

The Book of Acts / The History of the Apostles

Lesson 45 – Acts 12:1-24 – Persecution and Provision

INTRODUCTION

In this section, we left off with Herod Agrippa I. In his desire to appease the Jewish authorities, he kills James, the brother of John. This is the first Apostle to be killed. Remember that the Sanhedrin had already tried to silence, punish, and persecute the Apostles to no avail. The Apostles became untouchable, but now, with the execution of James, they are emboldened to take action. The text is not clear but the end of this section indicates that Agrippa I, being heralded as a god, may have thought that he was battling against the God of the Apostles and won, having put to death one of His Apostles.

Now, we see Agrippa taking on Peter, the de facto leader of the Apostles. If he can dispose of Peter, then the Apostles are no more. Peter is imprisoned during the days of Unleavened Bread, the leadup to the Passover. After the Passover, Agrippa I intended to make a spectacle out of Peter and put him to death as well.

ACTS 12:5-19 – PERSECUTION AND PROVISION

Verse 5—Peter was kept in prison. This prison was likely the fortress Antonia on the Temple Mount. As a trusted client ruler of Rome, Agrippa would have his own army, so the soldiers mentioned here need not be Romans, although they are described in terms of Roman organization and probably Roman trained.

Squad - τετράδιον tetradion – Four sets of four soldiers (sixteen soldiers total). Perhaps these groups of four worked in four three-hour shifts during the night. We know that Agrippa feared armed resistance, and he undoubtedly knew of Peter's previous escape under guard, so heavy security was warranted in his eyes.

On the other hand, intense (eager) prayer was being made by the assembly, before God, on Peter's behalf.

What were they praying? Freedom, courage, opportunity? It does not say specifically, so we do not want to make any assumptions.

The prayers of the saints in Scripture are designed to give glory to God, opportunity for the gospel, for spiritual betterment.

Acts 16:25; 2 Corinthians 13:7-9; Philippians 1:9; Colossians 1:9; 4:3;

2 Thessalonians 3:1; Hebrews 13:18-19; 1 Peter 4:6-8; Jude 19-21

It is not to say that they did not pray for Peter's safety, well-being, and release. But the recorded content of prayers were more towards the glory of God and the success of the mission. James had already been executed, they probably expected the same outcome for Peter.

Like in Acts 5:19-21 – Peter was in prison for the entire time upto being sent for. Then a very detailed escape was recorded.

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Verse 6 – Peter was on the verge of being summoned for execution and he was sleeping between two soldiers. Bound with two chains (presumably one chain bound to each soldier) and a guard in from of the doors.

Verse 7 – An angel came into the cell and had to wake Peter from sleep physically. And then the chains fell off his hands.

Verse 8 – Put your shoes on and get dressed.

Verse 9 – Peter followed, but though he saw a vision, he did not realize that he was being freed. Peter did not expect to be freed from prison.

Verse 10—This would have been the city gate leading out of the city proper, which was locked at night for security. When they got out to the street, the angel left him.

Verse 11 – Peter realized that he was delivered from Agrippa I and the certain expectation of death. What is different between this escape and the previous one in Acts 5 is that he was not instructed to go into the temple to teach.

Verse 12 – Peter went to John Mark's mother's house where many were gathered together and were praying.

Verses 13-15 – Peter knocked on the outer door and when Rhonda heard Peter she did not open the outer door but ran inside to tell everyone that Peter is at the door.

In verse 15, they do not believe it is Peter, but it is his angel. Most commentaries teach this as the people inside praying were telling Ronda that she was crazy, that it was not Peter at the door but Peter's celestial guardian angel knocking at the door.

The word angel is “ἄγγελος angelos,” the word means messenger (James 2:25). In the previous five verses, the messenger was sent from the Lord, and it explicitly states, “an Angel of the Lord.” So when they say it is Peter's angel what do we conclude that they think is happening?

The language would have us conclude that they were anticipating a messenger from Peter (they were expecting Peter to still be in prison); they anticipated a message from Peter through a messenger, not an angelic being.

Verse 16 – Peter kept on knocking and when it was opened they saw it was Peter and they were amazed.

Verse 17 – Peter quieted them down, then told them of the jail break from the angel of the Lord. Then he told them to tell James and the brethren, then he left.

Verses 18-19 tell of the aftermath. The sixteen soldiers were stirred about what happened to Peter. Then Herod came and looked for Peter, and when Peter could not be found, the guards were questioned and promptly executed. He, Herod Agrippa I left Judea and went to Caesarea.

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The account of Peter's escape reminds us of other miraculous interventions of God. Daniel in the lion's den, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and Peter's own escape earlier in Acts. It is important to note that there is no statement by any of God's servants of an expectation of survival.

Hebrews 11:32-40 – God chose to preserve some and others were not. What is the difference? It is God's choice, and it was done for his glory. Why was James executed and Peter delivered? The reason Peter was preserved was for the glory of God, the fame of Jesus, and the furtherance of the Gospel. Perhaps it was to stave off the aggression of the Sanhedrin.

What we do not do is take this as promise or formula.

ACTS 12:20-23 – DEATH OF HEROD AGRIPPA I

While in the region of Caesarea, Herod became angry with Tyre and Sidon. The rulers of those cities came to Herod and asked for peace because they depended upon Herod's regions for food. Remember the prophecy from Agabus; the famine was probably ramping up.

Herod Agrippa I liked to flaunt his power. His public meeting with these emissaries was in the theater of Caesarea, built by his grandfather, Herod the Great; the foundations of this theater still remain today (This was a mercantile port city easily accessible to Tyrian and Sidonian delegates). He spoke in judgment, demanding their respect for food, but God judged him; being a ruler of the Jews, God would make a spectacle out of him as he intended to do of one of His Apostles. With Herod's death came peace and flourishing of the Gospel, and the word of the Lord continued to grow, and many more people believed in Jesus.

Josephus provides a detailed account of the death of Herod Agrippa I in his work *Antiquities of the Jews* (19:8:2). He describes how Agrippa, after reigning for three years over Judea, attended a festival in Caesarea to honor Caesar. During the event, Agrippa wore a garment made entirely of silver, which reflected the sunlight in a dazzling manner. This led the crowd to proclaim him as a god.

However, Agrippa did not rebuke their flattery, and shortly afterward, he saw an owl, which he interpreted as a bad omen. He then experienced severe abdominal pain and declared that he was about to die, acknowledging that Providence was reproofing him. Agrippa was carried to his palace, and despite the people's prayers for his recovery, he passed away.