

Wednesday BIBLE STUDY

Acts Chapter 12 (ESV p 1019)

Verse 1- While the world is in a state of famine, the Christians are still doing ok because they are taking care of each other, but Satan doesn't like that, so he influences King Herod to persecute and arrest some of the Christians. This was King Herod Agrippa I, appointed by Rome to rule over Judea and keep the Jews happy. He was the grandson of Herod the Great who tried to have Jesus killed at birth and he was the nephew of Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist killed and had a hand in the crucifixion of Jesus. He came from a line of persecutors.

Verse 2- In keeping with his heritage, King Herod Agrippa I had James the apostle put to death with a sword. James was the brother of John, also an apostle of Jesus, so we don't know why God allowed this to happen. We can only deduce that it must have somehow served God's plan. We do know that Jesus told his apostles that they would be brought before kings and leaders to be persecuted for His sake. (Matthew 10:17-20, ESV p 904). We also know that when people of faith die, regardless of the circumstances of their death, they are taken to give them rest from the evils of this world (Isaiah 57:1-2, ESV p 687). James, John, and Peter were probably the closest to Jesus of all the twelve apostles. They were the only apostles to witness His transfiguration (his change from an earthly to a glorified heavenly presence) (Mark 9:2-9, ESV p 936) and they were the apostles that He took further into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Him before his arrest (Matthew 26:36-38, ESV p 923). So, it is not inconceivable that the Father would allow James to be taken to give him rest from the evils that were to come to all the disciples of Christ at Herod's hand.

Verse 3- Though we can only guess at why God allowed James to be killed, we know that Herod's motivation for doing it was strictly political. He wanted approval of the Jewish community. The increased favor of the Jews meant that the Roman Empire would increase the territory over which he reigned. Once James was dead, Peter or John would have been the next logical targets because of their known relationship with Jesus. This would have made him popular among the traditional Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. That is why Herod chose to do this during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The Festival of Unleavened Bread is a week of commemorating the Jews' leaving Egypt. It occurs after Passover and the unleavened bread symbolizes their hasty departure, purification and the removal of sin. Herod's gesture of arresting Peter at this particular time would please the circumcised Jews because they believed that Peter had committed blasphemy by allowing uncircumcised Gentiles into the fold. They were protecting the tradition and their perceived exalted place with God. (see Exodus 13:1-10, p 61)

Verse 4- Herod used this division among the Jews to increase his own power. So, he arrested Peter and had him heavily guarded. He intended to display him publicly at the end of the Passover celebration to gain popularity with the circumcised Jews. (Mark 3:24-26, ESV p 930), (Matthew 12:25, ESV p 906), (Galatians 5:14-15, ESV p 1077)

Verse 5- But while Herod was plotting, the people of God were praying non-stop for God to intercede on Peter's behalf. Naturally, they felt a sense of urgency after James' death. (Psalm 34:17, ESV p 513), The Greek word used to describe their prayers is, "ektenes" (ek ten ace') which means stretched out intensely. It is used as a medical term that means stretching the muscles to the limit. Given the circumstances they were in, being persecuted to the point of death, while still enduring famine, one could imagine that their faith was stretched to the limit.

Verse 6- Herod must have been very afraid that Peter might escape. After his arrest, he had four squads of four soldiers each to guard Peter (verse 4). Then, the night prior to his intended public trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains and guarded by several soldiers at the door. Obviously, Herod believed the power of God. (James 2:18-19, ESV p 1114). Unfortunately, just believing that God's power exists is not enough. Belief only leads to salvation if it prompts someone to repent and obey God's word.

Verse 7- Herod's fears became reality. An angel appeared inside the prison cell, lighting up the cell, and a miracle happened immediately. He told Peter to get up, and the chains just fell off of his wrists. Note that there is no mention of what the guards did while this was happening. Were they sleeping through all this commotion? Did they see and think that they were dreaming? We have no idea. Perhaps because it just does not matter. Perhaps what matters is simply that God's power rules in every situation. (Psalm 34:18-19, ESV p 512), (Proverbs 19:21, ESV p 603)

Verse 8- This verse reinforces just how much precaution was taken to keep Peter in this prison. He had been stripped of his clothes and sandals to make it harder for him to escape. It also emphasizes that no efforts can stop God's plans. (Isaiah 46:10, ESV p 677), (Job 42:1-2, ESV p 493)

Verse 9- Even though Peter was living this scenario, he thought he was seeing a vision. He couldn't believe that it was real. That's because we cannot always predict or explain what God is doing. We can only have faith that He does what He says and that He loves us always. (Isaiah 55:8-11)

Verse 10- The angel went with Peter until all the obstacles and hindrances were passed. The iron gate opened by itself and they went through it. (Mark 10:27, ESV p 938), (Luke 1:37, ESV p 948) This was in keeping with what Jesus told the disciples, that He would be with them always. (Matthew 28:20, ESV p 926)