



Walking Through the Scripture Together

June 15 - 21, 2008

Acts 12:1-25

Steamroller

Text Acts 12:1-25 (TNIV)

1 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. **2** He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. **3** When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. **4** After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. **7** Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. **9** Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. **10** They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. **13** Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. **14** When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

15 "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. **17** Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. **19** After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined

the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. **20** He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

21 On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. **22** They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a mere mortal." **23** Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

24 But the word of God continued to increase and spread.

25 When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. **28** One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) **29** The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the believers living in Judea. **30** This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Thought

There is more than chronology going on in Luke's mind as he brings his book to its midpoint with the death of Herod. The first half of the book is predominantly concerned with the mission of the young church to Jerusalem and Judaea, with forays into Samaria and to various Gentiles but nothing too ambitious as yet. In other words, Jesus has been announced as the true Messiah, the God-given and God-appointed King of Israel, the one who would bring redemption to Israel and to the world. The official Jewish leaders, starting with the high priests, continuing with hard-line Pharisees, and now including the reigning king of the Jews himself, have all tried to squash this ridiculous nonsense and prevent it from spreading; but they have failed. The chief priests have been left spluttering angrily into their beards in Jerusalem; Saul of Tarsus, the most prominent and violent of the Pharisaic persecutors, has been converted; and now Herod Agrippa, having had an unsuccessful attempt at killing off the church's main leadership, is himself suddenly cut down through a swift and fatal disease.

All this is of course part of the theme which Luke never tires of telling from one angle or another. Things appear to go badly for the church, this way or that. There may be real reverses, tragedies, and disasters. And yet the God who has revealed himself in and through Jesus remains sovereign, and his purpose is going ahead whatever the authorities from without, or various controversies from within, may do to try to stop it.

Acts for Everyone

Small Group Discussion Guide

Lean In

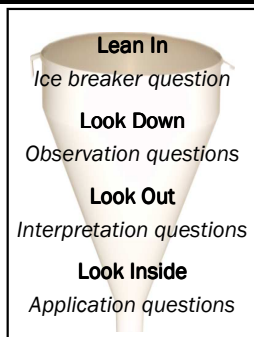
- Who was the most surprising person to show up at your door (or perhaps at your job or school)?

Look Down / Look Out

- Herod Agrippa I was appointed king over Judea — which included all the territory ruled over by his great uncle Herod the Great — from AD 38-44. Why do you think this “king of the Jews” would restart major persecution of the church in Jerusalem?
- Whom does he have executed? Whom does he imprison? What is the response of the Jewish leaders? How does the church respond?
- James is killed but Peter is released. Why one and not the other? Why are some healed and delivered and some not? How might Jesus’ answer to Peter in John 21:18-19 help us with this question?
- How did the believers respond to news that Peter was knocking on the door? If they were praying for Peter’s release, why were they so incredulous?
- What do you make of Herod’s sudden death? Why this tyrant and not others?

Look Inside

- How do you think you would have responded if you had been in that prayer meeting when Rhoda brought news that Peter was at the door? In other words, when you pray for rain do you carry an umbrella? Why or why not?
- What earthly powers and influences seem all powerful to you? How does this chapter put them in perspective?



details, details...

When he saw that it pleased the Jewish leaders

Knowing how profoundly the masses hated his family, Herod Agrippa I took every opportunity during his administration in Palestine to win their affection. When in Rome he was a cosmopolitan Roman. But when in Jerusalem, he acted the part of an observant Jew. Agrippa’s policy was preserving the Roman peace through preserving the status quo. He supported the majority within the land and ruthlessly suppressed minorities when they became disruptive.

Peter was kept in prison

Peter was likely imprisoned somewhere within the Fortress of Antonia, which overlooked the temple area to the north and had entrances to both the temple courts and the city. More important to Luke, for whom prayer is the natural atmosphere of God’s people and the normal context for divine activity (cf. 1:14, 24; 2:42; 4:24-31; 6:4, 6; 9:40; et al.), is the fact that “the church was earnestly praying to God for him [Peter].”

The house of Mary, mother of John also called Mark

Luke’s identification of Mary by her son implies that her son’s name was better known to his readers than hers. It also suggests that the John Mark referred to here was the one who was with Paul and Barnabas on a portion of the first missionary journey; namely, a cousin of Barnabas and the likely writer of the second gospel.

Tell James and the brothers

This would more than likely be James (Hebrew “Ya’akov” or Jacob) the Lord’s brother, who became a central figure in the Jerusalem church.

He ordered them executed

By Roman law, a guard who allowed his prisoner to escape was subject to that prisoner’s fate. It’s no wonder that there was “no small stir among the guards” over what had happened to Peter.

Family Discussion Guide

Day One Acts 12:1-5

Why do you think bad things happen to good people? Why does God let James be killed and Peter to be thrown into prison?

Day Two Acts 12:6-11

When have you seen God really answer prayer like he did with Peter? Do you think angels are still active in the world? Why or why not?

Day Three Acts 12:12-17

Since they were praying for Peter to be released, why do you think they have such a hard time believing that Peter was at the door? How often would you say you really believe your prayers are being or will be answered?

Day Four Acts 12:18-22

When have you found yourself wanting to show off like Herod did? When is it okay to be “proud” of something you have done? When does that become wrong?

Day Five Acts 12:23-25 Revelation 11:17-18

What do you learn from what happens to Herod? How does this story make you feel about God? Does it make you feel afraid or does it make you feel safer? Why?

Bible Life and Times

Herod Agrippa

The grandson of Herod the Great (the Herod of Matthew 2 who ordered the slaughter of the Bethlehem infants). He was sent to Rome as a boy where he was educated along with the children of the ruling



Coin of Herod Agrippa

dynasty — the Julio-Claudians. He was a companion of emperor Caligula, and played a pivotal role in the ascension of Claudius to power. Claudius repaid him by installing him as king over a restored Jewish state — all the Jewish territories united once again under one king (Agrippa was the first man in Palestine to bear the title “king” since his grandfather Herod the Great). Jerusalem was once again capital of Palestine as a whole, and received new city walls. His reign lasted seven years (AD 38-44), the last three ruling over all Palestine. His sudden death, dated in various ancient sources, provides one of the chronological anchors of the Acts account.

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, provides an independent witness to Herod’s sudden end:

Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea [...] There he exhibited shows in honor of the emperor [...] On the second day of the festival, Herod put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a truly wonderful contexture, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment was illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun’s rays upon it. It shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him. At that moment, his flatterers cried out [...] that he was a god; and they added, ‘Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.’

Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings [...] and he fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumor went abroad that he would certainly die in a little time. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign. [Flavius Josephus, Jewish Antiquities]