
Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Acts 12

Lesson 21 – What Hell couldn't Destroy

Acts 12:1-24 (NIV)

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 pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast 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 sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." 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 girl 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 brothers 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 a while. 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 man." 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.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Luke begins Acts 12 with the death of James but ends it with the deliverance of Peter? What does this teach us about God's sovereignty?

Key Scriptures: Acts 12:1-4

2. The sermon stated, "God's goodness is rooted in His character—not our circumstances." How does that truth challenge the way we normally evaluate whether God is being faithful?

Supporting Scriptures: Romans 8:28; Isaiah 55:8-9

3. Have you ever experienced a season where God was silent but later realized He was still working? Share how your perspective changed.

4. Acts 12:5 says, "The church was earnestly praying." What does "earnest prayer" look like today, and how is it different from simply saying prayers?

5. The sermon said, "Prayer is not preparation for the battle; prayer is the battle." Do you agree? Why or why not? How does this change the way we approach spiritual warfare?

Supporting Scripture: Ephesians 6:12

6. Peter was able to sleep the night before his execution. What does his peace reveal about his understanding of Christ's promises?

Supporting Scriptures: Acts 12:6; The Gospel of John 21:18-19

7. What "chains" in our lives most often rob us of peace (fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, finances, relationships, etc.)? How does the peace of Christ differ from simply having favorable circumstances?

Supporting Scripture: John 14:27

8. The sermon emphasized that "God often works suddenly after long periods of silence." Can you identify a time when God answered a prayer after you had almost given up?

Supporting Scripture: Acts 12:7-11

9. Peter was delivered because his assignment was not finished. How can knowing that God still has a purpose for your life help you persevere during difficult seasons?

10. Herod accepted glory that belonged to God alone. What are some subtle ways believers today can seek recognition that should belong to God?

Supporting Scriptures: Acts 12:21-23; Isaiah 42:8

11. Luke ends the chapter by saying, "But the word of God continued to increase and spread." Why is that statement the true climax of Acts 12? What does it teach us about the unstoppable nature of God's Kingdom?

Supporting Scripture: Acts 12:24

12. Looking at this entire chapter, which truth encouraged or challenged you the most?

- God's sovereignty when life doesn't make sense?
- The power of persistent prayer?

- Peace that cannot be stolen?
- God's ability to open impossible doors?
- The certainty that God's Kingdom will outlast every earthly kingdom?

Explain why that truth speaks to your current season.

Closing Challenge

After studying Acts 12, ask yourself:

- Where have I been asking "Why?" instead of trusting God's sovereignty?
- Am I responding to my struggles with worry or with earnest prayer?
- What prison have I accepted that God may be preparing to open?
- Am I seeking God's glory or my own?
- How can I live this week in a way that demonstrates confidence that no opposition can cancel God's purpose for my life?

13. Share your major takeaways from the Lesson/Sermon this week.

The Jerusalem Church is Miraculously Protected: God's Pattern for Deliverance from Persecution, 12:1-25

(12:1-25) **Introduction:** God always delivers His people either through or from the trials of this life, including persecution and martyrdom. This passage gives a picture of God's pattern for deliverance through persecution.

DEEPER STUDY #1 (12:1-25) Herod Agrippa I (A.D. 41-44)

1. (12:1-4) Persecution: there was the *first political attack* against the church. It had been about *eight years* since Stephen's death and the first persecution against the church. The persecution had been squelched by the hand of God in converting the arch-persecutor himself, Saul of Tarsus (see notes—Acts 9:1-9). However, throughout the eight years, feelings against the church had been growing until they reached the present peak (cp. "all the expectation of the Jews," Acts 12:11). The people were filled with animosity toward Christian believers. There were two primary reasons for their hatred. The public just did not understand...

- the teachings of Jesus and His followers: how the teachings fulfilled the law; how they could be reconciled with Jewish religion.
- the evangelistic outbreak of the church: that Jewish believers would be so full of fervor for Christ that they would reach out to convert the whole world. Apparently, the conversion of Cornelius and the founding of churches throughout the Gentile world upset some of the Jews to no end.

Herod, being the shrewd politician he was, saw an opportunity to please the Jews by persecuting and seeking to destroy the church. If he could please the Jews, it would help...

- keep the Jews quiet, keep them supporting Rome's policies.
- solidify his own prestige and power with the authorities back in Rome.

Herod launched the government's attack against the leaders of the church. (See Deeper Study #1, Herod Agrippa I—Acts 12:1-25 for more discussion.)

1. Persecution. The word "vex" or "persecute" (*kakōsai* ^{PWS: 4217}) means to oppress, to torment, to harm, to do evil against. Certain leaders in the church were arrested and imprisoned and apparently tortured. A person can just imagine the believers being man-handled and molested as the persecuted of every generation so often are, their homes and property being destroyed and confiscated or stolen.

2. Murder. One of the persons killed was James, the brother of John, one of the three leading apostles of the Lord (see also Deeper Study #4—Matthew 10:2; Deeper Study #5—Matthew 10:2; and Deeper Study #6—Matthew 10:2). Nothing is said about James in the book of Acts except that he was martyred. But the fact that Herod would attempt to silence him is clear evidence that James was very active in serving Christ. Christ had told James he would suffer martyrdom (Matthew 20:23). God makes a glorious promise to the believer who is persecuted.

"If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Romans 8:17).

3. Imprisonment. The persecution of the church's leaders pleased the Jews, especially the murder of one of the Lord's leading apostles. Herod's plan seemed to be working. Note three things.

a. It was the Passover season, the days of unleavened bread. (See Deeper Study #1—Matthew 26:17; note—Luke 22:1 and Deeper Study #1—Luke 22:1.) Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims had flooded into the city of Jerusalem. As on any festive occasion, there was a party-like atmosphere hovering over the city. The people were filled with a festive, merry spirit. Herod had a unique chance to really gain popularity among multitudes of people.

b. Herod was so elated with the response of the Jews, he lurched forward with the boldest plot imaginable: the arrest and jailing of *the leader* himself, Peter the apostle. Note: Herod was planning to execute Peter after the Passover. Jewish law did not allow executions during the Passover Feast. Also note: this was Peter's third imprisonment for the sake of his Lord (cp. Acts 4:3; Acts 5:18; Acts 12:4-5).

c. Herod had Peter heavily guarded (see Deeper Study #2—Acts 12:3-4).

"But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues" (Matthew 10:17).

"Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9; cp. Luke 21:12-13).

"Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also" (John 15:20).

"These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me" (John 16:1-3).

DEEPER STUDY #2 (12:3-4) Prisoners

2. (12:5-17) Persecution— Deliverance: there was God's pattern for deliverance. Note a significant point: God's providence saved Peter but not James. Why? Very simply, it was time for James to join his Lord and receive the fruit of his labor for work done here on earth. Peter's work was not yet done. Believers must always remember, the day when they are to go to their Lord does come. God's will may be for the believer to suffer and bear martyrdom for His name's sake. God's plan may be to use the persecuted believer's faithfulness as a testimony to reach others.

God's pattern for delivering believers through or from persecution is fourfold.

1. There is the pattern of prayer. Church-wide prayer delivered Peter (Acts 12:5). Note three points.

a. The whole church was praying.

b. The church was doing all it could do, praying *specifically* for Peter's deliverance.

c. The words "without ceasing" (*ektenōs* ^{PWS: 4379}) mean fervently and earnestly continuing in prayer. The idea is intense prayer, prayer that captivates and focuses a person's concentration. The root meaning of the word is "to stretch out." The picture is that the church was stretched out, prostrate before God, earnestly and fervently crying out to Him for God's sovereign deliverance of Peter. The church could do nothing and they knew it. Peter's only hope was God.

2. There is the pattern of confidence. Confidence in God's will and care delivered Peter (Acts 12:6). Note that Peter was asleep, and it was the very night before his execution. Christ was meeting His dear servant's need, infusing him with His very special grace and peace. Peter sensed the very special trust and care of his Lord.

Thought 1. The Lord infuses His strength, peace, care, understanding, and marvelous grace to go through whatever trial confronts His dear servant.

"There hath no temptation [trial] taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

3. There is the pattern of God's miraculous work and the believer's obedience. Both were involved in delivering Peter (Acts 12:7-10). Note the Scripture and outline.

- a. The angel did not do for Peter what Peter could do for himself. Peter had to act; he had to obey the commands of the angel.
 - b. Once Peter was safely delivered out of danger, he was left on his own, left to work out his own deliverance. He was to continue his "walk by faith"...
- to return to the church and to the believers on his own.
 - to seek the Lord about remaining or leaving Jerusalem and in making any other decisions that needed to be made.

The point is this: God's miraculous deliverance involved only *what Peter could not do for himself*. When Peter was helpless, God then took over. This is the point of miracles. Miracles are acts of God, acts that men cannot do for themselves. They are worked by God and by Him alone; therefore, He and He alone gets the praise and honor.

4. There is the pattern of God's sovereign will (Acts 12:11). It was God's sovereign will for Peter to be delivered. It was not His will for James to be delivered. The true believer rests in God's sovereign will, knowing that God's will results in the greatest blessings. Peter thought he was having a vision (Acts 12:9), that he was in some semi-conscious state, dreaming of God delivering him. Peter was startled; it took a moment to collect his thoughts and grasp what had happened. When he did, he realized...

- that God had delivered him by His sovereign will.
- that God still had a purpose for him on earth.
- that he still had a ministry to perform for the Lord.

He quickly sized up the situation and fled the city, for he knew Herod would have the soldiers searching for him as soon as his escape was discovered. But before fleeing, Peter decided to quickly visit the house of Mary (the mother of John Mark), hoping some of the believers were gathered there. He needed to let them know God had delivered him and where he was fleeing.

Thought 1. Again, note how God expects His people to *work out their own salvation* (deliverance) when it is in their power to do so. Now note the result of God delivering His dear servant. The Scripture and outline points are sufficient to see the results. Every miracle performed by God causes the same results—of course, all to varying degrees.

Note how the church had been praying ever so fervently, yet not really expecting a miracle. We must not be too critical, however. They had already witnessed the death of some outstanding leaders, two of which are named, Stephen the deacon and James the apostle.

"Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 18:19).

"Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24).

"If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7).

"And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (1 John 3:22).

DEEPER STUDY #3 (12:12) Mary, Mother of John Mark

3. (12:18-23) Herod, Death of— Judgment: there was God's sovereign wrath, His vindication of the church. God never has and never will allow the persecution of His followers to go on and on. God is longsuffering, wanting all to repent and to turn to Him, but He tolerates evil for only so long. Every man has to give an account for his evil deeds. Herod's time had now come. The judgment of God fell and fell swiftly.

1. The sins of Herod were very serious. He was guilty...

- of opposing God. He violently persecuted God's church, which was equal to persecuting the Lord Himself. He was determined to wipe the church off the face of the earth (Acts 12:1-4; cp. Luke 10:16; Acts 9:4; 1 Cor. 8:12).
- of murder: killing the servants of God, apparently plotting to kill them all (Acts 12:2-4).
- of loving the world: its power, position, and influence (Acts 12:3).
- of hypocrisy and deception: pretending to be religious—all for power and position.
- of wrath and lack of compassion (Acts 12:19): it was Roman law that the keepers of escaped prisoners were subject to bear the same punishment as the prisoner.
- of hostile and unwise leadership (Acts 12:20): the dispute with Tyre and Sidon is not explained, but Herod's nature is seen in the word "displeased" (*ēn thumomachōn* ^{PWS:1093}). The word means to be inflamed, to be filled with violent hostility. It is very hot anger, an emotion that should never characterize the leader of a nation.
- of pride: the pride of office, position, and person (Acts 12:21).
- of self-glory and self-exaltation (Acts 12:22): he willingly received the declaration that he was a god (Acts 12:22).

2. The death of Herod was under the sovereign will of God. Herod's time had run out; his sin could not be allowed anymore. The day of God's wrath against a heart so hardened in sin had arrived. Sitting there on the throne, Herod was immediately stricken down with a severe stroke of some sort. His body was being "eaten of worms" (*skōlēkobrōtos* ^{PWS:1226}). The word "*skolex*" was used by the Greeks to refer to intestinal worms. Josephus, the renown historian of that day, reported that Herod lingered for five days, suffering great pain in the

area of the stomach (Flavius Josephus. *Josephus Complete Works*. Translated by William Whiston. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1960. Ant. 19.8.2).

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

"How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation: which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him" (Hebrews 2:3).

"As righteousness tendeth to life; so he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death" (Proverbs 11:19).

"Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4).

4. (12:24-25) Church: there was the church marching on triumphantly.

1. The words "grew and multiplied" (*ēuxanen kai eplēthuneto* ^{PWS: 1807}) mean that the church kept on growing and multiplying. The progress of God's Word could not be stopped. Men and governments might try to stop it. They might persecute, imprison, and kill those who proclaim God's Word; but their efforts to silence the Word will always be to no avail. God overrules all and always will.

⇒ He has ordained His Word to be proclaimed, and it shall be by all those who are truly His.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

⇒ He has ordained His Word to bear fruit, to grow and multiply, never to return to Him void (Isaiah 55:11).

"He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him" (Psalms 126:6).

"Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1).

2. A young man was discipled, a young man destined for greatness. Barnabas and Saul had brought relief goods from Antioch to the famine-stricken churches throughout Judea and Jerusalem (cp. Acts 11:27-30). They were

now returning to Antioch, and note what happened. John Mark, a young disciple, had joined them. (See Deeper Study #4, Mark—Acts 12:25.) This was a young man who was destined by God...

- to be discipled by three of God's greatest servants: Paul, Barnabas, and Peter.
- to write one of the four gospels of the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark.

"Go ye therefore, and teach [make disciples, Greek] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19-20).

"And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

DEEPER STUDY #4 (12:25) John Mark

DEEPER STUDY #1

(12:1-25) **Herod Agrippa I** (A.D. 41-44): the facts concerning Herod Agrippa I are interesting.

⇒ He was the grandson of Herod the Great who had tried to kill the baby Jesus by murdering all the children (see Deeper Study #3—Matthew 2:3-4).

⇒ He was the nephew of Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist killed (see Deeper Study #1—Matthew 14:1-14; and Deeper Study #2—Matthew 14:1-14).

⇒ He was born about 10 B.C., reared and educated in Rome.

⇒ He became king over Palestine and ruled between A.D. 41-44.

⇒ He sought the popularity of the Jewish people by pretending to be a Jewish convert. He publicly kept the Jewish law and feasts, seeking the support and loyalty of the people. It was this that caused him to turn against the church. He was seeking the favor of the people, their approval and loyalty (cp. Acts 12:3). Herod was a shrewd politician, able to maneuver and manipulate people to his advantage.

Note this: for some time the Jewish people had begun to turn against Christian believers. The public misunderstood the teaching and the evangelistic fervor of Christians. The idea of reaching out to Gentiles and converting the whole world to Christ was just unheard of. Apparently a terrible animosity had built up against the Christian church. Herod sought to capitalize upon the animosity to gain more support and loyalty of the people by destroying the leaders of the church. He felt such action would gain their favor and help

tremendously in maintaining peace throughout Palestine—all of which would solidify his power and esteem in Rome.

DEEPER STUDY #2

(12:3-4) **Prisoners:** Peter was probably guarded by sixteen different soldiers. Four soldiers at a time served two separate three-hour watches within a twenty-four hour stretch. One wrist of the prisoner was usually chained to the wrist of a guard. Note the extra security with Peter: both wrists were chained (Acts 12:6). The reason for the extra security with Peter was the huge throng of pilgrims visiting the city during the Passover. In the midst of the mass confusion within the city, Herod felt some of Peter's friends might attempt a rescue.

DEEPER STUDY #3

(12:12) **Mary, Mother of John Mark:** Mary was also the aunt of the missionary Barnabas (cp. Col. 4:10). This is the only clear mention of her in Scripture. She was probably a widow, for her husband is never mentioned. She was apparently wealthy, the owner of considerable property. She owned a huge house large enough for believers to hold services there. There was also a gate and a portress to greet guests who entered the home. This may point to a palace-like house (Acts 12:13. Cp. the high priest's palace, John 18:16.)

Apparently Mary was a very godly woman, a dynamic example for all women of every generation. As will be seen she was also a godly mother, rearing her son John Mark in the gospel. She eventually encouraged him to commit his life to missions just as Paul and Barnabas, his cousin, had done.

DEEPER STUDY #4

(12:25) **John Mark:** John Mark had a godly mother (Acts 12:12). It seems that her home was the center of the Christian church (Acts 12:12). In fact, her home may have been the Upper Room which Jesus used for the Last Supper (Luke 22:10f) and for Pentecost (Acts 1:13). John Mark was related to Barnabas (Col. 4:10) and was a disciple of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25). As a young man and disciple something happened that caused his faith to weaken, and he forsook Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13; Acts 15:38). However, he later recommitted his life to missionary service and became so staunch in his commitment that he was willing to let Paul and Barnabas argue over his seriousness and divide their team efforts over him (Acts 15:36-40). Scripture is silent about what happened after this. Mark is seen only as a man who had redeemed himself in the eyes of Paul (Col. 4:10; Philemon 1:24; 2 Tim. 4:11). And Peter said Mark was serving with him (1 Peter 5:13). When writing to the churches of Asia Minor, Peter sent his special greetings from Mark. This points toward the churches knowing Mark personally. Mark apparently joined Peter on his missionary journeys. This is significant, for it means that much of what is in Mark's gospel probably comes from what Peter had told him. The Gospel of Mark, which Mark wrote, was probably the preaching material of Peter. (See note—'Acts 13:13.) John Mark also may have been the man carrying the pitcher of water as a sign for the disciples to approach him in order to secure a room for the Passover (Luke 22:10f). He was probably the young man who fled the scene of Jesus' arrest (Mark 14:51-52).

