

Acts 12

The book of Acts is primarily a chronicle of two men, Peter and Paul. That is not to say that it deals exclusively with them but they are the primary characters. The first portion of Acts dealt with Peter (although Paul was introduced there) and while the remainder of the book will deal with Paul's labors among the Gentiles, the historian returns to one more event in Peter's life. Only once more will Peter appear in the record (Acts 15).

About the time the work had been opened in Antioch, Herod the king put forth his hand to afflict certain of the church in Jerusalem. The Herod family included many notorious men. Herod the great slew the infants in Bethlehem in his vain efforts to kill Jesus (Matt. 2:16). Herod Antipas, son of Herod the great, killed John the Baptist because he condemned his actions in taking his brother Philip's wife [Herodias, who was the niece of Herod Antipas] (Mk. 6:16f). Consistent with their past behavior, Herod's hand falls upon James, brother of John, and kills him with the sword (Acts 12:2). James and John, cousins of Jesus through their mothers, were called "sons of thunder" and were part of the "inner circle," the group of three apostles that were often allowed by Jesus to witness some things the other apostles were not privy to, such as the transfiguration of Jesus, Matthew 17. While there may have been others who died since Stephen and before James, he is the second named disciple to fall.

Herod apparently slew James through some personal vendetta, but when he saw that his actions pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter as well. The Herod family was an unpopular lot with Jews, and that he had for once done something that pleased his subjects, he moved to increase his popularity more. Seizing Peter, he intended to bring him out to the people after the Passover, for these were the days of unleavened bread. The KJV says "after Easter" instead of "after the Passover." This is an unhappy, groundless translation. Easter was not kept by disciples at this period of time and would not be for many centuries to come as it grew out of the apostasy that produced Catholicism. Herod's slaying of James and arrest of Peter showed he had no respect for religion of Christians, but he was ostensibly at least, respectful to the Jews' religion. The expression "bring him out to the people" tells us he intended to kill Peter. He delivered him into the hands of four quarternions of soldiers, sixteen men for safe-keeping. Had he heard of Peter's earlier escape from prison?

Peter had been in prison before, at least twice before in fact (Acts 3, 5),

and while his second imprisonment had greater implications to his well-being than the first, neither was as ominous as this. Peter surely knew his life was in peril. Had he come to the juncture in his life that Jesus' prophecy concerning his death was about to be fulfilled (Jn. 21:18f)? He had fulfilled, so far as he could see, the things Jesus promised. He had used the keys of the kingdom to open the door for salvation both to Jews and Gentiles (Mt. 16:19; Acts 2:36-39; 10; 15:7). The Holy Spirit did not reveal Peter's thoughts nor fears.

The church was greatly concerned about him and prayer was made earnestly for him (Acts 12). There were many petitions they might have made; that his faith might not fail; that he find comfort in the fact that he was experiencing the same things Jesus had suffered and that he might be released. They knew such was possible for God had done it before. Yet, in the case of James, God had not seen fit to miraculously intervene nor might He this time with Peter. It all lie in His hands and they could only pray, "If the Lord will."

Still God was not yet through with Peter. Chains, locked doors and gates could not deter God from His purpose. Peter, chained between two soldiers, slept soundly on the eve before his being delivered to death. Guards stood before the door. Suddenly a light shown in his cell, an angel smote him on the side instructing him to rise quickly, girt himself, put on his shoes, cast his garment about him and follow the angel. He did. He was, as it were, in a daze. He could not believe these things were real (Acts 12:6-9).

They passed by the first and second guard unnoticed. The iron gate that led to the city opened to them of its own accord and after passing one street, Peter was alone. The angel had delivered him and left him. He hurried to the house of Mary, mother of Mark. Many were there praying. A young damsel named Rhoda answered his urgent knocking and so excited was she that he failed to admit him into the house. Rather, she ran to tell the assembled brethren Peter was there! They could not believe it and when she insisted it was true, they said, "It is his angel," perhaps an allusion to the common Jewish believe that every person has a "guardian angel." Unbelief gave way to joy! It was Peter! There must have arisen a clamor, with all attempting to speak or greet Peter for Peter beckoned with his hand for silence. He rehearsed how the Lord had delivered him and then asked that they tell James and the other brethren. Then he departed for parts unknown.

When day came there was no small stir about Peter. Herod conducted an

extensive, fruitless search for him, and having examined the guards, commanded that they be put to death. This was the Roman practice. Guards of escaped prisoners were put to death. For other references to this Roman practice, read Acts 16:24-27; 27:42-44. The record does not make clear whether all sixteen of the soldiers were put to death or whether just the four who were on duty at the time of Peter's escape were killed.

Verses 20-23 give an account of Herod's own death. He had gone from Jerusalem to Antioch and those of Tyre and Sidon sought to make peace with him because he was greatly displeased with them. They appointed a day for him to address them. The historian Josephus tells that Herod wore a robe of silver tissue that glittered in the rays of the sun. The people flattered Herod saying, when they heard him, "The voice of a god and not of a man." An angel of the Lord smote him because he gave not God the glory. He was eaten of worms and died. Secular historians tell that his death was a very agonizing, painful one.

Verse 25 tells that "Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministrations, taking with them John Mark." The passage takes us back to the eleventh chapter where the two named men had acted as agents to carry relief from the Antioch brethren to the brethren which dwelt in Judaea.

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