

James Martyred; Peter Delivered from Prison

Acts 12

Acts 12: "Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. ² Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. ³ And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. ⁵ Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. ⁶ And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. ⁷ Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. ⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." ⁹ So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. ¹¹ And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people." ¹² So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. ¹³ And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. ¹⁵ But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." ¹⁶ Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place. ¹⁸ Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there. ²⁰ Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. ²¹ So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. ²² And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" ²³ Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. ²⁴ But the word of God grew and multiplied. ²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark."

Background Notes

A number of men named “Herod” are mentioned in the New Testament, and it’s easy to get them confused, so here is a brief summary. First of all, there was Herod the Great, who ruled at the time of Jesus Christ’s birth. He is usually called “Herod the Great” because of his massive building projects – but he was not called “Herod the Great” in the Bible because he was not “great” in God’s eyes. This Herod was the king who ordered the murder of the male babies of Bethlehem. Then there was Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, who was ruler of Galilee during our Lord’s public ministry. Herod Antipas and Pilate became friends during our Lord’s trial.

The “Herod” mentioned in Acts 12 was Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great. Herod Agrippa was willing to do anything, including murder, to maintain favor with the religious Jews. Eventually God struck down this proud, heartless ruler. The people of Tyre and Sidon came to Caesarea, where Herod was staying in his beautiful seaside palace. They wanted a peace agreement. After Herod addressed them, they shouted: *“The voice of a god and not of a man!”* (v22). This adulation was obviously done for political reasons, but Herod accepted their “worship.” *“Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died”* (v23). The Lord has ways of dealing with people who don’t give the proper glory to God.

In Acts 26 we’ll meet another Herod Agrippa, who listened to Paul’s defense when Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea. That was Herod Agrippa II, the son of Herod Agrippa I.

The “James” who was martyred in Acts 12 was the disciple James, the brother of John. He was not the James who wrote the New Testament book of James. The half-brother of our Lord, wrote the book of James. In Acts 12, James was the first apostle to be martyred. All the apostles were eventually martyred, with the exception of the apostle John.

A group of the early Christians met in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (v12). According to tradition, the “Upper Room” where the Last Supper was held was located in Mary’s home. John Mark, who was Mary’s son, joined Paul and Barnabas when they returned to Antioch (v25), and he went with them on their first missionary journey. John Mark, by the way, is the “Mark” who wrote the Gospel of Mark.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers are not always delivered from physical danger.

God allowed James to be martyred, but He delivered Peter from death. Why? Was it because James didn’t have enough faith? Was it because more people were praying for Peter than for James? The essential answer is that *the Bible*

teaches that believers are not always delivered from physical danger. God can deliver a believer from any situation, including physical danger, but He may purposely choose not to do so, for any number of reasons that may be beyond our understanding. We often hear the expression, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” - and indeed it is. The Church grew following the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7, and “*the word of God grew and multiplied*” following the martyrdom of James (v24). There may be a number of reasons why God doesn’t choose to deliver every believer from all situations of physical danger.

But what about God’s promises of protection? What about Psalm 91:5-7? “*You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not come near you.*”

Can we claim the promises of Psalm 91? Yes, these are general promises of God’s care and protection for His people, and we can claim them. But God may call a believer to a special situation of physical danger, suffering, and even martyrdom - for the glory of God. But if God calls a believer to a dangerous situation, He will provide the grace and help to handle the situation (Hebrews 4:16).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord Jesus prayed: “*Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done.*” The Lord was the perfect Man, God’s beloved Son - but the cup of suffering was not removed. The Lord was not delivered from physical danger so God’s plan and purpose could be carried out - for our salvation. Believers are not always delivered from physical danger.

2. Believers are sometimes dramatically delivered from physical danger.

Herod intended to kill Peter as he had killed James, but God sent an angel to dramatically and miraculously deliver Peter from prison. And this was not the first time Peter was delivered from physical danger! Peter and the other apostles were delivered in Acts 5.

I love the way the angel directed Peter step by step, while Peter is still in a daze: “Come on, Peter! Get up, get dressed, put on your shoes, put on your coat - and follow me!” (v7-8). And I love the “automatic gate opener” in verse 10: “*When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord.*” This was the original automatic garage door opener!

Peter made his way to Mary’s house, where the Christians were praying for his release. He knocked on the outer gate, and a girl named Rhoda answered - but she kept Peter standing outside the gate because of her joy and surprise! So Peter kept on knocking. The Christians inside who were praying for Peter’s release didn’t believe that God had answered

their prayers! Do we ever pray like this – not really trusting that God will answer our prayers? Aren't you glad God answers prayer in spite of our lack of faith?

The other believers told Rhoda that she was out of her mind! Then they said that she was seeing Peter's "angel," probably meaning his "guardian angel." However, be careful about using verse 15 as a proof text for the existence of "guardian" angels. Verse 15 is the inspired record of what those early Jewish Christians said to Rhoda, and it seems to indicate that they believed in guardian angels. But the record of what they thought is not the same as a teaching passage of Scripture expounding the doctrine of guardian angels. I believe that the Bible does teach the doctrine of guardian angels, but I wouldn't use Acts 12:15 as a text that proves this doctrine.

Peter was dramatically delivered from prison. God certainly has the power to do deliver believers in any situation that involves physical danger - if He chooses to do so. Think of Daniel, who was protected in the lion's den. Think of the three believers who were unharmed in the fiery furnace. Think of Jonah, who was delivered by means of a large fish! Sometimes God chooses to dramatically deliver believers from physical danger.

I have a Korean friend, a Christian, who escaped from North Korea. He had to walk through an extensive mine field to make his way to South Korea. He said that a "man he didn't know" suddenly showed up and guided him safely through the mines - and then disappeared. He believes that that the "man" was an angel from the Lord. Believers are sometimes dramatically delivered from physical danger.

Practical Application

Leave sad fallout for doing what's right in the hands of God.

Verse 19: *"But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death."* As many as sixteen Roman guards - four shifts of four guards each - may have been executed.

How do you think Peter felt when he heard about this? Peter may have witnessed to these men. Maybe some of them had told Peter about their upbringing and their families. They were just doing their job. This was sad fallout of Peter's deliverance from prison. Peter didn't execute these men, but they were executed because of Peter's escape.

Unpleasant things like this happen, then and today. What should we do? What *can* we do? We shouldn't carry a load of guilt. We should leave it in the hands of God. When we have done what's right, and sad fallout occurs, we must leave the situation in the hands of God.