

G. The Onset of Gentile Opposition (12:1-25)

The persecution of Jesus' followers is a persistent theme throughout Luke's account in Acts. The Lord had promised that it would come, and Luke records the first instance of persecution immediately following the emergence of the New Testament Church at Pentecost (3:1-4:3). And although it was a new development in one sense, it was really only the continuation of the opposition that had been directed against Jesus Himself. The Church bears the life of its Lord and carried on what He "began to do and teach," and for that reason it provoked the same response from men that He had (John 15:18-25).

Christ's saints were persecuted from the beginning, but that persecution had always come at the hands of the Jews. The Church's witness to the Jews had provoked Jewish opposition, but the nature of the human heart leads to the expectation of the same dynamic with the Gentiles. The enlarging of the Church's mission could be expected to expand the opposition against it and its gospel, and Luke's account in chapter twelve provides a prophetic foretaste of that outcome. Jesus had warned His disciples that their witness to Him was going to reach beyond the leaders and people of Israel to Gentile kings and rulers. But they would give that testimony as men brought under inquisition, not as sought-out evangelists (Matthew 10:16-20).

Gentile mission meant Gentile opposition, and that understanding shows how Luke's apparent divergence in the flow of his narrative (cf. 11:30 with 13:1ff) is really nothing of the sort. The Herod episode is connected with the preceding context by making manifest what is implied by the budding Gentile mission at Antioch. In turn, it also points forward to the coming Gentile missionary endeavors by anticipating what lay ahead for Paul and his associates (ref. 14:1-7, 21:1-12, 26:1-18; cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-26).

1. The emergence of Gentile persecution parallels the Jewish counterpart in a couple of notable ways. First, both involved *rulers* rather than the common man: In the instance of Jewish opposition it was Israel's religious authorities (4:1-3); in the case of the Gentiles, it was the appointed civil ruler Herod Agrippa I. But there is a second point of correspondence, and that is that Herod, though not a Jew, was a descendent of the first two patriarchs Abraham and Isaac. Herod was an Idumean, a descendent of Esau, and his heritage is important to understanding his actions.

The Herod of this context was Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great who had called for the murder of the young boys at Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-18), and one of a long line of individuals who carried the title *Herod*. In order to understand the episode Luke records, one must understand the history of this family.

- a. The Herodian dynasty had its roots in the conquest of the Idumeans by the Hasmonean (Maccabean) ruler John Hyrcanus (Yohanan Girhan) circa 125 B.C. and their forced conversion to Judaism. From that point forward, the Idumeans – and so also the Herods – were Jewish by faith, but aliens by birth and allegiance. As their circumcision had been forced, so their Judaism was nominal, overshadowed by their continuing nationalistic loyalties. For the Idumean Herods, religion was a means to political power and influence.

The Herods (which is a title denoting heroism) began their rule in Palestine when Alexander Jannaeus – the son of John Hyrcanus – appointed Antipas governor of Idumea. His son Antipater followed him as a ruler under the Hasmoneans, as did his son Herod the Great. Both men were cunning, ambitious and resourceful and sought to employ the declining weakness of the Hasmonean rule and the ascending, indomitable power of Rome to their own advantage.

- b. Herod the Great carried an apt title, being the greatest of the Herodian rulers. He began his political career as the governor of Galilee while still a young man, and his skills as a statesman and labors on behalf of Rome eventually earned him the rule over all Judea. He subsequently brought about the end of the Maccabean Dynasty by exterminating the entire Hasmonean house. This outraged the Jews, who were loyal to the Maccabees, and they sought redress with Rome, but to no avail. Herod continued his courting of Rome by incorporating many of its cultural features into his own kingdom, including Roman sports and pagan temples. Those offenses only exacerbated the Jews' hatred of him. He did, however, exercise an influence over the younger generation and the Herodian party was the eventual result. The Herodians were ethnic Jews who outwardly embraced the religion of Judaism, but whose worldview and lifestyle practice were decidedly Graeco-Roman. For obvious reasons, the Jews despised the Herodians, and yet even the ultra-devout Pharisees willingly joined forces with them in their opposition to Christ (Mark 3:6, 12:13). War makes strange bedfellows.

Herod was well aware of the Jews' hatred for him and sought every opportunity to win them over. His greatest overture toward them (and his own legacy) was his lavish expenditure to expand and embellish the Jerusalem temple. Begun in 20 B.C., that work was still in progress during Jesus' life (John 2:13-20). But in the end the Jews saw him only as a usurper to David's throne; whatever he might be and do, he was an Idumean and therefore had no right to claim the kingship over Israel. What made it worse was that his rule was granted and secured by *Rome* – the hated occupier and oppressor of the Jews in whose service Herod exploited them. He plundered their wealth to ingratiate his Roman superiors, even defiling the tomb of their beloved David by looting it of its treasures.

A tragic and caricatured blend of brilliance and barbarity, Herod enhanced and preserved his rule with cold calculation, destroying everyone he perceived to be a threat, including his own wife and children. It was no wonder that the visit of the Magi provoked him to dispatch soldiers to Bethlehem on a murderous mission.

"He was unquestionably a man of talent... His whole life exhibits in no small degree statecraft, power of organization, shrewdness. He knew men and he knew how to use them. He won the warmest friendship of Roman emperors, and had a faculty of convincing the Romans of the righteousness of his cause, in every contingency. In his own dominions he was like Ishmael, his hand against all, and the hands of all against him, and yet he maintained himself in the government for a whole generation." (ISBE Bible Dictionary)

- c. Herod the Great was succeeded by his son Herod Antipas. Though lacking his father's greatness as a statesman, Antipas possessed his cunning and ruthlessness, adding to it an unrestrained licentiousness. He was educated in Rome and, like his father, became enamored with Roman culture and power; his time in Rome also developed his taste for Roman vices. Herod Antipas' scriptural claim to fame was taking his brother's wife for himself, which became the occasion for John's beheading (Matthew 14:1ff). What Elijah was to Ahab, John was to Antipas. John functioned as Herod Antipas' conscience before God; initially only a curiosity, the Baptist became for Antipas an object of reverent fear (Mark 6:1-20).
 - d. Herod Agrippa I (the grandson of Herod the Great through his son Aristobulus) succeeded Antipas, not through Antipas' death, but through intrigue. Agrippa had cultivated a friendship with Caligula, and when he became emperor, Agrippa convinced him to depose his uncle Antipas and grant him his kingdom. By his services and overtures to Rome Agrippa managed to enlarge his holdings until his kingdom exceeded that of his grandfather. In many ways, Agrippa showed himself to be a *Herod*: shrewd, ambitious and calculating. But unlike them, he displayed a degree of conscientiousness toward the Law of Moses, taking seriously his Jewish ancestry through the Hasmonean line. He went so far as to endanger his rule and even his life by petitioning the cruel and irrational Caligula to desist from his determination to install a statue in the Jerusalem temple. Like his grandfather, Agrippa sought the favor of the Jews – partly because he desired a stable rule, but also because he regarded himself as, in a certain sense, one of them. This was the man who is the subject of this context in Acts.
2. This history provides the backdrop for Luke's account regarding James' execution and Peter's arrest (12:1-4). Luke provides no explanation for Agrippa's decision to arrest certain members of the Jerusalem Church, but his identification with the Jews and his interest in securing their favor are likely the reason. Agrippa's uncle Herod Antipas had known Jesus and been involved in His trial during his reign (Luke 23:1-11), and so Agrippa must have also known about the Nazarene and the sect that had emerged following His crucifixion. Beyond what his uncle may have communicated to him, the ever-widening impact of this Way on the subjects of his kingdom could not have escaped Agrippa's notice and concern. But his concern would not have been merely political, for he shared the Jews' religious perspective and convictions. Like them, Agrippa regarded Jesus and His followers as a threat to Judaism and the Law of Moses. These things reinforce the contextual suggestion that Agrippa's reason for arresting and torturing these saints was to intimidate their companions and undermine the Church; somehow his zeal escalated to the point that he determined to put James (the son of Zebedee) to death.

This action met with an approving response from the Jews that exceeded Agrippa's expectation. James was one of the Twelve and so a leading figure in the Church; his death was an important milestone in dealing with the troublesome disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Jewish rulers probably believed it would help break the Church's back. Losing their leaders – the men personally connected with the dead Nazarene – would surely cause His followers to lose heart and lead to the dissolution of this movement.

Agrippa's reward for killing James was greater than he expected, and this encouraged him to have Peter arrested as well. He did so at the time of the Passover, intending to present him to the Jews for public trial at the end of the feast. Like Pilate before him, Agrippa wanted to engage his Jewish subjects in trying and condemning Peter to death and the Feast of Unleavened bread was the perfect occasion. For at that time Jerusalem was swollen with Jews from all over the Empire, enabling Agrippa to have the largest audience for his spectacle and thereby achieve the greatest effect. But whereas Pilate had acted out of fear, seeking to separate himself from what was being forced upon him (Matthew 27:15-26), Agrippa acted purposefully out of hubris and the desire to make a grand show for his own sake. He had secured and enlarged his rule by using men to his own advantage, and Peter was to be his pawn in advancing his designs with the Jews.

3. But while Peter was in prison awaiting the end of the Passover, God dispatched an angel to liberate him (12:5-10). Several things about this episode are noteworthy:

a. First of all, this is the second of three such supernatural deliverances recorded by Luke. The first also involved Peter in Jerusalem (5:18-20), while the third was Paul's later liberation from a prison in Philippi (16:23-26). *In each instance, the focus isn't on the mere fact of God's ability to liberate, but on the triumph of His power and purposes in the gospel.* Peter and the other apostles were set free to continue proclaiming the good news of redemption and life in Jesus Christ, confident and without fear (ref. again 5:19-20); likewise Paul's liberation saw the triumph of God's grace in the salvation of his jailer and his household (16:27-34). So here Peter's deliverance provoked exultant praise to the God whose grace in Christ never falters, but who sees, hears and cares for His children's needs. From first to last, Luke shows this deliverance to be the work of the Lord (12:11, 17).

b. The preceding observation leads into a second one, namely the intimate relationship between the saints' petitions and God's action. Luke explicitly stated that the Church was engaged in fervent, ongoing prayer even while Peter sat in chains awaiting his trial (12:5, cf. vv. 11-12). They had not forgotten how God had miraculously liberated the apostles during a previous incarceration, and they were pleading with Him to intervene again on Peter's behalf. Whether at the hand of an angel or through some other means, they were fully convinced that He was able to deliver His servant. On the one side of Peter's predicament was the authority and power of men and bonds; on the other was the power of dependent faith and the God who hears and whose "sovereignty rules over all."

God sent His angel even while His saints were praying, but not because their prayers compelled Him. The tendency is to reach this conclusion, but only because the human heart naturally conceives of divine-human interaction in terms of *magic*: men being able to prevail upon deity or supernatural forces by means of resources within their control. All religion is magic in this sense, and the same conception is readily imposed upon the Christian faith. There is nothing more intoxicating than the notion that prayer offered in faith can move mountains and secure every conceivable blessing (cf. Matthew 17:14-20; John 14:12-13, 15:7).

But God didn't respond because of some compulsion in His saints' petition, whether the confidence of their faith, their constancy or their fervency. Rather than acting because of their prayers, He acted *in* their prayers. God did respond to the pleas of His people, but as bringing them into His own interests and intentions. Stated differently, the Lord imparted His own mind to the saints, such that they found themselves pleading for the very thing He had determined to do.

At this point, it is also critical to note that this synching of God's mind with those of His saints doesn't always mean that their petitions will be answered as they are set before Him. At times He responds in a way that seems foreign to what is asked, *but this doesn't in itself indicate that the petitioners are acting contrary to His leading*. Sometimes God leads His own toward a certain burden – a burden He Himself bears, but that He intends to resolve in a manner which fulfills the essence of the burden without meeting the saints' conception of that fulfillment.

So, in this instance God could have answered the Church's burden for Peter's deliverance by liberating him *through death*. For the essence of their burden was Peter's safe-keeping – that the Lord would intervene to preserve His servant from loss. Meeting that burden didn't demand Peter's release from jail, and the Church's obligation in bearing it was *faith* (which wasn't as it ought to be; vv. 12-16): believing that God would hear and honor their petition for Peter, but also trusting that His response is the most appropriate form of the relief they sought.

Only that understanding answers the difference of outcomes for Peter and James. Wasn't James also an apostle of Christ, and wouldn't the Church have been praying for him as much as for Peter? Didn't God love James as much as Peter, and wouldn't He have heard the saints' petitions for him just as He did those for Peter? Yet James was executed in prison while Peter was supernaturally liberated from his bonds. The distinction wasn't in the saints' burden or the fervency and constancy of their prayer. Neither was it in a contradiction between their burden and God's will, His concern for these men or His receptiveness to certain prayers. God answered their burden for both of these men, but in different ways: James was preserved and liberated through death; Peter through an angel's hand.

- c. Finally, this supernatural intervention provides the backdrop for Luke's recounting of Herod's death (12:20-25). The God who is able to liberate His own from iron chains, prison doors and the eyes of trained guards is able to deliver them from the designs of men, even the most powerful of rulers. Whether by life or by death, the Lord is the vigilant, almighty protector of His people (Psalm 91).
4. Peter's escape must have vexed Herod, for even the most plausible explanation was extraordinary and beyond belief. How could a man chained between two guards escape unnoticed? Even if both men conspired to let Peter go, how could he get past the other soldiers guarding the prison (12:4-10)? But as unlikely as it was that a whole group of guards would orchestrate Peter's release, no other explanation made sense. Herod couldn't solve the mystery, but he could punish those who failed in their duty (12:19).

Herod executed his soldiers and then set about finding Peter. He wasn't about to let this man make a fool of him and undermine his authority in the eyes of the people. But Peter was long gone, having fled Jerusalem as soon as he met with the saints in Mary's house (12:17). When his men were unable to locate Peter, Herod retreated, foiled and flustered, to Caesarea, the provincial capital of his kingdom. He may have been humiliated in Jerusalem, but in Caesarea, the seat of his royal dominion, Agrippa was in his element; no one would get the better of him there – no one, that is, but the Lord of Hosts.

- a. Luke set the stage for Herod's death by noting a contention that arose between him and the Phoenician people of Tyre and Sidon. He doesn't explain the nature of this conflict, but indicates that Herod retaliated by cutting off their food supply (12:20). Why this region outside Agrippa's dominion was dependent on him for food is unclear; what is clear is that his action left the people in dire straits. Broken and desperate, they dispatched a delegation seeking peace, gaining an advocate for their cause in the king's own chamberlain. Ironically, their helpless, pleading state facilitated the scenario that would culminate in Agrippa's death.
- b. Blastus prevailed upon his master to give the Phoenician delegation an audience, and on the appointed day Herod appeared before them splendidly arrayed and surrounded by all the trappings of his royal authority and power. As he began to address the assembly they cried out as one man, "*It is the voice of a god and not of a man*" (12:21-22). The man who had built his kingship and kingdom through the subterfuge of flattery was now having the tables turned on him. These desperate ambassadors were ready to do whatever was necessary to gain relief for their starving people, and Agrippa was equally eager to bask in their accolades.
- c. Desperation moved the delegation to proclaim what they didn't believe, but their words had their intended effect and Herod lapped them up. Adorned in a glistening robe made of silver and seated on his glorious rostrum before a powerless and dependent people seeking his mercy and benevolence, Herod's pride and sense of ascendancy were swollen to the limits of human capacity.

Herod had lifted himself to the very heights of heavenly stature, but the One who is God indeed was about to cast him down to the depths. This vain imposter who solicited feigned worship through intimidation was no god; mere flesh and blood, lowly worms triumphed over him at God's command. "*I whom you call a god am ordered to depart this life immediately. Providence thus instantly reproves the lying words you just now addressed to me, and I who was by you called immortal am immediately to be hurried away by death*" (Josephus' account of Agrippa's dying words).

5. Like his grandfather before him, Agrippa had employed his power in opposition to God's kingdom: the former by attempting to slay the royal Son before He could assume His throne; the latter by silencing those who were now proclaiming His kingship. But whether calculated or simply the work of arrogant folly, all such attempts are destined to fail; God's kingdom will not be thwarted. The intent and decree of the greatest king can be overthrown, but the word and will of the Lord endure and flourish forever (12:24-25).