

THE REST OF THE STORY

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it –
but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 12:1-24

Topic

James and Peter are persecuted for their witness of Jesus Christ by King Herod prior to his being eaten by worms

Title

The Worms Go In, the Worms Go Out

or

The Witness Persecution Program

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

Acts 12:2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

Acts 12:3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was *during* the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Acts 12:4 So when he had arrested him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

Acts 12:5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

Acts 12:6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.

Acts 12:7 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by *him*, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off *his* hands.

Acts 12:8 Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me."

Acts 12:9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

Acts 12:10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own

accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

Acts 12:11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and *from* all the expectation of the Jewish people."

Acts 12:12 So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

Acts 12:13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer.

Acts 12:14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of *her* gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.

Acts 12:15 But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel."

Acts 12:16 Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened *the door* and saw him, they were astonished.

Acts 12:17 But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

Acts 12:18 Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter.

Acts 12:19 But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that *they* should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed *there*.

Acts 12:20 Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's *country*.

Acts 12:21 So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.

Acts 12:22 And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"

Acts 12:23 Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.

Acts 12:24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

Introduction

I've been around death to see that it bothers us when it strikes out against those who are younger. We can't help but ask, *Why?*

I think that part of the answer to the *why's* of God can be found in this episode. James was captured and mercilessly killed. Peter was captured and miraculously freed. It's a classic example of something God allows that causes us to ask, *Why?*

But we need to expand our thinking beyond just James and Peter. We need to see that a third apostle, John, was named; and that a nonbeliever, King Herod, also plays a prominent role.

James, Peter, and John were all charged in Acts 1:8 to **be witnesses** of Jesus Christ. From the moment they were baptized with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost they 'took the stand', as it were, to give their testimony. Each of them in turn went home to be with Jesus **the moment the Lord determined that their testimony on earth was finished.**

We struggle with *why* one man's testimony seems to be cut short by death when, in fact, it is just what God wants from him. *Then he goes home to Heaven!* Instead of feeling sorry for James we should envy him because he preceded Peter by years and John by decades to the place Jesus Christ was preparing for him.

Then there was King Herod. He's a nonbeliever who rejected the witness of Jesus Christ. His earthly end of being **eaten by worms** was terrible and foreshadowed his eternal destiny.

This episode should encourage you in your Christian witness. **You** are 'on the witness stand' until God is through using your testimony to bring Himself glory. Then you go home to the place being prepared for you. It can seem more like witness persecution than witness protection but it is all to the glory of God.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You are a Fearless Witness Regardless What Nonbelievers Can Do to You, and #2 Your Witness to Nonbelievers Should Render Them Fearful of What God Can Do to Them.

#1 You are a Fearless Witness
Regardless What Nonbelievers Can Do to You
(v1-17)

James, Peter, and John were three of the original apostles. They are often mentioned together. They formed a kind of 'inner circle' in that they often were closest to the Lord in His ministry. Thus we are

looking at how Jesus works in and through the lives of His beloved followers.

The length of their earthly witness runs the gamut:

1. James witnessed for Jesus only about a decade before being killed by King Herod.
2. Peter would go on witnessing for several decades before being captured by Caesar Nero and martyred.
3. John would witness into old age until exiled on the island of Patmos. After being released from exile he would return to Ephesus where tradition says he died of natural causes around 98AD nearly one-hundred years old.

The more I advance in age the more I can envy James rather than John! We shouldn't think it strange at all that God uses each of us differently to bring Him glory.

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

Acts 12:2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

It's hard to keep track of all the Herod's in the New Testament! This one is Herod Agrippa the first, nephew of Herod Antipas – the guy who murdered John the Baptist. Herod Agrippa the first was the grandson of Herod the Great – the guy in power when Jesus was born who ordered the murder of the infants.

He was called **king** because he was the first Herod in a while to rule over all of the Jewish Holy Land. As a Roman ruler he was charged with keeping the peace, the *Pax Romana*. Keeping the *Pax Romana* involved pleasing the leaders of his subjects. It pleased them to **harass** the Christians.

Why James? We don't know the earthly circumstances that made James the target. But from Heaven's perspective his time on the witness stand was done and he was going home.

Acts 12:3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was *during* the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Acts 12:4 So when he had arrested him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

It was **Passover** in 44AD. Associated with the celebration of Passover was the **Days of Unleavened Bread**. It was a week of searching through your house to rid it of all leaven in accordance with the ritual Law of Moses. Leaven pictured sin and the search for leaven was to remind the chosen people they were to put sin out of their lives and be holy to the Lord.

While going through the outward ritual, their hearts were filled with the leaven of sin as they desired the persecution of Christians and the murder of the apostles.

Peter had been imprisoned before only to be miraculously released. To insure he would not escape again sixteen Roman soldiers were assigned to guard him. Two of them were chained to him night and day! He was deep in the center of the prison.

Acts 12:5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

Did the Church pray for James? *Of course they did!* Did God answer their prayer? *Of course He did* – He said *“No!”* That is, assuming they were asking for his release.

I think the real insight here is to compare religion with relationship. While the Jews were busy searching their houses for outward leaven, believers were spending time in their house communing with God.

Acts 12:6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.

Peter slept a lot! You recall that he fell asleep on the Mount of Transfiguration while Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah. He fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane even after Jesus urged him to stay awake and pray.

But this sleeping in prison was different. It was a sleep of rest and peace. It was exactly what he ought to be doing on the night before he was to be executed! Either God would deliver him *from* prison and execution; or God would deliver him *through* it and take him home.

Acts 12:7 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by *him*, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off *his* hands.

Acts 12:8 Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me."

Acts 12:9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

Acts 12:10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

Angels always seem to be in a hurry. Their motto must be, *Git 'er done!* They are perfect in their service so maybe we should take a page out of their book. If God gives you something to do, get it done!

Acts 12:11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and *from* all the expectation of the Jewish people."

Acts 12:12 So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

- being changed to bring change -

Again notice that they were not busily searching for leaven. They were searching their hearts, pouring out their thoughts to God.

Acts 12:13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer.

Acts 12:14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of *her* gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.

Acts 12:15 But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel."

This is an example of humor in the Bible. This is meant to be funny.

Why did they say, *it is his angel*? Scholars say that the Jews believed every person had a guardian angel and they came to speculate that your angel looked and sounded like you.

If they really thought it was an angel, wouldn't they have opened the door? I think they were treating Rhoda as a child – acting like she had heard Peter's guardian angel in her imagination.

Acts 12:16 Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened *the door* and saw him, they were astonished.

If they were praying for Peter to be miraculously released, they got what they prayed for! Still **they were astonished**. We are a curious people, are we not? We pray with faith believing God can and will answer, then can't believe it when He does!

Acts 12:17 But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

This **James** is the Lord's brother who evidently held a prominent position in the Church at Jerusalem. Peter told them to spread the word of his release.

You might not have quite as exciting a story to tell but you ought to be quick to spread the word about how Jesus is working in your life. You are His witness.

Scholars think Peter may have headed to Antioch to hide-out and hang-out with the Church there. **We won't see him again in the Book of Acts.** He'll go on to minister for a time; he'll write his two letters and give Mark the details for the Gospel of Mark. Tradition tells us he was martyred by being crucified but upside down at his own request – not thinking himself worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus Christ.

James, Peter, and John. Beloved of the Lord. Saved then empowered to witness. One witnessed only about a decade; one a few decades; one many decades. Two were martyred; one was not.

God masterfully used their testimony as He saw best. He is under no obligation to explain *why*. From an earthly vantage point we are tempted to envy John. From a heavenly vantage point we would envy James.

You are just as beloved; just as saved; and can be just as empowered. Your life is God's witness. He will use your testimony to bring Himself glory. Men might persecute you but you are fearless and can rest as you await the earthly end of your time on the witness stand.

It is the nonbeliever who ought to fear!

#2 Your Witness to Nonbelievers Should Render Them Fearful of What God Can Do to Them (v18-24)

When James, Peter, and John were first selected as apostles, Jesus gave them a little talk. One thing He said to them was,

Matthew 10:28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

This episode illustrates that principle. Peter was without fear of King Herod Agrippa the first. He slept peacefully the night before he was to be beheaded. It was Herod Agrippa the first who ought to have been afraid – very afraid.

Acts 12:18 Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter.

Acts 12:19 But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that *they* should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed *there*.

According to the Code of Justinian, if a soldier let a prisoner escape then he must take the sentence upon himself. At least sixteen soldiers lost their lives.

Should God be blamed for their tragic deaths? *Of course not!* It was Herod Agrippa the first who should be blamed. People want to blame God for things when it is man's sin that is the cause.

I'd like to think some or all of those soldiers trusted Christ to save them. After all, Peter had almost a week to share with them as they were chained to him! Now, seeing God's miracle and facing eternity... it's not too much to hope they received the Lord! There are

stories in Foxe's Book of Martyrs of Roman soldiers who received Christ even as they led Christians away to their deaths – *only to be martyred alongside them*.

Herod got out of town and tried to make the embarrassment go away with work.

Acts 12:20 Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's *country*.

This was everyday, garden variety political intrigue as far as Herod was concerned. Little did he know he was coming to the end of his opportunity to trust Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Acts 12:21 So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.

Acts 12:22 And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"

Acts 12:23 Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.

Josephus was a first century Jewish historian. His writings are not inspired and cannot always be thought 100% accurate. But it is interesting to read his take on events in the Bible.

Josephus describes Herod as wearing a fantastic garment woven with threads of silver. There, glistening in the sun, the audience flattered him. He received their accolades – not knowing it was the last act of disobedience before God would require his life.

Josephus describes Herod dying from “a violent pain in his belly” after suffering for five days. Luke was a physician. Was Herod suffering from **worms** of some kind? Internal maggots???

Whatever the physical ailment that killed him, there is a spiritual element. The word for **worms** is reminiscent of something you read elsewhere. Describing torment in the afterlife for nonbelievers, Jesus said in the Gospel of Mark,

Mark 9:44 where 'THEIR **WORM** DOES NOT DIE AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.'

The point being made in Acts is that King Herod Agrippa the first ought to have been fearful of the witness of these James, Peter and the other Christians. God allowed Herod to execute James. God intervened and would not allow Herod to execute Peter. God was using them, each in a different way, to warn Herod of the judgment to come should he fail to repent.

Acts 12:24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

No earthly king can halt the progress of **the word of God**. No satanic power behind earthly thrones can halt it either.

By **grew and multiplied** we are to understand that many were added to the Church and then multiplied themselves as they, too, went about as witnesses.

If you are a nonbeliever you should be very, very fearful. Your soul and its destiny are at stake. Don't think you have today or tomorrow. You may not.

Believer – **be fearless!** In terms of your time on earth as a believer you may be a James... or a Peter... or a John. It doesn't really matter! See yourself as someone on the witness stand until Jesus dismisses you and calls you home.

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