

Acts of God
Against
Acts of Tyrants
Against
Acts of the Apostles
In Acts 12

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, February 16, 2022

That is a lot of acts! I have taught the book of Acts with chapter 12 several times over the last 51 years. Teaching it in 2022 offers new insights on current politicians. Nations long governed by laws enacted by representatives of the people have reverted to patterns that existed before the English Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1776. Under the guise of an “emergency,” principles of liberty articulated by John Locke in “On Civil Liberty” and held as basic to governance for over 300 years have been overthrown in favor of monarchical rule by petty tyrants at all levels of government. The shift is so profound that I wonder if, a hundred years from now, historians will see this era as much transformative of American political governance as the shift from the Roman Republic to the rise of the Caesars.

The New Testament covers the early decades of the Caesars from Caesar Augustus to Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. (Julius Caesar was not an emperor. It was just his name.) Acts 12 happens shortly after the death of Caligula and the ascension of Claudius. Something I am just noticing in this year’s teaching on Acts 12 is the degree to which the Apostles are not the main actors but more like the persons upon whom God and political powers act. There is very little of what the Apostles do and a lot about what the political powers do. I am not sure the passage offers a roadmap for Christian action today but I am sure that what those Christians would have felt toward their government is what I am increasingly feeling about mine.

In tonight’s study I want to focus on what God did and what the king did and only somewhat upon what the apostles did. I don’t intend to excessively focus on current tyrants but thoughtful people will see the parallels and draw their own conclusions.

In previous chapters when we saw persecution we saw how the church expanded by going to new places like Samaria and Antioch. Here they are all still in Jerusalem and are again facing persecution. This time it is James and Peter who are impacted by the persecution under the tyrant King Herod.

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.

When we read about King Herod it is easy to get confused since there actually were four kings named Herod in the New Testament. They were of the same family. They are Herod the Great; Herod Antipas; Herod Agrippa I; and Herod Agrippa II. The first Herod, called Herod the

Great, was the King at the time of Jesus birth. The Herod referred to here is actually Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great. Herod Agrippa I ruled from 37 to 44 AD. He was a total politician. Among his Jewish subjects he issued coins without images on them in keeping with Jewish preferences. The most common example is the bronze prutah shown here. It has a royal umbrella on the obverse surrounded by the Greek inscription "King Agrippa;" the reverse features three ears of barley and the date "LS" (Year 6 = 42/43). The Roman style of coin had the image of the politician on it. Agrippa issued those with the Roman audience in mind.

Herod Agrippa I was a rotten guy and had been for his whole life. His early life story indicates how much Israel was really at the center of Roman life and not isolated on the periphery. Agrippa grew up connected to the powerful in Rome. After his father, Aristobulus, was executed Agrippa went to school with the son of Emperor Tiberius, who had taken over from Caesar Augustus. Agrippa formed a bond with that ruling family. In time he was given the job of tutoring the adopted grandson of Tiberius. That grandson was the future Emperor Caligula. As Emperor, Caligula was cruel, sadistic, sexually perverse, and wildly extravagant. One wonders how much his character was shaped by his tutor, Agrippa. While in the Imperial Courts in Rome Agrippa made a wisecrack about the Emperor which landed him in prison. It was kind of like how Trudeau in Canada regards the truckers who criticize him. In any case, Agrippa stayed in prison until Emperor Tiberius died and Caligula succeeded him and quickly freed his old teacher. Caligula made Agrippa king of the area ruled by Philip the Tetrarch. In more palace intrigue, when Antipas tried to turn Caligula against Agrippa, Caligula responded by expanding Agrippa's territory giving him the area Antipas had ruled. Clearly, the evil Caligula and the evil Agrippa were two of a kind. Caligula was Emperor from 37 to 41 AD being assassinated at age 28 in the middle of Agrippa's reign.

Upon the death of Caligula, Agrippa helped engineer the ascent of Claudius to Emperor. In return, Claudius rewarded him by an enlarged territory that included Judea and Samaria. Thus Jerusalem came into his jurisdiction. With such a background, small wonder Agrippa was so willing to kill Christians to advance his poll numbers among the Jews. As such he is the model for petty tyrants in every generation who want to attack the rule of God in the earth because it plays well in anti-Christ circles.

Herod killed James the son of Zebedee, the first of the Apostles to die. Jesus called James and his brother, John, Sons of Thunder. James indeed drank the same cup as Jesus. Herod's evil gained him political power so he went after Peter as well. The first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread immediately follows Passover and lasts a full eight days. The Feast of the Unleavened Bread was celebrated in conjunction with Passover (Mark 14:12). It is to be a remembrance of Israel's deliverance from Egypt and a reminder of the haste at which they left. As indicated in Exodus 12, no bread made with leaven could be eaten for seven days. Leaven, because of its fermenting and permeating nature, is used as a metaphor for sin.¹ I presume, therefore, that the planned trial of Peter would take place also after Unleavened Bread and not just Passover as a singular day. In any case, the planned trial never happened. There is an irony here. Herod is closer to death than Peter, but no one would ever guess that.

Peter in Chains

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

¹ Richard Booker, *Jesus in the Feasts of Israel* (Destiny Image Publishers 1987) p. 38.

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.

Luke lets us know that the church was praying for Peter. This is understandable since another apostle of equal stature as Peter had just been killed. No doubt they were praying that his life would be spared. In this chapter, this is the primary action of the Christians with most of the rest of the commentary about what God was doing and what the politicians were doing. Prayer is obviously important but it is presented here not as the call to action but as a simple observation as to what they were doing.

I love angel talk. It is practical, as in "Quick, get up." I don't know why it had to be quick. Apparently even angels know that escapes should be quick and not leisurely. Then Peter is given a practical series of steps. Get dressed and don't forget your shoes. Also wrap yourself in your cloak because it is springtime outside and cold at night. Even though you are receiving a divine intervention, no need to take leave of your good sense. We would hate to lose you to the flu just as we are delivering you from Herod. I'm comforted that spirituality is not generally opposed to common sense.

They pass the guards without incident and the gate opened automatically (*automate*) or of its own accord. From that Greek word we get our word *automatic*. Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.

Who can answer the question as to why James dies but Peter is spared to minister for another 20 years. No one can answer that question or a host of other "why" questions in the Bible. There are many moments in life when we cannot know the answer. It probably is not even helpful to try to know the answer. We just pray as best we know how for the issue that lies immediately before us.

I would think the early church, having already seen so many great miracles, would have had great faith regarding Peter's release. On the other hand, they had just witnessed the killing of one of their other leaders. Rhoda gets high marks for recognizing Peter's voice and for being up to speed on the issues involved. On the other hand, she did not let him in proving that in every age it is tough to get good help.

In verse 17 Peter wants to be sure that James knows about this. Obviously this cannot be the James that was just beheaded. It must be James, the brother of Jesus. As such it provides another illustration that James was head of the church here and not Peter. Cyril, a later Bishop of Jerusalem, said, ". . . after that He was seen of James, His own brother, and first Bishop of this diocese. Seeing

then that such a Bishop originally saw Christ Jesus when risen, do not thou, his disciple, disbelieve him.²

Herod wanted Peter dead or at least he wanted the political credit for killing Peter. Things turned out exactly the opposite of what Herod planned. Herod, like so many tyrants, was hoisted on his own petard.

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

Little wonder there was “no small commotion” since Roman law required the very thing that Herod ordered. As many as sixteen soldiers died because Peter escaped. That was great for Peter but somewhat less so for the soldiers. It is worth noting that Roman law was used to make the decision to kill the 16 guards but the Roman law was ignored in the killing of James and the attempt on the life of Peter. Tyrants use the law when it is to their advantage and ignore the law when it suits them. Arbitrary use of law is essentially lawlessness and defines the tyrant. In American practice, appointing judges who will reach predetermined conclusions is lawlessness and tyranny. Enforcing the law against one group while ignoring law for another group is another form of tyranny we see today. Growing up with the “sit-ins” and occupation of administration buildings in the anti-war efforts of the 1960’s and 1970’s makes me laugh at the thin skins of current politicians when people criticize them and obstruct their world.

From Josephus we know that Herod went to Caesarea, the capitol, to preside over the public games in honor of the Emperor Claudius further illustrating the extent to which Herod and Caesarea was closely linked to Rome. The quarrel with Tyre and Sidon was apparently over a “foreign aid” program of which they had been recipients but lately were cut off. Tyre and Sidon were relying upon the executive branch, a “personal servant of the king” to be their ticket to a better decision. It is another form of abuse of power when appointed members of the executive branch lobby as though they were the legislative branch. The Herodian bureaucrat had a descriptive name, “Blastus.”

In honor of himself, Herod decided to make a political speech. Other texts said he had silver threads through his clothing so that it shone in the sunlight. The dutiful people, somewhat like the crowds that listen to Kim Jong-un’s speeches. They tell him what he wants to hear. Unfortunately for him, God was listening to both the speech and the people’s response.

The crowd thought Herod sounded good. Apparently the worms thought he tasted good too.

This is quite a chapter. It starts with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod glorying in royal splendor. It ends with Herod dead, Peter free, and the Gospel triumphing in godly splendor. There will always be Herods who oppose the work of God. These petty tyrants need to fear the place where the worm does not die. They can have their moment of glory because it will soon pass. Our worst day on the earth is better than their best day in eternity.

²Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., “Catechetical Lectures, Lecture XIV,” Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers; vol. 7 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995) 100.