

Acts 12

The persecution of Christianity started very early in the history of the church. After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ it didn't take long for the world to begin persecuting His followers. In Acts 4 we're told that the priests of Israel arrested Peter and John for preaching the gospel:

Acts 4:1-3: “And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide.”

The priests were supposed to be holy men of God who served Him faithfully and taught the people how to obey the Lord. Sadly, they were instead vicious enemies of God who persecuted those who believed in the Messiah. Acts 4:21 tells us that the priests threatened the disciples and then let them go, but that wasn't the end of it. In the next chapter the High Priest arrested the disciples:

Acts 5:17-18: “Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation, And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison.”

The job of the High Priest was to make atonement for the sins of the people. He was supposed to be a man of God who led the nation into righteousness. This High Priest hated the Messiah. Instead of being a righteous man he was deeply wicked.

This time the disciples weren't simply threatened and let go. The High Priest commanded that these men should be beaten for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Acts 5:40: “And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”

In Acts 10 we were told that the Gentile centurion Cornelius was a devout man who earnestly sought to hear the gospel. The Jews had a very different reaction: they wanted to destroy the gospel entirely. The High Priest wickedly commanded that the disciples be beaten, and then he ordered them to never speak of the Messiah again. The religious leaders of Israel hated the gospel and wanted to put an end to Christianity. They were supposed to be men of God but instead they were children of the devil.

But the disciples weren't deterred. They knew the truth and they knew the power of God. The Lord gave them great boldness and they continued to preach the gospel. In response to their preaching, persecution intensified. When the priests caught Stephen preaching the gospel they arrested him. When Stephen preached the gospel to them, they got so angry with him that they murdered him on the spot:

Acts 7:57-60: “Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Keep in mind that it wasn't legal for the priests to grab someone and execute him. Under Roman law they didn't have the right to execute anyone. That's why Jesus had to be brought before Pontius Pilate. This time, though, the priests were so enraged at hearing the gospel that they didn't care about the legality of their actions. They formed an angry mob and executed him right there in the street. That's how much the priests hated God! Just *hearing* the gospel was enough to make them fly into rage and murder the person speaking to them. These people were deeply demonic.

One thing we can see from this is that Christianity put people in a dangerous position. It wasn't safe to be a Christian at all. At first it was only punished by being imprisoned, then it was punished by being beaten. It quickly escalated to being put to death. Stephen was the first martyr the Bible records but he certainly wasn't the last. After his death a great persecution arose which was so severe that it scattered the early Christians far and wide:

Acts 8:8: "And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles."

The High Priest was determined to find everyone who believed in the Messiah and murder them. They were truly worthless shepherds, who led people to Hell and did their best to stop anyone who might want to be saved.

It may have seemed to the church that the priests were winning. A serious blow had been struck against them and Christians were scattered all over the world. However, this actually helped the church and was a great benefit to it. The gospel was no longer being preached in just Jerusalem! It was

now spread far and wide. Instead of stamping out the church the priests had caused it to grow even further.

As the gospel spread, so did persecution. The priests began sending people to other cities to arrest those who were telling people about the Messiah. When the Jews came against Saul he narrowly escaped with his life:

Acts 9:22-25: “But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.”

Saul (whose name was later changed to Paul) reasoned with the Jews and showed them through the Scriptures that Jesus really was the Messiah. When the Jews couldn't disprove his logic they decided to kill him. The fact that Saul could prove what he was saying with the Scriptures *made them hate Saul!* (If you preach the gospel to someone and show them the truth of the Scriptures, and they respond by trying to kill you, that's a pretty good indication the person you're talking to isn't godly.) These people were like Cain: they wanted to find righteous people and murder them.

The persecution against the early church was intense. Preaching the gospel was all it took to get a death sentence at the hands of people who were supposedly men of God. The religious leaders of the day were looking for Christians so they could illegally murder them in acts of mob violence. They wanted to stamp out the gospel and they didn't care how many laws they had to break to make it happen.

It wasn't just the priests who were persecuting believers. In Acts 12 we find that King Herod started doing it as well.

Before getting into that story let's take a moment to see who this Herod was. The man who executed John the Baptist was named Herod Antipas, but this man was Herod Agrippa. He was the nephew of Antipas. This Herod wasn't a Jew at all but was an Edomite. By this point the Edomites had been enemies of Israel for a thousand years. During the Old Testament they frequently persecuted God's people, and in the New Testament we find them doing the exact same thing.

Herod decided to go straight to the source. He began arresting the disciples and executing them:

Acts 12:1-3: “Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)”

It seems that Herod was doing this because it was a popular thing to do. Politicians like to do things that are popular because they often crave the support of the people. Since the Jews loved seeing Christians put to death, Herod decided to start executing them.

The first person he executed was James. This wasn't some random James. This was one of the twelve disciples! The church had lost one of its key members.

Herod didn't stop there. He arrested Peter and intended to put him to death as well. James and Peter were probably not hard to find. They spent their time among the people, preaching the gospel and telling everyone about Jesus. These men weren't in hiding! They had a mission to accomplish and they were preaching with great boldness. (Would we have done the same if we were in their position?)

This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which followed the Passover. This means they were arrested

shortly after the anniversary of the crucifixion. It looked like Peter was about to be killed and the church was going to lose another one of the twelve disciples:

Acts 12:4: “And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.”

Before going any further I'd like to stop and take a look at the word “Easter” in this verse. Some people claim that this shouldn't be translated “Easter” at all but instead should be “Passover”. (In fact that's exactly how the NIV translates it.) However, translating it as “Passover” is a mistake that shows a poor understanding of the Bible. You see, this event happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. That feast took place *after* Passover, not before! That means Herod couldn't possibly be planning on keeping Peter in prison until Passover because *Passover was already over*. It was too late for that! This verse isn't speaking about Passover, It's talking about a very different and more pagan festival.

Herod wasn't a Jew or a Christian. He was an Edomite. That means he didn't care about Jewish festivals. What he cared about were his own Edomite festivals. One of those festivals was the feast of Ishtar, the fertility god. (“Ishtar” is where we get the modern word “Easter”.) This passage is saying that Herod was going to wait until the feast of Ishtar was over and then he would bring out Peter and execute him. In this verse “Easter” really is the correct translation! This isn't the “Christian” Easter that celebrates the resurrection of Christ. It's the pagan, Edomite “Easter” (which the world still seems to celebrate).

To get back to the story: Peter was put in prison and was guarded by 16 Roman soldiers. These soldiers most likely would have taken their job very seriously because if they let Peter escape they were going to be executed in his place. There was no chance that Peter could escape, or that the church could do something to

rescue him. The situation was hopeless.

But that didn't stop the church! In their hour of need they cried out to God. They knew that He was powerful enough to free Peter from prison:

Acts 12:5: “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

The church didn't want to lose Peter. They didn't want him to be killed so they began to pray “without ceasing”. Prayer was made for Peter around the clock. This was an earnest and passionate time of prayer. The church knew that Peter's life was at stake. If God didn't intervene then Peter would surely be killed.

God heard their earnest prayers. On the night before Peter was going to be brought out and executed, the Lord did something amazing. When God acted the situation was utterly hopeless:

Acts 12:6: “And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.”

Peter was securely chained in prison and there were two soldiers at his side. Escape was *not* an option – but that's what was going to happen! The Lord was going to set him free. He accomplished this miracle by sending an angel to deliver Peter:

Acts 12:7-8: “And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment

about thee, and follow me.”

Peter was in such a deep sleep that the angel had to wake him up – and yet the angel did it in such a way that only woke Peter. No one else in the cell was alerted. Even though a light shined, only Peter could see it. The 16 guards who were around him didn't notice. (You might say that the guards were blind to the light. The light shone in the darkness but they didn't comprehend it.)

By the mighty power of God, Peter's chains simply fell off. He was going to walk right out of prison. It was astounding and impossible but God made it happen. Nothing is too hard for Him! It was so amazing that even *Peter* didn't believe it:

Acts 12:9: “And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.”

Peter was so certain that he was going to be executed that he thought he was seeing a vision. He didn't realize that what he was seeing was really happening and he was being set free. But he was free indeed:

Acts 12:10: “When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him.”

Notice once again the incredible power of God! The massive iron gates that were designed to keep Peter locked inside simply opened of their own accord. Peter walked by all of the guards and none of them noticed what was going on. God blinded them all and took control of the situation. Peter was led out into the street and he was free.

Peter finally realized what was going on:

Acts 12:11: “And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.”

He knew that the Lord had set him free. Against all the expectations of the enemies of the gospel, God intervened and released Peter from prison. Peter wasn't going to be killed the next day – and it was all because of God.

The disciple now had to figure out what to do next:

Acts 12:12: “And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.”

Peter decided the logical thing to do was go to the house where people were praying for him and let them know he was free. Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, and tried to get in:

Acts 12:13: “And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.”

At this house a lady named Rhoda who was given the job of answering the door. Since everyone was praying for Peter's release, Rhoda was tasked with opening the door. All she had to do was go to the door and open it. It was a very simple job – and yet when Rhoda saw who it was she failed to open the door. Instead she left Peter standing out in the street, where he could be seen and arrested:

Acts 12:14: “And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.”

Peter was probably *not* happy about this turn of events. After all, anyone could have seen him while he was standing there! Peter was a wanted man and he didn't want to be put back in prison and executed. It was very dangerous for him to be standing there. However, Rhoda was so excited that she didn't bother opening the door and bringing Peter inside to safety. Instead she ran inside and told everyone that Peter was at the gate!

How did the believers respond? By telling her that she was wrong:

Acts 12:15: “And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.”

Keep in mind that these people had been praying day and night for Peter to be released. Yet when God actually did release Peter and he showed up at their door, they didn't believe it! They simply refused to believe that God had answered their prayer and set him free. This means that even though they were praying without ceasing, *they didn't actually think that God was going to answer their prayer*. They were praying earnestly but they lacked faith.

Yet in spite of that God still answered their prayer. Even though they didn't believe that He would grant their request, He was merciful and did as they asked. (If someone ever tries to tell you that God didn't answer your prayers because you lacked faith, think about this passage.)

Meanwhile, Peter kept knocking on the door. He wanted someone to let him in:

Acts 12:16: “But Peter continued knocking: and

when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.”

After what must have seemed like an uncomfortably long time, the believers finally got around to opening the door and seeing who was outside. When they saw Peter they were amazed. Why were they amazed? Because they all believed that God wasn't going to answer their prayer! If they truly believed that God was going to free him then they wouldn't have been so surprised. If you think that God is going to do something and He does it, are you going to respond with complete shock and disbelief?

Peter told them to be quiet for a minute and explained what happened:

Acts 12:17: “But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.”

Peter didn't want to stick around because it was too dangerous. The guards would find out pretty soon that Peter had escaped, and one of the first places they might look for him was in the company of his friends. Peter needed to get out of town. As soon as he told them the great miracle that the Lord had done, he asked them to tell everyone else and then left to an undisclosed location. Peter wanted to flee to a place where Herod couldn't find him. In fact, Peter didn't even remain around long enough to tell everyone the news! He let others do that. He wanted to get to a place of safety.

The James who Peter wanted told of his escape isn't the same James who was executed by Herod. Instead it was a different James – the one who wrote the book of James, and the one who was the half-brother of Christ. He was a prominent

person in the early church and Peter wanted to make sure he heard the news.

Back at the prison, things weren't going well. Peter's disappearance had finally been noticed:

Acts 12:18: “Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter.”

The soldiers were greatly upset. Sixteen people had been charged with guarding one man and yet he was nowhere to be found. They knew the penalty for letting him escape was death, and that's exactly what Herod commanded:

Acts 12:19: “And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode.”

The keepers of the prison had no defense. There were sixteen of them and just one prisoner, who was in chains and locked behind iron gates. There was no way he could have gotten away – and yet he was gone. Herod commanded that they be put to death and then left town.

Since Peter escaped, Herod went elsewhere. It seems Herod was upset with the citizens of Tyre and Sidon. Those cities knew it was a terrible thing to be on Herod's bad side, so the people decide to make peace with him. They needed Herod's support in order to prosper:

Acts 12:20: “And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was

nourished by the king's country.”

What did the people do? The citizens of Tyre and Sidon worshiped Herod and called him a god:

Acts 12:21-22: “And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.”

Herod seems to have been glad to hear this. Politicians love hearing people's praise and they love having support. However, God was *not* pleased with this at all. Even though Herod was a pagan and not a Christian, the Lord still required Herod to give Him the glory. The fact that Herod kept that divine glory for himself and didn't stop people from worshiping him led to his painful death:

Acts 12:23: “And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.”

When did the angel smite him? *Immediately*. Herod was then “eaten of worms” and died, after a reign of just four years. Being “eaten of worms” wouldn't have been a good way to die. This is how one commentator put it:

“Herod does not refuse their homage. Immediately an angel of the Lord strikes him down and he is eaten by worms. He experiences pain in the heart and stomach--peritonitis from a perforated appendix, combined with intestinal roundworms, ten to sixteen inches long. (Bunches of these can obstruct the intestines,

causing severe pain, copious vomiting and finally death.) This excruciating condition continues for five days until he dies.” (IVP New Testament Commentaries)

Herod met an untimely and painful end. But what happened to the church? It didn't meet its end under the hatred and persecution of the priests. Instead it grew:

Acts 12:24: “But the word of God grew and multiplied.”

The word of God grew and multiplied. It wasn't destroyed at the hands of Herod; instead Herod met his end in the hands of an angry God. The world did indeed persecute the church (just as Christ said that it would) but it could not overcome it. Instead by the power of God the word grew and multiplied.