

Acts of the Apostles

Week 12:1-24

Persecution Breaks Out Again (12:1-5)

- A year after Jesus's death/resurrection, Herod Agrippa I (the grandson of Herod the Great) began persecuting the church (v 1).
 - o Unlike his grandfather, Herod Agrippa was loved by the Jewish establishment.
 - o He likely began persecuting the church at the behest of Jewish leaders who may have been alarmed at the early inclusion of gentiles.
- The persecution took aim at the church's leadership.
 - o Herod had James, the brother of John, put to death by sword – a possible reference to decapitation (v 2).
 - o When he saw that this pleased the Jewish leaders, he had Peter arrested also (v 3b).
 - o The heavy guard presence may have been a reaction to Peter's previous escape from prison.
- The church responded to persecution with increased prayer (v 5).

Peter Rescued from Jail (12:6-11).

- Luke went to great lengths to stress the presence of guards. There were four squads of four soldiers guarding him (v 4). Even as he slept, Peter was bound with two chains and sandwiched between two soldiers, with guards serving as sentries at the entrance to his cell (v 6).
- Rome's power proved not to be enough when an angel of the Lord appeared (v 7).
 - o Light shone in the cell – see Luke 24:4; Matthew 28:3.
 - o The angel awakened Peter by striking him (v 7).
 - o The angel commanded Peter to get up quickly (v 7), get dressed (v 8), wrap his cloak around him, and follow the angel out of the prison (v 8).
 - o As the angel spoke, the chains fell off Peter's wrists (v 7).
- Peter complied without understanding what was happening. He thought he was seeing a vision (v 9).
- It is only after they passed two sets of guards, came out of the iron gate into the city, and the angel left him standing on the city streets that Peter finally realized what was happening (vv 10-11).

Peter is Reunited with the Church (12:12-17).

- Peter headed to the house where the church was praying and knocked on the entrance (v 12-13a).
 - o A servant girl named Rhoda, came to the door, recognized Peter's voice, and then ran back to the those who were praying exclaiming, "Peter is at the door!" (v 13-14).
 - o The congregation first dismissed her as being delusional (v 15a). This isn't unlike the disciples' response to the women's news that Jesus had risen from the grave (Luke 24:11).
 - o As she continued to insist, they speculated that his angel was at the door (v 15b).
- Peter continued to knock, a reminder that reality does not change based upon our ability to comprehend it (v 16).

- The church finally opened the door and was astonished to find Peter there. While it is easy to critique what appears to be a lack of faith, remember that they had likely prayed the same way for James who was just recently put to death (see 12:2).
- Peter gave testimony to the work of God and asked them to make a report to the rest of the church about his deliverance (v 17).
- Peter quickly left for some other place – an indication that he may have gone into hiding for a while until things settled down.

The Guards are punished, Herod Dies, and the Gospel Stays on the Move (12:18-24).

- Understandably, when the officials discovered Peter was gone, a great commotion occurred (v 18).
- Herod put to death the soldiers who were guarding Peter (v 19).
- A short time later, Herod died while governing (vv 20-21).
 - The text mentions an interaction with the starving people of Tyre and Sidon – who were likely starving due to Herod's policies.
 - When Herod granted them relief, they praised him with blasphemous flattery (v 22).
 - The text notes that Herod did not redirect their praise to God (as Peter did in 11:26).
 - As a result, the Lord struck him with intestinal works, and he died.
- Luke followed Herod's death with the simple statement, "But the word of God continued to spread and flourish" (v 23). In the most understated of ways, Luke contrasted Herod's incompetence with the power of the gospel.

Thoughts

- **The Reality of Suffering for the Gospel:** Following Christ does not get a person out of trouble but into it. In this passage, James is put to death and Peter is thrown into prison. While Peter is miraculously delivered from jail this time, tradition holds that he was eventually put to death for his faith.
- **The Mystery of God's Deliverance:** Why does God deliver Peter but not James? I think it is safe to assume that the church prayed for James' deliverance in the same way they prayed for Peter's. Clearly, God is able to save. That God doesn't always miraculously thwart the plans of those who wish to harm the church confuses us, but it also reminds us that God's plans are bigger than keeping us out of temporary trouble. God is upending the world. Sometimes that upending is served by our faithful deaths. Sometimes that upending is served by our rescue. In either case, the gospel keeps on flourishing.
- **The Temporary Nature of Earthly Power:** No matter how powerful an earthly leader/country is, God is more so. All earthly powers are temporary. God's power is eternal. All earthly leaders will one day be food for worms, stopped by earthly foes or their own mortality. The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be stopped.

Sources

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