

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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James is Martyred; Peter is set Free

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The Death of the Apostle James ([12:1-2](#))

Herod the king: This would be Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled in the days of Jesus' birth (Matthew 2). Herod Agrippa I was also the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had a role in the trial of Jesus (Luke 23).

This isn't particularly new. Harassing the church was a politically popular tactic for Herod.

Stephen was the first martyr, and here James is the first of the twelve who knew and followed Jesus to be martyred. But the death of James shows that the twelve did not necessarily enjoy unique Divine earthly protection. James the brother of John, in particular, might have thought to have been "protected." He was one of the Jesus's inner circle, frequently mentioned with his brother John, and with Peter. i. But Jesus promised no special protection for even His closest followers; He had, in fact, warned them to be ready for persecution (Matthew 10:16-26).

The church has been growing at a supernatural rate, experiencing one exciting conversion after another. Every apparent setback we've read about is quickly followed by a period of more people coming to faith and joining the church. Then we have the miraculous conversion of The Persecutor, Saul of Tarsus, then the Gentile centurion Cornelius, then the mixed crowd of Jews and Gentiles in Antioch. But opposition inspired by Satan never stops. Is the same true today?

Eusebius relates a story from Clement of Alexandria, who says that the soldier who guarded James before the judge was so affected by his witness that he declared himself a Christian also and was willingly executed for Jesus alongside of James (Eusebius, *Church History* 2.9.2-3).

Significantly, there was no attempt to "replace" James, as there was to replace Judas (Acts 1). Perhaps this was because James died as a faithful martyr, while Judas revealed his apostasy in betraying Jesus.

Peter's imprisonment and release (12:3-17)

Because he saw that it pleased the Jews: Seeing his approval ratings rise in the polls when he kills James, Herod seeks to improve his ratings even more by going after Peter.

Note that there is at least one significant difference between the persecution by Saul and persecution by Herod. Saul (wrong as he was) persecuted out of sincere though misguided religious conviction. Herod, on the other hand, persecuted out of purely political motives.

Intending to bring him before the people after Passover: Herod wants to deal with Peter at a politically opportune time, thinking that a mob reaction could result when Passover pilgrims flood Jerusalem. So he decides to delay the action until the distractions that would naturally be present during Passover are done with.

Four squads of soldiers: Knowing that Peter and others had mysteriously escaped from prison before (Acts 5:17-21), Herod assigns a high-security detail to guard Peter.

Constant prayer was offered to God for him: The word constant here also carries the idea of earnest; literally, the word pictures someone stretching out all they can for something. It's derived from a medical term describing the stretching of a muscle to its limits. It is the same word Luke uses to describe the agonizing prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). This is fervent prayer!

Remember Jesus' promise, "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire and it shall be done for you." (John 15:7)

Thought he was seeing a vision: Peter accepted, believed, and obeyed without really knowing what was happening. He knew enough to sense that God was doing something, and trusted that an explanation might come later.

The iron gate... which opened to them of its own accord: So we have a pretty solid list of obstacles - soldiers, chains, guard posts, the iron gate. All are ineffective when God is with us and prayer is behind us.

It's easy for us to worry about the "iron gate" before we ever get to it. But this story reminds us that God will take care of our needs and remove the seemingly insurmountable obstacles at the right time.

Delivered me from the hand of Herod: Why did James die and Peter find deliverance? Only God knows. Clearly it wasn't time for Peter to go home yet. Until it was time, he was invulnerable. He couldn't be harmed. It was time for James; it was not time for Peter. But we can know that James, having gone to be with Jesus, did not consider himself to be on the losing end of the deal.

She did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate: This is amusing; Rhoda is so excited to hear from Peter that she leaves him out at the gate! She must've been pretty over-the-top, as the Christians, *even as they are praying for Peter*, find it hard to believe God actually answered their prayer. They certainly had the "mustard seed" of faith, but it was hardly overwhelming here!

It is his angel: Jews believed in the idea of "guardian angels," and it seems that they may have believed that one's guardian angel bore some kind of resemblance to the human it was assigned to.

Tell these things to James and the brethren: The James that Peter tells others to report to is not the James who was just martyred. It is probably James, the brother of Jesus, who was a prominent figure in the church at Jerusalem.

And he departed and went to another place: Except for a brief mention in chapter 15, this is the last Luke speaks of Peter. We know that Peter later met Paul in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14), and later, of course, he wrote his two letters.

Herod's Reaction ([12:18-23](#))

"No small stir" is among the great understatements of the Bible; Herod was *furious* that his prized prisoner had escaped.

They should be put to death: This execution of the guards was customary. In that day, if a guard's prisoner escaped, the guard was given the penalty due to the prisoner - in this case, death.

"The voice of a god and not of a man!" If Herod enjoyed the adulation here, it was the last adulation he would ever enjoy. This is the mark of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Herod wasn't the first or the last to covet the status of deity.

He was eaten by worms and died: The manner of Herod's death befits his spiritual state; he corrupted from the inside out.

The historian Flavius Josephus describes the death of Herod:

"He put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre 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; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another (though not for his good), that he was a god ... A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner ... when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life."
-- Antiquities, XIX.8.2

The Work of the Holy Spirit Continues ([12:24-25](#))

The word of God grew and multiplied: We should be used to this by now, shouldn't we? The contrast between Herod and the church is clear. Herod believed he had the upper hand against God's people, but God showed who was really in charge. Herod is judged, and the church is blessed.

History is filled with the stories of men who thought they could fight God and succeed. Among some notable, even "beloved" names are:

- Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher who coined the idea that God was dead, and that Christianity was a despised religion of weaklings. Fighting God drove him insane, and he spent the last several years of his life in that condition.
- Sinclair Lewis, who won the Nobel prize for literature, and fought against God in his book *Elmer Gantry*, a story about an evangelist who was also an alcoholic, and would sleep with any woman he could. Sinclair Lewis died a hopeless alcoholic in a clinic near Rome.
- Ernest Hemingway, who lived a life of adventure and rebellion against God seemingly without consequences - until he committed suicide by shotgun.

Fighting against God just doesn't work!