**Persecution Arises Again**

**Introduction:**

After Saul’s conversion, persecution of the church had greatly decreased. The churches in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee experienced peace. A new persecution began, but this time by a representative of the Roman government, Herod Agrippa I. (Acts 12:1) He was the grandson of Herod the Great who had ordered the murder of the babies at the time Jesus was born. His sister was Herodias who had John the Baptist beheaded. His son, Herod Agrippa II, tried the apostle Paul. Let’s now examine how the church responded to this new persecution.

**Text:** Acts 12:1-25

**Body:**

1. **James Is Killed** Acts 12:1-2 “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” NKJV

* Herod, in an attempt to win favor with the Jews, has James beheaded. James and his brother John were two of Jesus’ earliest disciples. (Mark 1:19-20) “When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets. And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him.” NKJV James and John were part of that inner circle of Jesus’ closest disciples. (Mark 5:37) “And He permitted no one to follow Him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James.” NKJV
* James’ suffering had been foretold by Jesus. (Mark 10:35-40) “Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, ‘Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.’ And He said to them, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ They said to Him, ‘Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’ So Jesus said to them, ‘You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared.’”NKJV
* There is no indication in the Scripture that a replacement for James was selected after his death. The New Testament knows nothing of “apostolic succession.”

1. **Peter Is Put in Prison** Acts 12:3-7 “And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. 5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, ‘Arise quickly!’ And his chains fell off his hands.” NKJV

* Herod was thrilled at how the Jews responded to his execution of James. So he had Peter arrested during the days of Unleavened Bread. This was the week of a long feast that followed Passover. No doubt it was Herod’s intention to have Peter executed as well when the feast was over. He went to extreme measures to make sure that he did not escape. He was guarded by four soldiers for a three-hour shift. Two were handcuffed to him, one on each side. There were three locked doors between Peter and freedom.
* While Peter was imprisoned, the church responded with its most powerful weapon: prayer. (Acts 12:5) Even though the doors of the prison were closed, the door to heaven wasn’t! They prayed for at least seven straight days. “The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.”
* Peter was sleeping peacefully the night before he was to be executed! (Acts 12:6) How was Peter able to sleep? No doubt it was because he trusted in God. Recall Jesus’ words to him in John 21:18-19. “ ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.’ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He spoken this, He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ ”

(Psalm 4:8) “I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” NKJV

* An angel of the Lord masterminded Peter’s escape. Acts 12:7-10 “Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, ‘Arise quickly!’ And his chains fell off his hands. Then the angel said to him, ‘Gird yourself and tie on your sandals’; and so he did. And he said to him, ‘Put on your garment and follow me.’ So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.” NKJV

Peter was sleeping so soundly that the angel had to punch him in the side! The huge iron gate that led into the city opened by itself. Some sources say it took twenty-five men to open the gate.

* The angel departed and Peter went to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark. Acts 12:11-17 “And when Peter had come to himself, he said, ‘Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.’ So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. But they said to her, ‘You are beside yourself!’ Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, ‘It is his angel.’ Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.’ And he departed and went to another place.” NKJV [Note that members of the Lord’s church in Jerusalem still owned private property.] Peter had apparently converted John Mark. (I Peter 5:13) “She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son.” NKJV Since Mary had a house big enough for several people to gather, a house with a courtyard, and at least one servant, she was probably well-off financially.
* It is interesting to note that those who were praying for Peter’s deliverance regarded as insane the one who informed them that their prayers had been answered! When your prayers are answered, don’t be surprised. (Proverbs 15:29) “The Lord is far from the wicked, But He hears the prayer of the righteous.” (Philippians 1:19) “For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit if Jesus Christ,” NKJV
* Peter then told his brethren what the Lord had done in getting him out of prison. Then he departed for “another place.” This is the last major incident in Peter’s life that is recorded by Luke.

1. **Herod Is Struck Down by God** Acts 12:18-25 “Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. 19 But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. 20 Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king’s personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king’s county. So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, ‘The voice of a god and not of a man!’ Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.” NKJV

* No doubt the guards started accusing each other. A massive search was made for Peter with no luck. The guards were examined [interrogated and tortured] and then executed. Herod had to protect his reputation. (Acts 12:18-19)
* We are not told why Herod was angry with Tyre and Sidon. These cities were in Phoenicia and depended upon food from Palestine. (Acts 12:20)
* A day was set for the hearing and Herod arrived in his royal apparel. The people flattered him by calling him a “god”. He loved the praise; he considered himself a god! Immediately he was struck down by the Lord. This was not surprising. (Isaiah 40:23) “He brings the princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth useless.”

(Isaiah) 42:8) “I am the Lord, that is My name; And My glory I will not give to another, Nor My praise to carved images.” NKJV Herod had pride; he did not give God the glory.

* As a result, the church grew. Herod was now out of the way.
* Barnabas and Saul were probably in the area when James was killed and Peter was put in prison. They brought John Mark with them when they returned to Antioch.

**Conclusion:**

Let us never forget the amazing power of prayer.

Bobby Stafford December 6, 2015 [Evening] Acts: Lesson 28 Acts 12:1-25