

Faithful Martyr, Miraculous Deliverance, Divine Judgment
Read Acts 12.1-25

INTRODUCTION / CONNECTIONS / CONTEXT

1/ This Luke narrative takes place “**About that time**” referring to **ch 11.27-30** when Agabus, a faithful prophet from the Jerusalem church, predicted that a famine would afflict ‘the whole world’ as it did during the days of the Emperor Claudius. This was also around the same time that the events of **ch 11** took place.
2/ In this chapter, Luke will tell us about three major events that transpired affecting the church in Jerusalem: [1] The apostle James, the brother of John, is martyred at the command of Herod Agrippa I; [2] the apostle Peter is imprisoned with the intention of killing him also, but God miraculously delivered him from prison and death; [3] and Herod is struck dead by the blow of the judgment of God.
3/ It is so significant that these dramatic and traumatic events of continuing fierce persecution and opposition against the church are sandwiched between reports of the simultaneous explosive and expansive growth of the church in spite of the attempts to exterminate it from the face of the earth [see **chs 11.24-25 & 12.24**]. Let’s see how these events unfolded...

I / vv 1-5 | James is martyred and Peter is imprisoned

1/ **v 1 / Herod the king continues his murderous assault against the Jerusalem church.** ‘Herod’ is not a proper name; it is a title. This Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great [Herod I] who sought to kill Jesus in His infancy [**Matthew 2**]. There is yet another Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist beheaded [**Matthew 14.1-12**]. There will be yet another Herod Agrippa II whom we will meet later in **ch 25.13-ch 26**. But Luke will narrate this short story of this Herod Agrippa I’s attacks against the church and the end he suffered under the judgment of God. He takes up the bloody task of seeking to extinguish the church’s influence by killing off their leaders, thinking that if he could violently kill them, he could, in effect, so demoralize the ‘movement’ that they would surrender and give it up. What he will discover is that his fight is against God – and you don’t fight God and win. God wins every time.

2/ **vv 2-3 / He killed James the brother of John with the sword.** This implies he ordered James to be beheaded. James thus becomes the second recorded martyr in this first church along with Stephen. And then, “*when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.*” “*There is no reason to execute James or to arrest Peter – the two weren’t political revolutionaries – but Herod wants to play to the Romans and the Jews. In taking such drastic actions, he can assure the Romans that this little sect called Christianity isn’t violating the ways of Rome, and he can also appeal to the Jews by showing that he is standing up for their traditions (i.e., the temple, the law, and separation from Gentiles). Herod loves power. He loves glory. He loves to please people.*” [Tony Merida | Acts]. “**This was during the days of Unleavened Bread,**” and during the days of that feast, trials and executions of sentences were forbidden.

3/ **v 4 / Herod ‘securely’ [he thought] locked up Peter and had him closely guarded with the intentions of bringing him out after the Passover feast and kill him also.**

4/ **v 5 / But God had other plans – “but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”** We will see the effects of these prayers meshing with the purposes of God in the next section of the narrative. But, for now, we must take note how the church conducted ALL of its ministry and business through their prayers to God. We have seen this from the beginning of Acts. The apostles were leading the church to implement what Jesus had taught them all throughout His ministry among them both in His explicit teachings and numerous parables. And especially in **John 14.12-14**, Jesus had left them with the specific instructions and promise that they would be effective only by asking Him, and He Himself would do what they asked. But, as I say, all throughout the Acts narrative, everything the church did was enacted by praying that Jesus would do it: **chs 1.14, 24; 2.1 [implied], 42; 3.1; 4.23-31; 6.4-6; 7.59; 9.10-12, 40; 10.9-16; 11.5; et. al.** *The church didn’t go to the streets to protest or take up arms – they prayed!*

II / vv 6-19 | Peter is miraculously delivered from prison – and death

1/ v 6 / **The Passover feast is passed, and Herod acts to execute Peter also.** Luke masterfully writes this true narrative in most dramatic fashion: **“Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night...”** Peter was as closely and securely guarded as the Roman soldiers could provide. There were **four squads of soldiers [v 4]** assigned to keep him until the appointed public spectacle to bring him out for public execution. These ‘four squads’ may mean one squad of four soldiers for each of the four watches or shifts of the day and night – or it may mean also that each squad consisted of four soldiers. What we do know is that **Peter was sleeping between two soldiers**, and that there were also two other guard posts between his cell and the outside [v 10]. Peter had Roman soldiers ‘swarming’ all over and around him. And besides them, he was **bound with two chains**. We have to wonder whether they were being sure Peter didn’t escape again like he did in **ch 5.17-26**. But just like at the tomb of Jesus, no numbers of soldiers or troops will prevent God from delivering His servants when it is His will to do so. AND, don’t overlook that **Peter was sleeping** – and soundly at that! – with all these impending death threats looming and the clock ticking down to the time! Do you know what else was ‘guarding’ Peter’s heart and mind? It was the peace of God! **See Philippians 4.4-7!**

2/ vv 7-8 / **An angel of the Lord comes to wake Peter up and lead him out of the prison.** There has to be some smile of humor on Luke’s face and in his quill as he writes these next words. And to remember also that Luke heard this from Peter as he later related it to him from his own personal experience. Peter is sleeping so soundly, slumbering even, that we would have to wonder if he was snoring [if he snored ;)]. **And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him** – but that didn’t wake him up; **and a light shone in the cell** – but that still didn’t wake him up. Only when the angel **struck Peter on the side and woke him** did Peter finally wake up! Do you reckon that as Peter related this to Luke, he might have said something like, “And I was sleeping so soundly, that I woke up only as this angel was kicking me in the ribs, saying ‘Get up quickly!’” But wake up, he did. **And the chains fell off his hands**. God miraculously loosed every restraint that was holding him in that cell. And then the angel still had to tell Peter to put his clothes on: **“Dress yourself and put on your sandals.”** This was not just a comforting visitation by the angel. They were blowing the joint! They were getting out! And then, Peter was forgetting his coat: **“Wrap your cloak around you and follow me!”** Neither Peter nor Luke says anything about the physical state of the soldiers who were guarding Peter. All we can assume is that the angel of the Lord ‘neutralized’ them for that moment like he did at Jesus’ tomb on the morning He arose: they **‘became like dead men’ [Matthew 28.4]** for that moment.

3/ vv 9-11 / **Peter follows the angel until they are safely escaped from the prison and out on the street.** Peter honestly confesses to Luke as he recounts this experience that he was not sure whether what he was experiencing was a dream, a vision, or some sort of surreal event. But, they exited the cell. And **when had passed the first and the second guard** [they just walked right passed them, or maybe stepped over them], **they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened to them of its own accord, and they went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.** The angel had fulfilled his mission. Peter was left alone [and yet, by now he knew he was NOT ALONE!] here late at night – yet in familiar surroundings and neighborhood. **“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.’”** God obviously had something else for Peter to do. God was going to disappoint a lot of people that next morning when everyone was expecting a public spectacle of an execution.

4/ v 12 / **Peter knows the church is earnestly praying for him, so he makes his way to where he knows they are.** There is a particular member of the Jerusalem church who has opened her home to host their meetings for some time now. So, **“when he realized this [that he was liberated, delivered, a free man!], he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.”** Luke is particular to introduce John Mark to us because he is going to come up again several more times in the Acts narrative [here, v 25; 13.5, 13; 15.36-39].

5/ vv 13-16 / **Peter knocks on the gateway door, trying to come in and join them...** but it takes him repeated attempts to do so.

- First, the servant girl, Rhoda, comes to see who it is that is announcing their arrival – here this late at night under these stressful circumstances. It IS a very tense and intense prayer meeting, after all! She recognizes Peter’s voice, obviously because Peter himself had been a frequent and prominent leader and attendee at numerous previous meetings. She is shocked to hear and recognize this familiar, beloved voice! And she is well aware that they are praying for HIM! So in her shocked surprise, she doesn’t even open the gate to let him in; she runs inside to announce **“Peter is standing at the gate!”**
- Nobody believes her! Here they are praying for Peter, knowing he is in Herod’s prison, and this very next morning, it has been announced that Herod is bringing him out to put him to death also. What were they praying for? Luke doesn’t tell us, but it appears they had resigned themselves to the inevitable fate of another one of their beloved apostles and leaders being executed. Maybe they were just praying that the Lord would strengthen, sustain, and give him courage and peace to face his death. If they were praying for Peter’s last-minute reprieve or rescue, they didn’t dare believe that it had been answered – at least not this miraculously! So they scolded and chided poor Rhoda: **“You are crazy – out of your mind! The stress of this situation has driven you to a mental meltdown! Shush up, girl! Can’t you see you’re interrupting our serious prayer meeting here for Peter – over there in that prison cell!”**
- **“But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, ‘It is his angel!’** but it can’t be him!” Again, we’re not sure what they meant by that. Jesus repeatedly taught about the presence of angels with Him and with us. Angels not only ministered to Jesus, but He reminded His disciples [and us] that angels guard, accompany, and serve us also [Matthew 18.10]. So maybe they knew that Peter was being attended by an angel, and maybe ‘his angel’ had come to deliver some message to them – to bring them some kind of news about him. Whatever they meant by that statement or were thinking, they still did not go to see.
- **“But Peter continued knocking...”** While they were inside, still not believing that it actually could be Peter or was Peter, here’s Peter still standing outside, on the street, late at night, by himself. What more dangerous place could Peter be in? Having just miraculously walked past the guards out of his cell, through the dark streets of the neighborhoods, and still standing alone outside the gate where the church is having this prayer meeting for him!
- But finally, they do decide to go out to see what Rhoda says she heard ... **“and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed!”** We need to learn and believe that God does extraordinary things here in our ordinary world and lives and ministries when we pray that He will! **“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”** [Ephesians 3.20-21]

6/ v 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.”** Once they could see it really was Peter, and that the Lord had indeed heard their desperate and fervent cries for help, it was them this time who had to be quieted down. What a jubilant celebration and praise service must have erupted – what spontaneous shouts of thanksgiving to God! Then, after Peter had given his dramatic testimony, he told the church, “I really can’t stay here. They’re going to be looking for me. But, **‘tell these things to James and to the brothers.’**” This is another James, of course, than the apostle James the brother of John who has just been martyred. This James is the half-brother of Jesus who believed and trusted in Christ after His resurrection. During these past few years, this James had also become a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church. We’ll see him conduct a prominent leadership role in **ch 15**. This is also the James Paul refers to in **Galatians 1.19**. And he would later write the **Book of James**. But for now, Peter **departed and went to another place** where he could escape discovery. Herod and his henchmen will be out looking for him.

7/ vv 18-19 / **As we would expect, there was chaotic confusion and panic at daybreak – “no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.”** This is why we believe God through His angel just put the soldiers into a deep God-induced sleep until it was time for them to wake up the next morning to deliver Peter to Herod. When they finally woke up, there was no Peter! There were the chains, the open cell doors, and the open gate to the street – but no Peter! **“And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined [and probably tortured] the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death.”** This was the customary sentence for such a dereliction of duty. God made a way of escape for Peter: **“Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.”** Jesus had forewarned His disciples that they would experience opposition, persecution, and even threats of death. But, **“when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next...” [Matthew 10.23].**

III / vv 20-23 | This Herod ‘played god’ with the people of Tyre and Sidon and accepted their ‘worship’ – but the True God struck him dead for ‘stolen Glory’

1/ v 20 / **There was a dispute between the ruling king Herod and the citizens of Tyre and Sidon over food distribution.** REMEMBER: there was an on-going famine in the wider regions [ch 11.27-28]. The ruling king had control over who got food and who did not. Herod was wielding this power, discriminating against the Tyrians and Sidonians. Those citizens ingratiated themselves to Blastus, one of Herod’s officials, whom they persuaded to successfully ‘lobby’ in their favor and intercede with Herod – a kind of Washington DC ‘K Street’ deal.

2/ vv 21-22 / **Herod took advantage of the granted favor to glorify himself with a grand display of pomp and circumstance and oratory.** The contemporary Jewish historian Josephus gives detailed accounts of the events on the day when this negotiated favor was to be announced, even writing that Herod’s robes were shiny and glittery with silver, catching and reflecting the rays of the sun. We don’t know if Herod’s robes would have compared with Liberace’s stage costumes, but you get the picture: “Look at me! I’m glorious!” This was a two-way mutual pandering occasion, and the people knew how to respond: **“And the people were shouting, ‘The voice of a god, and not of a man!’”** The Caesars had for a long time now ‘deified’ themselves and demanded that the Romans recognize and worship them as gods. This was not lost on king Herod, the friend of the Emperor Claudius. He grabbed hold of this opportunity for his own ‘deification’ and basked in the glory.

3/ v 23 / **The God of Glory had had enough: “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.”** Luke uses the same word here that he used in v 7. An angel of the Lord **struck** Peter on his side to wake him up and deliver him...and an angel of the Lord **struck** Herod with a fatal infection [parasites?]. Herod didn’t die immediately – he was only struck down immediately. Again Josephus records *“A severe pain...arose in his belly, which became so violent that he was carried into his palace, where five days later he died.”*

- Just a little timeline note here: history records that Herod died in AD 44 – which means that the events in Acts thus far cover about 13 years. Luke is not recording an event-by-event history of the early church, but rather the progressive advance of the Gospel as mandated by Jesus in **ch 1.8**.
- God judged and killed Herod for ‘Glory-stealing’ the Glory that belongs only to Him. **“I am The LORD; that is my Name; my Glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved images” [Isaiah 42.8].** Not them, not to Herod, and not now.

4/ vv 24-25 / **“Indeed, throughout church history the pendulum has swung between expansion and opposition, growth and shrinkage, advance and retreat, although with the assurance that even the powers of death and hell will never prevail against Christ’s church, since it is built securely on the rock” [John Stott | *Message of Acts*].**

- (Link v 25 with ch 11.29-30.)

“The body they may kill ... God’s Truth abideth still ... His Kingdom is forever!”
~ “A Mighty Fortress is our God”