

Acts 12

Peter's Miraculous Escape from Prison (Acts 12:1-18)

Herod Agrippa is the grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herod Antipas. He grew up in the courts of Rome and had great connections. He becomes king and quickly extends his kingdom and political power to equal that of Herod the Great. He ruled from Jerusalem and also had a palace in Caesarea, which was more the trade capital of the region.

He arrested James the brother of John and had him executed, probably for apostasy, based on the recommendation of the Jerusalem religious leaders. When he realized that this pleased the Jews, which served his political goals, he arrested Peter and planned to kill him as well. This all took place during the Passover season, which must have reminded Peter of the trial of Jesus and his own denial on that fateful night.

Verse 5 Peter is in prison – the weapon of this world against the church BUT the Church was earnestly praying – the weapon of the church against a persecuting world. Quickly we see who is going to win this show down.

We do not know why James was allowed to die and Peter was rescued but this is all part of the sovereignty of God. Peter still had a job to do for the Kingdom and that is why he was spared. Jesus and James died but it was not yet Peter's time.

Peter was bound with chains and guarded with great care so that he would not escape in the same way that the body of Christ had been guarded while it was in the tomb. However, in the same way that Christ arose from the clutches of death and the grave, Peter was delivered from the clutches of Herod and his prison. God's purposes will be accomplished and his Kingdom will be advanced and neither the powers of hell or the powers of this world will stop it from happening. Just as John the Baptist was killed and Jesus comes out of the prison of Death, so James is killed and Peter comes out of the prison of Herod. The same word is used to describe the prayer of the church as is used to describe the prayer of Christ in the garden before his trial. The angels were there at the tomb when the women went to see on the first day of the week and when they returned no one believed their report. In the same way an angel led Peter out of the prison and he knocked on the door and a servant girl heard his voice and went to tell the others but they did not believe her report. The thought it was Peter's angel just as the disciples thought it was Jesus Ghost when he appeared to them. Finally when they believe he leaves them and goes away to another place, just as Jesus left them to go away to the Father in the ascension.

There is a pattern that is repeated in the Gospel of Mark 6 and is seen to a lesser extent in Luke 9. In the midst of the sending out of the apostles by Jesus to evangelize, both Mark and Luke interject the story of Herod Antipas' beheading of John the Baptist. Once the story is told the narrative returns to the apostles returning from their mission. Interestingly, Luke interrupts the story of Paul and Barnabas bringing an offering from Antioch to Jerusalem to tell the story of the beheading of James by Herod Agrippa and the arrest of Peter, culminating in the judgment of Herod Agrippa for his sin against the body of Christ and his accepting of worship. What does this mean?? I believe that it is referring to the opposition of the leaders of this world to the advance of the Gospel, but the ultimate supremacy of God and ultimate triumph of the Gospel in the face of opposition.

Herod's Death (Acts 12:19-25)

Herod Agrippa goes from Jerusalem to Caesarea, which is more of his international capital. He had been embroiled in a conflict with the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, probably over the control of trade being shipped out into the Mediterranean Sea to Roman ports. After political maneuvering, they want to concede and establish peace with Herod because they are dependent on the grain producing areas of Herod's territory for their food supply. Herod is convinced that he is powerful and important because not only has he secured rule of his own territory to the extent of his Grandfather Herod the Great, but he is now exerting his will over the surrounding nations to do what is to his benefit.

Herod attends a festival which probably includes a sporting event and there he is seated on his throne and wearing a robe made of silver thread that shines in the early morning light of the dawning sun. The people hear him speaking and see him shining and they think that he is a god and not a man. Herod does not give the glory to God in contrast to Peter who rejected the worship of Cornelius in Caesarea as well.

Herod is struck down by an angel of the Lord. According to Josephus, Herod has a severe pain in his abdomen that could have been a ruptured appendix and from Luke's description there must have been a case of intestinal round worms which were common in Asia. The fact that an angel is present to strike down Herod is an indication of God's judgment on him for being a leader who tries to take the place of God.

In Verse 24 this is immediately contrasted with the statement that the work of God continued to increase and spread. The kingdoms of men come to an end but God's kingdom will advance even in the face of persecution. This is a comforting thought to the audience of Luke, which will experience great persecution for their faith as the gospel advances. Now we return to our two "heroes" who are returning to Antioch from Jerusalem and take with them John Mark. All of the players are in place and the first strategically planned missionary outreach is about to begin.