

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 28, Chapter 12

We just barely got into Acts chapter 12 last week, and the first thing we see mentioned in the chapter is that Herod Agrippa is now the King of Judah. The chapter will end with his death. His grandfather Herod the Great was the first Herod to rule, but his death just after Christ was born ended the rule of kings over Judah for 40 years until Agrippa was put into power by the newly coronated Roman Emperor Claudius. In between Herod the Great and Herod Agrippa, Roman procurators governed the Holy Land.

This is a good time to also recall that the so-called Jewish Kings Herod the Great and Agrippa were not Jews, even though they called themselves such. They were of Idumean (Edomite) stock on Herod's father's side, and Nabatean stock (that is, descendants of Ishmael) on Herod's mother's side. The Jews mocked Herod the Great for his claim of Jewishness, yet they accepted Agrippa's probably because he seemed to genuinely follow Judaism. It is interesting that to this day, adhering to the religion of Judaism is the primary test for determining whether a person is a Jew or not. Ethnicity is often secondary.

Let's re-read this chapter in its entirety since we only made it to verse 3 last time.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 12 all

Verse 3 identifies the group who was pleased that James had been executed and Peter had been arrested by Agrippa as ***Ioudaious***. This Greek Word can mean two different, but related, things. It can mean Jews, as Jews in general; or it can indicate Judeans more specifically. Judeans are Jews who reside in the Holy Land province of Roman controlled Judea. Sometimes the setting and the issue tells us which of these meanings is intended; other times it is nearly impossible to know. The scene in verse 3 takes place in Jerusalem of Judea, and so most likely the intent is to say that the Jews of Judea were the ones happy to see what King Herod Agrippa did to James and Peter. There were more politically sensitive and religiously motivated people in Judea than in the rest of the Holy Land because Jerusalem was the power center of Judaism and so these Judean Jews paid more attention to all the latest intrigues and issues, since the leadership was there to stir up trouble. But those Jews who lived outside of Judea, in the countryside and in the Diaspora, were more interested in daily life and family. Essentially, the Judeans were the inside-the-beltway Jews of the Holy Land (NOTE: inside-the-beltway refers to the political class that resides and/or works in Washington D.C.).

Peter's arrest occurred during the springtime feast period of Passover, Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits. Exactly at what point during this series of feasts we don't know. This means that Jerusalem would have been crowded beyond measure with thousands and thousands of Jewish pilgrims coming from all over the Holy Land and the Diaspora. So we're told that Agrippa decided it would be best (politically) to wait until after Passover to deal with Peter; that is, after all the crowds had left for home. I pointed out last week that by now it had become

common practice for Jews in usual everyday speech to refer to the entire sequence of the 3 spring feasts as either Passover or Unleavened Bread (*Pesach* or *Matza*). And just like we see here in verses 3 and 4, the two terms aren't meant to be precise, but rather as general and interchangeable, even in the same conversation. Once the crowds left, the only remaining Jews would be the Jews of Judea, the ones that had more interest in seeing the members of The Way being punished, and if possible, disbanded due to them not being politically correct according to the religious doctrines of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

So Peter is under arrest and in a Roman prison. However the point is made in verse 5 that intense prayer was being made on his behalf. David Stern makes a wonderful and salient point about prayer. He says that in the few words of this verse we are taught something invaluable about the nature of true, meaningful prayer, and the one who prays. He says that 5 points are made: 1) Prayer should be intense, not casual. That is, you need to be still, focused, and purposeful rather than repeating mantras and form prayers that often are said without actually contemplating what it is you're saying. I am one whose mind will sometimes wander when I pray silently; so long ago I learned to pray out loud even in private in order to stay focused. 2) When the verse says prayers were being made, it means prayer was ongoing. Prayer for Peter wasn't a one-and-done outburst. I've often asked myself if after approaching God with a specific request, whether it is even right for me to keep repeating that same prayer need as though God is forgetful. But I think that occasional thought really just reflects my worldly thinking creeping in because, Old or New Testament, praying continually to God over a specific matter is not portrayed as needlessly pestering Him; rather it is obeying and submitting to Him. We are commanded to do so and it is entirely to our benefit. 3) Our prayers are to be directed to God; not through an intermediary. Otherwise our relationship is not with Him, it is with another. And He has stretched out His hand to all who trust Him and offered us to come and stand before the throne of Grace and speak directly to Him, and hear directly from Him. 4) Prayer was made to God on Peter's behalf. That is, the prayer was not general; it was specific concerning Peter's precise difficulties. I have often said that I really don't want to see the words "unspoken prayer" on our Prayer List. An unspoken prayer will be an unheard prayer, and thus an unanswered prayer. It goes against every Biblical principle to essentially pray nothing. If it is too intimate to share, then don't; keep it between yourself and the Lord. But often it is simply an issue of pride or fear of embarrassment that keeps us from being specific, as we ask others to join us in prayer. Read the Psalms as David is open and honest (even highly emotional) about his predicaments (sometimes self induced), and how he feels about it all. It is a good model for us. 5) The community of Believers prayed for Peter. If we are truly going to be a community of Believers then we need to share our joys as well as our concerns. We are to rally around one another especially in the hour of need. We are not called to isolation. And we aren't called to be only concerned about our own needs. This is why I both ask you to put your needs and the needs of others on our Prayer List and to be as specific as possible. But also that when you receive the Prayer List that you take the time to pray for each request individually.

^{CJB} **James 5:16** *Therefore, openly acknowledge your sins to one another, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*

What follows in the next few verses is the result of the intense prayer made to God on Peter's behalf. The Passover week of festivals was over, Jerusalem now more or less back to normal, and this is when Agrippa planned to deal with Peter, no doubt intending to kill him. We don't know exactly in which of the several prisons in Jerusalem Peter was being detained, so I'll not speculate. What we are directly told, however, is that Peter was guarded so closely that two Roman soldiers were literally chained to Peter even inside his cell. And there were more soldiers stationed at the entrance to the prison. Peter was asleep, between the two sleeping Roman soldiers he was chained to, when suddenly an angel appeared before him. It says that a light shown in his cell; angels are almost always accompanied with light.

We are told that the angel literally tapped Peter's side to awaken him. It's not unusual for an angel to make physical contact with a human being as when Jacob wrestled with an angel who tapped Jacob's hip and dislocated it to end the struggle. The angel issued instructions for Peter to hurry up, get dressed, throw on his robe and to follow him. It is clear that Peter, still foggy from sleeping, wasn't at all sure what was happening or who was breaking him out of prison, or even if it was actually happening. But somehow the chains fell off of his wrists and in all the commotion the guards that lay next to him remained soundly asleep. Peter thought he was dreaming. But as the minutes passed, and as Peter led by the angel walked right by the 2 guards stationed at the prison entrance, he began to suspect that this was for real.

We're told that they finally arrived at the Iron Gate leading to the city. Which gate is often asked, but since we don't know the location of the prison, we can't ascertain which city gate is being described. Yet Luke's description likely means that in Peter's day both the location of the prison and of the specific iron gate were so well known that there was no need to say any more. Let me pause just a moment to remind us all that when the writers of the New Testament wrote, they weren't thinking in terms of speaking to readers far into the future, and especially not thinking about communicating to gentiles (the exceptions being, in some cases, John and his Book of Revelation and Paul in some passages in his letters). These current events were generally being recorded for the use of people in the Jewish culture in contemporary times. While the Torah was written specifically for the purpose of future generations having God's instructions at hand (as is stated in the Torah itself), no such claim is made by the authors of the books of the New Testament. So sometimes places and locations that are mentioned are difficult if not impossible to pin down, and descriptions that we'd love to have can be very sparse.

The Iron Gate opened by itself, no doubt meaning that it was locked. It was customary that city gates were locked once the sun went down to help keep the city residents safe from robbers and marauders during the night. The angel continued to lead Peter down one street, and out of danger, when suddenly he disappeared. That is when Peter knew for sure that this was God in action.

Sort of buried in this narrative is a conundrum: why did God save Peter but let James die at the hand of Herod Agrippa? This is the sort of thing that, if we've lived long enough, something of this nature has happened in our lives and we've wrestled with such a question. My father fought in WWII, and when I could get him to even speak about it (which was rare and mostly towards the end of his life), it was usually about some dire situation in which for some

inexplicable reason he survived, but many others around him did not. There seemed to be no pattern, no rhyme nor reason for who was saved and who wasn't. It was clear that he was troubled by this, no doubt feeling guilty to be alive as others were dying around him. This is mostly the reason he didn't want to talk about it. Why, he asked? Why did he make it and others perished? They were no less valuable than he; and he was no better than them. Was it pure serendipity? Wrong place, wrong time? One foot to left, you live. One foot to the right, you die. Or was God in control and choosing this one to live and that one to die? I think it is easier for us to sit in the safety of our sanctuary or our home and say confidently to ourselves that "God is in control". But when it is happening to you, and as you look back, I suspect that the experience alters how one thinks about it. For my father, a devout Christian man, he had no answers; only gratitude and at times deep sadness, which would well up in him even 50 years after the horrific events. He told me that as the war ended he became determined to be a good man, and to live a good life, because that was his duty now that for whatever reason, the Lord spared him. So I have no good answers for you as to why God chose to rescue Peter by means of an audacious, supernatural rescue mission, but stood by and allowed James to be wrongly convicted and executed. And this is where faith plays the biggest role in our lives as worshippers of the God of the Bible. It is when something happens and nothing seems obvious, or even logical, as to the how and why; and there is nothing left but to believe that either God oversees everything and has reasons beyond our ability to comprehend, or everything is mostly just due to the luck of the draw. One way allows for realization of hope in the mercy of our Creator; the other way leads only to despair and fear at the unpredictable turns of fate.

Peter made his way to Miriam's house; she was the mother of John called Mark. John Mark was a cousin of the disciple Barnabas. At this time, especially in Jerusalem, the Believers seemed to meet in homes, at other times in public places, and yet at other times in secret hideouts depending on the current social and political circumstances. Obviously Miriam's house was a known and regular meeting place for the core group of Jerusalem Believers, and when Peter arrived the group was in the midst of prayer for Peter. No doubt Miriam's house was larger than typical in order to be a suitable meeting place. Peter goes up to the house and knocks on the door and what comes next is almost comical.

Miriam's house servant, Rhoda, went to the door. Peter was calling to those inside and when she heard him she instantly recognized his voice. But Rhoda got so excited that she ran from the door and forgot to let Peter in because she was in such a hurry to tell the others that Peter was here. They told her she was crazy, but she kept insisting; it seems to never have occurred to her that all she had to do was go back to the door and open it to prove she was right. Finally someone said, it's not Peter it's his angel. This remark gives me a good opportunity to talk about how Jews thought about Angels in this era, but also to reveal another pet peeve of mine.

The reality is that as much as Heaven and Angels seem to be hot topics in every age of Christianity, our present time included, it was also that way among the ancient Jews. And since the Holy Scriptures are our sole divine source of reliable information about Heaven and Angels, it is disappointing to find that so little is said about either in the Bible. I can sum up Heaven by saying it is a spiritual place that resides in another dimension; it is God's dwelling place, it is eternal, it is beautiful, sin is not present there, Angels live in Heaven (when they're

not someplace else), and when a Believer dies, we go there. Outside of that, there's not much else divulged. It is the same for Angels. We know they exist, they can appear in human form, there are different kinds, light is usually involved, and they are sent by God. There are Archangels who seem to be at the top of a hierarchy of Angel ranks. That is not all, but it is most of what we'll learn in the Scriptures about Angels.

Today, it is popular to think that when humans die, we "get our wings" and become angels. Or that each of us has a guardian angel (or in the case of my wife, she says she has several very tired ones). But how were angels created? When? How many are there? Are more being made? Do they exist forever? Are there really different kinds or do they just have different jobs? What do they do? Are all Angels good Angels? What is a fallen Angel? These questions and more are common within Christianity and, again, were also of great interest to ancient Judaism.

The bottom line is that Angelology (the study of Angels), and the resultant doctrines that have been formed about Angels, are almost entirely the product of the imaginings of the human mind. And they haven't evolved that much over the centuries. In fact, I can say that generally speaking the doctrines of Angels as found in Christian tradition came almost entirely from ancient Judaism, and much of what Judaism believed came from Persian Angelology. So I caution you to be careful in just what you believe about Angels, or read about Angels (and Heaven for that matter) in the many books written on the subject because they consist almost entirely of doctrines and personal opinions and outright fantasy usually presented as Biblical fact. But how can a few sentences of Scripture about Heaven or Angels result in 400 page books? Much is added and leaps of assumption are made and I highly question its real value other than to distract us from spending time to learn what God has actually revealed to us in His Word.

Thus when we read of some Believer in the crowd at Miriam's house comment that it can't possibly be Peter at the door, but rather it is his angel, this is not to be taken as new Biblical information about angels, but rather as what Jews in that era believed as part of their **Halakhah**. And the Talmud indicates a belief in Judaism (at least by some Rabbis) of the existence of personal, guardian angels for each and every Jew. The response of this Believer about the person knocking at the door who sounds like Peter indicates another tradition that guardian angels can take on certain characteristics of the human person they are assigned to. But most of these thoughts about Angels amount to cultural superstition; becoming a Believer didn't erase those thoughts.

Finally the startled crowd at Miriam's house thought to open the door and to their shock there stood Peter! He raised his hand to quiet them, and then went about telling them what had happened. He urgently wanted to get this information about his escape and well-being to his co-leader of The Way, **Ya'acov**: or as he is called in our English Bibles, James the brother of Jesus. And because it's an important piece of information and not trivia, just remember that the Hebrew name **Ya'acov** translates in English to Jacob, not to James. So why do we find the name James in our New Testaments? It happened upon the creation of the King James Bible. In the New Testament, in honor of King James, the Bible editors substituted James for Jacob. And it has remained so ever since.

Now let me make a comment that I will say upfront is at least partly my speculation, but I think it is well founded and will interest you. Here in Acts 12 we see how King Agrippa and the Jews of Judea (not all of course, just the most politically correct and zealous) went on a murderous rage against The Way, or better, against the leadership of The Way. We really don't have any firm reason as to why this began. In any case, we do know from certain passages in the New Testament and from extra-Biblical writings that the earliest Believers in Christ at times had to meet in secret locations. This really occurred primarily in Jerusalem because elsewhere the persecutions against the Believers weren't so intense, or didn't exist at all, so as to make hiding necessary.

We have seen already in the Book of Acts how the persecutions would come and go. And of course, when the persecutions became intense the Believers would keep a much lower profile than when the persecutions lost steam. Thus it is believed that the secret sign of the Ichthys (the fish symbol) came to use about now. Some years ago my wife and I made a discovery in a garbage dump in Jerusalem that has had quite an impact on us. It was the result of a map taken from an old back issue of Biblical Archeology Review, and a small book I read that told about the discovery of the 3 part symbol that has become a major symbol of Hebrew Roots and Messianic organizations: the fish, to the menorah, to the Star of David.

I have taken a few of you to this spot we discovered and God willing on our next tour we'll take a few more of you there. It is off the beaten track and you won't find guides or tourists milling around. It is an underground cavern with its secret entrance hidden at the bottom of a large Mikveh that in recent times has been fenced off, with a concrete bunker built around it to keep people out. It was there in that cavern that about a half-century ago an elderly Greek Monk found pottery shards with the 3 part symbol scratched on them, and the same symbol etched into the cave walls. The pottery has been scientifically dated and it goes back to the time of James, Peter, and Paul. The cavern is substantial in size and its location is such that there is little doubt that at times of persecution the earliest Jewish Believers (probably the leadership) met underground here. I'll add a little anecdote that when I told Rabbi Baruch about it, he was skeptical. I took him there, and it at least peaked his interest sufficiently that he went to the Archeology department at Hebrew University where he was an adjunct professor at that time. He told them my claims, and they verified that they were well aware of it, and that it was true and accurate.

So as it concerns today's lesson, I speculate this: James (a different James) had just been executed. Peter was going to be executed as well but God miraculously saved him. Upon his escape Peter goes in the dead of the night to Miriam's house where Believers were stealthily meeting in prayer for Peter. He gestures for them to be quiet; no doubt because in their excitement from seeing he was alive they were making too much noise and he didn't want them to be discovered. Then in verse 17, he tells someone who is at the meeting to go and tell James (Yeshua's brother) and other brothers about what happened. Then Peter left quickly and escaped from Jerusalem. Why? Peter was an escaped prisoner and in danger; and in fact all the Believers were in danger. Why didn't Peter go to James himself? James was in hiding. The brothers spoken of were the leadership, part of the 12 disciples. Only a few of the Believers in Jerusalem even knew where to find James. Peter likely didn't know how to find James. I have every reason to believe that when the events of Acts chapter 12 were occurring

James was hiding in that cavern that we found in a garbage dump on top of Mt. Zion. The pieces fit together quite adequately to come to this conclusion.

In verse 18 we find the soldiers who had been guarding Peter were deeply disturbed to find him missing; this was not going to end well for them. This is because it was Roman law that the guards who allowed prisoners to escape could be held liable to suffer the punishment that had been intended for that prisoner. Peter's fate was going to be death.

But in addition to worrying for their lives, they were confused and perplexed because they were still wearing the chains that had been attached to Peter. How does a man lying between two soldiers slip out of his chains, making no noise at all, get dressed, leave the cell, go through another set of doors with other guards who see nothing, and escape? Sure enough, Herod doesn't buy the guards' outrageous story. He has Jerusalem searched, no trace of Peter is found, and so after interrogating the Roman soldiers they are executed for what Agrippa no doubt thinks is their complicity in Peter's escape.

After this Herod Agrippa went to Caesarea Maritima for a time. Likely the trip had nothing to do with Peter escaping because while he spent time in Jerusalem, he spent as much time if not more in Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government over Judea. He was likely only in Jerusalem to participate in the festival days, now concluded. Caesarea carried the nickname of "Little Rome", and he preferred being with the Roman aristocracy, which he had been since he was a small child.

Next comes the lead-up to an interesting explanation of Agrippa's sudden death. Starting in verse 20 we are told that Agrippa was quite upset with the people of Tyre and Sidon. These 2 cities were on the southern Phoenician coast, and had long friendly relations with Israel going back to the time of David and Solomon. Israel was perhaps the primary food supplier for these two major cities. We are given no hint as to what this grave offense was that caused Herod's anger against these 2 cities. But it was so serious that a delegation of high officials came to meet with Blastus, Agrippa's chief negotiator.

What made this all the more critical is that very likely this was when the prophesied famine that the Believing prophet Agav predicted would occur during the reign of Claudius happened: the timing lines up quite well for it. It's not that Israel was the only source of food for Tyre and Sidon; but with an Empire-wide famine, food was scarce and expensive. Kings and government officials set the food prices and determined where the supplies would go. So basically Agrippa used what was very likely a trumped up grievance against Tyre and Sidon at the time of a food crisis in order to extract some special political concessions that would give him more power over them or make him a wealthier man, or both.

Blastus obtains what Herod Agrippa wanted from the delegation. And once accomplished it was time to put on a big show. So Agrippa gets decked out in spectacular royal attire, sits on his throne, and certain dignitaries come to hear Agrippa make a speech to them. They of course respond with over-the-top flattery (something he fully expected and demanded), but they even went so far as to say to him: "This is the voice of a god, not of a man!" Then Herod Agrippa made a fatal mistake; rather than deflecting such ludicrous honor as being as a god

(and remember, Agrippa had made himself as a representative of the Jewish religion), he accepted it. God struck him down and we're told that he was eaten up by worms.

That the punishment of his blasphemy was immediate made it clear to all that his was divine judgment. This was no folktale that we see here in the Bible or is it an exaggeration. Josephus writes about Agrippa's death and confirms what happened, the reason for it, and what he died of. But let's also be clear that these words about worms don't necessarily mean that his death was a result of having been eaten from the inside out by worms (but there is a hint that indeed it could have). It is a standard understanding that when a corpse is put into the grave, that the flesh is eaten up by worms. It is the natural result of death; decomposition. However it is also a term that is used to describe especially the demise of the unrighteous, even though people understood the same thing happened to anyone who died.

It is hard to know what the disease was that killed Herod. Josephus tells us that it was something gastrointestinal. There actually are recorded incidents of parasites entering into humans and consuming people from the inside out. In any case whatever it was, it was painful and gruesome.

As we near the end of the chapter we're informed that the Word of the Lord continued to grow and multiply. No doubt now that Agrippa was dead, the persecutions against the Believers once again calmed down since once again a Roman procurator ruled and this meant that the Sanhedrin could no longer run around and incite the crowds or legally execute people like James and Peter. So essentially a contrast is drawn between this wicked man, Agrippa, who tried to eliminate The Way, and the great success that God achieved through The Way despite all the persecution.

The final verse of this chapter marks a turn from the focus being on Jerusalem and Jews, to the Diaspora and gentiles. The disciples that had gone to Antioch, but returned to Jerusalem, would take John Mark with them back to Antioch. Recall that their purpose for coming back to Jerusalem was to bring famine relief funds from generous Believers in Antioch. How long they would stay in Jerusalem before returning to Antioch (that we will read about in Acts 13) is unknown.

For the next several chapters the focus will shift to Paul and his missionary travels.

We'll begin chapter 13 next time.