

**Persecution Against James and Peter  
A Most Unusual Prayer Meeting  
A Proud Ruler is Abased and Destroyed**

**A Study in Acts Chapter 12**



**By Dr. John C. Whitcomb  
and  
George Zeller**

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**The Middletown Bible Church**

349 East Street

Middletown, CT 06457

(860-346-0907)

[www.middletownbiblechurch.org](http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org)

# Acts Chapter 12

## Persecution Against James and Peter A Most Unusual Prayer Meeting A Proud Ruler is Abased and Destroyed

This chapter contains God's inspired record of a powerful and effectual prayer meeting. The contents of this chapter can be summarized by thinking of a triangle. There are three sides: 1) An Evil King; 2) A Praying Church; 3) A Sovereign God. These three realities can be observed throughout all the ages of church history. They are also typical of Israel's history, past and future. God has a magnificent message for each of us as we consider the marvelous outworking of His plan for His people.

### Acts 12:1

"About that time," refers to the time when Paul and Barnabas brought relief to the famine sufferers in Judea (Acts 11:28-30). This chapter is parenthetical, and the account of Paul and Barnabas resumes in Acts 12:25.

Who was Herod the king? He was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of that monster of iniquity, Herod the Great (Matthew chapter 2). His uncle was another Herod, Herod Antipas, the "fox" (Luke 13:32), the one who murdered John the Baptist (Matt. 14:3-12). Both Herod Agrippa's father (Aristobulus) and his grandmother were murdered by Herod the Great. His son was Herod Agrippa II before whom Paul would stand as recorded in Acts 26. The whole family was incredibly wicked. Each one was an effective instrument of Satan for many, many years. Herod Agrippa I was raised in a godless, demonic atmosphere. He lived in Rome where he got into trouble with Tiberias the Emperor who threw him into prison. Later the emperors Caligula (also known as Gaius) and Claudius rescued and honored him and Claudius appointed him as king over Judea. He ended up ruling a large portion of Palestine.<sup>1</sup> His reign was from A.D. 37 to A.D. 44. He tried to gain favor with the Jews by outwardly observing the law of Moses and by honoring Jewish customs. All of the Herods were descendants of Esau (the Greek term for Esau or Edom was *Idumean*).

It is said that on one occasion, when reading the law at the Feast of Tabernacles, he [Herod] burst into tears as he read Deuteronomy 17:15 ("one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother"), for he remembered the Edomite origin of the Herod family; but the populace cried out: "Be not distressed; you are our brother!"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>He ruled the territory once controlled by Philip (Luke 3:1), and later acquired the territory of Antipas. He later added the territories of Judea and Samaria. No one had ruled over so much territory in Israel since Herod the Great.

<sup>2</sup>D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, editors, *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, p. 987.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that Herod wanted very desperately to gain the favor of the Jews (Acts 12:3). He wanted to maintain his power with their support. In order to accomplish this he decided to persecute the Christians whom the Jews despised, and this was done by going after two of the apostles.

The term “vex” (KJV) or “harass” (NKJV) means “to oppress, afflict, harm, maltreat.” The same word is used in Acts 7:6 which states that the Israelites were mistreated and oppressed by the Egyptians for 400 years. Herod’s treatment of James and Peter, as will be seen in this chapter, was shameful and despicable.

## **Acts 12:2**

Herod killed James the brother of John with a sword, probably by beheading him similar to the way John the Baptist was executed. This was not James the leader of the Jerusalem church who was the halfbrother of the Lord Jesus (mentioned in Acts 12:17). No, the man executed by Herod was James the apostle, the brother of John and the son of Zebedee. James and John were designated by the Lord as “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). On one occasion their mother came to Jesus and requested that her two sons be placed at the Lord’s right hand and left hand in His kingdom (Matt. 20:21). We must at least give this mother credit for not being amillennial.<sup>3</sup> She knew there was a coming kingdom which would be on this earth in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. It was a glorious thing to be present in the kingdom and she wanted her sons to be honored at that time. Of course, all of the other disciples were angered by her bold request on behalf of her sons.

“But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto Him, We are able” (Matt. 20:22). James and John said (paraphrased), “We are able to drink of this cup! We will pay whatever price is necessary to have such a glorious destiny with You in the kingdom.” “And He saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on My right hand, and on My left, is not Mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of My Father” (Matt. 20:23).

Here in Acts 12 we learn of this “baptism” that happened to one of her sons. If the mother of James were still alive she must have been horrified. Herod killed James, the brother of John with the sword.<sup>4</sup> Of all the twelve disciples, James was one of the privileged three. Peter, James and John had special privileges granted to them by the Lord, in anticipation of the coming kingdom at which time they will indeed be honored. However, the suffering must precede the glory. Here is a summary of the three times Peter, James and John were given special privilege:

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<sup>3</sup>Amillennialism teaches that this present age will come to an end with Christ’s coming, at which time there will be a general resurrection and a general judgment of all men, followed by the eternal state. They deny that there will be a millennial kingdom on this earth.

<sup>4</sup>James is the only apostle, apart from Judas, whose death is mentioned in the New Testament. We learn about the deaths of the other apostles by way of tradition. The Lord Jesus predicted Peter’s death (John 21:18-19) but no record of it is given in the New Testament.

Peter, James and John were the only disciples allowed to accompany Jesus when He raised up the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:37).
Peter, James and John were chosen to be with the Lord at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-7).
Peter, James and John were allowed to be in close vicinity to the Lord when He prayed at Gethsemane (Mark 14:33).

Under an earlier persecution, the apostles were not targeted (Acts 8:1), but in Acts 12 they became objects of Herod's evil designs.

### Acts 12:3

This was the third time that Peter was arrested. The first time he was arrested with John (Acts 4:3); the second time he was arrested with all the apostles (Acts 5:18); the third time he alone was arrested. Herod killed James and arrested Peter "because he saw it pleased the Jews." He wanted to gain favor with the Jewish people. Gaining popularity with the people was more important to him than doing what was just and right. Josephus agreed with Luke's account saying that Herod was "very ambitious to please the people" (*Antiquities*, xix.ch.8, Section 3).

Some infer from Acts 12:17 that the other apostles were no longer in Jerusalem because Peter told them to notify James (the half brother of Jesus), but made no mention of the other apostles.

James was arrested and killed; Peter was arrested and was miraculously released. God's plan for James was different from His plan for Peter. James was the first of the twelve disciples to die. His brother John lived a long life and wrote his epistles and the book of Revelation toward the end of the first century.<sup>5</sup> He may have been the only apostle to live to old age and to die a natural death, although some believe he was martyred. Foxe, in his book of Christian martyrs, wrote that John was the only apostle who escaped a violent death. These two brothers illustrate that God has a different and unique plan for each of our lives. Our times are in His hands. His plan for one is not His plan for another. In His grace and wisdom, we are each treated differently. The godly saint, Robert McCheyne, died at the young age of 29. John Brainard, devoted missionary to the American Indians, also died at age 29. On the other hand, the great man of faith and prayer, George Muller, died at age 92. Likewise, pioneer early-earth creationist and nationally known Bible teacher, Dr. John Whitcomb (the co-author of this commentary), was very active in the Lord's service up to age 95. When the Lord Jesus foretold Peter's death, Peter immediately asked about John, "What shall this man do?" (John 21:21). Jesus answered, "If I will (desire) that he tarry (remain alive) till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me" (John 21:22). The issue is not how long we live, but how well we live, and the faithful servant of the Lord knows that he is immortal until his work is done. James finished

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<sup>5</sup>The date when John penned the book of Revelation has been disputed. Preterists, those believing that most prophecies have already been fulfilled, insist it was written before 70 A.D. because their entire system falls apart if it were written at the end of the first century. For a masterful discussion of this, see "The Stake in the Heart: The A.D. 95 Date of Revelation" by Mark Hitchcock found in *The End Times Controversy*, edited by Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice.

the work that God had for him to do.

These events took place during “the days of unleavened bread” (the Passover feast—from Nisan the 14<sup>th</sup> to Nisan the 21<sup>st</sup>).<sup>6</sup> It was during this time that Peter himself was apprehended. Of the three privileged disciples, the only one to escape during this time was John. James was dead and Peter was now in prison.

#### **Acts 12:4**

Herod apprehended Peter, a deed carried out by the King’s underlings. Herod seized Peter in order to imprison him. The verb is used in John 21:3,10 of fish being captured in nets. The place of imprisonment may have been the Tower of Antonia next to the Temple (Acts 21:34). This was Peter’s third arrest (Acts 4:3; 5:18).

Peter was guarded by four quaternions of soldiers; each quaternion would be a squad of four soldiers. Four soldiers would always be on guard during each shift. Every three hours four fresh soldiers would take their place as they would rotate their shifts.

A quaternion was a set of four men occupied in the work of a guard, two soldiers being chained to the prisoner and two keeping watch; alternatively one of the four watched while the other three slept. The night was divided into four watches of three hours each; there would be one quaternion for each watch by day and by night.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Herod ordered such ample security forces because he was aware of the amazing escape of the apostles earlier (Acts 5:23). Peter was certainly under maximum security; his escape was humanly impossible.

Since it would have been inappropriate to execute Peter during a religious holiday, Herod intended to bring him forth to the people after the completion of the Passover feast. This apparently meant that they would bring him forth either to put him on trial or to slay him without a trial. It’s doubtful whether or not James ever received a fair trial. At any rate, Herod wanted to wait until after the feast to execute his evil plans against Peter. “The Feast of Passover (consisting of one meal and its related ritual on Nisan 15) was followed immediately by the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread. Sometimes, as here, both celebrations were grouped under the single name Passover.”<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew month of Nisan corresponds to our month April; Peter was arrested and Herod died in the year 44 A.D.

The term “Easter” (KJV) should be translated “Passover.” The Greek term is *páska*. Since the resurrection of Christ took place during the Passover season, we can understand how the term “Passover” later became linked to a celebration of Christ’s resurrection.

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<sup>6</sup>See Appendix 1--*The Chronology of the Passover Meal and Associated Feast* by James Ventilato.

<sup>7</sup>*Vines’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, under “Quaternion.”

<sup>8</sup>Homer A. Kent Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome—Studies in Acts*, p. 101.

The word “Easter” does not come from paganism as some suggest. One proponent of the view of Easter’s pagan origins was Alexander Hislop who wrote the book, *The Two Babylons*. He taught that Easter refers to Astarte, the queen of heaven, a Babylonian deity. He based this primarily on the fact that the two names sound similar (Easter/Astarte). Hislop, however, does not base this teaching on any sound linguistic evidence. The word “Easter” is Anglo-Saxon, not Babylonian. It was derived from the Germanic *Oster* which meant “Passover.” It was the common word used to signify both Passover and Easter. It was first introduced into the English Bible by William Tyndale who used the term “ester.” Tyndale knew that the word meant “Passover.” For example, he rendered Luke 2:41 as “And his father and mother went to Hierusalem (Jerusalem) every year at the feast of ester” and John 6:4 as “The jews’ ester was nigh at hand.” So Tyndale, not paganism, is the reason why the term “Passover” is translated “Easter” in many older English versions.<sup>9</sup>

Some people who try to find evidences of pagan connections to Easter do not seem to have a problem with many more familiar things which really are derived from paganism, especially pagan deities:

You might have your muffler replaced by Midas, wear shoes designed by Nike, chew Trident gum, or watch a movie by Orion Pictures. Several days of our week and months of our year are named after Norse gods, except for Saturday that comes from the Roman god Saturn, and Sunday and Monday of course. Several months are named after Roman gods. The eight planets and many of their moons are named after Roman deities. Mazda cars are named for a Zoroastrian deity, and many people drive a Saturn, Mercury, Ares, Aurora, etc.”<sup>10</sup>

If we are really concerned about paganism, it might be best to pay attention to the idolatry that can be found *in our own hearts* (1 John 5:21) and to make sure that there are no “high places” within our hearts which we have not torn down.

## Acts 12:5

“The prison was most likely the tower of Antonia, a fortress on the northwest corner of the temple wall. The tower provided a bird’s eye view of the temple area. Two flights of stairs led to the temple grounds, so that Roman soldiers could immediately respond to any unruly crowd. This tower was built by Herod the Great and named in honor of Antonius, better known as Mark Anthony.”<sup>11</sup>

The church, consisting of God’s people located in Jerusalem, prayed without ceasing for Peter.<sup>12</sup> All

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<sup>9</sup>For a fuller study on the term “Easter,” see the following article by Jonathan Sarfati:  
<https://creation.com/easter-and-good-friday-questions-and-answers>

<sup>10</sup>Jonathan Sarfati, *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup>Ron Merryman, *Verse By Verse Through Acts*, Volume 2, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup>The term “without ceasing” (KJV) means they prayed fervently, earnestly and intensely. This adverb is used in only one other place (1 Pet. 1:22). It is not the same word as is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (“pray without ceasing”). The imperfect tense of the verb “was made”

of God's people were united in interceding for Peter. From a human viewpoint, it seemed quite impossible that Peter should be delivered since Herod had him secured, having already put James to death. Yet God delights in what seem to us to be impossible situations. "With God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26; Luke 1:37). When God's people gather together in united prayer, in the name of the Lord Jesus, on the basis of His revelation, great things happen. Their united focus was to pray for Peter's deliverance.

Prayer is very important in the mind of God. Even in the book of Genesis we see evidence of this. In Genesis 4, Abel had been murdered, Cain was banished, and Adam and Eve were devastated at what had happened to their sons. However, God graciously gave to them another son whose name was Seth. Seth had a son named Enos. Notice how the chapter ends: "then began men to call upon the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26). Well over a hundred years had passed since the creation of Adam and Eve. Was this the first time anyone had ever prayed? No, but it was the first time that you had three believing men on this planet (Adam, Seth, Abel) who could unite in prayer to the living God. The Lord Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

As we shift to the last book in the Bible we see what prayer accomplishes in the plan of God on planet earth. "And when He had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odors, **which are the prayers of saints**" (Rev. 5:8). "And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense (a perfumed powder), that he should offer it **with the prayers of all saints** upon the golden altar which was before the throne" (Rev. 8:3). "And the smoke of the incense, which came **with the prayers of the saints**, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand" (Rev. 8:4). Such passages provoke in our minds some very interesting questions. What really happens in the universe when God's people assemble, whether two or three or a hundred or more, to offer genuinely from the heart and the mind meaningful prayer based on Holy Scripture? Such prayers are honoring the Lord Jesus to the glory of God the Father, all being implemented by the Holy Spirit of God. Those prayers ascend, beyond the atmosphere and into outer space and beyond the planets and stars, all the way to the third heaven, the abode of God. Thanks to the Spirit's intercession, those prayers have been purged and purified and cleansed of any unworthy motives or perspectives (Rom. 8:26-27) and are accepted by God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. "Lord, help me to have a new perspective on what prayer really is in Your sight in this world."

Of course, to the minds of unregenerate men, nothing could be more absurd than people gathering together and talking up into the air, in the name of a Man who died two thousand years ago. Yes, He did die, but now He is alive forevermore and He is at the right hand of God the Father. He told us to pray in His Name, for His glory, in the light of His revelation of truth, and He would answer our prayers according to His will. How we need to take these things seriously! The lack of prayer on the part of many professing believers seems to indicate that they have a concept of prayer much like the unsaved, namely that it is a futile exercise that does not really accomplish anything.

The humble, fervent, persistent prayers of people who are isolated on sick beds, etc. are of more power to accomplish great things for God than all the deliberations of secular political groups both

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indicates that they prayed continually. A closely related word is used in Luke 22:44 of our Lord's intense prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

nationally and internationally. “The fervent, effectual prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). God is very serious about this. “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints” (Eph. 6:18). Paul was in prison when he wrote these words, and he asked prayer for himself that he might have boldness to be a witness for the Lord to the prisoners whom God brought into his life and within the sphere of his influence. He wanted to be a reflector of God’s light in the midst of his dark dungeon.

“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God” (Phil. 4:6). Prayer involves asking, but it should also include thanking God for what He has done, is doing and for what He has promised He will do.

Even the dear disciples who gathered in Mary’s home in Jerusalem had a very dim concept of the effectiveness of their prayers. Can we imagine God sitting us down in heaven and saying, “Dear child, this is what was accomplished because you prayed. I heard your prayer that night. I heard your prayer as you prayed with two or three others. I heard your prayer when you prayed with your family. And I answered your prayers. But if you had just prayed more faithfully, more fervently, more frequently, more Biblically, here is what I could have done and would have done!” Do you expect this might happen? Or, do you think in your own heart right now that you have prayed adequately, sufficiently, Biblically and there is nothing more you could have done in the realm of believing prayer? Or course not. May we be stirred to pray, yes, to really pray.

God uses human intercessors to accomplish His greatest work, which includes salvation, sanctification, the planting of local churches, the outreach to the ends of the earth, etc. Acts chapter 12, given at the beginning of church history, is sending us this message: ***Watch how I work when people pray in the name of Jesus!***

### **Acts 12:6**

Herod was about to bring Peter forth to the people (compare verse 4). This was planned for the very next day. The bringing forth of Peter referred to Herod bringing Peter before the people publicly, after the Passover, to be executed (with or without a trial).

On this same night divine help came. God’s timing is flawless. God has grace to help in the time of need (Heb. 4:16) and God has grace to help in the nick of time! There were two soldiers, one on each side of Peter, and they were chained to Peter’s arms. The other two guards kept watch at the door of the prison, lest he try to escape or someone should try to come and rescue him. This was very tight security. We are reminded of the guards at the tomb of Jesus, lest anyone should come to steal the body and later claim that He had risen from the dead.

There is a question we might want to ask Peter some day when we are with him in glory: "Peter, were you an effective witness during the time when you were chained to those prisoners?" The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to be chained to Roman security officers as well. In such situations, Peter and Paul had a "captive audience," hour after hour. Peter had the opportunity for an amazing prison ministry: "Sir, I don't know who you are, but let me tell you about Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the living God, who died for your sins and rose from the dead." Did these guards understand what a privilege it was to be chained to the Apostle Peter? It was crucially important for Peter to share the gospel with these men. This would be the last night these guards would be alive. On the very next day King Herod executed all of these guards (Acts 12:19). Why



was this done? This later became part of the law of Emperor Justinian, who confirmed that which had been in effect for hundred of years.<sup>13</sup> According to Roman law, any guard who allowed a prisoner to escape would lose his own life. This was an exceptionally strong motivation for each guard to carefully watch his prisoner! Peter's supernatural escape would have dire consequences for these guards.<sup>14</sup> We wonder what Peter told them the night before they died. For these four men, it would be their last night on earth. It is sobering to think of the unsaved people we contact. We do not know when their last day on earth will be.

We are told that Peter was sleeping between these two soldiers. How could Peter have been peacefully sleeping if he knew that on the next day he would be executed? One reason was that Peter had been in prison previously and had been miraculously delivered (Acts 5:17-19). He knew that God could do it again if it were His will.

There is another possible reason to explain why Peter could calmly sleep under such circumstances. Perhaps it was because he believed what Jesus had said to him in John chapter 21: "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; **but when you are old**, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish. This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God" (verses 18-19, NKJV). The Lord was saying, "Peter, don't worry about John; I'll take care of him. But as for you, you are going to live a long life, and when you are an old man you will die by crucifixion." Peter believed what the Lord had told him. He was in prison but he was not an old man yet! He was scheduled to be executed, not by crucifixion but by the sword like James. And yet Peter, believing what Christ had told him was able to rest peacefully, knowing that he was not old, and thus the time of his death was not nigh. Based on Christ's prophecy, he must have expected to be somehow delivered from his chains.

"Oh that God's people might know the calm rest of faith. 'I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety'" (Psalm 4:8). Our lives are in His hands. He is over us and no enemy can harm us; nothing can touch us without His will."<sup>15</sup> Peter's sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane was not commendable; his flesh was weak. His sleeping in prison on this occasion was a marvelous rest of faith. Later Peter would seek to encourage other believers when he wrote, "Casting all your care (anxiety) upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). When we truly do that, we can sleep well! Our Lord Himself, the God-Man, slept on the boat in the tempestuous waters and winds (Matt. 8:24).

### Acts 12:7

Believers were praying, and suddenly an angel was sent into action. This angel transformed this

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<sup>13</sup>Justinian I was a Roman emperor in a much later period of history. His reign began in A.D. 527. He found the law of the Romans to be in a great state of confusion. He decided to reformulate the law and purge its contradictions and inconsistencies.

<sup>14</sup>What a contrast with how the guards at Christ's tomb were treated. Instead of being executed, they were paid money to tell a lie!

<sup>15</sup>Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 223.

prison cell (literally “dwelling place”) into a glorious room of light. Peter was struck on the side as he received a appropriate angelic wake up nudge.<sup>16</sup> His chains fell off as the guards were either sleeping or rendered unconscious by the angel. It is of interest that nothing is said about the guards during this supernatural escape. They offered no resistance.

### **Acts 12:8**

There were some things that Peter could do, such as gird himself (tighten his belt around his inner garment, and prepare for action), put on his sandals, and wrap his cloak around himself. God will normally not do for us what we can do for ourselves. There were other things that only God could do (through His angel): cause the chains to fall off and open the iron gate (verse 10). We need to do our part; we know God will do His part. When Pearl Harbor was under attack, a chaplain encouraged the frightened sailors by saying the memorable words, “Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!” The point was very clear: We will trust God to do His part and praise Him for it, and at the same time we will do our part and defend ourselves as best we can. God will never fail to do His part. He is ever faithful. By grace may we faithfully fulfill our duties toward God and man, praising the Lord that He will always do His part. He does all things well!

### **Acts 12:9**

Peter followed the angel as he had been told. All these events happened so suddenly that Peter thought he was still asleep dreaming and seeing some kind of vision. It was not too long before this when Peter had the vision of the great sheet full of animals (Acts 10). We can understand that Peter was in a state of total mental shock, and at first what was happening to him did not seem real.

### **Acts 12:10**

The word “ward” (KJV) means guard. On their way out they passed by two guards, or the word could mean two guardposts (a location or a station where a guard is posted). We are not told how they passed such security without being detected or challenged by the authorities. God provided fully for this escape even though we are not told all of the details. God certainly could have put the guards into a deep sleep or rendered them ineffective in some other way.

What a sight to see this heavy iron gate open all by itself (automatically, Greek *automatē*), like mechanical doors as you enter a grocery store, yet on a much larger scale. If the angel had not intervened, Peter would have passed through this iron gate the very next day with his chains still on, headed to the place of execution. Thank God for this deliverance of His servant. The angel escorted him down one street and then Peter went the rest of the way on his own. The angel departed, having accomplished his mission. All this was in answer to prayer.

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<sup>16</sup>The correct translation is “an angel of the Lord,” not “the angel of the Lord.” The angel of the Lord appeared in Old Testament times. This was the pre-incarnate Christ. After Christ assumed a permanent human body, He never again appears as the angel of the Lord.

## **Acts 12:11**

Peter finally realized that he was not dreaming! His miraculous deliverance was a reality. The Jews who hated the Lord Jesus also hated His disciples (John 15:18-20), and they were waiting with eager expectation for the execution of Peter, the one who always seemed to be the leader and spokesman of the twelve apostles. However, their expectation would be dashed because Peter was granted freedom. He survived by the wonderful deliverance of the Lord. As the old-time hymn says, “He is able to deliver thee!”

## **Acts 12:12**

Mary was John Mark’s mother. Peter had a very close relationship with Mark, and later actually called him his “son” (1 Peter 5:13). Peter was like a spiritual father to him. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Mark wrote the gospel that bears his name in association with Peter. The gospel of Mark could in some ways be thought of as the gospel of Peter. Apparently Mary was also an aunt of Barnabas, and thus Mark and Barnabas were cousins (Col. 4:10).

Peter seemed to know that if he were to go to Mary’s house he would find believers. This wealthy lady had a large room where disciples could gather. We do not know if this was the same room described in Acts 1:13, the famous “upper room.” Mary’s house was large enough for “many” believers to come together for the purpose of prayer. This was not a casual prayer meeting; they were conducting serious business. They were praying without ceasing, fervently and earnestly (Acts 12:5). As Peter arrived, the prayer meeting was still taking place. It apparently was an all-night prayer meeting.

## **Acts 12:13-14**

Rhoda may have been a humble servant girl, and one of her assignments was to be a doorkeeper (Psalm 84:10).<sup>17</sup> The answer to the prayers of these believers came and knocked at the door of the gate. Rhoda heard Peter (v. 14) and was so excited that she didn’t even take time to open the gate. Recognizing Peter’s voice, she ran in to tell the others that he had just knocked at the door and was standing outside.

## **Acts 12:15**

Their response was something like this, “Please be quiet Rhoda; can’t you see we are praying? You are mad to think Peter is there because we all know that Peter is in prison and we are very busy praying for his release!” “It is interesting to note that those who were praying so fervently for Peter’s deliverance should regard as insane the person who informed them that their prayers had been answered.”<sup>18</sup> Rhoda’s words seemed to them as an idle tale, and they believed her not (compare Luke 24:11).

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<sup>17</sup>The name “Rhoda” means “rosebush” or “rose.”

<sup>18</sup>*The Nelson Study Bible*, note under Acts 12:15.

What if Rhoda had come to those praying and said, “A messenger just came to the door and told me that Peter was slain by Herod.” Would they have believed her then? Probably so. They were more ready to believe something contrary to what they were praying, than to believe that Peter could be delivered, which was exactly what they were asking God to do!

Even more shocking will be the Lord Jesus someday pointing out to us how many times we prayed in His Name and really did not believe a word we were praying. We so often fail to believe that God can answer our prayers. God has all the available resources and power to answer the cry of our hearts, but often we do not believe He can do this.

Have you never had an experience where you prayed and prayed and asked God for something, and when He came in grace and answered, you could hardly believe it to be true? You thought there must have been a mistake somewhere. It shows how we dishonor God with our lack of faith.<sup>19</sup>

As we read this chapter, we detect that God has a sense of humor as He looks at the saints in their incredible weakness of faith.

The first response to Rhoda’s announcement was this: “Thou art mad!” Rhoda, you are out of your mind! This word “mad” is used in 1 Corinthians 14:23 of unbelievers coming into an assembly where everyone is speaking in tongues. Paul says, “Will they not say that you are mad?” Some of the Jews even accused Jesus of being mad (out of His mind, insane) in John 10:20–“He has a demon and is mad!” The Lord Jesus was the most sane Person who ever lived and yet they accused Him of being mad and demon possessed.

Rhoda insisted repeatedly that it really was Peter, yet they still didn’t believe her, even though she was an earwitness. Their second response to Rhoda’s announcement was this: “It is his angel.” Jesus once talked about the fact that certain angels are assigned to certain people. “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10). So also in Hebrews 1:14, “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” Angels have a special relationship to children and a special relationship to believers, the heirs of salvation, and they are constantly ministering unto us. Wouldn’t it be amazing to someday meet your ministering (serving) angel and thank him for all he has done, and hear him tell you all he endured in order to watch over you and protect you from the evil one?

We have these amazing little glimpses in the Bible about an unseen world around us. Angels desire to look into these things, namely how Jesus devised a plan to save sinful people and how He watches over them and protects them from Satan and millions of demons night and day. “Lord, help me to understand that I am desperately needful of help from heaven above, not only from You, dear Father and from Your beloved Son and the Holy Spirit, but also perhaps from angels whom You might choose to deploy. How I need help from above!” The whole machinery of the universe operates on the basis of the believing prayers of God’s people. This is hard to imagine and a great challenge to

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<sup>19</sup>Harry A. Ironside, *Acts*, pages 297-298.

our thinking. You say, “But isn’t God sovereign?” Yes, He is, but God has sovereignly appointed a means to accomplish His sovereign purposes, and one of those means is the prayers of His saints on the earth.

### Acts 12:16

In the meanwhile, Peter continued knocking! “Let me in!” “No, we will not let you in. You are not Peter!” When they finally opened the door they were amazed and astonished to see their answer to prayer standing in front of them. But should not we expect our prayers to be answered when we call upon the Lord in faith? “Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, **believe that you receive them**, and you will have them” (Mark 11:24, NKJV).

### Acts 12:17

Peter motioned to them to keep silent. He was a fugitive at this point and did not wish to start a ruckus. Indeed, Peter did not plan to spend time with these believers lest they all be in danger. His purpose was to deliver a twofold message: 1) the Lord brought me out of prison; 2) relay this message to James and the other believers. After delivering this message Peter departed and we are not told where he went. Undoubtably he knew of a place where he could be safe.

Which James is this verse referring to? It cannot be James the brother of John because he was executed by Herod as recorded at the beginning of this chapter. This was James the halfbrother of Jesus (Mark 6:3) who was now the leader of the church of Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup> He would later write the book of James. This was a large prayer meeting but many of the Jerusalem saints, including James, were not present in Mary’s house at this time. Peter wanted them to tell about the amazing thing God had done in response to the fervent and effectual prayers of His people (in spite of their lack of faith when they prayed).

God was not finished with Peter yet. God has a timetable for each of us. We might say, “Well, Lord, couldn’t you have spared James as you did Peter?” God has a distinctive, exclusive plan for every child of His on this earth. “Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). We do not know how many days God will give us each of us. We do know that our days are few and our time upon this earth is very brief in light of eternity. God knows exactly, in advance, how many days each of us has to function on this earth. God’s plan for James had been accomplished. It is not as if God said, “I tried so hard to protect James but nobody prayed for him so I had to let him die.” No, the providence of God is very mysterious. Every one of the apostles died, one way or another, sooner or later. Some people thought that John would never die, but would be alive unto the coming of the Lord: “Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple [John] should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I desire that he tarry till I come, what is that to you?” (John 21:23). They misinterpreted what Jesus had

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<sup>20</sup>In the New Testament, whenever James is mentioned without any other description (such as “the brother of John” or “the son of Zebedee” or “James the Less” etc.) then it is always referring to the Lord’s halfbrother, the son of Mary and Joseph, and the leader of the Jerusalem church.

said.<sup>21</sup>

How thankful and humbled we should be at God's plan and program and purpose for His people on this earth. He has a unique but all-wise plan for each of us.

Peter departed and went to another place, and we encounter Peter only one more time in the book of Acts, in chapter 15 at the great council of Jerusalem. The focus from now on shifts to the Apostle Paul. We know little about what happened to Peter after this point in history. We know he was an apostle to the Jews primarily, to proclaim the gospel to the circumcision (Gal. 2:7). We do glean some insight from his two epistles. Dr. Whitcomb was persuaded that one of the places where Peter ministered the Word of God to the Jews was Babylon, a place where hundreds of thousands of Jews were living. The vast majority of Jews who had gone to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar five hundreds years earlier never came back to the Holy Land. Only about fifty thousand returned to the land. At the end of his first epistle Peter sent greetings from the church that was at Babylon, located in present-day Iraq (1 Peter 5:13).

### **Acts 12:18**

This verse may suggest that God somehow prevented the guards from knowing what had happened until the morning. There was a great stir among the soldiers once it became daytime, but not before then. "No small stir" (KJV) means there was quite a great stir, commotion or disturbance. Since it was not small it was very big and significant!

Did God put these guards all in a deep sleep? We are just not told. Compare Matthew 28:4 where the guards at the tomb of Jesus became as dead men.

The soldiers should have remembered what took place in Acts chapter 5 when the apostles were released by an angel and went out and preached the gospel boldly. The lesson was this: you cannot permanently secure the confinement of a genuine servant of God if it is God's will for him to keep preaching the Word.

### **Acts 12:19**

As mentioned previously, the guards were put to death because they failed to do their job and they allowed Peter to escape. This death sentence probably included all sixteen of the prison guards (Acts 12:4). The verb actually means they were "led away," but most understand this to mean that they were led away to their execution, rather than to a lesser sentence such as imprisonment.

According to the Justinian Code, written hundreds of years after these events in Acts 12, if a guard were to allow a prisoner to escape, then that guard would have to face the same penalty that the

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<sup>21</sup>See George Zeller's paper, "A First Century Rapture Error," accessible at <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/proph/John21.pdf>

escaped prisoner would have faced.<sup>22</sup>

Those who intend to execute God's servants should beware of the consequences. Consider those who threw Daniel's three friends into the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:22) and those who had accused Daniel (Daniel 6:24).

We can only imagine how surprised Herod must have been to learn that his important prisoner could not be found. How could this have happened? Who was responsible for this breach of security? He carefully examined and interrogated the guards to try to understand what had happened.

Herod went down from Judea to Caesarea which was the capital city of the Holy Land from a Roman point of view. Perhaps Herod was very embarrassed and humiliated by what had happened. He had lost credibility in Israel seeing that he could not successfully keep a man in prison under very tight security.

### **Acts 12:20**

Here we learn of the circumstances which led to Herod's destruction. Tyre and Sidon were cities just north of Israel in the area of what today is called Lebanon (Phoenicia). These cities were dependent upon Israel for agricultural supplies, trade and commerce. There was political maneuvering going on at this time. On the part of the leaders of Tyre and Sidon, it was a geopolitical scheme to get what they wanted, to pacify Herod and to earn his favor.

Herod was greatly displeased with those of Tyre and Sidon. The verb is very strong. Literally it means "to fight with great animosity" (Vine), and thus, to be furiously angry, to have hot displeasure. We are not told the reason Herod was so enraged against them. Fortunately for the leaders of Tyre and Sidon, they had a friendship with Herod's chamberlain (the officer who was in charge of the bedchamber, that is, his living quarters), whom Herod respected and trusted. Whether or not they bribed Blastus to serve as such a mediator we are not told. Those of Tyre and Sidon wanted to be on good terms with Herod because they depended on him for many of their necessities. Herod nourished and supported them in many ways economically, and without the King's help, they would be in trouble. This helps us understand why they found it helpful to flatter King Herod (Acts 12:22).

### **Acts 12:21**

Plans had been made that Herod would address the people on an appointed day. According to Josephus, this "set day" (KJV) was a feast in honor of the Roman emperor. Herod primarily addressed those of Tyre and Sidon. The "them" of verse 21 apparently refers back to those of Tyre and Sidon mentioned in verse 20. And yet probably others were in the crowd as well. Herod was arrayed in his finest kingly garments. Often kings would wear robes dyed in purple, but Josephus says that on this occasion Herod was clad in brilliant silver which must have been quite a sight to

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<sup>22</sup>The Justinian Code was a major reform of Byzantine law created by Emperor Justinian I who reigned from 527-565 A.D. The laws therein continue to influence many Western legal systems to this day.

behold. Being thus gloriously arrayed, he sat upon a throne (Greek—"Bema"). At the right moment he addressed the people and gave an impressive speech.

### **Acts 12:22**

The motive of these people was clear. They were trying to gain favor with King Herod by flattering him in order to get something from him. The people cried out, saying that it was the voice of God, and not the voice of a man, thus attributing deity to this king.

What did Herod do? He delighted in their response. In one fatal moment Herod thought to himself, "You are right; I am a god!" Such self-exaltation marked the end of his life. The one who exalts himself will surely be abased and brought low (Luke 18:14). God will not give His glory to another (Isa. 42:8)!

Other Roman rulers were commonly deified, yet God did not slay them. One factor, according to Homer Kent, was that Herod Agrippa I was "a nominal Jew, an exponent and defender of Judaism. Thus his culpability was great."<sup>23</sup>

### **Acts 12:23**

Herod should have immediately issued a disclaimer. He should have forcefully silenced the crowd: "I strongly deny what you are saying. I am but an earthly king, a mere human. I am no god, just a mortal man." Compare Peter's response to the obeisance of Cornelius in Acts 10:25-26. But he delighted in this acclamation and refused to give God the glory; immediately he was struck with a stomach ailment which would soon take his life. Josephus says that it only took five painful, agonizing days. He was smitten by an angel of the Lord, perhaps the same angel who had delivered Peter. We remember how Satan, working with his fallen angels, was able to slay Job's servants, children and animals, and to smite Job with painful boils. Angels, with God's permission, are able to do amazing and sometimes horrifying things.

Herod was "eaten by worms," and all the unsaved should be warned of a certain hell "where the worm does not die" (Mark 9:48). He may have been afflicted by a tapeworm which could cause a ruptured cyst in the liver or abdominal cavity.<sup>24</sup> Secular historians place the death of King Herod Agrippa I at 44 A.D. which is when the events of this chapter took place. He died at the age of 54.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, says some remarkable things about this event. There are actually many references in Josephus' history, written a few years after the book of Acts, that give important and significant light on the kings and governors and events that are mentioned in the book of Acts.

The account of King Agrippa's death as told by Flavius Josephus is as follows:

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<sup>23</sup>Homer A. Kent Jr., *From Jerusalem to Rome—Studies in Acts*, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup>For a doctor's detailed description of such a tapeworm, see John MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Acts 1-12*, p. 327



Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea [...] There he exhibited shows in honor of the emperor [...] On the second day of the festival, Herod put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a truly wonderful contexture, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment was illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it. It shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him. At that moment, his flatterers cried out [...] that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature."

Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and he fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots, as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner."

After he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumor went abroad that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign.<sup>25</sup>

The account of Josephus is an amazing confirmation of Scripture. There is no evidence that Josephus ever read the book of Acts or that Luke ever read Josephus. What Josephus wrote was an independent account of what happened to Herod. Josephus says that God struck Herod in his stomach, and after five agonizing days the king died.

King Herod foreshadows the coming Antichrist (the man of sin). The Antichrist will refuse to give glory to God and he will allow people to worship him as God. This act of blasphemy will ultimately lead to his downfall and destruction (2 Thess. 2:3-8). Blasphemous pride led to the doom of both of these men.

Following the death of Herod, Judea was placed under Roman governors. Two of those governors (Felix and Festus) would interact with Paul later in the book of Acts.

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<sup>25</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.343-350.

## **Acts 12:24**

God's Word grew and increased and multiplied. The Church's enemies totally failed to hinder her progress. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. We see what prayer accomplished. Prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ offered up in unity by the saints in Jerusalem, resulted in Peter having been released from prison (chains fell off, doors opened), the persecuting king having been smitten with a fatal ailment, and God's Word having been greatly multiplied. What a great God we serve!

In the book of Acts, during the foundation period of the early Church, supernatural visible sign-miracles occurred, even as illustrated by Peter's miraculous release from prison. They did not have the completed Bible during this early stage of the Church and God confirmed His blessings upon them by many outward signs. Today, however, we should not demand of God supernatural, spectacular answers to prayer; nevertheless God does answer our prayers. Keep in mind that providence is no less spectacular than miracles. If you doubt this, just remember Joseph and Esther and be reminded of what God did on his and her behalf providentially. Providence may be less discernable by people but it's just as marvelous. "All things work together for good to them that love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). This is providence. One should not say, "God did not answer my prayer because I did not see miraculous signs." If it is the will of God to answer the prayers of His people *miraculously* at a particular time and circumstance, He has infinite power and the capability of doing it. However, God's normal method of working today is by way of managing events providentially.

The mighty King Herod met his final fate, never to persecute another apostle or another believer. Herod died but the Word of God was alive and was multiplying. Some future day we will better understand the mystery of answered prayer. In the meantime, may the incense of believing prayers ascend before the altar of the third heaven for the glory of God, in the name of the Lord Jesus.

## **Acts 12:25**

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from Jerusalem. Their mission had been to bring relief to the famine stricken believers in Judea (Acts 11:28-30). Perhaps these two men had been in Jerusalem when James was murdered, when Peter was arrested and when Herod was judged by God, but we do not know this for sure.

Paul and Barnabas brought with them John Mark whose mother Mary we had learned about earlier in this chapter (Acts 12:12). Could Paul and Barnabas have possibly stayed in Mary's house? Could they have been a part of the prayer meeting we learned about in this chapter? We cannot say for sure.

John Mark, a relative or cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10), accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the initial stage of their first missionary journey. Two brief, but significant, statements about John Mark will be given to us in the next chapter (Acts 13:5, 13) with further clarification in chapter 15 (Acts 15:36-40).

## Appendix 1

### The Chronology of the Passover Meal and Associated Feast by James Ventilato

And the first day of unleavened bread, when they slew the passover, His disciples say to Him, Where wilt thou that we go and prepare, that thou mayest eat the passover? (Mk 14:12)

Now the feast of unleavened bread, which is called the passover, drew nigh....And the day of unleavened bread came, in which the passover was to be killed. And He sent Peter and John, saying, Go and prepare the passover for us, that we may eat it. But they said to Him, Where wilt thou that we prepare it?...And having gone they found it as He had said to them; and they prepared the passover. And when the hour was come, he placed himself at table, and the twelve apostles with him. And he said to them, With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer. (Lk 22:1, 7-9, 13-15)

These passages clearly indicate that our Lord arranged to have the passover meal prepared on the very day on which "they slew the passover," "in which the passover was to be killed." And the disciples, upon the arrival of that very day, properly inquired of the Lord as to where they should prepare the passover. The Lord and His disciples then, subsequently, ate the passover.

From these passages we learn that the Jews of that time sometimes referred to the Feast of Unleavened Bread as beginning with, and as including, the day on which the passover was slain. This means that the day referred to in these Synoptic passages, when the passover was slain, was Nisan 14 (cf. Ex. 12:6; Lev. 23:5), not Nisan 15 (which is the day on which the Feast of Unleavened Bread officially commenced, and on the beginning of which day, in the evening, the passover meal was actually eaten; cf. Lev. 23:6; Ex. 12:6--8).

To be more precise, the passover lamb was slain on Nisan 14 "between the evenings," that is, "between the evenings" of Nisan 14 and 15; which is to say, prior to the end of Nisan 14 and the start of Nisan 15, at sunset (which marks the end of one day and the beginning of the next, according to Jewish reckoning). The slain passover itself was actually eaten later, on Nisan 15 (the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread), of the same "evening". See Ex. 12:6-8 with Deut. 16:3.

The 7 days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, commencing with the eating of the passover on the evening of Nisan 15, is also known as the Passover Feast or Passover Week.

In sum, these passages clearly indicate that our Lord and His disciples ate the passover meal on the beginning of Friday, in the evening, of Nisan 15. Our Saviour was then crucified on the following morning of the same Friday Nisan 15.