

In coming to chapter 12, we return to the church in Jerusalem. If you remember, the previous chapter ended with Barnabas and Saul bringing the donation given by the nearly formed church in Antioch to Judea (11:30). Thus, chapter 12 begins with the church in Jerusalem. Not only did they have financial needs, but as we shall see, they would become the object of Herod's harassment. Our theme this morning is Peter's Liberation from Prison (and I want to consider it under five main headings, summarizing it with a sixth, in which I shall offer several practical observations.

- I. Herod Harasses the Church (vv1-4)
- II. The Church Prays to God (v5)
- III. God Sends an Angel (vv6-10)
- IV. Peter returns to the Saints (vv11-17)
- V. Herod Searches for Peter (vv18-19)
- VI. Practical Observations

I. Herod Harasses the Church (vv1-4)

1. V1—"Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church"—the phrase "about that time" points back to the previous chapter.
2. At the time when the first Gentile Church was established in Antioch, and they send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.
3. In other words, when things were going relatively well—the church was growing and the gospel spreading.
4. V1—"Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church"—Satan and the wicked hate when the church prospers.
5. And thus, Satan no doubt, stirs up a hatred for the church within Herod, which finds expression in persecution.
6. The Greek word rendered "harass" by the NKJV literally means—"to oppress, afflict, harm, or mistreat."
7. The form of this harassment is found in v2—"Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword."
8. James and John were both apostles, sons of Zebedee, and were nicknamed "Sons of Thunder" by our Savior.
9. James was the first martyr among the apostles, as Jesus had seemingly foretold would happen (Matt.20:22).
10. V3—"And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also"—now, keep in mind, Herod and the Jews hated each other.
11. Because they both hated the Christians more, they often worked together in persecuting the Church (Christians).
12. Remember there are three Herods in the NT—Herod the Great (who slew the infants at Bethlehem at Christ's birth); Herod Antipas (who beheaded John the Baptist); and Herod Agrippa (who killed the James the apostle).
13. Luke tells us, v3—"Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread"—which refers to the 7 days prior to Passover.
14. Thus, we read at the end of v4, that he—"intended to bring him (Peter) before the people after Passover."
15. It wasn't that Herod was keeping the Passover, or that he cared for the Passover, but he knew they Jews did.
16. And he knew that if he executed Peter during Passover, the Jews would have missed it, so he intended to wait after Passover.

17. In other words, Herod wanted to ensure he had a good crowd of Jews, so that he could win political points.

II. The Church Prays to God (v5)

1. V5—"Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church."
2. This obviously forms a contrast—while Peter was kept in prison, the church kept or continued in prayer.
3. If Peter was arrested at the beginning of the Days of Unleavened Bread, then he was imprisoned seven days.
4. The Greek word rendered "constant" (NKJV), "without ceasing" (NJV), has two basic meanings to it.
5. It can refer to constant or continual prayer, or else, it can refer to earnest or fervent prayer (ESV and NASB).
6. There's no reason to select one and reject the other, as the word really brings with it both ideas or concepts.
7. It refers to prayer that is "constant" because it's earnest—it's prayer that "continues" because it's fervent.
8. John Calvin—"We see some of our brethren live in exile, others we see imprisoned, many cast into stinking dungeons, many consumed with fire, yea, we see new torments oftentimes invented, whereby being long tormented they may feel death. Unless these provocations sharpen our desire to pray, we be more than blockish; therefore, so soon as any persecution arises, let us by and by get ourselves to prayer."

III. God Sends an Angel (vv6-10)

1. In response to the constant and earnest prayers of the church, God sends an angel to liberate Peter the apostle.
2. V6—"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."
3. It seems that Herod was determined to bring Peter out of prison, likely to whip or kill, the very next morning.
4. Herod had Peter bound with chains between two soldiers, along with other soldiers guarding before the door.
5. In other words, Peter was not only in prison, but personally guarded, and also bound with two chains.
6. Herod had spared no expense to ensure that Peter would not escape, or be broken out by the disciples.
7. V7—"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. It appears that Peter was deeply asleep—thus, the angel struck Peter on the side to awaken him from his sleep.
9. As soon as Peter rose up, his chains fell off his hands—seemingly, the two guards were also fast asleep.
10. V8—"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.'"
11. According to v9, it appears Peter thought this was merely a vision, and not actually happening in real life.

12. If you remember, Peter had received visions in the past, so it was nothing for him to assume this was one.
13. According to v10, they past the first and second guard posts, which I take to mean they passed the guards.
14. How this was done we are not told—it's possible these guards were also asleep, or else, temporarily blinded.
15. We learn from the second half of v10, that the iron gate that led to the city—"opened to them of its own accord."
16. This simply underscores the supernatural nature of this deliverance—God was working through the angel.
17. Now again, while we are not expressly told, it seems likely this angel assumed a temporary human form.
18. This is usually, though not always, how angels interacted with people, both in the Old and New Testaments.

IV. Peter returns to the Saints (vv11-17)

1. V11—"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.'"
2. Put yourself in Peter's shoes (or sandals)—he's awakened by an angel who leads him out of the prison.
3. He no doubt wondered whether or not this was a dream—did this actually happen—it took him a few seconds to come to himself.
4. V11—"Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod."
5. Now he understood all that happened—he now understood that the angel was sent from God to liberate him.
6. Not only from the hand of Herod but also "from all the expectation of the Jewish people"—that is, the wicked Jews.
7. V12—"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."
8. The NT describes several different Marys—there's the mother of our Lord; Mary Magdalene (who was delivered from demon-possession); Mary of Bethany (sister of Lazarus); and Mary (the mother of John Mark).
9. John Mark as you may know, will actually become an assistant to Paul and Barnabas in their ministry.
10. From vv13-16, we have an interesting account—as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer.
11. V14—"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."
12. She was so overtaken with joy at hearing Peter's voice, she actually forgets to open the gate and let him in.
13. She ran back into the house and told them Peter was at the gate, v15—"But they said to her, 'You are beside yourself!' Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, 'It is his angel.'"
14. There's no way Peter is at the gate, because we know for certain that he's at present, imprisoned by Herod.
15. V16—"Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished."

16. I find it rather encouraging to think—although they've been praying for Peter, they were actually surprised to see Peter.
17. V17—"But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord has brought him out of the prison."
18. This is the second time Peter describes his deliverance in this way—while the Lord used an angel, it was the Lord who gave the deliverance.
19. V17—"And he said, 'Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren'"—that is, James the son of Alphaeus (often referred to as 'James the less').
20. Before I come to the last two verses (vv18-19), I want to say a few brief words about the phrase "So they said, 'It is his angel'" (v15).
21. This goes back to what I said early about angels—in that they often appeared to men in human form.
22. Heb.13:2—"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels."
23. It's likely he's referring back to Genesis 18, where Abraham and Sarah entertained three visitors (who were angels).
24. But what do they mean by saying—"It is his angel"—does this mean we all have our own personal angel?
25. Well, I think they simply understood the fact, that angels "are ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation" (Heb.1:14).

V. Herod Searches for Peter (vv18-19)

1. Verses 18-19—"Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death."

VI. Practical Observations

1. Here I want to answer the question, why? Why has the Spirit preserved this account in Holy Scripture?
2. I've said this before brethren, but it deserves repetition—the Spirit preserved these accounts for a reason.
3. There are reasons why this account, out of all the other accounts, has been preserved in the Holy Scripture.
4. Think about it—how many events were there that were never recorded in Scripture and are unknown to us.
5. But for some reason, the Holy Spirit inspired Luke, the human author, to preserve this specific event.
6. Why? Well, as I've looked over this account and pondered its particulars, as well as its overall context.
7. I want to suggest, without claiming special revelation from God, there are at least three great lessons to be learned from this passage.
8. And each of these lessons can be summarized by a single word—prayer, persecution, and protection.
9. (1) Prayer—Luke twice describes the church as praying—they were constantly praying (v5), and gathered together praying (v12).
10. And while we are not expressly told us what they were praying for, it seems rather evident, that at least in part, they were praying for protection from their enemies, and especially, for Peter who had been imprisoned.

11. (a) It was constant—as I've already said, the idea of constant or continual prayer includes earnestness.
12. Perhaps the best way to describe this prayer is by the word persistent—prayer that doesn't easily give up.
13. Lk.18:1—"Then He (Jesus) spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart"—He then gave them the parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge.
14. Lk.18:6-8—"Then the Lord said, 'Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?'"
15. That is, will He find that kind of faith that drives or fuels constant and fervent prayer—that enables us to cry out day and night to Him.
16. (b) It was corporate, v12—"many were gathered together praying"—it was corporate or communal prayer.
17. Praying by yourself in private is wonderful—it's absolutely essential to fostering a healthy spiritual life.
18. But I fear many, if not most Christians, fail to realize how important corporate prayer is to the health of the church.
19. As Herod stretched out his hand to harass the church, the church gathered together to seek help from Christ.
20. (2) Persecution—like prayer, persecution is a rather consistent theme throughout the book of the Acts of the Apostles.
21. This is the way in which Scripture describes the church—as a flock of sheep in the midst of fierce wolves.
22. God's people have always been hated by the world, and they will always be hated by the world until the very end.
23. This was true in the OT, as the nation of Israel was hated by the other nations, and it's true in the NT, as the church, a holy nation, is hated by other nations.
24. And before I go any further, let me simply underscore this point, which I think can easily be lost sight of.
25. The church itself is a holy nation within nations—and these two, the church and the world, are distinct.
26. Brethren, if every leader in our country became Christian, and they governed this country with Biblical principles, that would not make it the church.
27. Yes, if these leaders are true Christians, they would be apart of the church, but they are not the church.
28. The church will ever be governed by elders, assisted by deacons, and consist of a definable membership.
29. There will always be the church and the world—the church will remain a holy nation, within nations.
30. Sometimes those nations will be better and at times they will worse—but they will remain the nations (and not the church).
31. The church is its own entity—its own nation—its own kingdom—it's the place where Christ reigns over His people.
32. But you might ask—Doesn't Christ rule over every nation—Yes, of course He does, but He doesn't rule over every nation the same.
33. There's only one nation that He rules over in grace and love, and has committed to presence and protect.

34. And guess what—that nation isn't our nation or any other nation on the face of the earth—it's the church.
35. And so, because Christ rules over every nation, no nation is able to harass His people but by His will.
36. In fact, Christ allows the nations of this world to reach out their hands to harass His people for two reasons (to purify us and multiply us).
37. (a) To purify us—persecution, hardship, and affliction are fires used by Christ to purify His beloved people.
38. And I suggest such things as persecution, hardship, and affliction are used to strengthen three primary graces—faith, love, and hope.
39. Faith as we are forced to trust Him through the affliction—affliction reveals or exposes our own weakness.
40. Love as we are faced with the hatred of this world, we are forced to our Savior and other saints who love us.
41. Hope as we are reminded that the comforts of this life are temporary, and this is not our ultimate home.
42. V6—"And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping"—that is, he was sleeping on the eve of his execution.
43. How and why was he sleeping, but because he knew he belonged to Christ, and Christ would be with him.
44. Rom.8:35—"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword."
45. Can any of these separate us from Christ—the worst they can do is bring us into His heavenly presence.
46. (b) To multiply us—we've seen this throughout the book of Acts—the church scatters because of persecution.
47. (3) Protection—I suggest this is at the very heart of this passage—yes, our enemies will attack us, and yes, we must pray to God for help, but brethren, Christ has promised His people, that He will protect them from all their foes.
48. Now, remember, there are two apostles in this account—one is put to death and the other is liberated from prison.
49. I'm not here saying, that Christ has promised to deliver every person, from the hands of their enemies in the same way.
50. In the case of James, he was liberated from his enemies in that he was taken to heaven where he now worships Christ.
51. In the case of Peter, he was liberated from enemies so that he could continue to serve Christ on the earth.
52. But in both cases, they were liberated—James was eternally liberated and Peter was temporally liberated.
53. But here's my point under this third word (protection)—in the deliverance of Peter we are reminded that Christ has promised to preserve a witness for Himself on this earth.
54. And regardless how hard the nations of this world may try, the church of Christ will continue on another day.
55. Ps.34:7—"The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them"—He will always have a people.