

Acts 12:18-23

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The next day, Herod and his men cannot find Peter. The king orders Peter's guards to be executed. Herod departs Jerusalem for Caesarea. Later, while standing before a crowd in his kingliest clothing, the people shout that he is a god. Herod welcomes their praise. God sends an angel to strike Herod dead soon after.

Luke describes the fallout of Peter's escape from prison:

Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter (v. 18).

In the morning, *when the day came*, the alarm was raised. There *was no small disturbance among the soldiers*, which is to say, there was a great *disturbance*. When they went to sleep that night, their prisoner was in a cell chained to guards on the inside and guarded by men on the outside. But they woke up and he was gone. The chains which had held his wrists were attached to nothing. The soldiers did not know what *could have become of Peter*.

King Herod is informed of Peter's disappearance. A search for the escaped prisoner begins. The text does not say how extensive the search was, only that it failed. Peter may have been lying low, though in past situations where his life was sought after, he did not hide (Acts 4:31, 5:41-42, 8:1). Perhaps God frustrated the efforts of Herod and his soldiers to find the escapee. In any case, Peter's whereabouts are not discovered, and Herod takes his disappointment out on his own men:

When Herod had searched for Peter and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution (v. 19).

He *examined the guards* who were assigned to Peter's detainment, sixteen in all, meaning he questioned them concerning what had happened. With two guards physically chained to Peter and the remaining fourteen either standing outside the cell or trading shifts, it was difficult to understand how Peter had escaped. The guards themselves knew nothing. They had not seen the angel.

They had slept through the entire thing. Herod might have concluded that the guards let him go. The alternative explanation, the correct one, may have been too terrible to ponder. Herod does as any wicked tyrant might do in such a situation: he *ordered that Peter's guards be led away to execution*. If there was no Christ-follower to execute, the *guards* who let him escape would have to suffice.

There is no follow-up persecution after Peter's escape. While beforehand, Herod had been eager to arrest and destroy members of the faith, now that one of the foremost Christians had slipped through his fingers, he seems to give up on his campaign against the church. Morale among his own men had possibly dipped after the humiliation of losing the prisoner and the execution of their comrades. Jerusalem was a disappointing place for the petty king, so Herod "took his ball and went home," so to speak:

Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there (v. 19).

Herod Agrippa I leaves Jerusalem entirely, as well as the region of *Judea*, where *Jerusalem* was located. He then began *spending time* in the port-city of *Caesarea*. *Caesarea* is roughly 75 miles north of Jerusalem.

The Herod of Acts 12 was the grandson of Herod the Great, who built up the city of *Caesarea* into the important harbor it was in that day, naming it after Caesar Augustus to curry favor with the emperor. *Caesarea* soon became Rome's capital for the region. It accordingly housed the headquarters for the Roman governor.

Caesarea then supplanted Jerusalem as the primary seat of Roman power; Jerusalem was further inland and up a steep climb into the hills. *Caesarea* was more convenient to Rome, being on the coast. Herod Agrippa I had a home there, where perhaps he went to sulk after the embarrassment of losing Peter, and perhaps the plummeting of his popularity among the Jewish religious elites.

Luke informs us of another problem Herod faced during his reign, which relates to his undoing:

Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country (v. 20).

The *people of Tyre and Sidon* were Phoenicians, an ancient Canaanite people group (Genesis 10:15, 10:19). *Tyre and Sidon* were ancient cities on the Mediterranean Coast in Phoenicia, north of Galilee, in what is modern-day Lebanon. Both cities exist to this day. Jesus spent a brief period of time in Phoenicia during His ministry. While there, He admired the faith of a Canaanite woman and healed her daughter of a demon (Matthew 15:21-28).

Luke reports that *their country*, Phoenicia, *was fed by the king's country*. There was a supply chain between the regions of Judea (southern Israel) as well as Samaria and Galilee (northern Israel) which carried food to Phoenicia. Tyre and Sidon were wealthy seaports, but apparently traded for their food with the agriculturally-based peoples in the territory of Israel.

Now since Herod *was very angry* with the Tyrians and Sidonians (we are not told why), he had apparently stopped the export of food to them.

The *people of Tyre and Sidon* try to make nice with Herod. Hungry, and probably afraid of his reputation for putting people to the sword, they *were asking for peace* with him. Luke describes that the leaders of *Tyre and Sidon* were friends with Herod's *chamberlain, Blastus, having won him over*. The Phoenicians apparently executed a successful diplomatic strategy with *Blastus*.

We don't know anything about *Blastus* outside of this chapter. He was Herod's *chamberlain*, his chief servant who managed his household, money, and relationship with the public. He had influence with Herod.

The *people of Tyre and Sidon* had a successful campaign to make *Blastus* sympathetic to their suffering. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, a "certain festival [was] celebrated to make vows for his safety" (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 19, Chapter 8). We can speculate that

this festival was arranged by *Blastus*, since he was *won over* by the people of *Tyre and Sidon*. That he is identified in this chapter seems to indicate that he is the mediator between the Phoenicians and Herod, and has arranged a celebration to butter Herod up, where the Phoenicians can promise their loyalty, flatter him, and win him over. This event was so that the Tyrians and Sidonians could make vows to ensure *peace* and safe treatment from Herod.

Luke writes that Herod made a big show of himself at the festival:

On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, his finest dress, his most kingly appearance, and took his seat on the rostrum, the judgment seat, and began delivering an address to them (v. 21).

Josephus describes his *royal apparel* in some detail,

“he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful; and came into the theater early in the morning. At which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun’s rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner: and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him.”

(Antiquities.19.8)

While Herod makes his speech, his *address, the people* of Tyre and Sidon *kept crying out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!”* (v. 22). They likely praised him and built up his ego to ensure his good favor would remain on them (and resume the export of food from his kingdoms to their cities).

Again, Josephus provides some other details,

“And presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another; (though not for his good;) that ‘He was a God.’”

(Antiquities.19.8)

In Josephus’ chronicle, the Sidonians and Tyrians ask for mercy from Herod, saying that beforehand they had revered him only as a man, but from that day forward they would praise him as superior to humans. Josephus describes Herod’s reaction: “Upon this the King did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery” (Antiquities.19.8).

The Sidonians and Tyrians compare him to a deity, rather than a mere human ruler, saying he speaks with the *voice of a god*. Throughout history, this seems to be the ultimate compliment for kings. They wish to be *god*, and certainly wish to be worshipped as *a god* (Daniel 3:1, 5). This was the first temptation, and the linchpin of all sin; the deception that Satan whispered to Eve in the Garden, “...you will be like God...” (Genesis 3:4).

God took this opportunity to deal with Herod once and for all: *And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory* (v 23). Herod took all *glory* upon himself. He was called a *god* and did not correct those who worshipped him. Paul and Barnabas will have a similar experience in a couple of chapters, but will reject such worship, and redirect their audience to the one true God (Acts 14:11-15).

Herod fell suddenly ill, *struck by an angel of the Lord*, by one of God's messengers and servants, who obeys the will of the Lord perfectly. Herod's death is described such that *he was eaten by worms and died* (v. 23).

Josephus describes Herod's death in a similar way, having to do with stomach pains, which began immediately after he accepted the praise that he was a god:

“A severe pain also arose in his belly; and began in a most violent manner...Accordingly he was carried into the palace: and the rumor went abroad everywhere that he would certainly die in a little time...And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly, for five days, he departed this life.”
(Antiquities.19.8)

This chapter shows two instances of the Lord's angels taking action in the midst of human affairs. There is always a spiritual war going on around us (Ephesians 6:12). In Acts 12, one angel rescues an innocent man from prison, Peter, who gives God the glory (v. 11), and another angel strikes down the man who persecuted Peter, *because he did not give God the glory*.

We can surmise that it was not merely this one instance that decided Herod's fate. This was a moment iconic of his entire life, a culmination of Herod's constant disobedience toward God, a life lived for his own *glory*, in opposition to giving God the *glory*.

God deserves the *glory* because God is the source of all that is good. He is true goodness. He designed reality, and when we walk in humble obedience with God, we walk rightly or correctly (righteously, justly). We walk in reality when we walk in God's design.

If we walk in defiance of God's design, we are living in defiance of the true good, of true reality. If we defy God, we are sinning (which means to be in error, to miss the target). Herod was constantly missing the target. Instead of creating human harmony and human flourishing, he brought division and violence. He exploited others for his own gain. His end is a cautionary tale.

Herod *did not give God the glory*, he attributed *glory* to himself. *Glory* means someone or something's essence being visibly demonstrated (1 Corinthians 15:40-41). Herod accepted the false *glory* uttered by the people of Tyre and Sidon as though it was true.

The *glory* they spoke was in praise of a god, and Herod accepted this assessment of himself. But only God is God (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39, 6:4). Herod was not only acting proudly, he was willingly perpetuating a lie which defies truth and reality. The founding lie of humanity's fall away from God's goodness was that we could create our own goodness, apart from God (Genesis 3:4).

A verse from the Old Testament that is prominently quoted three times in the New Testament shows that the biblical opposite of pride is faith:

“Behold, as for the proud one,
His soul is not right within him;
But the righteous will live by his faith.”
(Habakkuk 2:4)

The opposite of faith in God is faith in self, which is pride. But faith in self is an illusion, as this story of Herod Agrippa I illustrates. It is reasonable to say that humility is the antidote to pride, as humility is the willingness to see and engage with reality as it is. If we see and engage with reality as it is, we will see that God is the source of all goodness, and will seek to follow His ways, which place us into following His design for us (and therefore our best).

Since God is the essence of existence, and therefore reality, humility is seeking to see things from God's perspective, because that is the perspective that is true and right. Herod knew no such perspective. He only saw whatever he wanted in each moment as true and right. One day it was persecuting believers and beheading them to earn political points and praise from men. Another day it was entering a trade agreement to earn the praise of men.

Herod trusted himself. But the *Lord struck him* down, illustrating that in the end, human pride comes to nothing.

Biblical Text

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