



The Persecution of the Apostles

Acts 12

It was bound to come! It is a miracle that the Apostles had not been persecuted before this. Already in chapter six the author of Acts tells us of the persecutions that come on the church. But, it was a persecution coming from the religious leaders of the Jews and striking the common members of the church. The secular rulers do not seem to have concerned themselves about the spread of the gospel of Christ. The picture is now about to change.

Herod Agrippa (to distinguish this one from the several other Herods mentioned in the New Testament), the grandson of Herod the Great, now moved to persecute several members of the church. We do not read of any particular reason for this persecution at this time. However, this man hungers for power, popularity and honor. He surely is well aware of the fact that the church is growing everywhere. He is also aware of the fact that the Jews are no friends of these Christians. Throw your influence in the direction in which it will bring the most honor and glory to yourself! Not the Christians, but the Jews will receive his favors. This Herod has done certain things for the Jews in the past. Even though he wants to please the emperor at Rome, he has seen to it that an image of the emperor Caligula was not placed in the holy place at Jerusalem. He is sensitive enough to the Jewish religion and tradition to know that an image of the emperor placed in the holy place is an abomination to every Jew. This was not due to his love for the Jews but to his desire to keep the people in his camp. He had some Jewish blood in him, but was really an Idumean.

A martyred apostle

The afflicting hand of Herod is extended to the church and some of the members feel the sting of his persecutions. Those who so suffered at his hand are not even named. But, now he reaches farther and strikes within the circle of the twelve Apostles. So far these have escaped the persecution which others have had to endure. Even the deacon Stephen is persecuted long before the Apostles. Herod takes hold of James and kills him with the sword. This is the brother of the Apostle John, one of the three who were closer to Christ than the others. Nothing has been heard of any of the Apostles except Peter and John since Pentecost. What has this James done? No doubt he calmly went about the task which Christ had assigned to all the Apostles, to preach the word and establish the church in various places. Since Pentecost only this one sentence is devoted to the Apostle James, even though much more than a long chapter is devoted to the work and speech of Stephen. Luke certainly is not writing biographies of the twelve. Why doesn't the Lord send an angel to rescue this important Apostle? God has His own way of writing history. He allows an enemy of the truth to sit on the throne of David and strike an ambassador of the Messiah!

Peter's arrest

When Herod sees that this act of his is popular among the people, he seizes Peter too. This is the leader of the band of the Apostles. If he can also rid his tiny kingdom of this man, he will have struck a blow for the Jews and for his own well-being. Herod still has a certain respect for the feast days of the Jews and therefore will not do anything about Peter until after the holidays. How this reminds one of the care the enemies took at the time of the seizure of Jesus. "Not on the feast," they said; but God said: "on the feast," because He was the Pascal lamb. If the execution has to be postponed for a while, Peter must be guarded well. There is a certain danger in having a notable prisoner and keeping him in custody for a time before anything can be done about him. The guard

is placed – and it is strong! Four shifts of soldiers guard this man! He is tied. There are iron gates! What kind of a man is being guarded? After the Passover judgment will be pronounced against him and the punishment will be severe.

Prayer and deliverance

There are so many aspects of this story which ought to receive more attention than we are here able to give them. Herod guards – but he cannot prevent the church from praying. The power of prayer goes right past all the guards and past iron gates. These are the kind of times which drive the believers to prayer. They do not have the physical power to resist Herod, but they can call on the heavenly power to intervene. Of course, they do not know whether he will be delivered. Nevertheless, they must pray! No doubt they did it for James too – but he was killed.

The time is coming close for Herod to make an end of the life of Peter. The night before – Notice how God waits till the last moment! God knows His time and His plans and these will be carried out. Even though the next day will be decisive for the Apostle, he *is sleeping* between two soldiers. He is ready to live for his Lord and he is also ready to die for Him. He is so sound asleep that the angel has to awaken him. An angel is sent by God to deliver His servant. The light radiating from this heavenly being lightens the cell where he is. The guards continue to sleep. The angel tells Peter to get up, get dressed and to follow him. Chains fall away. Guards are immobilized. Iron gates open by themselves. All is done in an orderly fashion. The Lord has complete control. If He does not allow one of His servants to suffer at the hands of men, he will not suffer! Is this reality or is it a dream? Peter is not sure for a time. But when the angel has led him out of the prison, past the guards and through the gates and leads him through one of the streets of the city, Peter knows that he is dealing with reality and that it is not a dream.

So far he has been led by the angel. But this heavenly being now departs and Peter must make his own plans. This is not difficult to do. He goes to the place where he knows there will be believers meeting even though it is in the middle of the night. The home of the mother of John Mark has an important place in the life of the early church.

He has been right. The believers are together here. He knocks and calls at the gate of this house. A certain slave, Rhoda, answers the knock, realizes it is Peter, but doesn't open the gate. When she tells those inside the house, who have been praying for Peter's release, that Peter is at the gate, they say that she is mad! Answers to prayer can be so great that they are virtually beyond belief. Could it be his angel? It can't be that it is really Peter. Could it even be more difficult to believe that it is an angel knocking? Finally, however, they open the gate and it is Peter! Now they are amazed and, as is common among them, they all begin to speak at once. Peter motions to them to be quiet so that he will be able to tell them what has happened. What a story! Don't keep this to yourselves, tell the brethren, the other Apostles, and especially James, the brother of Jesus. This James has assumed a leading role in the early church. If anyone, he must know that the Apostle Peter is safe and no longer in prison. Then Peter leaves and he *"went to another place."* Luke doesn't tell us where he went.

It will be made known to the brethren that Peter is no longer in prison but it will also become very plain to the soldiers in the morning that Peter is no longer their prisoner. They are responsible for him! Herod can't find him. This man has been so well guarded and he has still escaped. These soldiers, who are completely innocent, must now pay the supreme price for the escape of Peter. The cruelty of the Herods was proverbial. He certainly will not believe that an angel has set the man Peter free. The blame can be placed nowhere except on the soldier guard. They pay with their lives for Peter's freedom. Then, as though nothing has happened, Herod goes to Caesarea.

Herod's triumph and fall

Why does he go to Caesarea? He has had some difficulty with the people of Tyre and Sidon. It is not germane to the account to know exactly what this difficulty was, but Herod's kingdom supplied Tyre and Sidon with food. These people cannot afford trouble with Herod, because he will then cut off their supplies. A famine threatens. Tyre and Sidon must bring their wealth into the kingdom of

Herod. Nothing must disturb the orderly processes in the empire of Rome. Ambassadors are sent from Tyre and Sidon to placate the king. They work through his principal servant, Blastus, and receive an audience with "the great man."

Herod makes the most of this occasion. Dressed in his royal robes and seated on a throne, he makes an oration to these people. They say that his oration is like the voice of God and not of a man. What tremendous talent! It is super-human! Their flattery of the king is extreme. They are dependent on him and they want to make the best impression possible by an appeal to his vanity. He doesn't stop them. He likes it.

God then intervenes. Herod is struck down by a loathsome disease. Luke says he *"was eaten of worms."* He did not give God the glory for anything he might have. God removes all glory from him, even the dignity of a common human life. Soon Herod is dead. He has dared to touch the church of Christ. The stone of Daniel's vision is beginning to roll. The kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius fell to it and the little kingdom of Herod will also have to bow to the God of the church! He rules and that fact will encourage the church through the ages.

Gospel growth

But, the preaching of the gospel grows. This is heard like a refrain in the book of Acts (6:7, 19:20 etc.). Nothing is going to stop the spread of the gospel until it covers the earth.

Now, more specifically, Barnabas and Saul are about to go out on their first missionary journey. They take John Mark along. He could be a real help to them, but he will also show the weaknesses which characterize those who are called to bring the word. Despite this, the gospel will grow and be multiplied.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Why do you think the persecution did not fall on the Apostles before this?
2. Would it be profitable for the church if we knew what each Apostle had accomplished? Why are we not told?
3. Can you imagine how Peter can be sound asleep the night before the king's judgment will fall on him? Can we have that kind of faith?
4. Why don't people often expect an answer to their prayers?
5. Was it fair that these (innocent) soldiers had to lose their lives?
6. How must we use our talents? May we make a living with them?
7. Why does the gospel advance so greatly at that time? Are there still such advances?