Acts Chapter 12: James Martyred, Peter Imprisoned

The persecution of believers begins again in chapter 12, the Gospel had continued to grow after Saul became a follower of Christ, the persecution had subsided. Barnabas and Saul were discipling and training the growing body of believers in Antioch. Pockets of Gentile believers starting growing all throughout Judea, including Ceasera where now Cornelius, his family and other Romans were baptized into the faith (Acts 10). James, the brother of Jesus, along with Peter and John were leading the Jewish Church in Jerusalem. Concern of the growing church reached the Temple Priests and Herod Agrippa I, something had to be done. Satan's goal is to stop the Gospel, using fear and persecution, he attempts to stop the spread the Good News.

John and James were called the "sons of thunder", their mother wanted them to sit at the right and the left hand of Jesus, but Jesus needed to correct their thinking and goals. Following Jesus did not mean an easy road to glory, there was going to be suffering and tribulation. James is the first apostle to die for his faith in Jesus, while his brother will be the last. John lived to an old age, while James, son of Zebedee died young. Why do some suffer one way and others less? God sets the model and example for the church through his people.

All over the world people suffer for their faith in Jesus, while many in the US have it fairly easy. Why?, because this life is not the whole story, its just part of it. Are we willing to suffer and die for our faith in Christ? Do we really understand what is at stake? In the end, God will reward those who are faithfull not only with eternity, but also rewards for obedience. Many who are first in this world, will be last in the kingddom, persecution refines the believer, it makes him/her really understand what their faith means.

Matthew 19:28-30
28 Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.
29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.
30 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

James Martyred and Peter Imprisoned

Acts 12:1-25
1 About that time **Herod** the king laid **violent hands** on some who belonged to the church.
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.

About that time - That is, during the time that the famine existed, or the time when Barnabas and Saul went up to Jerusalem. This was probably about the fifth or sixth year of the reign of Claudius, not far from 47 ad.

Herod: Herod Agrippa I (AD 37-44), This is the grandson of Herod the Great (Matthew 2), his father was Aristobulus IV who was executed by his father, Herod the Great in 11 BC. Herod also executed his grandmother, Mariamne[1] (29 BC), who was descendent of the Maccabean king John Hyracnus II. Herod the Great was paranoid and always afraid of losing his kingdom to the Maccabean descendants. Herod the Great, executed two of his sons by Mariamne, fearing they would conspire against him. This Herod, Herod Agrippa I, is the son of one of those sons, Aristobulus IV.

He was educated in Rome and was friends with Caligula, the Roman Emperor, who gave him his kingdom when he succeeded Tiberius. After the assassination of Caligula in AD 41, Agrippa helped convince Claudius to take the throne, as a reward, his kingdom was expanded by Rome to include Samaria and Judea. In the end, the size of his kingdom matched that of his grandfather, he was like by the Jews because he was an actual descendent of the Maccabean kings. He was also a friend of the Roman emperors, Caligula and Claudius, so he felt very well connected.

Violent hands: Agrippa was from a violent family; his father and grandmother were both killed by his grandfather. Violence was an instrument that he was going to use to silence the church also.

Killed James; This is brother of John, author of the Gospel of John, Epistles of John (I,II,III) and the book of Revelation. He is not the James, who is the brother of Jesus. Jesus called him and John, "the sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). Jesus warned them, "you will drink my cup"(Matthew 20:23), meaning they will suffer. James is the first martyr, but his brother John was the longest living disciple, who was buried in

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Ephesus. He was probably beheaded like John the Baptist.
Pleased the Jews: unlike his grandfather, Herod Agrippa I was like by the Jews, he was ¼ of Maccabean or Hasmonean descent, so he was considered a Jewish king, not like his grandfather who was an Edomite, who was forced to convert to Judaism.
Peter was an eminent threat to Judaism, word probably spread of his fraternizing with Romans in Caesarea, also the miracles associated with him, the healing of the lame beggar (Acts 3:1-10), the healing of the paralyzed man in Lydda, Aeneas (Acts 10) and the raising of Dorcas (Acts 9:32-43). Peter was the chief spokesman of the church, when he testified before the Sanhedrin. (Acts 4:1-22, 5:17-42) This made Peter the focus of any attack to stop the advance of the church.
Days of Unleavened Bread: There were 7 Feasts for Israel (Leviticus 23), the first three were; Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of First Fruits. Jesus was killed during the time of the Passover feast. The next day was the feast of Unleavened Bread which lasted 7 days. It was at the end of this feast Peter was going to be executed.
Prison: This was probably the Antonia Fortress near the Temple, where Paul would also be held (Acts 22) before being sent to Caesarea to testify before Felix (Acts 24).
Four squads: Four squads of four soldiers were to watch Peter during the four shifts, a total of 16, guarded him. Two at the door and one each side, chained to him. There was no escaping, this is the message loud and clear.
After the Passover: The first three feasts, all occurred in close proximity, starting with Passover, then the 7 days of Unleavened Bread, also the Feast of First fruits, on top of the others. Herod's goal was to get favor with the Jews, he was trying to restablish the kingdom of his grandfather, so he need the priesthood's blessing.

Peter's Escapes from Prison

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.
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."

Earnest Prayer: What kind of prayer was being made for Peter? Is was the Greek Word: *ektenēs; meaning without ceasing fervent.* This word is only found in one other place in the New Testament (I Peter 4:8). Peter was going to be executed, in public, Herod wanted to make a major offensive against the Church and bring the Jewish Priesthood in on his side. Peter, was the example, Herod was going to war against the Christians, like his uncle, Herod Antipas in Luke 23:6-16. to intimidate the Church. The timing was at the end of days of Unleavened Bread, they would **bring him out.**
Peter sleeping: According to all human logic, Peter was about to die. Was he worried, maybe, but he was fast asleep.
An angel of the Lord: This is the second time we see angelic intervention, Acts 5:19, Peter was also in prison, and angel opens the door, freeing them and telling them, what to do next;

Acts 5:19-20
19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said,
20 "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."

God hears the prayers of his people. In Daniel 10, the angel who answered Daniel's prayer said he came because of your words. People were earnestly praying for Peter, who was about to be executed on Herod's orders. Unlike Pilate, Herod had direct connections and relationships with the emperor Claudius, so he did not need Roman approval for an execution.

Daniel 10:11-12
11 And he said to me, "O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you." And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling.
12 Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.

Opened for them of its own accord: God can and does intervene in the physical realm, the door opened on its own. Prayer is being answered for Peter, God is opening the path of escape, when all hope seemed lost.

The angel left him: Once Peter was safely on his way to the house of Mary, the angel left him. God gives us just enough, we still have to move forward, just like Peter in the boat, he still needed to get out of the boat to walk on the water, he sank when he doubted.

Peter came to himself, he thought it was a dream, or a vision, because it was so unreal. God does intervene in human events; we are just not aware of all the times it happens. God does unveil some events, so we can see how the spiritual realms operate.

Peter Reports His Escape

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**.

House of Mary: This was the house of John Mark’s mother, the author of Gospel of Mark.
John..Mark: He is the nephew or cousin of Barnabas, who is going to accompany Paul on the first Missionary journey. (Col 4:10). He will abandon them in Cypress, but Paul will later welcome him back. (2 Tim 4:11)
Gathered together..praying: Peter was going to be executed by Herod’s order, all hope seemed lost, but we can pray! This sets the example for the church, they are praying intensely late at night. How important is the issue? Are you willing to pray intensely about it at 3 or 4 in the morning?
Rhoda: The name means rose in Greek, and like Jesus rising from the dead, she is the first witness of Peter, who was all but counted as dead. She is overjoyed to hear **Peter’s voice**, she can’t believe it, neither can they. They think she is; “**Out your mind**”, that gives us a glimpse of dire situation. Like us, many times we pray, not really expecting God will answer, this is exactly their response. They are praying, but they think Peter is done for, finally thinking it might be **his angel**, but it couldn’t be Peter, he could never survive what happened to James, at least that is the attitude we see here.
James and ..the brothers: Peter is terrified, and he is planning on escaping, we don’t really know where Peter goes from here.
His Angel: There was a Jewish tradition, that people had angels assigned to them, who kept track of them. Jesus said regarding angels;

Matthew 18:10
10 “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

Another place: Catholics surmise he went to Rome, some say he went to Antioch, after all it was out of Herod’s jurisdiction, and we see come to Antioch in Galatians 2:11, it was a large city where he could escape Herod attack. We also see James and other believers later arrive in Antioch also, and Peter who arrived earlier removes himself from the Gentiles in Antioch.

Peter’s Escapes Discovered

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.

Day came: These soldiers were in big trouble; Peter life would be exchanged for their life. According to the law, if the prisoner escaped the guard would forfeit his life and be **put to death**. We see this later with the Philippian jailer who was going to take his life, when he thought Paul had escaped. (Acts 16:26-27).
Soldiers; the detail was 16 soldiers, 4 for each watch, it seems they did not even realize until the day came. The angel must have put them into a very deep sleep.

Death of Herod Agrippa I

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.

Tyre and Sidon: Part of Lebanon today, but they were under Roman authority, not Herod. He was probably disrespected in some way regarding commerce, so there was an inner feud between these two Roman controlled territories. Like an argument between states.

Blastus; oversaw the kings bedroom, chamberlain, so through him they were able to get some kind of agreement.

Appointed day: Herod was a proud man, who a great deal of vanity. He was friends with the Roman Emperor, he was over control large portion of Israel, like his grandfather. He was like by the Jews, he was ¼ descendent of the Maccabean kings.
An appointed, public day. This was the second day of the sports and games which Herod celebrated in Caesarea in honor of Claudius Caesar. Josephus has given an account of this occurrence, which coincides remarkably with the narrative here. The account is contained in his "Antiquities of the Jews," book 19, chapter 8, section 2, and is as follows: "Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower; and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity throughout his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver," etc.

His Royal robes: In the apparel of a king. Josephus thus describes the dress which Herod wore on that occasion. "He put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of wonderful contexture, and early in the morning came into the theater place of the shows and games, at which time the silver of his garment, being illuminated by the first reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently on him."

The voice of a god: He accepted the cheers from the crowd, which hailed him as a god. With that he was struck down. Josephus[2] relates a similar account as found in Acts 12:21

> 2. [A.D. 44.] Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Cesarea; which was formerly called Strato's tower. And there he exhibited shews, in honor of Cesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival a great multitude was gotten together, of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day of which shews, he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful; and came into the theater early in the morning. At

[2] https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-19.html

which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the suns rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner: and was so resplendent as to spread an 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.

eaten by worms: According to Josephus, his death took 5 days. His death mirrored, his grandfather, Herod the Great

Continued Progress of the Gospel

24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Word of God: with the threat of Herod removed, his alliance with the Priesthood was broken. His son was only 17 and was considered too young to have authority. His son and daughter appear towards the end of the book of Acts. Agrippa and Bernice are Herod Agrippa I, son and daughter who are in a incestuous relationship (Acts 25:13-27) . Another daughter, Drusilla,(Acts 24:24), is the wife of the Roman governor Felix.

Increased: The church could continue to grow, with the immediate threats removed.

The Envoys from Antioch Return

25 And Barnabas and Saul **returned from Jerusalem** when they had **completed their service**, bringing with them **John, whose other name was Mark**.

Returned from Jerusalem - They had gone to Jerusalem to carry alms, and they now returned to Antioch, Act_11:30.

When they had fulfilled their ministry - When they had accomplished the purpose for which they had been sent there; that is, to deposit the alms of the church at Antioch in the hands of the eiders of the churches, Act_11:30.

John, whose surname was Mark - See the notes on Act_12:12. From this period the sacred historian records chiefly the labors of Paul. The labors of the other apostles are, after this, seldom referred to in this book, and the attention is fixed almost entirely on the trials and travels of the great apostle of the Gentiles. His important services, his unwearied efforts, his eminent success, and the fact that Luke was his companion, may be the reasons why his labors are made so prominent in the history. Through the previous chapters we have seen the church rise from small beginnings, until it was even now spreading into surrounding regions. We have seen it survive two persecutions, commenced and conducted with all the power and malice of Jewish rulers. We have seen the most zealous of the persecutors converted to the faith which he once destroyed, and the royal persecutor put to death by the divine judgment. And we have thus seen that God was the protector of the church; that no weapon formed against it could prosper; that, according to the promise of the Redeemer, the gates of hell could not prevail against it. In that God and Saviour who then defended the church, we may still confide, and may be assured that he who was then its friend has it still "engraved on the palms of his hands," and designs that it shall extend until it fills the earth with light and salvation.

Herod Agrippa I (c. 11 BCE – 44 CE)

Herod Agrippa I (also known simply as Agrippa or Herod Agrippa) was a prominent king of Judea during the 1st century CE. A grandson of Herod the Great, Agrippa managed to navigate the treacherous waters of Roman imperial politics to briefly reunite his grandfather's fractured kingdom, becoming the last ruler to govern a unified Judean realm. He is also well-known for his prominent appearances in both biblical narrative and the histories of Flavius Josephus.

Early Life and Exile in Rome

Agrippa was born around 11 BCE to Aristobulus IV (a son of Herod the Great and the Hasmonean princess Mariamne) and Berenice. His childhood was marred by court intrigue; when Agrippa was just an infant, his paranoid grandfather Herod executed Aristobulus.

Following his father's death, Agrippa was sent to Rome to be educated. There, he grew up in the highest echelons of Roman society. He became a close companion to Drusus, the son of the Emperor Tiberius, and befriended the future emperor Claudius. Agrippa's youth in Rome was characterized by extravagance and reckless spending. After the death of Drusus in 23 CE, Agrippa lost his primary patron and found himself deeply in debt. Fleeing his creditors, he spent several years wandering the Levant, at one point contemplating suicide before receiving financial backing from his sister Herodias (the wife of Herod Antipas).

Rise to Power and Imperial Favor

Agrippa's fortunes turned dramatically when he returned to Rome in the 30s CE. He attached himself to **Gaius Caesar**, the young prince better known as **Caligula**. However, Agrippa's habit of speaking too freely caught up with him; he was overheard wishing for Tiberius's death so Caligula could ascend the throne, leading Tiberius to throw him into prison.

In 37 CE, Tiberius died, and Caligula became emperor. He immediately released Agrippa, exchanged his iron prison chains for a gold chain of equal weight, and appointed him king over the former territories of Philip the Tetrarch (Batanaea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis) and Lysanias.

Agrippa's influence grew rapidly:

- **39 CE:** Caligula banished Herod Antipas (the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea) and added his territories to Agrippa's kingdom.
- **40 CE:** Agrippa used his personal influence with Caligula to successfully talk the unstable emperor out of erecting a colossal statue of himself in the Temple of Jerusalem, narrowly averting a massive Judean revolt.

The Assassination of Caligula and Expansion of the Kingdom

In 41 CE, Caligula was assassinated. During the chaotic aftermath, Agrippa played a crucial, high-stakes role as a diplomat between the Roman Senate and his childhood friend, **Claudius**, who was being pushed for emperor by the Praetorian Guard. Agrippa's political maneuvering helped secure the principate for Claudius.

As a reward for his loyalty and assistance, Claudius added Samaria and Judea to Agrippa's domains. With this final acquisition, Agrippa ruled over a territory that mirrored the expansive kingdom of his grandfather, Herod the Great.

Reign and Governance (41–44 CE)

Unlike his grandfather, who was widely despised by his Jewish subjects for his ruthlessness and Hellenistic excesses, Agrippa I sought to govern as a devout, traditional Jewish monarch.

- **Domestic Policy:** Josephus notes that Agrippa adhered strictly to Jewish law, offered daily sacrifices, and resided primarily in Jerusalem. He remitted taxes for the citizens of Jerusalem and began reinforcing the city's outer walls (a

project Claudius eventually ordered him to halt, fearing a potential rebellion).

- **Foreign Policy:** Outside of Jewish territories, Agrippa maintained his Roman sensibilities. He funded public works, theaters, and baths in pagan cities like Berytus (Beirut) and hosted games, balancing his image as a Hellenistic benefactor abroad and a pious king at home.

Religious Conflicts and Biblical Account

In Christian tradition, Agrippa I is famously depicted in the New Testament (**Acts 12**) as a persecutor of the early Church in Jerusalem. Seeking to solidify his popularity among the Jewish religious leadership, Agrippa:

- Executed **James, the son of Zebedee** (one of the original Twelve Apostles), making him the first apostle to be martyred.
- Imprisoned **Peter**, who, according to the biblical account, miraculously escaped from prison with the help of an angel.

Death and Legacy

Agrippa's reign came to an abrupt and dramatic end in 44 CE during a festival in Caesarea Maritime held in honor of Emperor Claudius.

According to both Josephus and the Book of Acts, Agrippa appeared before the crowd clad in a magnificent robe made entirely of silver. As the morning sun struck the garment, it shone brilliantly. The crowd began shouting praises, hailing him not as a man, but as a god. Agrippa did not rebuke them or reject the impious flattery.

Immediately afterward, he was struck with severe, agonizing abdominal pains. He died five days later at the age of 54.

Because his only surviving son, Herod Agrippa II, was only 17 years old and deemed too young to rule by Roman authorities, Rome re-established direct governance over the region, converting Judea back into a Roman province overseen by procurators.