struck Herod down with worms and he died. According to Josephus, Herod lived for five agonizing days and then he died in total pain and agony.

God’s angel brought deliverance to Peter and death to Herod. Herod was a thorn to God’s people long enough so God killed him.

Divine Deliverance Fact #6 - God’s Word continued to grow . **12:24-25**

Now notice **verse 24** begins with contrasting conjunction “but”. But is sharp contrast to the death of Herod; there was life and growth in God’s Word. The persecutor of the Church was dead and the prosperity of God’s Word was alive.

With Herod dead, the Gospel began to move forward with great power and the focus is heading to Antioch. Two men who will become critical are Saul and Barnabas, and along with them we are introduced to a new man, the cousin of Barnabas, John Mark (Col. 4:10).

That Grace Gospel is wonderful – whoever will believe in Jesus Christ will be saved.