

## **THE BOOK OF ACTS**

### **CHAPTER 12**

#### **THE CHALLENGE OF CHAPTER TWELVE**

We should never fear the world's attitude toward the spreading of the gospel. If persecution comes, imprisonment, or even the possibility of death, we can experience God's divine peace while trusting His ability to deliver us supernaturally. The gospel cannot and will not be stopped, and Jesus will return to establish His kingdom in the earth.

#### **HEROD PERSECUTES THE CHURCH (1-4)**

With the spreading and growing influence of the gospel, Herod begins to persecute the Church. He killed James the brother of John and because James' death so pleases the Jews, he captures and imprisons Peter. He plans to also put Peter to death after the days of unleavened bread have passed.

Act 12:1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.

Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex (persecute and kill) certain (key members) of the church.

The phrase "about that time" refers to the time of the drought in Jerusalem. Herod Agrippa is the king mentioned in this verse. He is the grandson of Herod the Great. Herod, like his grandfather, embraces Judaism and wants to please the Jews. He learns of their hatred for Christians and is determined to persecute the church. This is primarily a political move on his part. Being a military man, he knows the best way to instill fear and discouragement into a group is to kill one of their leaders (5:36-37). Typically when a leader of a movement is killed, the followers disperse rapidly. However, in this particular instance, that plan backfires on Herod. Peter will remain alive, and Christianity will survive and flourish.

#### **JAMES IS KILLED**

Act 12:2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

James, the brother of John is decapitated. Jesus had nicknamed James and John the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). Their mother had asked for each of her sons to be seated beside Jesus in His kingdom (Matthew 20: 20-23).

Following the death of Stephen James is the next apostle to be killed. John will be the last.

This extreme persecution arises as a result of the legalism in Jerusalem. James' death could have been prevented through the prayers of the saints. However, because of James's death, when Peter is thrown in prison, the church immediately begins to intercede for him.

## **PETER IS SEIZED**

Act 12:3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

Peter is held in prison temporarily with the plan to later execute him only because the Jews had a law that no one could be executed during a feast day.

Act 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.

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 (Passover) to bring him forth to the people.

A "quaternion" is the smallest division in the Roman army consisting of four soldiers. There is one quaternion for each watch of the day (six hours). Two soldiers are chained to Peter, one on each arm. The other two soldiers watch the door. Herod's intention is to leave Peter in prison until the Passover week is completed and then to publicly execute him.

## **PETER MIRACULOUSLY FREED (5-17)**

As the church in Antioch prays without ceasing for Peter, an angel appears and the chains that bind Peter fall from his wrists. The angel instructs Peter to follow him, which he does. Peter eventually finds himself in the street outside the gates of the prison. He immediately goes to the house of Mary where the believers are praying.

## **CHURCH PRAYS WITHOUT CEASING**

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

The prayer made "without ceasing" is intercessory prayer. This prayer could have lasted as long as one week during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This verse also tells us the church is not a building but a people. Buildings do not pray. People pray.

Act 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 has been in jail for many days and was sleeping the night before his execution. This is the gift of faith in operation (1 Corinthians 12:9). The same gift was in operation when Daniel was in the lions den and when Paul was on board a ship destined to be shipwrecked (Acts 27).

The gift of faith can operate in one of two ways. A person can become bold under this gift as Samson did or as David did before Goliath. Other times, this gift causes a person to become peaceful during a time of tribulation, like Jesus sleeping through the storm.

## **AN ANGEL APPEARS**

Act 12:7 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.

The angel of the Lord described in this verse is not a visitation from the angel of the Lord (Jesus) in the Old Testament. This particular angel comes to rescue Peter. The light that shines in the prison is the glory surrounding the angel. Peter is consistent. He slept while Jesus prayed in Gethsemane (Matthew 26: 39-41), and now he is sleeping while the church is praying for him.

Peter has improved the cause for his sleep. Unlike the time in the garden of Gethsemane when he was supposed to be watching and praying for Jesus, he now is sleeping because he has God's peace and the gift of faith operates in his life. In fact, Peter is in such a deep sleep, the angel has to hit him on the side to wake him up.

Act 12:8 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.

What Peter could do, the angel commands him to do. But what Peter could not do, the angel does for him. The angel does not dress Peter or put his shoes on him. The angel did not carry Peter out of the prison. Peter could do that himself. However, Peter could not free himself. The chains fell off his wrists by supernatural power.

## **PETER FOLLOWS THE ANGEL**

Act 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 is still not quite awake and thinks he is having another housetop vision.

Act 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.

Peter comes to himself once he is outside the prison. The air in his face probably fully awakens Peter, and as he stands in the streets of Jerusalem, he realizes a true miracle has just taken place. This is Peter's second miraculous deliverance from prison (5:19).

## **PETER COMES TO HIMSELF**

Act 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.

Peter is delivered from the Jews and the Romans simultaneously.

Act 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 has some time to think about what has just happened before he arrives at the prayer meeting. Peter does not consider fleeing, instead, as he had done previously, he goes to his "own company" (4:23).

Those who are praying for Peter have gathered together in the house of Mark's mother, Mary. Mark wrote the book of Mark based on accounts he received from Peter. This is our first introduction to Mark. He is the same man who will accompany Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey from Antioch (verse 25; 13:5).

## **RHODA AT THE GATE OF MARY'S HOUSE**

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

Act 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.

Rhoda is probably a servant girl working in Mary's home. She is a believer, and although she is not praying with the others, she is concerned for Peter's deliverance from prison. When she sees Peter outside the gate, she is so excited, she runs to tell everyone and leaves Peter standing at the gate.

Act 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.

The intercessory, prevailing prayer of those gathered has been effective. Their prayers manifested so quickly, no one is ready to stop praying. They had planned to pray for a long period of time for Peter's deliverance and are surprised when the answer comes.

They initially think the girl has seen an angel. It should be easier to believe Peter is outside the gate than an angel. An angel would appear to them in their prayer room rather than knocking all the gate.

Act 12:16 But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.

But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished (speechless).

The group finally goes to the gate to see if Peter is really there.

### **PETER'S TESTIMONY OF BEING DELIVERED FROM PRISON**

Act 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.

When they see it is Peter, they are initially speechless, but then began talking so loudly Peter has to quiet them with his hand. He tells them the story of his deliverance and asks them to tell the church leaders what has happened.

After attending the prayer meeting in Mary's house, he departs for Antioch. Although he has been supernaturally delivered, he knows it is important to leave town quickly. The soldiers who had been left at the prison will be in danger for their lives and might come looking for Peter at Mary's house.

### **RESPONSE TO PETER'S ESCAPE (18-20)**

Herod is extremely angered by Peter's escape and searches for him unsuccessfully. Herod executes all of the guards who were on watch when Peter walked out of the prison.

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

In the natural realm, Peter's escape is impossible. The "stir" among the soldiers is comprised of confusion and disbelief which will then turn to anger.

Act 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.

At this point, Herod becomes angry and fearful for his kingdom and position as king. He has tried to please the Jews as much as possible, but now that things have become difficult, he returns to his true allegiance, the Romans. He flees to Caesarea, a Roman city.

Act 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.

A border dispute has broken out in this area of Phoenicia and has lasted for many years. Herod is angry at them during this time. While he is in Caesarea, the people of Tyre and Sidon come with a united front to meet with Herod and make peace because they fear he will cut off financial aid to their countries. They bribe Blastus to arrange a meeting for them with Herod.

### **THE DEATH OF HEROD (21-22)**

Herod gives a speech, and the audience heralds him as a god. Because Herod does not give glory to God for his position, an angel of God strikes him dead.

### **HEROD DEIFIED**

Act 12:21 And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.

Herod decides to make a big show of extending peace to the people of Tyre and Sidon. He is full of arrogance and expects the people to revere him.

Act 12:22 And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.

Because of fear of losing their finances, the people play into Herod's arrogance.

### **HEROD AND THE ANGEL**

Act 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.

According to the historian Josephus, the entire process of Herod's sickness from worms to death took approximately five days. The angel referred to in this verse is probably the same angel who delivered Peter from prison. Now he is delivering Peter from Herod. The assumption can be made that someone is still interceding for Peter's safety and for the government of the land. When a government plays God, it will be judged. Herod becomes weak and dies, but the church cannot be destroyed (Matthew 16:18).

## **THE GOSPEL CONTINUES TO SPREAD (24-25)**

Neither the death of James nor the imprisonment of Peter hinders the spread of the gospel.

Act 12:24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

Out of persecution, the church, the Word, and the disciples in Greece. They also increase in power. Whenever the Word increases, so does the number of disciples. When the number of disciples increases, so does the number of converts (6:7).

Act 12:25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.

Barnabas and Saul are given the mission to deliver money collected by believers in Antioch to the saints in Jerusalem (11:27-30). When they return to Antioch, Barnabas and Saul take Mark with them on their first missionary journey.