

God is Greater than the Politics of People – Acts 12:1-25

Introduction:

The enemy of the cross is Satan, yet he uses all kinds of means to attack the church of Jesus Christ. During Jesus' ministry, we saw Satan use storms, false witnesses, demons and even Jesus' disciples to try and stop the Gospel from going forth. Of course, Satan does not stand a chance when opposing Jesus. So what happens when Satan opposes the work God is doing through the church? What if Satan could stamp out the church before it ever took root? His first attempt was devastating, enlisting a man named Saul to arrest and kill Christians. But that did not work, for not only did the Gospel spread as the Christians fled, but Saul was converted and became the greatest advocate for the fledgling faith. So Satan takes another approach: he works through the political sphere. It was easy to find people to do his bidding there. Politicians are so easily swayed as they try to hold onto their positions and power. How successful will Satan be working through political powers to silence the Gospel?

Precarious Position: Acts 12:1-5

Background: Herod

So who is "Herod the King" mentioned here in verse one? It gets confusing as there are three Herods mentioned in the New Testament. The first Herod is the Herod mentioned when Jesus is born. He is "Herod the Great" (37-34 BC) (cf. Matthew 2:1-18). The second Herod is Herod Antipas, the first Herod's son, who ruled Judea from 4 BC to AD 39). This would be the Herod who had John the Baptist arrested and killed, (Luke 3:19-20, 9:7-9) and questioned Jesus (Luke 23:6-12). The Herod of Acts 12 is the third Herod, who is Agrippa I, the grandson of Herd the Great. He ruled Judea only three years, AD 41-44. He tried to rule the area as a good Jew, which gained him the favour of the Pharisees. We will meet his son, Agrippa II, in Acts 25:13-26:32). Got all the Herods straight?

1. What actions does King Herod take against the church? (vss. 1-3) What was his greatest crime? Who was James? What reason is given for the arrest of Peter? What does this tell us about the feelings of the Jews towards Christians at this time?
2. When was Peter arrested? (vs. 3) What was this feast to celebrate? (cf. Exodus 12:1-13:16) When was Jesus arrested? (cf. Mark 14:1) Of note, Luke uses the same verb for “arrest” in this verse describing Peter’s arrest as that used of Jesus’ arrest (Luke 22:54). Do you think this is significant?
3. In verse four we get a description of Peter’s circumstances. How likely is it that Peter would get free? Why? When was the execution scheduled?
4. As Peter sat in prison, what was the church doing? Is this what we would have done?

We are not told why James was chosen, but here was one of the inner circle of Jesus. He experienced more than many of the other disciples, and yet so soon he is snatched away from the church and this earth. Jesus said James would drink the cup of suffering he drank from, (Mark 10:38-40) and sure enough he did. To be taken by the sword means to be beheaded, one of the worst ways to die for the Jews. This shows that sometimes God’s plan allows for death, even of the saints.

Peter’s Release – Acts 12:6-11

5. Verse 6 gives us a time reference for the next event. What is the time reference? And noting the details in this verse, how likely is it that Peter will get away? Explain.
6. He shows up in the cell with Peter (vs. 7)? How does Peter respond to the angel? What does this indicate about Peter’s frame of mind? What command is given to Peter? What happens to enable this?

7. In verse 8 there are specific instructions about getting dressed. Why all the instructions?
8. According to verse 9, what did Peter think was happening?
9. How did Peter get by the guards? The locked gate? (vs. 10) Who was behind all of this?
10. At what point did the angel leave Peter? (vs. 10)
11. Peter now realizes what has happened. What does he conclude (vs. 11)?

Here on the eve of the end of the Feast of Unleavened bread, the celebration of the first Exodus, Peter is delivered from the hand of the enemy, the political power trying to oppress the people of God. The same God who delivered Moses and all Israel acts again to deliver Peter, and gives the hope of the deliverance of all God's people.

The Strangest Welcome – Acts 12:12-17

12. Where does Peter go when he realizes what has just happened? (v. 12)
Who is there?
13. When Peter knocks on the house door, who comes to answer it? (v. 13)
How does she respond to her surprise visitor? (vs. 14)
14. How do the people praying for the release of Peter respond when told Peter is at the front door (vs. 15)? If it was an angel, what would that mean?
15. Peter continues to knock until the door is opened, and what is the response of the church (cf. vss. 16-17) Why does Peter hush the crowd?

16. According to verse 17 Peter shares his testimony of what the Lord has done for him. Who does he want the church to pass this testimony on to?

17. Why does Peter not stay at that house? (v. 17)

The Price Paid – Acts 12:18-19

18. Meanwhile, back at the prison, what happens in the morning when they discover Peter is gone (vs. 18)?

19. What is Herod's response to the escape of Peter (v. 19)?

Judgement Day – Acts 12:20-25

20. Another scene unfolds up in the city of Caesarea where Herod has gone. We are not told why Herod is upset but we do know what he has done to show his displeasure. What is it according to verse 20?

21. Herod shows his authority and power through royal dress and position, according to verse 21. As he sat upon his throne, how secure do you think Herod feels?

22. In verse 22 we get the response of the people to his speech. How do they respond?

23. According to verse 23, how does Herod respond to their adulation? How does God see this pride? What are the consequences for Herod? (note: Josephus, Jewish historian, also records this event and says it was five days of suffering before he died)

24. Is there a message here about rulers and authorities and the sovereignty of God?
25. Satan thought he recruited a great ally in Herod: a man with power, authority and great pride. But God showed once again that the greatest political powers are nothing compared to the authority of God. As God is dealing with Herod, what is happening in the church (vs. 24)?
26. Saul and Barnabas have missed all the fun – and arrive in Jerusalem after Peter is released and safe. Why were they in Jerusalem? (cf. Acts 11:30). Who did they bring with them? (vs. 25) So where did they likely stay, and what story would they have heard? (aside: according to Colossians 4:10 Barnabas is the uncle of Mark, likely making Mary his sister)

Conclusion:

This chapter contains a most exciting story of deliverance. But as with every story of healing or deliverance, there are unanswered questions. Why wasn't James delivered? Where did Peter go? Why hide this time when last time he was arrested he returned to the temple to preach? So many questions, which reminds us that walking with Jesus is not about a set of rules or orders. It is dynamic, and flexible. We must be willing to respond to the "blowing of the wind of the Spirit." (John 3:8). But in closing, here are a few thoughts from Bible Scholar Warren Wiersbe:

"There is a practical lesson here: when Satan wanted to hinder the work of the church, he went after Peter and James. He goes after the best Christians and seeks to hinder their work. Are we the kind of Christians that Satan wants to attack? It is significant that Peter was delivered while James was permitted to die. God has a unique purpose for each of His own."¹

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). [*Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament*](#) (p. 308). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.