

Acts 12:1-5

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Herod Agrippa I begins persecuting the believers in Jerusalem. He executes James, one of the twelve Apostles. This violence makes the Pharisees and Sadducees happy, so Herod arrests Peter with the intention of executing him after Passover. The believers pray for Peter diligently.

After the church has experienced years of peace, which allowed it to grow, it is struck by sudden, violent opposition. Initially, believers in Christ faced antagonism from the religious leaders of Jerusalem: the Pharisees and Sadducees, the same groups which crucified Jesus. This persecution intensified under the leadership of Saul the Pharisee (Acts 8:1). Jesus appeared before Saul in a vision, calling him to give up his campaign of persecution and become a minister of the gospel (Acts 9:3-4). Saul believed and obeyed. After this, believers were left alone (Acts 9:31).

Now, it is not the religious leaders openly contending with the followers of Jesus. This persecution comes from the Jewish government:

Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them (v. 1).

Luke, the author of Acts, provides general chronological indicators of when the events about which he writes occur. In telling his readers *Now about that time*, he is referring to the end of Chapter 11, where Barnabas and Saul had departed from Antioch to travel to Judea and deliver charitable givings to the believers in Jerusalem due to an impending famine (Acts 11:27-30).

As Barnabas and Saul journeyed south from Ancient Syria (modern-day Turkey) to Judea, *Herod the king* decides to attack the church of Jerusalem.

There are many Herods in the Bible. This Herod was Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great. It was Herod the Great who ordered the slaughter of the male babies in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:16). Herod the Great's son Herod Antipas was the Herod who ordered John the Baptizer's execution, and to whom Pilate sent Jesus during His trial (Mark 6:27, Luke 23:7).

Antipas' nephew, Herod Agrippa I, spent much of his youth in Rome, befriending future Caesars. Agrippa I swayed Caesar Caligula to believe that his uncle Antipas was plotting a rebellion against the Caesar. Caligula had Antipas exiled to Gaul (France), where he died. Agrippa I received authority over Antipas's territories: Galilee and Perea.

After Caligula was assassinated, Herod Agrippa I helped Claudius (his childhood friend) become Caesar, and Claudius rewarded Agrippa I with authority over most of Judea, Idumea (Edom), and Samaria (northern Israel). Not since Herod the Great, his grandfather, had a Herod ruled over so much of the old kingdom, and more.

Agrippa's reign over these many provinces would last for only three years. Despite a lifetime of successfully ingratiating himself with the Romans, political scheming, and ladder-climbing,

Herod Agrippa I would go on to cross an enemy whom he could not manipulate or backstab: the God of Israel.

Herod *laid hands on some who belonged to the church*, arresting Christians in Jerusalem, with a clearly defined goal in mind: *in order to mistreat them*. This could mean he had them beaten, probably in public, to shame and scare the other followers of Christ.

Herod escalates from simply wanting to *mistreat* the believers to executing one of them. By Herod's order, the first of the 12 apostles is martyred:

And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword (v. 2).

James the brother of John was James the son of Zebedee. Jesus called James "Boanerges," along with his brother *John*, which means "Sons of Thunder." *James* was with Jesus early on in the Lord's ministry. Jesus had warned him and the other disciples that "you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles" (Matthew 10:18). So it had happened and James became the first of the twelve to be martyred.

By trade, *James* was a fisherman at the Sea of Galilee, and a business partner with Peter (Luke 5:10). There is some evidence he was a cousin of Jesus through his mother Salome (Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40, John 19:25).

Like Peter, *James* and *John* appeared to be part of Jesus's inner circle. The trio were allowed into the room when Jesus raised Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mark 5:37). They were the only three disciples to witness Christ's transfiguration (Matthew 17:1, Mark 9:2, Luke 9:28). And *James*, Peter, and *John* were brought by Jesus further into the Garden of Gethsemane and were asked to pray for Him before His arrest (Luke 26:37). Both Zebedee brothers were passionate and zealous. At one point during Christ's ministry, they showed their zeal in a misguided way, which Jesus took the opportunity to correct. After a village in Samaria would not give Him room or food, James and John asked if their Master wanted them to call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritan village. Jesus rebuked them, saying "the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:51-56).

James wanted to be great. He prompted his mother to ask Jesus to appoint her sons to sit on Jesus's left and right side at the coming of His kingdom (Matthew 20:20-21, Mark 10:35-37). This request stirred resentment among the other disciples (Mark 10:41). But Jesus did not discourage James and John's ambition. He redirected their fierce zeal to become servants. Jesus encouraged their ambition to be great, but for the kingdom of God rather than man:

"Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, 'You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.'"
(Mark 10:42-45)

Interestingly, in Revelation 3:21, Jesus offers this reward to share His throne to any believer. This promise was originally directed to the church in Laodicea. But Revelation is written to Jesus's servants, so the promises are applicable to any believer (Revelation 1:1).

Jesus promises the reward of a shared reign to anyone who overcomes as He, Jesus, overcame. One trial Jesus overcame was the temptation to live in His own will, the temptation to seize power rather than serve the mission His Father sent Him to serve (Matthew 26:53).

But at the initial point that the Zebedee brothers asked Jesus to seat them at His right hand in His Kingdom, He replied by testing how serious they were, what they were willing to do to achieve greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven:

Jesus: "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

James and John: "We are able."

Jesus: "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized."
(Mark 10:38-39)

Jesus seems to be referring to His death in this verse from Mark. Thus, James was indeed baptized with the same baptism as Jesus, as James died for his testimony, just as Jesus did. According to Revelation 3:21, that means that James overcame as Jesus overcame, and will therefore get his wish; he will share Jesus's throne with him.

The basic message of Revelation is that Jesus will greatly reward anyone who overcomes death, loss, or rejection from the world. This is the great blessing that is promised to any servant of Jesus who reads, hears, and does what is written in Revelation (Revelation 1:3).

Later on, while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His arrest, Jesus asked the Father,

"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."
(Matthew 26:39)

Now, at the hands of Herod Agrippa I, James drank the cup that Jesus drank, obedience to the Father even unto death (Philippians 2:8-9). James had overcome the world.

That he was *put to death with a sword* means James was beheaded. The response from the Pharisees and Sadducees was positive. Herod took note of their reaction: *he saw that it pleased the Jews* (v. 3). The religious leaders in Jerusalem had been responsible for Jesus's death, and in the years since had tried to snuff out the significant following He left behind.

They were successful in stoning Stephen the Deacon to death (Acts 7:59), and under Saul's initiative they had arrested (and possibly killed) many in the church (Acts 8:3), causing the entire church to flee Jerusalem for a time, except for the twelve apostles. But in the years since Saul put

his faith in Jesus and began teaching the Gospel rather than persecuting it, the religious leaders seem to have given up on destroying the followers of Jesus. A time of peace reigned (Acts 9:31).

Here Herod restarts the persecution, and the Pharisees and Sadducees loudly and clearly communicate to him that this was a good move. Their favor may have been why he began arresting and harming the Christians to begin with.

So, in an effort to sustain his boost in popularity, Herod repeated what had worked before:

When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were *pleased* to see James, one of Jesus's oldest and most prominent followers, brutally executed. They were probably beyond ecstatic to see Herod *arrest Peter also*. Peter had been a thorn in their side ever since Pentecost. Through his preaching, many thousands of Jews had turned to faith in Jesus (Acts 2:41, Acts 4:4, Acts 5:42). The Sanhedrin (the Council of Pharisees and Sadducees) had arrested Peter themselves, and threatened to kill him, but nothing they had done stopped him from preaching about Jesus.

Now they saw Herod apparently getting results. James was dead. Peter was arrested. Soon he would be executed as well.

Luke tells us the arrest of Peter took place *during the days of Unleavened Bread* (v. 3). The *days of Unleavened Bread* was the festival also known as *Passover*. It was during *Passover* that Jesus was arrested and crucified over a decade earlier. Thousands of Jews sojourned to Jerusalem every year to celebrate this founding holy day.

Peter was put under heavy lock and key:

When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people (v. 4).

Not only was he *put in prison*, but *four squads of soldiers* were ordered to *guard* Peter. The word for *four squads* is "tetradioids," meaning there were four men in each squad, making a total of sixteen *soldiers* just to keep one man, Peter, a fisherman from Galilee, locked up.

Evidently, James was executed before *the days of Unleavened Bread*, but probably not too long before, since Herod arrested Peter subsequent to the positive response he received from the Pharisees and Sadducees for executing James. But the timing of Peter's arrest allowed for some delay between imprisonment and execution. Herod was *intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people*. First the holy day must be celebrated, the *Passover seder* must be performed, the meal eaten, and then perhaps the next day Peter could be beheaded *before the people*, in public for everyone to see.

The thought may have been that this would make an even greater impact due to the timing of this execution, taking place on the same anniversary of Jesus's execution. It would add salt to the wound and be all the more horrifying for believers in Jesus to see their leader and apostle publicly slain on the same day their Lord was slain.

The thousands of Jews who had journeyed to Jerusalem for the celebration would also see this prominent believer killed, and it would put great fear into everyone. It would seem the timing was calculated to create a deterrent, to induce the Jews to have nothing to do with Christ or His followers.

But it was not acceptable to kill Peter on the day of *Passover*:

So Peter was kept in the prison. He was afforded some time, albeit behind bars with four squads of soldiers watching his every move.

But the Christians did not give him up for lost: *but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God* (v. 5).

The *church of God* refers to the believers in Jerusalem. The Greek word translated *church* means “assembly.” The use of *church* in this context refers to believers assembled together for a shared purpose. In this case, they assembled to offer *prayer for Peter* that he might be freed.

Their *prayer was made fervently*. The word *fervently* here is the Greek “ektenēs” which literally means “stretched out.” Metaphorically, it is used to mean *fervently*, or “without ceasing.” They were praying stretched out of over time, extensively; it gives the picture that every minute Peter was imprisoned, the *church of God* was praying for his release.

Biblical Text

1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. 3 When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. 5 So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.