

**Herod Agrippa I
Persecutes the Church at
Jerusalem**

Acts 12:1-25

Introduction

- In Acts chapter 11, we saw the apostle Peter's work among the Gentiles explained and exonerated.
- The chapter closed with Barnabas and Saul leaving Antioch, Syria, and bringing a monetary offering to help the poor in the Church at Jerusalem.

I. King Herod [Agrippa I] decides to persecute the followers of Jesus (Acts 12:1).

ESV Acts 12:1 About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

Explanation

- This is **Herod Agrippa I**, the grandson of King Herod I (Herod the Great).
- **Herod the Great** – the first Herod) was the “king of the Jews” at Jesus’ birth and tried to have Him killed (Mat. 2:1-20) by having all the baby boys under the age of two in Bethlehem slaughtered. Herod the Great died in 4 BC.

- Upon his death, Rome divided his kingdom into four sections where were ruled by “tetrarchs”. Three of his sons were installed simultaneously as tetrarchs: Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip, and Herod Antipas. A “Lysanias,” about which almost nothing is known, was the fourth tetrarch (Luke 3:1).
- A tetrarch was a lower rank than “king” and was equivalent to being a

- “governor” of a region,” accountable to Rome.
- **Herod Archelaus**, his oldest son, reigned over Judah and was king when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus left Egypt to return to Israel (Mat. 2:22). Joseph, returning from Egypt, was warned by an angel not to return to Bethlehem because Archelaus was ruling there. Archelaus’ reputation for cruelty exceeded his father’s, so

- Joseph settled in the Galilee region, in the town of Nazareth. Archelaus was banished by Rome in 6 AD and died in 18 AD.
- **Herod Philip** is mentioned once in Scripture (Luke 3:1) as tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis. He ruled from 4 BC to 34 AD. The Bible has nothing else to say about him.

- **Herod Antipas** was tetrarch of the Galilee region from 4 BC to 39 AD. He was the ruler of the area in which Jesus grew up and the one who had John the Baptist imprisoned and beheaded and before whom Jesus appeared in his trial before Pilate. This is the one Jesus referred to as “that fox” (Luke 13:31-32).

- Several times in Scripture (Mat. 14:9; Mark 6:14-29) Herod Antipas is called a “king”. This reflects Jewish popular usage and was not an official title recognized by Rome.
- **Herod Agrippa I**, occurs in Scripture only in Acts chapter 12. He is a third generation “Herod” and the son of

- Aristobulus IV, Herod the Great's third son whom he executed in 7 BC. This makes Herod Agrippa I the grandson of Herod the Great and the nephew of Herod Antipas.

II. Herod Agrippa I kills the apostle James and arrests the apostle Peter (Acts 12:2-4).

² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ And when he had seized

him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.

Explanation

- From Rabbinic sources we know that **Herod Agrippa I** wanted to win the favor of the Jewish leaders so he

would have less problems with the Jews while administering his territory.

- **Background history:** Despite being raised and educated in Rome, Herod Agrippa I was always on shaky ground with the Romans. He ran up numerous debts in Rome, then fled to Palestine, leaving angry creditors behind him. Unwise comments he

- made got back to the Roman emperor Tiberius, who promptly imprisoned him. Released from prison following Tiberius's death, he was made ruler of northern Palestine (Luke 3:1), to which Judea and Samaria were eventually added in 41 AD. He ruled the largest territory of Palestine since Herod the Great

- nearly fifty years earlier. Because of his tenuous relationship with Rome, it was imperative that he maintain the loyalty of his Jewish subjects.
- To win Jewish favor, he participated in the Jewish feasts at Jerusalem and even read from the Torah and delivered a blessing during the feasts.

- His presence in Jerusalem during the days of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, and his care to time his actions in reference to Peter's arrest and intended execution so as not to interfere with the sacred days of the feast (Acts 12:3), shows his desire to pursue policies that pleased the Jewish leaders.

- Peter was guarded by 16 Roman soldiers, 4 groups of 4. He was chained between two soldiers and two others guarded the prison doors.

III. Christians pray for God's intervention and Peter's protection (Acts 12:5-10).

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. ⁶ Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door

were guarding the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and

follow me." ⁹ And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.

Explanation

- Imagine thinking you are seeing a vision of yourself escaping prison and then discovering you are actually experiencing a miracle and you have an angel for your alarm clock! That's what happened to Peter when he was in prison awaiting trial and certain death.

- Approximately sixteen years later, Peter may have had this miraculous experience in mind when he quoted in his first epistle Psalm 34:15–16: “For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil” (1 Peter 3:12).

- That Psalm quotation certainly summarizes what God did for Peter, and it reveals to us three wonderful assurances to encourage us in the difficult days of life. 1) **God sees our trials.** Nothing comes into the life of a believer except it passes through the sovereign control of God (Acts 4:28). God permitted the apostle James to be killed but not the apostle Peter. 2) **God hears our**

- **prayers.** We must never underestimate the power of united prayer with other Christians. 3) **God will deal with our enemies.**
- We do not know at what time of the night it was when the angel delivered Peter, but when the next squad of 4 soldiers (a quaternion) arrived at the cell, imagine their consternation when they discovered that the

- guards were there but the prisoner was gone! If the new watch awakened the old watch, it was certainly a rude awakening for them! If the old watch was already awake and alert, they must have had a difficult time explaining the situation to the new watch. How could a chained prisoner escape when there were four guards present and the doors were locked?

- We need to remember that there is nothing too hard for God (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17)!
- What enabled Peter to sleep when his execution was decreed for the next day? Could it be that Peter remembered Jesus' promise that Peter would live to be an old man (John 21:18-19)?

- Notice that God does not usually do for us what we can do for ourselves. Peter could not free himself from the chains nor open the prison doors, but he could dress himself, put on his sandals, wrap himself in his cloak and obediently follow the angel.

IV. Peter's response and the praying people's response to his deliverance (Acts 12:11-17)

¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." ¹² When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the

mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴

Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept

insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

Explanation

- It seems that the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, was a place used for church gatherings and in this case a prayer meeting. She was evidently a wealthy woman because she has at least one servant (Acts 12:13).
- By the statement, “It is his angel,”

- we know that the people believed in “guardian angels” (Mat. 18:10; Heb. 1:14).
- The fact that Rhoda, a servant girl, could recognize Peter’s voice without seeing him indicates she must have known him well.
- We also learn that even in “famous” prayer meetings there is sometimes

- a spirit of doubt and unbelief.
Perhaps it could be explained in the words of the father who said to Jesus, “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).
- The “James” Peter asks the people to tell is James, the half-brother of Jesus, who was not an apostle, but who became a leader among the Jerusalem Christians.

- Where Peter went when he left the meeting, nobody knows. Except for a brief appearance in Acts 15, Peter walks off the pages of the Book of Acts to make room for Paul and the story of his ministry among the Gentiles. 1 Corinthians 9:5 tells us that Peter traveled in ministry with his wife, and 1 Corinthians 1:12 suggests that he visited Corinth.

V. The anger of Herod Agrippa I and his response to Peter's escape (Acts 12:18-19).

¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. ¹⁹

And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the

sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

Explanation

- If a guard permitted a prisoner to escape, Roman law required that he receive the same punishment that

the prisoner would have received, even if it was death (see Acts 16:27; 27:42).

- This law did not strictly apply in Herod's jurisdiction, so the king was not forced to kill the guards; but, being a Herod, he did it anyway. Instead of killing one man to please the Jews, he killed four and perhaps hoped it would please them more.

VI. God kills Herod Agrippa I for his arrogance and pride (Acts 12:20-23)

²⁰ Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on

the king's country for food. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

Explanation

- Luke records: “the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!”²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.”



- The ancient Jewish historian Josephus, also writing in the first century AD, fills in some interesting details about this event. Josephus writes that Herod Antipas I had “put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun’s rays

- upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god; and they added, “Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to

- mortal nature.” Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good

- tidings to him; and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner...And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life,” (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Chapter 19, Chapter 8, Section 2).

- The audience played to Herod's ego and told him he was a god, and Herod loved every minute of the praise. But, because he did not give the glory to the Lord, this whole scene was nothing but idolatry. God says, "I am the Lord: that is My name: and My glory will I not give to another" (Isa. 42:8; see 48:11). Instead of Peter being killed by

- Herod, it was Herod who was killed by Peter's God! Could it be that the same angel who delivered Peter also smote the king?

VII. The Church continues to grow and Luke turns his focus back to Barnabas and Saul (Acts 12:24-25).

²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied. ²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

- Luke closes Acts chapter 12 telling us that Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission. They had completed their mission of bringing famine relief money to the Jerusalem church (see Acts 11:30).

- Luke also notes that John, who was also called Mark, accompanied them. From **Colossians 4:10** we learn that he was Barnabas's cousin. As he accompanied them on their relief mission to Jerusalem, so he would accompany them on their first missionary journey (13:5).

Conclusion:

- The early church had no “political clout” or friends in high places to “pull strings” for them. Instead, they went to the highest throne of all, the throne of grace. They were a praying people, for they knew that God could solve their problems. God’s glorious

- throne was greater than the throne of Herod, and God's heavenly army could handle Herod's weak soldiers any day or night! The believers did not need to bribe anyone at court. They simply took their case to the highest court and left it with the Lord!
- And what was the result? "But the word of God grew and multiplied"

- (Acts 12:24). This is another of Luke's summaries, or "progress reports," that started with Acts 6:7 (see 9:31; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). Luke is accomplishing the purpose of his book and showing us how the church spread throughout the Roman world from its small beginnings in Jerusalem.

- At the beginning of Acts 12, Herod Agrippa I seemed to be in control and the church was losing the battle. But at the end of the chapter, Herod is dead and the church—very much alive—is growing rapidly!
- The secret? A praying church!

- Missionary Isobel Kuhn used to pray when in trouble, “If this obstacle is from Thee, Lord, I accept it; but if it is from Satan, I refuse him and all his works in the name of Calvary!”
- Let’s ask God to help us to be a praying Church so that He might do wonderful works in our midst!

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