

ACTS 12: THE ANTAGONIST REMOVED

In Acts 11, we read of the growing pains of the fledgling church as more and more Gentiles, as well as more Hellenistic Jews were being brought into the fold. We saw that cultural barriers were being dealt with, as real life questions and issues were brought to the fore. And from that, we read of how Barnabus saw the grace of God being manifest as the early church began to see each other, not as separate people groups, but as one united family. This is much easier said than done, but it is a testimony of how the Spirit of God can and does work in people, when Jesus is the priority and cultural norms are no longer seen as the status quo.

But all this was a problem to the Jewish power center. Christianity was gaining momentum, and even worse, it was gaining momentum in Jerusalem, right around the Temple, at the very power base of Judaism. This caused quite a bit of consternation among the pious Jews, who saw this as a threat to their peace and as something else that would push back the arrival of the Messiah for yet another period of time. What they had failed to see, was that the Messiah had indeed come, and this new group, “the

Christians” was the outworking of the Messiah, himself. Within that morass, we find ourselves in chapter 12. And the pattern continues, as we read of the persecution of the church, which was followed by growth. Now, having seen the grace of God in chapter 11, we read of another wave of persecution. What will happen now? What will the believers do? What will God do? Will this be the end of Christianity? Turn in your Bibles to chapter 12, and we will see.

1 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.

As we have seen before, when reading Biblical narrative, we look for the “problem” of the passage and then look for the resolution of the problem. Herod, is the problem. He is the antagonist – the bad guy in the story. And has seen fit to imprison two

of the leaders in the church, in Jerusalem. Who was Herod, exactly?

This is Herod Agrippa, half-brother to Herod Antipas, the Herod with Whom Jesus dealt. They were grandsons of King Herod, the Herod in power at Jesus' birth. Herod Agrippa was a Jew, and had become the governor of Palestine. He was a local ruler upon whom the Romans relied on order to collect taxes and keep the peace. And in a very practical way, Herod is attempting to do just that – keep the peace, by keeping the Jews happy. And if the Jews are happy, they pay their taxes and the Pax Romana can continue and all will be well in this precinct of the Roman Empire.

Herod was seen by the Jews as, “their man.” While he wasn't pious, he did intercede for them to Rome, keeping an image of Caesar out of the Temple. And for that, the Jews were grateful. And now, seeking to keep the Jews happy, he had James, the brother of John, as well as Peter, (who seems to be the face of the movement, at least in Jerusalem), arrested. James was executed. Herod was cunning here. He executed a minor leader and saw that it pleased the people. How much more would they be pleased if he executed the face of the movement?

And look at the timing of Herod's move. It was before Passover. Does this ring any bells? Jesus was brought before the people just before Passover. And what effect do you think this had on Peter?

John 21:18,19

18 Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.” 19 This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.”

Do you think Peter thought this was his end? James was now dead, and the imagery and timing of events matched the death of Jesus. Imagine what was going on in Peter's head. We know that Herod died in 44 AD. Spoiler Alert! We will read of his death at the end of this chapter. Was Peter thinking that it was already his time to go, being only a decade or so after the death and ascension of Jesus?

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."

Peter was kept under guard, in what seemed to be an inescapable situation. This was a Roman jail, not a holding room in the Temple precincts, like before.

There were guards posted everywhere – even chained to Peter. Nevertheless, an angel freed Peter from his chains and walked him out of the jail by night. Peter was free! But this leads us to a question. Why wasn't James freed and thus allowed to live? The only answer I have for that is the sovereignty of God. As you read the Bible, you will see God intervening selectively. We can't make an axiom out of this. We can't say that God will always intervene on behalf of His people in every bad situation. That is not what we see in the scriptures and therefore is bad theology. Some things are left to the mind and plans of God. At any rate, Peter was now free and when he "came to his senses, he realized what had happened. It wasn't a dream or vision. The fact that he had been sleeping may tell us that he had come to grips with the idea of his death, or that he believed he would be rescued at some point. At any rate, he seemed to be at peace. And now he quickly leaves the area and heads for friendly territory.

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.

Peter went to John’s mother’s house. Why there? We were told at the beginning of the chapter. James was John’s brother – Mary’s other son. People were gathered there praying. They were comforting Mary. Think of people gathered at the home of someone who had just suffered a death in the family.

Peter knocked on the gate and a young servant girl named Rhoda went out to see who it was. Could it be Roman soldiers? No. It was Peter. And when she recognized his voice, she was so excited that she went back into the house, leaving Peter in the street. When she told the prayer team that Peter was outside, they didn’t believe her, saying it had to be his angel.

Why did they think it was his angel? Explain –
dopple-ganger.

How does this effect the narrative?

Were they showing a lack of faith when Peter showed up? Only if they were praying for his release. But the fact that they thought it was his angel hints that they most likely thought he had already been executed. This would change the focus of the prayer vigil to one of comforting Mary and praying for relief from the oppression. Let's not be too quick to say they were showing no faith.

This can be comedic. Leaving Peter outside, not believing Rhoda.

This can also be comforting in that we see these people, who have seen so many miraculous events, as oscillating between places of faith and doubt - great joy at the growth of the church followed by times of heartache and persecution.

Does this sound like what we go through? Times of faith and joy, followed by times of doubt?

Sure, it does! And they were no different. We have all seen this pattern in our lives. And while we don't want to wallow in doubt, it is still a reality. Doubt simply means that we are questioning the things going on around us. It

doesn't mean that we have lost our faith. Doubt will pass, if we focus on the Word.

After telling them what had happened, Peter left the area, so as not to bring any heat upon the others and to go on the lam for a while. This was the prudent thing to do.

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.

As you can imagine, there was a great deal of confusion at the jail the next morning. No one had an explanation of where Peter had gone. How could they? God had intervened. Herod hadn't counted on this. Of course, he didn't. He didn't believe in the one who had rescued Peter. And that was the problem in the first place. With no satisfactory explanation, Herod did the only thing he thought he could do. He had the guards executed for dereliction of duty and then went to his palace on the coast in

the city of Caesarea. He had moved on – or so he thought.

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.

Herod was now at his palace on the beach. For some reason, we aren't told why, he was irritated with the people of Tyre and Sidon – two old cities mentioned in the OT, that were further north, up the Mediterranean coast. Though these cities weren't under his jurisdiction, they still relied on Herod for the imports they needed. All maritime imports for the region came through Caesarea. Secular history tells us that a feast and some games were being held there at this time in honor of Caesar. Herod couldn't miss an event like that. We are told from the same

source, that Herod had dressed in a cloak of some shiny, silver – metallic material. He glistened in the sun. And when he spoke, the people, eager to get back on his good side, cheered him on, saying he spoke and looked like a god. Herod was enjoying the attention when suddenly he was struck by an angel. Luke tells us that he died of worms. Secular history tells us that Herod saw an omen – an owl, which he interpreted as a sign of his impending death. He was immediately struck by chest and stomach pains, was taken back to the palace and died 5 days later. As an impious Jew, one who ate pork, many would have seen his death as the result of his having eaten improperly cooked pork. This was a common idea of the time. But we know Herod died there in 44 AD. Luke makes sure we know it to be by the hand of God. Herod had accepted the glory given to him by the people, and God wasn't having it. But more importantly, if we go back to the “problem” at the beginning of the chapter, Herod, who was the problem, had been removed.

The barrier, the one who was doing all he could, with the authority of Rome behind him, to quash the church, had been removed. “Problem solved.” The passage has now been exegeted properly.

Conclusion and application:

We began the account with a barrier, a stumbling block, in the form of a person, albeit a person in power, to the growth and mission of the church. By the end of the account, that barrier, Herod, had been removed. We also saw how God intervened on behalf of Peter but didn't intervene on behalf of James. God's sovereignty has to be taken into account in the life of the believer. Jesus told the disciples they would face resistance and persecution. And we have seen that throughout the book of Acts. We see it throughout the Bible and we see it even now.

We saw people, regular people just like you and me, oscillate between faith and doubt. Just like you and me.

And we saw a barrier removed from the lives of the believers. Just as you and I have seen. Sometimes God moves in our lives in miraculous ways, and other times it seems that he doesn't move on our behalf, or even that He doesn't hear our prayers. But the truth is, that He always hears. And when we don't think He hears, He is moving in other ways for His purposes.

Mt. 16:18

18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The gates of Hell. Gates were a defensive weapon, used when an enemy had besieged a city, in order to keep the enemy from taking the city. Hell and all the powers operating within it, are on the defensive. The church will continue to grow and expand, taking back territory from the enemy. Sacred space will be reclaimed as the church grows. God's plan will come to fruition, despite how we may think it is languishing. From the Bible we are able to glean that if God's plan is going to happen, He will have to carry the burden. And while we have a part in it, He will make sure it happens, despite our times of doubt. Take heart, God loves you and you have a part in the plane of God. Continue to pray and look for the way God is moving in your life, especially when you don't think He is. You will be amazed by what you see. At the beginning of chapter 12, things looked hopeless to the believers in Jerusalem. But by the end of the chapter, things were back on track.

Acts 12:24

24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

And that is how we should see what they went through and it is the way we should see what we are going through today. Even now, while in the middle of a pandemic, churches are seeing a larger viewership in online services than they did before. God is using even this to grow His church. So take every advantage to share the message. It can only grow from here.