

Divine Intervention

Acts 12

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The world in which we live is increasingly atheistic. The general principle in our society is that everything should proceed under the assumption that there is no God and that He has no say over anything that we do as a nation. Individuals are welcome to believe in a deity if they so choose, but our governments, schools, and most businesses should function as though God does not exist.

I find it ironic, however, that within these realms, people still refer to certain events as “acts of God.” Many contracts have clauses in them that provide coverage in the event of an act of God. Schools and governments are sometimes allowed to close without penalty when an incident is deemed an act of God. And insurance companies will often recognize certain natural disasters as an act of God, indicating that no one could have prevented the loss that happened. For all the atheistic language and mindsets in our world today, people still recognize and speak of “acts of God.”

In our passage this morning, we get to see a few of God’s acts. We see it in the way the Lord dealt with the Apostle Peter, and we also see it in the way He dealt with Herod. We even see it in the way He dealt with the Apostle James. There is much for us to learn in this fascinating and often surprising passage.

Herod Agrippa

Luke once again shifts the focus from Antioch back to Jerusalem. While the church was thriving in Antioch, we discover a new round of persecution breaking out in Jerusalem.

About that time King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church. ² He had the apostle James (John’s brother) killed with a sword. ³ When Herod saw how much this pleased the Jewish people, he also arrested Peter. (This took place during the Passover celebration.) ⁴ Then he imprisoned him, placing him under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover. ⁵ But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him. (Acts 12:1-5, NLT)

Herod Agrippa chose to execute the Apostle James. There are several different people named James we often encounter in the New Testament. One is Jesus’ brother, who became one of the primary leaders in the church in Jerusalem. Another is James son of Alphaeus, about whom we know very little. The other is the brother of John. Throughout the gospel there are many times where we read that Jesus did something with “Peter, James, and John.” James was part of the inner circle of believers and surely continued to be a significant leader in the early church. It is this James who was arrested and executed at the hands of Herod Agrippa.

Many people do not realize that “King Herod” could actually refer to many different people, because Herod was a family name, and there were several members of the

family who reigned as king in some capacity. The bible mentions 5 different Herods (though there were more than just these 5.)

Herod the Great was the king in power when Jesus was born. He was the one who ordered the execution of all children aged 2 and younger in Bethlehem. He was a ruthless king, but also a great builder. He built the city of Caesarea and began the process of expanding the temple (a process that was still going on in the book of Acts!)

Herod Archelaus was his son. Those who thought Herod the Great was bad were shocked to discover Archelaus was even worse. He was unpredictable and ruthless.

Herod Antipas was in power during the ministry of Jesus. He participated in Jesus' trial and was the one who ordered John the Baptist to be killed to satisfy his wife.

Herod Agrippa I and Herod Agrippa II are both mentioned in the book of Acts. Agrippa II reigned later, and we will see him participating in one of Paul's trials.

Agrippa I is who we see in our story today. He lived quite a tumultuous life. In his early years he spent time in prison in Rome. But he made friends with two men who would later become emperor: Caligula and Claudius. Those friendships resulted in him being given the ability to rule over his family's kingdom in Judea and Galilee when these men ascended to the throne.

Agrippa was mostly a Jew in name only. He was familiar with Jewish practices, and even participated in Jewish rituals, but he was by no means a devout follower of God. He was, however, was shrewd in recognizing how to gain power and influence among the people. When he saw that having James arrested and killed pleased the Jewish religious leaders, he thought he could gain additional influence and power by doing something similar to Peter. So he had Peter arrested, with plans to kill him. But this was during the week of Passover, so he couldn't execute Peter until afterward.

Herod ordered that Peter be kept in prison until after the Passover had finished, at which point he could bring him out and make a public example of him. Herod may have heard about how Peter had escaped from prison once before, which is why his security detail seems overkill. He was chained to not one, but two guards at all times. Two other guards stood as sentries to ensure nothing happened. There were four squads of soldiers who rotated their time guarding Peter. Herod was taking no chances!

Peter's Escape

Despite Herod's best efforts, however, Peter did escape from the prison. It wasn't because Peter was a master escape artist, but because Herod was fighting against God, which is always a losing battle.

⁶ The night before Peter was to be placed on trial, he was asleep, fastened with two chains between two soldiers. Others stood guard at the prison gate.

⁷ Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter. The angel struck him on the side to awaken him and said, "Quick!

Get up!” And the chains fell off his wrists. ⁸ Then the angel told him, “Get dressed and put on your sandals.” And he did. “Now put on your coat and follow me,” the angel ordered. ⁹ So Peter left the cell, following the angel. But all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn’t realize it was actually happening. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guard posts and came to the iron gate leading to the city, and this opened for them all by itself. So they passed through and started walking down the street, and then the angel suddenly left him.

¹¹ Peter finally came to his senses. “It’s really true!” he said. “The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jewish leaders had planned to do to me!” ¹² When he realized this, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered for prayer. ¹³ He knocked at the door in the gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to open it. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the door, she ran back inside and told everyone, “Peter is standing at the door!” ¹⁵ “You’re out of your mind!” they said. When she insisted, they decided, “It must be his angel.” ¹⁶ Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking. When they finally opened the door and saw him, they were amazed. ¹⁷ He motioned for them to quiet down and told them how the Lord had led him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers what happened,” he said. And then he went to another place. (Acts 12:6-17, NLT)

The first thing we should notice about the story is that Peter was asleep in his prison cell on the night before his execution. This tells us something about his mental state. Peter did not see any need to worry. He had surely prayed for God’s deliverance but also rested in God’s providence. Later on, Peter would write,

Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. (1 Peter 5:7, NLT)

Clearly, he believed what he said! Peter was apparently so soundly asleep that when the angel arrived, he didn’t wake. The angel had to strike him on the side to wake him! His chains fell off, and then the angel told him to get dressed and follow him. As Peter passed through the gates of the prison and then the gates of the city, with the gates opening before them with no intervention from either himself or the angel, he thought it seemed like a dream. But then the angel left him and Peter was left in the cold night air alone. And he realized that it hadn’t been a dream, God had delivered him!

Peter knew he needed to get out of town, but before he did, he wanted to make sure the other believers knew what had happened. Apparently Mary, who was the mother of John Mark (who we will meet soon—he is also the author of the gospel of Mark), had a large home that was a frequent gathering place for the believers. Peter decided to go there and let them know what had happened before leaving town.

Luke tells us that many gathered there in prayer. They were surely praying for Peter’s release. Given the fact that it was the middle of the night, we have some idea of how committed they were to praying. They had spent the entire night together, lifting their

hearts together before God, asking that He would spare Peter from the fate that James had faced.

And that is when the humor of the story begins. As they were praying for Peter's deliverance, Peter showed up! They heard a knock at the gate and sent a young servant girl named Rhoda to go check on it. She recognized Peter's voice and was so excited to hear him that she didn't let him in and went to tell the others Peter was there! So Peter, the fugitive, continued to stand on the street and bang on the gate.

The believers gathered inside didn't believe Rhoda. They concluded that Peter couldn't possibly be outside, and if she was hearing his voice, then it must be an angel instead—an indication that Peter had been executed. You see the irony—they were praying for Peter's release but didn't expect it to actually happen! When Peter showed up, they couldn't believe it! How often are our prayers similarly faithless? How often do we pray for things without believing that God can (or will) do what we ask? Despite their failings, God answered their prayers.

Peter came inside and told them the news of what had happened. He asked them to relay the message to James (the brother of Jesus) and the other leaders of the church, so they would know what had happened. Peter then left Jerusalem.

Aftermath

The next morning the guards discovered, to their horror, that Peter was somehow gone. They couldn't explain it. Of course, Herod flew into a rage.

¹⁸ At dawn there was a great commotion among the soldiers about what had happened to Peter. ¹⁹ Herod Agrippa ordered a thorough search for him. When he couldn't be found, Herod interrogated the guards and sentenced them to death. Afterward Herod left Judea to stay in Caesarea for a while. (Acts 12:18-19, NLT)

Herod ordered a thorough search for Peter. When they couldn't find him, he ordered that the guards be given his sentence. They were executed. Herod was so mad that he also left town and went to Caesarea for a while.

While he was there, he dealt with a conflict with the people of Tyre and Sidon. When the conflict was resolved, Herod went to speak with them.

²⁰ Now Herod was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they sent a delegation to make peace with him because their cities were dependent upon Herod's country for food. The delegates won the support of Blastus, Herod's personal assistant, ²¹ and an appointment with Herod was granted. When the day arrived, Herod put on his royal robes, sat on his throne, and made a speech to them. ²² The people gave him a great ovation, shouting, "It's the voice of a god, not of a man!" ²³ Instantly, an angel of the Lord struck Herod with a sickness, because he accepted the people's worship instead of giving the glory to God. So he was consumed with worms and died.

²⁴ Meanwhile, the word of God continued to spread, and there were many new believers. ²⁵ When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission to Jerusalem, they returned, taking John Mark with them. (Acts 12:20-25, NLT)

These events may have been up to a year after the events of Peter's escape. Luke is not the only historian who records what happened next. Josephus, the noted Jewish historian also records the event. Josephus' account said that Herod wore robes woven with pure silver, so that his robes gleamed in the sunlight, making him almost too bright to look at. Herod gave a speech to the people, clearly seeking to assert his power and authority over them. The people, knowing the kind of man Herod was, responded by saying that they were clearly hearing from a god, not a man. Herod seemed to like this praise...God, however, did not.

Herod immediately fell ill. Luke (the doctor) tells us that Herod ended up being consumed from the inside out by worms, and he died. The clear implication was that this was God's judgment upon Herod. Despite all Herod's attempts to exercise control and authority over things, he was continually reminded that God will not be mocked. When you set yourself up as an enemy of God, you will always lose.

In contrast, Luke closes by telling us that the church continued to grow. Many believed, and the church was about to usher in the missionary age. God will always prevail.

Conclusions

This account is full of twists and turns, and even a great deal of humor. But it raises a few questions, and teaches us some important lessons as well.

What about angels? Angels feature prominently in this account. An angel delivers Peter and the believers assumed that Peter's angel was who was at the door. This raises lots of questions. The Bible doesn't teach a lot about angels, but does tell us that they are created beings, created by God for His service. People do not become angels; rather angels have existed since the beginning of time.

Angels are not to be worshiped. They are agents of God, sent to carry out His work on earth. We should not pray to angels; we should pray to God. They are powerful beings, but they also refuse worship, because they rightly recognize that God alone is worthy of worship. Their work is often unseen to us. We cannot know when, where, or how God will cause angels to act. We may not even know they are there. What we do know is that there is a spiritual realm which is real, but unseen. And the spiritual realm has a profound effect on our physical existence as well.

What about James? We see God's miraculous deliverance of Peter, but the same did not happen to James. Surely the church had prayed just as fervently for his deliverance. Why did God allow him to be killed? Was it that Peter was better or more important than James? No. We don't know the reason God allowed James to die in this way at this time but delivered Peter. We do know that God had a plan and a purpose for both of them. It is noteworthy that we believe that 11 of the 12 apostles (including Peter) were

ultimately killed for their faith. John was tortured, but died of old age (meaning his brother was the first apostle to die, and he was the last). God had a plan and a purpose for each of them. God doesn't always act the way we think He should, but that doesn't mean He isn't listening. God allowed James to be killed for a reason, and He allowed Peter to be spared for a reason. Peter seemed at peace with this. I suspect James was as well. They trusted that God knew better than they did.

So what does all of this teach us?

First, God's ways are higher than ours. We often do not know why God chooses to act (or not act) as He does. We know that He is in control, but He often does not work on our timetable. God eventually caused Herod to die, but that likely didn't happen for another year. In our minds, it would have been better for him to die before he had the chance to kill James. But God had other plans. Instead of fretting over the fact that we don't understand all the how, when, and why of what God will do, we should rest in His character. As Peter said, we can cast our anxieties on Him, knowing He cares for us. If we can keep that in mind, it takes a huge load off our minds, no matter what we face.

Second, we should pray with faith. Praying with faith involves believing two different things at once. First, God can do anything. We must not doubt that God can answer the prayers we pray. We must remember that God can work in even the most dire of situations. In the book of James, he tells us that we do not have because we do not ask God. He also says we need to ask with right motives, but many times we don't see God move because we don't ask Him to! Believe God can do everything, and ask for what you believe is good and right. But the other truth we must remember is that God knows better than we do. God doesn't always do what we ask. When He doesn't act as we desire, we shouldn't doubt that He cares or listens to us, we should trust that He knows what He is doing! If we hold those two truths in our minds as we pray, we can pray boldly, and I suspect, we will see God move mightily.

Finally, we have been delivered too! Peter's deliverance was a dramatic example of God working to set someone free from bondage, but every believer has experienced the same thing. It is only by God's miraculous working that any of us are freed from our slavery to sin and brought into the light of God's grace. The moment we lose sight of that, the moment we begin to believe we have done something to merit God's favor, we put ourselves in a weakened position. It is when we recognize that everything we have is from God's hand that we begin to understand just how much He loves us, and we are driven to a place of much deeper trust in Him. And then we begin to see how life was meant to be lived. We need to remember our deliverance as much as we remember Peter's.

This passage reminds us that God is always at work, often at ways we cannot perceive or understand. As believers, we are to pray boldly, confidently, and also humbly. The unbelieving world understands that God is still active in our world—maybe we as believers ought to do the same.

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