

## SCRIPTURE STUDIES

**SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS****ACTS CHAPTER 12****“THE CHURCH IN PERILOUS TIMES”**

*“Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.”*  
(Acts 12:1)

How are we to live in perilous times? The early church affords us an example. The church was born in perilous times and it could be said that the church has been at her best in such times. The apostle Paul wrote to Pastor Timothy these words: *“in the last days perilous times shall come....”* (II Tim.3:1)

We have heard it said that, “A rolling stone gathers no moss.” So it was with the early church. There was no time to gather moss for the Christian movement was gaining momentum and new and exciting, though not always pleasant things, were happening every day.

We have noticed all along, through the preceding chapters of the book of Acts, how that the threats to the church were on the increase. Indeed, they continue to increase throughout the Book of Acts. The apostle Paul records some of the many perils which he, and I am sure others as well, endured during this time, in II Corinthians chapter 11:22-27.

As the doors of opportunity opened before them, the deeds of opposition increased around them. Someone has said, “The doors of opportunity swing on the hinges of opposition.” This was certainly true in the early days of the first church. Notice:

**I. THE MOUNTING PERIL.** Acts 12:1-11

Acts chapter 12 introduces us to a new type of opposition. We read, *“Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.”* (12:1) The peril to the early church in Acts 12 involved three principal persons: Herod, James and Peter; or, a murderer, a martyr and a minister. The first to be brought to our attention is a murderer.

**A. The murderer.** – v.1

*“Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.”*

This was Herod Agrippa the 1st, whose uncle, Herod Antipas, had murdered John the Baptist and whose grandfather had killed all the male children two years old and under in Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus.

This Herod was preeminently a politician. He was, to say the least, an opportunist for, according to Josephus, he appeared to observe certain Jewish customs and was therefore very popular with the Jews. He desired to retain his position and in order to do so found it necessary to please the Jews, therefore, he *“stretched out his hand to harass some from the church”* and that pleased the Jews.

This is the first time that we have recorded persecution of Christians by a secular political power. Up until this time the persecution had come from the Jewish rulers -- now the secular rulers begin persecution.

**B. The martyr.** – v.2

*"And he killed James the brother of John with the sword."*

When Herod exerted the power of the throne and had James killed, he killed a great leader in the early church. This James is not to be confused with the James who was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem. This James was the brother of John. They had been called the "Sons of thunder" by the Lord Jesus Christ. (Mark 3:17)

A prophetic statement by our Lord concerning James and John is recorded in Mark's Gospel as follows, *"And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him, saying, Master, we would that you would do for us whatever we desire....grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.... Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized...."* (Mark 10:35-39)

Notice those last words: *"You will indeed drink the cup that I drink."* That is the prophecy. This prophecy was fulfilled when Herod Agrippa, had James killed. What was the crime that he had committed? He was not demonstrating against Rome, he was simply and solely preaching the message of salvation through Jesus Christ! Indeed, as Jesus had said, *"In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33)

**C. The minister** – v.3

*"And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also."*

Herod saw that the killing of James pleased the Jews and so he had Peter arrested also. *"Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church."* (v.1) Note that he *"harassed some from the church."* He concentrated upon the visible, human leadership of the church, not knowing that The Head of the Church was the Lord Jesus Christ. Little did he know that in doing so he was signing his own death warrant!

The account of Peter's imprisonment and escape is very interesting. James was the leader, but Peter was the main spokesman. That Peter was considered "big game" is evident from the fact that 16 soldiers were assigned to guard him even though he was in prison and in chains. The jailbreak initiated by the angel resulted in the soldiers who were guarding Peter being put to death. (v.19)

Herod was a multiple murderer -- we have recorded here in chapter 12 alone that he killed 17 men -- James and the 16 guards; therefore, to kill Peter, which certainly he intended doing, would not have caused him any more pangs of conscience.

In David's song of Thanksgiving recorded in I Chronicles 16:20 – 22, he sings of God that: *"He rebuked kings for their sakes, Saying, "Do not touch My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm."* Although Herod left town and went from Judea to Caesarea, will he go free after touching God's servants the way he does, killing James and imprisoning Peter? Stay tuned, we shall see shortly!

## **II. THE MEETING FOR PRAYER.** - Acts 12:12-17

Peter was in prison: *"Peter was kept in prison"* - v.5; the church was in prayer: *"many were gathered together praying."* - v.12. This is the key to the entire chapter.

### **A. The assembled persons.**

While Peter was sleeping in prison, a company of Christians was praying -- in fact, a cottage prayer meeting was going on at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. They were having an all night prayer meeting. They did not have a "sit-in"; did not parade around with placards demanding Peter's release; did not hire a lawyer to intercede with Herod for Peter's release; did not contact their political representative, etc. They prayed!

**Illustration:** I was speaking in a church in Florida when, after the evening service, the choir director was leading the choir as they rehearsed the song, "Just Keep On Praying." He said to the choir, "Don't hold on to praying too long!" He meant, "Don't hold on to the word, "praying" too long." I chuckled and thought to myself, "That is exactly what we need to do!"

Martin Luther said, "I would rather be opposed by an army than by 100 men and women praying." The world at its worst needs the church at its best and the church is at its best when it is on its knees in prayer! *"The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds."* (II Cor. 10:4)

### **B. The answered prayer.** -- Acts 12:13-14

Because of their intercession, God intervened. He sent an angel to break Peter out of jail! Either the angel was very quiet about his business or the 16 soldiers were deep sleepers -- I think that it was the former rather than the latter. The angel took off the chains that bound Peter; brought clothing and sandals for Peter to wear and instructed him to dress himself; opened the prison doors and led Peter out. An angelic jailbreak!

The writer of Hebrews tells us that the angels are *"ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those who are the heirs of salvation."* (Hebrews 1:4) and Psalm 34 reminds us that *"The angel of the Lord in camps around those that fear him and delivers them."* (v.7)

### **C. The astounded pray-ers.** – Acts 12:13-17

Were they praying that through some turn of events the next day, Peter would be set free, or that Herod would change his mind. Surely they were not praying that God would send an angel and awaken Peter and lead him out of the prison. This is evident from their reaction when Peter interrupted them in the middle of their prayer meeting!

Here we have unbelieving believers. At first they said to the girl who answered the door at Peter's knock, "You are mad." Then they said, "It is his angel." Finally, when they saw Peter "They were amazed!" How true to life this is -- when we ask God for something and he

answers our prayer, sometimes we can hardly believe that it has come to pass. We had better learn not to be amazed at anything God does in answer to prayer.

**Illustration:** Mr. and Mrs. Huber were missionaries to Africa and they related the following story: They were to leave their mission station in two months but found that they barely had enough powdered milk to last for the two months and meet the needs of their five month old baby and themselves. At the same time a lady missionary suddenly became seriously ill and could only take milk.

To further complicate the situation, a native baby which had been neglected was brought to them, and of course, it too, needed to have milk. But they only had the meager supply of powdered milk that would not begin to meet the need of two babies and three adults for two months. Therefore, they began to pray earnestly for the much needed milk.

That evening Mrs. Huber was reading her Bible and came across this verse in Proverbs: *“You shall have enough goats’ milk for your food, for the food of your household, and the nourishment of your maidservants.”* (Prov. 27:27)

She showed her husband the verse and they both agreed this was God's verse for them and they claimed that verse and began to pray for milk. But there were no goats in the entire region! Yet they believed God. The next day a very ungodly man, one who had never offered to help them before, indeed had fought their work, came to their door and asked, "Can you use some goat's milk?"

He had just returned from a long journey with his truck where he had bought some goats and was bringing them back to his home. It was late in the evening and time to milk the goats and he happened to stop at the missionary's house. They gladly milked the goats and they had all the goat milk that they needed. Later the missionaries found out that there were no other goats within hundreds of miles! Indeed, "God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform!"

### **III. THE MONARCH PERISHES.** - Acts 12:21-25

Herod's pride was terribly hurt when his plans for Peter went awry, being interrupted by a miraculous delivery from prison. He left Jerusalem in a temper tantrum and went down to Caesarea where he made his final and fatal mistake. Notice what followed:

#### **A. Herod exulting.** – v. 21

*“So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.”*

#### **B. Herod extolled.** – v. 22

*“And the people kept shouting, “The voice of a god and not of a man!”*

#### **C. Herod expiring.** – v. 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.”*

He was a worm-eaten king! *"For whoever exalts himself will be humbled."* (Luke 14:11) Adolf Hitler, the infamous killer of millions of Jews, hated Jews. But did you know that his daughter married a Jew? God will not be mocked!

**CONCLUSION:**

One might think that with all of the opposition and oppression from secular as well as religious leaders that the church would dwindle. However, verse 24 records that, *"The word of God grew and multiplied."* Jesus declared, *"The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."* (Matt. 16:18)

What do we learn from the church's perilous past that will help us to live in our perilous present? Let us ask James, Peter and others:

"James, what can you tell us?" - *"Be faithful unto death!"*

"Peter, what can you tell us?" - *"Bars do not a prison make!"*

"Praying believers in the early church, what can you tell us?"

*"God answers prayer in the morning,  
God answers prayer at noon;  
God answers prayer in the evening,  
So keep your heart I tune!"*

"Herod, if you could speak from the grave, what would you tell us?" - *"Pride goes before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction."*

What is your impossible situation? Moses had his Red Sea; David had his Goliath; Peter had his prison, etc. What is your impossible situation? Remember, every difficult situation for the Christian is a great opportunity brilliantly disguised as an impossibility! This chapter illustrates the truth that, "Man proposes but God disposes!"

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