

## HEROD OPPRESSES CHRISTIANS

### Acts 12:1-19

Our reading today looks at the beginning of another period of persecution for the church instituted by Herod Agrippa, which leads to the execution of the apostle James and then the arrest of Peter, followed by a miraculous escape. So as we study this passage together, you can follow the main text on page [\*\*\*] of the church Bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be projected on the screen.

In our last few sermons from Acts we've been focussing on the spread of the gospel message amongst the Gentile community, now we shift focus to look at the role of the Jerusalem church and the Jewish community. We'll be looking at the themes of persecution, prayer, divine deliverance, and the advancement of the gospel.

Here we've arrived in 42 or 43 AD – just 10 years after the crucifixion of Christ – and King Herod Agrippa I, who was now king of Judea and Samaria, was opposed to the church and commenced a new persecution of Christians in Jerusalem – look at verses 1-3:

“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.” (verses 1-3)

When Gaius succeeded Tiberius as Roman Emperor in 37 AD, he bestowed on Agrippa the former tetrarchies of Philip and Lysanias in southern Syria (cf. Luke 3:1), together with the title “king.” Two years later Agrippa's kingdom was enlarged by the addition of Galilee and Peraea, the former tetrarchy of his uncle Antipas, whom Gaius deposed from his rule and sent into exile. When Claudius was made emperor in A.D. 41, after the assassination of Gaius, he further increased Agrippa's realm by the addition of Judaea, which since A.D. 6 had been governed on the emperor's behalf by a prefect – and this is where Agrippa is now exercising his authority in our text.

The persecution of Christians we read of was no doubt begun by Herod Agrippa to please the Jewish leaders of the day thus supporting Herod's kingship. Herod cultivated the Jews, especially the Pharisees. But, I think we can assume that the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem had continued in a greater or lesser degree ever since the days of Saul and the stoning of Stephen, even as converts in distant places faced opposition both from secular society and 'the Jews'.

We see that James - that's James the apostle not James the brother of Jesus - became the second martyred Christian leader after Stephen and I think we can see a parallel here with the earlier beheading of John the Baptist by Herod the Great. I also think the use of the sword here suggests that Herod Agrippa (who generally sought to live as a faithful Jew) saw James (and hence the Christian movement) as a political rather than a religious threat. Apparently the main threat to Christians was no longer the Jewish leadership but Herod Agrippa. Note that the execution of James doesn't lead to the appointment of a new apostle, the days of the twelve apostles are over.

When Herod saw that executing James pleased the Jews he had Peter arrested also. Herod intended to have Peter tried before the Jewish crowds - look at verses 4 and 5:

“After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.” (verses 4-5)

Just as the Jewish leaders and people conspired together to destroy Jesus, so there was collusion to eliminate his apostle Peter - and as with Jesus this was happening during the feast of unleavened bread. Peter's situation is desperate, Herod intends to put him to death as well.

But the church was praying for him. Here the Greek indicates fervent prayer by the believers which has great power (James 5:16) and this led to a miraculous rescue from God - look at verses 6-11:

“The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."” (verses 6-11)

Luke doesn't say where Peter was imprisoned, but it was probably the Antonia fortress, the main centre of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem and where Paul was later confined (Acts 21:31-23:32). The fortress stood northwest of the Temple area, and a flight of steps led down from it to street level, comparable to the flights excavated south and southwest of the temple mount since 1968. The diligence with which Peter was being guarded - two sets of chains are mentioned in verse 6 - just adds to the wonder of his miraculous release. It also probably means that his guard were aware of his previous miraculous escape from prison (Acts 5:18-14). At various key points divine deliverance from physical circumstances was necessary for the advancement of the gospel. The God who brought his people out of slavery in Egypt is still the God who rescues his oppressed people. As usual with our God deliverance is entirely through his grace. Peter is fast asleep, and contributes nothing more to his deliverance than sheer incomprehension and incredulity. The angel's specific instructions to Peter, '*Put on your clothes and sandals*' and '*Wrap your cloak round you and follow me*', demonstrate God's care and control in the situation. Once again, his leaving in haste, in obedience to God's instructions, recalls the exodus flight from Egypt. But, the most

extraordinary aspect of this escape, is that the guards were apparently not aware of what was happening and did absolutely nothing whatsoever to prevent Peter escaping. Peter's trusting obedience to his angelic rescuer is also emphasised.

I think this amazing escape was in Charles Wesley's mind when he wrote the words of his famous hymn:

“I woke; the dungeon flamed with light.  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.”

Those who doubt that such escapes can happen in modern times, or even at any time, should look at the details of the Christian missionary Sundar Singh's amazing release from a locked execution well in Tibet.

That James should die whilst Peter should escape is a mystery of divine providence which has been repeated countless times in the history of God's people. As the writer to the Hebrews says, some “escaped the edge of the sword”; by faith others “were killed by the sword” (Hebrews 11:34, 37).

Peter then went to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark, probably the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and was the author of the gospel of Mark – see verses 12-16:

“When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognised Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.” (verses 12-16)

The fact that the servant girl left him standing in peril at the door sounds like an authentic eyewitness detail. It's also interesting that

this servant girl was completely willing to believe that their prayers for Peter had been answered whilst the elders in the Christian faith absolutely refused to believe in his release until they saw him. They were discovering that God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

Peter then made known his miraculous release before making good his escape from Agrippa’s police – see verses 17-19:

“Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place. In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while.” (verses 17-19)

Peter asked them to tell James, the oldest half brother of Jesus, and the other brothers. James by now seems to have become the leader of the church in Jerusalem and was later to play a key role in defining the rules of admission to the Christian faith for Gentiles (Acts 15). Peter then departed and went underground so successfully that he escaped, indeed to this very day no one knows where he went, although he certainly continued a missionary role (cf. Galatians 2:11-14; 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 1–2 Peter). Once Peter’s escape was confirmed, Herod ordered the prison guards executed, because under Roman Law, guards who allowed a prisoner to escape suffered the penalty he would have been due – which is another confirmation that Herod had intended that Peter should suffer the death penalty. Any satisfaction Herod may have had in this would have been fairly short lived as God’s judgement, God’s death penalty, was about to fall on his head and with his removal the church in Jerusalem would continue to grow and multiply.

Along with Bauckham, I think the events of Acts chapter 12 indicate that Peter’s leading role – which has hitherto been seen both in his leadership in Jerusalem (chapters 1-5) and in his pioneering role in the

mission out from Jerusalem, including the first breakthrough to the Gentiles (8:14–25; 9:32–11:18) – passes not merely to one successor but to two: James (12:17) in Jerusalem, and Paul (13:2) in the mission to the Gentiles.

For me this passage speaks of several things. Firstly we need to stand firm under persecution. Our destiny may be death like the apostle James or we may be delivered like Peter – but we know that our God has the power to keep our spirit safe and bring us to be with him in his kingdom. As Christ said in his agony on the cross “into your hands I commit my spirit”.

Secondly, it speaks to me of divine deliverance. We worship a God who is able to do more than we could ever imagine or believe. God is able to deliver us from the most horrible circumstances even if we are facing death, as was Peter in his prison cell before the angel of the Lord set him free.

Thirdly it speaks to me of the spread of the gospel. Neither Herod or any of the other Jews who were opposed to Christianity could halt the spread of the gospel, it’s unstoppable advancement. Indeed within a year Herod would be dead and the Jerusalem church would flourish again.

Finally it speaks to me, no it shouts to me, of the power of prayer. As I said at the beginning, the Greek text says that the disciples were praying fervently for Peter. They were praying with passion. When we bring our troubles and problems before God and ask him for his help, for a resolution of our problems, with sincerity and passion believing that he is able to deliver us then miraculous things happen.

For thirty-one years, C.H Spurgeon filled the pulpit at the Metropolitan Tabernacle He preached twice each Sunday and hundreds and hundreds of people came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ each year and were baptised. What was it that gave this church its power? Well, one Sunday, five young college students who were preparing for the pastoral ministry visited the Metropolitan

Tabernacle to hear Charles Spurgeon speak. While waiting for the church doors to open, Charles Spurgeon himself approached them and asked if they would like to see the powerhouse of this great church. Of course the young preachers were delighted at the opportunity to see the secret to the power behind this great church. Spurgeon led them through a long hallway, down a stairway, and cautiously opened a door at the bottom. What the five young men saw astonished them. Looking through this open doorway, they saw about 700 church members bowed in prayer, asking God for His blessing on the upcoming service. “That,” said Spurgeon “is our powerhouse!”

You may be facing an issue that seems impossible... PRAY!  
There may be times when you don't feel like praying... PRAY!  
There may be times when you don't think you are getting through to God... PRAY!

When God's people pray those prayers WILL BE ANSWERED. Not always as we want or imagine but in accordance with God's will. And you know, something else will happen when our prayers are answered: People will be amazed, like those who found Peter at their door.

BUT our prayers need to be intentional – the Christians were praying with one goal – Peter's release. Our prayers need to be fervent – the Christians were praying passionately and fervently for Peter. Our prayers also need to be corporate – the brothers all joined together in praying for Peter. Let's all get together and pray like that for the church, for our persecuted brothers and sisters, for the world and whatever else God puts on our hearts – start by coming to our monthly prayer breakfast next Saturday.

Let's close with a few words of prayer. Father give us a heart to gather together to pray directedly and fervently for our needs, the needs of the world and all those things God puts on our hearts. Help us to make prayer a real priority in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray.  
Amen