

ACTS

Chapter 12

James Killed and Peter Imprisoned

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. 5 So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

12:1 *about that time.* Some hold that the events recorded in ch. 12 group together matters concerning Herod and may not be in strict chronological order. For example, the arrival of Barnabas and Saul in Jerusalem (11:30) may have followed Herod's persecution and Peter's release from prison. Since the date of Herod's death was A.D. 44, these events would probably have occurred in 43. According to this view, the famine of 11:28 occurred c. 46, following Herod's death (v. 23). Others hold that such juggling of events is not necessary. Thus the relief gift of 11:30 came before Herod's death in 44, and the return of Barnabas and Saul (v. 25) followed Herod's death. According to the former view, the Jerusalem visit of Gal 2:1–10 was the famine visit of v. 25; 11:30. According to the latter view, the Gal 2:1 visit was the Jerusalem council visit of 15:1–29. (CSB)

King Herod. Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great – Was the king who had the infants of Bethlehem slaughtered in an attempt to kill the King of the Jews, Jesus.) and son of Aristobulus. He was a nephew of Herod Antipas, who had beheaded John the Baptist (Mt 14:3–12) and had tried Jesus (Lk 23:8–12). When Antipas was exiled, Agrippa received his tetrarchy as well as those of Philip and Lysanias (see Lk 3:1). In A.D. 41 Judea and Samaria were added to his realm. Early in A.D. 41 Emperor Claudius made Herod Agrippa I king over all Palestine. Jerusalem was his capital, and since his elevation to kingship he had been busy courting the favor of the Jews, especially that of the Pharisees. This was fertile ground for Satan when he was allowed to unleash his fury again. And unleash it he did, suddenly and unexpectedly. Christians found themselves rudely ripped from their homes and places of business, arrested solely because they were Christian. Again the lash of the scourge was felt, and prison doors clanged shut behind them. (CSB)

Probably Herod Agrippa I (AD 37–44), tetrarch of Galilee, Judea, and Samaria. (TLSB)

12:2 *James.* Brother of John the apostle and son of Zebedee (Mt 4:21). This event took place about ten years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus had warned of their coming suffering (Mt 20:23). (CSB)

The fact that Herod singled out an apostle shows to what lengths he intended to go to curry the favor of his Jewish subjects. (LL)

death with the sword. Beheaded, like John the Baptist. (CSB)

12:3 *Unleavened Bread*. Here again the ruling hand of God is plainly evident. Because it was the time of the Passover, Peter escaped the immediate execution accorded James. To place his Jewish subjects forever in his debt, it appears that Herod planned to bring Peter to public trial and execution on the same day Jesus was publicly tried and crucified. (LL)

12:4 *four squads*. One company of four soldiers for each of the four watches of the night. (CSB)

Extra security. A heavily armed force was sent to apprehend Jesus (Mt 26:47; Lk 22:47; Jn 18:3). (TLSB)

It was Roman practice to attach each of the prisoner's two chains to each of two guards. Not only were there two more guards from the squad standing watch, but other soldiers were stationed as sentries. Security was tight. (PBC)

Passover. Another way of referring to the whole week of the festival. (CSB)

Notice the emphasis that timing played in both this account and the account of Christ's crucifixion. The leaders showed fearful respect for the crowds and their festivals. (TLSB)

12:5 Praying with faith in Christ brings wondrous results (Jas 5:16). How much more so when believers gather with one accord, letting their requests be made known to God with thanksgiving for His gifts (Ac 1:14; Php 4:6). (TLSB)

12:1–5 As Christ had prophesied, His disciples share in His suffering, being arrested, beaten, and even killed. By His crucifixion and resurrection, Christ has passed through death and draws us safely through to life. He alone holds the keys of death and will leave none of His own behind. • Father, in the righteousness of faith in Christ, hear my prayer for believers who face persecution for Your name's sake. Keep them faithful unto death, that they may receive the crown of life. Amen. (TLSB)

Peter Is Rescued

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.” **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. **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.

12:6 *sleeping* – Peter slept like a baby! Not a care or worry in the world! No mulling over the speech he would probably be asked to make tomorrow – only sleep. No – “Lord, what will happen to the church or my family” – only sleep. How eloquently and beautifully this sleep said that “to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (CSB)

The prison enacted maximum security procedures. (TLSB)

12:7 *a light shone*. The glory of the Lord (see Lk 2:9). (CSB)

God continues to work through the means of both angels and apostles. Angels serve primarily as messengers of salvation and freedom from persecution throughout Ac (e.g., 5:19; 10:3; 12:23, 27:23), often emphasizing that they are real rather than a mere vision (e.g., 12:9, 11; 23:8). (TLSB)

12:8 *Dress yourself*. As a means of punishment, the guards had likely deprived him of warm clothing. (TLSB)

12:9 *prison*. Probably the tower of Antonia, located at the northwest corner of the temple—the “barracks” where Paul was later held (see 21:34). (CSB)

12:10 *iron gate* – The massive iron gate locked with a huge bolt, was guarding the entrance to the prison. Normally it took four or five men to open the bolt and swing the gate open. (LL)

The reality of the angelic escort was seen in the iron gate's opening. The number of guards and the iron gate suggests a maximum security prison. (TLSB)

street – The street on which the angel left him wasn't accidental, for it led him to a home where some close friends lived. (LL)

An odd detail; the angel abides with dazed Peter. (TLSB)

12:11 *the Lord has sent* – Immediately Peter spoke his thanks by acknowledging the Lord as his rescuer. (LL)

all that the Jewish people were expecting. Given the death of James (v 2), many would expect Peter to be killed at this time. Two of Jesus' closest followers would be eliminated. Cf Jn 21:18–19; 2Pt 1:14 regarding Peter's coming death. (TLSB)

12:12 *house.* Later tradition suggested this was the site of the Upper Room, where Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. A church was built on the traditional site. (TLSB)

Mary. The aunt of Barnabas (see Col 4:10). Apparently her home was a gathering place for Christians. It may have been the location of the upper room where the Last Supper was held (see Mk 14:13–15; see also Ac 1:13) and the place of prayer in 4:31. (CSB)

Probably the sister of Barnabas and the hostess of one of the house churches in Jerusalem. (TLSB)

John ... Mark. The Lat name "Markus" may indicate his involvement with Roman culture or administration. (TLSB)

12:13 *door of the gateway.* Indicates an outer courtyard. (TLSB)

Rhoda. A hired servant, but in sympathy with the family and the church. (CSB)

Suggests that Mary was relatively wealthy. (TLSB)

12:15 Their doubt about Rhoda's discovery recalls Peter's unwillingness to accept the testimony of Mary Magdalene and others after Christ's resurrection (Lk 24:10–12). (TLSB)

his angel. Reflects the belief that everyone has a personal angel who ministers to him (cf. Mt 18:10; Heb 1:14), adding the idea that such an angel occasionally showed himself and that his appearance resembled the person under his care. (CSB)

12:16 *were amazed.* Though they had been "earnestly praying to God for him" (v. 5). (CSB)

We can imagine what was going on inside that house. Remember, it was probably two o'clock in the morning. The small group of Christians had been praying non-stop since Peter's imprisonment. All hope of an answer from the Lord was almost gone. But they kept on praying. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Was it Herod's soldiers seeking more victims? Consternation and fear ran through the group. (LL)

12:17 *James.* The Lord's brother, a leader in the Jerusalem church (Gal 1:19). James, the brother of John, had been killed (see v. 2). (CSB)

Brother of Jesus, who served as the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem Church. (TLSB)

another place – Means that Peter left the city. (PBC)

Recall how the disciples assisted Paul in escaping (9:25, 30). (TLSB)

12:18 *no little disturbance* – One can feel the absolute and incredible fear that ran through the prison at about 5:30 that morning. Everything was in place except the prisoner. The how didn't matter, for they knew the consequences. (LL)

12:19 The disappearance of Peter fulfills the warning of Gamaliel that the authorities will find themselves struggling against God (5:39). (TLSB)

put to death. For delinquent duty. (TLSB)

Caesarea. Not only a headquarters for Roman procurators, but Agrippa used it as his capital when no procurators were assigned to Judea. (CSB)

It was a part of Judea, but the Jews regarded it as a Roman rather than a Jewish city. Herod the Great had built it in honor of Caesar Augustus. There was no Roman governor at the time (Pilate had lived there when he was in charge.), and so Herod Agrippa used the city as his capital. Being on the Mediterranean shore, it was cooler in summer than Jerusalem. (PBC)

12:6–19 The death of James at the hand of Herod and the imprisonment of Peter demonstrate the world's hatred of the Gospel. Yet, nothing can separate believers from the love of Christ. He fulfills His purpose for us in life and in death; therefore, we have joy. • Father, may Rhoda's joy at seeing Peter overflow in my life as I have fellowship with other believers. Amen. (TLSB)

The Death of Herod

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,[b] 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. 24 But the word of God increased and multiplied. 25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

12:20 Events of AD 44. (TLSB)

Herod was angry. Never explained. Herod followed the Herodian pattern of intrigue and violence (Mt 2:1–18; 14:3; Mk 6:17; Lk 3:19–20; 13:32). (TLSB)

Tyre and Sidon. The leading cities of Phoenicia (Lebanon today). They were dependent on the grainfields of Galilee for their food. (CSB)

These were two Roman free cities in Phoenicia. They had depended on Galilee for grain and olive oil since the time of King Solomon (1 Kings 5:11; Ez. 27:17). When there was a quarrel

between those cities and King Herod, their food supply was endangered. They tried to mend the breach with the help of Blastus, probably bribing that official to intercede on their behalf. (PBC)

Blastus. The treasurer; not otherwise known. (CSB)

Position of influence in Herod's court. (TLSB)

depended ... for food. Positioned on the Phoenician coast, Tyre and Sidon gained their wealth through shipping but remained vulnerable to food shortages. (TLSB)

12:21 *On the appointed day*. A festival Herod was celebrating in honor of Claudius Caesar (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 19.8.2). (CSB)

put on his royal robes. The historian Josephus describes a silver robe, dazzling bright, that Herod wore that day. When people acclaimed him a god, he did not deny it. He was seized with violent pains, was carried out and died five days later (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 19.8.2). (CSB)

12:23 *he did not give God the glory*. Falling into pride and idolatry. (TLSB)

eaten by worms. A miserable death associated with Herod's acceptance of acclaim to be divine, but may also be seen as divine retribution for his persecution of the church. (CSB)

Likely a disorder of the digestive tract. Josephus mentions his stomach trouble (*Ant* 19:346, 350). (TLSB)

Intestinal worms consumed his digestive tract and he died five days later. (PBC)

12:24 *the word of God ... increased*. Third summary report of progress (see 6:7; 9:31). Three more follow (16:5; 19:20; 28:31). (CSB)

Despite internal tensions and outside persecution. "[Rulers] should work toward the preservation and growth of divine things, that is, the Gospel of Christ on the earth.... As God's representatives, they should defend the life and safety of the innocent" (Ap XXI 44). (TLSB)

The threat of famine and the outbreak of persecution did not stifle the church or stop the gospel's spread. On the contrary, the word was preached ever more widely and effectively. (PBC)

12:25 *complete their service* – It might seem that Luke has been telling us that Herod's persecution and his death all took place while Barnabas and Saul were in Jerusalem. That was not the case. Luke simply wants us to know about the persecution, which probably took place before Barnabas and Saul brought the relief funds to that city. No he returns to the story of Barnabas and Saul. (PBC) – Second Corinthians 8:1-9 tells how part of the collection was done and how God can work great miracles.

Probably refers to the relief effort entrusted to Barnabas and Saul. (TLSB)

John ... Mark. See v. 12. He was perhaps the young man who fled on the night of Jesus' arrest (Mk 14:51–52). He wrote the second Gospel and accompanied Barnabas and Saul on the first part of their first missionary journey. (CSB)

12:20–25 Herod’s violence and intrigue illustrate how evil breeds evil. Yet God can decisively topple evil. In mercy to us, He sent His Son to the cross to condemn evil and rescue us. Living in forgiveness, we eagerly await the day when our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ takes us to live with Him forever in heaven. • “By all Your saints in warfare, For all Your saints at rest, Your holy name, O Jesus, Forevermore be blest! For You have won the battle That they might wear the crown; And now they shine in glory Reflected from Your throne.” Amen. (*LSB* 517:1) (TLSB)