

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Fifteen
Acts 12:1-13:5

Day One

12:1 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.

12:1 - I always get the Herods confused, so I thought I would just cut and paste from a Bible commentary a brief history of this particular Herod:

This was Herod Agrippa, the son of Aristobulus, and grandson of Herod the Great; he was nephew to Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist, and brother to Herodias. He was made king by the Emperor Caligula, and was put in possession of all the territories formerly held by his uncle Philip and by Lysanias; namely, Iturea, Trachonitis, Abilene, with Gaulonitis, Batanaea, and Penias. To these the Emperor Claudius afterward added Judea and Samaria; which were nearly all the dominions possessed by his grandfather, Herod the Great.(from Adam Clarke's Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

v. 2 – It has always intrigued me that this James was martyred so early in his ministry, for he was one who was with Jesus at so many special times. You would think that his life and ministry would have been longer, but God often promotes His choicest servants to heavenly duty, having distinguished themselves on earth.

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, *James* and John the brother of James (Mark 5:37-38).

After six days Jesus took Peter, *James* and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them (Mark 9:2-3).

He took Peter, *James* and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled (Mark 14:33-34).

Don't ever think that your intimacy with God will prevent death. It won't. And what's more, you have no guarantees of how long you have left. **Are you making the most of your time with this fact in mind?**

vs. 3&4 – This is Peter’s second time in prison (see Acts 5:19). Since Herod owed his rule to Rome, he wanted to keep the peace and please the Jews. This tells me that Jesus’ followers were causing some unrest in Herod’s kingdom. So Herod thought he would deal with the problem using physical and military force, but to no avail. Herod’s uncle had beheaded John, and now this man was following in his family’s tradition of persecuting God’s people to befriend themselves to the Jews so that they could keep their place of power bestowed by Rome. Don’t ever underestimate the ruthlessness of ambitious men and women who have no morals and don’t know Jesus.

Day Two

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 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.

v. 5 – The church was praying for Peter. But the church also didn’t believe that God would hear their prayers! You will see what I mean in the study the day after tomorrow. **Are you praying with expectation of God answering, or are you just praying with no thought or expectation that you will be answered? If you aren’t hopeful that God is listening and will act, why are you praying?**

v. 6 – We saw yesterday that 16 soldiers guarded Peter, four at any one time. So two were acting as sentries and two were on either side of Peter, who was bound with two chains. I would say that Peter was secured and guarded well, wouldn’t you? It would also seem that there was no means of escape, unless someone were to come and overpower the guards. Do you agree with this assessment?

Does this relate to your current situation? Are you in a tough place, with no means of escape or assistance? If so, then this story can bring you hope. Peter was about to experience his second jailbreak, both of which were initiated by angels. Where is the hope in this situation? The hope is in the fact that God knows where you are and what you’re going through. This story doesn’t promise that God will miraculously release every believer in jail or in a tough place. But the story shows that God *can* do that, so if He doesn’t, it’s not because He can’t. Rather He chooses not to do so because He is doing something else in your life. So it comes down to faith, not for escape, but for God’s plan to work for your ultimate good and His purposes. You must have the same attitude that Daniel’s friends had if you are in a tough place:

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:17-18).

v. 7 – The angel smacked Peter on his side and told him to get up! They had places to go and people to meet. The angel brought his own light with him, so they could see. God will always light your way, whatever that way is for you. At any rate, I wonder where the guards were? Did they see or hear anything? It doesn't seem that they did. So God is able to speak to you and make it so clear, yet keep others around you in the dark.

v. 8 – It seems that Peter had no clothes on, which makes sense to me. I have visited foreign jails and that is how they keep the inmates at night in many places. How humiliating for a Jew to sleep naked between two Romans. But it must not have bothered Peter too much, for he was asleep. Could you sleep in a similar situation? Anxiety would probably have kept me awake. But Peter was sound asleep, which shows the peace that he had.

Notice how “bossy” the angel was. He was acting urgently and needed Peter’s full cooperation. When God is getting ready to deliver you, you need to pay attention and carry out His instructions to the fullest.

Day Three

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.

v. 9 – If an angel had just released me from chains and was leading me out from the midst of guards who were unaware of what was going on, I would think it was a vision, too. The psalmist wrote:

When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy (Psalm 126:1-3).

If you’ve never been in a tough place, then you can’t ever have a testimony of how God saved you. How old is your last, best testimony? Is it time to develop another one?

v. 10 – Nothing could hold Peter when God moved to deliver him—not chains, guards or a locked iron gate. And nothing can stop you either if you are doing God’s will. Trust God for the impossible and He will do it. But it just can’t be to obtain something that you

want; it must involve carrying out His will for your life. I am writing this in Kenya, on a safari in the famous Mara game park. I'm not sure how I got here, but God has opened iron gates for me to pass through. He has provided many opportunities for ministry and for enjoyment. At times, it does seem like a dream. The key here is that I am no one special. If God did it for me, He can do it for you? What is the "it" for you?

v. 11 - Finally Peter came to his senses and realized that he was experiencing a major miracle! Because we can be spiritually dull and also because our mind can get fixed so we can only see certain things that "fit" our perspective of reality, we can miss what the Lord is doing. There are many instances in the Bible where God opened the eyes of his servants so they could see what was already right in front of them! **Can you think of any such stories? But the real question is: does God need to open your eyes? What aren't you seeing today that, if you saw it, could change your entire walk with the Lord?**

You may say, "Well, I can't answer that because I don't see it!" And you would be correct. So the first thing you need to do is be open to the fact that there is something that you aren't see—that you don't have everything figured out—and then ask God to open your eyes. But be careful! Once He opens your eyes, you will be responsible for what you are seeing.

v. 12 – Peter had a good idea where the believers would be praying, so he set out for the house of Mary, mother of John Mark. Some believe that this was where the disciples received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. But there is nothing special about a place of geography; what God's people do there makes it special. What made this house special was that people were gathering and praying. So Peter went off to share the good news of his escape. With whom would you share God's good news when it happens to you?

I wonder why Peter didn't go home to his family? Was his family there praying? I'm not sure, but I know that Peter's wife traveled with him in ministry:

Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? (1 Corinthians 9:4-5).

But Peter's first thought was to get to the saints as quickly as possible to tell them what happened. And that is what he did.

Day Four

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.

v. 13 – It is interesting that this home had a servant girl, which I didn't think Jews had. The King James refers to Rhoda as a damsel, which would have made her a member of the family. If the household had their doors locked for fear of the Jews, I wonder why they had a girl and not a man answer the door? At any rate, these aren't important questions, which is what we should focus on when we study God's word. Don't waste your time on minor points or trivial pursuits as Paul warned:

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned (Titus 3:9-11).

We should not only avoid arguing over silly things, but we should also avoid those who do.

v. 14 – This young girl forgot one important thing in her joy: She forgot to open the door! But you can't fault her, for she was overjoyed that she heard the voice of her brother who was in trouble. God wants to mold us into a spiritual family so that He can do His work in us through other people. This is such an important issue, for otherwise how can we fulfill the verse:

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15-16).

Are you connected enough to other believers that you know their joy, problems or grief? If not, are you ready to make a new commitment to a church body that will enable you to do this?

v. 15 – I always laugh when I read this verse. The believers were probably praying, "Lord, help Peter. Protect him and set him free." Then Rhoda came into the prayer meeting to tell everyone that God had answered their prayer—Peter was there! And what was their response? "Girl, you're crazy! It's his ghost!" Why were they so incredulous that God had answered their prayer?

Are you guilty of this? Do you pray and then find it hard to believe that God would answer your prayers? Why pray then? I expect God to hear and answer and I actively begin looking for the answer. I don't believe that prayer is trivial, nor will God trick me when I pray. He hears and answers, even if the answer is "No!"

v. 16 – Peter was probably standing outside, thinking, "Let me in, before the Jews find me standing out here and re-arrest me!" So he kept on knocking and they finally opened the door. When they saw him, they were shocked! I think that God attempts to bring us face to face with our prayer answers, but it's hard for us to see them or to even believe that they are answered. **Is the Lord trying to help you see a prayer answer right now? Ask Him to open your eyes and see what you can't see?** Then ask Him why you couldn't see it.

Day Five

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. 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.

v. 17 – You can only imagine how excited everyone was, and I am surprised that Luke would include this detail about Peter motioning with his hand for quiet. It must have been quite raucous. At any rate, Peter didn't hang around to be recaptured. He gave his report, told them to inform the elders and then went to a more secure place. At no time did the disciples expose themselves to needless persecution. If they had no other option, they would stand and suffer. But if they could, they moved on to keep their work going without interruption.

v. 18 – This event had everyone excited, in one way or the other. The disciples were overjoyed and the soldiers were beside themselves. They had been given a commission to guard someone and he had escaped! They were in big trouble.

v. 19 – Herod conducted his own investigation and we aren't aware of what he found or what the soldiers said. It must have been public knowledge that the soldiers lost their lives over Peter's miraculous escape. Like the Sanhedrin in Acts 4, Herod couldn't fathom that God could miraculously intervene in any situation and that God was more powerful than Rome's army. Historians and politicians alike without the mind of God cannot report objectively on the things of God. Only those full of the Spirit of God can do so.

v. 20 – This seems to have been a pretty ordinary affair of the state, one that Herod would have attended to on a regular basis. I'm sure he thought it was business as usual, but little did he know that this would be his last trip ever, except his impending trip to hell. No one knows when their last day will be; that's why we must maximize our time, making the most of every opportunity. Are you living with this in mind? James wrote:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (James 4:13-16).

Day Six

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.

v. 21 – Historians report that this robe was made of silver, which shown brightly as the sun hit it. The people saw Herod as their source of provision and were eager to placate his anger so they could have their food supplies restored. And Herod saw him as their supplier, so he cooperated in this godless drama.

vs. 22&23 – The people declared that this puppet of Rome was really a divine being and Herod did nothing to deflect their praise. I would imagine that this attitude was present in the Herod family for decades, and finally their prideful sins exceeded God's ability to endure. So an angel struck Herod with some sort of intestinal malady, and worms ate him up! What a wretched way to die! But Herod and his family were wretched people, and these worms were an indication of their spiritual state and condition before God. Herod wore royal robes to cover his worm-eaten soul!

There is no external covering, perfume or title that can cover a wicked heart that isn't right with God. God's mercy is longsuffering, but not indefinite. In a time known only to God, Herod's sins had exceeded God's grace and Herod was struck down. I'm reminded of the same thing happening to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, except that his illness wasn't fatal. God judges everyone, although his judgment begins with His own household:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17).

v. 24 – Herod's family was finished, yet God's word and work continued to grow and prosper. If you were with me for our Revelation studies, you will remember the basic lesson of that book: Every "ism"—every political, religious or intellectual movement that exalts itself against God may prosper in the short-run but is doomed to fail in the long-run. No one and nothing can stand against God and His purposes. At the same time, the Church cannot be passive in the face of these enemies of God, for these philosophies and demagogues will enslave and even kill millions of people if they have their way. We must oppose them prayerfully and with other means at our disposal, convinced of God's eventual victory, but mindful of evil's Satanic power.

v. 25 – Barnabas and Saul had been sent by the believers in Antioch with alms to relieve the suffering in Jerusalem. Now they returned to Antioch after Herod's death and history was about to be changed as those two were to be sent out as missionaries to the Gentile

world. When you aren't expecting it, God can move, using you in ways that He has prepared you for, but in ways that you never expected. Keep your eyes on Him and don't be anxious. Yet use every opportunity you have to prepare for the day that will come, when you will be used for the purpose for which you were created.

Day Seven

13:1 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. 4 The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. 5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

v. 1 – it is noticeable that pastors, apostles and evangelists aren't listed as present in Antioch. Remember, the Church wasn't even the Church yet. It was still evolving and developing into what we know today. But we do see that those who could equip God's people with His word, whether through teaching or prophecy, were in abundance. So at this point, Saul and Barnabas had one or both of those offices. At the time of this writing, the role of teacher has greatly diminished in importance and status in the church. Many want to be apostles and prophets, some evangelists, many pastors but just a few teachers. If these positions were up for volunteers, I would volunteer to be a teacher.

It's interesting that someone from Herod's household was among the saints at Antioch. Perhaps Herod had heard the gospel from Manaen, which would have made Herod's judgment described in the previous verses more tragic and understandable. Jewish historians have told us that Manaen's mother was Herod's nursemaid, and that Manaen displayed a prophetic gift early in life, "predicting" that Herod would one day be king. Herod obviously brought Manaen to the royal court when the prophecy came true.

v. 2 – I took a little Greek and I understand that when the Spirit said, "Set apart for me," that this is what is called the verbal middle voice. The middle voice basically represents when someone does something for himself. And here the Spirit set apart for himself the work to which Saul and Barnabas were called. When you are set apart for your purpose, you aren't set apart to some work. You are set apart for God to use you for Himself. So the work isn't the focus, nor are you, but rather God is first and foremost, even in the work of the ministry. Does that make sense to you? Don't ever let your purpose or your work take the place of God in your life. That isn't something God intended to happen.

This is "church" at its best. The leaders were ministering to the Lord, the Holy Spirit "spoke," revealing the purpose for two men. **I wonder how the Spirit spoke?** I would imagine through the prophets who were there. However He chose to speak, the men recognized it and acted accordingly. That is how it should be in the life of the Church of Jesus Christ.

v. 3 – The men finished ministering to the Lord, confirmed and sealed God’s word to them with prayer and fasting, and then released these men to their God-given purpose without any hesitation. Nor do I think that Saul and Barnabas had any promises of financial support as they went. I’m sure the brothers gave them something for living and transport, but the rest of their trip was by faith. **Is money keeping you from moving quickly in response to God’s word to you? What can you do about that? Is that a good thing? A necessary thing? A hindrance?**

v. 4 – The Spirit led these two, but it’s interesting that they went to Cyprus first, which was Barnabas’ home. The Spirit started them out with someplace familiar, where they undoubtedly had contacts. They also went to the synagogues first, which would have been natural for them, according to their heritage and values. Don’t ever over-spiritualize the guidance process. Sometimes God uses your natural inclinations and tendencies to order your steps.

v. 5 – Team ministry is always more effective than working solo. Barnabas, Saul and John were a traveling team, and there could have been others. Who is part of your team? Of whose team are you a part? How effectively are you working together? What can you do to improve?

Saul and then Paul always started in the synagogue, but this was by no means a biblical mandate. If it was, you and I would have to begin in the synagogue wherever we went to preach the gospel. This represented a personal value and a strategy for Saul. He knew that he owed the Jews for his heritage, yet he also knew that every synagogue had believing Gentiles who attended. So he fulfilled his personal obligation of trying to win some Jews, but as soon as the Jews became obstinate and rejected Saul’s message, he withdrew. Try not to spend time and energy where you are only tolerated. Instead go to where you are celebrated.